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.

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
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 households\(^3\) members residing in more than one geographical territory (Douglas, 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’ (Douglas, 2006: 421). Douglas (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 West\(^4\) 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

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\(^1\) 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’.

\(^2\) The term ‘householding’ (Douglas, 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 Douglas (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 ‘western policy-makers and funders through policy prescriptions for economic and social development’ in a variety of countries (Sen, 2001, Deacon, 2007 in Bowiby et al., 2010: 46).
sought at all costs (Fraser and Gordon, 2002). This dichotomy is rooted in the notion of ‘individualistic liberalism that sees normative man(sic) as a freely choosing and rational actor, characterised by self-sufficiency and self-reliance’ (Robertson, 1999 in Maynard et al., 2008: 75). However, this division bears little resemblance to people’s lives in general as ‘our very individuality exists only as a result of our embeddedness in a network of relationships both private and public’ (Robertson, 1999: 83). Indeed, this simplistic duality which denigrates dependence and appeals independence relies upon, without due acknowledgement, the necessity for mutual interdependence (Bowlby et al., 2010).

The notion of interdependence has been illustrated implicitly in various studies of migration and intergenerational transfers. Research in Indonesia, Thailand and China found that through providing financial support the migration of children to urban areas contributed positively to the material well-being of their older parents who remained in rural areas (see Kreager, 2006; Knodel and Saengtienchai, 2007; Li et al., 2009). Moreover, research has shown how older people are often the providers of support in their families (Arber and Attias-Donfut, 2000). In various Asian countries including China, grandparents act as ‘kin keeper’ taking care of their grandchildren when their children migrate (Croll, 2008; Quah, 2009). As most of these studies focused on migration as a singular event, they do not capture the historical family context in which contemporary forms of intergenerational support are shaped. By contrast, this article studies the life histories of family members and foregrounds the interconnectedness of family members at all life cycles.

While the notion of interdependence underlines daily householding strategies, inequalities are also embedded in the process. As Douglass (2006) put it, the household is not a black box of always harmonious relationships, but is instead a site of gendered, intergenerational contestations, negotiations, compromises and cooperation revolving around individual differences and status. Gender as an analytical concept is particularly useful to reveal the inequalities within the household. Feminist scholars have judged what they see as women’s subordination in family life under the influence of patriarchy, as well as the barriers that traditional family roles have posed to women’s economic and social advancement. In particular, the maintenance of family welfare and intergenerational relations is premised upon an implicit gender contract (Ginn and Arber, 2000). The gender contract is based upon the division of paid work and unpaid work between men and women: the gender division of domestic labour facilitates men’s undisrupted participation in paid employment while the employment participation of married women is constrained especially if they have children (Ginn and Arber, 2000). One crucial element of the gender contract is the social construction of the care work as women’s work (Hockey and James, 1993; Lee, 2010; Yeoh and Huang, 2010). Since the exchange of care between family members is central to building and maintaining the interdependent household network (Bowlby et al., 2010), women’s care work is critical to the physical and social reproduction across generations. Feminist scholars argue that care work within the family is often socially constructed as ‘non-work’ (Grace, 1998), because it is not quantified by a wage, and so women’s contribution and the incurred costs for them are often obscured.

An appreciation of gender is particularly important in the Chinese context. Rural–urban migration literature shows that migration plays an important role in differentiating experiences of rural migrants. It may curtail women migrants’ working life whilst enabling men to migrate since the wife is expected to look after the household in the countryside (Fan, 2003). Indeed, research has found that while men and young women leave for better paid jobs in the cities, older and married women tend to stay behind and take responsibility for low-profit agricultural work (see Davin, 1999; Jacka, 1997, 2006; Judd, 1994; Murphy, 2002). Further, traditionally patrilineal culture considered sons and daughters-in-law to be the best providers of old age support while married daughters had no obligation to provide support (Leung, 1997). The gendered migration pattern renders this ideal form of support problematic. This article will show the importance of the role that all interlinked family members play in the context of migration. In particular, the role of stay-behind daughters will be highlighted.

3. Research methodology

The majority of existing studies on rural ageing in China are survey-based (see Cong and Silverstein, 2008; Zhan and Montgomery, 2003; Ye and He, 2008). Although measuring social change is important, evaluating and understanding how social change is lived by those involved is equally significant (Liu, 2007). A qualitative methodology has been adopted here to capture the micro-level processes that constructed people’s experiences.

To investigate familial relations of support in their earlier and contemporary context within families, life history interviews were conducted with men and women of different generations from nine households in a rural village in northern China. The village was chosen for two key reasons. First, the proportion of population over 60 years old (13%) in the village was close to the national picture (of 13%). The village also had a relatively high proportion of households that experienced migration (70%). Second, through the connections of an academic contact, it was possible for local introductions to be personally made and this helped reduce the inhibitions of interviewees. The research was conducted during an 8-week stay in the village from the Spring Festival of 2011 onwards.

Village households, from which at least one adult had emigrated, were randomly selected for interview. The objective was to then conduct up to four interviews per household; that is, both older parents and two adult children of different gender. Where the older interviewee was widowed and/or the adult children were not available for interview, grandchildren (over 20-years old) were approached for interview. In total 32 interviews were undertaken. All interviews except one were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. Field notes were taken to describe the village setting and the household background.

Each interviewee was asked to recall his/her childhood first and then encouraged to take the lead. If not covered during the natural course of the following discussion, specific questions related to migration and ageing were asked. Each transcript was then analysed chronologically; that is, early life, migration phase, present conditions, future plans. A thematic analysis was applied to each transcript to identify common themes that emerged from different transcripts in each generation. A further in-depth analysis on the intergenerational relations was also carried out for each household. The life history approach was fruitful for a number of reasons. First, it helped to show the link between the past and the present, in particular the various factors that contributed to the event of migration. Second, as this method was applied to a household setting, it helped to map out the relations between each member within the household. Finally, as different family members told their life histories these inevitably overlapped with one another.

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5 This idea has its origin from Sen’s (1989) ‘cooperative conflict’ model and also work by Kandiyoti (1988).

6 Murphy (2008) shows that married women are increasingly migrating to the cities in some regions in China. To what extent this might become a national pattern requires further research.

7 Spring Festival is the celebration of Chinese New Year. It is the most important annual festival for the Chinese people.
making it possible to cross reference narratives and test the credibility and discrepancies of stories.

To examine deeper the complexities of lived experiences, strategies, expectations and preferences within a household setting and in particular the relational dynamics between different generations, this article discusses and analyses one family history\(^8\) (that is, four interviews) in depth while supplementing discussions with examples from other interviewees in the same village. Names have been altered to maintain the anonymity of the interviewees.

4. The village context

The research village was located in an inland region of a northern province. It had ca. 400 households, most of which were multi-generational, and a total population of ca. 1500. From the early 1990s, young male villagers had started to go to the cities to work (mainly Beijing and other provincial capital cities in Northern China) but the number was relatively small. Having seen the early pioneers earn considerably more from their labour migration, others followed and migration had increased markedly from 2000 onwards. Migration was arranged through two principal channels; recruitment agencies advertising in the village, and introductions arranged by relatives who had already migrated.

The gender composition of those aged between 16 and 25 who migrated was balanced; that is, young men and women who usually worked (in factories) after completing/dropping out of school. After returning to the village to marry, the majority of husbands migrated while wives stayed in the village (although a small number of couples migrated together to work). As a result the migrating population between 26 and 65 were mainly males who went to work for large construction firms or operating their own small enterprise in a city. Before migration, villagers mainly relied upon selling grain from the fields. Due to the gap between rural and urban salaries, remittances from migrants had become a major source of household income in the village. People who stayed in the village still tended the field crops (mainly wheat, sweet corn and cotton). The average annual cash income from local farming was 3000 Yuan compared with an average monthly cash income from labour migration of 1000–3000 Yuan. As a result many others in the village tried to supplement their income by working for small local factories (usually 1 or 2 km from the village, at an average daily wage of 30 Yuan) or street vending in village markets.\(^9\)

There was no state pension provision in the village. From 2007, a nationwide scheme called the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee (MLG) was introduced to the village for rural residents whose income fell below a defined level; the allowance rate for 2011 was 450 Yuan a year. According to the villagers, the people who actually received the MLG were generally families who had connections with village committee leaders rather than those on the lowest incomes. Although state medical insurance was introduced in 2007, and all villagers who contributed to the scheme became entitled to subsidised treatment if hospitalised, the villagers complained that this arrangement was of little value since they hardly ever became hospitalised and could not use the contribution to offset the cost of their medicine expenses (which comprised a large proportion of their medical treatment). As a result many villagers had opted out of the medical insurance scheme. With such an ineffective state support system and the non-existence of community support organisation in place, it was basically their family and kin that villagers could turn to when they needed help. Therefore, the informal familial support had formed the basis of welfare provision in the village.

5. Case study

Mother Zheng (67 years old) and Father Zheng (70 years old) had lived in the village all their life. Their main source of income was selling breakfast in the local market and raising goats. The Zheng’s had four adult married children and ten grandchildren. Their two sons (second and fourth child) had migrated to another province with their wives and each worked in their own restaurant, returning only once a year during Spring Festival season. The elder son had three daughters who had been married into the village or nearby villages. The two adult daughters of the second son were also married into nearby villages whilst his teenage daughter and infant son still lived in the province he had migrated to. The Zheng’s two daughters (eldest and third child) were married locally. The older daughter of the Zhengs and her husband sold food in the street and their children (one son and one daughter) were married in the village. The younger daughter worked as a hairdresser and her husband delivered goods in the village; they had one child (son) who had recently married. The Zhengs lived less than ten minutes walk from their younger daughter’s house. Although the Zhengs lived alone, Mother Zheng and her sister (who lived in another village) shared the responsibility of accommodating their 86-year old mother whilst her brothers worked away in a city. Mother Zheng, Father Zheng, third child Daughter Zheng (42 years old) and fourth child Son Zheng (41 years old) were interviewed individually.

5.1. Webs of interdependence

The Zhengs family history was characterised by ‘webs of interdependence’ (Robertson, 1999: 83) which support Croll’s findings of a shift from traditional filial piety characterised by a subordination of the young to the will and welfare of parents and grandparents to filial care based upon ‘mutual need, mutual gratitude and mutual support’ (Croll, 2008: 110). This process of interdependence across generations over the life course was a key feature in their daily strategies of householding.

In their early life, Mother Zheng and Father Zheng worked hard to provide for the family and bring up the children. According to traditional Chinese familial ideology, a parent’s duties are fulfilled when their children marry and establish their own households. For the Zhengs, parental support did not stop at marriage. Mother Zheng looked after her son’s children\(^10\) when they were young to free up their mother’s time for work. Father Zheng settled the fine when Son Zheng breached rural family planning policy.\(^11\) Son Zheng expressed great gratitude for his help when interviewed. However, as a result of this incident Father Zheng was fired from working as a cook for the town government and lost his entitlement to a state pension. Father Zheng did not regret standing by his son: ‘how could I report my son [to mitigate responsibility]? That would make my son hate me!’

In recent years, with both of her sons’ families working away, Mother Zheng helped to look after Son Zheng’s fields and in return, Son Zheng allowed his parents to keep the agricultural produce

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\(^8\) This family is chosen first because its arrangement of care for the older generation is representative of the pattern found among the households interviewed; second, it is chosen because the availability of family members meant that a full set of four interviews with different generations and with different genders was conducted.

\(^9\) Every five days there is a village market where people buy food, clothing and other utensils and tools.

\(^10\) Mother Zheng received little childcare support from her in-laws. But from Daughter Zheng’s cohort and onwards, it became a taken-for-granted practice that the parents were expected to look after sons’ children.

\(^11\) In rural China, the state family planning policy states that parents are allowed to have a second child if their first child is a girl. Son Zheng already has two girls but he wanted to have a third child in order to have a son. As he had three young children and so was financially tight at the time, his father paid the fine.
from the fields. The Zhengs, however, did not want to be a financial burden on their children. When asked if their sons sent regular remittances, Father Zheng replied: ‘they wanted to offer some, but we didn’t accept it. As long as I can move around and work, our children don’t need to provide for us. Only when I can’t move any longer, I will need children’s support’. Mother Zheng explained why she did not want to take children’s money: ‘children’s lives were not easy either; they need make a living and provide for their own family’.

While trying to maintain day-to-day economic autonomy, Father Zheng and Mother Zheng, together with many other older interviewees, acknowledged one-off financial support from their migrating children in respect of medical expenses. With an ineffective rural medical insurance system and high medicine costs, support from family members was considered crucial. Father Zheng suffered a heart attack in 2008 and the treatment cost over 10,000 Yuan, more than twice his and his wife’s combined annual income. Although the daughters offered to contribute, the two sons insisted they settle the medical bill. In 2010, when Father Zheng had a kidney stone removed, he insisted that he paid for the bill [5000 Yuan] himself because he wanted to use up his own money before his children’s.

While the sons offered financial support for Father Zheng’s medical expense, it was the daughters who provided emotional and day-to-day support. Because Daughter Zheng lived nearby, the parents often visited after dinner [chuan men12]. The daughters’ families helped during harvest, carrying heavy stuff and looking after them if they became ill.13 Although Chinese familial ideology emphasises privileged parental investment in sons, many older people in the village also extended considerable support to their daughters after marriage. The Zhengs married their daughters off in the same village so that they could help if their daughters ran into troubles after marriage. The Zhengs married their daughters off in the same village so that they could help if their daughters ran into trouble. Mother Zheng helped to look after her daughter’s children when her in-law family was not available and helped Daughter Zheng in her family’s fields during the harvest. Mother Zheng and Father Zheng also helped to settle debts when Daughter Zheng’s family ran into financial difficulty as a result of their house needing repairs. Some years later when the parents rebuilt their own house, Daughter Zheng offered financial support.

In addition to the exchange of support between parents and children, the grandchildren also entered the webs of interdependence and reciprocity. Although the elder of the Zheng’s sons worked away, all of his daughters were married off in his ancestral village. As a result the Zhengs’ home acted as the natal family for the married granddaughters. After the granddaughters had given birth, in accordance with local custom that women should spend time in their natal family during their recovery, Mother Zheng cared for her granddaughters in her own home. The granddaughters frequently visited Mother Zheng and Father Zheng and in doing so provided emotional and instrumental support. When Father Zheng had the kidney stone removed, the two sons were not called back because the operation was considered non-serious. The granddaughters (and daughters) therefore took turns looking after Father Zheng whilst he was hospitalised. Grandchild to grandparent support was found in other village families when the middle generation was not in a position to offer support because they had migrated. One grandchild interviewee commented: they [grandparents] treated me well when I was little, now I would treat them well. Grandparenting (mostly grandmothering) has become an important process in Chinese families where values of filial care and reciprocity are transmitted. In response to support provided when they were young, the grandchildren reciprocated support in later life.

In the Zheng family, the wife of the elder son was viewed by many as a trouble maker. Once she had a big quarrel with Daughter Zheng and subsequently their family stopped talking to Daughter Zheng’s family. She thought Mother Zheng stood by her own daughter and thus was cold towards her in-laws. Daughter Zheng felt that she had to act against her own will and make the first move to mend the relationship so that her parents would not have a difficult time in future. Although family members resumed talking, both sides felt that the relationship remained superficial. After they migrated to another city for work, the elder son offered the obligatory financial support when Father Zheng was ill, but he did not phone home at all. By contrast, the younger son contacted his parents every 2 or 3 days enquiring into their conditions and health. When asked about their expectations of care if they become bed-ridden in future, both Father Zheng and Mother Zheng expressed concern about the support from the elder son’s family because of the damaged relationship with the elder daughter-in-law and said they would prefer to let other children look after them.

The Zheng family reflected the householding elements specified by Douglass (that is, ‘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’). Their family histories demonstrate the micro-level processes through which rural households are adapting to the economic and social changes in China. Unlike the modernisation thesis which anticipates the decline of family ties, the data demonstrated the significance of family and kinship in shaping members’ lives in the Zheng family. All the children except Daughter Zheng were engaged in cooking business, all taught by Father Zheng who in turn had learnt from his uncle. The migration itself was encouraged by Father Zheng after he had visited relatives in the city. As Father Zheng put it ‘we had some relatives there so he [elder son] established himself quite soon’. After the elder son had established himself, the second son followed his brother and set up his own restaurant about one hundred metres away. Other villagers also reported how family members introduced jobs to them or followed their relatives to the migration destinations (see also Pun, 2005). Not only were people’s migrating livelihoods secured within the family network, the household acted as a safety net for all members. It was a common theme in all interviews that, whenever people ran into difficulties, monetary or non-monetary, it was family members who they turned to for help. It is exactly for this reason that daughters had become a crucial tool in householding strategies – if they were married in the village, into a large family, rather than a far away city, then this extended the kinship network and provided support for older generations.

In contrast with the victimised images of those ‘left-behind’, many older interviewees actively pursued strategies to ensure their own short or long-term security and care (also see Yan, 2003). In a departure from traditional ideology, many villagers extended support to their married daughters to weave a web of interdependence that would be reciprocated in their old age. Moreover, many interviewees in the older generation held a positive attitude towards children’s migration. As one interviewee put it rhetorically ‘only when young people have a good life themselves, there is a possibility that we old people live a good life. If they are poor, how could we possibly ask them for support?’ In the Zheng family, sons’ migration was a householding strategy actively initiated by the older generation; Father Zheng discovered the business opportunity in another province when he visited relatives there and encouraged his sons to migrate.

Interdependence becomes the dominant feature of relations between older parents and their children but members vary in their

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12 Chuan men is a non-purpose visit.
13 Among the families in the village where all offspring had migrated, other more distant relatives stepped in. This concept of a wider kinship support network is a common characteristic of many Chinese villages. Historically, many villagers shared one of a handful of surnames, which means their ancestors were generally related within five or six generations.
degree of solidarity. In the webs of interdependence, a principle of ‘tiered egalitarianism’ underlines the relationships of reciprocal obligations and duties. That is, parents still prioritize sons’ family needs over daughters’ family needs and then between sons, the support from parents is provided equally. Any perceived non-compliance with this principle would cause damage to the interdependent networks within the family. As in the Zheng household, the point of potential family tension revolved around the daughters-in-law. Because of the strained relationship between the wife of the elder son and the rest of the family, the elder son kept a distant relationship from his parents; migration seemed to make this relationship more distant; conversely, the second son felt closely attached to his parents and sisters prior to migration and felt that his migration had not affected their relationship at all. Both Mother and Father Zheng doubted future support from the elder son’s family but were very confident of support from the families of their other children. Other interviewees had perceptions of unequal childcare support and property division from parents; indeed these issues were an important source of family discords between parents and children and between siblings. These conflicts in the household usually led to the breakdown of the webs of interdependence and reciprocity, with detrimental effects upon old age care for the seniors in the household. This is consistent with other case studies in China which have shown that perceptions of lack of parental support among the younger generation or conflict over the allocation of familial resources tend to lead to cases of old-age neglect in later life (Davis-Friedmann, 1991; Zhang, 2005). Therefore, the way in which migration affects care and support for older people is shaped by the conditions embedded in the reciprocal relations between older parents and adult children prior to and during migration.

5.2. Gender inequalities within the household

I now move to unpack the household box to examine the inequalities embedded in webs of interdependence featured in daily householding activities in rural China. As discussed earlier, the intergenerational contract is mostly premised upon a gender contract that is based upon the division of labour between men and women. Despite being mobilised to work outside the home since the 1950s, women in China are still expected to be mainly responsible for domestic work and to prioritize their husbands’ work development (see Davin, 1976; Croll, 1983; Liu, 2007; Wang, 2000). In the Zheng household, Father Zheng had been a cook all his life. After gaining a good reputation through cooking for the production team, he was asked to cook for the town government in 1983. Due to his son’s breach of the one-child policy, he stopped working there in 1999. Ever since, he has sold breakfast in the street market. Unlike her husband’s linear career as a cook, Mother Zheng only referred to this as a way to escape her ‘errands’ but felt she had no choice.15 In comparison with the cash income generated by her husband, Mother Zheng’s non-valorised contribution to the household was trivialised and devalued as non-work (this supports the arguments of Grace, 1998). This gendered division of labour and the feminised notion of care work contributed to the reproduction of gender inequalities within the household.

The division of labour by gender renders Mother Zheng in a supportive role throughout her marriage; this principle has also underlined the changing daughters’ role in rural households. Traditionally the care of parents was primarily the concern of sons. Because of the patriarchal marriage practice, a daughter moved to her husband’s family to take up her place in his household and look after his family. Daughters were only required to make contributions to their natal families as long as they remain unmarried. Due to a lack of universal pension provision and the persistence of patriarchal marriage practice in rural China, the reliance upon sons’ support in old age remained strong during the Maoist period. In recent years, where married men are more likely to migrate than married women, the stay-behind married daughters have become an important source of emotional and instrumental support to their parents.

In the Zheng family, daughters played a very important role in assisting their parents to ensure the social and physical production across generations. Because of limited financial resources and lack of childcare, the eldest daughter helped Mother Zheng with household chores and to care for her siblings at the expense of her own educational opportunities.16 Moreover, the daughters’ marriage choices were utilised to enhance the collective welfare of the household. Both daughters were married into local families17 with quite a few sons. Daughter Zheng considered this arrangement a strategy to protect her brothers: as the Zhengs had few relatives in the village, marrying into a big family would afford the Zheng family some protection. Retrospectively, Father Zheng considered his earlier decision a very sensible one in terms of old age support. Now, with both sons

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14 During the collectivisation period (mid 1950s to early 1980s), collective farming was the norm in the countryside where villagers worked in the production team.

15 She had no mother-in-law; at that time, her own mother needed to look after her brothers’ children so was not available to help.

16 The introduction of this system signalled the ending of the collective production that dominated in the Maoist period and the start of household production. Each rural household, regardless of whether it wants to farm, is ‘allocated land, required to cultivate that land and pay all taxes and fees, and to sell to the state a set quota of grain associated with each plot’ (Oh, 1999: 621).

17 As Mother Zheng was perceived as a reserve helper and carer, she constantly needed to juggle between different domestic or caring tasks demanded of her from the family and the wider kinship network. She felt these tasks seemed never-ending and as a result found her life stressful. Whilst she hoped to migrate in order to escape her ‘errands’, her search for jobs in the cities was jeopardized by the fact she was considered ‘too old to be employed’.

18 This pattern was common across the village; as a result, in this cohort, women’s educational level (up to primary school) tended to be lower than their brothers’ (middle school level).

19 For this generational cohort (now in their 1940s), most of their marriages were set up with introductions and their parents made the final say, very similar to their parents’ marriage. By contrast, the next generational cohort (now in their 1920s) could make a much freer choice among the potential partners introduced to them.
and their families away, the two daughters and their families were the main source of emotional and instrumental support to Father Zheng and his wife. Although daughters had played the role which was traditionally expected from sons, their labour was not duly compensated. Daughter Zheng did not receive any financial payment from her brothers. Mother Zheng only received some ‘thank you gesture’ money from her brother during Spring Festival for looking after her 86-year-old mother. When family discords arose, daughters sometimes had to take the initiative to mend relationships for the sake of their parents. Daughter Zheng made the first move with her sister-in-law so that her parents would not have a difficult time in future. In another household, when the mother failed to provide childcare to the sons’ families, the eldest daughter took the mother’s place and looked after her brothers’ children so as to prevent any wronged feelings towards her mother.

Associated with the changing role of daughters in old age support is the part a daughter-in-law plays in the household. Traditionally, while sons were considered the main providers of support for parents, it was their wives who undertook the daily care work (Zhan and Montgomery, 2003). Today, the daughters-in-law’s filial obligations towards the in-laws still remain but some care responsibilities have been transferred to the daughters. For many village interviewees, washing parents’ dirty clothes and bed sheets had become a taken-for-granted daughter’s job. None of these tasks had been taken on by the sons, instead they remained feminised and simply shifted between women within the patriarchal paradigm.

Despite the fact that daughters played an increasing role in caring for the parents in the context of migration, the patriarchal practice that only sons could inherit the parental house still persists. When I pointed it out as unfair to interviewees, most people commented just like Son Zheng: ‘this is the way it is’. Although Father Zheng did not question this practice, he recognised: ‘in terms of care for parents, in reality daughters are better than sons. But sons are needed to continue the family line’. Daughter Zheng was one of only a few daughters who openly felt this practice unfair, however she did not feel in a position to challenge ‘tradition in rural village’. The persistence of gendered arrangements and tradition such as patriarchal property inheritance still allowed sons more symbolic status and material benefits.

The daughters’ contribution to the natal household was considerable; on most occasions, these contributions were sacrifices they made for the maintenance of the collective welfare of the family. The virtue of sacrifice is historically gendered in China. Pre-modern Chinese history saw the pervasiveness of the rhetoric of female sacrifice, exemplified in the praise of virtuous wives and chaste widows (see Carlitz, 1994). In early twentieth century China, nationalist reformers considered the promotion of a long tradition of self-sacrifice among females as one of the strengths in Chinese tradition (Duara, 1998). In socialist China, the Communist revolutionary project was secured through a model of a sexless and sacrificing woman (Meng, 1993). Growing up in households and kinship continue to be the major sources of support to rural residents, this article also highlights the need to examine internal power relations and inequalities that may be obscured by the process of maintaining collective welfare of the family. The data showed that women had played a critical role in ensuring the physical and social reproduction across generations; however, the gendered division of labour and feminised care work often left rural women’s sacrifices and resilience unduly unrecognised.

6. Conclusion

Through an analysis of the strategies, arrangement, preferences and expectations of members in rural households, this article has outlined familial relations of support in both an early and contemporary context within rural families. It illustrates the webs of interdependence that feature in the daily strategies of householding and shows the foregrounding of the interconnectedness of family members at all stages in the life cycle. Instead of focusing on migration alone, it highlights the historical familial context in which contemporary forms of intergenerational transfers are shaped. In particular, it shows that the way in which migration affects care and support for older people is dependent upon the relations between older parents and adult children prior to and during migration. It finds that it would be over simplistic to suggest that migration is always detrimental to the older generation who stay behind. Migration choice is often made in a household context. Frequently, it was a strategy to enhance the collective welfare of the household and positively accepted by the older generation. Despite geographical distance, different family members worked together to pool resources for the collective welfare of the household. Contrary to 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 has negative effects upon old age care for seniors in the household.

This article further identified the role of gender in intra-household power relations. It showed that the caring, supportive and kin-keeping roles performed mainly by women played a critical role in maintaining the webs of interdependence and facilitating the bonds between generations in their daily householding. However, the gendered division of labour and feminised care work were not only at the expense of women’s own employment and migration opportunities but also trivialised women’s contribution to the maintenance of wellbeing of the household. In particular, I highlighted the role daughters played in the absence of migrating brothers in old age support: daughters were becoming the main providers of emotional and instrumental support for their parents. While helping to build and maintain the webs of interdependence, daughters’ labour is not duly valued and compensated. The combination of patrilocal marriage practice and patrilineal inheritance practice allows sons greater material benefits and symbolic status. Exactly because of such a caring role played by daughters in parents’ old age support: daughters were becoming the main providers of emotional and instrumental support for their parents. While helping to build and maintain the webs of interdependence, daughters’ labour is not duly valued and compensated. The combination of patrilocal marriage practice and patrilineal inheritance practice allows sons greater material benefits and symbolic status. Exactly because of such a caring role played by daughters in parents’ old age support: daughters were becoming the main providers of emotional and instrumental support for their parents. While helping to build and maintain the webs of interdependence, daughters’ labour is not duly valued and compensated. The combination of patrilocal marriage practice and patrilineal inheritance practice allows sons greater material benefits and symbolic status. Exactly because of such a caring role played by daughters in parents’ old age support: daughters were becoming the main providers of emotional and instrumental support for their parents. While helping to build and maintain the webs of interdependence, daughters’ labour is not duly valued and compensated. The combination of patrilocal marriage practice and patrilineal inheritance practice allows sons greater material benefits and symbolic status.

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