Family Ties and Filial Piety of Female China Migrant in Singapore

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OF FEMALE CHINA MIGRANTS IN SINGAPORE

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‘Xiao,’ or alternatively known as filial piety, is a Confucian value commonly adopted and cultivated to the functioning of families in China over the past decades. This concept decreed children’s obedience, loyalty, provision and care to their own parents (Zhan & Montgomery 2003), and it is a value resonated and reproduced by both the elderly and their children over generations.

Recent studies done about family and filial piety encompass the perspectives, expectations and the life satisfaction of elders particularly in rural China (eg. Xu and Chi 2011; Cong & Silverstein 2012). Findings from these viewpoints would affirm elders’ needs of filial piety for the sake of family harmony and life satisfaction. Other studies in the discourse of family include the correlation between the wellbeing of urban Chinese elders and economic funding as a form of filial piety practice (eg. Chen and Silverstein, 2000; Krause, Liang, & Gu, 1998). Trends in published work over the years would also include the typologies of intergenerational relationships between elders and their children and elder’s preference of sons over daughter-in-laws in terms of care provision. Most of these studies have used quantitative measures and surveys in determining what filial piety means to people and how it is practiced or manifested. As much as quantitative work and statistics are valued in studies, a qualitative method that encompasses *emic* or insider’s perspectives of the adult children who have to care for their parents, parents-in-law and their child is insufficient. Qualitative methods such as interviews or ethnographic fieldwork could reveal interesting dynamics within different families, and will be constructive in adding meanings to statistics.
Although they are mostly discussed in relation to the economic reforms that happened in late 1970s and early 1980s, another factor was not typically insinuated or elaborated within the discourse of filial piety; and that is globalization. Families are changing by the touch of globalization, one in which China has seen a skyrocketed flow of migration, not just from one province to other but also migration to outside of mainland China. When searching for articles on Chinese migrants, most of them were related to rural-urban migration, focusing on the inequalities faced by rural workers. In Myerson, Hou, Tang, Cheng, Wang and Ye (2010), they have found that rural people do not enjoy equal opportunities, prospects and well being on the same level as the urban residents.

However, articles about adult Chinese migrants in other countries are scarce. Migration has become a new contributing factor in the trajectory of a family’s functioning and could have impact on how filial piety is perceived and enacted. There are various recent studies about mainland China transnational families, and these researches are often carried out in the United States of America. These studies of Chinese transnationals situated in the Western context give fruitful insight about the challenges Chinese immigrants face as they try to reconcile traditional familial values with globalization (Lieber, Nihira and Tan 2004). Therefore, this study seeks to explore another context of individual Chinese transnationals; and that context is in Singapore. Comparing mainland China family patterns in United States and Singapore promises a further comprehensive understanding of how globalization has shaped intergenerational relations across different cultural context.

Studying family relationships of Chinese migrants in Singapore is sociologically significant to unravel the extent of how family obligations are redefined and how the
importance of the cultivated Confucian value should be rethought of (e.g. Liu 2000; Sung 1998; Teo 2003). Difference in familial relations should be accounted for, and the practices or meaning of ‘filial piety’ to migrant adult children should be re-examined because of the geographical distance and temporal space. Providing support at a distance may restrain positive interactions among family members with strong filial commitment (Rossi & Rossi 1990). The vast geographical distance could also potentially engender a Chinese transnational to circumvent ‘filial piety’ with her family – in which this study seeks to discover various effects of globalization.

The following body of literature serves to explore filial piety at ground level of China, which forms a fundamental basis of the normative practices in China families. As the literature progresses, the factor of gender would emerge, as some researchers have found daughters to hold more responsibilities economically and physically towards elder Chinese parents. Finally, the literature review will include studies of mainland China migrants, adopting concepts from rural-to-urban and international migration; and to reaffirm that families are indeed changing and diverting from traditional values. The paper will utilize these reviews to study the changing family structures in China and to re-examine ‘filial piety’ among female China migrants in Singapore.

**INTERGENERATIONAL TIES AND GENDER**

Guo, Chi and Silverstein (2012) did a comparative, longitudinal survey and quantitative study on the intergenerational relations in rural China, the West and European societies. They typified five variables such as “tight-knit” and “distant reciprocal” parent-child ties. They concluded that there are strong, normative expectations of interdependence obligations in families. Yang & Neal (2006) added that economic growth and 21st century political reforms might create new patterns in
family interactions. Two of the typologies that accounted for geographic distance are crucial to our study of China migrants in Singapore. They are the 1) distant ascending ties and 2) distant reciprocal ties; both similar in terms of great geographic distance and minimal contact between generations. Distant ascending ties is predominantly upward financial support while distant reciprocal ties involved monetary support exchange (parents and children financially support one another).

The researchers have found that daughters were more likely to have distant ascending ties with parents than sons; which they felt contradicted the belief that sons predominantly handle old age care. It might indicate that rural Chinese women were able to provide financial assistance because of their out-migration and labor participation, but Cook and Dong (2011) would argue that there are more layers to this discovery than just monetary support; calling for gendered approach to studying filial piety.

Cook and Dong argued that post economic reforms have caused pressures on Chinese women because of their dual roles as care givers and income earners. They would rebut Man Guo, Chi and Silverstein by questioning them if those relationship types are gendered, and urge them to examine further how women fared in relation to men. Cook and Dong asserted that the provision of care for children, elderly and the sick remained predominantly on women’s responsibilities. They argued that because of patrilineal norms, married Chinese women were expected to care for parents-in-law in order to earn their husbands’ approval and support. Additionally, the influence of the One-Child Policy had impacted married couples to undertake the sole responsibility for four parents and one child; in which most carework rests on women (Chen and Standing 2007).
Cong and Silverstein (2012) would postulate ‘gender’ differently from Cook and Dong by contending that modernization had brought about daughters to assume more active roles in their elder parents’ lives because of society’s gradual acceptance of gender equality ideology, women’s economic autonomy and increased women’s self-esteem (e.g., Xie and Zhu 2009; Zhang 2007). In a survey done in rural China, participants rejected patriarchy as a key aspect of a family system, whilst simultaneously supporting concepts like filial piety and other Confucian values (Wang 2004). In other words, filial piety was no longer seen a dominant reason to take care of parents, neither is patriarchy repressing them, but other factors had empowered daughters to take on more roles. Globalization could play a part in changing these gender ideologies.

While women typically bear the role of monetary provider, Goh and Kuczynski (2010) would disagree to Cook and Dong, and Cong and Silverstein by postulating that many studies have largely overlooked the role played by grandparents in contemporary China as joint caregivers with adult parents in raising an only child. They would argue that daughters are not entirely the most burdened or the utmost responsible one. Logan, Bian and Bian (1998) found that three-generational co-residence in urban China is a practical decision for child-rearing. Goh and Kuczynski also propounded that Chinese adult children do depend on their ageing parents for social, childcare, household and financial support; which earlier, Man Guo, Chi and Silverstein would typify this as the *distant reciprocal ties* in which parents and adult children partake in interexchange of finance. The implication of acknowledging the social worth of grandparents in raising Chinese migrant’s child could mean that family ties are strengthened because of this dependency despite the geographical distance. Noticeably, Goh and Kuczynski could spot this patterned discovery and
rebutted the methods of content analyses by Cook and Dong because Goh and Kuczynski have utilized ethnographic narratives by following families for over 6 months, which could reveal things not captured on paper.

However, we should notice that this difference is attributed to the fact that Cook and Dong’s article was a mixed of both rural and urban China, while Goh and Kuczynski is mainly about urban China. Thus, when treading our arguments, we should heavily account for female Chinese migrants’ historical family background; because these could have different implications on family ties and filial piety based on their social class and whether they come from rural or urban areas in China.

**INDIVIDUAL CHINA MIGRANTS**

After discussing intergenerational family ties and gender relations on the ground level of China, we will now further narrow our focus to immigrant China individuals who reside overseas for work purposes, leaving their families behind. The base studies of families living in China will be used as contrasts and comparisons to family relations of individual China migrants working internationally.

Although she focused on the process of full family movements, Glick’s (2010) research about individual immigrants is beneficial to our study. She had found that individual immigrants make decisions not out of full agency and desires but their decision to migrate, the choice of destination, and the plans for a successful life are tied to their family. Here, she asserted that immigration policies have the power to shape aspects of family life. Thus, specifically studying Chinese migrants in Singapore would also require in-depth reading and statistics of local immigration policies. Amongst other things, Glick discussed at length about the selectivity of migration in which it refers to the nonrandom process in determining the person who
will be migrating for economic benefits of a China family. Though not explicitly stated, the very act of a collective selection process may reveal insights about altered expectations of filial piety within a family.

Further supporting this argument, Guo, Chi and Silverstein (2011) in their other article, noted that geographic distance between parents and adult children is an important factor in children’s tendencies to maintain relationships and provide support to their families. It was hypothesized that filial obligation lessened among adult children who live far away from their elderly parents. However, the authors argued that the consequences of geographic dispersion on intergenerational relationships vary according to different individuals. This area was untested and requires ethnography approach or interview methods that could enlighten collectively the correlation between distance and familial relationships.

Being in a new country of migration could also mean inculcating cultures of different lifestyles. LaFramboise, Coleman and Gerton (1993) called people who have access to two cultural capitals as ‘cosmophiles,’ denoting persons who are able to adapt to two cultures easily. Migrants are likely to be influenced by urban lifestyles and customs (Davin 1996), further supported by a concern raised by Lieber, Nihira and Tan (2004) in which migrants struggle to adopt Western skills yet maintaining their cultural values. Acculturation, according to Glick, which is the process of learning other’s cultures, may have negative consequences for family dynamics and intergenerational conflict. However, Myerson, Hou, Tang, Cheng, Wang and Ye (2010) have indicated that China’s generations of migrants seeking career opportunities in other developed areas can compromise between the tightly knit agrarian family, the capitalist family, and the nationalist and communist citizens.
Thus, studying the different nuances and assimilation issues that individual China migrants face is beneficial to understanding the shifting ideas of filial piety and changing families in China.

CONCLUSION

Filial piety has been practiced in the past decades. Discursive trends about this Confucian value includes China elder’s perspectives of filial expectations as well as the typologies of intergenerational relationship between elders and their offspring. One common theme not explored in variety is globalization, where we witness a Changing Family in China; not just rural-to-urban migration but international migration. Most international China migrant studies are in the United States. Studying China migrants in Singapore will give insight to how filial piety is redefined due to geographical distance. The literature review starts on the basis of normative family relationships, and then moves on to encompass international migration to show that indeed, families are changing among China families. The roles of adult China women in families, be it rural or urban, are changed as well, and they will be the research subject of our study.
REFERENCES


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