Changing notion of filial piety in urban China

Theresa Ong
Title: Changing notions of filial piety in urban China

Name: Theresa Ong Hui Jie

Course: HS4008 Social Institutions of Contemporary China
Introduction

Historically, the family has been the source of support and care for the elders in China, and filial piety has been a fundamental tenet in Chinese culture. Filial piety includes showing respect, obeying, pleasing, and offering both material and non-material support to the parents (Ng, 2002). Displaying filial piety traditionally involves absolute subordination from adult children to their parents, and prioritizing parents above all other responsibilities (Sereny, 2013). Parents in China have expected their adult children to fulfill their filial responsibilities and regarded taking care of elderly as one of the key functions of the family (Xu, 2012). While research on filial piety in China is vast and extensive, this literature review paper will only focus demographically on urban China. In contemporary urban China, market reform and modernisation have fundamentally shifted China’s historical foundation of filial piety. Changing social conditions redefine children’s obligations to their parents. As a result, attitudes and meanings of filial piety have undergone changes. Though there have been alternate arguments on how filial piety has remained robustly intact in China despite modernisation, this paper will focus on the modernisation perspective and the changing actions of filial piety in urban China. This literature review will aim to: (1) highlight how modernisation has altered the concept of filial piety in urban China, (2) and further synthesize the literature by examining the modern expressions of filial piety in both adult children and elderly parents’ perspectives. The paper concludes with the key points picked up from the literature review and gaps in current literature.
Literature Review

1) Modernisation Perspective

Several studies have argued that modernisation has changed the notion of filial piety in China. Structural-functional theories predict erosion of filial piety as an inevitable consequence of modernisation in China. Aboderin (2004) argues that modernisation changes social structures and aspirations, which alters the meaning of filial piety and the practices of its obligations. For example, Cheung and Kwan (2009) found that in cities with higher levels of modernisation, the higher the reduction in affirmations of filial piety, and lower filial piety behaviors. Likewise, Zhan (2004) also argues social structures play a crucial role in shaping one-child generation students’ attitudes toward filial responsibility in urban China. Findings revealed families with higher economic conditions had a positive impact on young adult’s attitudes on filial piety. Conversely, willingness to care for their elderly parents were negatively related when children saw the caregiving responsibility as conflicting to adult children’s jobs. This supports the argument of the ideological shift towards individualization and the sacrifice of kinship for self-interest.

Traditionally, filial piety was seen as an authoritative obligation, where children are guided by “gratitude and willingness to repay one’s parents” and to care for their elderly parents’ needs (Yeh, Yi, Taso, & Wan, 2013). However, the authoritative aspect of filial piety has now been undermined in urban China, with recent studies suggesting an exchange of care between children and parents stemmed from pragmatic and personal choices instead (Lee & Kwok, 2005). The change in attitude towards a more pragmatic and contemporary experience of filial piety in urban China is also displayed through the voluntary contract between older parents and adult
children concerning parental provisions (Chou, 2011). Due to the trend of diminishing filial involvement among adult children, the Family Support Agreement (FSA) was promoted and monitored by the government as a means for parents to receive support from adult children. While the agreement’s “moral persuasion is based on filial piety” (Chou, 2011), it is legally regulated and monitored. Laws now govern the filial responsibilities and legally oblige urban adult children to care for their aging parents, removing the moral values that once guided the notion of filial piety in China. This pragmatic and personal choice is reflective of the social and cultural change in urban China’s filial responsibilities, which are a result of urbanization and governmental policies.

In terms of the elderly perspective, research by Li, Long, Essex, Sui, and Gao (2012) reviewed that variations between rural and urban elderly parents’ perceptions of filial piety and family care giving appear to reflect the differences in socioeconomic development and institutional structures between rural and urban China. Unlike rural elderly, urban residents recognize the separation between filial piety ideals and reality, and adjust their expectations accordingly. Urban aging parents casted doubts on adult children’s ability to provide long-term support. Thus, it is evident that while filial piety still remains; the effects of modernisation on the changes in social structures and aspirations have shifted urban Chinese citizens, both adult children and their parents’ view on filial piety and responsibilities.

2) Expressions of filial piety

Studies have indicated that the meanings and practices of filial piety in the context of changing societies have been modified and reinterpreted in various ways. With
modernisation and urbanization, taking care of aging parents in urban China comes in a variety of different forms, and such manifestations of filial piety include providing monetary support and coresidence (Chi & Mao, 2011). In light of modernisation, new filial practices such as provision of institutional care for older parents in China have also emerged (Zhan, Feng, & Luo, 2008).

Financial Support. Financial support, instead of actual care giving, has become a primary expression of filial obligation for adult children in urban China (Cheung & Kwan, 2009). Similar to their adult children, elderly parents also view financial support from adult children as a positive expression, and perceive their families as harmonious (Chi & Mao, 2011). The increase in education and employment for urban citizens in China allow greater income and economic resources for adult children. Tangible financial support now translates as a filial act for both urban adult children and their aging parents, especially in urban cities (Xu, 2012).

Gender also has a role in filial piety behaviour. Traditionally, married sons and their wives were responsible for taking care of the sons’ parents, and daughter-in-laws served the husbands’ families instead (Deutsch, 2006). However, Deutsch argued China’s one-child policy has undermined filial piety and patrilineal norms in cities. In recent years, daughters are valued as much as sons, or even more so. Unlike in Imperial China, where sons were responsible for the care of their parents, in the early 21st century both sons and daughters feel responsible for their own parents. Over the years, the patriarchal structure of the traditional Chinese family has been broken as married daughters now provide more financial support to elderly parents than married sons do (Xie and Zhu, 2009). This change in gender norms can be
explained by the daughters’ access to resources, such as education and wage employment in urban China today.

**Coresidence.** Residing with elderly parents is also another means of expression of filial piety for urban adult children. China, like many Asian societies, has a strong traditional filial responsibility rooted in intergenerational coresidence. Using quantitative data, Zhang and Luo (2014) showed that the greater the expression of filial piety by adult children, the higher the likelihood these adult children would coreside with their elderly parents. Results also showed that married adult children are more likely to stay with elderly parents either because of the parental help provided for grandchild care, or because elderly parents have provided financial support previously. Significantly, adult children who own homes are less likely to live with their elderly parents than those who do not own their own places. Results from this quantitative research suggest that coresidence in urban China is not just simply for filial piety and attending to parents’ needs. Intergenerational coresidence is also influenced by adult children’s socioeconomic resources, values, and previous acceptance of grandchild care work.

However, the motivations behind adult children’s filial act of intergenerational coresidence are different to the elderly parents’ perception of coresidence. Those who received financial support from adult children perceived their children as good-natured, but those who coresided with their married children considered their children as pious and dutiful to the elderly (Chi & Mao, 2011). It is clear that while filial obligation is still an important role in urban China, the meanings and practices of filial piety have undergone changes and needs to be understood in terms of the
social and material context of both adult children (Qi, 2015), and their elderly parents too.

*Eldercare institutions.* Changing attitudes about filial piety in urban China have also resulted in an increase in elderly parents placed in eldercare institutions. Zhan, Feng, and Luo (2008) highlighted urban adult children now negotiate the notion of filial piety in terms of their “own social worlds and on the basis of their own social locations and contexts”. With the increased modernisation and wage employment, urban adult children are increasingly unavailable to provide for the elderly parents. Thus, urban adult children view the benefits of eldercare institutions as a major explanation for the new manifestation of filial piety in China. Zhan et. al (2008) argued that the meaning of providing institutional care for elderly parents has shifted from stigma to a new interpretation of filial behaviour. Zhan, Feng, Chen, and Feng (2011) provide a contextualized understanding of the reasons for institutional placement in the eyes of adult children. Chinese families whom sent their parents to urban eldercare institutions in Nanjing struggled to manage the cultural demands of elder care, and managing stigma of parents being in eldercare institutions have been a key issue for these children.

In another city in China, Chen (2011) conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with elderly residents in eldercare institutions in Shanghai, and highlighted that elderly parents display a more reciprocal understanding of the new filial support behaviour shown by their adult children. Elder residents consider their children’s lives and are “more willing to accept institutional caregiving” to ease family caregiving burden on their children. When adult children show a reduced level of filial
piety than expected, elderly parents tend to lower their expectations of filial piety. The changing social contexts in cities are now altering the cultural meaning of placing elderly parents in institutional care, and coresidence is no longer the only way for children to care for their parents’ living arrangements. This shows that urbanization has socially and culturally reconstructed the notion of filial piety and family caregiving behaviour in urban China.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, though filial piety is still maintained in urban China, modernisation and urbanization has shifted the notion of filial piety. While the culture of filial piety is not declining in urban China, the structural changes due to modernisation influence and predict urban adult children’s filial responsibilities and attitudes. The motivations and attitudes behind the filial obligations and responsibilities of urban adult children are due to the social and material contexts in which the urban family now operates in. Expressions of filial piety in urban China include financial support and taking care of the living arrangements of aging parents, and these studies were understood through the lens of urban adult children. But few studies have focused on aging parents’ perspectives on modern expressions of living arrangements, which include eldercare institutions and coresiding with adult children. This new way of thinking of filial responsibility of adult children among the elderly parents reflect the changes in China’s traditional filial culture (Zheng, et. al, 2012). The gap in current literature in understanding the shift in reasons for elderly parents’ perception and concept of filial piety needs to be examined, especially so when the aging population of China is set to rapidly grow in the near future. Specifically, research needs to be done on understanding how and why the elderly people in these two different living
arrangements, both eldercare institutions and coresiding with adult children, understand and interpret filial piety and responsibilities from adult children. A comparative micro framework between these two groups of elderly parents will enhance current knowledge and understanding of the new attitudes towards filial piety among the elderly parents in urban China.


Zhan, H. J. (2004). Socialization or social structure: investigating predictors of attitudes toward filial responsibility among Chinese urban youth from one- and


