Two levels of agency: the negotiation of intergenerational support in Chinese families

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Introduction

Intergenerational family support has been playing a vital role in China’s welfare provisions, especially regarding the old-age support arrangements. Filial piety, intergenerational contract, and intergenerational solidarity are among the most discussed theoretical frameworks that explain the nature of these support arrangements. However, given the rapid changes in demographic and family structure, the shifts in social and cultural norms, and the extended coverage of public pension schemes, little is known about how older Chinese and their families arrange and negotiate intergenerational support under the new circumstances. It also remains to be examined how far these theoretical frameworks may offer renewed insights in understanding intergenerational support relationships in a changing context. This chapter aims to provide new empirical evidence on the negotiation of intergenerational support in Chinese families. Moreover, it proposes a two-level analytical framework to understand both individual agency and familial agency in the arrangement and negotiation of intergenerational support.

By the end of 2020, more than 264 million Chinese had reached the age of 60 years and above, accounting for 18.7% of the total population in China; meanwhile, the working-age population (15 to 59 years old) had decreased to 63.4% (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). Such demographic change not only poses an enduring challenge to the society and its welfare provisions, but also has a significant impact on older individuals and their families. For instance, one of the implications of the ageing population in China, reflected at the family level, is the changes in family structure (Peng, 2011; Su, Hu and Peng, 2017). With the ‘baby-boomer generation’ entering their old age, and the one-child generation having now reached the age of marriage and childrearing, the ‘4–2–1/+’ multi-generational family structure becomes more common in China – where a working-age couple needs to
take care of four older parents and one or more young children (for example, see Abrahamson, 2016; Zang and Zhao, 2017).

The changes in demographic and family structure and their impact on intergenerational families also need to be contextualised in China’s recent socio-economic developments. For instance, the regional disparities in economic growth and imbalanced labour market have been contributing to the massive domestic migration from less developed areas to more developed ones (for example, see Cheng et al, 2019). One of the major impacts of domestic migration, at the family level, is an increasing geographic distance among family members, which further challenges the informal old-age support arrangements in both urban and rural China. In the meantime, the Chinese cultural and social norms are also undergoing a series of changes. The traditional Chinese filial piety, which requires one to unconditionally provide for and show obedience to their older parents (Yeh et al, 2013), is being contested particularly by the younger generations and re-interpreted by both generations during the process of modernisation (Mehta and Ko, 2004; Croll, 2006; Guo et al, 2020).

In 2009, after a successful pilot public pension programme in Baoji, Shaanxi Province, the Chinese government initiated the nationwide New Rural Social Pension scheme (NRSP). This new public pension scheme aims to extend the formal public pension coverage to the long–excluded rural residents. In 2011, a parallel programme in urban areas, the Urban Resident Social Pension scheme (URSP) was introduced to include urban residents who were not eligible for the existing employees’ pension schemes. The new public pension system aims to provide a fully covered income protection to older Chinese. However, given the primary role of the Chinese (intergenerational) family in protecting and providing for its members, there is little research exploring in depth the arrangement and negotiation of intergenerational support in the context of the changing family structure and the new public pension arrangements.

Based on 14 in–depth semi–structured interviews with older Chinese in Baoji, Shaanxi Province, where the New Rural Social Pension scheme was first initiated, this study aims to explore how older Chinese and their families arrange and negotiate for intergenerational support. The remainder of the chapter will first explore the existing intergenerational and family theories (for example, Bengtson and Schrader, 1982; Connidis and McMullin, 2002; Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, 2019) and propose a theoretical framework of two levels of agency – individual agency and familial agency – for the analysis of intergenerational support. It then moves on to describe the interviewing and thematic analysis approaches used in this study. After that, the chapter draws together the findings on the main themes, including gendered support arrangement, ambivalent attitudes and suppressed need, negotiation strategies, and the cross–generational consensus that family is a primary
socio-economic actor. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the two levels of agency in the arrangement and negotiation of intergenerational support in Chinese families.

**Family, intergenerational relationships and two levels of agency**

As one of the most influential theoretical models for studies of intergenerational relationships, Bengtson and his colleagues’ intergenerational solidarity model (Bengtson and Schrader, 1982; Bengtson and Roberts, 1991; Parrott and Bengtson, 1999; Bengtson et al, 2002) provides a framework for understanding the ‘building blocks’ of relationships and interactions between generations within the family sphere. The six inter-related constructs, including family structure, associational solidarity, affectional solidarity, consensual solidarity, functional solidarity, and normative solidarity, highlight the multidimensionality of intergenerational interactions and have been applied in studies on intergenerational relationships both in China and beyond (for example, see Izuhara, 2010; Guo, Chi and Silverstein, 2012; Brandt and Deindl, 2013; Lin and Yi, 2013).

Admitting the significant contribution of the solidarity model to the understanding of the multidimensionality of intergenerational relations, however, one may argue that solidarity alone is hardly enough to capture the whole picture of the relationships between generations, especially in the changing time when different values and norms collide. Prior to the intergenerational ambivalence approach, studies on intergenerational relations tended to interpret consensus and shared values as solidarity and the negative aspects of family life as ‘an absence of solidarity’ (Lüscher and Pillemer, 1998, p 414). This approach simplified the complex and dynamic relationship between generations within the family sphere and reduce it to an ‘either–or’ situation. Instead, conflicts arise from daily interactions, and sometimes conflicts may even result from solidarity itself (Lüscher and Pillemer, 1998). For instance, intergenerational conflicts are more likely to be generated among inter-dependent generations (Braiker and Kelley, 1979).

Many scholars have been trying to define intergenerational ambivalence and explore its implications for studies on intergenerational relationships. For instance, Lüscher and Pillemer (1998, p 416) define intergenerational ambivalence as ‘contradictions in relationships between parents and adult offspring that cannot be reconciled’. The contradictions in this context are discussed at two levels, that is, contradictions at the social structure level such as roles, norms, and expectations, and contradictions at the subjective level such as cognitions, emotions and motivations (Lüscher and Pillemer, 1998). Connidis and McMullin (2002, p 558) further develop the concept of intergenerational ambivalence as ‘structurally created contradictions that
are made manifest in interaction’. They agree with Lüscher and Pillemer’s (1998) definition of the two-level of contradictions, but they underline individuals’ agencies in the negotiation of relationships within the constraints of structured social relations (Connidis and McMullin, 2002).

The previous discussion paves the way for using intergenerational ambivalence as a bridging concept to link the analyses of contradictions at the micro, meso, and macro levels (Lüscher, 2002; Connidis, 2015). For instance, the concept links psychological ambivalence experienced by the individuals, the contradictions in social institutional resources and requirements, and the macro-level systemic inequalities caused by the structured social relations such as gender and age. Moreover, it also links individuals’ attempt to exercise agencies to negotiate in the intergenerational relationships to ‘the opportunities and constraints embedded in social institutions, social structure, culture, and economic and political processes’ (Connidis, 2015, p 79). The latter, especially social policies, are also crucial to understand ‘sources of ambivalence, their implications for negotiating relationships, and solutions to socially created ambivalence that go beyond individual adaptation’ (Connidis, 2015, p 83). For instance, the way in which the relationship is negotiated is not only determined by the resources owned by the individuals and the cultural values and beliefs held by them, but might also be shaped by (the lack of) social policies which can either contribute to avoiding intergenerational conflicts via eliminating and/or reducing social structural contradictions (Bengtson et al, 2002; Connidis and McMullin, 2002).

The intergenerational ambivalence theory highlights the individual agency in the negotiation process; however, it fails to take familial agency into account. To understand family and the role of familial agency in the arrangement and negotiation of intergenerational support under the wider social structure, one should consider the economical, sociological, ideological, and political implications of family. For instance, family plays an important role in income redistribution, labour supply and consumption; family provides for care needs and arranges relations across generations; family has an impact on the continuity and change in values; family can be viewed as a site of social control (Daly, 2010). Family can also be seen as an economic actor in terms of stocking ‘moral capital’, a concept coined by Silverstein et al to refer to ‘the internalised social norms that obligate children to support their older parents’ (2012, p 1246).

The concept of family as a socio-economic actor is further developed by Papadopoulos and Roumpakis (2017, 2019), where the roles of family in generating relational goods and organising different types of economic practices are highlighted. Their work has also drawn attention to the familial agency in mobilising and redistributing resources to absorb social risks and maximise the collective wellbeing (Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, 2017, 2019). Empirical studies on China’s intergenerational relationships have, to
a greater or lesser extent, touched the dual roles of family in organising and
facilitating social production and reproduction (see Roumpakis, 2020 for
informality in social production and social reproduction) and highlighted
the familial agency in coping with structural constraints such as geographic
distance caused by China’s massive domestic migration (Lee, Parish and Willis,
1994; Cong and Silverstein, 2012; Gruijters, 2018; Qi, 2018; Gu, 2021;
Zhou, Kan and He, 2021). The familial agency is realised by, among others,
the flexibility and resilience of China’s intergenerational support network
and the renegotiation and reinterpretation of filial piety (Huang and Chang,
2020; Wang, 2021). The new patterns of intergenerational relationships in
Chinese families indicate that the Chinese family acts as a corporate group
(Lee, Parish and Willis, 1994; Cong and Silverstein, 2012; Gruijters, 2018)
which actively adjusts to new challenges and situations, makes familial rational
choices (Huang, 2011) and long-term arrangements to protect its members.

Bringing intergenerational theories and family theories together, this
chapter proposes an analytical framework of two-level agency to understand
the arrangement and negotiation of intergenerational support in Chinese
families. It examines both individual agency – how older individuals make
sense, manage, or adapt to the intergenerational ambivalence at different
levels – and familial agency – how family as a socio-economic actor protect
its members by mobilising, allocating, and redistributing resources via
intergenerational support network.

Research design

Research data were collected via one-to-one, semi-structured, telephone
interviews with older Chinese people. Ideally face-to-face interviewing
approach would have been used to better collect non-verbal information
(for example, the body language, the facial expressions, and the atmosphere)
and build rapport relationship (Brinkmann, 2013). However, given the
COVID-19 pandemic restrictions at the time of the study being carried
out and followed the instructions of the Ethics Committee, the interviews
were conducted via telephone calls.

As a special form of conversation (for example, ‘conversation with a
purpose’ as mentioned in Burgess, 1984, p 102), qualitative interview allows
the researcher to use interactional dialogues (Brinkmann, 2013) to explore in-
depth the lived experience of older individuals about their arrangement and
negotiation of intergenerational support. By talking interactively with older
people, the researcher can obtain everyday knowledge of the arrangement
and the process of negotiation via older people’s account and interpretation.
A topic guide was developed based on the research aims and refined after
a pilot interview, which aims to serve as a tool to facilitate the interviews
with both consistency as well as flexibility.
Participants were recruited from Baoji, a prefecture-level city in western Shaanxi province (as shown in Figure 5.1), and one of the first pilot cities of NRSP. Baoji is the second largest city in Shaanxi province with more than three million residents by the end of 2020. Among them, 57% of the population are urban residents and 43% are rural residents, and residents aged 60 or older account for 23% of the total population (Shaanxi Statistics Office, 2021). At the time the interviews were conducted, the flat-rate NRSP/URSP benefits were ¥148 (ca £16) per month, plus a monthly ¥50- yuan (ca £5.5) cash transfers to residents aged 70 and above. Although there were no official statistics of the average pensions for employees in Baoji, for example, the Enterprise Employee Basic Pension (EEBP) or the Government and Institution Pension (GIP) benefits. To provide a general picture at the national level, according to Zhu and Walker’s (2018) analysis, the average pension benefits for EEBP or GIP recipients can be as great as 14–20 times as the average pension benefits for NRSP or URSP recipients. The inclusion criteria for participation in this study were that participants need to be aged 60 or older, in physical and mental condition that allows for verbal communication, and receiving or used to be receiving any kind of support from adult children. Purposive sampling strategy was applied to establish ‘a good correspondence’ between research questions and participants (Bryman, 2016, p 458), and to achieve representativeness regarding the experience, knowledge, and practice of the phenomenon (Flick, 2007). Specifically, participants included both urban and rural residents, as well as people with different public pension status. Fourteen participants took part in the interviews with informed consent. Among them, there are 11 women and three men; ten rural residents and four urban residents; one recipient of GIP, one recipient of EEBP, nine recipients of NRSP, two recipients of URSP, and one participant who did not enrol into any public pension scheme; five participants aged between 60 and 69, seven participants aged between 70 and 79, and two participants aged above 80 (more information about the participants can be found in Table 5.1).

The interviews were audio-recorded (informed consent obtained) and transcribed anonymously into text materials for analysis. The thematic analysis approach, as informed by Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2022) and Attride-Stirling’s (2001) work, was applied to identify, analyse, report, and interpret themes that are related to the arrangement and negotiation of intergenerational support in Chinese families.

Gendered support arrangement

The interviews show that intergenerational family support in China can be in different forms (such as financial, practical, emotional, care, and housing support) and flows upward and downward across three generations. But such
Figure 5.1: Location of Baoji within Shaanxi province

Source: This map was obtained from Ding et al (2021) under an open access licence (Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License). Text was added to indicate the location of Baoji within Shaanxi Province.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee code</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Urban/rural</th>
<th>Public pension</th>
<th>Co-residence with adult children</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>No. of adult children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Government and Institution Pension (GIP)</td>
<td>No, living alone</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>2 sons &amp; 1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>New Rural Social Pension (NRSP)</td>
<td>Yes, living with daughter</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>2 sons &amp; 2 daughters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Not participated into any public pension schemes</td>
<td>Yes, living with son</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>1 son &amp; 1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>New Rural Social Pension (NRSP)</td>
<td>Yes, living with son</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3 sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Enterprise Employee Basic Pension (EEBP)</td>
<td>No, living with partner</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1 son &amp; 1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>New Rural Social Pension (NRSP)</td>
<td>No, living alone</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>2 sons &amp; 1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>New Rural Social Pension (NRSP)</td>
<td>No, living with grandchildren</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2 sons &amp; 1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>New Rural Social Pension (NRSP)</td>
<td>Yes, living with son</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1 son &amp; 3 daughters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>New Rural Social Pension (NRSP)</td>
<td>No, living alone</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>2 sons &amp; 2 daughters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Urban Resident Social Pension (URSP)</td>
<td>No, living with partner</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1 son &amp; 1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Urban Resident Social Pension (URSP)</td>
<td>No, living with partner</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2 sons &amp; 1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 12</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>New Rural Social Pension (NRSP)</td>
<td>No, living with grandchildren</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1 son &amp; 2 daughters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>New Rural Social Pension (NRSP)</td>
<td>Yes, living with son</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>2 sons &amp; 2 daughters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 14</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>New Rural Social Pension (NRSP)</td>
<td>Yes, living with son</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>2 sons &amp; 1 daughter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
support arrangements tend to be highly gendered. Taking a rural multi-generational family as an example, Figure 5.2 illustrates how intergenerational support is arranged asymmetrically between a son and a daughter, and how older people’s expectations of support differs between a son and a daughter. Before adult children get married, both the daughter and the son received financial support from their parents (denoted by the ‘F’ in the downward arrow at the very left of Figure 5.2). However, such support was highly skewed to the son (denoted by the solid shaded figure in the upper stream of Figure 5.2) to increase the son’s prospect of getting married and having children, or the son’s ‘marriageability’ as described by Eklund (2018). This is due to the social expectation that being a homeowner is the precondition for a man to marry a wife and that the husband’s parents need to provide such housing-related financial support (denoted by the ‘H’ in the downward arrow in the upper stream of Figure 5.2).

After the son’s marriage, older people might continue to provide financial support to the son and his new nuclear family. Furthermore, once the son has a child, older people would also provide grandparental childcare support (denoted by the ‘CC’ in the downward arrow in the upper stream of Figure 5.2). But such support, along with practical support on household chores, is often deemed by older people as to daughter-in-law specifically (denoted by the dotted light figure in the upper stream of Figure 5.2). This, in a sense, is also a reflection of the gendered view of older people on the division of caring and housework task. As a return, the son’s family is expected to provide financial support and co-residence living arrangement to older parents (denoted by the ‘F’ and ‘R’ in the upward arrow in the upper stream of Figure 5.2). Such expectation grows with age, especially when older people are no longer capable of taking care of themselves. Similarly, implicitly or explicitly, daughters-in-law are then expected to perform the duties of daily care (denoted by the ‘DC’ in the upward arrow in the upper stream of Figure 5.2).

On the other side, the daughter (as shown in the lower stream of Figure 5.2) is treated by her natal family as a part-outsider once getting married: compared to her brother, the daughter (denoted by the dotted light figure in the lower stream of Figure 5.2) will only receive negligible financial and/or childcare support from older parents. Accordingly, daughters are not assumed or expected to take the responsibility of taking care of their parents.

Following is an example where the daughter was excluded from receiving extensive support from her parents, meanwhile, she was also exempted from the obligations of supporting her own parents.

‘I didn’t help my daughter with childcare. Her parents-in-law were responsible for that. It is just the tradition. When my daughter got married, she became one of their [her partner’s]
Figure 5.2: Intergenerational support arrangement from a gendered perspective

20s–60s  Grandparent phase
60s–70s  Transitional phase
70s–80s  Care-required phase
80s+

Son

Labour incomes

Son and his new nuclear family

NRSP

Support that is highly expected by older people

Daughter and her new nuclear family

NRSP

Support that is not expected (yet received) by older people

Labour incomes

Source: Researcher’s own work, based on the interviews
family members. Her responsibility lies in her parents-in-law. I don’t count on my daughters, either.’ (Interviewee 9, female, 79 years old, rural hukou, recipient of NRSP)

Nevertheless, the interviews show that daughters not only provided more emotional and practical support such as frequent visits and help with housework but would also, sometimes together with their partners (denoted by the solid shaded figure in the lower stream of Figure 5.2), provided financial support to older parents. For instance, the following participant had two sons and a daughter. He offered more than ¥300,000 housing-related financial support to his sons. He had also been providing childcare support to both sons, but he had never helped his daughter with childcare or purchasing a home. When he talked about his daughter, he said:

‘The meat and vegetables I eat, clothes and shoes I wear, they are all bought by my daughter. When my wife went into the hospital, when I went to see a doctor, it was my daughter and son-in-law who paid for it. When I was busy with reaping wheat, my son-in-law came to see me and gave me a few hundred yuan before he left. He said I might need money for reaping wheat. I didn’t want the money, but he just left it on the cupboard and walked away. [long sigh] Sometime I think I am relying too much on my daughter. My daughter and son-in-law are taking care of everything. If I need something, I don’t need to do anything but just open my mouth (say it), and they would always bring it to me. They would come back every two or three weeks, always get me some daily necessities. Even my sons couldn’t treat me better.’ (Interviewee 7, male, 65 years old, rural hukou, recipient of NRSP)

Ambivalent attitudes and suppressed need

It is found in the interviews that older people experience ambivalent attitudes towards the negotiation of intergenerational support. On one hand, negotiation is often stigmatised, and such stigmatisation has been internalised by older people themselves – it is interpreted by older people as a sign of being dependent/needy, disharmony, or the failure of filial parenting. For instance, interviewees would feel “being a burden/trouble” (Interviewee 2, 69 years old, recipient of NRSP; Interviewee 14, 74 years old, recipient of NRSP) if they need to ask for support from adult children. Some interviewees might also claim that there is no need for negotiation because “they (adult children) are filial children” (Interviewee 4, 70 years
old, recipient of NRSP), or that they are “not at that point (to discuss about intergenerational support arrangement) yet” (Interviewee 6, 63 years old, recipient of NRSP). The ideal arrangement, in the narratives of almost all interviewees, is that adult children take the initiatives to offer support, regardless older parents need/accept it or not, as such initiatives demonstrate good relationships and filial behaviours.

At the same time, participants have shown a strong apprehension of the financial pressures on the younger generation, for example:

‘I don’t want to ask (adult children) for help. They have family to support and mortgages to repay. My eldest grandson is going to get married this year. It will cost (his father, the eldest son of the interviewee) a fortune. My youngest son and daughter-in-law are street vendors, and their children are going to college this year. They are all exhausted.’ (Interviewee 13, 76 years old, rural hukou, recipient of NRSP)

Although family is institutionalised in old-age support arrangements in China, in practice, these feelings make it difficult for older people to seek support from adult children. Moreover, the ambivalent attitudes towards the negotiation of support suggest that the long-trenched family-oriented support arrangement might become less tangible. However, without adequate public pensions, older people must either suppress their needs and make adaptations to their living standard, or to adopt a series strategies to justify or negotiate for intergenerational support.

For instance, it was shown in the interviews that intergenerational support is often only sought for the purpose of meeting very essential needs such as food and medicines. In the lack of material resources, social needs such as participation in social interactions were considered by older people as less important and therefore often be suppressed.

‘My children give me money, even then I won’t go to weddings or funerals or rituals like that. I can’t afford to buy a gift or to prepare a red envelope. I don’t have extra money for that. I need to live.’ (Interviewee 9, 79 years old, rural hukou, recipient of NRSP)

**Negotiation strategies**

In other cases where intergenerational support is required, for instance to meet the financial, care, or emotional needs that cannot be met elsewhere, older people will apply a range of strategies to negotiate for such support.
The longest-term strategy that both sides often apply unconsciously is the cultural and social norms and expectations. Adult children are expected to behave in accordance with filial piety, which is not only acting as a ‘golden standard’ of being a good child but also mentioned across interviewees as a determinant of a good life in retirement. The content and scope of filial piety, in this context, includes frequent interactions such as visits or phone calls, evident respects for and affections to the older, excessive initiatives to offer support and strong commitments to caring obligations.

An example of the application of this strategy in practice is through parenting education:

‘We have a good family education in traditional values. My parents had taught me to respect and love the older since my childhood. I continued this tradition. We have strict (filial) education for children … Because my parents educated me in this way, I treat them very well. I was a filial son myself, taking good care of my mom. They (adult children) have seen it for themselves. They saw how I treated their grandma, so they wouldn’t treat me badly. I was educating them by words and deeds, wasn’t I?’ (Interviewee 1, 81 years old, urban hukou, recipient of GIP)

On the other side, social norms also require older people to continue to provide housing-related support and childcare support for adult children, particularly for sons (as discussed earlier), for example:

‘If they (her son and daughter-in-law) need you to be there [to take care of the grandchild], as a parent you have to. Surely you can’t say no … For us older people, it is our role and duty to take good care of them, even it means suffering a little. It is okay.’ (Interviewee 6, 63 years old, rural Hukou, recipient of NRSP)

‘It is a matter of course for us to help with childcare … It is a parental obligation to spend on son’s marriage and housing. I didn’t think much about it.’ (Interviewee 9, 79 years old, rural hukou, recipient of NRSP)

Such continuous downward support was sometimes interpreted by older people as a long-term exchange for, or a way to secure future support. Parents provide support throughout their lifetime for their children, with
an expectation that adult children would take care of them in future when they are in need. For example,

‘You have to help [with childcare]. Otherwise, when you get older, they won’t take care of you. They would say you didn’t take care of their children either. It’s just how it is.’ (Interviewee 6, 63 years old, rural hukou, recipient of NRSP)

‘If I don’t count on my children, who else can I count on? I take good care of them and bring them up so that I can count on them one day.’ (Interviewee 10, 67 years old, urban hukou, recipient of URSP)

Family as a socio-economic actor

At the centre of the negotiation of intergenerational support, either within or outside the family sphere, is the cross-generational consensus that family is a primary socio-economic actor.

It is shown in the interviews that participants believe that the responsibility of care and support lies in family, and that family should play the primary role in protecting its members. For example,

‘Everyone has their family, right? Everyone should be cared for by their family members. That’s how the society works.’ (Interviewee 9, 79 years old, rural hukou, recipient of NRSP)

Within the family sphere, resources were mobilised and redistributed via the intergenerational support network so that the needs of both generations can be met and the risks from outside family can be absorbed or mitigated. The following quotes provide examples for the mobilisation and redistribution of resources within the family sphere.

‘Her (the eldest daughter of the interviewee) children need to go to school. Sometimes she couldn’t even scratch together the tuition fees. So I need to save as much as possible. The money that my sons give me, I always spend carefully, so that I can save, say, two or three hundred yuan and give it to my eldest daughter. So that her children can go to school. As a parent, of course, I want all my children to do well. If one of them is better off, I can ask for a little more money; and if anyone is experiencing hardships, then I can give them a bit of help.’ (Interviewee 9, 79 years old, rural hukou, recipient of NRSP)
‘[My youngest daughter has] children to support, medicines to take, she often found herself in difficult situations. If I happen to have 50 or 100 yuan, I would give it to her. I don’t have money myself. When her elder sister and brother give me some money, and if I can save a hundred or two, I might be able to help her out.’ (Interviewee 12, 74 years old, rural hukou, recipient of NRSP)

It shows that family resources are mobilised and reallocated through upward and downward support networks across generations, where older people are playing a vital role in the redistribution process within the family.

Outside the family sphere, intergenerational support, especially the grandparental childcare arrangement, is arranged so that the collective wellbeing can be maximised. For instance, the grandparental childcare arrangement, sometimes along with the relocation of older people, is an example of the agency and resilience of intergenerational families in addressing the conflicts between the dual roles of the Chinese family in social production and social reproduction. This is especially evident in the intergenerational families with migrant workers.

‘My daughter-in-law isn’t working for the time being, but she plans to find a job after the Chinese New Year. If she successfully finds a job and needs me to take care of my grandson at some point after the Chinese New Year, then I will go back to Beijing and live together with them.’ (Interviewee 6, 63 years old, rural hukou, recipient of NRSP)

‘They (the eldest son and his wife) asked one of us (the interviewee and his partner) to go there and help with looking after the youngest one (granddaughter), who just turned one year old at that time. My daughter-in-law couldn’t manage it while she was working as a full-time schoolteacher. My wife went there and helped with childcare for a few months. … she (daughter-in-law) couldn’t leave her job, could she?’ (Interviewee 7, 65 years old, rural hukou, recipient of NRSP)

‘I told them that I can take care of the child so that both my son and daughter-in-law could do their work.’ (Interviewee 10, 67 years old, urban hukou, recipient of URSP)

**Conclusion**

Findings from the interviews have highlighted the role of Chinese families in both social production and social reproduction. It also demonstrates
how such a role is achieved via the negotiation of intergenerational support arrangements in this process. In families where the members are geographically dispersed (for instance, families of migrant workers), intergenerational support arrangements can also be negotiated and tailored over spatial distance so that the young couples can participate in the paid labour market. The interviews have confirmed the malleable role of grandparents, as described in Gu (2021, p 17) as ‘the reserve workforce in the domestic sphere’. In this way, the responsibilities and costs of social reproduction are in fact transferred to older members in the extended family (Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, 2019) via the intergenerational support network.

The interviews also demonstrated the ways in which resources, either in financial, care, co-residence, or practical form, are mobilised at the family level and redistributed intergenerationally so that the collective welfare can be enhanced. For instance, the financial transfers from adult children to their older parents might be partly channelled back to support other adult children when the latter were in need. Those arrangements and the negotiation process corroborate the idea that family, as a socioeconomic actor, copes with structural constraints and maximises the interests and wellbeing of its members via exercising its agency (Huang, 2011, 2018; Cong and Silverstein, 2012; Daly and Kelly, 2015; Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, 2019; Gu, 2021). In this view, family is seen as a ‘corporate group’ (Cong and Silverstein, 2012, p 427) or a ‘strategic coordinator’ (Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, 2019, p 245) that makes ‘familial rational choice’ (Huang, 2011, p 485) and strategical decisions (Laslett and Brenner, 1989) through long-term arrangements and ongoing negotiations within and outside the family sphere.

One of the examples of family exercising its agency to cope with constraints and protect its members is the (re)negotiation and (re)interpretation of intergenerational contract. For a long time, at the core of the Chinese intergenerational contract has been the filial piety and related obligations and expectations such as the unconditional provision for and obedience to older parents (for example, Shi, 2009). The interviews, in line with the findings from previous literature (for example, Teo et al., 2003; Croll, 2006; Izuhara, 2010; Chen, Liu and Mair, 2011; Izuhara and Forrest, 2013; Abrahamson, 2017; Zhong and Li, 2017; Huang, 2018; Gu, 2021), suggest that new filial practices and patterns have emerged, negotiated, and accepted by both generations. For instance, instead of older parents being dependent on adult children, the findings reveal a mutual interdependence where housing-related financial support and childcare support provided by older people has become an essential element of a reciprocal intergenerational support arrangement. It on one hand reflects the influences of social structural factors such as changing family structure and booming housing market. On the other hand, it demonstrates the efforts of Chinese families to adjust for those changes and seek for the improvement of familial wellbeing by pooling together resources.
The (re)negotiation and (re)interpretation of intergenerational contract is also reflected in the gender aspect, in particular, in the changing relationship between (married) daughters and their older parents in natal families. The traditional patrilineality and patrilocality embedded in the Chinese filial piety indicates that daughters become outsiders of their natal families upon marriage (Croll, 2001; Shi, 2009; Eklund, 2018). The manifestations include, among many others, that married daughters are excluded from the extensive intergenerational support arrangements from their natal families and simultaneously exempted from the obligations and duties of caring and providing for their natal parents. The interviews, however, identified a changing pattern where older people in fact received both tangible and intangible support from their married daughters. It is found that daughters are more likely to provide emotional support and practical support, more caring, and visiting and contacting more frequently than sons. If conditions permit, daughters also voluntarily share the financial responsibility of providing for their older parents. Meanwhile, older people provide occasional support to their married daughters as well.

Findings from the interviews have illustrated the potential of intergenerational ambivalence as a bridging concept that links micro, meso, and macro level of analysis (as suggested in Connidis, 2015). For example, one of the reoccurring sources of ambivalence among rural families comes from the dependence vs. autonomy of older people. Although support from adult children demonstrates successful parenting and good behaviours in accordance with filial piety as well as care and love between generations, the fact that rural people ‘have no choice but to’ rely on their adult children due to lack of resources in old age often leads to negative feelings. This presents the psychological ambivalence that is experienced by older people (at the individual level), the expected, but not always realised, role of Chinese families in protecting its older members (at the familial level), and the potential risks caused by the lack of adequate public pensions after retirement (at the structural level). In fact, the interviews revealed the inadequacy of the new pensions and a lack of formal childcare support, which contribute to the continuous role of intergenerational family but also a potential source of conflict. Social policies that address these issues will help intergenerational families to better manage their relationships.

The negotiation of intergenerational support reflects older people’s experience, sense-making, and adaptation/reaction to the individual, institutional, and structural levels of intergenerational ambivalence. The findings not only demonstrate the individual agency of older Chinese but also highlight the familial agency by viewing the Chinese family as a socio-economic actor in the negotiation of intergenerational support. The study is subjected to certain limitations. For instance, although the purpose of the study is to offer in-depth understanding of the process, strategies, and experience of intergenerational support arrangement
and negotiation rather than the discovering generalisable patterns, the external validity from a quantitative perspective (generalisability beyond the specific research context) can be an inherent weakness of the study, as the sample size is relatively small and not representative in terms of demographic structure. Another limitation regarding the sample is that some analytical categories (by public pension status and hukou types) are overrepresented while other are underrepresented (as shown in Table 5.1). The main reason is the difficulties and challenges in recruiting participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Future research engaging with URSP recipients or rural residents who didn’t participate into any public pension schemes can be helpful to understand the arrangement and negotiation of intergenerational support in China.

References


