

**Predictors of Attitudes about Support in Later Life
among Rural Chinese**

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Abstract

Traditionally, people in rural China prefer to depend on their children, particularly their son, in their old age. Children are social and economic resources for the elderly. However, China's birth control policy has greatly challenged the traditional support arrangements in later life, and therefore has influenced stated support preferences. These attitudes have, in turn, affected compliance with the birth control policy. In this paper, I compare attitudes about support in later life among rural Chinese in households that have illegal children (non-compliant households) and in households that do not have any illegal children (compliant households). It is found that son preference is alive in rural China. Non-compliant household members prefer to depend on sons more so than compliant household members. Compliant household members prefer to depend on self/spouse and government more so than non-compliant household members.

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Introduction

Due to the success in reducing fertility and mortality rates, China has started to experience rapid population aging during the past few decades. There is a large older population in China, which has increased rapidly in recent years. The *Communiqué on Major Figures of the 2000 Population Census (No. 1)* released by National Bureau of Statistics of China indicates that, 88.1 million persons are in the age group 65 and older, accounting for about 7 percent of the total population. Compared with the results of the 1990 population census, people age 65 and older was up by 1.39 percentage points. By the end of 2003, the number of people age 65 and older has been up to 96.9 million, accounting for 7.5 percent of the 2003 year-end total population. For people age 60 and older, the population is 0.138 billion in 2003 China, which accounts for about 10.6 percent of the total population (National Population and Family Planning Commission of China, 2004). Population aging is of particular concern in China because of the following factors: the unprecedented pace of population aging, the large size of population, the lack of a social welfare system, and the radical transformation of the social and economic structure over the past three decades (Jiang, 1994).

According to traditional Chinese culture and norms, it is the children's duty to take care of parents in their old age. Filial responsibility is considered the greatest virtue in Chinese culture. Although this tradition has been slightly weakened in modern society, it is still part of the dominant culture (Whyte, 2003). The family has been playing the dominant role in providing support for China's elderly, and children have been the major caregivers all along, especially in rural areas. Moreover, support for the elderly is weak from society in general and government in China. Social welfare and a social security system have not been well established in China, particularly in rural areas. In rural China, where dependence on farming is high, grown children serve as caregivers and economic supporters for the elderly. This is especially true for sons. Son preference is tied to security in old age.

The family planning policy in China initiated in the 1970s, centered on birth control, accelerated the population aging, and challenged the traditional elderly support arrangements. The one-child-per-family policy started in 1978 in order to control the population growth rate. Various kinds of measures were introduced by the government to secure compliance. Since 1979 one-child certificates were issued to offer a variety of benefits to couples who had only one child and promised to have no more. A birth-quota system was initiated in 1980 in order to better monitor women's reproductive behavior and limit the number of infants born each year. Beginning in 1979, penalties were imposed upon couples who violated the one-child policy (Li, 1995). Among the persons subject to the family planning policy, some obeyed the policy, and as a result they have only one child (some of them legally have two children). Compared to previous

generations, the human and economic resources for their caregiving have diminished and challenged their traditional attitudes about support in later years. Others violated the family planning policy due to son preference, old-age security, and other reasons. The traditional values and practices of elderly support in the face of the implementation of the family planning policy have collided in contemporary China.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the stated attitudes about old-age support in rural China given the influence of family planning policy, particularly the differences between the persons who comply with family planning policy and those who violate the policy.

Previous Studies

Prior literature has discussed elderly support in China (for example, Fei, 1983; et al), and there is a general consensus that adult children are the major supporters for the elderly and meanwhile the older persons prefer to depend on their children rather than others or government. The Chinese family is a “feedback model,” in which each generation fosters the generation succeeding it and in turn receives financial support and living care in later life from grown children. On the contrary, the Western model has been described in terms of a “continued linear model”, in which the support for old parents by children is very weak even absent (Fei, 1983).

The “feedback model” is deeply rooted in Chinese civilization schemed by Confucian culture. Filial piety has been portrayed as the most important value within the Confucian moral order (Whyte, 2003). Confucian “filial piety” sustains the traditional

institution of family care for the elderly. This informal old-age security system has been functioning well, particularly in rural areas (Dwayne et al, 2000).

Furthermore, family responsibility for the older generation has been codified in Chinese laws. The Marriage Law emphasizes the duty of adult children to care for their elderly parents, and the Chinese Constitution states that “parents have the duty to rear and educate their children, and the children who have come of age have the duty to support and assist their parents.” In addition, the Penal Code has established that children can be imprisoned for neglecting their parents. These laws reflect the values and practices of old-age support in Chinese society.

The social welfare and the security system is another important alternative for elderly support. However, no social welfare systems exist in rural China. Elderly Chinese in rural areas are not covered by formal pensions, and medical care is available only on a pay-as-you-go basis (Whyte, 2003). At the same time, the poorly developed financial markets can offer few sound private pension arrangements. Some old-age insurance businesses have appeared in recent years, but most peasants have no confidence in them.

In short, the results of these institutions and practices are that rural Chinese heavily depend upon their grown children in later life. On the one hand, it is their willing choice based on Chinese tradition; on the other hand, they have few alternatives.

In terms of children, sons and daughters are always considered to be differently involved in elderly support. Social scientists have long identified gender-based caregiving (Dressel and Clark, 1990), with women as the primary caregivers. Research in

social gerontology has highlighted the importance of adult daughters as caregivers for the elderly (Stoller, 1983). However, son preference in China is extremely pervasive.

Due to the Confucian traditions, the Chinese population exhibits high levels of son preference in old-age support. The family in China has been dominated by the male patriarch. The obligation to support parents has followed the patrilineal lines. According to the Book of Rites, “A woman is to obey her father before marriage, her husband during married life, and her son in widowhood.” Traditionally, the adult daughter is not considered a family member after she is married, because she should obey her husband and belongs to her husband’s family. Therefore, it is considered improper for the elderly to depend on a married daughter, who is a member of another family. The elderly are more willing to depend on sons. Moreover, given the demands for labor for the farm or family business, a son is valued over a daughter in old-age support. Therefore, the care of the elderly traditionally is undertaken by an adult son and his spouse. Although the Marriage Law of 1980 makes both sons and daughters liable for the support of their parents in old age, sons are still preferred to provide old-age security. The study by Yu et al (1990) indicated that sons assumed this responsibility far more than daughters, and few of the respondents believe their parents should live with a daughter. In sum, rural Chinese prefer to depend on a son even if daughters are present.

For Chinese peasants, children particularly sons are the best investment for old-age security. However, the one child policy reduces the number of children a family could have, and also increases the possibility that that a family would have no grown sons available to support parents in their old age. This is one of the most important reasons for

noncompliance with fertility regulations in rural areas, despite strong government sanctions (Jiang, 1994). In other words, persons who violate the family planning policy usually have stronger preference for elderly support from their children, especially sons, compared with those who comply with the policy. For the persons compliant with the family planning policy, they might have changed their attitudes about old-age support, either accepting the support from daughters, or switching their preference to other sources such as self, spouse, or government, no matter willingly or forcefully.

Additionally, the attitudes about support in later life vary across populations associated with sociodemographic characteristics, such as age, gender, marital status, education, and income.

The primary mechanism by which the young cared for the old is through shared living arrangements. Many studies on living arrangements report that male, better educated, more affluent elderly are more likely to live alone or with a spouse other than in a stem or joint family (Martin 1989; Casterline et al. 1991; Hermalin et al. 1991). However, Sanders (1981) reported that, although men were slightly more apt to prefer family sources of care than women, there were no significant differences in care preferences by gender. Also in his study, a positive, but statistically nonsignificant, association was found between care preference and education. Age stratification theory (Riley, 1971) suggests the hypothesis that various age cohorts will differ in their expectations and preferences concerning care of the elderly. Consistent with the age stratification perspective, most previous studies have found an association between chronological age and general endorsements of family as the primary source of care for

the elderly (Seelbach, 1978). With few exceptions (e.g., Wake and Sporkowski, 1971), it seems that older persons are more likely than younger ones to expect the family to care for its elderly members. Younger cohorts may be more apt to expect nonfamily sources to aid in the care for the aged. Nevertheless, Sanders (1981) argued that preference for family as the primary source of care was found to be statistically independent of age, cohort, gender, education, and marital status, but significantly associated with race.

There are also variations in son preferences for old-age support among Chinese. In the study by Yu et al (1990), when asked to project their own preferences in old age, sons tended to prefer to depend on a son, but daughters exhibited a preference to live with a daughter. By examining the One-Per-Thousand China National Sample Fertility Survey 1982, Arnold and Liu (1986) provided empirical evidence that son preference was lower among more educated women.

To sum up, there have been mixed findings about the associations between the old-age support attitudes and the sociodemographic characteristics.

Research Hypotheses

In the case of China, it is a prevalent argument even a common sense that the majority of peasants prefer to depend on children, particularly sons, in their late years and this is the main incentive for noncompliance with the family planning policy. But there have been few studies to explore the relevant empirical evidences. In fact, few researches have been done on the population group that violates the family planning policy. The major reason is the lack of data. This study is an attempt to fill in the gap. In this paper I

compare the old-age support attitudes of the rural Chinese in the households that have illegal children (non-compliant households) and in the households that do not have any illegal child (compliant households).

Based on the Chinese contexts and the previous studies, I put forth two major hypotheses about the old-age support attitudes among rural Chinese. One, rural Chinese prefer to depend on sons in later life; the more sons, the stronger son preference. Two, compared with compliant household members, non-compliant household members more likely prefer to depend on children especially sons while less likely on self/spouse and government. The socioeconomic characteristics are controlled.

Data and Methods

The data for this paper come from the survey “Old-Age Support of Rural Couples Subject to Family Planning Policy”. This project was sponsored by the China National Population and Family Planning Committee, and was carried out jointly by the China Population Information and Research Center (CPIRC) and Population and Development Institute of Nankai University in 2002. The purpose of this project is to evaluate and compare the ability to support one’s later life within compliant households and non-compliant households in rural area of China. The survey objects are the households residing in the place for more than half a year. 12,000 households were selected through multi-stage cluster sampling from 51 villages in the four provinces Sichuan(in Southwest China), Hubei(in Central China), Hei Longjiang(in Northeast China), and Gansu(in Northwest China). 11,618 valid questionnaires were obtained (Hereafter called “primary

sample”). The interview questions include demographic characteristics, household economic status, family planning and welfare, and attitudes about old-age support. Besides the primary questionnaire, a supplementary survey about living conditions was designed to interview the elderly aged 60 and above. 3,231 respondents aged 60 and over were interviewed (Hereafter called “60+ sample”).

Before I start the analyses of old-age support attitudes, the descriptive statistics of current old-age support practice in rural China is given based on the 60+ sample (n=3,231). One question is “who is the most helpful for your living care this year”, and the response categories are spouse, sons, daughters, grandchildren, other relatives, friends, government, and others. The other is “Who provides you living expenditure this year and how much (RMB *yuan*¹)”, and the respondents report the amount of living expenditure provided respectively by self/spouse, sons, daughters, grandchildren, other relatives or friends, government, and insurance company. The practice of old-age support for the current elderly provides the background against which the rural Chinese think of the support for themselves. I discuss the extent to which their attitudes drift away from the current practice given the new social and policy context.

The analyses of attitudes about old-age support are based on the primary sample. I drew the adult respondents (18 years old and above) from the initial data set and got a sample of 11,240² persons after omitting observations with missing data on key variables.

¹ RMB (*yuan*), Chinese currency. 1 dollar approximately equals 8 *yuan*.

² There are 284 cases with missing data on family planning question (“Do you have illegal children?”). I create a category for these missing observations and include it to run the same models as reported in this paper, the results change too slightly to be considered.

I am interested in people's attitudes about supporters in later life. The dependent variables are based on the question "Do you agree with the following statements? 1. Old-age support relies on children; 2. Old-age support relies on sons; 3. Old-age support relies on daughters; 4. Old-age support relies on self/spouse; 5. Old-age support relies on government." The response categories for each of the five items are "yes" or "no". Accordingly, five dummy variables are created. As to the variable "children", I score all the respondents answering "yes" to "Do you agree that old-age support relies on children" as 1 and those answering "no" as 0. It is also the case of the other four variables "sons", "daughters", "self/spouse", and "government". These five dependent variables are independent of each other.

The socioeconomic characteristics are controlled as independent variables and measured as follows. Age is measured in years. Gender is a dummy variable scored in the direction of female. Marital status is measured by four mutually exclusive categories: unmarried, married, widowed, and divorced. Each is recoded as a dichotomous variable and the married serves as the reference category. Respondent's highest educational attainment is measured by four categories are: illiterate, elementary school, middle school, and high school and above. I recode them into dichotomous variables, and high school and above serves as the reference category. The measure of income refers to the household annual income (RMB *yuan*).

In order to examine the son preference, two independent variables are introduced: number of sons, number of daughters.

The independent variable to measure the influence of family planning policy is the household types according to family planning policy. The survey question from which this variable is derived is “Do you have illegal children?” There are three response categories: “Yes”, “No”, and “Not applicable”. Accordingly, three household types are considered in the analyses: compliant households, non-compliant households, and not-applicable households. Compliant households refer to the households without illegal children, and non-compliant households refer to those with illegal children. In terms of not-applicable households, the family planning policy is not applicable to the respondents in this category. For example, persons who had been beyond reproductive age when the family planning policy initiated fall into this category. Compliant households serve as the reference category.

The analyses start with the description of the old-age support practice in rural China based on the 60+ sample. Logistic regression is used to analyze the primary sample to examine the attitudes about support in later life among rural Chinese. The discussion focuses on son preference and the attitude difference between compliant households and non-compliant households.

Results

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics based on 60+ sample for the current elderly support in rural China. Sons are most helpful in caregiving for a remarkable majority of Chinese rural elderly of both sexes (64.6 per cent). Compared to older men, a

higher proportion of older women depend on sons. Only around 10 per cent of respondents reported daughters are the most important helpers for their living care, and again a higher proportion of women than men depend on daughters. Besides sons, spouses are the second most important helper with 28.1 per cent of men reporting spouse as the most helpful living-care helper, while only 12.9 per cent reported by women. Help from the government is quite small. As for financial support, the first three important helpers are sons, self and spouse, and daughters. On the whole, the majority of Chinese elderly depend on children, on the one hand; on the other, the involvement of sons and daughters in elderly support is extremely unbalanced in rural China. In addition, women report a higher level of dependence on children and lower on spouse.

[Table 2 about here]

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics based on the primary sample for the variables used in the analyses on attitudes about old-age support.

58 per cent the respondents agree to depend on children. Preference for support by sons is as popular as the current practice. More than half respondents agree to depend on son in later life. Although sons are still favored over daughters, the preference to support by daughters is much higher than the practice. Only 9 per cent of the respondents in 60+ sample report daughters as the most helpful caregiver, but more than one third of the respondents in the primary sample would like to depend on daughters in later life.

With the comparison between the elderly support practice and the attitudes about old-age support in rural China reported in 2002 survey, a most interesting finding is that

the highest proportion of respondents prefer to depend on self/spouse, though it is not dominant in practice. 65.3 per cent agree to depend on self and spouse in old age. This percentage is higher than that for children. As observed in urban China, there are signs of an adaptive family institution in rural areas in face of the family planning policy and rapid socioeconomic transition, not one that stubbornly clings to “traditional” ways (Whyte, 2003).

In addition, given the extremely low level of support from government to the current rural elderly, the endorsement of government as old-age support resource is relatively high.

The majority of the rural households comply with the family planning policy. 65.5 per cent of the respondents live in the compliant households without any illegal child, and 12.9 per cent live in the non-compliant households with illegal children.

[Table 3 about here]

Results from logistic regression analyses based on the primary sample are presented in Table 3.

The number of children is significantly associated with the rural Chinese’s attitudes about support in later life. Having more sons and daughters increases the odds of the preference for old-age support by children. However, the numbers of sons and daughters have different impacts. Having more sons significantly increases the odds of the preference for old-age support by sons ($e^{.583} = 1.792$), but decreases that for the support by daughters ($1/e^{.058} = .944$); and having more daughters increases the odds of the

preference for old-age support both by daughters ($e^{.344} = 1.410$) and by sons ($e^{.076} = 1.079$). Whereas, having more sons and daughters decreases the odds of the endorsement of old-age support by self/spouse and government.

Respondents living in non-compliant households are about 1.2 times as likely than the compliant household members to agree to depend on children in their old age ($e^{.172} = 1.188$), as well as on sons ($e^{.167} = 1.182$). On the contrary, non-compliant household members are .8 times as likely than compliant households members to prefer to the support by self/spouse ($1/e^{.192} = .825$), and they are also less likely to agree to depend on government ($1/e^{.275} = .759$). A weak negative, but statistically nonsignificant, association is found between household types and the attitudes for the support by daughters.

The attitudes about old-age support are also associated with socioeconomic characteristics. (Forthcoming...)

Conclusion

In this paper I have described the patterns for elderly support practice in rural China based on the 60+ sample, and also analyzed the attitudes about support in later life among rural Chinese based on the primary sample. Son preference is examined. The differential attitudes about old-age support are examined for households who comply with family planning policy and those who do not.

Although children are the major caregivers and financial supporters for Chinese elderly, it is noticeable that a high proportion of the respondents agree to depend on

self/spouse, which is much larger than that of the support by children. The implementation of family planning policy has introduced a new multigenerational family structure called “four-two-one” family, which refers to a family consisting of a couple with their parents and child. It is extremely hard for a couple to simultaneously provide good care and support for four elders and one child. As a result, more and more Chinese might lower their expectation for old-age support from children and turn to self support or spouse support. Given the demographic projections for the elderly population, increased reliance upon self/spouse support might call for more social service programs for the elderly.

However, more than half of the respondents still agree to depend on children in late years. Given strong traditional culture and in the absence of a social welfare system, family, including children and spouse, will still be the principle resource for old-age support for a long time in rural China. Therefore, many contemporary views concerning the general defunctionalization of the family and the particular decline in the family’s traditional protective functions may not be fully accurate in the case of rural China.

The multivariate results indicate that having more sons decreases the odds of the preference for the support by daughters, while having more daughters still increases the respondents’ expectation for support by sons. These results give evidence that having sons for the sake of old age is an important motivation for the rural Chinese to violate the family planning policy. Deeply rooted Confucian tradition and the resulting son preference are alive and well in rural China.

The results also show the persons living in non-compliant households have different attitudes about their old-age support from those in compliant households. The former are more likely than the latter to agree to depend on children and sons while less likely on self/spouse and government. Moreover, no statistically significant association is found between non-compliant households and the agreement with the support by daughters.

On the whole, the implementation of family planning policy leads to the decline of human and economic resources for old-age support. The strong son preference for the sake of old age is the major reason for resistance and noncompliance to family planning policy. Given the influence of family planning policy, the preference for the support by self and spouse has remarkably increased, but the preference for the support by children has not significantly declined. Therefore the family planning policy is still a serious challenge for the current Chinese peasants' later life.

Future studies should examine more variables such as occupation, household registration status, and living with parents/parents-in-law or not, which are not addressed in the present study.

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TABLE 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF OLD-AGE SUPPORT FOR THE RURAL ELDERLY, 2002 (60+ sample)

	Both sexes	Male	Female
The most helpful caregiver (%)			
Spouse	21.2	28.1	12.9
Sons	64.6	58.1	72.5
Daughters	9.3	8.2	10.6
Grandchildren	1.8	1.6	2.0
Other relatives	.6	1.0	.2
Friends	.2	.3	.1
Government	.7	.9	.5
Others	1.5	1.8	1.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
The mean of living expenditure provided by economic helpers (yuan)			
Self and spouse	600.09	756.61	399.77
Sons	728.50	731.73	724.61
Daughters	203.25	192.92	215.76
Grandchildren	25.35	26.39	24.09
Other relatives or friends	20.38	29.10	8.87
Government	51.33	67.59	21.49
Insurance company	7.53	11.08	3.23
Others	15.58	20.38	9.73
<i>n</i>	3,231	1,768	1,463

TABLE 2. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF VARIABLES USED IN ANALYSES (primary sample, n=11,240)

	Percentage	Mean
Dependent Variables		
Depend on children		
Agree	58.0	
Disagree	42.0	
Depend on sons		
Agree	51.7	
Disagree	48.3	
Depend on daughters		
Agree	33.6	
Disagree	66.4	
Depend on self/spouse		
Agree	65.2	
Disagree	34.8	
Depend on government		
Agree	23.1	
Disagree	76.9	
Independent Variables		
Age		41.25
Gender		
Male	57.1	
Female	42.9	
Marital status		
Married	94.8	
Unmarried	1.1	
Widowed	3.4	
Divorced	.7	
Education		
Illiterate	12.2	
Elementary school	36.3	
Middle school	43.5	
High school and above	7.9	
Income		8631.63
Number of children		
Number of sons		.93
Number of daughters		.84
Household types		
Compliant household	65.5	
Non-compliant household	12.9	
Not-applicable household	21.6	

TABLE 3. LOGISTIC REGRESSION ANALYSES OF OLD-AGE SUPPORT ATTITUDES (primary sample, n=11,240)

Independent variables	Old-Age Support Attitudes				
	Children (1)	Sons (2)	Daughters (3)	Self/Spouse (4)	Government (5)
Age	-0.007**	-0.006*	0.005	-0.006*	0.029***
Gender	-0.344***	-0.398***	-0.145***	0.268***	0.040
Marital status					
Unmarried	0.028	-0.029	-0.313	-0.219	0.623**
Widowed	0.178	0.402***	0.171	-0.471***	-0.183
Divorced	0.148	-0.034	-0.105	-0.447	0.216
Education					
Illiterate	0.397***	0.644***	0.304**	-0.273**	-0.397***
Elementary school	0.339***	0.295***	0.321***	-0.120	-0.261**
Middle school	0.107	0.030	0.062	-0.034	-0.224**
Income	0.000*	0.000*	0.000	0.000***	0.000***
Number of children					
Number of sons	0.317***	0.583***	-0.058 ^a	-0.185***	-0.135***
Number of daughters	0.234***	0.076**	0.344***	-0.135***	-0.071*
Household types					
Non-compliant	0.172**	0.167**	-0.012	-0.192**	-0.275***
Not-applicable	-0.090	0.027	-0.333***	-0.323***	-0.241***
Constant	0.083	-0.302**	-1.181***	1.154***	-1.821***
Model χ^2	337.533	791.741	332.551	481.020	156.033
df	13	13	13	13	13
p	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

^a $p \leq .05$ (one-tailed test) * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$