

*Original Paper*

## A Comparison of Contemporary Filial Piety in Rural and Non-Rural China and Taiwan

Li Ping Su<sup>1</sup> & Richard B Miller<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> College of Human Services and Humanities, University of Houston Clear Lake, Houston, Texas, USA

<sup>2</sup> School of Family Life, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, USA

\* Richard B Miller, School of Family Life, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, USA

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### **Abstract**

*Research has found that filial piety remains strong in Chinese societies, despite dramatic social and economic changes. However, little is known about differences in filial piety between rural and nonrural regions of China and Taiwan, as well as gender differences in filial piety. Using data from the 2006 East Asia Social Survey, results indicated that there were no differences in attitudes about filial piety and attitudes of financial support between rural and nonrural regions in China and Taiwan, as well between adult men and women. Caregiving for elderly parents was more common in rural China, compared to nonrural China, and men in rural China were more likely to be engaged than rural women in caregiving. There were no other differences in reports of caregiving. Overall, the results suggest a lessening of gender differences and rural vs. nonrural differences in filial piety in China and Taiwan.*

### **Keywords**

*filial piety, filial attitude, attitude of financial support, caregiving, China, Taiwan, rural, urban, gender*

### **1. Introduction**

Filial piety *Xiao* is considered to be the central concept in Confucianism, which guides proper manners in the parent-child relationship and moral responsibility in China and Taiwan. The ancient Confucian ethic writing, “The Book of Filial Piety”, stated that adult children’s four basic filial responsibilities to elderly parents were first, taking care of elderly parents’ basic financial, material and emotional needs; second, absolutely obeying parents’ teachings and desires even if the child has to sacrifice his/her own will; third, co-residing with elderly parents in order to provide their basic needs; and fourth, repaying parents’ kindness after death with proper ceremony and remembrance (Lu & Li, 2008). In traditional

filial piety, parents and children had reciprocal obligations in that parents provided the basic needs and shelter to children when they were young, and children would repay their parents' kindness by taking care of them in their elderly years. After the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), though, filial piety became a more one-sided obligation so that parental authority and control overpowered children's autonomy and independence (Hwang, 1999). As the Chinese proverb stated, if the emperor wanted the servants to die, the servants had to die; if the father wanted the son to die, the son had no rights to disobey (Ruan, 1644-1911).

However, due to industrialization and urbanization, an increase of immigration to the urban areas for employment led to a change of family structure from the three-generation living arrangement to the nuclear family, which led to adult children's economic independence, as well as a looser connection between parents and adult children (Thornton & Lin, 1994). As a result, the traditional norms regarding filial piety have changed in modern China and Taiwan. For many adult children, the obligatory duty or obedience to parents have become unreasonable, unpractical, and problematic. The hierarchical parent-child relationships seemed to create barriers for children's free choice and independence, and some children perceived pressure in a hierarchical relationship to sacrifice their own needs and goals for the good of parents under the obligation of filial piety. Consequently, this has caused resentment among some adult children toward their parents, with their behavior towards their parents coming from obligatory duty, rather than genuine love and respect (Zhan, 2004).

Despite these cultural changes, a number of studies have shown that filial piety still holds societal significance in China and Taiwan (Chen & Yi, 2011; Leung et al., 2010; Ren et al., 2021; Yeh et al., 2013). However, very little research has examined the differences and similarities in adult children's levels of current filial piety toward parents across urban and rural regions in China and Taiwan, as well as between males and females. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to fill that gap in the research literature by examining rural and urban differences, as well as gender differences, in filial piety using data from the 2006 East Asia Social Survey (EASS) that was conducted in China and Taiwan.

### *1.1 Historical Filial Piety within Families*

Filial piety emphasizes the importance of a child's relationship with his/her parents, including a duty to obey and take care of his/her elderly parents (Baker, 1979). Filial piety, a reciprocal respect and set of behaviors between parents and children, was considered the fundamental principle in teaching children proper manners in order to maintain family and societal stability (Lee, 1953). It also promoted the importance of parent-child interdependence and child's moral obligation to repay parental care and affection (Yang, 1959). Filial piety demanded that children be absolutely obedient and completely devoted to their parents. At the same time, parents depended on their children for their old-age security, which enhanced their deep devotion to the care and upbringing of their children (Yang, 1959). From a historical perspective, sacrifice for family was considered the most cherished virtue and important part of life. As for adult children, they held respect and obligation to aging parents, honored the family

name, and emphasized group harmony instead of individual desires (Fan, 2000). In the traditional household structure, a multigenerational-family living structure was the typical family structure in Chinese society. This living arrangement also formed a basis for the support system between parents, children, and grandchildren for each family (Yuan, 1987).

### *1.2 Research on Filial Piety in Contemporary China and Taiwan*

Current research has shown that filial piety still holds a significant value in Chinese societies (Chen & Yi, 2011; Leung et al., 2010; Liu, 2013; Ren et al., 2021; Yeh et al., 2013); however, the current differences in overall level of filial piety in rural and non-rural China and Taiwan is relatively unknown. In the only study that examined regional differences, Fuligni and Zhang (2004) found that China urban male adolescents reported a weaker sense of family obligation than did rural male adolescents and both urban and rural female adolescents.

Some studies indicate that age, co-residence, and geographical areas influence the level of filial piety. Comparing different populations, younger urban residents appear to have a weaker sense of filial piety than older urban residents (Lu, 2009; Yang, 1981). Moreover, adult children who lived with their parents also report more commitment to their filial responsibility than those who do not (Chuo & Li, 2008). In response to the notion that there might be a decline of filial piety, Zhang (2004) and Qi (2015) have argued that filial piety is not declining in Chinese societies; rather, structural changes, increasing educational opportunity, and greater geographic mobility are going to have a greater impact on their behaviors in elderly care.

Although financial support is still one of the ways that adult children fulfill their filial piety (Ho et al., 2012; Ikels, 2004), it is no longer the most common way. Studies have shown that helping parents with their personal matters and giving emotional support are more common than financial assistance (Chen & Yi, 2011; Lin, 2000; Wang & Liu, 2004). However, financial support may compensate for absence of other filial responsibilities, such as emotional support, co-residence, and caregiving, due to physical distance that has accompanied urbanization (He & Ye, 2009). Research shows that the frequency and amount of financial assistance were generally determined based on the needs of elderly parents (Lee & Xiao, 1998; Lee et al., 1994). Adult children give more financial support to their elderly parents if the parents have lower incomes, lower occupational positions, or poor health (Lee & Xiao, 1998). Additionally, adult children who migrated to urban areas for employment provided more financial support to the elderly parents in the rural area than those children who stayed in the rural area (Du et al., 2004).

Adult children still show a strong sense of filial responsibility in taking care of elderly parents; however, their caregiving behaviors often do not match up to their sense of filial piety due to geographic mobility and migration for employment and education (Chen & Yi, 2011). Also, Zhan, Ni, and Bin (2006) found that young adults expressed less commitment to elderly care if there was a conflict between employment and caregiving. Co-residence is an important factor in fulfilling filial

responsibility, with adult children who are living with their parents performing more caregiving functions (Lin et al., 2003; Wang et al., 2014). However, the proportion of the elderly who live only with their spouse or alone has increased significantly, leading to a decrease in the proportion of the elderly living with married children (Chang, 1999; Yi & Chen, 1998). Yeh (2009) has suggested a mutual aid model to explain the connection between living together and providing more support. He argued that that amount of emotional support adult children provided to their aged parents was at least partially a function of the assistance in household labor and child rearing that parents provided to their children. However, when adult children did not reside with parents, both parents' support to children and children's support to parents decreased. This phenomenon was explained due to the lack of contact and communication between both parties.

### *1.3 Rural and Non-Rural Comparisons*

Little research has compared levels of filial piety in rural and urban regions in China and Taiwan. While no studies could be found that compared rural and non-rural regions in Taiwan, three studies were found that studied populations in China. A study examined rural and urban differences in financial support by adult children towards their parents in China. The national study (Lee & Xiao, 1998) used 1992 data from the China Research Center on aging with a sample of 20,093 participants aged 60 or older participants from 13 of China's provinces. They found that elderly parents' needs and unequal support from the government between rural and urban areas strongly influenced adult children's financial support to them. Elderly parents living in the rural areas more frequently received support than those living in urban areas; however, those in the rural areas received a smaller amount of financial support than those in the urban areas, probably because adult children in rural areas had lower incomes. Additional research has found that adult children who migrated to urban areas for employment provided more financial support to the elderly parents in the rural area than those children who stayed in the rural area (Du et al., 2004). Both studies were conducted from elderly parents' perspectives, instead of adult children's.

Another study examined attitudes of approximately 700 tenth and twelfth grade students living in rural and urban China in the areas of family obligation, current assistance, respect for family, and future financial support (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004). They found that urban male adolescents reported a weaker sense of family obligation than did rural male adolescents and the females of both locations, and rural adolescents held a higher value on supporting the family in the future than urban youths.

In addition, Wu (2021) used the first waves of the China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study (CHARLS) to examine the relationship between intergenerational support and life satisfaction in both rural and urban China. They found that living with grandchildren is associated with a higher level of life satisfaction in rural China. The higher life satisfaction is also attributable to receiving support from children (i.e., help with self-care and household tasks) and exchanging financial and emotional support with them. In contrast, living in a skip-generation household is associated with a lower level of life

satisfaction in urban China. Only instrumental support is beneficial for older parents' life satisfaction.

#### *1.4 Gender Differences in Filial Piety*

Historically, in China and Taiwan sons and daughters-in-law have generally carried the major responsibility for taking care of their older parents; daughters fulfilled the son's roles when sons were not available (Lee et al., 1994; Lin et al., 2003). In past studies with Taiwanese samples (Lin, 1992; Lin et al., 2003), the results have indicated that sons were almost twice as likely as daughters to provide support in both household labor and finance to their older parents. Additional research (Lin, 2000; Yi & Chen, 1998) found this to be true in rural Taiwan. These studies found that elderly parents expected their adult sons to take care of them more than their daughters. This phenomenon could be explained by the Taiwanese parents' expectation of their sons and daughters-in-law to carry the filial responsibilities instead of their daughters (Yeh, 2009).

On the other hand, the responsibility of providing caregiving to elderly parents seems to be expected as daughters' filial responsibility more than sons' in China. In Fuligni and Zhang's 2004 study of 700 tenth and twelfth grade students in China, they found that male adolescents reported a weaker sense of family obligation in terms of assisting, supporting and respecting the family than did female adolescents. Similarly, Zhan and Montgomery (2003) reported a decline in the patrilocal tradition of caregiving in urban China, finding that the responsibility of taking care of the elderly parents had shifted from sons to daughters. Although Hu and Chen's study (2019) found older parents have no preference for sons over daughters to provide support, Hu (2017) found that daughters still provide more financial support and housework assistance to older parents than do sons.

#### *1.5 Purpose of Study*

Due to rapid social and economic changes, traditional attitudes and behaviors regarding filial piety have changed in Chinese cultures. However, the rate of social and economic changes in rural and non-rural areas in China and Taiwan have been different (Lee et al., 1994). The differences in the social structure in China and Taiwan over the past 60 years have created possible regional differences in current filial attitudes and behaviors. The purpose of study was to address this important gap in the research literature by comparing current levels of filial piety between rural and non-rural China and Taiwan. In addition, gender differences in filial piety were examined. Using data from the 2006 East Asian Social Survey, this study focused on four questions:

- 1) What is the pattern of filial attitude, attitude of financial support, and caregiving in China and Taiwan?
- 2) Are there differences among adults in filial attitude, financial support, and caregiving between rural and non-rural areas in China and Taiwan?
- 3) Are there gender differences among adults in rural and non-rural areas in China and Taiwan in filial attitude, financial support, and caregiving?

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Procedure

The data used for this study came from the East Asian Social Survey (EASS) 2006. The EASS 2006 was conducted from June to December 2006 in China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan. It included questions about families, including marriage, gender roles, family solidarity, intergenerational support exchanges, filial duty, division of labor, and marital relationships. This cross-national survey was composed of the four general social surveys—CGSS (Chinese General Social Survey), JGSS (Japanese General Social Survey), KGSS (Korean General Social Survey), and TSCS (Taiwan Social Change Survey) that included identical questions so that cross-national comparisons could be made. For the purpose of this study, only the Chinese and Taiwanese data were used in this study.

The Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) followed a four-stage Probability Proportional to Size (PPS) sampling to gather data from September to December 2006. All questions were given by structured face-to-face interviews and answers were filled in by the interviewers. The initial sample size was 7,572 participants. After excluding those who could not be contacted, refused to participate, and were ineligible, the final sample size for CGSS was 3,208 participants, for a 38.5% of response rate. The relatively low response rate can be explained by the way that it was calculated, which included both eligible and ineligible (bad addresses, deceased, etc.) sample members in the calculation. Due to the nature of this study, the sample for this study was limited to those who were between aged 20-69 years old and had at least one child and one parent alive. The entire sample was married at the time of study. The final sample size for this study was 1,542.

The Taiwan Social Change Survey (TSCS) followed three-stage stratified sampling to gather data from July to August 2006. All questions were given by structured face-to-face interviews and answers were filled in by the interviewers. The initial sample size was 5,032 participants. After excluding those who could not be contacted, refused to participate, or were ineligible, the final sample size for TSCS was 2,102 participants, for a 42% of response rate. Again, the response rate calculated with the inclusion of those who were ineligible for the study. Due to the nature of this study, the sample for this study was limited to those who were between aged 21-72 years old and had at least one child and one parent alive. The entire sample was married at the time of study. The final sample size for this study was 751.

### 2.2 Sample Characteristics

The sample from China was 43.3% male and 56.7% female. The mean age was 39.93 years old ( $SD=9.11$ ), with a range of 20 to 69 years old. In terms of education, 6.2% reported no formal education, 17.4% reported had 1-6 years of schooling, 39.1% had 7-9 years of formal schooling, 25.3% received 10-12 years of schooling, 11.4% received more than 12 years of schooling, and 0.6% reported still attending school at that time. In addition, 32% reported there were no sons in the family at the time of interviews, and 41.4% reported no daughters in the family at the time of interviews. In terms of their parents' status, 70.2% reported their father was still alive, 89.8% reported their mother was alive at that

time, and 58.1% reported both parents were alive.

The sample from Taiwan was 47.0% male and 53.0% female. The mean age was 43.41 years old ( $SD=9.33$ ), with a range of 21 to 72 years old. In terms of education, 1.3% reported no schooling, 9.4% reported 1-6 years of schooling, 15.9% had 7-9 years of formal schooling, 38.7% received 10-12 years of schooling, 34.2% received more than 12 years of schooling, and 0.5% reported still attending school at that time. In addition, 19.2% reported there was no son in the family at the time of interviews, and 28.6% reported there was no daughter in the family at the time of interviews. In terms of their parents' status, 63.5% reported their father was still alive, and 90.7% reported their mother was alive at that time.

### 2.3 Measures

Filial attitude was measured using a six-item scale. Participants responded to the following statements, "Children must make efforts to do something that would bring honor to their parents", "Be grateful to parents for raising me", "No matter how bad parents treat me, one should still treat them well", "One should give up his/her interest or choice of career to fulfill parents' expectation", "Support my parents' livelihood to make their life more comfortable", and "Authority of father should be respected". They responded on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". This scale showed adequate reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of .74 for the China sample and .62 for the Taiwan sample.

Attitude of financial support was measured by using a four-item scale. The first two items were used to measure attitude of financial support toward men and the last two items were used to measure attitude of financial support toward women. Participants responded to the following questions: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about financial support for parents? Your attitude to financial support: a.) unmarried adult man to parents, b.) unmarried adult woman to parents, c.) married adult man to parents, and d.) married adult woman to parents". They responded on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The scale showed good reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of .81 for the China sample and .82 for the Taiwan sample.

Caregiving was measured using a two-item scale. Participants responded to the following question, "How frequently did you do each of the following things to your own parent(s) for the last 12 months? a.) Taking care of household chores (e.g., cleaning, meal preparation, shopping, running errands, etc.) and b.) Listening to personal problem or concerns". Participants responded to a five-point Likert scale ranging from "very frequently" to "not at all".

In China, the researchers divided the size of communities into seven different categories based on population and region: above 4,000,000; 2,000,000-4,000,000; 1,000,000-2,000,000; 500,000-1,000,000; 200,000-500,000; under 200,000; and rural area as being clearly designed into its own category. In this study, we categorized the first six categories as a non-rural region and the rural area in the sample as a rural region. Approximate two-thirds (66.3%) of the final sample size for China

fit in the non-rural region and about one-third (33.7%) fit into the rural region. As for Taiwan, researchers divided the size of community into four categories: large cities, medium cities, small cities/towns, and rural areas as being clearly designed into its own category. Similar to the China sample, we categorized the first three categories as non-rural regions and the rural area in the sample as the rural region for this study. Approximately 94.9% of the final sample size for Taiwan fit in the non-rural region, whereas about 5.1% fit into the rural region.

Age and education were included as control variables in the analysis. The inclusion of these variables enable us to assess the research questions, regardless of the age or education of the respondent. Age was measured by the age of the participants at the time of interviews, and education was measured by the number of years each participant attended school.

#### 2.4 Analysis

A series of one-way ANCOVAs were used to compare the level of filial piety between rural and non-rural areas, and males and females, with age and education included as covariates. First, we compared adult children's filial attitude, attitude of financial support, and caregiving between rural and non-rural areas within China and Taiwan. Second, the levels of filial attitude, attitude of financial support, and caregiving were compared between male and female respondents within non-rural and rural China and Taiwan.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Preliminary Analysis

A factor analysis on the twelve items of the level of filial piety within each country was examined. As expected, three factors were found for both countries. The first factor, filial attitude, contained six items representing adult children's attitude toward the norms of filial piety. The second factor, attitude toward financial support, contained four items representing adult children's attitude toward providing financial support to their elderly parents. The third factor, caregiving, contained two items representing adult children's frequency of providing caregiving to their elderly parents.

#### 3.2 Descriptive Statistics

The results of the descriptive statistics indicated that most adults in China and Taiwan reported being in agreement with traditional attitudes and norms of filial piety. For example, when collapsing the categories of *strongly agree*, *fairly agree*, and *somewhat agree*, 88.5% of participants in China and 84.9% in Taiwan agreed that "Children must make efforts to do something that would bring honor to their parents". Likewise, 84.6% of participants in China and 79.6% in Taiwan agreed that "Authority of father should be respected". In regards to providing financial support, at least 65% of the respondents in both regions agreed they should provide financial support for their parents. Over half of the respondents in both regions reported that they currently help their parents with household chores and listen to their parents' personal concerns.



### 3.3 Differences between Rural and Non-rural China and Taiwan

Results of the analysis indicated that the only difference in filial piety in rural and nonrural was in regard to caregiving. While controlling for age and education, univariate independent one-way ANCOVAs demonstrated a significant effect for caregiving, ( $F(1, 1521)=11.32, p<.01$ ), but non-significant effects for filial attitude, ( $F(1, 1521)=.00, p=1$ ), and attitudes of financial support, ( $F(1, 1521)=.66, p=.42$ ).

Post hoc Tukey analyses for regional differences in China in the levels of caregiving ( $p=.00$ ) yielded significant results. Respondents in non-rural China ( $M=3.30, SD=.88$ ) reported significantly, yet moderately lower levels of caregiving than those in rural China ( $M=3.12, SD=.89$ ). (Lower values indicate higher levels of caregiving).

In terms of Taiwan, there were no significant differences in filial piety between rural and nonrural regions. While controlling for age and education, univariate independent one-way ANCOVAs demonstrated non-significant effects for filial attitude, ( $F(1, 743)=1.67, p=.20$ ), attitude of financial support, ( $F(1, 743)=.27, p=.61$ ), and caregiving, ( $F(1, 743)=.63, p=.43$ ).

### 3.4 Gender Differences within Rural and Non-rural China and Taiwan

There was only one gender difference among the participants in China. While controlling for age and education, univariate independent one-way ANCOVAs demonstrated a significant effect for caregiving [ $F(3, 1519)=10.67, p=.00$ ] and non-significant effects for both filial attitude [ $F(3, 1519)=.01, p=1.0$ ] and attitude of financial support [ $F(3, 1519)=.80, p=.50$ ]. Post hoc Tukey analysis of gender differences in levels of caregiving in rural China indicated that males were more actively involved in caregiving than females ( $p<.01$ ), with means of 2.95 ( $SD=.83$ ) and 3.29 ( $SD=.90$ ), respectively.

There were no significant gender differences among the Taiwan participants. While controlling for age and education, univariate independent one-way ANCOVAs demonstrated non-significant effects for filial attitude [ $F(3, 741)=2.68, p=.05$ ] attitude of financial support [ $F(3, 741)=1.17, p=.32$ ] and caregiving [ $F(3, 741)=.81, p=.49$ ].

## 4. Discussion

Although some scholars have hypothesized reduced filial piety in contemporary China and Taiwan due to dramatic social and economic changes from modernization and urbanization (Chen & Silverstein, 2000), the results of this study found that adult children in China and Taiwan continued to report a strong sense of filial piety. A strong majority of the participants in this study showed strong agreement toward traditional norms of filial piety and actively provided caregiving to their elderly parents. These findings support the previous research (Chen & Yi, 2011; Liu, 2013; Yeh et al., 2013) that filial piety is still significantly valued in these two current Chinese societies.

The findings in our study of caregiving differences between rural and non-rural areas in China, with rural participants reporting higher levels of caregiving than nonrural participants, regardless of age and level of education, were consistent with previous research and similar with previous studies. The study by Fuligni and Zhang (2004) of high school students in China found that those living in rural areas had higher filial piety than urban residents. Also, Lee and Xiao (1998) found that rural parents were more likely to receive financial assistance from their children than parents living in urban China, although the amount is less.

The finding of gender differences in actual caregiving in rural China, with male participants reporting higher levels of caregiving than female participants, regardless of age and level of education, is consistent with previous research. In China and Taiwan, sons have generally carried the major responsibility for taking care of their older parents (Lee et al., 1994; Lin et al., 2003). Previous studies with Taiwanese samples (Lin, 1992; Lin et al., 2003) have found that sons were almost twice as likely as daughters to provide support in both household labor and finance to their older parents. Additional research (Lin, 2000; Yi & Chen, 1998) found this to be true in rural Taiwan. These findings could be explained by Taiwanese parents' expectation of their sons and daughters-in-law to carry the filial responsibilities instead of their daughters (Yeh, 2009).

Overall, though, this study found few differences in filial piety between rural and nonrural adults, as well as between males and females. In fact, there were no gender or rural and nonrural differences in all three aspects of filial piety in Taiwan. Moreover, the only differences in China were regarding the caregiving aspect of filial piety, which referred to the actual behaviors associated with caregiving; there were no differences in filial attitudes and attitudes of financial support. For Taiwan, the major reason for a lack of differences between rural and nonrural regions is the fact that contemporary Taiwan is an overwhelmingly urban society, with relatively few people living in rural areas. For example, only 5% of the Taiwan sample for this study were from rural areas, which is consistent with Taiwan's national demographics. Thus, both from a statistical and a practical standpoint, few differences would be expected to be found with such a small group of rural participants.

China has experienced a great deal of fluidity in the rural and urban populations in recent years. An increasing number of rural adults are moving to urban areas in search of better employment. Moreover, services to rural areas have increased, thereby helping to narrow the discrepancy in medical and social services available to rural populations, compared to urban populations. Consequently, it is reasonable to think that differences in attitudes about filial piety between rural and nonrural have decreased significantly.

A lack of gender differences in filial piety is probably best explained by the changing role of women in Chinese societies. In both China and Taiwan, women are becoming more educated and more likely to be in the workplace. With these changes in the status of women in Chinese societies, gender role ideology and family norms have changed dramatically (Lin, 2009). Thus, it is reasonable to suggest

that attitudes about filial piety are now less bound by traditional Chinese norms, allowing for few gender differences.

Future research is suggested to test how changes in the nature of rural life in China, as well as gender role changes in Chinese societies, may help us better understand filial piety in China and Taiwan. Moreover, dyadic data, where the responses of adult children and their partners can be included in the same analysis, may provide a clearer picture of filial piety and a more comprehensive picture of contemporary intergenerational support in Chinese societies.

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