Chinese parent-child relationships in later life in the context of social inequalities

Abstract:
This paper examines how parent-child relationships vary against the backdrop of socio-economic inequalities evident in China. China is both an increasingly unequal and rapidly ageing country. Understanding how the relationships that older Chinese have with their children are associated with social inequalities is therefore of paramount importance. We do this by examining the effect of socio-economic indicators of the parent and child on their relationship in a multilevel, multinomial logit model of parent-child dyads using data from the Chinese Family Panel Study. First, the relationships we observe are not unidimensional and display complex patterns which deviate heavily from a ‘strong versus weak’ description of family ties. The results do not support a family displacement perspective of parent-child relationships but instead suggest that educational and financial resources facilitate support that is associated with greater emotional closeness and negates the need for support which places an emotional strain on the parent-child relationship.

Key words: intergenerational support, China, inequality, latent class analysis

Introduction
China presents a fascinating opportunity to examine parent-child relationships given rapid economic development, increasing inequalities, and a unique and highly specific social and cultural context with regards to family ties. For example, incomes more than doubled in the last ten years (IMF 2016), leading to considerable inequalities within society but also within families (W. Cheng/Wu 2015; Kanbur/Zhang 2009). Educational opportunities such as access to higher education have also expanded rapidly over the past 20 years, meaning that educational inequalities within and between generations is an ingrained feature of modern Chinese families (Emran/Sun 2011). In addition, the mass migration of individuals from rural to urban areas, particularly amongst younger generations, has led to increasing proportions of aging parents who are separated from their adult children (Cong/Silverstein 2011; Connelly/Maurer-Fazio 2015; Guo/Chi/Silverstein 2012). This trend of modernization has
transformed Chinese society and, given the relative shift in resources between generations, the impact on Chinese families is not likely to be immune to this change. This paper seeks to examine how Chinese parent-child relations in later life are situated in this unique socio-economic context through the creation of a relationship typology and scrutiny of the typology’s association with a variety of socio-economic factors.

The multiple dimensions of intergenerational ties are best understood as a complex multi-faceted set of arrangements within the context of a longstanding and often at times mixed affectual and emotional relationship (Dykstra/Fokkema 2011; Ferring/Michels/Boll/Filipp 2009; Silverstein/Bengtson, 1997; Silverstein/Gans/Lowenstein/Giarrusso/Bengtson 2010; Steinbach 2008; Van Gaalen/Dykstra 2006). Empirical studies of parent-child relations have revealed complex, multi-dimensional relationships described by the intergenerational solidarity model, which identifies several underlying dimensions including, but not limited to, affectual and functional solidarity (Bengtson/Roberts 1991). To consider the different dimensions of parent-child relationships independently, focusing only on separate elements of the solidarity model (for example, associational or the structural part of the relation), neglects many of the nuances that exist within parent-child relationships that cannot be captured by the idea of strong versus weak family ties (Reher, 1998). Research on modernity and family relations in later life is relatively less common but there is strong empirical evidence in support of the intergenerational solidarity model, including from China (Ikels 2006; Lei 2013; Ruggles 2007).

Modernization theory identifies greater economic resources as the most important reason for a variety of social outcomes and sees higher incomes and independence as juxtaposed to complex family arrangements and interdependence in traditional societies (Parsons 1960; Slater/Goode 1964). With regards to intergenerational relations, it can be argued that they are “situationally dependent and shaped by local circumstances of history, economics, social organization, and demography and by personal circumstances of wealth, gender, and family configuration” (Ikels 2004: 2). Previous empirical research on modernization theory and the family has focused on its impact on family formation, the distribution of household work and the first and second demographic transitions, whereas research on later life too frequently uses filial piety and cultural norms to explain findings that vary in the separate dimensions of the solidarity model.

In this paper, we seek to examine whether higher incomes, education and geographical mobility that result from rapid and extensive modernization are indeed associated with ‘modern family behaviours’ identifiable by withering parent-child relations or whether these relationships are still prescient. How do Chinese who have benefitted from sustained and rapid economic development differ in their family relationships from those who are less fortunate? What types of parent-child relationships can we expect to find when a child of a rural labourer has a university degree? How do the parent-child relationships of the 245 million urban migrants differ from those who stayed behind? Do the social inequalities arising out of modernization result in inequalities in parent-child relations? In our analysis, we use representative data of the Chinese population over 60 from the Chinese Family Panel Study (CFPS). Educational mobility, economic prosperity and migration patterns are not evenly distributed across the population of China and there are large differences between urban and rural areas as well as across provinces. The aim of this paper is to give a comprehensive overview of how Chinese parent-child relationships
in later life compare for different groups within China and therefore capture the true depth and breadth of social transformation within China. The representative sample of the Chinese population allows for a clear identification of how groups with diverse socioeconomic circumstances maintain family ties, and to our knowledge is the first study to encompass both rural and urban Chinese populations.

**Parent-child relationships in China**

Research on later life parent-child relationships in China has been developing rapidly in the past few years. For example, Guo et al. (2012) analysed the parent-child relations of the over 60’s in rural parts of Anhui province, situated in Eastern Central China on the Yangtze River. Their findings suggest that the considerable number of migrant children providing remittances to their parents reflect the strong filial obligations that Chinese adult children have toward their parents and that many migrant children engage in complex exchanges of support which reflect collaborative and mutually beneficial parent-child relations in the context of massive rural-to-urban migration. These findings emphasise that, in contrast to the European and North American context, Chinese parent-child relations are greatly shaped by migration. This is exacerbated by the Hukou household registration system (T. Cheng/Selden 1994), adding dynamics to Chinese families that are not found elsewhere. Each individual is registered with either an urban or rural hukou. If you have a rural hukou, you can live in an urban area but you do not have the same status as someone with an urban hukou.

The strict hukou system denies migrants access to many of the social services in urban areas such as schools, welfare systems and certain forms of employment (Cao/Liu 2015; Y. Chen/Feng 2013; Han et al. 2014; Li et al. 2014; Y. Wen/Hanley 2015) and therefore Chinese who migrate to urban areas maintain complex family ties with those they left behind. When their own children migrate, old parents frequently continue to live in a rural area, possibly by themselves or taking care of grandchildren (Biao 2007; M. Wen/Lin 2012). Thus, intergenerational support is related to migration also in the form of childcare for children who are left behind with grandparents in rural areas. Urban migrants therefore maintain close relations, often sending financial support back to their parents (Cai 2003; Secondi 1997). Regarding gender, women represent approximately half of all migrant workers (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2016). The large-scale migration of women into urban areas where they have limited access to childcare has therefore led to complex intergenerational arrangements. Older Chinese care for their grandchildren in what appears to be exchange for both long and short term financial support (Cong/Silverstein 2011). An open question remains, however, as to how this exchange fits within the wider parent-child relationship and particularly its association with emotional aspects (Silverstein/Bengtson 1997; Tu, 2016).

Despite the attention that exchange-based relationships with migrant children have received, they are less prevalent than relationships where children provided financial support to family left behind in rural areas without any identified reciprocation (Cong/Silverstein 2011). This particular type of relationship is possibly attributable to two factors: the absence of social support mechanisms for the elderly which means that older persons