

China's Population Policy: Aging, Gender, and Sustainability

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China is about to undergo a stunning demographic transformation, a rapidly aging population. Despite the influence of the aging process on women's lives, very few works analyze the interconnectedness of gender and aging. This article analyzes the interrelationship between China's aging population, gender inequality, and elderly women's poverty. Since gender issues in aging have been ignored, idealistic models put forward to promote the wellbeing of the elderly fail to address the specific needs of aging women. Traditional attitudes in China toward caring for the elderly have met serious challenges as a result of China's economic reform, one-child policy, and social acceptance of individualistic development and competitive life-styles. I argue that a fruitful way for dealing with the "graying" population of China is not to abandon her traditions but to call upon a Confucian notion of reciprocity that provides guidelines for the respect and care for the elderly through a joint effort of family, community, and government support. When properly revised and infused with gender consciousness, the Confucian tradition points the way to attending specifically to the needs of disadvantaged elderly women.

While Confucianism emphasizes how humans can live together and create a just society with a benevolent government, it, like Daoism, reminds us of the importance of harmony with nature. I will argue that the needs of elderly Chinese will be well-served not just by interweaving gender consciousness into the tradition of Confucianism, but also by emphasizing an ecological consciousness; cooperation with nature will foster limited growth within a steady state economy and sustainable development that will help all elderly, both women and men, in the long-run.

I. One-Child Policy and its Problems

When the Post-Mao regime took power in 1978, Deng's new policies focused on strengthening China's economy. He saw overpopulation as a roadblock to economic development. The one-child policy was introduced to ensure that China, which has historically been prone to floods and famine, could feed all her people. At the end of 1970s China was home to a quarter of the world's people, who were occupying just 7 percent of world's arable land. The baby boomers of the 1950s and 1960s were entering their reproductive years. The government saw strict population control as essential to economic reform and to an improvement in living standards. So the policy started in 1979 and became enforced as the national law of "one-child" for one family. "After more than 30 years of different endeavors, the effort to modify Chinese population trends has achieved remarkable success that has been recognized all around the world."¹ China's population is expected to increase and "the total population in China will peak at 1.486 billion by 2034, and then slightly decline to 1.44 billion by 2050."² The director of China's National Population Control and Family Planning Committee declared that the One-Child Policy reduced about 0.4 billion births at the end of 2005 and that China cannot change the policy in the future.³ The reduction in fertility reduced the severity of problems that come with overpopulation, like epidemics, slums, overwhelmed social services (health, education, law enforcement, and more), and strain on the ecosystem from abuse of fertile land and production of high volumes of waste. Despite of all these achievements from the result of implementation of "one child", a number of problems were created through this policy.

Among these problems, two severe issues concern the imbalance of sex ratios at birth and the rapidly aging population.⁴ Sociologists say that 30 million more Chinese men will be unable to marry by 2020 because there are not enough female counterparts for the men; the inability to find suitable spouses could trigger aggressive behavior among frustrated

bachelors, including kidnapping and trafficking in women. These consequences could be a real threat to China's stability in the future.

“Although the one-child policy has been blamed for the high male sex ratio, it is probably just one contributory factor. There was a sex-ratio imbalance in China in the 1930s and 1940s, mostly resulting from infanticide of girls”.⁵ It is likely that, even in the absence of the policy, sex-selective abortion has continued. “The solution will come only with a change in attitudes toward female offspring” .⁶

The influence of traditional ideologies such as widespread remnants of Confucianism has definitely played an important role in preferring sons over daughters. People's mentality of “more sons, more happiness” has been shaped through and deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Chinese feminists need to provide a critical analysis of the traditional bias against women and to clarify that the problem is a matter of ideology that devalues women and girls.⁷

What are feminist concerns concerning Chinese aging and women? Do gender issues matter in regard of aging? I will describe how gender inequalities have made elderly women's lives harder than that of their male partners and will propose how the state policy should change toward a more sustainable and equitable approach to improve the quality of the lives of aging women in China.

China will rapidly age because of the one-child policy that prompted a steady slide in total fertility rates to a level estimated at about 1.5 today.⁸ When the People's Republic of China was born in 1949, life expectancy was only 45 for women and 42 for men. Now it is rising steadfastly along with a rapidly growing economy and an improving standard of living. “By 2050 life expectancy could be as high as 81 for women and 76 for men. The combination of low fertility and longer life spans will create the phenomenon of an aging China.”⁹ The burden of aging is a spur to Chinese leaders to pursue policies that will better prepare the

country for meeting the cost of caring for its huge elderly population.

II. How Can Traditional Virtue of Filial Piety Meet the Need of Elderly?

Before economic reform, as a socialist society, China was steeped in its unique cultural tradition of filial piety and strongly endowed attitudes of promoting the well-being of the elderly. A definite goal for the elderly is so called “Five Haves”, that is Lao You Suo Yang (the elderly have appropriate material and financial support), Lao You Suo Yi (appropriate medical care), Lao You Suo Xue (educational opportunity), Lao You Suo Wei (accomplishment), and Lao You Suo Le (entertainment/enjoyment).¹⁰ Although the “Five Haves” sound very idealistic for ordinary people who had low earnings and small pensions after retirement, they have become endorsed in the system as a practice for young generations to care for their elderly parents.

The central value of the Chinese familism is Xiao (filial piety). Xiao or the sense of filial piety was instilled among children to foster the desirable attitudes toward their parents and other family members of older generations. “As the family was the basis of the social structure in traditional China, the idea of Xiao played a vital role in maintaining support of old persons and helped fashion a respectful societal attitude towards the elderly”.¹¹

Traditional Chinese society was a feudalistic one characterized by its sociopolitical hierarchy. To maintain social hierarchy a set of cardinal principles regulating social relations were needed and observed as “San Gang Wu Chang”, which dictated the positions of subjects submissive to the king, sons to parents, and wives to husbands. “Xiao as an idea differentiating the family status of parents and sons thus became a major means to uphold the social hierarchy in the traditional Chinese society.”¹² Such a feudal society was marked not only by its social hierarchy but also by strong mutual obligations and common interests. A harmonious and happy family relationship was an ideal shared among family members.

Family went before individuals, and different roles and mutual obligations of family members to each other were essential and maintained from generation to generation. The reciprocal nature of the Chinese intergenerational caring relationship was not just exemplified in supportive activities through life but also was manifested by efforts of both the younger and older on a daily basis of exchange and cooperation to satisfy the common interests of the family.¹³

All in all, “the equation ‘community care = family care’ seems to be a claim historically relevant to China.” According to Chen’s analysis, since women were prescribed the lowest status in the family and society, Xiao did have a side effect in balancing the three-fold subordination requirements for the mother, hence, “it is perfectly permissible to say that elderly men benefitted more under Xiao, than women, because women did not enjoy the same social status and privileges as men during that time.”¹⁴ However, Chen continues to point out that the requirement of Xiao eventually led to the promotion of female wellbeing in relation to their grownup sons. “When women entered older ages Xiao was a major means to guarantee their living with support mostly from their sons” and the reason for this, according to Chen, is that grownup sons “were considered as the mainstay of the family and the society.”¹⁵ To me this argument sounds question begging: the mainstay roles of the sons actually were prescribed by the society, and their responsibility of providing Xiao for their mothers was assumed. In the realities of a family with young and old generations, the wife is most likely doing the household chores and providing emotional support for families. Socially assigned roles and different obligations to women should not be the cause of their bearing less responsibility compared to that of men to their elderly mothers. Furthermore, in reality, everyday-based caring practices most likely were accomplished by women--daughters or daughters-in-laws--but those providing the caring work were not considered as equally

valuable as sons.

Lau's article "Changing Family-related Values in Communist China" points out further issues of gender inequality. When the earnings of men and women are compared, observable inequality prevails. Husbands earn much more than their wives do and have higher positions at work. In Lau's report, the present Chinese pension scheme includes a monthly pension of 70% to 80% of the basic salary. This scheme is restricted mainly to those living in the city, and working as officials, educators, scientists, etc. As a result, "a large number of Chinese citizens still do not receive any pensions." "The old people who have only a meager pension or even none at all will have no choice but to rely upon the family as the most important source of support."¹⁶ Very fortunately, the tradition of filial piety is still prevalent for those old in need. Nevertheless, under the current market economy, new lifestyles and burgeoning consumerism have accelerated young people toward developing individualistic attitudes, replacing both the traditional and the new social values introduced by the Cultural Revolution. "The ideal of total devotion to the family or the state is being replaced by individualism. A survey in Beijing also finds that '80% of those aged 15 to 25 wanted to set up financially independent families and maintain some physical distance from the parents.'¹⁷

Other scholars also demonstrate challenges to the "family care only" system. Milligan cites a recent commentary in the *Beijing Review* (2007) that predicts the family based system of support for older people will come to an end in the next 20 years.¹⁸ The migration of working age adults from rural to urban areas leaves behind the many elderly Chinese who remain in their rural homes. As Milligan states, "Whilst urban populations doubled from 16 percent to 32 percent between 1960 and 2000, three-quarters of all elderly people in China still live in rural areas..."¹⁹

Cheung has specifically addressed gender issues in the aging population, and, in

particular, has analyzed the differential implications of aging for men and women. Women live longer than men but are more likely to be widowed or single, and are more likely to be economically dependent. “Their lifetime earnings are substantially lower than those of men. They do not receive the benefits of pension schemes or provident funds, which are tied to paid employment.”²⁰ She argues for life-cycle approach to gender and aging analysis across Asian countries, a gender mainstreaming method endorsed by the All China Women Federation, Women Research Institution.²¹

III Analysis of Possible Strategy and Policy for China’s Transition toward a Sustainable Model of Caring for All Elderly

Sustainability is characterized by Guo and Marinova as “meeting the needs of current and future generations through an integration of environmental protection, social advancement and economic prosperity”²² They point out that sustainability is a new concept and is not China’s priority at present. It seems that China has emphasized economic growth at the expense of environmental protection and social advancement. The response of Chinese leaders, of course, would be that her most important focus has rightly been economic growth so that people could rid themselves of poverty and have “warm and full stomach”, in Deng’s terms. But can China maintain economic growth and preserve her arable land, water, and other limited natural resources and at the same time support social advancement, health care, and the quality of life for her population? In a team report of “Ten Big Challenges Confronting Population and Development in China”²³ they point out China confronting the most serious environmental problems relating to water and soil erosion, land desertification and grassland destruction. Polluted water and air, noise, and garbage in the city and the abuse of chemical substances “have obviously imposed severe threats to food security and people’s health in China.”²⁴ What will be better strategies for China to employ in order to promote

sustainable growth of the economy and meet expanding domestic demand that will come from an increasingly large aging population?

Guo and Marinova do mention China's aging will result in an increased demand for the home-based care for the disabled, frail and elderly, and will lead to more pressure on the environment to meet the demand. Although they rightly state, "Future economic prosperity and growth are not certain if there are risks to the natural environment",²⁵ they seem to see the polarization only as a dilemma. They offer no suggestions for a possible solution, and do not see how China's traditional values of harmony with nature and of filial piety and reciprocity might provide a key to crafting a solution.

According to Wang and Shanahan, both Daoism and Confucianism convey insightful ecological themes. The principle concern in Daoism is for harmony with the Dao, the nameless way that is the source of all existence. In Confucianism, the stress is on how humans can live together and create a just society with a benevolent government. For both the Daoists and the Confucians, harmony with nature is important. The Daoists emphasize the primacy of unmediated closeness to nature to encourage simplicity and spontaneity in individuals and in human relations. The Confucians, especially the Neo-Confucians, stress harmonizing with the changing patterns in nature so as to adapt human action and human society appropriately to nature's deeper rhythms.²⁶

Daoism advocates that yielding is a form of strength. Its calls for non-interfering action have enormous implications for our interactions with nature, namely that humans cannot arrogantly or blindly force nature into our mold. To cooperate with nature in a Daoist manner requires a better understanding of and appreciation for nature's processes. While an extreme Daoist position might advocate complete noninterference with nature, a more moderate Daoist approach would call for interaction with nature in a far less exploitive manner than

China engages in at present. Such cooperation with nature would sanction the use of appropriate or intermediate technology when necessary and would favor the use of organic fertilizers and natural farming methods. In terms of economic policy it would foster limited growth within a steady state economy that could support sustainable, rather than exploitive development. Clearly, a Daoist ecological position is one with significant potential in the contemporary world. And this ecological position offers us insight about the aging population as well: aging is a part of a natural cycle. To ignore the special needs of aging men and women is to “fight” or “ignore” nature, quite contrary to Daoist thought. To recognize the fact of aging is to fully acknowledge that humans are part of—not removed from—the natural ecological cycles.

In *Dao De Jing*, chapter 46, Laozi states, “There is no greater calamity than not knowing what is enough”²⁷ which implies that in issues of aging we go along with the path of the nature. Someone may raise a challenge to Laozi that it sounds too easy to give up life. Laozi would reply in chapter 50, don’t give up easily but be good at holding on to life. Reading the two chapters together, clearly, the Dao asks us follow the law of nature, the mystic of life, and knowing that enough is enough brings people with calm and serenity. The Dao put human life as a part of the natural ecological cycles as a whole so people could have peace of mind when their time comes.

An aspect of human life often obscured by an emphasis on individualism is our interdependence with the rest of nature and with other human beings. As the feminist philosopher Eva Kittay points out in *Love’s Labors*, we are all some mother’s child; we are all equal in the sense that we inevitably depend on other humans for our own well-being. Kittay is right when she argues that care should be a moral value of considerable importance. But I would add that a person’s place in the lifecycle affects how and on whom the person

will be dependent. There is a difference between a parent-child relationship, a husband-wife relationship, and an adult child-aging parent relationship—and how caring is best expressed will be shaped by the differences in these relationships.

In traditional Confucianism women were to be obedient to their parents and husbands and thus more likely to be the benefactor than the beneficiary in their caring relationships. Confucianism, though, must be understood as a living, dynamic theory—not a fossilized code—and should be modified to meet better the needs of both women and men. Attention to gender consciousness leads us to call for a Confucian ethics that extends its moral sense to encompass gender equality. In order to care for all, Confucianism must delete its call for the “threefold obedience of women”²⁸ and commit fully to gender justice. Properly revised, Confucianism’s family-oriented ethical thought is compatible with a feminist ethics of care and serves well as a general guide for dealing with public life. At their best, both Confucianism and the ethics of care properly emphasize contextual- and connection-based reciprocity.

In denying individual exchange reciprocation, Kittay raises a notion of Reciprocity-in-Connection:

Significantly, the reciprocation is based not on the care her mother gave her daughter and which she now expects her daughter to return. That would turn the mother’s care for her daughter into a sort of advance payment for later care—a maneuver typical of exchange reciprocity. The daughter instead invokes a set of nested obligations. The fulfillment of those obligations is now her responsibility and her’s uniquely.²⁹

This set of nested obligations demands human relationships extend from family to community and society, from today’s generations to future generations. Today’s generations should look after their young and old, and future descendants as a whole

The post-Mao government has kept Mao’s commitment for women’s equality and had

tried to focus on community construction and service through a call of taking humanity as Root principle which serves everyone including women. The city of Beijing has built 107 residential community centers and service stops almost 3000 since 1998.³⁰ Cai Wenmei, professor of Peking University, argues that old aged people should be taken care at home through the community service, and not to be sent to senior center.³¹ According to her, living at home is the best way for old people to enjoy the rest of their life, and actually, it is desirable for the old through the investigations of their choices. For example, Hepingli residential community realizes old people's needs and interests and organizes various forms of activity to energize their lives such as calligraphy and drawing group, singing and dancing group, sports and games associations, etc. With regular meetings retired and elderly people get together in order to communicate with each other and to share their common interests. The goals of community are to take care of the two important stages of life: birth and old age. Laid-off and unemployed women get service jobs and are able to practice public care in their own resident community. This benefits both family and society in general. Li shumun states that everyone is going to be old and need help, so helping the old is to help one's self.³² For today's old and tomorrow's self we must care for everyone and take care as the most important value in a good life.

The Women Studies Center of Peking University conducted a survey of elder women's lives in the western suburb of Beijing in 2008³³: most of them are lower income or poor women. According to the survey of 304 women ranging in age from 60 to over 80 and few over 90, one third of them were living with their children or relatives, less than two third were living near by family members with close contacts, and one sixth of them were living with three generations of family. All of them except one expressed their will of living with family rather than being alone. The purpose of the survey is to make suggestions regarding

laws that protect elder women's rights and interests. Thus, the survey laid out many questions about those women's everyday activities and about their economic status, health care, medical situations, etc.

When a recognition of the natural rhythm of aging and the interdependency of humans is combined with the Confucian social values of filial piety and reciprocity, we have the keys to better strategies for China's future as it promotes sustainable economic growth and meets the demands of an aging population. In my view, the state should carry on the traditional values of the harmonious relationship between the young and the old, increase the pensions of the elderly. Since there have been increased gaps between genders and most elder women have no pension in the countryside, the state should put the most needy women elderly as the priority in aging relief policies. The state also need to develop further social programs in the local community that imitate the diversity of nature itself; both individuals and companies should be looked to for financial support for social programs, and volunteers from neighborhoods should be solicited to watch out for and help the elderly who live alone. Since the problem of 4/2/1³⁴ in the next two decades will increase rapidly, elder people will be live alone more often than before, the demands of intensive care for them will be increasing immensely, so the pressure on the environmental cost. The government should consider more sustainable options that will allow the elderly to stay at home or be housed in the local community rather than in more expensive and centralized senior centers that would be yet another drain on energy reserves. Although public services should be available for those having special needs, "people in the community helping people" should be the guiding principle for care of the elderly—and it is precisely in this principle that we find a deep recognition of human interdependency.

IV. Caring for Elderly Women in the Crisis of China's Aging

Elderly women are more likely than men to be widowed and to live alone. “The proportion of old men and women living alone is 8 and 10.2 percent respectively.”³⁵ Also, older women are more likely to be economically dependent because of their past unpaid household labor and lower-paid jobs.³⁶ Therefore, “the disadvantages of women in marital life and living arrangements are substantially more serious than those of men at old ages.”³⁷ Older women are less likely than older men to get remarried due to their economic status, educational level and other factors.³⁸ Elderly women’s care, especially for those living in the countryside, should be the priority in the government policy for dealing with an aging population.

According to Leung, women are entitled to five years of early retirement in high-risk professions. But, women also are compelled to retire earlier than men and, so, have a shorter career lifespan. The retirement age is 60 for men and 55 for women. Why are women required to leave their jobs five years earlier than men? Theoretically this policy protects women, “but the protection can be seen as paternalistic and restrictive, and in concrete terms might be seen as inhibiting women from attaining equal working conditions and wages to men”³⁹ Leung emphasizes that so-called harmony between men and women is superficial, based as it is on the absolute dominance by the male of the female. “There cannot be real harmony until men and women can live with dignity and respect as equals”.⁴⁰

We should not ignore these social causes of women’s economic dependence. The government should consider providing for the needs of the poor elderly women with special funds while supporting the traditions of family care for the elderly. For those elderly who live alone or have needs beyond that provided for by the family, the state and local communities should take the responsibilities for their everyday care. The retirement age of women in professional fields should be made equal to that of men.

China must secure the current population control and stabilize the present low fertility level. Learning the positive elements of Confucian and Daoist traditions is necessary in order to secure a harmonious and green society—even if it means a slowed economy and readjustment to meet healthy and sound standards for development. The Chinese government started to limit the number of private car purchases (one car for one family) in Beijing since 2011 in order to reduce air pollution. This is just one important step in trying to make economic development fall into harmony with the natural environment.

In conclusion: China can move toward a sustainable and equitable development through a joint effort of family, community and the state. To confront aging, the family, community and state must work together to meet all older people's needs, especially those of the disadvantaged elderly women. These tasks can be accomplished with the help of a Confucian framework of filial piety based on non-individualistic, contextualized reciprocity but only when this framework is properly infused with both gender and ecological consciousness.

Notes:

1. Chen 2008, 2.
2. Chen 2008, 2.
3. BBC News 2006.
4. Chen 2008.
5. Hesketh, Li and Zhu, 2005.
6. Hesketh, Li and Zhu, 2005.
7. See Wang Yanguang presentation, 2008.
8. Zhou 2011.
9. England 2005.
10. Wu 1986 in Chen 1996, 57.
11. Yang, 1959 in Chen, 1996, 59.
12. Chen, 1996, 60.
13. Chen, 1996, 61.
14. Chen 1996, 62-3.
15. Chen 1996, 63.
16. Lau in Law 2001, 197.
17. Lau in Law 2001, 203.
18. Milligan 2009, 50.
19. Milligan 2009, 50.
20. Cheung in Yeung edited 2002, 211.
21. See Liu Bohong 2010 PDF.
22. Government of Western Australia, 2003, p. 24; Newman, 2005, pp 273-274 in Guo and Marinova 2006, 8.
23. Chen 2008.
24. Tang 2006 in Chen 2008, 7.
25. Guo and Marinova 2006.
26. Wang and Shanahan, 2002: 485.
27. Lao-tzu, 1993.
28. See the *Book of Rites*.
29. Kittay, 1999, 67.
30. Ma 2003, 124.
31. Cai in Ma 2003, 127.
32. Li in Ma, 2003, 136-137.
33. Wei 2008.
34. Sun Xi 2010.
35. Zeng and George, 2000.
36. *Women Across Cultures*, chapter 5, 2011.
37. Zeng and George, 2000.
38. Zheng 2007: 83.
39. Leung 2003, 367.
40. Leung 2003, 372.

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