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## **Family Bond and Family Obligation: Continuity and Transformation**

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### **Abstract**

In examining family relations in contemporary China the paper reports the findings of an empirical investigation, which are discussed in terms of recent accounts in the specialist literature. While the individualization thesis suggests that the bonds between family members are diminishing and that family obligations are similarly less significant than they used to be, it is shown here that family bonds and obligations remain strong even though the grounds on which they are performed and the attitudes and emotions associated with them have undergone change since China's marketization from the 1980s. The individualization thesis neglects the process of reinterpretation and renegotiation of filial obligation, and fails to appreciate that modification of filial behaviour is initiated not only by the younger generation but also by the older. The paper shows that contemporary filial relations are less concerned with authority, and more directed to financial and emotional support for parents, and from parents to children both adult and dependent.

### **Key words:**

authority, respect, filial obligation, intimacy, reciprocity, exchange, individualism

### **Introduction**

Economic reform, institutional restructuring and demographic changes have produced an unprecedented impact on almost every aspect of life in China at the present time. The speed and scope of societal transformation is readily demonstrated in the relationships between individuals and their families. There is a growing body of literature arguing that marketization and the rise of consumerism has led to individualization, to a decline of moral behaviour and disintegration of the family bond and sense of obligation of adult children for their elderly parents. Young people, it is held, tend to be egocentric, selfish, and pursue individual happiness at the expense of the

well-being of their parents. A growing number of rural young couples establish nuclear families immediately after marriage and leave their parents in empty nests. The image emerges of an ‘uncivil’ younger generation that has led their elderly parents to a situation of powerlessness and helplessness.

This paper acknowledges the significance of change that the individualization thesis describes but argues that its representation of relationships between adult children and their elderly parents is not accurate. The industrial transition organized by the Chinese state and the emergence of capitalism and consumerism has led to an economic advancement of society but at the same time it has introduced uncertainty and sense of insecurity for individuals and families. Rather than working against their elderly parents, adult children find that their best interests are to work together with their parents as a family ‘corporate’, but in a new way. Instead of disintegrating, family bonds remain strong and are even reinforced in some aspects in a transformed and ever transforming society. It is also interesting to note that increasingly not only the younger generation but also the older generation take initiatives to reinterpret the entrenched notion of filial piety so that both work strategically to serve and maximize individual and family interests.

### **Family Bond and Filial Obligation**

According to individualization thesis, the ultimate goal of the current generation of Chinese youth lies in the pursuit of personal happiness (Ci 1994) and individual realization; it holds there is an ethical shift from collective-oriented values to individual-oriented values (Hansen and Svarverud 2010; Yan 2009; 2010). As a consequence, young people, particularly the only-child generation, tend to be selfish and are neither prepared nor competent to take care of other people, especially their parents (Jiao, Ji and Jing 1986).

Whereas the individualization thesis emphasizes individual pursuit of self-interest at the expense of their families, the collectivistic approach focuses on the sacrifices individuals make for their families. Each of these positions treats individuals and their families as opposed to each other. The simple contrast between collective needs and self-interest fails to appreciate a third possibility, namely the Chinese relational self, based on ego-centric attachments. In discussing

Chinese relationships Fei (1992: 67) emphasizes that ‘there is always a self at the centre of each web’ of relationships. Even in traditional society, an individual was not simply passively controlled by his family. As Barbalet (2014: 203) notes, ‘the self in traditional Chinese society is both subject to intimate collective forces and at the same time self-consciously aware not only of its role obligations but also the choices available in managing them to the satisfaction of its personal individually-defined purposes’. In today’s society an individual has wider perimeters to operate and more opportunities to pursue his/her interests but his/her self-interest is not necessarily achieved at the expense of his family. The dominant family pattern in China today is neither individualistic nor collectivistic but tends to be relational; the self and his/her family work together in such a way that interests of family members might be harmonized and optimized.

Research conducted by the author supports the position indicated in the preceding paragraph. A study of family life based on a questionnaire delivered to 28 undergraduates (2 male and 26 female) in Guangzhou in November 2013 indicates a number of features of orientation and behavior in family bond and obligation. Evidence shows that young people spend a lot of time with their parents and most contribute to household chores. In response to the proposition ‘I spend time with my family at home’ 71% respondents checked ‘often’ or ‘almost always’ on a 5-point range. In addition, respondents reported behaviour quite supportive of parents. In response to the proposition ‘I run errands that the family needs done’ 42% indicated ‘often’ or ‘almost always’. This figure goes up dramatically to 86%, however, if the indication of ‘sometimes’ is included in the result. In response to the proposition ‘I help around the house’ 68% indicated ‘often’ or ‘almost always’, and the figure increases to 85% if ‘sometimes’ is included.

The research found evidence of support for grandparents but not as strong as for parents. In response to the proposition ‘I spend time with my grandparents’ nearly 19% respondents checked ‘often’ or ‘almost always’ and only 8% indicated ‘almost never’ with a third of the sample indicating ‘not often’. Similarly, in response to the proposition ‘I spend time with my aunts, uncles and cousins’ nearly half (48%) indicated ‘almost never’ or ‘not often’. This frequency of contact is associated with corresponding behaviour. In response to the proposition ‘I help take care of my grandparents’ 37% of respondents indicated ‘almost never’ (4%) or ‘not

often' (33%) and in response to the proposition 'I run errands for my grandparents' 33% indicated 'almost never' (8%) or 'not often' (25%).

Respondents indicated that they spent a great deal of time with their immediate family or parents while they spent proportionately little time with grandparents and also with uncles, aunts and cousins. The nuclear family tends to be of higher priority for these respondents than intergenerational relations and relations with remote relatives are less important. The evidence indicates that consanguinal obligation does not extend to three generations but remains significant at the two-generational level. This corresponds with Croll's (2006) findings that the intergenerational contract is renegotiated in maintaining family care and that a familial contract operates to preserve individual well-being for both generations. This sense of a family bond between adult children and their parents is confirmed by a number of recent research findings (Lin and Yi 2013; Liu 2008; Wang 2010).

In studies of family bond and obligation the aspect of intimacy between family members is often overlooked. Questions associated with the issue of intimacy were included in the author's 2013 Guangzhou study. In response to the question 'Do your parents express their love for you openly, for example with kissing or hugging?', 69% respondents indicated 'almost never' or 'not often', only 10% indicated 'often' but no one indicated 'almost always'. Though members of the younger generation express their feelings slightly more openly than their parents', a similar pattern of behavior of adult children toward their parents is indicated in the findings. In response to the questions 'Do you express your love for your parents openly, for example with kissing or hugging?', 63% respondents indicated 'almost never' or 'not often', 19% indicated 'often', with no one indicating 'almost always'.

According to the survey results, then, both younger and older generations tend not to express their love for each other openly. Does this suggest that there is little intimacy between members of Chinese families? In western societies intimacy is manifest through mutual disclosure and verbal expression (Giddens 1992). Based on this conceptualization, intimacy does not exist between Chinese adult children and their parents. A number of other indicators, however, show that strong family bonds do operate between Chinese adult children and their parents. Intimacy

in Chinese society is more actional than verbal, which involves tending to each other's needs and concerns, involvement in each other's affairs and decision-making, being reliable in crisis, and similar behaviour. Conceptualization of intimacy which draws on Western experiences fails to capture elements of intimacy in Chinese social relations.

Intimacy between adult children involves concern for the parents' view in terms of decision-making which may affect family relations. In response to a question regarding the choice of a marriage partner, 79% respondents considered parental advice to be 'important' or 'very important' and no respondents thought that it was 'not important at all' or 'not very important'. In terms of love and marriage, both rural and urban young people are increasingly free to independently find a spouse. The findings of the present study correspond with others which show that parents' advice and preference are taken seriously by young people and the family's interests feature in decision-making concerning spouse choice and arrangements for marriage (Hensen and Pang 2008: 82–84; Unger 1993: 37). In these and connected relationships there is a continuing basis for the sense of obligation to care for and support of elderly parents experienced by adult children in mainland China today.

Traditional family relations and filial obligation are maintained through parental authority, especially the father's, and a duty of obedience from adult children. Confucius (2000: 2, 4, 6, 14, 20, 44, 256) insists that adult children must satisfy their parents' material needs, and show them reverence and obedience. Responses to the Guangzhou questionnaire indicate a strong commitment to the ideal of respect for parents and at the same time a relatively low regard for parental authority.

In response to the proposition 'To treat my parents with great respect' 99% respondents indicated that it was 'important' or 'very important'. The ideological rather than behavioural significance of this result can be gauged in the fact that a similar proposition related to grandparents led to a response in which nearly 92% of respondents indicated that that proposition was 'important' or 'very important'. These findings were consistent with the result of a study conducted by Liu (2008). It is interesting to notice that though Confucian thought including patriarchy was attacked and undermined during the Mao-era, family obligation through the enforcement of 1950

marriage law was even reinforced (Qi 2014). A rehabilitation of Confucian ideology (Bell, 2008) and associated developments since 1978, including adoption and modification of New Confucianism created in Taipei, Hong Kong and Harvard (Dirlik, 2011; Song 2003; Tan 2008) promote Confucianism as a moral force in China, including for filial obligation (Whyte 1997: 23).

While questionnaire results indicate that respect for parents is high and perception of the family seems to be as a corporate entity, respect for parental authority is not high and suggests that the respondents are significantly individualized in terms of their relationship with parental authority. In response to a question regarding acceptance of their father's authority 15% of respondents indicated that it was 'not important at all' or 'not very important', 56% indicated that they thought that it was 'sometimes important', and 29% indicated that they believed it to be 'important' or 'very important'. Mother's authority fared slightly worse. Nineteen percent of respondents reported that it was 'not important at all' or 'not very important', 54% indicated that it was 'sometimes important', 27% believed that it was 'important' or 'very important'. In a traditional family, elder brothers have authority over younger siblings. In response to a question, 'to accept my older brother's authority', nearly 67% respondents indicated 'not important at all' or 'not very important'. Only 10% respondents choose 'important' or 'very important'. A similar result is reflected in the response to 'to accept my elder sister's authority'.

Whereas young people see respect for parental advice regarding spouse choice as important, they reveal more independence and autonomy in decisions about jobs or career. Not only is the acceptance of parental authority low there is a correspondingly low level of acceptance of parental advice on these crucial issues. In response to a question concerning the importance of following parents' advice about choosing their degree and courses only 15% of respondents believed that parental advice was 'important' or 'very important' on a 5-point range, and in choosing their job or career 23% respondents believed that parental advice was 'important' or 'very important'.

Indeed, the relatively high individualism of respondents is indicated in responses to a question concerning the contribution of the suggestions of children in solving family problems; 68%

respondents believed that their contribution to solving family problems was ‘important’ or ‘very important’. In answering a more direct question, asking a response to the proposition ‘In solving problems, the children’s suggestions should be followed’ 77% respondents agreed ‘generally’ or ‘strongly’ on a 5-point range. It can be seen that respondents both accepted the principle of obedience to parents and at the same time indicated a practice of not accepting parental authority. When asked whether they agreed with the proposition that ‘Children should obey their parents’ 63% of respondents ‘generally agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’. But when asked to indicate whether they disagreed or agreed with the proposition that ‘Children should not talk back to their parents’ only 6% ‘strongly agreed’, 35% of respondents ‘generally agreed’, and 21% ‘strongly disagreed’ or ‘generally disagreed’.

Authority relations in families are traditionally solid in agrarian society where there was no other institutional involvement; as soon as children participate in formal education and employment outside the home then parental authority is reduced through competition with other bases of authority. Reverence in filial obligation is replaced by respect for parents. Young people tend to not simply accept parental authority as the only option. Since 1978 China has moved from a purely planned and collectivized economy to a more market-based economy. China is increasingly integrated into a globalized world and there are various channels for young people to access Western liberalism and individualism. While much is made of the importation of western popular culture leading to individualism among Chinese young people, there is sufficient in structural development in China itself to account for a move to an ‘individualistic’ orientation (Qi 2014). Chinese young people today see it as appropriate for them to express their own point of view and to be involved in decision making about family affairs. Young individuals do not simply follow conventional norms of filial obligation but reinterpret them and practice filial obligation in a way that permits active shaping of their own lives. It is not only young people who reinterpret the sense and practice of filial obligation. It is often neglected that parents also reinterpret filial obligation in a changing society. Filial obligation is no longer a fixed norm but a guideline which parents and young people negotiate to operate it more flexibly and effectively.

In response to a question ‘Do your parents say to you something like “parents brought you up through hard work; you should repay parents’ sacrifice in the future”?’ , 25% of respondents



indicated 'almost never'. Sixty percent of respondents indicated 'not often', or 'sometimes' and only 15% of respondents indicated 'often'. In response to a question 'Do your parents tell you that they expect to live with you (or one of their other children) when they are old?', 19% of respondents indicated 'almost never', 66% of respondents indicated 'not often' or 'sometimes', only 15% of respondents indicated 'often' or 'almost always'. In response to a proposition that 'Parents sacrifice themselves so that their children can have a better future', 67% of respondents indicated 'strongly disagree' and 'generally disagree'. No one choose 'strongly agree' and only 13% indicated 'generally agree'.

In traditional Chinese society and also during the Mao-era, fulfillment of filial obligation was more-or-less unconditional, based on the uncontested principle that 'parents give life and raise the child up'. At those times it was not unusual for parents to advise their child: 'Parents gave you life and raised you up. We sacrificed ourselves for you'. By the same token an adult child may remark: 'No matter what I do I wouldn't be able to repay what my parents did for me'. Responses to the Guangzhou survey indicate that filial obligation tends not to be unconditional in the traditional sense. It is interesting to see that this change is not only reflected in the attitude of the young but also through their parent's behavior. Does this mean that young people are not prepared to provide support for their parents in future? The results show that there is a continuing sense of filial obligation among young people. The sense of obligation to care for aged parents is not diminished but coexists with authority-independence. This is an important finding in terms of the individualization thesis in which individualism is treated as unitary.

In completing the proposition 'To help my parents financially in the future is ...' only one respondent indicated 'not very important'. The rest of respondents indicated 'important' and 'very important'. In completing the proposition 'To have my parents live with me when they get older is ...' no respondents indicated 'not important at all'. Only 1 respondent indicated 'not very important', with 81% of respondents indicated 'important' or 'very important'. The attitude represented in these findings is reflected in corresponding behavior. Based on data from the 2006 East Asian Social Survey, Lin and Yi (2013: 304) found that 24% of adult children in China lived with their parents, and the percentage of sons in intergenerational co-residence (36.8%)

was significantly higher than that of daughters. As for those who didn't live with their parents, sons saw their parents in person much more often than did daughters.

In completing the proposition 'Elderly parents should live ...' no respondent indicated 'in a nursing home', showing that nursing homes are not regarded as desirable or appropriate places for aged parents. Also, no respondent chose the option 'in their own home, with a hired maid' while 35% of respondents indicated 'with one adult child for a period of time and then live with another, and so on repeatedly'. These findings indicate a weakening among respondents of the traditional idea that aged parents should live with their eldest son. The younger generation has an increasing tendency to operate in terms of equal shares of gender responsibility, which is less discussed in the literature. There is an orientation among this group toward the equity rule of deliberate calculation or orientation to value ratios in the principle of market pricing (Fiske 1992). Thirteen percent of respondents completed the proposition by indicating that elderly parents should live 'with an adult child, who hires a maid to look after them'. This indicates provision of financial or emotional support but not direct involvement of physical support. Forty-six percent indicated 'with an adult child who looks after them'. Overall, it can be seen that young people still think that it is their responsibility to provide support for aged parents. A survey conducted by Li and Shin (2013) shows that in nearly all cases, children offer some type of support to their parents.

The findings of the Guangzhou study correspond with those of a study of labour-related migrant families in Anhui province by Cong and Silverstein (2008). They found that aged parents received infrequent instrumental assistance from their non-resident adult children but received more tangible financial support at a level surpassing the average total household income of the older generation in return for caring for grandchildren left in their care. Their data also shows parents' emotional closeness with adult children. It is interesting to note that rural elders prefer this form of exchange in which parents' psychological benefits of receiving economic aid from migrant children are contingent on providing child-care services. Geographic separation between different generations of family members does not necessarily entail that family bonds and obligations are eroded. Indeed, the assumption that family support is necessarily grounded in

physical proximity between the individuals concerned cannot be accepted as a general proposition (Baldassar 2007).

It can be seen from the Guangzhou data and other studies that filial obligations continue to play an important role in the relations between parents and adult children. At the same time, it has been shown that the established patterns of filial obligation are reinterpreted and re-negotiated through the initiative of both young adults and also their parents. The idea inherent in the individualization thesis, that an obligation of adult children to care for their aged parents is no longer to be assumed and likely to be neglected through a growth of self-interest, is not supported by the available evidence. The question arises, then, of what is the basis of filial obligation which operates in mainland China today? This shall be explored in the following section.

### **State, Family and Self**

Demographic structures, economic climate, law and public policy together shape both the need for kin support and the capacity to provide it, for they create the conditions under which people 'make their lives' (Finch 1994: 236; see also Phillipson 2010). Similarly, Giddens (1979) indicates that social structures should not be seen as simply external to individuals and having the effect of constraining their actions; rather, they are used by human agents in constructing their own lines of action. It can be seen that the welfare system, law, economic reform, demographic change and policy in China all shape the continuing importance of family bond and filial obligation. More importantly Chinese individuals flexibly reinterpret and negotiate the meanings of filial obligation in the construction of their own lives.

It is prescient of Blau (1967: 119) to observe that 'a person who has all the resources required as effective inducements for others to furnish him with the services and benefits he needs is protected against becoming dependent on anyone'. The basis in Western Europe of expectation of state provided aged-care comes from a long history of fiscal development for state provision that includes not only a liberal economy, social democracy and the welfare state but also two world wars through which universal military service led to post-war welfare reforms (Flora 1986: XII–XV). None of these factors is present in the history of China. The Chinese government is

‘neither willing nor able to perform the main role in providing elder care’ (Wong 2008: 90). The lack of a substantive state system of pensions and care means that aged parents have no choice but to depend on their adult children. The large majority of older adults in rural China depend almost exclusively on their children for financial security (Joseph and Phillips 1999). Health care has become an issue for many elderly since their medical costs are only partially covered due to work place reforms as a result of withdrawal or reduction of state subsidies since 1990s (Ikels 1993:312). Moreover, both urban and rural elderly people are left with no option but to rely on their family for care when they become physically dependent (Liang and Gu 1989; Thogersen and Ni 2008: 31; Whyte 2005).

Both the 1950 and 1980 Marriage Laws stress reciprocal obligation of family members for the welfare of the family as a whole. The Marriage Law of 1950 and all subsequent related legislation explicitly stress the reciprocal obligations of family members for the welfare of the family as a whole. One difference distinguishing the 1950 Marriage Law from the 1980 Law is that the latter has stronger family obligation clauses. The 1980 law indicates that ‘children have the duty to support and to assist their parents’ and if they fail to do so, then parents in need ‘have the right to demand support payments from their children’ (Article 21). The 1996 Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Seniors, which remains in force today, states: ‘aged care primarily relies on the family; family members are responsible for the care and welfare of the elderly’ (LPRIS 1996: Article 10).

The mechanisms of obligatory relations are indicated by Chinese language terms such as *mianzi* (face), *renqing* (social and moral norms of reciprocal favour or benefit) and *huibao* (reciprocal obligation) in which regard for and commitment to others are central and highlighted. The role of social approval or sanction in terms of face relations is crucial; filial behavior is responsible for enhanced face and unfilial behavior leads to loss of face (Qi 2011). The notion embedded in Chinese Buddhism, that one’s actions have a cause and consequence, that there is an effect – including revenge – from *laotian* (heaven) or ghosts, tends to continue to provide an element of sanction against moral transgressions, not only in rural but also urban China. The expectation that adult children shall support their parents when the need arises, and the expectation of adult children that this obligation must be discharged, continues to shape the personal lives of the

overwhelming majority of people in mainland China (Qi 2014). In response to the proposition in the Guangzhou questionnaire, 'It is a child's responsibility to look after the parents when they need help', 43% of respondents indicated general agreement and 54% strong agreement. In addition to external mechanisms the internal mechanism of guilt and anticipation of regret after a parents' death also play an important role.

There is a view in the literature emphasizing how the family operates as a 'welfare agency' for elderly parents. But it is equally important to acknowledge that the family in mainland China has increasingly become a 'reliable welfare agency' for young adults, especially with dependent children. With China's integration in capitalist globalization, bringing with it privatization and competitiveness in labour markets, there is increased uncertainty for individuals. The privatization of housing in China makes it increasingly difficult for young people to afford a house on their own. One obvious consequence of marketization on family relations is an increasing dependence of young adults on their parents. In a study of rural and urban middle-class families Wang (2010) shows that the corporate family model remains a highly effective cultural unit that has helped Chinese families survive massive large-scale social and economic reorganization. According to this study, parental authority still plays a crucial role and has been further consolidated by the rapid growth of the urban Chinese property market. A sense of fear, uncertainty, and insecurity bring family members closer as the family emerges as a means of survival and betterment in a market society. For some young people parents seem to be a more reliable source of support than a spouse (Li and Shin 2013). Tomba (2004) shows how parents and adult children collaborate strategically in terms of living space arrangement, family financial pooling and intergenerational exchange of public entitlements and become China's first generation of commercial housing owners and landlords.

An aspect of social life sponsored by Communist Party policy, namely the one-child policy, has led to a significant change in the family structure summarized as the 4-2-1 family; four grandparents, two parents, and one child. One consequence of this pattern is that responsibility for providing support for elderly parents has shifted from a shared responsibility of siblings to the only child. While the only-child generation accepts that they have no choice but to consider their parents' well-being (Liu 2008), there is at the same time open expression of a sense of burden, a sentiment traditionally regarded as unfilial. On present indicators it is unlikely that the

historically unprecedented weight of responsibility of a single adult child carrying the full burden of care for two aged parents shall lead to increases in state support for the aged.

Another unintended consequence of the one-child policy is the enhanced status of urban women in mainland China today. Without brothers urban daughters, unlike previous generations of girls, do not have to compete for family resources. It has been reported that brotherless daughters receive more resources than sisterless sons since parents ‘invest all their savings in their daughters’ education, rather than saving part of it for the purchase of marital housing’, as they would for a son (Fong 2002: 1104). Fong’s study reveals that parents now direct all their love, hope, and need for old-age support to their only daughters, who in turn demonstrate that they could fulfill the filial obligations once exclusively reserved for sons (Fong 2002: 1101–1102).

### **Transformation of Family Bond and Filial Obligation**

The changes in Chinese society, of family obligation directed to support of persons through intergenerational exchanges is frequently taken as evidence of individualized market relations insinuated in the social organization of the family. Yan (2011: 227) argues that ‘the new game of intergenerational reciprocity [is] based on market logic [of exchange principle] rather than the logic of filial piety’. Similarly, Sussman (1965: 80) notes that ‘the pattern of actual giving to children is one subtle way of buying kinship insurance during the period of old age and senescence’. Family, according to Antonucci (1990), functions as a ‘support bank’, providing insurance in times of crisis in which parents invest and deposit through their support of children and build equity that can be later withdrawn when parents require care or support. This approach entails that parent-adult exchange is purely market-instrumental. But such a view misunderstands markets as well as family relations. Market exchange requires more or less equal exchange; it is in the nature of markets that if a seller or buyer is not satisfied, experiences unequal exchange, then he or she will withdraw from the market in question. Reciprocity between parents and adult children, on the other hand, is not based on equal value exchange and neither party is free to withdraw. More importantly, reciprocity between adult child and parents operates in a way involving concern for each other, entailing emotional attachment and a desire for the well-being of the other.

It is true that economic development in China has altered the meaning of filial piety, from an unconditional duty of an eldest son to obey and support his parents to a form of support that is to some degree conditional on parents' prior support of their children. The parents of adult children may provide housing for their offspring, secure a job for them through their *guanxi* networks, provide childcare for a grandchild and contribute other household chores, effectively 'earning' indebtedness to be realized in aged care. Filial support can thus be seen to operate as an obligation achieved through prior provisions of care and resources, rather than as a 'natural' basis of duty. In this process aged parents are typically regarded as passive recipients of this new form of obligation based on reciprocity, altruistic and powerless faced with selfish children, often depicted by the Chinese media as the '*kenlao*' generation, eating off their parents' resources. What is neglected in this portrayal is the initiative of parents and the benefits to them in the emerging reciprocities of 21<sup>st</sup> century family obligation. It is not unusual for parents to offer co-habitation, to provide a house to their children or offer financial support (Li and Shin 2013). Parental support for the educational and occupational success of their children can contribute to the parents' future wellbeing in both material and non-material ways. It is by no means an exclusively Chinese experience that parental investment in children is correlated with parents' future financial security (Coleman 1990: 585). Indeed, Coleman (1990: 585) suggests that as the future financial security of parents in the West is less dependent on their children so parental investments in children in the West have declined. The significant investment of Chinese parents in their children can be described as a mingling of both altruism and self-interest, or, to borrow a term from Lucas and Stark (1985), as 'tempered altruism' in which both the altruistic imperative to give and the motive of self-interest are fully intertwined. The ability to give may provide parents with 'feelings of worth and self-efficacy and allays fears of powerlessness in dependent relationships' (Cong and Silverstein 2008: 8). Less discussed is the prospect that parental support entails a sense of power, to be influence in adult child's decisions or at least the power to give advice and continue to participate in family affairs.

Traditionally filial obligation operates vertically, from the younger to the older, from children to parents. An element of the re-negotiated form of filial obligation that operates in mainland China today is that it can be performed and provide benefit horizontally. An example of this is provided by Wang (2010). Wang reports that Mrs Liu has a daughter and a son. The daughter and son-in-

law have good jobs, are financially comfortable and childless. Her son, on the other hand, has not been so successful, her daughter-in-law was laid off work, and they have a son who attends middle school. Mrs Liu's daughter and son-in-law pay for all of Mrs Liu's household utilities and her medical bills. Mrs Liu says: 'Whenever my daughter wants to buy things for me, I ask her to spend more money on her nephew, he needs more investment. I always tell her that treating her brother's family well is to treat us well'. Mrs Liu's daughter and son-in-law, at Mrs Liu's request, pay for their nephew's extracurricular classes. By providing support directly to her parents, and also to her brother's family, Mrs Liu's daughter performs filial obligation to her parents. Out of gratitude to his parents' redirection of his sister's wealth to his family, the son and daughter-in-law of Mr and Mrs Liu frequently spend time at Mr and Mrs Liu's home in order to help the senior couple with daily chores. Their son's gratitude to their parents seals the guarantee that he will repay their generosity by providing his own services to them in their old age (Wang 2010: 972).

## **Conclusion**

According to the individualization thesis Chinese society has undergone an ethical shift from collective-oriented values to individual-oriented values (Hansen and Svarverud 2010; Yan 2009; 2010). The individual is 'no longer willing to sacrifice oneself for the collective interests and for the perpetuation of the extended family, the individual in modern society seeks her or his interest and happiness through the working of the family' (Yan (2009: xxiv). This approach points to a direction in which individuals not only cease to provide support for their elderly parents but also achieve self-interest and self-satisfaction at the expense of the welfare of their elderly parents.

The present paper has shown that the behaviour described by the individualization approach does not represent the dominant pattern between young people and their families. The dominant family pattern is neither individualistic nor collectivistic but tends to be relational; individual members of families collaborate to secure cross-generational interests. While a sense of the corporate nature of the family remains significant, young people exercise relatively high individualism in terms of parental authority. And yet a sense of family bond and obligation remains strong, not in terms of relations of authority but in terms of financial and emotional support for parents, and from parents to children, both adult and dependent. It has been shown



that the concept of intimacy in the Western sense fails to understand Chinese family relationships. Rather than mutual disclosure and verbal expression intimacy between Chinese adult children and their parents is more actional, involving pragmatic display, catering for needs and concerns, involvement in decision making and reliability in crisis.

The paper shows that family obligation remains strong even though the grounds on which family obligation is performed and the attitudes and emotions associated with it have undergone change since marketization. What is neglected by the individualization thesis is that the process of reinterpretation and renegotiation of filial obligation is not only initiated by the younger generation but also by the older. Filial obligation today tends not to be based on traditional unconditional principles of parents giving life and bringing up the child but on a continually achieved form. Though the dominant pattern of parent-adult children relationships has an exchange form it is by no means equivalent to market exchange. Parent-adult exchange involves more than instrumental elements; reciprocity between parents and adult children is not based on equal value exchange. The paper shows that adult children are not purely self-interested and that parents are not necessarily purely altruistic. Parents' investment in their children and their continuing support for them includes an embedded self-interest for future prospects. In a transformed and ever changing society, adult children and their parents work strategically so that individual interests and family interests can be harmonized and optimized.

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