



University
of Basel

Institute for
European Global Studies



EUROPAINSTITUT
Institute for European Global Studies

GLOBAL EUROPE

BASEL PAPERS ON EUROPE IN A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

No. 114

Charlotte Bruckermann

Longevity, Labor, and Care between Kin and State in China

Marijke de Pauw

Global Population Aging from a Human Rights Perspective: The Need for a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons



“Global Europe – Basel Papers on Europe in a Global Perspective” is an academic e-journal showcasing the excellent research of graduates as well as other young and senior scholars interested in analyzing Europe and the EU in a global context. The journal is published in two issues per year by the Institute for European Global Studies at the University of Basel. It is available via the websites www.europa.unibas.ch/global-europe and http://ub-ojs.unibas.ch/ojs/index.php/global_europe/. In addition, readers can subscribe to it by sending an e-mail to europa@unibas.ch.

The **Institute for European Global Studies** is an interdisciplinary research institute of the University of Basel. It conducts research on the development of Europe in a global context. The Study Program offers the Bologna-style Master of Arts (MA) in European Global Studies. The Institute for European Global Studies was established in 1992 and is funded by the University of Basel. It is supported by personalities from the fields of economy, politics, and culture. Director of the Institute for European Global Studies is the historian Prof. Madeleine Herren-Oesch.

Publisher

Prof. Dr. Madeleine Herren, Director
Lisa-Marie Zoller-Blundell, Editor
Europainstitut der Universität Basel | Institute for European Global Studies
Gellertstrasse 27, Postfach, CH-4020 Basel
www.europa.unibas.ch

ISBN-13: 978-3-905751-39-0

ISBN-10: 3-905751-39-9

© 2017, CC BY-SA

Cover Picture: Marc Eggimann Fotografie www.marceggimann.ch, with the support of Port of Switzerland

Charlotte Bruckermann
**Longevity, Labor, and Care between
Kin and State in China**

Abstract: Global aging poses important questions about intergenerational care, frequently framed around the rising burden of the elderly as care dependents. By contrast, in rural China senior kin often perform essential work in families as care providers who tend to partners, support children, and nurture grandchildren. Between state welfare regimes and kinship obligations, senior citizens in rural China contribute work in fields, courtyards and homes into their old age. This article asks why this is the case and examines the effects this care has on the value of labor, kinship, and personhood. In doing so, it takes up issues of the invisibility of elderly rather than feminized care work. Local idioms of labor threaten to hide care ‘inside’ the village, overshadowed by remunerated, formal work performed ‘outside’ in the urbanizing economy by younger generations. By turning towards senior citizens performing everyday acts and hosting festive celebrations, aging villagers stake recognition for their caring labor to their kin, neighbors, and community. Senior citizens thus claim recognition for the care work they perform in the Chinese countryside.

Key words: Aging, care, generations, welfare, rural China

Dr Charlotte Bruckermann works as a research fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany. Since completing her PhD in Anthropology at the University of Oxford in 2013, she has worked at the Anthropology Department of the London School of Economics, at the research centre Re:Work for Work and the Lifecycle in Global History at the Humboldt University and the Institute for European Global Studies at the University of Basel. Her areas of expertise include the anthropology of China, labor, gender, ritual, economic transformation, environmental policy, and finance. Her doctoral fieldwork in rural Shanxi Province explored how villagers make themselves at home despite economic inequality, political rupture, and ecological degradation. She currently investigates the role of finance in driving environmental projects.

When addressing questions of age and ageing, the closely associated term of ‘generations’ looms large. The notion of generations enables researchers to group people together in relation to historical eras, life phases, or family networks. Hence we speak of generations as, for instance, the “baby boomers”, the middle-aged, or grandparents. However, different academic disciplines diverge on how far to cast the temporal net in considering intergenerational relations. While sociologists usually focus on the living, anthropologists often consider the ancestors, and analytic philosophers may even take into account the unborn. Especially when examining who holds a stake in decisions affecting multiple generations, choosing whom to include and exclude in generational analysis cannot be taken lightly.

States must constantly negotiate claims made by its citizens in allocating and distributing resources, making crucial budget allocations and setting institutional frameworks for age-related welfare provisions, including everything from pension schemes to childcare facilities. Families also frequently face dilemmas of how to distribute material resources, such as money, food, clothing, and accommodation, while maintaining their intangible connections of affection, attention, and discipline.

Welfare provision and mutual dependency are constantly being balanced across multiple generations. Inequalities in income, generation, and gender may come to the fore, while the transfer of assets, especially in the form of inheritance, often lurks in the background. Safeguarding the welfare of individuals, families, and populations across generations reveals clefts in who is responsible to whom, and when. States, markets, and families all come to bear in debates on demographic ageing and the necessity for intergenerational solidarity.

This article is situated along the theoretical crossroads of kinship, care, and labor in China’s rapidly aging population. Within a rural mountain community in the north-central region of Shanxi province, inequalities in gender and generation intersect to valorize particular forms of work, and even specific types of workers, above others. As a result, providing caring labor through both kin and state does not necessarily lead unequivocally to cohesion, belonging, and integration, but may also generate coercion, competition, and exclusion in rural China.¹

In order to reveal the social organizations that develop alongside caring practices, this article attempts to question assumed dichotomies of public and private life that underlie many social

1 Charlotte Bruckermann, “Caring Claims and the Relational Self across Time: Grandmothers Overcoming Reproductive Crises in Rural China.” *JRAI (Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute)* 23 (2017): 356-375.

science approaches to care² and highlight the diversity of ‘multiple modernities’ that coexist around the world.³ Instead, Chinese conceptions of ‘inside’ (*nei*) and ‘outside’ (*wai*) as gendered forms of labor⁴ will be re-read through shifting generational divisions of labor in the countryside. Following Heike Drotbohm and Erdmute Alber, three varying perspectives on care as work, care as kinship, and care in the life-course will be simultaneously developed.⁵

The article begins by situating the shifts in the composition of the Chinese population within the larger global demographic context, in which China offers insights into rapid processes of population aging within a developing country. Turning to the caring labor of the rural Chinese elderly, senior citizens have emerged as not just care dependents, but care givers. Senior villagers have attempted to unite ideals of personal aging with state support and kinship obligations. The article argues that the partial and oscillating provision of care from kin and state create constellations that compel elderly villagers to contribute labor, in general, and care, in particular, into old age. Yet, senior rural residents refuse to allow this labor to go unrecognized in the ‘inside’ sphere of fields, courtyards, and houses. Instead, elderly villagers seek and create opportunities to make kin, neighbors, friends, and the wider community recognize this caring labor through both everyday acts and festive celebrations in front of audiences that acknowledge their work.

Demographic aging in context

The UN defines an ‘aging population’ at a threshold where more than 10% of the population is over 60 years old. Population aging has long been predominantly associated with developed economies where declining birthrates and increasing lifespans coincide, due to improved state provisioning of family planning and medical care. However, there have been global shifts in this picture, not least due to China’s changing demographics, as many developing countries begin to experience population ageing. This trend of population ageing among developing nations is

2 Tatjana Thelen, “Care as Social Organization: Creating, Maintaining, and Dissolving Significant Relations” *Anthropological Theory*, 15, no. 4 (2015): 497-515.

3 Hans Bertram, “Die Plurale Moderne,” in *Familie, Bindungen und Fürsorge: Familiärer Wandel in einer vielfältigen Moderne*, eds. Hans Bertram and Nancy Ehlert (Opladen: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2011), 11-30.

4 Ellen Judd, *Gender and Power in Rural North China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

Tamara Jacka, *Women’s Work in Rural China: Change and Continuity in the Era of Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Susanne Brandtstädter, “The Gender of Work and the Production of Kinship Value in Taiwan and China” in *Chinese Kinship: Contemporary Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Susanne Brandtstädter and Goncalo Duro Dos Santos (London: Routledge, 2009), 154-177.

5 Heike Drotbohm and Erdmute Alber, “Introduction,” in *Anthropological Perspectives on Care: Work, Kinship, and the Life-Course*, eds. Erdmute Alber and Heike Drotbohm (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1-19.

set to increase dramatically as the trend is accelerating, rather than decelerating as in developed countries. The UN projects that in developing regions the number of persons aged over 60 is set to quadruple from 376 million to almost 1.7 billion between 2000 and 2050, while in developed nations the increase will only be about 80% from 231 million in 2000 to 421 million in 2050.⁶

Chinese demographics have transformed at an incredibly rapid rate, and China became one of the first countries with a low GDP per capita to reach high levels of population ageing. China's population of over 60-year-olds surpassed 10% in 2000 when the GDP per capita was less than 8000 RMB or 1000 USD, and by 2015 that age bracket edged close to 15% of the population, an extremely rapid rise. Chinese citizens over sixty years of age now amount to over 200 million people, and, globally, nearly one in four people over the age of 60 now lives in China.⁷ The major factors contributing to China's aging population are both the extension of lifespan through longevity and the lower rates of reproduction. These two transformations went hand-in-hand in China, as access to medical facilities, expertise, and treatment have increased since the 1950s and accelerated from the 1970s; this was the same period in which restrictions on reproduction gained pace through the Family Planning Policy (*Jihua Shengyu Zhengce*).

This makes China an incredibly important test case, as the country not only pioneered certain macro-economic shifts in demography, but also underwent important shifts on the ground in terms of family and state care under conditions of population aging. Evidence from ageing societies in developed economies predominantly focuses on the growing burden of elderly welfare dependents societies face as fertility rates decline and life spans increase. Moreover, the classic European model of welfare as a state responsibility is giving way to a neoliberal market-orientation and unwaged family dependencies.⁸ This can lead to unexpected consequences: the moral value of volunteering as a social endeavor among aging Italians, for instance, may overshadow the work done by paid migrant workers, whose care is devalued as merely self-interested.⁹

6 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division, *World Population Ageing*, UN Doc. ST/ESA/SER.A/390 (New York: United Nations, 2015), 9-10. http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WPA2015_Report.pdf.

7 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division, *World Population Ageing*, UN Doc. ST/ESA/SER.A/390 (New York: United Nations, 2015), 16-17. http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WPA2015_Report.pdf.

8 Bertram, "Die Plurale Moderne."

9 Andrea Muehlebach, *The Moral Neoliberal: Welfare and Citizenship in Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

Although Chinese population policies have ushered in an extremely rapid process of population ageing within a developing economy, this has also resulted in many elderly people becoming care providers as well as welfare dependents.¹⁰ With both parents working outside the home, for instance, grandparents frequently become carers for grandchildren.¹¹ Furthermore, when their children migrate for work or if they never had their own children, older generations often take care of each other in the absence of offspring.¹² At times, both grandparents and grandchildren may be left behind in the countryside, with remittances from parents supporting them financially¹³. In fact, the presence of elderly grandparents in need of care and the potential for grandparental childcare are important factors for Chinese couples in making reproductive decisions.¹⁴

The Chinese case could be indicative of processes that will occur in other developing countries under conditions of population aging. These developments therefore pose the question of how acute demographic ageing in an emerging economy affects intergenerational relations. The Chinese context offers interesting points of comparison from the situation often evoked in developed economies, where elderly people supposedly withdraw from labor contributions and become dependent on state and kin. Instead, an alternative perspective on ‘global ageing’ emerges from the developing economy situation within rural China, one in which elderly citizens and kin become crucial providers of, and not just dependents on, labor and care.

This research is based on over sixteen months of fieldwork in the mountain village of Sweeping Cliff in Shanxi Province, north-central China between 2009 and 2010, with a return visit in 2017. In the village intergenerational cooperation formed an important component of family interaction. Elderly family members were not just welfare dependents, but welfare providers who contributed labor to their families by tending to fields, houses, partners, parents, and grandchildren. This context provides an alternative account of ageing that challenges demographic projections and discourses which reduce elderly people to family burdens or state dependents, on the one hand, and the view of elderly people as isolated from wider social networks, on the other.

10 Esther Goh, *China's One-Child Policy and Multiple Caregiving: Raising Little Suns in Xiamen* (London: Routledge, 2011).

11 William Jankowiak, “Practicing Connectiveness as Kinship in Urban China,” in *Chinese Kinship: Contemporary Anthropological Perspectives*, eds. Susanne Brandtstädter and Goncalo Duro Dos Santos (London: Routledge, 2009), 67-91.

12 Ye Jingzhong, “Left-Behind Children: the Social Price of China’s Economic Boom,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38 (2011): 613-50.

13 Ye Jingzhong, “The Issue of Left-Behind Elderly People in the Context of China’s Modernization” in *Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no.5 (2017), 971-999.

14 Bruckermann, “Caring Claims and the Relational Self across Time.”

The value of work and the morality of aging

In relation to the phenomenon of elderly people providing care, recognition of this form of labor becomes eclipsed not so much by gender, but by generation. A consequence of the Family Planning Policy has been the intensification of concerns over care, as families face a situation with more elderly members and fewer children. Relaxation of the Family Planning Policy in recent years has had the explicit intention of creating a larger pool of adult children who can look after elderly generations in the future.¹⁵ Many extended families are composed of four elderly grandparents, two middle aged parents, and one grandchild, also known as the 4-2-1 problem. This has resulted in challenges within families who have to manage care across multiple generations, leading to balancing acts of care.

There is a paucity of ethnographic studies on the Chinese elderly that explore the subjective experiences of old age and contest negative views of the elderly. However, there have been challenges to demographic projections that reduce elderly people to family burdens or to isolated population segments outside of family networks.¹⁶ The Chinese case reveals how state intervention into demography intersects with kinship logics formally associated with ancestor reverence and patrilineal descent. Drawing on analyses of Chinese intergenerational labor between parents and children through reciprocal caring cycles, this links exchanges beyond the nuclear family to shifting extended family networks.¹⁷

Flows of care moving up, down, or across generations are not just material, but include emotional and ethical forms of interaction.¹⁸ In China, intergenerational obligations are frequently framed through discourses of sacrifice and gratitude¹⁹, as filial piety and ancestral reverence continue to inform understandings of aging, as ideals remain that seniority and status should increase with age.²⁰ However, the quasi-retirement many elderly Chinese formerly enjoyed often fails to materialize and old-age poverty, neglect, and depression are rampant in rural areas.²¹

¹⁵ In November 2013 the Chinese government announced a significant amendment to its so-called One-Child-Policy by allowing two children to married couples in which one partner is an only child. In October 2015 the Communist Party issued another statement that effectively extended the right to have two children to all married couples. As couples confront the potential of two children in need of care, grandparents' roles will become even more important.

¹⁶ Goh, *China's One-Child Policy and Multiple Caregiving*.

Anna Boermel, "'No Wasting' and 'Empty Nesters': 'Old Age in Beijing,'" *Oxford Development Studies* 34, no. 4 (2006): 401-418.

¹⁷ Charles Stafford, "Chinese Patriline and the Cycles of Yang and Laiwang," in *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship*, ed. Janet Carsten (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 37-54.

¹⁸ Drotbohm and Alber, "Introduction."

¹⁹ Harriet Evans, *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

²⁰ Liu, "The state through its mirrors."

²¹ Yan Yunxiang, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village 1949-1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

Elderly Chinese people often continue to contribute work into old age, at times even expressing pride at their capacity to provide labor to their families.²²

Theoretically, analyses of elderly caring labor nonetheless resonate with recent approaches by feminist sociologists and economists of care who criticize the invisibility of certain forms of caring labor and caution against drawing rigid boundaries between economic transactions and intimate exchanges.²³ This article explores this dynamic by engaging with the following three dimensions: first, social security provisions between state and personal networks; second, the compulsion and obligation to contribute labor into old age; third, ritual conceptions of aging and the life course in recognizing caring labor.

Social security provisions between state and personal networks

“All the elderly shall be properly taken care of” (lao you suo yang)

Confucian doctrine

Various state projects since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 have usurped, appropriated, and praised the Confucian mandate for elderly care in line with different phases of governance.²⁴ The history of both family-based care and institutional facilities must be considered in examining how transformations in care-giving to and by the elderly unfolded over time. Under Maoism (1949–1976), family-based care supplemented institutional childcare and elderly support provided by urban work units and rural brigades.

The 1950s was a period of complete overhaul of local community organization across China as rural brigades and urban work units began to organize most aspects of citizens’ lives through their workplaces. While urbanites increasingly enjoyed welfare provisions, from housing to medical facilities that their rural counterparts could only dream of, communities in the countryside promoted social security for the most vulnerable segments of the population through the Five-Guarantees (*wubao*) welfare system.²⁵ The five guarantees included in the scheme were the provision of food, clothing,

²² Goh, *China’s One-Child Policy and Multiple Caregiving*.

²³ Viviana Zelizer, *The Purchase of Intimacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

²⁴ Liu Xiaoqian, “The State through its Mirrors: an Anthropological Study of a ‘Respect-the-Elderly Home’ in Rural China at the Turn of the 21st Century” (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2013), 46-47.

²⁵ Liu, “The State through its Mirrors,” 20-23.

medicine, housing, and burial. The elderly, disabled, and children who were on the *wubao* system were also referred to as the Three-Nos (*san wu*), as they were included in the scheme due their inability to work, the absence of adult sons, and the lack of a means of livelihood.²⁶ The elderly on these schemes were generally cared for individually in their homes or collectively in seniors' residences, but the provision of assistance varied across regional differences and urban-rural inequalities in China.

In the Market Era (1978-present), many of these formal care institutions have been dismantled or marketized and migration has blurred the fault lines between rural and urban China. These changes have exacerbated inequality between families in accessing institutional and marketized forms of care. Simultaneously, rising standards of living and aspirations for the future have pushed more ambitious caring targets onto families. In attempts to safeguard general welfare, China has been establishing rural state-sponsored social security provisions. Of particular note are the rural medical insurance and pension schemes that the state has extended into the countryside in recent years.

As many rural collectives collapsed under increasing marketization in the 1980s and 1990s, so did their communal support for the elderly, with responsibilities for elderly care thrust on neighbors and kin.²⁷ To counteract rising inequality in rural areas, the new millennium saw Hu Jintao's government increasing efforts to expand social insurance schemes and strengthen safety networks, such as the abolition of agricultural tax, investing in a rural medical scheme, introducing village pensions, and even income support measures.²⁸ With the rehabilitation of much Confucian doctrine and concomitant re-traditionalization of Chinese society under Xi Jinping, both community and kin efforts have been strengthened.

The pressure to provide high quality care has become particularly acute since the aim of the population policy has shifted away from simply decreasing population quantity through restricting fertility. In recent decades, China's developmental paradigm has changed towards improving 'population quality' (*renkou suzhi*) as a set of physical, intellectual and moral characteristics.²⁹ This ambition becomes particularly visible in policies directed at providing children with 'education for quality' (*suzhi jiaoyu*), where imperatives of improving health and education come together through new, family-based responsibilities for care.³⁰

26 Liu, "The State through its Mirrors," 30.

27 Liu, "The State through its Mirrors," 20-23.

28 Liu, "The State through its Mirrors," 27.

29 Susan Greenhalgh, *Cultivating Global Citizens: Population in the Rise of China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

30 Andrew Kipnis, *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

Less visible to the public eye than children spilling out of schoolyards on their way home, China's elderly often find themselves side-lined, or even devalued, by the discourse of 'population quality.' The devaluation of some elderly people's 'quality' in terms of education, health, and rural or urban background thereby creates social inequality across generations.³¹ Furthermore, rendering the elderly's work as invisible or unproductive because it is unremunerated amplifies this inequality and further emphasises the role of the elderly as welfare recipients, while eclipsing their contributions as welfare providers.

There are a growing number of institutional care facilities for both grandparents and grandchildren emerging throughout China, at least for those who can afford them. Nonetheless, these institutions cannot always meet the needs of the vulnerable elderly, who may be priced out of marketized care or neglected by their relatives, particularly when they live far away. Elderly neglect, both financial and emotional, has emerged as a serious problem with the increase in both physical and occupational mobility across China. These negative consequences have arisen despite the Confucian values of filial piety that stipulate respect and even reverence for older generations. One reaction by the government has been to issue laws for the protection of the rights and interests of elderly people, mandating family support for ageing relatives.

Since 2008, Sweeping Cliff has offered residents state-sponsored health insurance under the implementation of the national New Rural Cooperative Medical System (*Xinxing Nongcun Yiliao Hezuo*). In 2008, the village committee supplied the funds for the health insurance scheme, but since 2010 villagers themselves contribute to the insurance as well. Depending on the care needed, the insurance policy usually covers between 50% and 75% of medical care at public hospitals in the municipal area. The government official in charge of the insurance program in Sweeping Cliff explained to me that "before this policy, people had to take out their own insurance or they had to pay the bills themselves. Often, people would borrow money from relatives and friends, or, sometimes, they felt that they could not afford to see the doctor and would just give up (*fangqi*) [on seeing a doctor]."

Sweeping Cliff also has two pharmacies and a doctor's office, as well as vaccination drives for children through schools. However, the doctor working in Sweeping Cliff actually opened the practice in his parents' house to offer villagers services for their small illnesses (*xiao maobing*) so that they do not always have to go to the hospital in the township capital several kilometers away. The doctor and his wife work in the city and own an apartment there, but their son lives with his grandparents in the village. In fact, the small Sweeping Cliff practice operates out of a side-building of their

³¹ Ann Anagnost, *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

residential courtyard and the doctor's mother helps with a lot of the administrative paperwork necessitated in registering all the villagers for the New Rural Cooperative Medical System.

Older people's compulsion to work and contribute labor to others changed through the state provision of financial assistance. While the care provisions for the elderly and children were frequently unpaid, this new form of state-sponsored support was explicitly monetary. Since 2000, the village committee operates a pension scheme for those over 60 years of age, who receive 60 *Renminbi* a month towards their living costs. Additional claims could be made on the basis of hardship, especially in the absence or lack of children, especially sons. However, many villagers pointed out the contradiction that sons were supposed to care for them, but responsibility effectively fell to their daughters or daughters-in-law as they were more frequently present in the village during the day due to their limited participation in outside wage labor. In addition, elderly people often did agricultural work to feed themselves, although they usually also receive financial support from their relatives with remunerated employment. This led to a simultaneous feminizing and aging of agricultural work, as in the eldest village generation, many women outlived their husbands, as the wives not only enjoyed longer life expectancies but were often additionally between five to ten years younger than their spouses.

While older people often refused financial contributions from personal connections, and especially close kin, they were keen to take advantage of the new forms of state assistance. Universal coverage for the medical system and pension scheme meant that these initiatives suffered from far less stigma and loss of face than the former hardship programs. Indeed, rural elderly still supported by the *wubao* system were embarrassed to discuss the assistance they received. By contrast to hiding any dependence on the state beyond the universal provision of support, elderly villagers enjoyed showing off the filial kindness they received from their offspring, while simultaneously often denying its necessity. Daughters were expected to help out as a matter of 'conscience' (*liangxin*) while sons were bound by the duties of 'filiality' (*xiao*) to provide support or enlist their wives to the task.³²

This reveals a differential evaluation of financial assistance from personal networks and state support in relation to social security. Elderly people justified receiving financial assistance from the pastoral state as part of its mandate to provide care to its vulnerable citizens, while they would demonstrate reluctance to accept support from their families in ways that could be

³² Compare with Ellen Oxfeld, *Drink Water, but Remember the Source* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

construed as a burden. In return for favors, especially in terms of cash support, they often provided agricultural goods and home-made foods, which they produced by working for as long as possible in the fields, courtyard, and home to provide for their kin through their subsistence, but unremunerated, labor.

The complete absence of support by close junior kin could nonetheless result in bitter accusations of neglect and ensuing hardship. An elderly neighbor in his seventies complained that he struggled with the small amounts of financial support from his family and the local government. He explained that this was the reason he tended a vegetable garden in his courtyard to produce food for himself, despite his advancing age. By contrast, his granddaughter pointed out that her family mainly supported him through providing him with food, and particularly noodles, as flour needed to be purchased and therefore necessitated cash income. Visiting this neighbor over several months, he oscillated between pride in his capacity to continue doing agricultural labor and admonishments of his son and daughter-in-law for not making his continued work unnecessary by taking over more work in his fields and courtyard. What are the origins of this compulsion and obligation to contribute labor into old age?

The compulsion and obligation to contribute labor into old age

‘Old people lack knowledge and therefore do not have a good footing to stand on. Old people have a mentality of efficiency (*xiaoneng yishi*), but nowadays what is required is an agile mentality (*lingkuai yishi*). You don’t need this to grow things in the fields, but you need this to work in the city.’

Village primary school teacher

The quotation from Sweeping Cliff’s primary school teacher reveals how villagers attribute value to different kinds of work. On the surface, the variables in this evaluation are the location of work in either a rural or urban setting, as well as the way of thinking necessary to attain and complete this work stratified by generation. However, beneath this simple statement lie a number of assumptions about the differing value of work, in terms of both the financial remuneration received and the desirability of work. Sweeping Cliff villagers claimed that ‘all good jobs are in the city’ (*hao gongzuo dou zai shi heli*).

Not taking into account the workers' particular dispositions and situations, there was a general stratification of labor across the urban-rural area. The least coveted way of making a living was through hard, physical, manual labor (*laodong*), for instance by tilling the fields or breaking rocks in a stone quarry. Slightly more prestigious was occasional, piecemeal labor that involved some skill but not necessarily qualifications (*xiaogong*), such as working in construction or transporting goods. More regular and secure shift work in offices or businesses (*shangban*) was held in high esteem due to the low toll it took physically, although having to answer to a boss did not suit everyone. Contractually secured formal labor (*gongzuo*) held the prestige formerly reserved for urban work unit employees, although many of the housing, medical, and pension benefits had been cut since the 1980s. To avoid a hierarchical relationship to a superior and become one's own boss, an insecure and yet potentially lucrative alternative was to 'dive into the ocean' (*xia-hai*) of doing business (*zuo shengyi*) by becoming an entrepreneur (*getihu*).

People's preferences for these different types of work often depended on their gender and age cohort, with older people often taking pride in agricultural labor, while younger generations shun this type of work in favor of office jobs. In addition to these remunerated jobs, there were many kinds of unpaid work that included household labor for the family and interpersonal work for friends and colleagues, as well as agricultural work. These activities were not necessarily viewed as doing work (*ganhuo*) but could be part of maintaining a livelihood (*zuo shenghuo*).

In addition to the rural and urban differentiation already discussed, a second contrast between work lies between categorizing activities as 'inside' (*nei*) and 'outside' (*wai*) work. This differentiation has been historically gendered with women working in the inner realm of the domestic sphere of the courtyard, although their products from embroidered clothing to silkworms were frequently sold in markets. By contrast, men's work was seen to lie beyond the home, tilling the fields, conducting business, or becoming a bureaucrat in the wider world. These characterizations of an economy where 'men plough, women weave' (*nangeng nüzhì*) as an ideal of gendered divisions of labor were more of an ideal than a reality for most of Chinese history, especially for households where the necessity of making ends meet meant sending female members out to work.³³

³³ Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

Characterizing work as inside or outside labor also often becomes aligned with whether the work is unpaid or paid.³⁴ Agriculture in particular has increasingly been brought into the domain of inside work.³⁵ This expansion of the inner sphere to include agriculture is linked to rural women's mandatory participation in agriculture within village brigades as communities tended to the fields collectively through People's Communes in the countryside. Increasingly, those engaging in this area of hard labor not only tend to be female, but considerably more senior in age than was previously the case. Inside work in the fields and household tend towards the subsistence of lives and livelihoods, areas less prestigious and visible than remunerated work in the outside world.

Notably, in many Sweeping Cliff families a new intergenerational division of labor has been occurring, with the eldest generation often taking on agricultural and domestic duties in the village, while the middle generation works for an income in the city. The closest urban center can be reached within thirty minutes, making many parents in the village into commuters, while their children receive daycare from their grandparents during the day. Most of the parental generation received middle school or higher qualifications, thereby receiving formal skills to enter the urban labor market their parents were excluded from due to low levels of formal education. Bitter complaints arise when this form of intergenerational support breaks down, with the situation often blamed on death, divorce, or even difficult daughters-in-law.

As young women increasingly enter the waged labor market outside the village after finishing school, these labor dynamics are shifting. Women with adult sons would often complain that bringing in a daughter-in-law no longer meant that they would help in the home, as young women went out to do shift-work (*shangban*) or sell their labor (*dagong*) rather than contribute to the household. Older women even complained that bringing in a daughter-in-law just meant another mouth to feed. In addition, they claimed that young women often had very high material demands and were a burden to the family despite contributing most of their income to the household.

The situation could become even more complicated for elderly men who were not embedded within wider kin networks. An example that brings together the difficulties of holding an intergenerational cooperation together is the family of Hanlian, whose parents were immobile due to various ailments. After losing his job in one of the local mines, Hanlian turned to drinking, which

34 Rachel Rosenfeld, "What is Work? Comparative Perspectives from the Social Sciences," in *Re-Drawing Boundaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China*, eds. Barbara Entwisle and Gail Henderson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 51-66.

35 Judd, *Gender and Power in Rural North China*.

drove his wife away, taking their daughter with her and moving back to her hometown. Hanlian's parents were not eligible for social support beyond the minimum pension, as the presence of their son excluded them from the more generous Five Guarantees scheme. Hanlian could, on occasion, contribute to the household income by taking on day jobs, although his drinking made him an unreliable worker to his neighbors. Fortunately, Hanlian's sister's family also supported their household with food and cash, although Hanlian vehemently denied that this was in any way payment, as he cared for his parents to fulfill his filial duties, despite all his hardships.

Another elderly man in a similar situation was a man named Dacao whose wife had died of cancer and whose daughter had married out into another township. Dacao made ends meet by collecting medicinal plants and insects in the surrounding countryside, selling them to local traders or directly to visiting tourists and passers-by on the village's main street. Upon enquiry about his mixture of healing goods and some plant substances said to protect children's health, Dacao once summarized: 'Nowadays people think children are more important than adults and ignore the health of the elderly,' thereby pithily summarizing the hardships faced by the rural elderly in gathering the necessary elements for even their basic livelihoods.

Gaining recognition for 'inside' work

Care work often lacks visibility. Between kin this often arises due the unremunerated nature of the work despite its being embedded in capitalist economic processes, therefore sidestepping the monetary terms that nominally quantify, solidify, and render labor legible. In more formal labor settings, the location of care work within residential institutions, health facilities, or domestic homes as well as inequalities between those who can afford to pay for care and those who must sell their caring labour often minimizes acknowledgment.³⁶ In China the conceptualization of care as part of the 'inside' work similarly undervalues the contributions carers make to the long-term reproduction of lives and livelihoods in China. In the 2000s, this caring work in the Chinese countryside predominantly fell to the elderly and female proportions of the population, vulnerable segments of the population who often did this work without any direct form of remuneration; a situation that often contributed to undermining the formal recognition for this work.

Although rural elderly care and elderly carers' work within Sweeping Cliff occurred outside of the bright lights and bustling sphere of the nearby urban environment, elderly people in Sweeping

³⁶ Drotbohm and Alber, "Introduction."

Cliff creatively sought ways to make their labor contributions visible, legible, and recognized. Furthermore, when they received recognition for their ‘inside’ work in providing food, caring for children, or taking care of elderly kin, they wanted to share this appreciation with others through everyday conversation, material evidence, and even grand celebrations.

The recognition could take on very mundane material forms, such as the fulfilment of requests for domestic comforts or household luxuries from those earning incomes to purchase washing machines, electric blankets, or even heating installations.³⁷ These forms of care, attention, and intimacy form part of an emotional and material expression of affection that the older generation, in particular, often avoid verbalizing.³⁸ Instead, physical labour, material goods, and considerate actions become paramount in fostering and maintaining relationships.³⁹ The following three examples trace some of the ways senior villagers in Sweeping Cliff gain recognition for their ‘inside’ work in agricultural and household domains, as well as the work they do in creating and sustaining the wellbeing of their children and grandchildren.

Le, a woman with two sons in their mid-twenties, admired her best friend’s situation of inter-generational work distribution. She pointed out that this friend, Sheng, also had to shoulder the agricultural work, but had her mother-in-law doing the housework and three daughters to subsidize the household income. Le dismissed the possibility that bringing in daughters-in-law would lighten her workload of tilling the family’s land and doing all the household chores. Le claimed that young women now exclusively work outside the home and feel their responsibilities to the household are met through financial contributions rather than sharing the housework.

On one occasion, Le gave me a tour of one of the courtyards she and her husband had built. Swelling with pride at the recently constructed buildings, Le drew special attention to the under-floor heating (*dinuan*) that had been installed beneath the glossy white tiles of the main building where she spends much of her time. Despite the high cost of this coal-fuelled installation at 5200 RMB of the total house construction cost of 64,000 RMB, her husband and eldest son had insisted on this modern convenience. Although some villagers were now installing central heating (*nu-anqi*) in their houses, this novelty of underfloor heating was unique in Sweeping Cliff homes at the time.

37 Wu Xiujie, “Men Purchase, Women Use: Coping with Domestic Electrical Appliances in Rural China,” *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: an International Journal* 2 (2008): 211-234.

38 Yan Yunxiang, *Private Life under Socialism*.

39 Andrew Kipnis, *Producing Guanxi: Sentiment, Self, and Subculture in a North China Village* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

When enquiring why her husband and son wanted to add this new system when they already have the heated bed-platform⁴⁰ in both living rooms, she exclaimed with a boisterous air as she threw up her arms: ‘I’m growing old! [I] want heat! Sometimes it’s insufferably hot, but it’s beneficial for my body!’ Le continued to explain that despite being only one person, she tills 20 *mu* (1.334 hectares) of land by herself, prepares the food, and takes care of both her sons’ courtyards while the men go to work. Le insisted that she was a hard worker and thus her husband and sons insisted on taking care of her. Her sons, in particular, were thereby being ‘virtuous’ (*daode*) and ‘filial’ (*xiao*) towards her. In summarizing their attentive care, she told me that the men in her family took her to city to buy whatever she wanted for the house saying that “If [I] want something, they bring it!”

The article now turns to Le’s neighbor and friend, Sheng, who has adult daughters, rather than sons. On a late summer evening, Sheng’s family were eating bowls of noodles and picking at the dishes on the low living room table as the evening news blared in the background. Erdan, the family’s second daughter, and her husband had come to visit from the city where they worked as service personnel in a hotel. As was usually the case when one of the daughters, and particularly one of their husbands, came to visit, a variety of dishes were served, such as sliced spam, scrambled eggs with tomatoes, boiled string beans, fried aubergine, or salted vegetables.

On this occasion the common practice of sharing dishes as a way of expressing intimacy between diners was in full swing. As Erdan was heaping meat slices on her husband’s bowl of noodles, Sheng was pouring the rest of the string beans into her daughter’s bowl. When Erdan realized what her mother was doing, she began fending off the bowl of greens with her chopsticks, arguing: ‘Ma, you should finish up the beans. You’re supposed to eat more vegetables. Doctor’s orders!’ Erdan took the bowl out of her mother’s hands and emptied the remaining beans on top of her mother’s noodles.

When asked why the doctor wanted Sheng to eat more vegetables, Erdan raised her eyebrows and tightened her lips in preparation for the argument that she knew was about to ensue. In a curt tone meant for her mother’s ears she explained: ‘My mother’s got high blood pressure, the doctor says

40 The *kang* is a raised bed platform made of brick that is attached to the stove in Northern Chinese homes. The heat generated by the stove travels through airways in the *kang* before being released through a chimney vent that protrudes from the roof. The *kang* therefore acts as the main source of heat in the home. For detailed information about this technological device, see Mareile Flitsch, “Knowledge, Embodiment, Skill and Risk: Anthropological Perspectives on Women’s Everyday Technologies in Rural Northern China,” *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: an International Journal* 2 (2008): 265-288.; Mareile Flitsch, *Der Kang: Eine Studie zur materiellen Alltagskultur bäuerlicher Gehöfte in der Manjurei* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004).

she eats too many noodles and she should eat lots of vegetables, but she won't eat enough of them.' With the air of an often rehearsed defence her mother snapped in irritation: 'Well, vegetables are expensive.' Now Erdan waved her chopsticks and raised her voice in defiant dismissal: 'Expensive?! What do you mean expensive?! You grow the vegetables yourself, there is no cost!' Sheng sighed in exasperation and pulled out her final retort: "No cost?! No cost?! Didn't I work hard in the fields for these vegetables?!" Her daughter conceded the point, thereby acknowledging her mother's hard work in the fields and at the stove in growing, preparing, and feeding her family.

Beyond these domestic exchanges to gain recognition for their labor, some senior kin took it into their own hands to organize a grand celebration of themselves as the apex of a wide network of kin, of which they are the creators. Gathering kin, friends, and neighbours in the celebrants' courtyard for a banquet frequently marks sixtieth birthdays, which completes a full round of five zodiac cycles of twelve years. After this year, people are generally considered to have led a full adult life, and passing away becomes an event to be mourned with great sadness rather than as a tragedy. For the sake of the audience assembled at these birthday celebrations, as well as for memories in posterity of this future ancestor, photograph sessions generally occur to document who assembled.

At an elderly matriarch's sixtieth birthday celebration, I acted as the photographer for her various kin networks. She gathered relatives together in a wide array of constellations that followed logics of kinship and descent, including exclusive photos with her sons, with her sons and their wives, with her grandchildren, and a particularly impressive group shot of all thirty-four relatives in attendance. The photographs reveal a keen awareness and documentary intent for various kin by gender, age, generation, and proximity of relatedness to the celebrant. Asked about the plans for these photographs, attendees referred to the already impressive wall of family photographs this great-grandmother had amassed in her home. These photographs, too, would soon go up for all to marvel at the many descendants she had created.

In these three very different ways, these three senior residents of Sweeping Cliff received recognition for their labor contributions in the fields and homes, through material installations, verbal confirmation, and visual documentation. All three of these women depended on other kin, particularly children but also husbands, to generate monetary income for household expenses such as coal and electricity. However, the work they did in creating, nourishing, and caring for their families was recognized in diverse ways beyond monetary means as part of establishing the value and dignity of their work.

Longevity as extending labor in China

Longevity is generally conceived of as a sign of social health and the long life of an individual person is generally considered a cause for celebration. Nonetheless, demographic aging at the social level is seen as cause for concern; as a threat to economic growth due to the weight and cost of growing elderly care needs. This article has shed light on an often neglected domain of the elderly population across the globe, the role of elderly workers as welfare providers, and not just dependents. In the Chinese village of Sweeping Cliff, many senior citizens were unable or unwilling to retire from subsistence labor and care work, often turning this into a virtue and demanding recognition for their efforts.

As outlined earlier, China forms a specific case due to the rapid speed and demographic scale at which longevity and aging coincided, particularly for a developing economy. While the post-Maoist period saw the roll-back of certain livelihood guarantees by local communities since the 1980s, other forms of state-sponsored institutional welfare provisioning were only just getting started in the 2000s. However, these logics of financial support often followed family logics of absent descendants as a support network, and family-based care was frequently considered an ideal, especially for the elderly, but also sometimes by the elderly, as they supported each other and their offspring through their care.

This article brought together kinship, care, and labor concerns in China's rapidly aging society, to examine how senior members of a rural community contribute to larger social organization. To dissolve Eurocentric tropes of public and private, as well as modern and traditional, the article engaged with local understandings of affective, intimate, and reproductive labor as care located in the 'inside' domain. As the parameters of what 'inside' spheres entails shift, senior residents created new ways to make their labor acknowledged, recognized, and valued by kin and the wider community through everyday interactions and festive celebrations. Furthermore, this revealed how mutual obligations between kin to cooperate in maintaining livelihoods stretches beyond remunerated labor to other forms of support that may take monetary, material, emotional, and even ethical forms. As global aging gains pace, the situation in Sweeping Cliff raises a concern for elderly care as an issue that must be appreciated within the facets of multiple modernities, in which seniors do not unequivocally represent a caring burden, but must also be recognized for their many caring contributions.

Bibliography

- Anagnost, Ann. *National Past-times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.
- Bertram, Hans. “Die Plurale Moderne.” In *Familie, Bindungen und Fürsorge: Familiärer Wandel in einer vielfältigen Moderne*, edited by Hans Bertram and Nancy Ehlert, 11-30. Opladen: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2011.
- Boermel, Anna. “‘No Wasting’ and ‘Empty Nesters’: ‘Old Age in Beijing.’” *Oxford Development Studies* 34, no. 4 (2006): 401 – 418.
- Brandtstädter, Susanne. “The Gender of Work and the Production of Kinship Value in Taiwan and China.” In *Chinese Kinship: Contemporary Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by Susanne Brandtstädter and Goncalo Duro Dos Santos, 154-177. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Bray, Francesca. *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Bruckermann, Charlotte. “Caring Claims and the Relational Self across Time: Grandmothers Overcoming Reproductive Crises in Rural China.” *JRAI (Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute)* 23 (2017): 356-375.
- Drotbohm, Heike and Erdmute Alber. “Introduction.” In *Anthropological Perspectives on Care: Work, Kinship, and the Life-Course*, edited by Erdmute Alber and Heike Drotbohm, 1-19. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Evans, Harriet. *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.
- Flitsch, Mareile. “Knowledge, Embodiment, Skill and Risk: Anthropological Perspectives on Women’s Everyday Technologies in Rural Northern China.” *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: an International Journal* 2 (2008): 265-288.
- Flitsch, Mareile. *Der Kang: Eine Studie zur materiellen Alltagskultur bäuerlicher Gehöfte in der Manjurei*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004.

- Goh, Esther. *China's One-Child Policy and Multiple Caregiving: Raising Little Suns in Xiamen*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Greenhalgh, Susan. *Cultivating Global Citizens: Population in the Rise of China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Jacka, Tamara. *Women's Work in Rural China: Change and Continuity in the Era of Reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Jankowiak, William. "Practicing Connectiveness as Kinship in Urban China." In *Chinese Kinship: Contemporary Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by Susanne Brandtstädter and Goncalo Duro Dos Santos, 67-91. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Judd, Ellen. *Gender and Power in Rural North China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.
- Kipnis, Andrew. *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Kipnis, Andrew. *Producing Guanxi: Sentiment, Self, and Subculture in a North China Village*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.
- Liu, Xiaoqian. "The State through its Mirrors: an Anthropological Study of a 'Respect-the-Elderly Home' in Rural China at the Turn of the 21st Century." PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2013.
- Muehlebach, Andrea. *The Moral Neoliberal: Welfare and Citizenship in Italy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Oxfeld, Ellen. *Drink Water, but Remember the Source*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.
- Rosenfeld, Rachel. "What is Work? Comparative Perspectives from the Social Sciences." In *Re-Drawing Boundaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China*, edited by Barbara Entwisle and Gail Henderson, 51-66. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

- Stafford, Charles. "Chinese Patriline and the Cycles of Yang and Laiwang." In *Cultures of Relatedness: New approaches to the study of kinship*, edited by Janet Carsten, 37-54. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Thelen, Tatjana. "Care as Social Organization: Creating, Maintaining, and Dissolving Significant Relations." *Anthropological Theory*, 15, no. 4 (2015): 497-515.
- United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division. *World Population Ageing*. UN Doc. ST/ESA/SER.A/390. New York: United Nations, 2015. http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WPA2015_Report.pdf.
- Wu, Xiujie. "Men Purchase, Women Use: Coping with Domestic Electrical Appliances in Rural China." *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: an International Journal* 2 (2008): 211-234.
- Yan, Yunxiang. *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village 1949-1999*. Stanford: University Press, 2003.
- Ye, Jingzhong. "Left-Behind Children: the Social Price of China's Economic Boom." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38 (2011): 613-50.
- Ye, Jingzhong. "The Issue of Left-Behind Elderly People in the Context of China's Modernization." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 44 (2017): 971-999.
- Zelizer, Viviana. *The Purchase of Intimacy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.