

## Attitudes and preferences towards future old-age support amongst tomorrow's elders in China

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### Background

Until recently, the family had been considered as the main source of support in later life in China, while state interventions had largely been limited to individuals perceived as very vulnerable, *i.e.* those with no surviving children, living on very low incomes and with no other forms of support (Cai *et al.*, 2012; Falkingham *et al.*, 2019). However, traditional systems of familial support in later life in China are now coming under increasing pressure; improvements in mortality mean that more people are surviving to older ages at the same time as extensive migration is leading to families being separated across large distances (Evandrou *et al.*, 2017), whilst three decades of strict family planning policies have reshaped family structures (Zimmer and Kwong, 2003). There are important questions as to whether in future older people will expect to, or wish to, rely on their adult children, or indeed whether adult children will be willing or able to provide the level of care needed (Aboderin, 2004). At the same time, many governments around the world are reassessing formal (state provided) elder support strategies in the face of population ageing and increasing fiscal pressures (Bloom *et al.*, 2015). Understanding individuals' attitudes and preferences towards alternative sources of support in later life is therefore of critical importance for policy planning and the design of future service provision (Daatland and Herlofson, 2003). This paper examines the attitudes towards current old-age support and preferences for their own future old-age living arrangements amongst individuals currently in mid-life (aged 40-55 in 2013), representing the next generation of China's older population.

The life course experiences of those born in China in the late 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s have been very different to those of their predecessors. They are the first cohort to enter mid-life with a high probability of having a surviving parent and thus to have had direct personal experience of being a mid-life carer; they are also the first cohort to have, on average, two or fewer children; finally, they are the first cohort who are likely to enter their own later-life with pension savings, and to have adequate economic resources to fund themselves during their retirement. Such experiences may shape their attitudes and preferences towards old-age support. Against this background context, the paper uses data

from the 2013 Chinese Household Finance Survey (CHFS) in order to examine how the attitudes and preferences towards future old-age support among today's mid-lifers vary according to their family structure, socio-economic status and current experiences of intergenerational support, providing important insights for the design of future policy.

This study tests three hypotheses, inspired from the modernisation and ageing theory, the role of reciprocity in intergenerational support and the life course perspective:

H1: Today's middle-aged people with fewer children, particularly sons, and those with higher socioeconomic status will have more positive attitudes and preferences towards independent old-age support and living arrangements.

H2: Current patterns of intergenerational support provision by those in mid-life, especially upward flows, will be associated with their own expectations of old-age support.

H3: There will be gender and cohort differences in the respondents' attitudes and preferences towards old-age support.

## Data and method

The data for this study is drawn from the Chinese Household Finance Survey (CHFS), which is a nationally representative household survey conducted by the Survey and Research Center for China Household Finance at Southwestern University of Finance and Economics (SWUFE) (Gan *et al.*, 2013). The analytical sample used here includes all study respondents aged 40 to 55 who have at least one surviving parent and one child. The two dependent variables used are a) **attitudes towards current old-age support** and b) **preferences on their future old-age living arrangement**. The survey questions were:

*Who is responsible for the life of a senior citizen who has children?* 1. Mainly the government; 2. Mainly the children; 3. Mainly him/herself; 4. Responsibility shared equally among the government, child and senior.

*Which old-age living arrangement would you choose in the future?*<sup>1</sup> 1. Nursing home; 2. Living in the community; 3. Living with children.

Independent variables include **demographic** characteristics, **Socio-economic** characteristics, and **intergenerational reciprocity**.

Bivariate analysis and multinomial logistic regression were applied. In order to explore gender differences in their future care preferences, the multinomial logistic regressions were

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<sup>1</sup> This is the translation as supplied in the English version of the questionnaire.

run for the whole sample, and then for men and women separately. Differential effects of family structure and socio-economic characteristics across cohorts were tested through an interaction effect.

## **Results**

Among the middle-aged respondents, 42 percent believed that the children should be responsible for the life of a senior citizen who has children. One-third of respondents thought that the responsibility should be shared equally among the government, child and senior person, while just 9 percent of respondents believed that the government should be primarily responsible for old-age support.

When asked about their preferences with regard to their own future living arrangements, over half of the respondents (54 percent) preferred living in the community when they are old, more than one-third of respondents (35 percent) expressed a preference to live with their children, and one-tenth would like to live in a home for elderly people. It is noted that the main analytical sample was restricted to those respondents who had at least one parent alive and at least one child. If we consider all people in middle-age, including those who are childless and those whose parents have both passed away, the proportion who stated a preference to live in the community in the future was slightly higher, while the preference to live with children was somewhat lower.

Results from the bivariate and multivariate analysis show that the number of children, and having at least one son significantly influence individuals' attitudes and preference. There is substantial variation in attitudes and preferences by rural and urban residence (Hukou) and by education. Looking forward to their own old age, those who are currently providing care to an aged parent are more likely to expect to be cared for in the future by their own children. The results also highlight differences among men and women, as well as for different birth cohorts.

## **Discussion**

Overall, attitudes and preferences towards old-age support are rooted in life course relations within the family, which are in turn affected by broader historical and contemporary social, economic, and cultural conditions. First, the results offer support to the argument that the broad cultural values of intergenerational support have remained relatively stable and that middle-aged people in China are adapting to the changing life circumstances. However, the results in this paper do also point towards new patterns / norms of old age support, especially

for those with one child living in urban areas where a sizeable minority were considering living in a nursing home as a future option. Secondly, the results support the notion of indirect reciprocity. The middle generation who provide co-residence to the older generation are in turn more likely to expect co-residence from the younger generation. Lastly, the results also point to important cohort and gender differences in attitudes and preferences towards old-age support attitudes, especially amongst urban (non-agricultural Hukou) respondents.

The findings have implications of for policy makers and planners. The demographic and socio-economic environment in China is continuously changing. Tomorrow's older people will differ considerably from those of today in terms of the number and location of their adult children, their economic resources and their life experiences. They will be better educated, have different employment histories, are likely be in better health, and many more will be covered by some form of formal retirement benefits. Policy needs to adapt to these changing circumstances, enabling future elders and their adult children to access support which facilitates older people to retain their independence for as long as possible, be that by supporting co-residential family carers, or through the provision of assistance to people living in their own homes with tasks such as cleaning, cooking, washing and dressing, or the provision of residential care with the full range of medical support. No one solution will meet all needs, rather there should be a continuum of care which adapts to individuals' needs and preferences across the life course.

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