



# Family Matters:

Aging China and the Issue of Generational Equity

# I The Issue of Generational Equity in Aging China

China has aged rapidly and the rate will accelerate in decades to come.

Three decades ago (in the 1980s), only 5 percent of the population was over 65; today, 123 million people, or 9 percent of the population, are over this age. A report released by a government think tank forecasts that China will become the world's most aged society by 2030. Further, by 2050 China's older population will likely swell to 330 million, or a quarter of its total population, and younger generations face an unprecedented burden of care. It is expected that for every 100 people aged 20-64, there will be 45 people aged over 65, compared with about 15 today.

Against this background, the issue of generational equity has become a hot topic in both academic study and public debate in China.

In the context of Chinese aging society, the debate over generational equity has a topic less discussed in the typical western framework. Besides public transfers between generations through social welfare system, it equally emphasizes the importance of private exchanges within families for sustaining a just distribution of social goods between generations.

Therefore, the issue of 'generational equity and justice' in the context of Chinese society is usually formulated as a two-fold crisis not only of the welfare state, but also of moral life within families.

- On the social dimension, the risk of the conflict comes from generational inequity in welfare contributions. The central problem is whether the state can afford the cost of pensions and health care for a growing older population.
- On the dimension of private life, however, the risk of the conflict comes from the imbalance between inter-generational supports within the family, especially for the elderly. The central problem is whether the traditional “feedback” model of family responsibility for elderly care is still viable.
- More importantly, the two dimensions are presumed to be interactive and interdependent. E.g. social welfare security working as a safety net for family support.

In other words, the debate of generational equity in the Chinese context is oriented by a broadened understanding of transfers between generations, with a focus on generational solidarity and family responsibility, which I refer to as a family-oriented generational interdependence (GI ) framework for thinking about the just share of societal resources between generations.

This paper will examine the claims of the family-oriented GI framework, and provide a moral justification for these claims from a Confucian view of social justice. In the end we will discuss its implications for China's old-age policy in future.

# II the Family-oriented GI Framework

Compared with a individualist liberal framework of generational equity ,such as Norman Daniels' s “prudential lifetime account” , the family-oriented GI framework has three distinctive claims.

**The first claim:** Filial obligations serves as the basis of old-age policy. Filial obligations substantiates a network of giving and receiving, through which different generations have much to offer each other.

Daniels argues that filial obligations lacks moral foundation, because there is a basic asymmetry between parental and filial obligations. Parents assume the duties of caring for their children through their adult act, while the role of being a child is not the kind of role we undertake in the way we undertake the role of parenting. There is no reciprocity in the strict sense to ground filial duty.

- The GI framework would think appealing to the principle of reciprocity to justify filial obligations is misleading.
- The GI frame recognizes vulnerability and interdependence as the essential human condition: human beings are essentially vulnerable to various kinds of afflictions and most of us are, at some times, afflicted by disease and disability, not to mention the inevitable progress of being young or aging.
- By taking vulnerability and interdependence seriously, the GI framework recognizes a common good for human flourishing, that is, we all need to be included in *a network of giving and receiving* --the paradigm of which is the family--in which people's needs get responded to and cared for.

- The roles of one person in this network is *reversible*: the role of being care-receiver at some times implies the role of being care-giver at some other times, because our lives are deeply connected and mutually committed.
- Chinese traditional 'feedback' model of elderly care could be seen as the institutionalization of this moral community of giving and receiving.

$F1 \longleftrightarrow F2 \longleftrightarrow F3 \longleftrightarrow F_n$  (F represents generation,  $\rightarrow$  represents the care of parents for their children,  $\leftarrow$  represents the care of children for their parents)

And this feedback model, along with the network of giving and receiving, serves as the paradigm of generational contract, as well as inter-generational justice, in the Chinese cultural context.

**The second claim** is that family is the primary context for understanding the value and meaning of old age.

Families are the most important social nexus in which the process of aging takes on personal and shared meanings. They are also settings where biographies are written and rewritten as lives unfold, take on structure, and become interwoven. Putting aside the context of family, it will be difficult to develop an individual rational life plan in the first place.

As Mark H. Waymack points out, it requires an equipped vocabulary and a practiced repertoire of biographies in order to understand one's values in old age and how to integrate them into one's whole life. Obviously family life and familial relationships is the key context.

**The third claim** is a theory of justice, which is adequate to cope with old age and generational interdependence should be “starting at home”, which means 'starting with what occurs in ideal families'.

Concerning old-age policy, the person in discussion is an embodied being, limited, embedded in a community of giving and receiving. However, A Rawlsian approach has started with public life and rational entities somehow cast full-grown into the world of discourse and debate, lacking concerns for the basic human condition like vulnerability and dependence.

As Alasdair MacIntyre says, Rawlsian theory of justice ignores two things: 1. the needs of family members, 2. the contribution of every family member to the family as a whole. Both have significant effects on our understanding of what is a just plan of distribution between generations.

In sum, the family-oriented GI framework draws on the theme of community responsibility for the needy and emphasizes the common interests of generations and inter-generational solidarity.

As we will see below, this framework starts from the families and entails an account of justice different from Rawlsian theory.

# III The Confucian Theory of Justice: Benevolent Governance

Firstly, on Confucian view, a just society should be grounded on well-functioning, harmonious, and prosperous families.

As Mencius put it, “there is a common expression: 'the world, the state, the family. 'The world has its basis in the state, and the state in the family.’” (Mencius 4A. 5)

In respect of distributive justice, it makes sense to say that the kinship rules don't encompass the social world, but make off the first set of boundaries within it. Important distributions are carried out in the family through the rules of kinship and love, closely connected to other distributive spheres, vulnerable to their interventions. A just society should leave space for autonomous families.

Secondly, the primary duty of the state is to guarantee that the family is capable of taking care of its members. Besides, where family support fails, the state should fill in the gap.

For example, “Old men without wives, old women without husbands, old people without children, young children without fathers--these four types of people are the most destitute and have no one to turn to for help. Whenever King Wen put benevolent measures into effect, he always gave them first consideration ”(Mencius 1B.5)

These four types of people are “the most unfortunate” from the Confucian perspective. While Rawlsian social justice measures the misfortune of an individual simply in terms of income and wealth, Confucianism also gives account of that individual's family status and relations.

- Thirdly, the Confucian theory of justice puts virtues before rights and entitlements, as Fan writes, the classic Confucian view of social justice” focuses on the pursuit and promotion of intrinsic goods such as the moral virtues of *ren* and *yi*”, “it demands the complete exercise of complete virtue (*ren*) in relation to others, not only what concerns oneself”.
- Based on virtues, the feedback model actually encourages a two way flow of service and support between adult family generations. Part of the public transfers to the elderly are channeled back to the young through the transfers in family, with the effect of reducing the tension between old and young generations in social security system. Furthermore, the transfer behavior of parents is strongly dependent on the needs of their children, like employment or education. It makes sense to say families may be a more effective system of detecting needs and mobilizing resources.

# IV Concluding Remarks

- Neither the private approach nor the public approach is adequate to cope with the problem of generational equity in the context of Contemporary Chinese society.
- An promising alternative--culturally relevant, morally tenable, and practically viable-- is a model of family-oriented mixed responsibility for elderly care, i.e., the family and the state should go hand in hand. The state serves as the safety net and support net for family care. while the family could serves as pressure relief valve for the social welfare system.
- An example: the social welfare security system should establish family savings accounts.



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