Please cite:

Liu, Jieyu (2016) 'Intimacy and Intergenerational Relations in Rural China'. *Sociology*, (51) 5, pp 1034-1049.

Abstract

This article applies the concept of intimacy (Jamieson 2011) to examine relationships between adult children and their parents in rural China; an area which has been predominantly located in an obligatory framework. I reveal a qualitative difference in support between relationships built on intimate ties and those bound by duty and obligation. A unilateral emphasis on obligation-based relationships can deprive both the parent and adult child generations of agency and autonomy, which can be disempowering for both. The complex relations between intimacy and obligation are the product of local socio-economic circumstances and gender norms. Although traditional patrilineal and patrilocal culture excludes married daughters from the filial discourse surrounding their own parents, they are often considered to have the most intimate relationship with their parents. Paradoxically, the practices of intimacy between aged parents and their married daughters strengthen the natal ties that facilitate modifications to patrilocal and patrilineal customs.

Keywords:

Intimacy, Intergenerational Relations, Rural China

Introduction

Research on families in the field of sociology is a key area of academic interest. From early studies concerned with family needs, to a more recent focus on processes of relationality in family life, the

sociology of the family has witnessed a conceptual shift from an understanding of the family as a functional unit to one that focuses on the relational connections captured in such phrases as 'family practices' (Morgan 1996) and 'networks of intimacy' (Jamieson 1998:77). One of the contributing factors in this shift has been drawing attention to the *quality* of relationships and the ways in which different acts of intimacy sustain relational ties (Gabb 2008). As a result, researchers need to be more attentive to the processes that reflexively construct intimacy in relationships rather than take the existence of intimacy for granted.

The research embracing the new focus on intimacy is largely confined to the study of sexually intimate relations between couples. In recent years, however, scholars have emphasized the need to broaden the conceptual boundaries of intimacy to include other types of relationship and this has developed the study of parent-child relations through the lens of intimacy (Gabb 2008). Going beyond a western notion of the nuclear family, research on transnationalism has drawn a broader definition of transnational families to cover a wider range of intimate ties and include intergenerational relationships (Baldassar and Merla 2013). This article follows the trend in transnational family literature and uses the concept of intimacy (Jamieson 1998, 2011) to empirically examine the relationships between adult children and their parents in rural China, an area of research which hitherto has been predominantly located in an obligatory framework. This is a crucial area for academic study, not least because of the number of people involved: starting in the l990s and accelerating thereafter, rural China has experienced the largest outward migration in human history and there are now as many as 144 million rural residents working in towns and cities (Fan 2007:23). This movement has geographically separated the younger (mobile) generation from their stay behind parents leading to reduced family contact, straining the familial support system.

Existing scholarship on intimacy documents changes in intimate relationships as a consequence of forces such as globalization and individualization, however little is known about the extent to which intimate relationships affect family structure. This article demonstrates the potential of doing intimacy to impact upon the institutions of family and kinship and reveals how intimacy is an effective bridging concept linking social change and individual agency. Additionally, through the lens of intimacy, this article aims to readdress the imbalance in existing scholarship of intergenerational relations in China which is currently dominated by obligations and norms with insufficient attention to feelings, agency and emotions.

Intergenerational relations in China

For most of the two thousand years leading up to the twentieth century Confucian ideology formed the basis of Chinese state governance. Confucian principles dictated a highly structured family ruled by a set of moral ethics in which respect and obligation were central to building harmonious family relationships (Mann 2001). Filial piety was the defining principle in relations between adult children and older parents; Confucius writing, '*in serving his parents, a filial son reveres them in daily life; he makes them happy while he nourishes them; he takes anxious care of them in sickness; he shows great sorrow over their death; and he sacrifices to them with solemnity'* (Chai and Chai 1965:331). The key features of filial piety were a total submission of the will of adult children to that of the senior generation; the adult children ought to provide all-round support to their parents and it was a patrilineal obligation because the patrilocal custom placed married daughters on the filial map of their in-laws.

In the early twentieth century, reformist intellectuals criticized Confucian protocols of hierarchical family relations as a cause of China's defeat in the Opium War and a barrier to China's development leading to some modifications to family relations among intellectual elites - with limited progress changing attitudes and organizations (Norman 2000). The communist revolution in the mid-twentieth century, however, completely changed the political landscape and the Party set about launching various campaigns to reform the family with the immediate aim of stamping out the power of family elders in order to reorient citizens' loyalty to the state. While these campaigns (e.g. collectivization and commune) somewhat undercut the power and authority of family elders, material necessity and the immobility of labour (reinforced by the household registration scheme – see below) often required a strengthening of family ties in rural China (Davis and Harrell 1993). The state's reluctance (or inability) to provide social welfare and public services, filial norms reinforced by Communist Party policies and laws that stipulate adult children's obligation to care for their parents have meant that to this day families remain the main providers of funding and services in contemporary China (Shang and Wu 2011).

Existing literature on intergenerational relations indicates that traditional filial piety has been transformed in two areas. First, the nature of filial obligation has changed over time - filial piety has morphed into a filial support based upon 'mutual need, mutual gratitude and mutual support for two-way exchange of support and care' (Croll 2008:110). In this new 'intergenerational contract' (Ikel 2004), reciprocity rather than submission is the key principle in maintaining a two-way exchange of support and so adult children consider what their parents have done for them and aim to give an equal amount back (Croll 2008, David-Friedmann 1991, Ikels 2004). Evidence from rural China indicates that the perception of a lack of parental support among the younger generation or conflict

over the allocation of familial resources leads to neglect by adult children in later life (Zhang 2005). Second, the contents of filial obligation have changed from an all-round support to material/financial support; Miller (2004) found that in rural China 'filiality has been distilled to its barest essence' with the only focus upon material support for parents in the form of providing meals and sometimes housing. In 2013, the state proposed enforcing parental visits upon children as a form of legal obligation in order to enhance the delivery of emotional support, however with so many migrants working away from their families across China it is difficult to see how this will be implemented in practice.

Existing scholarship is predominantly occupied with filial piety or its newly modified term 'intergenerational contract' (Ikels 2004). While this framework is effective in examining the functions and structure of Chinese families, its overwhelming concern with duty and obligations is at the expense of individual feelings and preferences, failing to capture the complexities of doing family relationships. This neglect of personal feelings and agency is closely linked to an understanding that the Chinese family is institutionally hostile to personal feelings. In analysing patriarchy in pre-modern China, Hamilton (1990) noted that as filial piety is symbolized in the duty of submission, the prescribed emotion interrelating children and parents in the family is respect (*Jing*) unlike in the West where love is the prescribed emotion. Hamilton added that although respect did not preclude a closer attachment, respect required no personal involvement.

Fei's seminal study of rural China in the Republican era suggested that both intergenerational relations and the relationship between husband and wife was stripped of 'ordinary emotions' by the demands of a family's practical activities; in order to obtain efficiency for the family enterprise,

discipline and prescribed family relationship rules rather than personal feelings were required (Fei 1947/1992: 85). More recently, Yan (2003) focused on the individual and examined the dating and premarital sexual experiences of youth in a rural village, revealing young couple's demand for intimacy, love and privacy and concluding that conjugal ties took precedence over vertical ties. However, Yan's investigation into intergenerational relationships still remained in a framework of filial piety. There is a need to revise the filial obligations framework and search for a new approach to studying intergenerational relations in rural China that captures both the wider advances in academic research and the changing make-up of family life.

Rural to urban migration

The rural-urban categorization of the population in China is not only a geographical issue but also a systemic one (Yan 2003). The household registration system (*Hukou*) introduced by the Communist Party in 1958 required every Chinese citizen to register at birth with the local authorities as either an urban or a rural household registration holder of a particular fixed place in order to control population mobility (Fan 2003). Although the state's ban on rural-urban migration was lifted in the 1980s, as China adopted an approach to socialist development centred on economic modernization, the systemic segregation between urban and rural Hukou holders remained intact as a means of managing access to resources in the cities. Regardless of their actual place of residence, rural Hukou holders are deprived of various benefits (e.g. access to better jobs, admission to city schools) and welfare provisions (e.g. pension) that are only available to urban Hukou holders. This lack of state welfare support, combined with an institutional discrimination against rural Hukou holders, has created particular challenges for rural families in the context of rural-urban migration.

Against this background, reliance on adult children[1] in old age is the only choice for many people in rural areas (Lee and Xiao 1998). In accordance with overarching filial norms, male heirs and their wives should be the primary providers of support for parents in old age while married daughters are obligated to provide support to their in-laws rather than their own parents (Lee and Xiao 1998). Although daughters have been incorporated into the contemporary legal version of family obligations, evidence reveals that the obligation to provide old age support in rural China still lies only with sons' families (Miller 2004, Jing 2004). The gendered pattern of migration has complicated this model; i.e. while both single women and men migrate to cities for work, after marriage a man will generally return to migration labour whilst women will not (Fan 2003). In the absence of sons, there is evidence that stay-behind daughters in rural areas are playing an increased role supporting their own parents (Xu 2001, Ye and He 2008). Nevertheless, large survey data in rural China found that while daughters play a more active role in their parents' support network, parents still named sons to be the preferred support providers (Cong and Silverstein 2014). Whilst the son-centred filial norm remains, the support practices are changing.

Drawing upon qualitative data, I find a difference in support for ageing parents between relationships built on intimate ties and those bound by duty and obligation. Although the two types of relationship can merge, there is a need to disentangle them as obligation is not necessarily the structural determinant of an emotional life. Further, the interaction between intimacy and obligation is intertwined with gender norms; although traditional patrilineal and patrilocal cultural practices exclude married daughters from the filial discourse surrounding their own parents, they often have the most intimate relationship with their parents. Paradoxically, the practices of intimacy between aged parents and their married daughters strengthen the natal ties that challenge patrilineal

institutions and have facilitated modifications to patrilocal customs.

Introducing Intimacy

Since the 1990s the concept of intimacy, defined as the 'quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality' (Jamieson 2011), has been used in western sociology to encompass the specific qualities of close personal relationships (Giddens 1992; Jamieson 1998, 2011; Gabb 2008). A related term is the 'practices of intimacy', which refers to practices which 'enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other' (Jamieson 2011). The closest Chinese equivalent to the word 'intimacy' is the character '*Qin*' which can be an adjective and a noun, describing the state of a very good relationship. *Qin* is distinguished from *Jin* (close) in the common phrase '*Jin er bu qin*' (a relationship can be socially recognized as close but not intimate); and so *Qin* in particular emphasizes the subjective feeling and the quality of a relationship and this is largely captured by the concept of intimacy.

The introduction of 'intimacy' represents a significant phase in the theoretical shift in western sociology of family from a functionalist focus on family structure and institution to a practice oriented approach that aims to capture the substance of relationships (Jamieson 1998, Gabb 2008). Using 'obligation'[2] as a point of reference the conceptual power of intimacy lies in the following aspects. First, unlike 'obligation' which is a normative concept focusing upon what people 'ought to do' (Finch 1989, Finch and Mason 1990), the concept of intimacy emphasizes 'subjective experience' (Jamieson 2011) and so enables agency and individual feelings. Intimacy does not naturally exist in a family relationship but requires time and effort to be built up (Gabb 2008). Second, with an emphasis on practices, intimacy enables an empirical description of what happens

in reality, going beyond a 'generational rhetoric[3]' (Luscher 2011). Third, intimacy places the quality of relationship at the centre of analysis, and this was formerly obscured by the emphasis on structure of support. Fourthly, intimacy builds upon experiences of 'relatedness' (Carsten 2004)[4] and helps to redress the bias in western social theory largely premised upon an individuated autonomous self (Jamieson 2011). This conceptual shift opens the possibility to examine non-western cultures which do not have a liberal notion of self and individual (Jackson 2015).

Gender and intimacy remain a critical topic within the literature on intimacy. Beyond the western imaginary which identifies the concept of family with a nuclear household, studies on transnational families have broadened the conceptual boundary of intimacy to examine how gender and intergenerational relations interact in shaping intimate family relationships (Baldassar and Merla 2013, Charsley 2012, Gardner 2002, Salih 2003, Schmalzbauer 2014). For example, studies on transnational care giving consider exchange of care as being mediated by a dialectic encompassing the needs, capacities and feelings of family members from different generations and culturally informed expectations around the receipt and provision of care, which are deeply gendered (Baldassar et al., 2007). The quality of intergenerational relations and the scope for mutual understanding and coordination within the care circulation between family members are considered critical to the efficacy of transnational care giving (Baldassar and Merla 2013). Existing discussion on the dynamics, consequences and contradictions of intimacy in gender and intergenerational relations are particularly useful for the analysis of the Chinese data since Confucian familialism is built upon a hierarchy of gender, generation and age (Mann 2001).

While establishing a focus on intimate relationships in family studies, Jamieson (2011) acknowledges that social structures contribute to differences in human intimacy, arguing that socio-cultural change is effected through personal life which cannot be dislocated from social processes. Hence, as social selves and social world are mutually produced, studying practices of intimacy will assist in explaining social change. Giddens' (1992) thesis on the emergence of the 'pure relationship' and Beck and Beck-Gernheim's (2002) account of individualization assume that intimate relationships are shaped by process of modernization (Jackson 2015). Yet historical analyses in both Europe and East Asia (MacFarlane 1978; Chang 2010) suggest that this assumption may well be flawed and that particular family forms 'may have consequences for modernization rather than simply being moulded by social changes external to them' (Jackson 2015). Instead of simply exploring how intimacy is influenced by modernity, the question which has been insufficiently studied is what intimacy could do for modernity. Transferred to the micro level, the outstanding question in the literature of intimacy is – how will the forming of intimate relationships impact upon the structure and institution of the family? This article aims to answer this question by analysing the changing relationship between daughters and their parents over time and revealing the potentiality of the practices of intimacy to impact the patrilineal tradition of the Chinese family and kinship.

The study

The majority of existing studies on intergenerational relations in rural China are survey-based (Ye and He 2008, Cong and Silverstein 2014). Although statistical studies may map out a trend, this is often to the detriment of examining in more depth the complexities and dynamics of lived experiences, tensions, strategies and expectations of people who have gone through these social changes. A qualitative methodology has been adopted here to capture the micro-level processes that

constructed people's experiences of intimacy. Research shows the value of life histories in capturing lived experiences and personal accounts of human agency (Wengraf et al., 2002) especially in the context of migration. Furthermore, life history provides the overlap in the chronology between family members and is particularly important in studying family relationships. As most people live most of their lives in families, life history interviewing is an effective approach for gaining in-depth insight into changing family relationships and relevant strategies.

Using Chinese academics as local contacts, I was introduced to two villages in rural China (one in Shandong province, Village 1; and one in Hunan province, Village 2) and lived in each for two months respectively during 2011. The villages were chosen because they had a high proportion of the population over 60 years old (13% - similar to the national average) and a high proportion of households that experienced migration (70%). In the Shandong village, there was no state pension provision; by contrast, the Hunan village had been included in a national pilot pension scheme (covering 10 per cent of the villages in China) which entitled inhabitants to a state pension of 55 Yuan (*c*. £5). Entitlement to the pension was based upon all adult family members contributing to the scheme. Both sets of villagers were covered by state medical insurance. However, like the rest of rural China, the level of cover was grossly insufficient, i.e. state reimbursement only related to hospitalization and so villagers could not use their contribution to offset the cost of medicine (which was a major form of medical treatment for them). With ineffective state support it was the family and kin that villagers could turn to when they needed help. This informal familial support formed the major basis of welfare provision in both villages.

Purposive non-random sampling techniques (Mason 2002) were used to recruit families into the study ensuring that a broadly representative spread of ages, gender and social hierarchies were included. In total, seventeen families took part in the project and sixty individual, private, interviews were conducted across at least two (and sometimes three) generations in each family with both male and female family members. The representativeness of small-scale in-depth study in the two villages is inevitably limited compared with the scale and diversity of China. However, as I indicate in Findings section, this study found similar processes of intergenerational change as large scale quantitative studies in other regions, reflecting the commonalities of the villages experiencing a high proportion of migration and strengthens the transferability of the findings to the understanding of rural families in the context of migration.

Each interviewee was asked to recall his/her childhood first and then encouraged to take the lead. If not covered during the natural course of the ensuing conversation, specific questions relating to relationships with family members were asked. All interviews except one were taped recorded and fully transcribed. A thematic analysis was applied to each transcript to identify common themes that emerged from different transcripts in each generation. A further in-depth analysis on intergenerational relations was also carried out for each household. The life history approach was fruitful for a number of reasons. First, it helped to show the link between the past and the present, in particular the various factors that contributed to the event of migration. Second, in a household setting, it helped to map out the relations between each family member. Finally, as different family members told their life histories these inevitably overlapped with one another, making it possible to cross reference narratives and test the credibility and discrepancies of stories.

Findings

Obligation versus Intimacy

Filial piety has been transformed in contemporary China (Ikels 2004, Croll 2008). Other studies of rural villages have already found that a filial obligation prescribed the duty for sons to support their parents in older age (Miller 2004, Jing 2004, Zhang 2005) and this is confirmed below. However, a filial obligation still dictates how intergenerational relations should be, thus constituting a form of 'generational rhetoric' (Luscher 2011:192). Such rhetoric can result in a rigid normative relationship frame between parents and their adult children that may be disempowering:

> Q: *Who would you prefer to look after you in your old age?*
>
> A: *I won't be able to make a choice. When I am unable to move around, the norm is to be supported via rotation among my sons. But in terms of preference, I want my second son. He has a calm nature, while my elder son is very moody and not as good as the second one. My elder son doesn't get on with his mother. They always start quarrelling after a few sentences of talking.* (Father 5[5], aged 70, Village 1)

In Family 5, overemphasis on normative guidelines was at the expense of the older generation's agency, and counter to its preferences. The bond between the older couple and their two sons was tested when both sons migrated away. The younger son called home two or three days a week, whereas the older son never called home. Migration improved the living standards of both sons' families greatly, but the older son remained cold toward his parents, Mother 5 (aged 67) recalled: *'(Our) older son said, "As long as you still have money, I won't give you a penny for living; only when you can no longer make money will I give you any." I answered, 'How do we have money? We work hard every day to earn it.*'

The older son's comments capture the contrast between obligation and intimacy. Migration resulted in a division of labour in support arrangements between migrating siblings and stay-behind siblings with the former providing financial support and the latter instrumental support (Ye and He 2008). As a migrating sibling, the eldest son complied with this modified obligation, albeit only when his parents no longer had the ability to make money meaning they would need to work to the point of fragility. His distant attitude toward his parents did not prevent him fulfilling his filial responsibility when required. For example, when Father 5 was hospitalized, the elder son shared equally the medical bills (which were beyond his parents' capacity to pay) with his younger brother. Whilst the functional intergenerational ties remained intact, in terms of quality, intimacy was lacking, and decisions were not based on the preferences of either party. Only by differentiating relationships bound by obligations from those formed by intimacy can we capture the agency and complexity of 'doing' family relations. These two types of relationships can merge, as reflected in the relations between the second son and his parents, however the mingling of the two for the elder son and his parents was disempowering for both.

The complex relationship between obligation and intimacy is shaped by the socio-economic context of rural China. Owing to long-established urban-rural segregation, rural areas have not experienced the economic development that has been prioritized in cities. In the context of subsistence farming, underdeveloped infrastructure and lack of state welfare provision, the family acts as the main and often only safety net for rural residents. The culture of reciprocity (Yang 1994) has meant that to gain support from the extended family, an individual must fulfil their familial obligations to sustain the interdependent family network. Although the elder son in Family 5 did not like his parents, he could not afford to break the family ties that he benefited from. Father 5 explained, '*How did he*

establish himself in the migrating place? Because we have relatives there. If there were no family links, I don't think it would have been that easy for him'.

Gender plays a critical role in the dynamics between obligation and intimacy. As Chinese families are patrilineal and patrilocal, filial piety placed married daughters on the filial map of her husbands' family and in doing so alleviated them of responsibility to their natal family. Although in contemporary China daughters now have a legal obligation to support their parents[6], studies of rural China found that daughters are still excluded from parental expectations of old age support[7] (Ikels 2004, Cong and Silverstein 2014). When asked to comment on who he would prefer to look after him and his wife in their old age, Father 5 excluded his two married daughters, both of whom remained in the village, even though he later commented that his daughters provided emotional and instrumental support, noting '*in reality, sons are not as good as daughters in parents' old age support*'.

When intergenerational relations are examined in terms of functions and obligations, daughters are placed at the bottom of the structural hierarchy. Mother 8 (aged 79, village 1) said: '*It was said that daughters become the member of another family upon marriage, so we sent only our sons to school*'. Father 4 (aged 67, village 1), when asked whether he would pass on his house to his daughters, commented, '*No, my sons and daughters-in-law would be unhappy about it.*' In families with only daughters, nephews rather than daughters inherited the deceased parents' house. This structural hierarchy of discrimination against daughters is reinforced by state policies on agricultural land distribution; regardless of gender, each villager is allocated land, however, after women are married their land is taken back by the village committee and redistributed to women who marry into the

village.

This embedded structure and minimal investment in daughters imposed no obligations on married daughters toward their parents in old age. However, examined through the lens of intimacy, daughters are often more favoured than sons. Father 5 noted, '*it was still daughters who are intimate* [qin] *with their parents*'. First, daughters' advantage over sons is built upon the gendered division of labour in the domestic sphere. As care is usually considered women's work (Hockey and James 1993), and care is often used to define the parameters of intimate relationships (Gabb 2008), parents consider themselves closer to their daughters because it is daughters who perform care (a form of embodied intimacy) when they are ill. Second, daughters' advantage over sons in the intimacy arena is embedded in gendered notions of emotionality. 'Cultural frames name and define the emotion, set the limits of its intensity, specify the norms and values attached to it, and provide symbols and cultural scenarios that make it socially communicative' (Illouz, 1997:3-4). Gabb (2008:106) states that '(e)motionality is antithetical to traditional understandings of masculinity.' Like their Western counterparts, parents in China use the communicative feminine model to measure emotional closeness with their sons, Mother 4 (aged 61, village 2) remarking: '*My two* (married) *daughters often call me or visit home once a month, or once every three weeks or whenever they feel like visiting home. But my sons don't. Men are just like that. They don't know how to care about parents. My sons hardly have anything to say to us.*' Although emotional support from a son would certainly enhance the 'economy of gratitude' (Hochschild 2003), it is not a sufficient condition for building an intimate relationship, as a son is expected to provide material support to his parents. A son who failed to provide financial support while offering emotional support would be considered a phony. Father 6 (aged 70, village 2) noted, '*the sons always phone*

and ask us not to work on too much land. They say that it's sufficient for us to eat by just working on my own allocated land. But you know, they are just saying it' (implying that there has been no active support from their sons).

Daughters-in-law occupy an ambivalent position in the intersection between obligation and intimacy. Although the discourse around filial obligation in Chinese culture is largely centred on the image of the filial son waiting upon his aged parents, in reality it is the daughter-in-law who performs care (Zhan and Montgomery 2003). Much of the existing literature on intimacy suggests that care is central to intimate relationships (Gabb 2008); however, acts of care do not necessarily foster or represent an intimate bond. It is important to take into consideration the context in which the care is performed, i.e. whether it is voluntary or out of obligation. The difference between acting voluntarily and out of obligation, and the consequences of this difference, is illustrated in the following analysis of the relationships within Family 9 (Village 1).

In Family 9, the widowed mother had been bedbound for four years. Initially, her only (married) daughter, who lived in a neighbouring village, moved in and looked after her. However, the daughter still had her own family to look after and so living with her mother did not constitute a long-term solution, so the daughter and her brothers' families agreed to rotate care every 10 days. During their 10 allocated days, each family sent someone to cook for Mother 9, escort her to the toilet, and spend the night in her house. However, all of the dirty laundry was left for the daughter to wash. As the elder son had migrated for work, his wife carried out the care duties during his family's turn. Although she performed all of the tasks expected of her to avoid village gossip that she was unfilial, her relationship with her mother-in-law was not intimate. In fact, the daughter-in-

law held a grudge against Mother 9 whom she felt favoured the younger son's family and had not divided the family estate equally between her sons. Whilst the elder son's wife talked about how tiring it had become to care for her mother-in-law, in addition to doing her own agricultural work, she later admitted that she hoped Mother 9 would not get better because she wanted to continue seeing her suffer.

The daughter-in-law's sentiments were in sharp contrast to her attitude when describing how she had looked after her late mother who suffered from dementia. In this case, she volunteered to take her mother in because she was afraid that her brothers' families would not treat her mother well because she did not look after their children while they were little and so would be considered to have failed to fulfil her obligations as a grandmother. Despite caring for her mother until her death she inherited nothing from her natal family. The Family 9 example indicates that daughters often provide care to their parents voluntarily and unconditionally, whereas support from daughters-in-law is dependent on whether the in-laws have fulfilled their obligations. A relationship bound by obligations therefore requires symmetric reciprocity at its core[8], whilst an intimacy-based relationship condones asymmetric reciprocity.

Asymmetry in intimacy is often built upon the intersection of gender and generational inequalities (Jamieson 1998; Gabb 2008). As daughters are structurally located at the bottom of rural family and kinship arrangements, a sacrificial principle has gradually and consciously been imposed upon girls through a culturally sanctioned preferences for boys. As a result, daughters are more likely to sacrifice their own interests to the collective well-being of the family. Intimate ties between parents and daughters are built upon a mixture of mutuality and daughters' submission to parental power.

Intimacy and Social change

The relationship between daughters and their parents in rural China has not always been intimate; indeed intimacy is a relatively recent social phenomenon. Through a case study of three generations of women's care relation with their own parents in Family 9 (Village 1), this section reveals how daughters' connection with their natal family was strengthened over time and the ways in which intimacy can assist in explaining social change.

Wang, the grandmother in the family, was born in 1932. She recalled that her contribution to her own parents' care was minimal and that she rarely visited her parents who were in another village: '*when my parents were old, their son and grandsons looked after them well and required nothing from me'*. As her sister-in-law died before her parents, it was the wife of her nephew who cared for both her parents who died at roughly the same time. She spoke fondly of her nephew's wife; she was grateful for the fact that she not only looked after her parents but also offered her a place to stay overnight on the rare occasions she visited. This practice of a married daughter staying overnight with her natal family was not common for this generation; some women of this generation reported that their husbands did not allow them to frequently visit or care for their natal parents.

Wang's daughter-in-law, Zhang (born in 1954), exhibited a much closer care relationship with her parents. Migration affected this generation; Zhang's brothers and husband migrated to the cities for work and this subsequently led to a gendering of care roles among the adult children, with sons providing economic expenses for care while daughters provided day-to-day care (cf. Xu 2001, Ye and He 2008). In addition to acting as the carer for Wang during her husband's migration, Zhang

cared for her own mother until she died. She recalled a conversation with her husband: '*I will look after your mother. This is my duty. But I want to look after my mother too and you cannot stop me from doing it'*.

Zhang's daughter-in-law, Wu (born in 1985), expressed a strong attachment to her natal family. She visited her natal family (in a neighbouring village, 15 minutes away by bicycle) for a whole day, and often overnight, every 2 or 3 days before she had children and every 10 days after she had her son. She summarized her relations with her parents and her in-laws: '*I didn't feel any barrier with my parents and would say anything I feel like. But I always feel something between me and my mother-in-law, and I have to think if I should talk to her about something. I always feel the relationship with in-laws is not as intimate as that with own parents*'.

Jackson (2015) draws our attention to the place of intimate family relationships in social change, as 'potentially implicated in the processes of change rather than merely affected by or adapting to change'. Following Jackson's argument, I suggest that the increasingly strengthened interaction between daughters and their natal families is not only constitutive of social change but also an important source to effect social change in rural China. There is evidence that strengthened natal ties might pose challenges to patrilineal and patrilocal traditions.

First, while son preference persists, some modification occurs and educational investment in the daughters has increased. In Wang's generation, daughters were not sent to school, unlike their brothers, and instead stayed at home learning to weave and helping with childcare and domestic work. A key change in Zhang's generation was parents' attitude towards daughters' education: they

would support daughters through school if they did well academically. For Zhang, her only son dropped out from middle school because he hated studying, no matter how much Zhang hoped him to continue. Whilst Zhang did not put much expectation upon her daughters, her second daughter studied hard and so she continued to provide for her education, and the second daughter ultimately won a place at a city college. Zhang confided that while her son was the expected support provider, she hoped her daughters would be able to help their brother with the financial burden of parental old age support. For Wu's generation, dwelling upon the old age prospect, they are keen to have a daughter after they have had a son. Wu noted '*daughters are much better than sons for old age support. Daughters will wash clothes and do everything for parents but sons won't. A son performs the* (symbolic) *function; in reality they are not as good as daughters'*.

Second, although the patrilocal tradition remains intact in name, in practice it is being gradually modified. For Wang's generation, none of the women came from the same village. Inspired by the intimacy with their daughters, some women from Wang's generation started marrying their own daughters to men from the same village or a neighbouring village – rather than further afield as had been the norm. Mother 6 (aged 73) said, '*my daughter washes my clothes and my bed sheets but all my daughters-in-law feel them too dirty. That's why I married my daughter very close and did not let her outside the village. I told this to my daughter's mother-in-law. She followed my advice and also married her daughter off within the village'*. As a result, almost half of all the daughters (aged over 40) interviewed were married into the same village, including Zhang. They all lived fairly close to their parents, usually 10-20 minutes away on foot. Whilst the intra-village marriage practice has been found in other rural regions, with some examples linked to uxorilocal marriages (Judd 2008), the significance of the finding in this study is that all intra-village marriages are patrilocal

marriages, indicating a modification of the patrilocal residence tradition.

Conclusion

In the context of a rapidly ageing population and limited state welfare provision, the Chinese government places great weight upon family obligations, building upon and reinforcing the perception that support between parents and children is a duty which rests upon natural feelings. Applying Jamieson's concept of 'intimacy', this article disputes the confusion between obligation and intimacy widely embedded in public and academic discourse on intergenerational relationships in China. Instead I highlight the importance of differentiating intimate ties from relationships bound by obligations, as the two sets of relationships do not necessarily overlap. The empirical data suggest that a unilateral emphasis on obligation-based relationships can deprive both the parent and adult child generations of agency and autonomy, which can be disempowering for both. The complex relations between intimate ties and obligated ties are the product of local socio-economic circumstances and gender norms. By introducing the lens of 'intimacy', this article seeks to move beyond the existing obligatory framework and reshape our understanding of intergenerational relations in rural China.

The discrepancy between these two types of relationships (i.e. those bound by intimate ties and those bound by obligations) creates both risks and opportunities, and this has gendered and generational consequences. Across generations, whilst making sacrifices for the collective welfare of rural families, mothers and daughters are more likely to form closer bonds with other family members than their male counterparts owing to the gendered division of labour in the domestic sphere and gendered notions of emotionality. This complex relationship between gender and

intimacy at different levels of social construction may have paradoxical consequences for well-being in later life. Men's advantage in terms of economic productivity declines as they age, and as a result of their insufficient investment in the affective bank, evidence in developing countries reveal that older men are less likely to receive family support and care than older women (Knodel and Ofstedal 2003). Building intimate relationships in the family is critical to well-being in later life, particularly in societies where the family remains the main focus of funding and support.

Through a case study of rural families in China, this article seeks to add sociological understanding of the relation between intimacy and social change. New-generation modernity theorists have described how modernization has consequences for the intimate relationships, however the role of intimate relationships in social change is underexplored. My findings suggest that changes in intimate relationships can be part of social change as well as a source of social change. Through an investigation of daughters' position at the intersection between intimacy and obligation, I have demonstrated the potentialities of the practices of 'doing intimacy' to influence the institution of family and kinship. Although the patrilineal and patrilocal cultural traditions exclude married daughters from the filial discourse surrounding their own parents, they often have the most intimate relationships. The strengthening of intimate natal ties over three generations has seen the modification of gendered investment in children and patrilocal practice, which may eventually challenge the patrilineal culture. As family is an institution as well as a pattern of relationship, doing intimacy may enact a family reform from the bottom up, one that the Chinese state has not yet envisaged.

[1] In the 1950s, Chairman Mao's 'people-as-power' discourse encouraged women of childbearing age to have as many children as they could. Older interviewees in this study (born in the 1930s and

early 1940s) had an average of three to four adult children. The one-child policy was then introduced in 1979 and, following resistance from rural areas dependent on their children to assist with farm work and old age support, in the mid-1980s the state modified the policy for rural couples so that if their first child was a girl they were allowed another child. The generation born in the 1960s generally had at least two children per family. Rural families tend to have a 20-year generational gap.

[2] Obligation is defined as 'an act or course of action to which a person is morally or legally bound; a duty or commitment' (Oxford English Dictionary).

[3] Generational rhetoric refers to 'public discourse on how intergenerational relations ought to be lived and assessed' (Luscher 2011:192).

[4] Carsten's concept of 'relatedness' has been applied in recent anthropological work on Chinese families (Stafford 2000; Brandtstadter and Santos 2008). However, the concern of this body of scholarship lies with the divide between and dynamics of relationships shaped biologically and those formed socially.

[5] To contextualize the lived experienced and preferences within a family setting and in particular the relational dynamics between different generations Family 5 was chosen. Family 5 was picked because its arrangement of support for the older generation was representative of the pattern found among the families interviewed. The subsequent discussions are supplemented by quotes from other families.

[6] Because the one-child policy was strictly implemented in urban China, a lack of alternatives means that urban parents generally expect a daughter to provide old age support, however the burden is lower because state welfare provisions are better.

[7] Miller (2004) explains the main incentive for adult children in the village to provide support is a cultural/moral obligation, which continues the gendered nature of filial piety.

[8] Finch (1989), drawing upon Gouldner's discussion on reciprocity, indicated that calculations of their own and other people's position in structures of reciprocal support are embedded in the process of performing filial obligations. This calculating nature was also found in studies of rural China (Davis-Friedmann 1991).

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