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Globalization and its Effects on Chinese College Students' Perspectives on Elderly Care

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Her research was mentored by Dr. Jing Tan from the BSU Social Work Department in Summer 2011.

Research was conducted at Shanghai Normal University in Shanghai, China, and was funded by the Shea Scholarship. Juliann presented her research findings at the 26th National Conference on Undergraduate Research at Weber State University, Ogden, Utah in March 2012. After graduation, Juliann plans to attend graduate school and earn her MSW.

In China, the need to care for the elderly population is increasing dramatically. China's baby boomer generation is now aging, and in great need of assistance. As a result of China's economic reform in the 1990's, the country has undergone a rapid process of globalization that is now changing our world. Increased geographic mobility, longevity, the one-child policy, increased job opportunities, and the change of social roles in China are all factors that have resulted in decreased availability for adult children to take care of their aging parents. Attitudes and perspectives on elderly care have developed and varied as the structure of China has drastically changed.

This issue of elderly care is something that previously has not been a major concern for the country. The traditional Chinese thought and practice of filial piety (*xiao*) includes care and respect for the elderly population based on Confucianism (Kuang, 2010). Filial piety has long been China's means of taking care of the elderly population. It is the norm that an adult children's parent(s) will live with them. Not only does filial piety encompass all the needs of physical care of a parent, but also notions of loyalty, obedience, and respect for the elder (Zhan, 2008). Historically, institutional elder care in China has been minimal, and laws were based on cultural values of Confucianism and filial piety. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the government has made it law that one must take full responsibility and care for their aging parents. If one did not perform these tasks, he or she is punishable under China's Criminal Code. Further significance of a son or daughter's legal responsibility to carry out this action was placed in 1996 with the enactment of the Elder's Protection Law of the Peoples Republic of China, further promoting Chinese people's values of respect and inclusive care of those over 60 years of age (Wu, 2005).

Before the establishment of China's one-child policy, elderly men and women would typically have more than one adult child to rely on for care. In the 1980's, with the launch of the population control campaign, China's one-child policy has warped the structure of the traditional Chinese family. This structural change involves several families of three: two parents and one child. When the child becomes an adult and gets married, both the adult child and their spouse will have a set of parents to care for, in addition to their own child (Zhan, 2006). This creates a 4-2-1 family pattern, in which a lot of pressure and responsibility is put on the married adult children. This nuclear

family structure is especially common in urban areas, where the one-child policy has been more accomplished. Overall, China's birthrate has effectively decreased over the years from 22.28 per 1,000 in 1982, to 18.24 in 1992, and 12.6 per 1,000 in 2002 (Sheng, 2006).

In addition to the one-child policy, industrialization in China has also contributed to changing demographics in China. In the early 1900's, China's rural population consisted of 90% of the total population. Over the past century, due to modernization and industrialization, the number of those living in rural areas includes only 60.91% in 2002, according to the National Bureau of Statistics in China (2003). Traditional large families became difficult to pursue in urban areas, and families have decreased in size. The mean size of an urban household has steadily declined from 3.89 members in 1985 to 3.04 members in 2002 (Sheng, 2006). These families are small, and more mobile than traditional families, making them less available for extended family support.

Under the Communist regime, the only elders that were institutionalized for care were those that encompass the "three no's": no children, no income, and no relatives. Elders who entered these homes were generally stigmatized, and were lumped in institutions with orphans and mentally ill patients (Zhan, 2008). Yet, China's social welfare reform has implemented changes since the 1990's, and the country has developed into a free market economy. Many government-owned elderly homes have closed, and several new private elder homes have been opened for business (Zhan, 2006). The country's economic reform has decentralized China into a competitive, market-based system. This resulted in a drastic decrease in government spending, and a less secure future for many retirees. China's governmental budget for social welfare services and social relief was decreased from .58% GDP in 1979 to .19% in 1997 (Zhan, 2006). Before the reforms, government-operated enterprises provided retirement wages, health care expenses, and in-home long-term care for physically dependent retirees. After the country's economic changes, many of these enterprises went bankrupt, or merged with businesses or companies to stay afloat. The demise of these enterprises left China with very few businesses that still provided traditional retiree services through working assignments. With a great lack of public and government funding available, the issue of long-term care for older adults is growing. The children of elderly parents have shared financial expenses in providing care for parents over the years, but many only-children that are now approaching adulthood will experience this burden alone (Wu, 2005).

Not only has the economic reform affected governmental

support for retirees, it has also, as previously stated, changed family structure. Living arrangements have changed as housing improvements have been made, and adult children tend to prefer to live separate from their parents. The younger generation has had access to opportunities of work and mobility within the economic reform, further weakening the ties to traditional family living. With the continuation of these trends, it is anticipated that lack of available resources for elders will become a greater problem in China. Research has noted that resources have been provided at the local level in response to these issues, but there are still too many in need of assistance. When asked if local services provided the elder's needs, 70% responded that their needs were "partially met," and 30% reported that their needs were "not met" or "not at all met." This has led to the concern that the country does not have enough of a trained workforce to provide long-term care for elders (Wu, 2005).

The impact that globalization has had on the country as a whole has drastically changed traditional norms in China. A new concept of what filial piety means, and perspectives and attitudes towards institutional care, have seemingly changed within China's newer generations (Zhan, 2008). But what exactly is globalization? How has this process changed China? Despite the previous stigmatization of elderly institutional care, research suggests that this means of providing for the elderly has become more socially acceptable in China. Due to the country's economic reform, and the process of globalization, it is not only the elderly that encompass the "three no's" that are in need of assistance. According to researcher Zhan in 2006, an elder home visited ($n=265$) was comprised of 16.6% of elders that had no children and 62.7% that had three or more children. 54.5% of these elders lived either alone or with a spouse prior to moving into the elder home. Over half, 55.8%, reasoned that their children did not live close, and were too busy to take care of them. This was expressed as their major reason for moving into an elderly home. It was also found that adult children were less willing to give up working to stay home and take care of a parent (Zhan, 2006). It has seemingly become more acceptable for families to place their elders into institutional care. Some children of these retirees view this as an even better act of filial piety, because the elder is now receiving professional care. Research suggests that some believe that as long as children still provide emotional support to their parents, it is a greater expression of *xiao* to provide their parents with finances and institutional care, especially as they become more dependent and their children become less available for direct, daily care (Zhan, 2008). To some, it has become viewed as a privilege to live in an elder home because it represents one's high economic status if one has the finances to receive special care. Through interviewing older adults who are receiving

institutional care, research has suggested that this population does not view their situation as their children abandoning them. They see institutional care as a better means to care for the aging, especially those with major health problems. Yet, adult children who did not visit their parents or provide emotional support and involvement were considered to be unfilial (Zhan, 2008). In all, research suggests that expressions of filial piety have changed for many Chinese families.

These changes in ideas, attitudes, and traditions are believed to be a result of globalization. Many assume that globalization is the Westernization or Americanization of Eastern countries. It is also commonly interpreted to be the process of modernization. Yet, globalization engulfs many definitions, referring to worldwide communication, technology, trade, dependence, and exchange of language, norms, and ideas (Sheng, 2006). Research has found that rationalizations for institutionalization of elders are often related to the unavailability of their children due to geographic distance or busy work schedules (Zhan, 2008). This commonality of unavailability for family is generally new to China, and is a result of the process of globalization. Relations between parents and adult children have changed as younger generations have gained access to higher paying jobs. Western attitudes regarding elder care responsibilities have been adopted by much of China's younger generation (Sheng, 2006).

As a result of globalization, China's economy, lifestyle, and values have evolved to accommodate new situations within the country. Countries such as China that are experiencing demographic changes and globalization are expected to develop more interdependent means of family care-giving (Sheng, 2006). This process has circulated a tremendous amount of information, cultural exposure, and economic activity around the world, enabling a special interconnection between countries that has not existed before.

This project has a specific focus on how globalization has affected China's economy, traditions, culture, and availability for elderly care. This information is important for future law and policy regarding China's elder care system. Laws that have previously mandated adult children to provide all elderly care for their aging parents is now becoming impractical due to our developing and globalized world. It is also important that Chinese college students are aware of the country's growing elderly population, because they will be the country's future policy-makers, and they will also have to decide what is best for their own parents regarding elderly care. This topic is important for social work research in that it will provide some answers to how the future elderly population may be cared for, and what college students' perspectives are towards this issue. It

is vital to listen to young adult's perspectives on elderly care in order to find the most feasible, appropriate, and practical way to care for the large elderly population that is coming, keeping in mind the changing lifestyles and values of China's younger population. It is important for social policy to know the best way to care for this population reasonably and respectfully.

METHODOLOGY

This project targeted the population of Chinese college students. The sampling frame included students of Shanghai Normal University in Shanghai, China. This cross-sectional study was based on purely qualitative data collected in focus groups held on the University's campus.

Three focus groups were conducted with six to eight subjects in each discussion group. Participants in these groups were found through the help of Shanghai Normal University's English department and through the University's "English Corner" (after hour English practice for Chinese students). This method of sampling was used because the focus groups were conducted in English, so subjects who were competent in the language were needed. Focus groups included discussion questions that looked at Chinese students' perspectives on future elderly care for their parents and themselves, and explored the influence of traditional cultural values and globalization. Focus groups were tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using concepts of globalization and elderly care that were discussed in each group. Data collected from focus groups has been used to examine if and how globalization has changed traditions of filial piety and elderly care.

RESULTS

Through reviewing the content of the focus group discussions, it is observed that different concepts were introduced and discussed by the subjects with great interest and differences in opinion. These concepts included varying outcomes of globalization in China, and how these occurrences have impacted college students' perspectives on elderly care, and future plans to care for their aging parents.

Travel

One major outcome of globalization is increased geographic mobility. There are more opportunities to travel abroad than ever before as our world has advanced in transportation services and technology. The students that participated in the focus groups discussed this topic, and introduced differing perspectives on how travel opportunity influences elder care options. One student stated: "Of course we are deeply affected by globalization, you know today's world, is, you know,

interconnected...we are absorbed for a wealth of knowledge... are getting more international in China.” Traveling has become more popular as the world has globalized. When asked how they plan to care for their parents when they get old, one student answered: “I would prefer to live with them, but my parents just want to live alone and...travel abroad, travel the whole world. They are very independent.” Some students shared similar stories about how their parents do not expect them to live together for their adult lives. When speaking of her own plans for when she is older, one student shared: “When I am old, I would like to travel with my husband, because my children will have their own lives.” Another student who had interest in future travel quoted: “After traveling, I prefer to stay in my hometown and look after my children’s children. Just live a peaceful life. And leave them the room to have their own lives.”

Education and Work Opportunities

As a result of globalization, increased opportunities in further education and advanced careers have greatly impacted the college-aged Chinese population, and their future plans to care for their parents. This concept also links with the previously discussed topic of travel, as both schooling and jobs are offered abroad. According to the subjects’ focus group discussion, going away for school or work seemingly has become more popular and accepted in Chinese culture. One student stated: “I think that not just us, but our parents are influenced by globalization, because I have been told by my mother that when she was young my grandmother didn’t allow my mother to marry or find a job in another city, let alone go abroad. But nowadays, my parents think, to go to another city or abroad is a good thing. They will always go along with my decisions.” This new way of thought and opportunity in China was discussed by several students. Many students agreed that if they were offered a stable job in another country, they would take the job and move abroad. Another said: “In the future, if I have the opportunity to go abroad, I will settle there. For my parents also want their children to have a good development. So, I think, we settle abroad and we can find some solution. Like, I can telephone call them...I can use holidays to come back and visit them as much as possible.” Although the notion was captured that many students were willing to go abroad, there were also students that claimed they would not want to leave their parents for work. One student said: “As for me, I will refuse the opportunity because my parents are all I owe...I am pleased to take the responsibility to live with them. A job is only to feed us; our hometown is our permanent home.” Another said: “I think I will refuse the position without hesitation...I think the opportunity is valuable, but I’d rather live a peaceful life, or more easy life with my parents.” Students who were not willing to go abroad tended to have more traditional

Chinese values that were seemingly instilled in their lifestyle pursuit. It was observed that while some families had parents that influenced their children with modern, developing ideas of how they should live their life, some lacked this exposure and openness to pursue work opportunities abroad. Those who were open to working or continuing education abroad were willing to express their duties of filial piety in new ways, different than the traditional structure of physically living with their parents. This way of living is more associated with western lifestyle and values, something that has been exposed to China through globalization and cultural exchange.

Cultural Exchange

As the world has become more globalized, Chinese culture and society has been exposed to several different cultures. The Chinese have been exposed to new customs, ideas, ways of thinking, and means of governing that previously may have been unknown or unaccepted. This exposure to cultural exchange is especially prominent in China’s cities, as these financial and political districts become more diverse with workers and travelers. It was frequently discussed among the Chinese college students that their parents do not want to be a “burden” to them as they pursue their lives and future careers. When asked what their general view of older adults was, one student answered: “I think sometimes they are independent, and they don’t want to be a burden of their children.” Another student explained that her ideas and means of carrying out her filial duties will be different than what her grandparents expected of her parents. She shared that she is the only child in her family, like most, and that if she moves abroad she will not be around a whole lot to take care of her parents the way that traditional values would expect her to. Yet, her parents told her that they think it is natural that they go to a nursing home or receive elderly care when they are older. When speaking of her parents, she stated: “I think they have a very advanced attitude.” She talked about how her parents don’t think that it is unfilial, mean, or disrespectful for her to send them to a nursing house, as older generations may have thought. She simply said: “they don’t want to be a burden of mine.” The acceptance of this lifestyle is certainly a value that has been developing in China as the country has partaken in drastic changes over the past couple decades as the economy and demographics of the country have shifted. One student shared an experience of cultural exchange with America. She quoted: “I think my parents may be influenced by their neighbors because when they were young, their neighbor’s children went to America, and they lived there for more than thirty years... So maybe my parents were influenced by them. My parents say ‘when you grow up...you can do everything you like. Maybe you can choose every city you like, or maybe you can go abroad and choose your lifestyle.’” She also discussed that her parents do not think that she has to live with them in the future to perform

her filial duties, and that as long as she lives a good life, she feels that will be enough for them.

Nursing Home Development

Students discussed the business of nursing homes in their country. China's economic reform, a change as a result of globalization and the exchange of ideas, has brought with it an increasing nursing home business in their relatively new free-market economy. As previously discussed, because children are increasingly unavailable due to China's one-child policy, travel, and work, there is a greater need for nursing homes in China. Results yielded several mixed opinions regarding nursing home care. Many negative views on nursing homes appeared to stem back to traditions of filial piety and living with/taking care of one's parents themselves. One speaker shared that her father says to her: "don't put me in the nursing house, no way." Another shared that "in Chinese traditional culture, it is very rude to send your parents to the nursing homes. And their children will be regarded as the bad guys." Some shared that their parents are willing to go to a nursing home, but that they do not want to send them there. The students had concern for the quality of care in the nursing homes. One boy said: "I think that if the nursing house provides good service, I will persuade my parents to do this. But now I think the nursing home is not good enough." Another stated: "I think when you go to a nursing home you lose your freedom and the care is not perfect." Others had heard bad things about nursing homes that scared them away from making it an option for their parents in the future. One said: "In my opinion, I don't think the nursing house it a good place for old people to live. One of my relatives has said she had been there, and she said that the nursing house is very horrible, and the nurse and doctor, their tempers are very bad...and that the facilities are very old and not advanced." Another shared: "I think I won't let my parents live in a nursing house; the facilities are old and the people are not good enough to them. I will feel great anxiety while I'm at work or my own place. I will worry..." Another shared: "when I think of nursing house I think of lonely or sickness." Yet, some did verbalize anticipation that nursing homes will improve in the future, and become a more viable option. An example of this is a quote from one student who said: "Probably years later, there might be a lot of improvement in the nursing system or in medical service, or those related. There is a lot of potential to be improved in the Chinese system. I think we will find ways to get it, to attain a better quality of life in the nursing house."

There were also several students that were currently not opposed to sending their parents to a nursing home, or to staying in a nursing home themselves in the far future. Because nursing home care is becoming a more available and discussed option

in China, some have seemed to support the intentions and needs of nursing and elderly care. This was reflected in many responses made by the students. One said: "My parents told me that the nursing house is not just a place where they will be lonely or suffer some pain. They think it's a very good choice to go to the nursing house when they are old because in the nursing house, ...they can get faster medical security. Medics, doctors and nurses in the nursing house...And they think the nursing house will have many friends at just their age." Another shared her opinions about nursing home, stating: "I don't think this is a bad place, you don't have to cook or wash in there. You just live there and enjoy your life...we don't want to be a burden to our children." Another student shared a personal story about a family member's positive experience staying in a nursing home. She said: "Because my grandma was in there, I think she is very happy. My mother and father offer to look over her in there, she is very happy in there. If I'm old, I will go there."

One student shared his experiences volunteering at a nursing home. This experience helped shape his opinions on elderly nursing care. He shared: "I once got the chance to visit a nursing home in China. I did volunteer work...community service. And those elderly people up there are mentally disabled or physically disabled or a combination of both. But when I get there, and they enjoy a better life...so the nursing house did an excellent job and provided an excellent service to take care of the old people both emotionally and physically. And they arrange a lot of different activities to help support their vision and to make their life colorful and verified. And that's amazing. So now, in China, it's not a bad choice to go to a nursing house."

Modernization

With the exchange of cultures and ideas, the exposure of modern technology and thought has also greatly affected China and elderly care. As cities in China modernize, traditional lifestyles have changed.

One student shared their advanced attitude towards xiao, or filial piety in China. He shared that the value system in China says: "Don't be yourself, just follow the rules." Overall, the concept of feeling burdened by societal pressure to stay local and live with family throughout life is a problem for the college-aged Chinese. When speaking of this burden, one subject shared: "...it makes our life tough. Maybe it's a lot of pressure on me to support, because in the future I cannot support four parents, but I will try my best."

Other opinions from various students regarding this topic were shared:

“I think there is a generation gap between my parents, and other children I know. We are the next generation; we are the leaders for tomorrow, so we are pretty different. And we don’t have those old perspectives that we should always stay close with our parents like we should live with them or pay such close attention to them. I think it’s not necessary.”

“Maybe in the old days, the Chinese families were big families. The next generation just lived with their elders...but society has changed...now with new couples...they won’t want to live with their parents, because they like to share some privacy.”

“We emphasize more on individuality, so it’s pretty different than the old perspective. The old perspective utilizes no individuality...you know, collectivism, so it’s very different.”

Despite emerging ideas of individualism and privacy from family, these students still face societal pressure in terms of taking care of their parents when they age. This is a tradition that has been embedded in Chinese society for a long time, and is hard to move on from and find different acceptable ways of expressing filial piety, other than physically living with one’s parents. One student shared: “I think I face a lot of pressure, I mean peer pressure among society. And I care about that, I do care about the peer pressure and how others people view about you and that’s pretty important in China.” Another student commented that living nearby one’s parents, but not in the same household has become more popular and accepted nowadays, and still is considered being filial. Many others agreed.

When the subjects were asked what they will expect of their children regarding filial duties, most had similar responses. One said: “I will probably not rely on that much on my children. To not put a heavy burden or pressure on them.” Another said: “I will choose to live in a nursing house because I don’t want to bother my children a lot.” “I will not put pressure on my children.” Another quoted: “We feel so much burden and so much stress right now, so we don’t want to do that again to our own children.” Almost all subjects agreed that they do not wish to put pressure on their future children to live with them throughout life. They expressed that they felt this way because of the future opportunities they will have, the pressure they feel now to live with their parents, and wanting to rid their children of this societal pressure. Lastly, when speaking of their generation, one subject said: “We are not really the traditional Chinese; we are the first modern Chinese.”

DISCUSSION

Results yielded several mixed perspectives towards concepts of globalization and perspectives toward elderly care in China. Increased travel, education, and work opportunities in China have shown to have great impact on the college generation’s lifestyle, and future plans and perspectives towards elderly care. Geographic differences in elder-care philosophy were mentioned: urban areas have a more westernized perspective of familial care, while rural areas tend to hold onto traditional forms of elderly care.

Values of taking opportunity and branching away from one’s roots to obtain happiness and success are congruent with modern thought. This suggests that the Chinese have been exposed to these new ideas as a result of globalization through cultural exchange. Interactions with American and Western ideas are certainly present in the life of these college students, and results suggest that this influence will continue over time. Willingness and enthusiasm were displayed with the college students when discussing elder care issues. Most subjects mentioned that they have already discussed plans with their parents, and shared their parents’ personal expectations and opinions regarding elderly care. The presence of open discussion with parents suggests that the population is aware and willing to find new means of elderly care in order to adapt to their changing country. This further emphasizes the presence of global influence on the country not only in a policy-level perspective, but also within a local and familial standpoint. Generational differences in perspectives were also discussed, showcasing how college students’ thought has been influenced differently than older generational, traditional thought.

The college students mentioned several times that they do not expect their future children to live with them throughout life, or provide extensive care for them. This was because their current generation feels so much societal pressure to conform to Chinese tradition and provide familial elderly care for their parents at the same time as taking advantage of various new opportunities that are available to them. The reality was met that they will have to choose between taking care of their parents, or pursuing travel and job opportunities. If the latter is chosen, other options of financial and emotional support, in-home care, or institutionalization were discussed. Several students voiced that they did not want to put this burden on their future children, and that they will find new ways to live independently as options increase. Several students suggested that their future children’s personal goals and happiness were their concern, and did not feel that this threatened their family or future well-being.

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