

Filial Obligation in Contemporary China: Evolution of the Culture-System

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ABSTRACT

Family obligation, which has an exceptionally high salience in traditional Chinese society, continues to be significant in contemporary China. In family relations in particular sentiments and practices morphologically similar to those associated with *xiao* (filial piety) remains intact in so far as an enduring set of expectations concerning age-based obligation continues to structure behavior toward others. Researchers pursuing the theme of “individualization” in Chinese society, on the other hand, argue that family obligations and filial sentiments have substantially weakened. The present paper will show that under conditions of cultural and social change in China filial behavior through family obligation continues to play an important role even though the conventions associated with the relevant expectations, attitudes and emotions have undergone significant change. The paper argues that the culture-system develops not merely through an internal dynamic and that family obligation must be understood in terms of the social and material context in which it operates and the nature of the motivations and imagery of the people that practice it.

Keywords: filial piety, family obligation, social welfare, family interdependence

INTRODUCTION

Commentators observe that obligation has an exceptionally high salience in traditional Chinese society and continues to operate in modern China. Hwang (1987, p. 944) notes that in “Chinese society . . . norms of reciprocity (*bao*) are intense . . . shaped by the public nature of obligations and by the long time period over which obligations are incurred”. Indeed, the mechanisms of such obligatory relations are indicated by Chinese language terms such as *mianzi* (face), *renqing* (social and moral norms of reciprocal favour or benefit) and *huibao* (reciprocal obligation) in which regard for and commitment to others are central and highlighted.

In family relations in particular sentiments and practices morphologically similar to those associated with *xiao* (filial piety) remains intact and provide an enduring set of expectations that continues to structure behavior toward others (Whyte, 1997, 2005). Researchers pursuing the theme of “individualization” in Chinese society (Yan, 2009, 2010; Hansen & Svarverud, 2010), on the other hand, tend to emphasize the novelty of the category of the “individual” in recent Chinese history. Yan (2003, 2009) argues that family obligations and filial sentiments have substantially weakened in recent times.

Filial piety (*xiao*) has been regarded as a traditional element of Chinese society, fundamental in its function of maintaining family obligation, including the provision of aged care and support. According to Confucian doctrine *xiao* entails that adult children should exert themselves to the utmost in the service of their parents in providing satisfaction of material needs, and in showing reverence and obedience (Confucius, 2000, pp. 2, 4, 6, 14, 20, 44, 256). Adult children are encouraged to avoid travelling far from their parents (Confucius, 2000, p. 44). In spite of the enormous changes undergone in China in the 2500 years since Confucius it is frequently remarked that the importance of the Confucian notion of *xiao* persists today (Cong & Silverstein, 2008; Whyte, 2005; Zhan, 2004). While the ethos and practice of family obligation continue to have a major role in determining the behavior of both parents and their children the meaning of *xiao* has been reinterpreted in various ways, however, and the institutional basis of family obligation in present-day China operates in concert with the interests of the party-state and the contextually based self-preserving motives of its citizens.

Given the significant changes mainland China is currently undergoing, through political reform and marketization, the question arises of the impact of these changes on the pattern and structure of social relationships. A significant marker of social change in Chinese society is located in shifts in the sense and content of obligation that individuals feel toward others, especially in family relationships. The present paper argues that with social and cultural change it is unlikely that family obligation shall remain unaffected. The “individualization” argument, however, exaggerates the degree to which individuals become free of their family obligations. The paper shows that family obligations in China continue to play a significant role, even though conventions associated with the expectations, attitudes and emotions involved in obligation orientations undergo change. In this sense the argument to follow addresses Hwang’s (2012, 2014) culture-inclusive theories (see Bond, 2014) of Confucian relationalism (see Liu, 2014). The discussion of family obligation will show how a core element of Chinese cultural heritage appears to persist over historical time, even though the meaning of its associated practices and the institutional bases on which it rests are transformed by political and economic forces.

The paper will advance an empirically-based theory of cultural development which supplements the indigenous psychology approach by indicating the role of the politico-legal and social context in which values and norms operate. Such

norms and values appear to have a history and persistence beyond their current basis in effectively drawing on or replicating the imagery of traditional practices. The theoretical model advanced below accepts that indigenous cultural forms are both a resource for action and its possible rationalization and at the same time an outcome of practices which are necessarily contextualized, politically and socially (Bourdieu, 1984; Swidler, 1986). The development of the culture system is therefore not through an internal dynamic but interactionally evolved in concert with the larger institutional framework in which it is situated (Qi, 2014, pp. 103–142). The impact on action of cultural forms, meanings and precepts is conditioned by the wider socio-historical contexts in which both culture and action are located (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003; Swidler, 2001). The case to be dealt with in the present paper, of family obligation in mainland China, has a clear inheritance profile of Confucian filial piety and a politically changing context of communist party rule and a socially changing context of gender relations and marketization. Expectation of individualization in this mix are not realized through these developments, which produce instead a persistence of family obligation morphologically similar to Confucian filial piety, but on a basis drawn from present-day institutional and social developments. These latter maintain a cultural formation that draws on the imagery of traditional filial piety.

ENDURING CHARACTERISTICS OR DIMINISHING PRACTICE

Family obligation is an enduring characteristic of Chinese social structure, legitimated and rationalized in Confucian thought (Fei, 1992; King, 1985). And yet this historical tradition is today supported with legal codification and enforced against those who offend against the norms of family obligation, who may be subject to legal sanction. Both the 1950 and 1980 Marriage Laws stress reciprocal obligation of each family member for the welfare of the family as a whole. In more practical terms, circumvention of bureaucratic control of job assignments and coping with housing shortages, accessing resources and opportunities (Bian, 1994; Whyte, 1997, p. 22; Yang, 1994) leads people to rely on favour-seeking or rent-seeking forms of *guanxi* relations (Qi, 2013, p. 310) and particularly to find support in family networks. These practices also tend to reinforce the strength of family bonds.

The theme of “individualization” in Chinese Society, on the other hand, argues that family obligation and filial sentiments have been substantially weakened during the reform period. Those who support the individualization thesis point to cultural acceptance of an ideological shift from self-sacrifice for kinship or collective needs to self-realization and self-interest (Yan, 2009, p. xxiv). Indeed, since China opened its door to the outside world in 1978 exposure to western culture and particularly individualistic ideas has increased, especially among young people. Individualism is understood to include a right to satisfy self-interest

without regard to the rights or needs of others. It is held that young people tend to promote their individual rights in challenging the authority of parents and in failing to exercise traditional bonds of filial obligation. Yan (2003, p. 189) emphasizes that the “most significant change with regard to elderly support . . . is the disintegration and ultimate collapse of the notion of filial piety, the backbone of old-age security in Chinese culture”.

It is accepted here that China is presently undergoing cultural and social change in which the conventions of family obligation and associated expectations, attitudes and emotions shall also change. It will be shown, however, that the role of family obligation in the welfare of individuals is unlikely to lose its importance in the near future in light of a number of current changes in mainland China as well as the continuing absence of a social welfare system and the interdependent reliance of adult children and their parents. Yan’s simple contrast between collective needs and self-interest fails to appreciate the ego-centric nature of the Chinese relational self (Fei, 1992, p. 67; see also Fung, 1998, pp. 635–636 and King, 1985), and, more importantly for our present purposes, the significant but overlooked role of self-interest in family obligation (Barbalet, 2013; see also Qi, 2013, pp. 319–321). The question which social commentators and researchers face concern not the end of family obligation but the changes it shall undergo and also the nature of the social and moral mechanisms through which it shall continue to operate.

FROM CONFUCIUS TO MAO TO CONFUCIUS?

Family obligation and welfare provision for the elderly by their adult sons and daughters-in-law are regarded as key characteristics of Chinese culture supported by a hierarchical social structure. According to Hwang’s (2012, 2014) analysis, pre-Qin Confucianists developed an ethical system based on a delicately contrived balance of benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*) and propriety (*li*) which advocated the fulfillment of reciprocal obligations between each dyad of the five cardinal relationships (*wu lun*). The Confucian ethical system for ordinary people, set out in a classical Confucian compilation, the Book of Rites (*Li Ji*) (Dai & Dai, 2004, p. 41), highlighted the relative virtues of exerting oneself in realizing the values of “kindness on the part of the father and filial duty on that of the son; gentleness on the part of the elder brother, and obedience on that of the younger; righteousness on the part of the husband, and submission on that of the wife; kindness on the part of the elders, and deference on that of juniors” within the family.

These ethical principles encapsulated in the five cardinal relationships was transformed by later scholar officials, during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.), into an absolutist ethics of *Three Bonds* which was adopted throughout the territory of imperial rule. In this ethic the absolute authority of the ruler over the minister is delineated, as well as the absolute authority of the father over the son,

and of the husband over the wife. This revised form of politicized filial piety (Liu, 1996) is characterized as authoritarian moralism and cognitive conservatism which underlie both the traditional and the contemporary ideologies (Ho, 1994). A number of writers, on the other hand, argue that authoritarian filial piety no longer dominates and that reciprocal filial piety is increasingly practiced (Hwang, 1999; Yang, 1995, 1996).

The relationship between governmental regulation and ethical relations and practices, while conceptually distinct, are not so readily separated in concrete circumstances. Indeed, it should not be forgotten that according to the *Mencius* state authority is to inculcate the five cardinal relationships (Mencius, 2004, p. 60). What the preceding discussion considers is not only whether the state plays a primary or secondary role in the maintenance of ethical systems and the enforcement of ethical behavior in face of individual lapses but also the changing nature of the ethical regime itself in terms of both the details of its constitution and the institutional basis on which it rests. The idea that a set of ethical principles and the practices associated with them may remain free of both political determination and social influence cannot be defended. What is required, on the other hand, is a clear understanding of the ways in which the norms of conduct relate to the social and political framework in which they operate.

Family obligation as filial piety was traditionally institutionalized in imperial China by a moral culture based on Confucian ideology reinforced by laws that favoured seniority (Leung & Nann, 1995; Xu, 2001). In these terms family formation serves the principle of “*yanger fanglao*” (raise a son to secure future prospects in old age) and “*fumu zai, bu yuanyou*” (when parents are alive, children should not travel too far afield). There remains in China today a background assumption that children have a duty to support their elderly parents and in particular that adult children are called upon to sacrifice their own interests to ensure the fulfillment of their parents’ requirements. The psychological mechanisms implicit in these relationships are understood in different terms. Ho (1994) regards the character of filial piety as authoritarian and he believes that it justifies absolute parental authority over children, governing their socialization and intergenerational relationships in general. Yang (1995, 1996), on the other hand, views filial piety as a social-orientation through which reciprocity functions as a self-reinforcing power. A sociological approach, on the other hand, avoids reification of the concept of filial piety and treats the relationships to which the term refers as grounded in the prevailing politico-legal, social and normative frameworks in which individuals are located and through which they develop both accommodating and innovative strategies.

An investigation conducted during the early period of economic liberalization asked respondents to place in order five reasons for having children (UNESCO, 1984, p. 112). Young people in rural Sichuan typically chose old-age support as the first or second reason, whereas young people in Beijing placed old-age support on average as the fourth most important reason. It might be noted that in Beijing

support of parents in their old age was not the last reason for having children. These findings have to be placed in their historical and social context.

During the Mao era and especially during the Cultural Revolution forceful endeavours were made to uproot traditional cultural values. Massive campaigns were directed to securing ultimate loyalty away from kinship networks and firmly placing it with the Communist Party and its instrumentalities (Vogel, 1965). Confucian ideology was attacked and the Maoist ideology of class struggle, revolution and self-sacrifice to build an ideal communist society was promoted (Madsen, 1984). During the period from the 1950s to the 1970s rectification campaigns had the effect that the “traditional notion of filial piety lost its ideological and institutional ground” (Yan, 2009, p. 172). Yet while the traditional legitimation of filial piety was undermined, family obligation itself was left intact. The Marriage Law of 1950 and all subsequent related legislation explicitly stress the reciprocal obligations of each family member for the welfare of the family as a whole. While conflicts of loyalty between the family and Party were resolved in favour of the Party, the Party nevertheless stressed the continuing importance of family relationships for individual welfare in the new China.

One of the structural consequences of the removal of the Confucian ideological basis of family support in conjunction with the legal strengthening of the principle of family obligation was the placement of the practice and carriage of filiality with daughters rather than sons (Whyte, 1997, p. 30). As a result of ideological transformation, institutional reforms and constitutional changes during the Mao era women were liberated from traditional oppressions and prevailing propaganda stressed their equality with men. From the late 1950s women were encouraged to participate in public life. Urban women were able to work full-time in state or collective work-units and rural women became important in the labour force of collective farms. Through these changes women were able to play the role of resource allocator in their interaction with their family members. Because they held the power to directly contribute to the family budget, their influence within the family consequently grew. There thus occurred a shift from a patrilineal emphasis, essential in the Confucian construction of filial piety, to a bilineal orientation, which in turn led to a decline in parental preference in cities for sons, and daughters became increasingly important as a source of support for aged parents, including in the provision of a home, in both urban and rural areas (Davis-Friedmann, 1983; Hansen & Pang, 2008, p. 85). Thus the change of institutional contexts entails changes in the nature and form of the cultural resources on which people draw in their situated actions.

The enhanced status of urban women in mainland China today is supported by an unintended consequence of the one-child policy, which began in 1979 and directed to population control. Urban daughters have benefited from the demographic pattern which results from this policy even though its negative impact, including forced sterilizations and abortions, increased family tension, an unbalanced gender ratio, among other things, has drawn much political and research

attention. Without brothers urban daughters, unlike previous generations of girls, do not have to compete for family resources. It has been reported that brotherless daughters receive more resources than sisterless sons since parents “invest all their savings in their daughters’ education, rather than saving part of it for the purchase of marital housing”, as they would for a son (Fong, 2002, p. 1104). Fong’s study reveals that parents now direct all their love, hope, and need for old-age support to their only daughters, who in turn demonstrate that they could fulfill the filial obligations once exclusively reserved for sons (Fong, 2002, pp. 1101–1102).

Since 1978 China has moved from a purely planned and collectivized economy to a more market-based economy. Under these circumstances communist ideology no longer provides a compelling basis for the values of self-sacrifice to secure collective goals (Yan, 2009, p. 33). Indeed, a structural consequence of market relationships is attention to the individual person’s own relationship with employment and consumer markets, which translates to an encouragement for self-interested behavior. Another aspect of social life sponsored by Communist Party policy which leads in the same direction is the family structure resulting from the one-child policy, summarized as the 4–2–1 family; four grandparents, two parents, and one child. As the Chinese family is increasingly child-centred (Bian, 1989; Guan, 2003) so the child him- or her-self becomes self-focused or narrowly self-interested. While much is made of the importation of western popular culture leading to individualism among Chinese young people, there is sufficient in structural development in China itself to account for a move to “individualist” orientations. To place this development in a theoretical framework: members of the younger generation have a gradually increasing tendency to interact with their family members in terms of the equity rule of deliberate calculation or of orientation to value ratios in the principle of market pricing (Fiske, 1992). The Chinese government has responded to these and associated developments through a rehabilitation of Confucian ideology (Bell, 2008), or more accurately, adoption and modification of New Confucianism created in Taipei, Hong Kong and Harvard (Dirlik, 2011; Song, 2003; Tan, 2008). Since 1978 New Confucianism is promoted to serve as a moral force in China, including for filial obligation (Whyte, 1997, p. 23).

On-the-ground expression of these state-sponsored ideological developments includes the voluntary contracts in rural China between elderly parents and their adult children, known as the *Jiating Shanyang Xieyi* (Family Support Agreement). This form of contract was initiated by cadres in Dafeng County, Jiang Su Province in 1985 and since then has been adopted throughout rural China (Wei & Tao, 2002, pp. 1–5). The 2006 government white paper, *Development of China’s Aging Affairs*, states that adult children and their parents in families are encouraged to sign *Jiating Shanyang Xieyi*. These contracts stipulate the content and standards for aged support and are implemented and monitored through village (neighbourhood) committees or other relevant organizations, which aims to ensure the right of support for the aged (SCPRC, 2006). This contract, which is legally binding,

functions on the basis of the foundation of filial piety as a set of moral precepts (Chou, 2011). In other words, the government effectively rehabilitates filial piety on the ground of reciprocity of relations rather than the authoritarianism of the *Three Bonds*.

By the end of 2005, 13 million rural families had signed such *Jiating Shanyang Xieyi* (SCPRC, 2006). This is a relatively low although by no means insignificant take-up given that the rural population is approximately 900 million with about 150 million over the age of 60 years. But this contract is not the only instrument enforcing the support of elderly parents by adult children and is simply indicative of the legal basis of family obligation in mainland China today. The major difference between the 1950 Marriage Law and the 1980 Law which replaced it is a strengthening of the family obligation clauses. The 1980 law, in addition to the statement that “children have the duty to support and to assist their parents” adds what is absent from the earlier Law, namely that if children fail to perform this duty, then “parents who are unable to work or have difficulty in providing for themselves shall have the right to demand support payments from their children” (Article 21). The administrative support for compliance with this part of the Law is not only in the *Jiating Shanyang Xieyi* but to be found in local enforcement regimes.

The assertion of filiality in other forms at the level of government directives is evident in events during 2012 and 2013. In early August 2012 *Quanguo Laoling Ban* (China’s National Bureau of Senior Affairs) released the New 24 Filial Exemplars. Some points of these exemplars are included in a draft Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Seniors. The Communist Party Organization Department of a county in Huaihua, Hunan indicated that applicants who are found to be not providing sufficient care for their parents will be ineligible for party membership (Zhuang, 2012, p. A6). The party secretary of the Qufu (the hometown of Confucius) municipal government is reported to have said that officials who did not show due filial piety would not be promoted (*South China Morning Post*, 2012, p. A11). From the end of April 2013 the local government in Qufu requires all citizens to pay their parents a monthly allowance and to take them for a haircut at least once a month, and a thorough health check at least once a year (*South China Morning Post*, 2013, p. A12). Filial piety, as a form of cultural meaning, is highly codified and sustained by institutional sanctions which have a significant effect on how individual actions are interpreted by others, and that limit the range of courses of action available to persons (Abramson, 2012, p. 173).

On-line responses to the New 24 Filial Exemplars both indicate support from parents and adult children for the idea of filiality and also an unwillingness or inability to sacrifice their own interests in order to look after aged parents (CDnews, 2012; CE, 2012). It was reported that people thought that it was not feasible, in supporting aged parents, for adult children to give up their jobs—or their spare time or leisure—to do so, but considered that appropriate support of aged parents could come in the form of money contributions to hire a helper.

The emotional commitment of adult children today is more likely to be placed with their conjugal family rather than with their parents. This is the opposite of traditional expectations in which parent-son relationships are central to family life and superior to other family relations, including conjugal ties (Freedman, 1966; Yang, 1968). The shift in primary emotional responsibility of adult children from their parents to their conjugal family should not be understood, however, to mean that adult children feel that they have no responsibility to their parents' wellbeing, including their emotional wellbeing. Adult children, as Vaisey (2008, 2010) says in a different context, seem to pursue the strategies for which they are best equipped; and, in general terms, can "clearly make choices rather than following pre-ordained cultural scripts" (Abramson, 2012, p. 160).

To conclude this part of the discussion: It is possible to show that family obligation, particularly in terms of material support for the elderly, will not atrophy as the proponents of the individualization argument suppose. Indeed, family obligation will continue to play an important role in Chinese society in the foreseeable future. This is not to say that past structures or patterns of family obligation and filial piety remain unchanged. They do not. The issue, however, is not whether family obligation will disappear or persist, but to consider how the conventions and practices associated with family obligation shall continue to change. The question is not whether adult children will or will not sacrifice themselves for their parents but rather what social imperatives are responsible for emergent patterns of parent-adult child interactions and what form of support and on what basis adult children feel obliged to provide to their elderly parents.

ABSENCE OF SOCIAL WELFARE SYSTEM AND THE PERSISTENCE OF INTERDEPENDENT RELATIONS

A millennially-held tradition in China is that the care of the elderly is the responsibility of family members, never the government or the wider society. China has never had a comprehensive welfare infrastructure and a system of state provision for elderly care is absent in mainland China today. This situation is likely to persist. As one researcher notes: "neither the Communist Revolution nor the post-1978 reforms represent any significant break" from this tradition (Ikels, 1993, p. 307). In 2000 elderly care homes managed by the state and collective units provided beds for only 0.8% of their target population (Wong, 2008, p. 90). Wong also reports that at the end of 2011 state-run old age homes numbered 2,700 whereas NGO run homes exceeded 36,000 (Wong, 2008, p. 90). In western societies, in which care for the elderly is widely recognized as a state responsibility, there is an ethos of independence from rather than deference toward elders which the elderly themselves share, which includes their taking pride in their independence from adult children (Finch, 1989; Hajnal, 1982, pp. 449–494; MacFarlane, 1986). In China, on the other hand, an elderly parent's source of pride is in a

demonstration of their reliance and therefore their dependence on the care provided by their adult children.

Only the childless elderly are eligible for state-provided “five guarantees” benefits, which cover the basic livelihood needs of food, housing, clothing, and health care as well as burial costs; which are provided at the lowest subsistence level (Thogersen & Ni, 2008, p. 13). Most rural elderly receive neither pensions nor health benefits, and so are forced to rely on their adult children for financial support when they lose their ability to earn an income. Though many urban aged persons receive a modest pension there are no built-in guarantees against inflation and many suffer pension reductions if their prior work-places perform poorly or close-down (Ikels, 1993, p. 312). It is reported that “just under a quarter of the mainland’s elderly residents survive on pensions, while more than 40 per cent seemingly rely on family members” (Yan, 2012, p. A7). Health care has become an issue for many elderly since their medical costs are only partially covered due to work place reforms as a result of withdrawal or reduction of state subsidies since 1990s (Ikels, 1993, p. 312). Moreover, both urban and rural elderly people are left with no option but to rely on their family for care when they become physically dependent (Liang & Gu, 1989; Thogersen & Ni, 2008, p. 31; Whyte, 2005). An online survey conducted in early October 2012 found that “about 90 percent of the public was seriously concerned about their quality of life in old age” (Yan, 2012, p. A7).

According to the sixth national census of China’s population in 2010, there were 178 million people over 60 years of age, constituting about 13.3 per cent of the total population. It is estimated that by 2050 the aged population will increase to 430 million, constituting more than 30 percent of total (Yan, 2012, p. A7). Not only is China aging at an unprecedented rate but care for the elderly is increasingly becoming an intractable social problem. When the population lived in settled communities and there was an absence of significant geographic mobility then the physical presence and co-location of adult children meant that the needs of aging parents were likely to be met. At the present time in China there are increasing numbers of workers who leave their birth-place and the vicinity of their parents’ location in order to seek employment in distant cities. Additionally, the massive reduction in Chinese fertility rates means that there are fewer numbers available to support a growing aged population.

Rather than accepting the responsibility of the welfare for its elderly citizens the Chinese government has persistently reinforced the liability of family members for aged care through propaganda and constitutional measures. The 1996 Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Seniors, which remains in force today, states: “aged care primarily relies on the family, family members are responsible for the care and welfare of the elderly” (LPRIS, 1996, Article 10); it goes on to assert: “The care-giver has an obligation to provide economic support, life care and moral comfort, and attend to the elderly’s special need. The term ‘care-giver’ refers to a daughter or son of the elderly, and those others who are

legally obliged to provide for their care” (LPRIS, 1996, Article 11). In the absence of state-provided welfare the aged have no option but to rely on their adult children for the satisfaction of their needs.

The structure of Chinese families continues to be one of mutual dependence rather than independence. Economically, socially and emotionally Chinese family relationships tend to be close and inwardly directed. It is not unusual for Chinese adults to receive financial support from their parents. Such support takes various forms, including meals at parents’ home, financial contribution to a mortgage or purchase of a house for marriage, paying for a marriage, tuition fees and educational expenses for a grandchild, and so on. Whereas the ethos of western families is to encourage adult children to live independently from their parents and to take pride in financial and emotional independence, a Chinese adult is more likely to be encouraged to receive parental financial assistance and encouraged to seek close emotional support from their parents. Additionally, adult children in China typically rely on their parents’ provision of domestic chores and child care. Parents continue to provide advice to their children even after they attain adulthood, and continue to provide assistance “through the mobilization of personal contacts to help solve particular life problems” (Whyte, 2005, p. 19). In terms of love and marriage, both rural and urban young people are increasingly free to independently find a spouse even though their parents’ advice and preference would be taken seriously and the family’s interests would feature in making a decision concerning the choice of a husband or wife and arrangement for marriage (Hansen & Pang, 2008, pp. 82–84; Unger, 1993, p. 37). In these and connected relationships there is a continuing basis for the sense of obligation to care for and support elderly parents experienced by adult children in mainland China.

Parents and their grown children are embedded in a wide variety of mutual exchanges and frequent interactions summarized as “*wangluo jiating*” (networked families) (Whyte, 2005, p. 18; Unger, 1993, p. 42). Unger (1993, p. 40) notes that “even those parents who live apart from their married children still tend to maintain very close mutual contact, more so than would be the norm in most Western societies”. In this structure of continuing interdependence aging parents form a clear and forceful expectation that their own needs will be satisfied by their adult children.

SOCIAL MECHANISMS

The dramatic changes in social structure since 1949 in mainland China have freed families from the authoritarian filiality of the *Three Bonds*, but at the same time they facilitate Chinese family relationships of continuing interdependence, which operate in terms of an informal “intergenerational contract” (Ikels, 1993). This means that parents form expectations that the deprivations they experienced

in supporting their children from infancy and continuing through adulthood will be returned in kind by their adult children when they are in need through old age. These expectations are not only for material support but also for expressions of gratitude and emotional commitment. This is a form of reciprocal family obligation which “encompasses emotionally and spiritually attending to one’s parents out of gratitude for their efforts in having raised one, and physical and financial care for one’s parents as they age and when they die for the same reason” (Yeh & Bedford, 2003, p. 216). It is not unusual for a Chinese mother to advise her child: “I gave you life and I raised you up. I sacrificed myself for you”. By the same token an adult child may remark: “No matter what I do I wouldn’t be able to repay what my parents did for me”. In this sense a person’s identity is interdependent and inclusive of family members (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). One experiences one’s self as a related- or interdependent self. As Stafford (1995) shows for children growing up in Taiwan there is in Chinese families more generally a structure of mutual interdependence in which children are encouraged to be devoted to and have a continuing sense of indebtedness to their parents. Chinese children experience a familial and social milieu in which the sense of obligation to return their parents’ love and “sacrifice” is so deeply imprinted that it becomes part of their mentality. In this way “a sense of obligation for all that parents had already done for one, as well as ties of affection, was expected to make the care of parent seem ‘natural’, an inescapable aspect of the parent-child bond” (Ikels, 1993, p. 308). The sense of “sacrifice” and “indebtedness” that comes to function as cultural meanings not only carries emotional weight but in becoming internalized serves a larger cultural script that has pervasive social influence (Ferree & Merrill, 2000). In this context it is not surprising that while adult children have more open and individualistic attitudes on a range of political, social and cultural issues than their parents, they share similar views concerning family obligation and filial support (Whyte, 2005, p. 20).

In recounting the interaction between fathers and sons in Catholic working-class Boston, Sennett and Cobb (1977, pp. 119–135) describe their relationship, which in some ways is similar to the relations within Chinese families indicated above, as a “sacrificial contract” or “sacrifice as a contract”. In the Bostonian case the father feels betrayed by his son when he does not receive respect, gratitude and love and loses continuing control over him. At the same time the son feels betrayed while the sacrificial contract was not of his making and “because his father has taken him on a ‘guilt trip’ . . . a way parents have of manipulating [their children], rather than really loving them” (Sennett & Cobb, 1977, p. 134). The difference between the Bostonian and the Chinese sacrificial contracts is that the Bostonian contract is based on support given to a dependent child who is expected to become independent at maturity. This maturational independence undermines the sacrificial contract. As Chinese parents continue to have an interdependent relationship with their adult children a sense of betrayal is less likely to be formed. But in addition to the continuing interdependence between parents and their

adult children there is another mechanism which tends to limit in China the sense of betrayal that issues from sacrificial contracts in Boston.

It is necessary to examine further the social mechanisms which maintain family obligation in China. Inherent in obligation is an expectation of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960; Hwang, 1987). This expectation, that in the long-run a parents' felt need to make some sacrifice for their children shall be repaid, is part of the normative mechanism that consolidates the veracity of obligation. The expectation that a future need shall be met by the other maintains the normative structure of reciprocity. Given the continuing absence of state provision of aged care in China an adult child is aware that their own old-age care will be secured from their own children. In these circumstances it is in their interest to not set a bad example in how they treat their aged parents. Within the relationships internal to the family, then, it is not contradictory that self-interest in a person's need to secure their future aged-care from their children will lead them to promote the moral virtues of filiality to those children, which can only be demonstrated by their own support of their aged parents. In this way the interactive effect of state regulation on the one hand and individual interests and expediency on the other articulate in the advancement of values and norms that draw upon the language and heritage of filiality which continues to operate in Chinese cultural areas.

In the circumstances described in the preceding discussion there is a continuing moral approval of filiality throughout mainland China. This shall continue to be supported through social approval or sanction in terms of face relations in which filial behavior shall enhance face and unfilial behavior lead to loss of face (Qi, 2011). Therefore, "even parents without resources or without the affection of their children were not entirely powerless. In a small village or a tightly knit community any child known to be unfilial risked public censure and jeopardized his other social relationships" (Ikels, 1993, p. 308). As indicated above, such social sanction is supported through legal and political means. The notion embedded in Chinese Buddhism, that one's actions have a cause and consequence, that there is an effect—including revenge—from *laotian* (heaven) or ghosts, tends to continue to provide an element of sanction against moral transgressions, not only in rural but also urban China.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Family obligation to provide support for the elderly has survived and continues to play an important role through political-constitutional, social and economic changes. Chinese elderly people have never had any inclination from a perspective of citizen's rights (Thogersen & Ni, 2008, p. 35) to demand support from the government. Neither do adult children have a perspective from which they can envisage a governmental role in or responsibility for their parents' old age care. Personal income tax is quite recent in China, introduced as late as 1980, where

“traditionally income tax was nonexistent” (Hsu, 2005, p. 111). Personal income tax revenue constituted less than 0.1 percent of total tax revenue in 1986, approximately 1.5 percent in 2005 and 2.5 percent in 2008 (Piketty & Qian, 2009). The basis of expectation in Western Europe of state provided aged-care comes from a long history of fiscal development that includes not only a liberal economy, social democracy and the welfare state but also two world wars through which universal military service led to post-war welfare reforms (Flora, 1986, pp. XII–XV), all of which are absent in Chinese history. The expectation of aged parents, that their adult children shall support them when the need arises, and the expectation of adult children that this obligation must be discharged, continues to shape the personal lives of the overwhelming majority of people in mainland China. What has changed, however, is the basis and grounds on which family obligation is performed, and the attitudes and emotions associated with family obligation.

The most publically obvious indicator of family structure is the residence pattern of family members. The traditional form of Chinese households is represented by co-residence in which more than two adult generations resided together. Increasingly, however, sons establish their own households on marriage so that families now typically occupy separate residences (Whyte, 2005, p. 16; Yan, 2009, pp. 57–84). In both rural and urban areas parents of adult children are more accepting of living arrangements in which their son and his family reside apart from them. Such residential patterns no longer threaten to attract the charge that non-cohabitation indicates a parents’ failure to raise filial sons or a son’s disgrace for behaving unfilially. Parents increasingly keep an open mind about the choice to live independently as it is easier “to maintain intergenerational harmony by reducing the children’s burdens to a minimum” (Thogersen & Ni, 2008, p. 29). In this way the “conciliatory” behaviour of parents toward their married children can be seen as part of a strategy in which obstacles are reduced for the aging parents to either co-habit with or live close by their adult children at a later time, when they are too frail to look after themselves (Yan, 2008, pp. 5–6). In this context, then, the growing trend among the elderly to live independent of their adult children need not imply a deterioration of the family support system (Yan, Chen & Yang, 2003, p. 163).

The evidence of anthropological and sociological studies indicates that a major development in Chinese family relationships is a shift in the focus of adult children from a strong son-parent alliance to a primary concern with their conjugal family, but this does not mean that a close emotional contact with their parents is not maintained. At the level of the cultural system it can be said that while the present state of family relations in China tends to contravene the authoritarianism of the *Three Bonds* these relations are arguably consistent with the reciprocity internal to aspects of the formal structure of the five cardinal ethical relations (Hwang, 2014; Tu, 1998) if not their content. It is necessary to add this qualification because in its original form filiality related exclusively to father-son consanguinity whereas today in mainland China daughters rather than sons have a central role in family

obligation, unthinkable in traditional society, as kinship ties between a married woman and the family of her birth were greatly attenuated and her dominant if not total family loyalty was with her husband's parents and never her own. Adult children regard it as their responsibility to support their parents; but this does not mean that in doing so they will sacrifice their own interests or support their parents unconditionally even against their spouse, as Confucian tradition requires. Adult children are prepared to provide support to their parents, but they are less likely to tolerate or allow their parents' behavior to jeopardize their conjugal relations (Thogersen & Ni, 2008, p. 21).

As a result of institutional reforms urban individuals have more autonomy to seek employment in other cities, and rural people have more opportunities to join the urban labour force (Quach & Anderson, 2008). Those adult children who leave home in rural areas will not be able to visit their parents regularly or perform duties of care in person. However, this does not entail that they have an excuse through their absence to evade family obligation. Such individuals typically provide financial assistance through remittances to cover the cost of housing aged parents, and their medical care or the hire of a helper. As Hansen and Pang (2008) indicate, those young people who leave home typically continue to discharge their obligations toward their parents. Though there are rapid changes in intergenerational relations, family concerns remain the most important collective force for both young and old (Hansen & Pang, 2008).

Women who continue to play an important role socio-economically have more influence in family affairs than in the past. Daughters are regarded as even better sources of support for old age than sons since daughters are not only able to contribute financially but more importantly to provide emotional support and practical physical care. Women's increased social power leads to a change of their focus in performing filial obligation. Instead of looking after parents-in-law, as in traditional expectations, contemporary daughters have "increased capacity to act as daughter caregivers for their own parents" and "more power to decline or refuse to provide support for their parents-in-law" (Xu, 2001, p. 312).

CONCLUSION

It has been shown in this paper that a number of factors tend to support familial obligation in China that have some morphological relationship with Confucian filial piety but operate on an entirely different basis and have a distinctive structure. The structural basis of family obligation in present-day China is the continuing dependence on family members for aged care in the absence of state-provision of welfare. This structural basis of family obligation is sustained by the continuing inter-generational interdependency of family members through which adult children are supported by their parents in various ways including through execution of domestic responsibilities.

Changes in the present structure of family obligation include the increasingly important, indeed predominant role of daughters over sons, which is a reversal of the traditional form. There is a tendency toward and more acceptance of separate residence of adult children and their parents. The adult children's focus has increasingly moved from the home of their parents to their conjugal family. There is continuing re-interpretation of filial piety and renegotiation in the practice of family obligation. Underlying all of these developments is the individualization of Chinese society in which self-interest paradoxically drives behavior for both the satisfaction of the present needs of elderly parents and the future needs of their adult children. Those who assume that the individualization of Chinese society undermines family obligation neglect the importance of the shaping influence of state policy and the self-interested actions of adult children in satisfaction of their own future needs.

Similar trends of change in filial piety presented in current reviews of previous sociological studies conducted in mainland China can also be found in the results of empirical research conducted by indigenous psychologists in other Chinese societies which have not had the experience of an anti-Confucian Cultural Revolution, such as in Taiwan (Yeh, 1997) and Hong Kong (Yang, 1988), or communities in which Chinese people have accommodated to modern Western culture such as America (Yu, 1983) and New Zealand (Liu et al., 2000).

The tendency to understand social behaviour only in terms of norms and ideational forms possibly arises from a confusion of the well-springs of action on the one hand with justifications for such action on the other. This is not to say that norms have no place in understanding behaviour, including behaviour in families. The present discussion of family obligation in mainland China acknowledges an historical Confucian background in the principle of filial piety, understood as a practice of generational hierarchical obligation of a patrilineal form. But Confucianism, including its codification by literati and scholars, is not the basis of the practices or concerns of Chinese people, who drew on many cultural traditions and in their behaviour operate in a context much broader than any given normative framework which is itself subject to change as their political and material circumstances change. This is mentioned here because it is necessary to indicate that the culture-system does not develop merely through an internal dynamic and that the cultural forms of family obligation must be considered in respect to its development in terms of the social and material contexts in which it operates and the nature of the motivations and imagery of the people that practice care of elderly parents.

The focus of the present paper on family obligation in mainland China has shown that the context and basis of present practices include the politico-legal framework of the 1980 Family Law and associated legal and administrative apparatuses, including the absence of state-provision of welfare entitlements, as well as the social developments associated with fundamental changes since 1949 in gender relations associated with female empowerment and, since 1978,

economic liberalization and marketization. The relevance of inheritance of the imagery of Confucian filial piety is also important in consideration of family obligation. The present paper has shown, against the individualization argument, that family obligation remains a core element of the mainland culture-system. The development of that system has been shown to be not the result of internal elaboration but interaction with the politico-legal and social context in which it operates. Hwang's (2012) analysis of the deep structures of Confucianism elegantly indicates the articulation of conceptions of destiny, ethics and self-cultivation. Filial piety is not only a single element of this conceptual reticular but also a single aspect of ethical relations within the family. The relationship between adult children and their parents in mainland China today is morphologically similar to the obligatory elements of Confucian filial piety, from which it draws its imagery. Its basis in the laws and administrative apparatus of the communist party-state and the gender relations of intensive daughter involvement and significant atrophy of son's primary contributions are un-Confucian and the expedient and self-interested rationale of obligation to aged parents, while not necessarily external to the practice if not the letter of Confucian ethical relations, operates as a non-ethical value in the practice of family obligation.

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