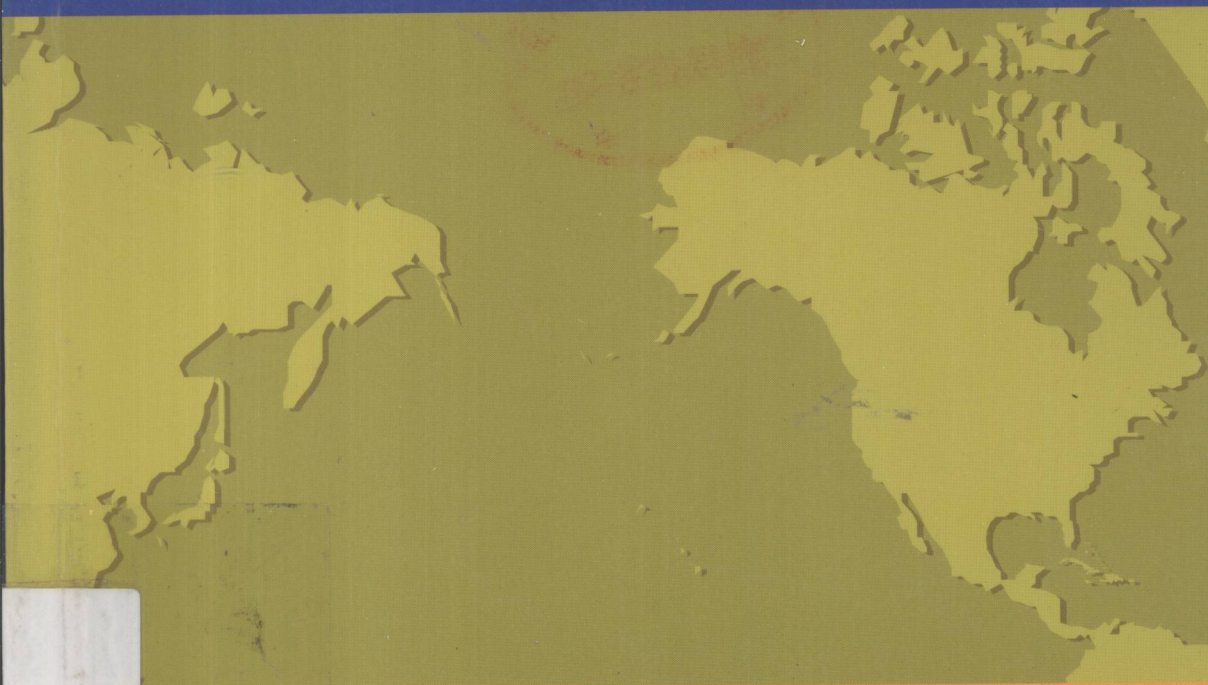


A close-up, sepia-toned photograph of an elderly person's face, focusing on the eyes and nose. The person has a gentle expression.

Elderly Chinese in Pacific Rim Countries

Social Support and Integration



Edited by Iris Chi, Neena L. Chappell and James Lubben

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Preface

This book considers the experience of Chinese ageing within different social contexts with contrasting social beliefs and values. A particular focus of this study is on social support and social integration. Social support is one of the most important factors in determining an older person's quality of life. Social support networks have gained increased respect from a diverse group of scholars inspired by a growing body of social science and epidemiological evidence suggesting that social support networks effect a broad spectrum of psychosocial and health phenomena (House, Landis and Umberson 1988; Stuck et al. 1999).

In a Chinese context, social support is usually described as *guanxi*, which refers to social ties or connections among people that result in mutual benefit. *Guanxi* also includes instrumental resources, generally based upon self-interest, and interpersonal resources that are considered both natural and necessary for one's emotional life (Yang 1994). *Guanxi* is egocentric extending to others based on a hierarchical structure. The shorter the distance to the centre, the stronger the *guanxi* connection. Usually, kinship *guanxi* is the strongest *guanxi* for Chinese individuals, followed by extended families and consanguineous relations, neighbours, friends, co-workers, and eventually some weak connections such as those between service providers and customers. *Guanxi* regulates expected behaviours of people belonging to a particular network. Chances of social interaction, level of self-disclosure, and willingness to seek

or provide help are some of the factors that contribute to the strength of *guanxi*. *Guanxi* also provides individuals with a sense of belonging and security. Moreover, it provides a framework of reference that assists in an individual's construction of social identity through a process of social comparison and self-evaluation. Accordingly, social support and social integration are central to understanding ageing within a Chinese context.

Conversely, there has been a tendency for policy-makers and health professionals in many well-developed nations to propose highly technical medical approaches for ageing societies while disregarding less technical social interventions. Unfortunately, these highly technical medical approaches often are contrary to the preferences of elderly persons in part because their side-effects lower the quality of life. Furthermore, such medical models tend to be very expensive and so they cannot be considered a viable option for less developed nations. Generally, the highly technical approaches have not been able to respond to the needs of ageing populations, but instead have generally created a set of new problems. Thus, a more balanced approach is preferred. More specifically, all ageing societies will need to consider medical approaches when necessary, but they must also safeguard the social support and cultivate the social integration of their older citizens.

Unfortunately, social support and social integration are factors that have often been neglected by practitioners and policy-makers, even though such factors have increasingly been shown to be the essence of healthy ageing. Accordingly, a healthy ageing society must treat its older citizens as normal persons with an array of particular needs just as other citizens have other particular needs. In order to facilitate normal and healthy ageing, a society must not marginalize its senior citizens, but must fully integrate them into society and guarantee that they have adequate social support. Elderly Chinese persons living in many different parts of the world also prefer to be treated as normal citizens of the society.

How to ensure that elderly Chinese persons continue to receive social support needed in their old age and how to better integrate elderly citizens into society are meaningful research topics for scholars, policy-makers and practitioners in the many countries with ageing Chinese populations. Accordingly, the focus of this book is on social support and social integration for elderly Chinese in ageing societies in many different parts of the world.

The overall population of China is still relatively young, and its aged population is not evenly distributed. Most of the major cities in China can already be classified as ageing societies whereas the population in rural areas contains relatively few older persons. Nonetheless, in terms of absolute numbers, China has one of the largest numbers of older persons in the world. Although Hong Kong and Taiwan share the same ethnic and cultural background with mainland China, there are substantial differences among

these communities as a result of social and economic development. Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997 and made a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. Before its reunion with China, Hong Kong had been a British colony for over 150 years. The social and economic development in Hong Kong surpassed that of many developed countries in the world. In order to have a smooth transition, the 'one country, two systems' policy was adopted by recognizing the cultural differences between Hong Kong and mainland China due to the long separation and ruling under different political and economic ideologies. Taiwan's current situation is quite similar to that of Hong Kong. Taiwan was a colony of Japan for many years and subsequently benefited from many years of foreign investment. Within a relatively short period of time, it has become one of the more economically developed places in the world.

Historically, Chinese people have migrated to other countries seeking better living conditions. The Chinese diaspora, although never halted, has experienced varied motivations and patterns over the years. There are four overlapping types of migration (Wilson 2000). One is the conventional lifestyle Chinese migrants who choose to move in order to improve their quality of life. This group largely moves to more prosperous Western societies. Secondly, there are the economic migrants who grow old after a lifetime working in a foreign country. Thirdly, there is the small group of older Chinese whose increasing frailty requires that they move to be near their far-away children. Fourthly, there are the refugees fleeing war, famine or human rights abuse.

For various reasons, Chinese populations, regardless of their final destination, have tended to maintain their distinctive identity over many years or even centuries. Chinese migrants in many parts of the world remain in enclaves separate from the communities into which they have migrated. Both internal and external social forces have enforced this tendency. A certain amount of economic success and strong sanctions against marrying outside the community were deemed important attributes for long-term community survival and so the Chinese immigrants often enforced *de facto* segregation policies upon themselves in whatever community they settled. In other cases, the forces were external to the Chinese immigrant community, and Chinese were restricted access to the wider community. Within most destination countries, including pluralistic and heterogeneous nations like Australia, United States and Canada, large enclaves of Chinese populations can be found. As a consequence, elderly Chinese persons living in a Western country confront different social beliefs and values that in turn may affect their later life experiences. The inability to integrate into the mainstream signifies an abnormal ageing experience for many elderly Chinese migrants.

There appear to be different views on ageing emerging between developed nations and less developed ones. In the developed nations, the 'burdens' of

pensions, care-giving burdens and intergenerational equity dominate much of the discussion on the challenges of an ageing world. In contrast, in the developing world, there is very little such debate, but rather a basic assumption that older people will work unless pension schemes become viable, and that family members will provide elderly care when it becomes necessary.

At the extremes, the choice appears to be between whether the family or the individual is the central unit of society. In many Western societies, individualism is the dominant ideology. Families are often perceived to be an economic unit involving a collection of related individuals but still primarily seeking individual fulfilment. In contrast, Chinese culture assumes that the family or lineage is the basic unit of society. The individual is a relatively weak and undeveloped concept in Chinese societies.

Older Chinese persons living in Western societies are caught between these two extremes. Traditionally, family care is supported by very strong social and religious sanctions in Chinese communities. Confucianism contains norms of filial piety requiring children to honour their parents and look after them. Therefore, how Chinese people think and feel about their families has far-reaching consequences for their older lives. Such traditions are officially upheld in mainland China and Singapore where the governments have stipulated very clear policy or legal statements to regulate the practice of filial piety.

Nonetheless, norms appear to be rapidly changing in some Chinese communities. For example, in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Chinatowns in North America, there are increasing exceptions to these norms, which may or may not be usable by potential carers. For instance, having children and having a full-time job could be a socially acceptable excuse for not assuming a heavy parental caretaking role. Also, it is quite acceptable to employ others to care for ageing parents. Nevertheless, Chinese traditions do exist in different Chinese communities in the world and have their impacts on the lives of older persons living in these communities. Nevertheless, each society also has its own interpretations of these traditions.

Structural changes appear to be affecting caring relationships in later life worldwide (Kendig, Hashimoto and Coppard 1991). It is also becoming clear that the interpretations of traditions and expectations of filial piety are different among generations within the same Chinese society. Whether globalization, post-modernization or other social forces will change the nature of social support in ageing societies, and how these social phenomena may influence long-standing Chinese traditions are interesting and important research questions for cross-cultural gerontology studies. Further, despite differing cultural traditions, all societies are facing rapidly ageing populations that will challenge the way in which care is delivered and supported. It is easier to be filial when families are large and life expectancy short. It is a bigger challenge

when offspring are few and one's parents require long-term care that may persist for many years. Also, differences between Confucian-based societies and those of the West may be less than sometimes thought. For example, even though Western societies lack norms of filial piety and formalized policies specifying an adult child's responsibility for ageing parents, there is strong evidence that children in Western societies remain the primary caretakers of ageing parents (Stone, Cafferata and Sangl 1987). Accordingly, a comparative analysis of how various cultures will adjust to rapid demographic changes in society is an additional set of interesting questions for cross-cultural and cross-national gerontologists.

The strength of a cross-cultural approach is that it contrasts dominant ideologies in different cultures, makes power relations involved more visible and so allows us to question what appears to be 'natural' in any society. Comparison among cultures also highlights the diversity within cultures by showing that ideologies that are dominant in one culture are present in others, but very often in muted form, or in ways that are modified to suit the different cultural and environmental constraints. The presence of older adults from different cultures is a challenge to mainstream gerontology. Firstly, migration is a process that emphasizes the importance of a life course perspective. Secondly, the idea of old age as ethnically homogeneous and culture-free is challenged by the presence of minority ethnic groups among the aged population. It is clear that diversity in later life cannot be ignored, and culture or ethnicity needs to be understood as one of the factors that shapes the lives of older adults (Wilson 2000). The collection of scholarship in this edited book demonstrates the rich potential for increased understanding of the ageing phenomenon that is attainable through cross-cultural and cross-national study.

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1

Silent Pain: Social Isolation of the Elderly Chinese in Canada

Marian E. MacKinnon, Lan Gien and Douglas Durst

'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.'

This study explores the perceptions of elderly Chinese people in a small urban area in one of the Atlantic provinces in Canada, who, for reasons such as health or finance, find themselves living with and dependent on their adult children. It explores their perceptions of how the care-receiving situation affects their health and adjustment to Canada.

Current knowledge about the effects of socio-economic factors, the need to feel useful and productive, to have a sense of control over one's life, and the positive effect of social connections and other determinants of health (Premier's Council on Health Strategy 1994), indicate the significance of knowing what the stresses and strains of being a care-receiver might be. Given this knowledge, it seems important to discover how the sometimes sudden transition from living an independent life to becoming a care-receiver might affect the health outcomes for the elderly. For Canadian-born elderly, the transition from independent living often follows an unexpected and sudden illness. For others, such as the respondents in this study, becoming a care-receiver seems to follow immigration and all the threats to security and independence that it brings.

■ Literature Review

Respect for the elderly has been a guiding principle in the Chinese culture for several thousand years (Wu 1975). Because of the prominent and venerated position of the elderly in the culture, the Chinese are said to look forward to old age as a time when they can sit back and enjoy the fruits of their labour while family members seek their advice on important issues and decisions (Tsai and Lopez 1997; Cheung 1989).

Traditional behaviour and social interaction in China have been strongly influenced by Confucianism. Filial piety, a central concept of Confucianism, was defined as 'loyalty, respect, and devotion to parents' (Wu 1975, p. 273) and was considered the 'root of all virtue' (Lang 1968, p. 24). Considerable significance was also placed on 'reciprocity and loyalty' (Lee 1986). Yang (1957) described reciprocity and loyalty as the foundation of the closely knit Chinese family structure, and indicated that the venerated position held by the elderly Chinese was based not only on love and respect, but also on the elderly having some control of power resources.

Arising out of this long tradition of filial piety is the expectation that parents in their old age live with their adult children. However, the results of recent research suggest that because of different experiences and changing values, support from Asian families for their elders may be changing (Chan 1983; Tsai and Lopez 1997).

When one considers that elderly Chinese immigrants come to Canada often having left behind their families, friends, neighbours and colleagues, as well as their homeland, properties and lifework, it is reasonable to assume that loneliness and isolation may be a problem for them (Lee 1994). Rathbone-McCuan and Hashimi (1982) identified four causes of isolation: (1) physical isolators, such as language barriers and transport; (2) psychological isolators, such as uncertainty, timidity and depression; (3) lack of financial ability; and (4) change in roles of family work. With the move to a foreign country, many elderly Chinese suffer the loss of their means of livelihood and hence their economic independence. With the loss of friends, neighbours and colleagues as well as the changes in values and customs, their world may become limited to their immediate family. The stress of the move as well as the burden of being totally dependent on their families may have physical and psychological health outcomes for the elderly Chinese.

Equity theory may explain some of the difficulties that occur in such a situation. A basic proposition of equity theory is that people who find themselves participating in unequal relationships become distressed (Walster, Walster and Bercheid 1978). They experience greater stress as inequality in the relationship increases. Tilden and Gaylen (1987) found that the inability to reciprocate had a greater impact on the morale of an elderly individual