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# **Towards a Chinese Conception of Social Support**

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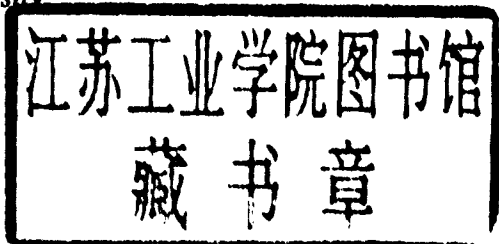
***A Study on the Social Support  
Networks of Chinese Working  
Mothers in Beijing***

**Angelina W.K. Yuen-Tsang**

# Towards a Chinese Conception of Social Support

A Study on the Social Support Networks of Chinese Working Mothers in Beijing

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**Ashgate**

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# Preface

This study is an attempt to study the patterns of social support among Chinese working mothers in a Beijing neighbourhood with the aim of developing a beginning understanding of the Chinese conception of social support. The grounded theory method was used to guide the research process since the researcher is more interested in the discovery and generation of a theory on social support in the Chinese context rather than on the verification of theories already developed in the West.

The data indicated that there were great variations in the support relationships experienced by the 27 Chinese working mothers interviewed. The forms of support received and their intensity vary throughout the life course of the Chinese working mothers. While the majority of the interviewees had adopted a "family-network support strategy" which stressed heavily on social support from close kin, some had adopted the "self-support strategy," and some others had developed a "diversified support strategy."

The support networks of the Chinese working mothers are conceptualized by the author as the "Chinese communal support networks". Salient features of the "Chinese communal support networks" include their communal nature; their holistic provision of network resources; the rigid boundary between "insiders" and "outsiders; the "absorption" of non-kin members into the networks; reciprocity throughout the life course; distinctive gender divisions among network members; and the emphasis on harmony as the integrative thread for the networks.

However, the "Chinese communal support networks" are facing increasing challenges from the external environment. The economic recession of state-owned enterprises; escalating inflation; diminishing role of the *danweis* in welfare provisions; rising expectations and aspirations; growing inequalities; as well as shifting value orientations are interplaying to undermine the support capacities of

the "Chinese communal support networks." In order that the "Chinese communal support networks" could continue to provide needed support for their members, it is proposed that social work interventions have to be developed at the network, the neighbourhood, and the policy levels to strengthen the existing networks and to fill the gaps in which the networks have found to be inadequate. The introduction of formal social work interventions to supplement the informal networks is therefore envisaged to be a necessary and inevitable trend of development in the People's Republic of China.

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# 1 Introduction

## **Purpose and focus of the study**

Since the 1970s, there has been a dramatic increase of interest in the concept of social support. This interest is reflected in an escalation of research and academic discussions on the topic. The popularity of the topic can be partly attributed to the fact that growing evidence suggests that social support can have preventive, therapeutic, and buffering effects for individuals, families and groups under stress. Researchers across fields have emphasized increasingly that social support is critical to handling life stress, crisis, transition, mental and physical illness, unemployment, job stress, bereavement and a host of other critical life events (e.g. Caplan, 1974, 1976; Cassell, 1974; Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Dean & Lin, 1977; Erickson, 1975; Gore, 1978; Hammer, 1981; Hirsch, 1980; House, 1981; Ladewig et al., 1990; LaRocca, House & French 1980). The growing recognition of the rich potentials of informal and natural helping networks in providing social support and in enhancing individual and group functioning has resulted in numerous attempts to apply social support and network concepts in social work intervention. Experimental projects which employed social support and social network concepts in working with persons going through life crises and life transitions have yielded positive results (e.g. Miller & Myers-Walls, 1983; Bloom et al., 1982; Jacobson & Margolin 1979). Informal social support have also been extensively employed to supplement formal welfare provisions in numerous community-based social service projects (Genovese, 1984; Froland et al., 1981; Levy, 1976; Litwak, 1985, 1990; Olsen, 1986; Shanas, 1979). Proponents of the concept of "community care," for example, emphasize on the inter-dependence and partnership of formal and informal sources of social support and advocate for the purposeful integration of informal sources of support with formal support in social work intervention.

While social support and social network concepts are rapidly gaining recognition and popularity in the West, these concepts are still largely unexplored in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Though it is commonly understood that informal social support is playing an important role in enhancing the well being of individuals and families in Chinese societies, little has been done to date to study the patterns of social support that are currently existing in Chinese neighbourhoods and the meanings attached to the concept of support. In the past, studies have been carried out to explore the kinship structures of Chinese families and the relationships among their members rather than on the social support of the Chinese per se (e.g. Chao, 1983; Baker, 1979; Fei 1939, 1947, 1992; Hsu, 1967). The few recent studies that have been carried out in the PRC on social support have either relied heavily on Western social network measurement scales (Ruan, Zhou, Blau & Walder, 1990), or are highly quantitative in nature (Pan, 1992; Sun & Cong, 1993; Xia, 1988) and therefore have not seriously examined the deeper cultural meanings of social support to the Chinese. Therefore, social support remains a largely under-researched area in the PRC which definitely warrants more intensive research efforts. It is because of the realization of this research gap that I have endeavoured to carry out an exploratory study with the aim that it will deepen our understanding on the support patterns of the Chinese working mothers in the PRC and will generate relevant theories on the Chinese conception of social support. Moreover, it is also hoped that the study will provide useful insights which will guide the future development of social work practice and social work intervention in the PRC.

I have chosen Chinese working mothers as the target group for my study because Chinese working mothers occupy multiple roles both in their families and in society, and that they need multiple sources of social support to help them to withstand the stress and strains arising from the multiple demands imposed on them. Moreover, because of the numerous roles which the Chinese working mothers normally occupy, a study on their social support patterns will yield stimulating insights on not only the support behaviours and support concepts of the working mothers themselves, but will also illuminate us on the support concepts and support behaviours of those significant others whom they have constant interactions with, including their family members, workmates, and neighbours.

The grounded theory first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) has been selected as the research methodology for the present study. Grounded theory is "a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p.273). The grounded theory method emphasizes on generating and developing theory from data, rather than on the verification of established theories. This methodology is especially suitable for the present study given the lack of research and established theories on the Chinese conception of social support and on the support behaviours of the Chinese. The research was conducted in a residential neighbourhood in Beijing between

September 1993 and September 1994 and a total of 27 Chinese working mothers who resided in the neighbourhood were interviewed. Different qualitative research methods including in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation were used in the process. The data collected through the research process were used as the basis for generating a grounded theory on the Chinese conception of social support through the eyes of the Chinese working mothers interviewed.

The objectives of the present study are:

- 1 To understand the existing patterns of social support of Chinese working mothers in a Beijing neighbourhood and to appreciate the dynamics involved in the evolvement of such relationships.
- 2 To develop a beginning understanding of the Chinese conception of social support through the use of the grounded theory method.
- 3 To explore the implications of the Chinese conception of social support on social work practice and social work intervention in the PRC.

## **Organization of the book**

This book will be divided into eight Chapters. Chapter 1 presents an introduction and overview of the purpose and focus of the study and Chapter 2 is devoted to a review of literature on social support. In Chapter 2, it is observed that most of the existing literature on social support, especially the American literature, tends to employ a egocentric orientation and tends to emphasize on the support relationships between individuals. The majority of the empirical studies on social support have adopted quantitative research methodologies which emphasize on the measurement of perceived or actual support effects during critical life crises or transitions. While these approaches to studying social support may have their definite merits, I will argue that the present study on the Chinese conception of social support warrants an alternative research paradigm which emphasizes on the generation of grounded theory from empirical data, and on the deep understanding of the impact of social, historical, and cultural forces on the support process.

Chapter 3 presents the research methodology used in the present study. The rationale for choosing the qualitative approach and the grounded theory method will be discussed. The entire research process, including the preparatory and exploration phase; the in-depth interview phase; and the data analysis and theory generation phase will be presented in detail.

Chapter 4 to Chapter 6 are devoted to the presentation and analysis of the data collected in this research. In Chapter 4, the patterns of support of the Chinese working mothers through their life course will be presented. Through analysis of the data, I have identified six critical life events in the life course of the Chinese working mothers interviewed. These six events include: entry into the labour force; courtship; marriage and family formation; child bearing and parenting; caring for

the elderly; and retirement. I will describe the support relationships of the Chinese working mothers in each of these six life events and will attempt to analyze the possible reasons and forces which had shaped the development of such patterns of relationships.

In Chapter 5, I will present and analyze the different support relationships of the Chinese working mothers. I have identified at least seven types of support relationships through analysis of the data collected. These support relationships include: spousal support; intergenerational support; kin support; peer support; neighbourhood support; *danwei* (work organization) support; and paid support. I will describe the types of support rendered by the different support relationships and will also analyze the reasons that had contributed to the evolvement of the support relationships.

In Chapter 6, I will present the three major support strategies of Chinese working mothers which I have identified from the data. The first strategy, which was most commonly adopted by the Chinese working mothers interviewed, was the "family-network support strategy" in which the working mothers drew heavily from the support of their close kin. In the other extreme were those working mothers who did not, or could not, draw support from their kin, neighbours, and friends, and therefore had to adopt a "self-support strategy." The third strategy was the "diversified support strategy" which was adopted by those who had numerous opportunities to develop new relationships and who had the privilege to develop multiple sources of support. I will also analyze the reasons and social forces giving rise to the three support strategies, and will discuss on the potentials and limitations of the three different support strategies in the contemporary Chinese context.

Chapter 7 is the core chapter of the thesis in which I will attempt to generate a Chinese conception of social support from the data collected. Firstly, I will try to derive a Chinese conception of social support seen through the eyes of the Chinese working mothers through the use of "vivo codes" (Glaser, 1978, p.70; Strauss, 1987, p.33), or the words used by the interviewees themselves. I will then conceptualize on the "Chinese communal support network" which I have discovered through analysis of my research data. I will argue that the social support networks of the Chinese are basically communal in nature and I will also elaborate on the salient features of the "Chinese communal support network."

In Chapter 8, the final Chapter, I will discuss the impact of social and economic changes on the "Chinese communal support networks" and its implications on social work intervention. I will first present a picture of the changing social and economic scenario and will discuss on the possible impact of such changes on the social support networks of the Chinese. Subsequently, I will discuss the implications of such changes on social work intervention and will propose interventions at the network, the neighbourhood, and the policy levels so as to strengthen the existing Chinese support networks and to fill the gaps in which the networks have found to be inadequate.

## **2 Theoretical conceptualization of social support: a literature review**

As indicated in the preceding Chapter, there has been a dramatic increase of interest on the concept of social support since the 1970s and this interest has triggered off a flood of research and publications on the topic. However, most of the research conducted on social support were carried out in the West and were mostly reliant upon conceptual frameworks and measurement instruments developed in the West. Little has been done to date to research on issues relating to social support in Chinese societies and therefore our understanding of social support in the Chinese context remains limited. It is precisely because of the realization of this significant gap in knowledge that I have become interested and motivated to embark on the present study.

Although the concepts developed in the West on social support may not be directly applicable to the Chinese context, it does not mean that we could not learn from the richness of accumulated knowledge developed by our predecessors on the topic. Therefore, it is necessary that we must first acquire a good understanding of social support concepts developed in the West before we endeavour to explore our understanding on social support in the Chinese context. Moreover, a good grasp of the knowledge already accumulated on social support may increase our theoretical sensitivity towards the topic and may facilitate the process of theory triangulation and theory generation.

In the following Chapters, I will provide an overview of the theoretical conceptualizations on social support based on a review of primarily Western literature. But instead of giving a comprehensive review of all the literature which has been written on social support, I will only selectively report on those literature which are relevant to the issues and debates to be deliberated in this study.

## Conceptualizing social support

According to the Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, support is defined as "an act or process that promotes, assists, helps, or holds up something else". Thus social support denotes "forces or factors in the social environment that facilitate the survival of human beings" (Lin et al., 1986, p.17). While this definition is adequate for general discussion, it is neither adequate nor specific enough for academic discourse and for providing guidelines for serious research work.

The concept of social support is by no means a simple one. In Western academic literature, social support has been viewed from diverse perspectives involving multifarious relationships, activities, and evaluations. The richness and complexity of the idea precludes a simple conceptual definition and has hampered systematic research on social support. To date, a consistent and universally accepted conceptualization of social support and its constructs is still lacking, though many attempts have been made to do so, with differing attention to its emotional, communicative, material, and relational aspects. In fact, a number of writers have remarked on the confusion and lack of consensus regarding a theoretical definition of social support (Carveth and Gottlieb, 1979; Thoits, 1982; Vaux et al., 1986a). But there seems to be no simple solution to the issue as a result of the complexity of the idea.

Many conceptualizations of social support have been delineated, often from different perspectives and with different emphasis. The following are the major approaches that have been adopted to define and conceptualize social support.

### *The functional approach*

The most common conceptualization focuses on the functional content of supportive behaviours. Supportive behaviours take many forms and they perform numerous functions in helping the recipients to meet their needs and to alleviate their problems. With this conception, social support has been delineated as "any action or behaviour that functions to assist the focal person in meeting his personal goals or in dealing with the demands of any particular situation" (Tolsdorf 1976, p.410).

Researchers who follow the functional approach have attempted to sketch out the kinds of activities that constituted support. Caplan (1974), one of the earliest pioneers to research on social support, noted three broad categories of activity: helping to mobilize resources and manage emotional problems, sharing tasks, and providing material and cognitive assistance to help deal with a particular stressful situation. Others have distinguished functions that might be served by support. Cobb (1976) distinguished information leading to beliefs of being cared for, esteemed, and involved. Weiss (1974) distinguished six provisions of social relationships, including attachment, social integration, reassurance of worth, reliable alliance, guidance, and opportunity for nurturance. Numerous other researchers have

proposed their own social support typologies which are varied and sometimes confusing. For example, Pattison (1977) distinguished between instrumental and affective support; Tolsdorf (1976) delineated between tangible support, intangible support, advice, and feedback; Hirsch (1980) identified emotional support, cognitive guidance, tangible assistance, social reinforcement, and socializing; and Vaux (1988) differentiated between emotional support, socializing, practical assistance, financial assistance, advice/guidance.

The numerous attempts to construct different typologies of social support have no doubt provided useful guidelines and insights on the functions of social support. The functional approach represents a most commonly used approach to understanding and conceptualizing social support and this approach has greatly influenced the development of research and scholarly work on social support in the 1970s and 1980s.

### *The structural approach*

Some others prefer to use a structural approach to conceptualize social support and they tend to see social support from the perspective of social embeddedness. That is, they identify the direct and indirect linkages that tie people to family, friends, and peers. Rather than working towards an indirect understanding of social structure in the abstract, the structuralists prefer to study social structures directly and concretely. They analyze the ordered arrangements of relations among members of social systems. They map these structures, describe their patterns (often using a set of tools derived from mathematical graph theory), and seek to uncover the effects of these patterns on the behaviour of the individual members of these structures - whether people, individuals, groups, or organizations (Scott, 1991; Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988). These linkages, commonly referred to as social networks, are seen as indicators of social resources that have the potential to serve social support functions in times of crisis. Most structural analysts have concentrated on studying egocentric, or personal networks, defined from the standpoint of focal individuals. "Egocentric networks" show the significant interpersonal ties of focal persons perceived by the individuals at the centres. Important network features to be examined include network structures such as size and density; network composition such as the proportion of family members, friends, neighbours, or workmates; and component relationships such as frequency of contact, geographical proximity, the durability and intensity of relationships, degree of reciprocity, and multiplexity. These egocentric network studies have documented the pervasiveness and importance of connectivity, thereby rebutting mass society contentions that recent large-scale social transformations have produced isolation and alienation (Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988). On the other hand, some structuralists prefer to view networks as astronauts view the universe: as outside observers studying relationships linking all members of a population. The resulting "whole network"



studies describe the comprehensive structure of role relationships in a social system. Through manipulating matrices, analysts can find patterns of connectivity and cleavage within social systems, "structurally equivalent" role relationships among system members, changes in network structures over time, and the ways in which system members are directly and indirectly connected (Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988).

Social networks, however, do not equate with social support since the social support system only refers to "that subset of persons in the individual's social network upon whom he or she relies for socioemotional aid, instrumental aid, or both" (Thoits, 1982, p.148). According to the structuralists, social networks are only sets of nodes and sets of ties depicting the interconnectedness among social system members and these may not necessarily be supportive all the time. The primary interest of the social network analysts is to study the structure of the social network per se rather than to examine the supportive functions of the networks. But the tools offered by the network analysts have been widely used by social support researchers to study the structure of support networks.

### *The subjective appraisal approach*

The early studies on social support paid little attention to distinguishing actual from perceived elements of support, and the measures employed often contained items reflecting both. More recently, some writers have argued for the importance of the individual's experience of supportive relationships and interactions (Heller & Swindle 1983; Procidano & Heller 1983; Turner, Frankel, & Levin 1983; Vaux et al., 1986a). Instead of merely focusing on the content and structure of social support, they prefer to conceptualize social support as the subjective appraisals of support perceived by the recipients.

Much of the time, perception and actuality will correspond, often closely. But in those instances when they diverge, the perception of support will be influential. For example, an act may be seen as an expression of kindness although it was not intended as such. The perception that others are willing to help, even when illusory, surely will afford a degree of comfort, and the perception that no one is willing to help will increase the stress level. For those who subscribe to this approach, social support is seen as a personal experience rather than a set of objective circumstances. Social support is "the individual's cognitive appraisal of his or her social environment and the level of confidence he or she has that when support is needed it will be available, sufficient to meet the need, and offered in a way that is perceived as beneficial" (Tracy, 1990, p. 252).

Support appraisals may take many forms, including expression of satisfaction, feeling cared for, respected, or involved, and having a sense of attachment, belonging, or reliable alliance. As such, support appraisals are perceived as "subjective, evaluative assessments of a person's supportive relationships and the