INTERGENERATIONAL RECIPROCITY AND THE WELL-BEING OF OLDER ADULTS IN RURAL CHINA

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China's population is aging at a rate three times that of most Western nations. It will take only three decades for China to double its proportion of older adults from 10% to 20%, a transition that took most Western countries more than a century to achieve. Consequently, China will have less time to develop the infrastructure necessary to adapt to its aging population and the historically unprecedented societal demands that this change will engender. The dependency ratio—the balance between non-working and working segments of the population—will accelerate in the next four decades, straining China's ability to fund service programs and pensions for its surging elderly population.

More than two-thirds of the older population in China lives in rural areas that provide relatively few services and little formal support to older individuals. Less than 10% of rural elders receive state pensions and adult children are normatively and legally expected to economically support their aged parents. Reductions in family size (due primarily to the one-child policy in urban areas and 1.5-child policy in rural areas) will lessen the availability adult children who currently serve as the backbone of the elder-support system. Further, many older adults in rural regions are "left behind" in their villages by migrant children seeking jobs in economically booming cities. However, the deleterious effects of children's migration on the emotional well-being of older parents may be assuaged by the remittances that migrant children send back to their home villages.

Financial support from children may directly improve the mood of older parents by allowing them to exit the workforce, providing the means to purchase material necessities, and instilling an overall sense of security. However, elderly parents in rural China are not necessarily passive recipients of their children's largess. The physical absence of parents often requires that grandparents take custody of dependent grandchildren, often in skipped-generation households. Millions of young workers who have migrated out of impoverished rural regions to take better paying factory and service jobs are both assisting their parents financially and being assisted by them in terms of childcare in a pattern of mutual exchange.

In this investigation we examine how financial assistance from migrant adult children affects change in the emotional health of aging parents in rural China. We hypothesize that reciprocity in the form of a time-for-money exchange will psychologically benefit older parents such that those who provide care to grandchildren and receive financial support will feel compensated for their efforts and prone to better psychological outcomes.

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We analyzed data collected from a random sample of 1,715 adults aged 60 and older living in rural townships within Chaohu, a primarily agricultural city of 4.5 million people located on the north bank of the Yangtze River in the central part of Anhui Province. The survey was originally fielded in April 2001 as a joint project between Xi'an Jiaotong University and the University of Southern California. In November 2003, a follow-up survey was conducted with 1,368 respondents, or 79.8% of the original participants. Our analysis was performed on 4,776 parent-child dyads based on 1,220 parents who participated in both surveys. Older parents in the sample averaged 69 years of age (SD = 6.6), and their adult children averaged 39 years of age (SD = 8.8),

Emotional distress was measure by the severity of depressive symptoms. Three items indicated feelings of positive affect (feeling happy, enjoying life, feeling pleasure), two items indicated feelings of negative affect (feeling lonely, feeling upset), two items indicated feelings of marginalization (feeling useless, having nothing to do), and two items indicated somatic symptoms (having poor appetite, having trouble sleeping). The nine items were asked in 2001 ($\square$ = .80) and in 2004 ($\square$ = .76). We predict distress (reverse coding positive items to indicate negative outcomes) in 2004, while controlling for the same measures in 2001.

Our key predictor variables were the amount of financial support that older parents received from each of their adult children, and the amount of care they provided for grandchildren sired by each of their adult children. Financial transfers were measured as the total amount of money that parents received from each child during the past 12 months, ranging from none to more than 10,000RMB. Respondents were asked how often they provided care, on average, to each set of grandchildren (16 and younger), with response categories ranging from none to full-time daily care. We also controlled for the amount of instrumental and emotional support received from children, as well as age, gender, marital status, education, income, occupation, health status, and number of living children.

The scale score for depression averaged 6.01 (SD = 3.95) in the second wave, and 5.99 (SD = 3.84) in the first wave. While there are no benchmarks to determine the magnitude of these averages relative to diagnostic criteria, they are about one third of the possible maximum score of 18, suggesting that the sample as a whole is moderately distressed. Financial support from children averaged almost 100 RMB, a figure surpassing the recipients' average work and retirement incomes combined.

Our multivariate results showed that economic receipts from adult children reduced depression in their older parents. Looking further into whether this benefit varied by children's migrant status and grandparents' caregiving status, we found that financial returns reduced depression most when grandparents provided full-time care for the families of their migrant children. This finding is depicted graphically in Figure 1 (shown only for grandparents providing the least and the most

grandchild care, and with all other variables held constant at their mean values). Larger remittances produced steeper reductions in depression when grandparents spent the most time taking care of children left behind by their migrant offspring—a combination of factors where time-for-money reciprocity is at its peak.

Our findings suggest that social and economic change in China has altered the way older and younger generations rely on each other, but not necessarily to the detriment of older individuals. If childcare is adequately compensated by remittances, older adults are the less depressed. In this sense, grandparents who make strategic investments in the economic success of migrant children may feel entitled to share in the fruits of their children's enhanced earnings that they (the grandparents) enabled. Conversely, when expectations for reciprocity are violated, older parents may feel that they have been unfairly treated and feel distressed.

However, it should be noted that even grandparents who did not provide care for grandchildren benefited psychologically from their children's economic support. This is not surprising in a region of China that is virtually absent of pensions and where older individuals have little or no income of their own. In a real sense economic transfers from children "buy" happiness insofar as they determine the standard of life parents will experience in their later years.

We conclude that intergenerational "time-for-money' reciprocity is not only a survival strategy for ensuring the economic prosperity of rural migrant families, but can also contribute positively to the psychological well-being of grandparents left behind in rural villages. Public policies could be designed to strengthen this natural resource by assisting older adults who care for their grandchildren. At the provincial or local levels, special child/geriatric health and social services can target skip-generation households and frail grandparents with grandchildren in their charge. Supplemental payments within the rural pension system may help caregiving grandparents and their young grandchildren maintain an adequate quality of life, particularly if remittances are insufficient. Such policies may become increasingly valuable given that fertility reductions will reduce the number of wage-earning children who are available to support their older parents. Serving this population as a deserving group implicitly recognizes that the growing older population is not the problem but the foundation on which China's current economic boom rests.
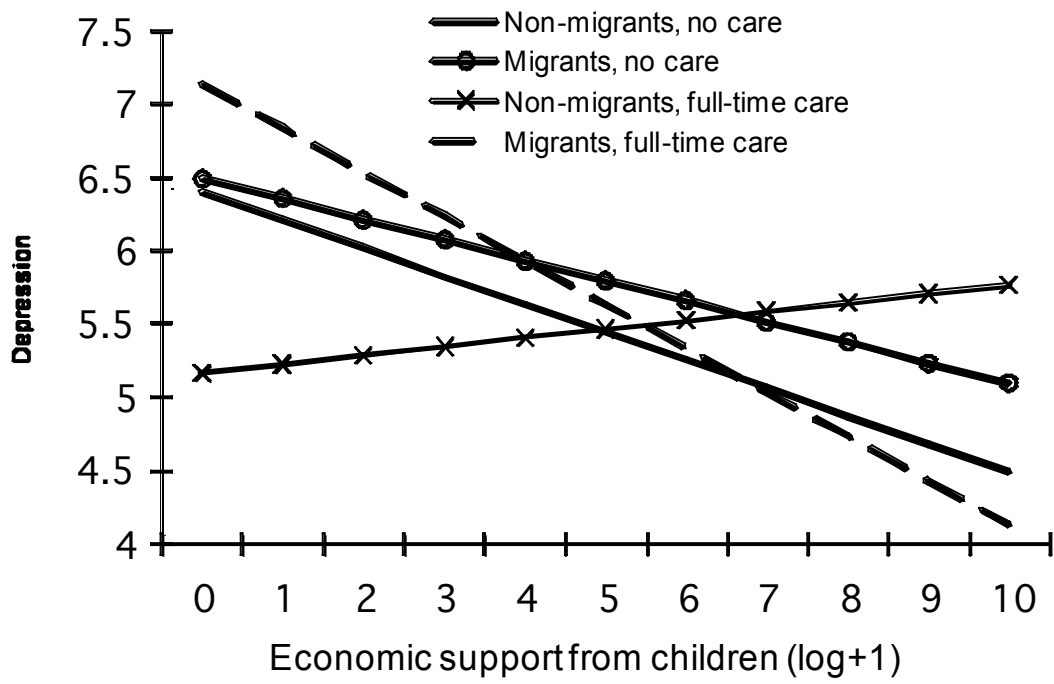
Figure 1. Predicted depression of parents by economic support from children, by migration status of children and two conditions of grandchild care (covariates shown in Table 2 are held constant at their means).