

RESEARCH

Open Access



Familial affections vis-à-vis filial piety: the ethical challenges facing eldercare under neo-familism in contemporary China

Yunxiang Yan*

*Correspondence:
yan@anthro.ucla.edu

Department of Anthropology,
University of California, Los
Angeles, USA

Abstract

The present study demonstrates that the values and practices of neo-familism are altering the ethical foundation of eldercare in a similar way as they did in other areas of family life. The chief ethical challenges include the shift of the center of gravity from ancestors to children or grandchildren, the inversion of the hierarchical order within the oneness of parent–child identity, the saliency of eldercare *qinqing* discourse derived from the intimate and emotional turn in family life, the importance of family history as the keeper of the balance sheet of *qinqing* interactions, and the emerging pursuit of distributive justice in the sphere of private life. Working together, these challenges have effectively destabilized the principle of filial piety as the ethical foundation of eldercare and, at the same time, they have contributed to the formation of a *qinqing* ethics of eldercare. The article ends with a sketch of the main features of the emerging *qinqing* ethics and a call for more innovative thinking out of the gatekeeping box of filial piety paradigm in the sociology of Chinese family.

Keywords: Eldercare, *Qinqing*, Filial piety, Moral reasoning, Ethical challenges, And neo-familism

Introduction

In a thought-provoking article, sociologist Wu Xiaoying calls for more scholarly attention to the sociology of care. While recognizing the critical problems arising due to the looming crisis of care provision, she notes that the mystification of the values of familism and the reliance on familial solutions are dual cognitive obstacles in Chinese scholarship on care and welfare in policy making (Wu 2020). Inspired by Wu's seminal work, the present study examines the challenges of the values of neo-familism vis-à-vis those of filial piety, and it attempts to describe the profound impact of this visible yet unrecognized ground-shaking change.

In the rapidly aging Chinese society, eldercare is an unprecedentedly critical issue (Cook and Liu 2016; Lu and Zhang 2017; and Wong and Leung 2012), and, due to the sharp decline in the fertility rate and the radical developments in family structure and culture, can no longer sustain on the traditional familial care alone (Zhan et al. 2011). The principle of filial piety (*xiaodao*, 孝道) long served as the ethical foundation of

eldercare throughout Chinese history. Mainly due to this historical significance, filial piety is still widely accepted in both research and policy-making circles as the main, if not the only, solution to meet the new challenges facing eldercare in the twenty-first century (Chou 2011; Gruijters 2017; Ikels 2004; Liu 2022; Lu 2012; Lum et al. 2016; Shang and Li 2009; Sun 2017; Zeng et al. 2016; Zhang 2017; and Zheng 2021). Yet, it is generally overlooked that the ethical and practical challenges brought about by the newly emerging neo-familism (Yan 2018, 2021) are destabilizing the principle of filial piety in some domains of real life and even replacing its foundational role with an ethics of *qingqing* (亲情, familial affections)¹ in other areas. Therefore, it is important that we examine the changing ethical foundations of eldercare in practice and reflect upon the gatekeeping functions of filial piety as the dominant paradigm in eldercare studies.

Throughout this article, the term “ethical challenges” is used in a broad and practical sense, referring to the new and critical issues in the field of eldercare that require individual moral reasoning and ethical reflections. During these processes, individual social actors must choose between right and wrong, or between good and bad, and then take corresponding actions. Some of these challenges arise because of the impact of the radical social changes, such as rural–urban migration or the individualization of the social structure, some are caused by conflicts between new and old values, such as individual rights vis-à-vis family interests, yet others, more than any other types of conflicts, reflect the tensions between one’s family obligations and personal feelings that trigger moral distress.

I open the article with a mini ethnography of current eldercare conditions in Xiajia village of northeast China where I have conducted longitudinal field research since 1989.² Two vignettes highlight the new ethical challenges facing eldercare, both of which resulting from the practice of neo-familism. The second section analyzes five ethical challenges facing eldercare that have been identified in the Xiajia community and that have been confirmed by scholarly research from other parts of China. The responses to these ethical challenges demonstrate that the values of neo-familism have marginalized the principle of filial piety as the moral foundation of eldercare; in its stead, a psychological-emotional-ethical complex of *qingqing* has emerged as an alternative ethical compass. I conclude the article by sketching the main features of the emerging *qingqing* ethics in eldercare and I argue that these new ethical challenges problematize the current paradigm of filial piety in eldercare research, especially its gatekeeping function

¹ I use the Chinese word *qingqing* (亲情) throughout this article because its rich connotations cannot be captured by any comparative English term, such as “familial affection.” Like the Chinese notion of *guanxi* (关系) or *renqing* (人情) (for my analysis of these two terms, see Yan (1996), especially Chapter 6), *qingqing* also contains emotional attachments, moral obligations, and instrumental concerns. A straightforward way to set the three apart is to measure the relative weight of one element against that of the other two elements in each notion. In *qingqing*, the weight or order of significance goes in descending order from emotional attachment to moral obligation to instrumental concern; in *renqing*, it goes from moral obligation to emotional attachment to instrumental concern; and in *guanxi*, the order is instrumental concern, moral obligation, and then emotional attachment. The ethics of *qingqing* refers to moral reasoning and ethical norms based on *qingqing*, as will be explained toward the end of this article.

² Prior to entering college, I lived and worked in Xiajia village from 1971 to 1978. I returned to conduct long-term fieldwork in 1989 and 1991. Since then, I have paid short visits to the community in 1993, 1994, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019. The livelihood of the villagers is now closely tied to the market through cash-crop farming, household side-line businesses, and labor migration. By 2015, wage labor had become the single most important source of income, with nearly 70 percent of laborers of all age groups spending at least four months every year working in the cities. By the summer of 2019, more than 60 percent of the village population, mostly young and middle-aged people, had permanently moved to the county seat (now a district of Haerbin city). For more details about the community, see Yan (2003: 27–41).

that has likely obscured more than clarified the entangled issues of eldercare in current scholarship.

Current state of eldercare in a rural community

As I document elsewhere, eldercare in Xiajia village underwent a filial piety crisis from the 1980s to the 1990s, featuring a rapid marginalization of the elderly, serious inter-generational conflicts, the extraction of parental financial resources through bride-wealth and dowry, and several cases of elderly abuse (Yan 2003). Beginning in the late 1990s, there was a reconciliation between the generations, with the younger generation believing that they were being filial if their own happy lives also brought happiness to their parents (Yan 2011: 219). By the early 2000s, the earlier crisis had waned, and it was replaced by the emergence of a multi-generational yet flexibly structured household organization and renewed intergenerational solidarity (Yan 2011, 2016). Instead of complaining about their suffering in old age, elderly villagers were competing to praise their married children (both sons and daughters) for their wide-ranging support and care, using the local expression *qinjin* (亲近, literally meaning “dear and close”) to describe this change. They had also abandoned their expectation that their adult children would be submissive and obedient, using the expression *xiao er bushun* (孝而不顺, “caring and supportive, but not obedient”) to describe the increase in generational communications, mutual understanding, and affections. I call this change an intimate or emotional turn in family life (Yan 2016, 2018). Meanwhile, the foci of the family group and the existential meaning of life have shifted from glorifying own’s ancestors to raising successful grandchild(ren), who are now a centripetal power attracting the attention, love, and care of both their grandparents and their parents and bringing the generations together in a number of ways and motivating all adult members of the family to work toward the common goal of family success. I theorize this family change to be the result of the rise of neo-familism (Yan 2016, 2018, and 2021), a widespread trend that has been observed in other regions and explored by many scholars, notwithstanding any differences in their research perspectives (see, e.g., Evans 2008; Harrell and Santos 2017; Jankowiak and Li 2017; Kang 2012, 2014; Liu 2018; Liu 2011, 2016; Zheng 2018; Zhong and He 2014; and Zhu and Zhu 2013).

However, strengthened intergenerational solidarity and the emotional turn in family life under neo-familism have led to an unexpected consequence, that is, eldercare yielding to care of the grandchildren in the allocation of family resources as well as in the meaning of care-giving actions. This is a rational yet destabilizing strategy that I first noticed from the flexible residence patterns of elderly villagers (Yan 2018), a common phenomenon better known as *laopiao* (老飘, floating/migrant elders) that has recently attracted increased scholarly attention (Cook and Liu 2016; and Qi 2018). Depending on the changing needs of their adult children who, since the early 2000s, had moved to the local city (previously the county seat), Xiajia elders (whom I refer to as grandparents in the present study and in previous works) were constantly readjusting their places of residence to assist their children dwelling in the urban areas.³ Typically, villagers in

³ As in all my previous studies on intergenerational relations in Xiajia village, I classify villagers into three categories: (1) grandparents who were born in the 1950s and the 1960s, grew up in the era of planned economy, and received a full share of farmland when the rural collectives were dismantled in 1983 (this remains the single most important source of capital for those of this generation); (2) adult children/parents who were born in the 1970s and the 1980s, some of whom have few or no siblings due to the impact of the one-child policy. They are full-time wage laborers who rely entirely

their late forties to their mid-fifties remained in the village to farm and to take care of their preschool grandchildren (known as “left-behind children” in a skip-generation household), while their adult children worked in the cities. Most elders in their early sixties or older, however, temporarily moved to the city to live with their adult children so that they could continue to take care of their grandchildren who were attending urban schools. In cases where two or more adult children required assistance, an elderly couple would split up or move back and forth from village to city several times to accommodate the varying demands of grandparenting as well as other needs (Yan 2016). After reaching the age of their mid-seventies or older, the grandparents would typically return to the village because they had already completed their grandparenting tasks and they did not want to become a burden in the urban homes of their adult children. Teacher Wang once summed up all this moving back and forth by the elderly (including himself) as: “People will do whatever matches their family needs. There are no fixed rules. ... Family problems, family solutions” (Yan 2018: 182–183).

By the time I returned to Xiajia village in the summer of 2019, however, I found the earlier equilibrium in intergenerational solidarity facing a new challenge in terms of eldercare. Following the previous pattern, more grandparents in their middle or late seventies had returned to the village, and the age of many of the earlier returnees had already advanced into their eighties or even older. This resulted in an unprecedented expansion of the old-old elder population. At the same time, those who were in the category of adult children or parents had moved into the group of young elders and they had begun to take up the ever-expanding responsibility of grandparenting and assisting their own married children (some of whom were grandchildren in my previous studies). The old-old elders, therefore, had fallen into a downward spiral due to their increasing vulnerabilities in advanced old-age and the decreasing capacity of their aging adult children to provide care because they were driven by values of neo-familism to prioritize the interests of their grandchildren.

It should be noted that basic economic support is no longer a main issue of eldercare for the absolute majority in Xiajia village today. Elders in their sixties or older all have income generated from their share of farmland (either from farming or from leasing it out) and they receive a small monthly stipend (about 60 yuan in 2019) from the local government. Many old-old elders also receive irregular yet more heartwarming monetary support from their adult children and/or grandchildren. Notwithstanding their security in subsistence living, more village elders were suffering from loneliness, boredom, and growing self-care difficulties as they grew older. As far as custodial care is concerned, many old-old elders require assistance with instrumental daily-life activities, including meal preparation, housework, finances, medication management, and communication skills. A capacity to perform these activities is crucial for them to live

Footnote 3 (continued)

on out-migration work in the cities because they were too young to receive any farmland during the period of decollectivization; and (3) the grandchildren or the child of the third generation who was born in the 1990s or later, most of whom have grown up in the cities. Some of my informants were great-grandparents born in the 1930s or the 1940s but their influence on family life had largely diminished and thus they are not featured in any of my previous works (Yan 2011, 2016). As far as eldercare is concerned, the provision of care to the group of old-old villagers is clearly the most problematic. An increasing number of the young-old people must provide care for their parents, which represents a new challenge, as to be shown in the following pages.

independently. As they gradually lose control over these instrumental activities, they require help with basic daily-life activities, including dressing, eating, use of the toilet, personal hygiene, and physical movement.

By the summer of 2019, all elders who could manage instrumental daily-life activities on their own were living in either empty-nest households or single-elder households, with the others either struggling or having already relocated to live with an adult son (or daughter in rare circumstances) who was already part of the young-old age-group. Spousal care was a particularly valuable resource at this stage. Most elderly couples in the group of old-old were relying on spousal care to get by in everyday life; consequently, the number of empty-nest elder households in the village had increased from nine in 2013 to twenty-eight in 2019. Widowed old-old elders faced the difficult choice of either struggling to survive through self-care on their own or by living with an aging adult son or daughter and living on the very margins of a four-generation household. Many had chosen to live alone to protect their personal dignity (what they called *bushouqi* (不受气), or not to be bullied) for as long as they could, adding to the number of single-elder households from three in 2013 to seven in 2019.⁴ The two vignettes below will illustrate these changes in detail.

On a sweltering summer morning in 2019, Mr. Li, a 76-year-old friend, visited me at my landlord's home. Ever since I had lived in the village during the 1970s, I always called Mr. Li "Sige," or fourth elder brother, a term referring to both his birth order and his generational rank in the imagined kinship system that I had adopted during my early visits. I had had a reunion with Sige during most of my return visits, but this time I was shocked to find him very feeble and blind, even though I was already aware that he had long been suffering from glaucoma. He explained that he had completely lost his eyesight in late 2016, thus becoming dependent on his wife. But in 2017, his wife was paralyzed due to a stroke. The couple was seriously impacted by these developments as up until that point they had been living on their own in the village while all their sons were living in the city. Sige had to learn how to do the household chores on his own as well as to take care of his wife's basic needs. He would carry her throughout the house, always following her instructions. He joked that he had borrowed his wife's eyes and he had lent her his limbs, thus making the two disabled elders into a single new person. "It worked out OK as we improved our coordination over time, but I always got some details wrong, such as how much salt I should add to a dish." He stood up to show me some of the moves they used in their two-in-one strategy, adding worriedly: "If one of us is gone, how will the other survive?"

As I knew his youngest son had died in a work-related accident many years earlier, I hesitated to ask about his other two sons and why he and his wife had chosen to continue to live on their own. He sensed my concern and told me that his sons were all overwhelmed by life in the city. His eldest son (a 55 year old) had become a grandfather several years earlier and was working odd jobs while his daughter-in-law (a 54 year old) took care of his great-grandson so that Sige's grandson and grand-daughter-in-law could concentrate on their careers. His second son and daughter-in-law

⁴ This pattern of self-care among elders is commonly found elsewhere as well, in both rural and urban China (Chen and Fang 2013; and Gruijters 2017).

(both 52 years old) were struggling to pay a huge debt resulting from their son's marriage that included the purchase of an apartment unit in the city for the newlyweds, and they were expecting to be even busier in a matter of time because they were about to become grandparents. The wife of his deceased son had remarried and had taken away his only granddaughter. "You see," Sige continued as he looked at me:

"It is all about fate. My fate is no good. The fate of my youngest son was even worse. Now I can do nothing to help my sons because I am too old and I am blind. The best I can do is not to burden my sons and grandchildren. My sons felt guilty for having to leave us behind in the village, but all they could do was to often call us and give us some money. When they came to visit us during the New Year, my wife felt that they seemed fragile, exhausted, and incredibly old. It is sad (shangxin, 伤心). It hurts (zhaxin, 扎心)!"

With a deep sigh, Sige ended our conversation because he had to return home to attend his wife's needs. Watching him slowly leave, my landlord came over to sit next to me and recap the story, as it seemed that he thought I might have misunderstood Sige's pains. Just like a knife striking his heart (*zhaxin*), Sige's greatest misfortune was knowing that his sons had almost been crushed by life's burdens, but he was not able to help them at all. My landlord said he totally understood Sige's inner pain, and then he added: "Do not get it wrong. Sige's sons are good-hearted men. They are just like their father, doing everything possible for their children and grandchildren. They all have struggled, barely making a living. Why is life so unfair to good people?" he asked but obviously he did not expect me to answer.

Several days later, I met Mr. Guan, a widower in his early eighties, at the village shop. He gave me a similar fatalist account of old-age desolation, but unexpectedly, and intriguingly, his story was then refuted by some other villagers. Guan is a tall, well-built man with a bad temper. I did not know him in person during the 1970s because he had been living in a small hamlet that was affiliated with the village. But I had heard plenty about his beating up his wife and children at home and his bullying fellow villagers in public, which, as was determined many years later, was a way to prove his masculinity. He would treat his eldest son and daughter very poorly, but he would indulge his youngest son. Rumors had it that he had demanded excessively high bridewealth when marrying out his daughter, but he had refused to use it to fund his eldest son's marriage, a selfish and scandalous act that earned him the moniker "daughter-seller." But Guan ran out of good luck at the age of forty-six when his wife died. Thereafter, his eldest son moved away and practically cut off all relations with him. His favorite child, the youngest son, turned out to be a big liability, relying on financial support from Guan for many years and having been imprisoned on numerous occasions for theft and other crimes. Throughout our long chat in the village shop, Guan continued to complain about his poor health, his unlucky fate, and how much he was suffering from his unfilial children. His daughter was the worst, according to Guan, because she refused to let him visit his great-grandson, did not care about his chronic ailments, and once even physically pushed him out of her house. "It is unfair that no one cares for me in my old age," Guan repeatedly complained.

As soon as Guan left the shop, the other villagers there (four men and two women, all in their early fifties) began to refute his narrative. They warned me that everything Guan had told me was either a lie or a story twisted in his favor. The most blatant fabrication was about his daughter refusing to take care of him. They claimed that the reality was quite different. When Guan was seriously ill and required daily care, his daughter took him in and treated him fairly well, even though there was not much emotional bonding between them. But while at his daughter's home, Guan remained his same old selfish, demanding, and annoying self, shouting and cursing at everyone including his four-year-old great-grandson. In the end, not being able to take any further abuse from him, Guan's son-in-law kicked him out of the home. Another villager in the shop added that it was unfair to expect the daughter to take care of him because she had been treated poorly before she married out and she did not inherit any of the family property. The two women in the shop were particularly vocal about this point, adding that many elders did not dare make demands on their unruly sons, so they picked on their daughters instead, who, with their soft and caring hearts, were easy targets. All six villagers in the shop agreed that people should do their best to help their children, from childhood to adulthood and beyond, and to build a strong *qinqing jichu* (亲情基础, foundation of familial affections), which was the only assurance adult children would provide for eldercare. Guan had not paid attention to *qinqing*, so no one in his family looked after him in his old age. One of the villagers in the shop then concluded: "Heaven was fair to Guan," and all the others burst out in laughter.

Five ethical challenges facing eldercare under neo-familism

During the 1990s, elder villagers were resentful not only of the insecurity of economic support in old age but also of their loss of status and power in conflicts with their adult children on almost every critical issue in family life, leading to a filial piety crisis. In contrast, the current challenges facing eldercare are less confrontational on the surface, as evidenced by the above-mentioned cases. Many elders choose to rely on self-care for as long as possible and they empathize with their adult children's incapacity to provide care instead of blaming them for being unfilial. Yet, the social suffering that these new challenges have generated are no less painful than those of the earlier crisis in eldercare. More importantly, the transformative power of the values of neo-familism have destabilized the ethical principle of filial piety and redefined the boundaries of eldercare.

As I explain elsewhere (Yan 2016, 2018 and 2021), neo-familism refers to the new discourses and practices (since the early 2000s) that invoke familism as the primary strategy to pursue both individual happiness and family prosperity through the collective efforts of a multi-generational domestic group. As such, it demonstrates both similarities to and differences from traditional familism. There are six features of the ongoing trend of neo-familism. The first is children-centeredness, meaning that the focus of family life has shifted at both the spiritual and the material levels from glorifying one's ancestors to enabling the youngest generations. The second is an inverted hierarchical order in the notion of parent-children oneness, wherein the parents' existential meaning and identity to a great extent are defined by their children. Third, an intimate/emotional turn in family life has rendered *qinqing* the new overarching emotional-ethical power that binds family members together and governs intra-family relations. The fourth feature consists

of recognition and pursuit of personal happiness (mostly among the young generations) which in turn create tensions between the family and individual interests. The fifth feature is an overwhelming social pressure to achieve family prosperity by way of success in childrearing and wealth accumulation. Last, the operational logic of improvisation deconstructs the patrilineal principles of Chinese kinship and leads to a diversification in the household configuration and ad hoc operation of family actions (Yan 2021: 15–17). As far as eldercare is concerned, values of neo-familism have posed direct challenges to the previously dominant principle of filial piety in at least the following five ways.

The relocated center of gravity in resource allocations

The first ethical challenge facing eldercare presents itself as a straightforward moral dilemma between prioritizing the care needs of one's elderly parents and the needs for child or grandchild care. Given that every person's time, energy, attention, drive, and tangible resources are always finite, individuals who are caught between competing demands for the provision of care must make ethical decisions in favor of one at the expense of the other. To the best of my knowledge, the choices made by Xiajia villagers invariably have been in favor of the youngest generation. Such a consensus cuts across generational lines and is also reflected in public opinion. As shown in the examples in the preceding section, despite their disabilities and almost unbearable suffering, Sige and his wife did not complain about their sons for staying in the local city, nor did they complain about having to take care of their great-grandchildren in the city or demand that they be allowed to return the village. Instead, Sige blamed himself for not being able to help them and he felt pain in his heart when he heard about his sons' heavy burdens and declining health. Equally noteworthy is my landlord's positive moral evaluation of both Sige and his sons that is representative of public opinion under the circumstances. In a similar vein, villagers discredited Guan's testimony based on his past negligence of his children. The best illustration, however, was provided to me by an old villager back in 1997: "In the past, the best room in a house and the most delicious food for a special occasion were always reserved for the elders, especially the grandparents, because they had earned this privilege through their hard work, and they did not have many years ahead of them. The young were required to wait for their turn. Now the opposite situation is occurring. The young always get the best, and the old have to wait."⁵

The traditional principle of filial piety contains three elements: (1) unconditional respect and obedience of the junior generation to the senior generation; (2) financial support and daily care by adult children for their elderly parents; and (3) perpetuation

⁵ He is the same person who once summed up the social changes during his lifetime as "the grandfather is turned into the grandson, and the women have gone up to the sky" (爷爷变孙子, 妇女上了天). I refer to him as Uncle Lu in my previous works (Yan 2003: 98--99; and 2021: 1) and I use his comment to indicate the decline of parental authority. Uncle Lu was more sensitive to this issue than his peers because, even though he had seven sons and had helped all of them marry in style, he and his wife eventually ended up living in an empty-nest household. He was 74 years old in 1997, suffering from several chronic diseases and relying on his wife for daily care. After he died in the early 2000s, his wife moved out of the village to live with her daughter. By recalling Uncle Lu's comment in the 1990s and then comparing it with the current mentality among the old-old elders (such as that of Sige who appears in the first vignette), I realized that the shift in the center of gravity of family life, or the replacement of ancestor-centeredness by child-centeredness, has, to a great extent, altered the collective consciousness and social expectations of eldercare. This is so much the case that even if Sige, who was 25 years younger than Uncle Lu, had used the same language of filial piety or the same kinship term of grandfather as Uncle Lu, their messages still were quite different. It is precisely these changes, situated beneath the level of a verbal resemblance, which reveal the impacts of neo-familism on eldercare in particular and on the family institution in general.

of the descent line through human reproduction and the provision of ritual services to one's ancestors. The beliefs and practices of filial piety focus on the centrality of one's ancestors that are internalized and embodied from generation to generation through the process of enculturation under Confucian ethics such that parents and grandparents are viewed as living ancestors, and by this status alone they demand filial actions by their adult children and grandchildren. In the current situation, only a minimum provision of material support is secured by the combination of self-support and welfare policies, with all the other aspects of the traditionally defined filial piety having been shattered for the simple reason that the foci of family life are no longer past-oriented, and all kinds of family resources are directed toward the children of the youngest generation. The moral reasoning behind this ethical change is that every adult person's value (including that of the elders) is in accordance with her/his contribution to the future success of the youngest generation, which is the first main element of neo-familism. Instead of glorifying ancestors, now the raising of perfect child(ren) symbolizes family prosperity, creates life meanings, and enables individuals to achieve full personhood (Di, Li, and Zhong 2017; Di and Zheng 2016; Lin and Mao 2022; and Yan 2018, 2021).

Assessing the full impact of child-centeredness in the context of the steady growth of the elder population and the consistent decline of fertility, the predicament of the young-old elders requires more scholarly attention. Torn by the conflicting duties to provide care for their ailing parent(s) and the newly added duties of grandparenting, these newcomers in the category of the sandwiched generation also face increased personal vulnerabilities and needs for eldercare, as revealed in Sige's story (see also Thomason 2021; and Zhang 2015). The replacement of ancestors by grandchildren as the center of gravity in family life essentially pulls out the rug from under the principle of filial piety.

The inverted notion of father–son oneness

The second ethical challenge facing eldercare is caused by the value of neo-familism in parent–child oneness (*qinzi yiti*, 亲子一体) in terms of both identity construction and intergenerational cooperation. In contrast to the early trend of intergenerational detachment and conflict that were driven by ideological differences and political mobilization before the reform era and conflict in resource allocation during the early reform era (Yan 2003), in the late 1990s intergenerational solidarity arose as the main operating mechanism of family life. Communicative intimacy became a new force tying together parents and adult children and facilitating intergenerational negotiation, mutual dependence, and an intimate/emotional turn (Evans 2008; and F. Liu 2018). By the second decade of the twenty-first century, when considering the new multi-generational yet flexible household configuration many scholars were conceptualizing the close intergenerational bonding and mutual dependence as *qinzi yiti*, or the oneness of parents and children, or *sandai yiti* (三代一体, “the trinity of three generations”) as suggested by Liu (2016). In this imagined two-in-one entity, parents and their adult children symbolically regard the other party as part of themselves and they interact in an unbreakable relationship of mutual dependence. Typically, parents rely on their adult children for spiritual reward and emotional support, including the success of their grandchildren, and the adult children depend on parental support for substantial resources, including the emotional labor of grandparenting. The rather extreme phenomenon of *shidu* parents (parents who

have lost a singleton child) imagining that they are living their lives through the eyes of their deceased children (Shi 2021) and of the singleton adult children letting their parents manage their divorce (Yan 2015) may drive home this point.

It is crucially important to note that, although it is derived from the traditional notion of father–son oneness (*fuzi yiti*, 父子一体), parent–child oneness bears significant differences from its roots and serves an opposite function in terms of eldercare. To the best of my knowledge, sociologist Zhou Feizhou offers the most thorough and clear interpretation of the notion of father–son oneness. Based on his close reading and penetrating analysis of the Confucian classics, Zhou asserts that father–son oneness is not only a ubiquitous conceptual tool in Chinese thought but it also reflects a deeply rooted social consciousness of *fuzi yiben* (父子一本), or the father–son as one foundational existence, identifying one’s father, instead of Heaven or God, as the single foundation of one’s life and existential being. Together, the notions of oneness and of one foundation (*yiti* and *yiben*, 一体与一本) constitute the social ethics of filial piety, upon which the structures of the family and the state are built. He further notes that parents, as the center of gravity in filial piety, demand submission and respect from their sons, quoting the classic statement “father as the head and son as the feet.” Conversely, sons view themselves as the physical and social continuation of their parents’ body and spirit, regarding parental satisfaction as the sole indicator of their being filial (Zhou 2021: 10–23). In other words, there is a hierarchical order within the father–son oneness that places the father in the primary and superior position, demanding the submission, obedience, respect, and full support in old age from the son.

This is precisely what sets the contemporary version of parent–child oneness apart from its historical roots. In daily-life discourse and practice, the traditional submission and obedience of the junior generation to the senior generation is long gone; in its stead, we see first the rapid decline of parental authority and power along with the rise of youth autonomy and entitlement, and then the growth of emotional attachment, intimate communication, and negotiation across generational lines. This is what I refer to as the inversion of the family hierarchy, or simply the inverted family (Yan 2021). This has been widely referred to by other scholars as the new intergenerational relationship, or the new style filial piety (Kang 2014; Sun 2017; and Zhong and He 2014). Regardless of the differences in interpretative perspectives, all agree that in the current version of parent–child oneness, or the three-generation trinity, it is the child or grandchild who occupies the primary and superior position. The inversion of the hierarchical order in the traditional father–son oneness is the logical consequence of the shift in the center of gravity in the family from the ancestors to the youngest generation and, consequently, it has similar impacts on filial piety and existing patterns of eldercare.

The inverted hierarchy in the contemporary notion of parent–child is well-illustrated by adult children’s claim of their parents’ property as their own. As Zheng Dandan insightfully noted, adult children’s family wealth and household budget often incorporate In a similar case elsewhere, a daughter-in-law was furious with her father-in-law for losing half of his wealth through a bad investment because deep in her mind, she had already claimed ownership over the wealth of her parents-in-law (Zheng 2018: 17).

This is also why remarriage among elders often becomes a complicated issue entangled with the claim of parent–child oneness from adult children. While elder

women tend to meet less objections from their adult children as they are supposed to “move away” from the parent–child oneness, elderly men commonly encounter strong objections because they are perceived to “bring in an outsider” to the parent–child oneness. As a recent example in Xiajia village shows, when the 73-year-old Mr. Zhang proposed to marry a younger widower next door, his sons strongly objected the proposal, claiming their father’s wealth as theirs based on the notion of parent–child oneness, and they also resorted to the centrality of the grandchildren to strengthen their argument. Ironically, although they considered their father’s wealth to be theirs, they did not contribute any of their own wealth or emotional labor to take care of their father, which was the reason why their father wanted to remarry in the first place. But neither they nor the villagers cared about this inconsistency. Intriguingly, when Zhang tried to assert his independence and protect his personal interest by drawing boundaries between his household and that of his sons, his argument was dismissed by not only his sons but also by public opinion.

In other words, the current version of parent–child oneness imposes unlimited responsibilities on parents, and it gives almost unlimited entitlements to adult children and grandchildren. This is widely known in the current literature as the unequal intergenerational exchange, the priority of the junior generation in family resource allocations, or the imbalance between the unlimited and limited responsibilities across generational lines (Di, Li and Zhong 2017; Di and Zheng 2016; Lin and Mao 2022; Qi 2021; and Zheng 2018).

The most profound impact of the current version of parent–child oneness (and three-generation oneness), however, is the widely accepted and internalized ageism in terms of eldercare. Admittedly, ageism emerged globally as a byproduct of the relentless pursuit of productivity in the name of modernity and the shift of cultural transmission mechanism the postfigurative culture in which the junior generation learn from the senior generation to prefigurative culture that makes the senior generation learn from the junior generation (Mead 1970). In both, youth play a leading role, while the elderly work hard to keep pace with the rapid social changes.

Yet, ageism itself does not necessarily lead to a devaluation of elders in eldercare if care is not measured by the same criterion of material success. Unfortunately, both the relocated center of gravity in family life and the inverted parent–child oneness were constructed and adopted as a means to achieve family prosperity and mobility success. So, when they are applied to eldercare under neo-familism, they transform the elders into a lesser, incapable, and burdensome existence because of their loss of productivity in family life. Prioritizing childcare over eldercare is indicative of an ageism that relies on individual productivity and materialism. It is particularly noteworthy that the elders are influenced by ageism as much as others, and many of them fall into a self-devaluation trap, blaming themselves for being useless to their adult children and grandchildren (Zou et al. 2020a, b). Sige, in the first vignette, is a good example in this connection, and his self-blaming mentality is quite representative of elders in the village community and beyond, so much so that some scholars have noted a gerontophobic trend in society at large (Bai et al. 2016).

***Qinqing* as the new Lingua Franca of eldercare**

The third ethical challenge facing eldercare is derived from the discourse on *qinqing* in neo-familism that has long been used as the *lingua franca* of eldercare by people who otherwise might have conflicting views. What struck me most in my 2019 fieldwork was to hear and witness friends in the village of all age groups frequently referring to *qinqing* when talking about issues related to eldercare in the community, but, unlike earlier, they rarely invoked the traditional notion of filial piety. The only noteworthy exception was Guan who had built his entire argument on the supremacy of filial piety (or its absence among his children); yet his narrative was immediately discredited by the other villagers. I should add that on some occasions, when describing the junior generations' specific expressions of *qinqing*, such as gift-giving or calling/visiting them regularly, the village elders praised their adult children or grandchildren for having filial hearts (*you xiaoxin*, 有孝心). As a 67-year-old woman explained to me, *qinqing* begets the heart of filial piety (*qinqing sheng xiaoxin*, 亲情生孝心).

Unlike filial piety that was vertically indoctrinated across generational lines as an unwavering ethical principle that sustained the family, intergenerational relations, a kinship-based community, and the imperial state throughout Chinese history (see Zhou 2021), the new discourse on *qinqing* is affectively constructed by family members through long-term interactions in daily life that pivot on mutuality, intimacy, and emotional attachment. Individuals must exercise their agency to cultivate, nurture, and exchange *qinqing* in a horizontal way. Unlike filial piety that consists of dogmatic rules and imposed obligations, *qinqing* may be expressed, understood, and received with individual choices and variations. The notion of *qinqing* per se is not new, but its increasing influence in sustaining intra-family relations, guiding ethical decisions, and legitimizing eldercare choices is no doubt part and parcel of the intimate/emotional turn of family life under neo-familism in the early twenty-first century (Yan 2018 and 2021).

As such, the effects of the new saliency of *qinqing*, like the child-centeredness and the redefined parent-child oneness, operates overwhelmingly in favor of the children of the third or fourth generation. Parental and grandparental affections toward children/grandchildren are commonly expressed through their almost unconditional love, mindful care, hard labor, and material support. The reciprocal expressions of *qinqing* by the younger generation tend to be mostly in symbolic terms, but they may also involve substantial caregiving if the *qinqing* is well-maintained across generational lines.

The asymmetrical and unbalanced flow of *qinqing* is also defined by values of neo-familism. From the perspective of a multi-generational family group, as soon as the children grow up and are capable of providing reciprocity to their parents/grandparents in more substantial ways, they become overwhelmed by their paramount duty to pour all the family resources into their own children or grandchildren. The descending focus of family life is part of *qinqing*. Therefore, Sige's concern about his sons' health is *qinqing*, his sons' prioritization of grandparenting over care of their father is *qinqing*, and Sige's grandsons' dependence on assistance from their father is also *qinqing*. The three generations in Sige's family group all speak of *qinqing* when they talk about eldercare or other family issues, but their ethical focus and associated personal feelings are quite different. Nevertheless, the language of *qinqing* enables them to find common ground and to concentrate their efforts to achieve their shared goal, that is, to raise and empower the

children of the youngest generation (the fourth generation in this case). In this sense, *qinqing* serves as the *lingua franca* of eldercare discourse and, at the same time, it contains the radical impact of the values of neo-familism in a much softer emotional framework of intimacy, mutuality, and mutual dependence across generational lines (see also Evans 2008; Liu 2020; Qi 2021; Sun 2017; Zhang 2015; Zhong and He 2014; Zhu and Zhu 2013).

Equally noteworthy in this connection is the nuance in my landlord's comments after Sige's visit. He took great pains to make me understand the local phrase *zhaxin* to describe Sige's *qinqing* toward his sons, but Sige's sons also had *qinqing* toward their father. At that time, I felt my landlord's efforts were unnecessary because I thought understood Sige perfectly. In retrospect, however, I realize that my landlord was probably also reasoning with himself as well and trying to empathize with the moral predicament of Sige's sons from the perspective of the more flexible and complicated *qinqing* ethics (more on *qinqing* ethics below). His effort to enlighten me was more of a projection of his own uncertainty and psychological struggle because, after all, at the age of 73, he had been brought up under traditional familism and, due to the resourcefulness of his family, he had not faced ethical challenges similar to those faced by most elders.

Temporality and the *qinqing* balance sheet

The new prerequisite of *qinqing* in family life opens a temporal dimension to family relations in both the moral reasoning behind eldercare and the moral worthiness of care in each situation, which stands out as the fourth ethical challenge facing filial piety in eldercare. As shown in Guan's case above, family history and memories of individual experiences to a great extent may determine the quality of familial eldercare and its social sanctions by public opinion. Guan's elder son refused to take any responsibility for caring for his aged father on the grounds that his father had failed his most basic and important fatherly duty—to provide financial support for his son's marriage. Such logic would not have been accepted by public opinion when the principle of filial piety dominated the moral reasoning of eldercare because, regardless of Guan's past irresponsible or even immoral deeds, being a father alone would have made him the legitimate recipient of care from his sons, as shown in the legend of how Sage Emperor Shun reciprocated his abusive parents with filial piety.⁶ Yet, from the perspective of *qinqing* under neo-familism, Guan is held accountable for his poor treatment of his wife and children in the past because he did not care about *qinqing* and he had not built a *qinqing* foundation for his old age. In the words of a witty villager, if there were a bank of *qinqing* in each family, Guan's account was already overdrawn, or he likely did not make deposits to begin with. The generous care offered by Guan's daughter is also explained by the villagers in terms of her unusually strong *qinqing* bonding with her father, which, to a certain extent, overpowered the bad memories of her father's abusive behavior. The same witty

⁶ According to legend, Shun's father and stepmother treated him poorly during his childhood because they favored his stepbrother Xiang. The father and stepbrother were even involved in several failed attempts to murder Shun. Yet Shun remained obedient and respectful of his parents in both life and death, even when he became Emperor. Shun was therefore promoted as the "ultimate personification of an exemplar of filial piety." The chief message delivered in his exemplary stories is that parents can never be wrong regardless of what they do, whereas children must always remain submissive and admiring of their parents (for a theoretical elaboration of this legend and the essence of filial piety, see Zhou [2021: 18–20]).

villager used the same metaphor to comment on the daughter's kindness, praising her account for being full of *qinqing* such that she could benefit from it in old age.

It is important to note in this connection that the villagers went to great lengths to recall many examples of Guan's poor behavior, showing that memories of *qinqing* matter greatly in the moral judgment of public opinion. In retrospect, I can trace its formation in the local moral world back to the early 1990s. The suicide of Mr. Li in 1990 and his failed battles in the past to retain his patriarchal power vis-à-vis his son and daughter-in-law might be a primary indicator of the ethical change, as the village leadership and public opinion at the time were not supportive of Mr. Li. Instead of blindly believing in the absolute moral superiority of one's parents, the villagers began to engage in ethical thinking of right and wrong in terms of intergenerational conflicts (Yan 1997).

This explains why Sige empathized with his sons' focus on their parenting and grandparenting duties as a proactive strategy to secure their own old-age support. As other studies have documented, cultivating good *qinqing* attachments with adult children and grandchildren is widespread and almost standard behavior among the young-old elders, many of whom consciously view this as a strategy to secure old-age support. Although many grandparents do not necessarily enjoy grandparenting or regard it as a moral imperative, they still devote much time, labor, and other resources to it because they want to cultivate and secure a strong and affective tie with their adult children so that they can count on their adult children for their old-age care. For example, one elderly woman told researchers that she was not happy to see her son and daughter-in-law living an easy life while they delegated the job of grandparenting to her. "Still, the less trouble the better. If I were to say anything to them, they would consider it complaining. And I will count on my only son in the future. I do not want my daughter-in-law's family to find fault with us in terms of childcare. As a result, I will do whatever they ask me to do now" (Lin and Mao 2022: 50; see also Thomason 2021; and Zhang 2015).

Distributive justice in family life

The fifth ethical challenge facing eldercare is triggered by the intensified discourse on unfairness in terms of eldercare in particular and on family life in general. Admittedly, such an awareness of unfairness is not new. Disagreements about the distribution of responsibilities among brothers to provide eldercare, for example, have long been a common feature of family conflicts; hence the custom of meal rotation in many rural areas (Jing 2004). Yet, my landlord's question regarding why good people always suffer from bad fate raises the discourse to the higher level of social inequality and injustice. Moreover, in the two other cases, the unfair treatment of women in the provision of eldercare emerged as a central topic in public opinion. Women felt that the imposition of eldercare duties on daughters were excessively unfair because daughters had not received the same parental care and family resources as had sons. They resented Guan's son for his irresponsible behavior of pushing women into the role of primary caregiver for their elderly parents. While most male villagers still believed that women should be the primary caregivers, they judged Guan's previous poor treatment of his daughter as unfair and, based on the new *qinqing* ethics of eldercare, they felt that disentitled Guan from claiming his daughter's care.

Furthermore, working in tandem with the other ethical challenges noted above, the stronger and wider disapproval of the inequities has gone beyond the previously scattered personal grievances to begin an awareness of distributive justice in family life (Jecker 2002). The dogmatic principle of filial piety has indeed become obsolete, and the intrinsic mutuality and subjectivity in the construction of *qinqing* seems to have incubated a new sense of equality, forging the demand for justice in eldercare to the level of ethical thinking. This has resulted in a surge of emotional trauma from being wronged or abused, known as *weiqu* (委屈), among caregivers and care recipients in both familial eldercare and institutional care (Wu 2021a; Zou et al. 2020a, b). A closely related phenomenon is the so-called “psycho favor” in a larger social setting, wherein individuals who suffer from the trauma of family injustices and try to improve the entangled family relations rush to receive psychological training or to seek various kinds of psycho-therapeutic treatment (Bregnbæk 2016; and Zhang 2020).

The gendered distributive injustice exists ubiquitously in eldercare, care provision in other areas, and family life in general because it is deeply rooted in the patriarchal culture and androcentric worldview. Women are naturalized as the principal care providers, especially in terms of family care of the elderly, and young girls are socialized and internalized with a gendered role in most cultures throughout the world. What makes the Chinese case noteworthy is that gendered injustice has long been veiled as a female virtue and it has been legitimized as a pragmatic necessity of filial piety because the actual daily work of filial piety, from the maintenance of the ancestral altar to routine provision of care (especially custodial care of the elders) all fall onto the shoulders of women, regardless of their roles as wives or daughters-in-law, or, more recently, married-out daughters. Similarly, older women, especially those from the lower rungs of society, constitute the backbone of the care-giving labor force in both commercial and state-run eldercare institutions, and their labor to provide care in the public domain is similarly underrecognized and undercompensated (Ngan and Wong 1996; Wu 2021b; and Zhan and Montgomery 2003). The contributions of women to provide care can hardly be overstated, yet the burden of care that they are forced to bear normally goes unnoticed, undervalued, or underappreciated, even by the very persons for whom the care is provided. Moreover, under the hegemony of filial piety, women also suffered from epistemic injustice (Carel and Kidd 2014) in the sense that their narratives were normally discredited as trivial gossip and their viewpoints were degraded as meaningless and insignificant by the male-dominated mainstream society.

It is the combined effects of the above-mentioned ethical challenges by values of neo-familism that such gendered injustices have been recognized in public opinion, slightly cracking open the door to distributive justice. The shift to *qinqing*-based moral reasoning in eldercare, however, does not necessarily reduce the burdens on women to provide care in real-life situations. On the contrary, recent research has found that more married-out daughters are proactively taking up the task of caring for aged or disabled parents based on their strong emotional attachment to and affective concern for the elderly (Tang, Ma, and Shi 2009; and Zeng et al. 2016). Therefore, at the very least, their contributions and self-sacrifices are beginning to be recognized and they are being given credit in the family and beyond.

The emerging *qinqing* ethics

As early as the beginning of this century, I observed young villagers using the notion of *qinqing* in their accounts of intergenerational relations as they redefined the meaning of filial piety (Yan 2011). Witnessing the salience of *qinqing* as the *lingua franca* in eldercare discourse among older villagers in 2019, I began to ponder whether, beneath the level of verbal communications, the ethical foundation of eldercare might have shifted from *xiaodao* to *qinqing*, or from filial piety to familial affections. When I shared this initial finding with Teacher Wang, my old friend and a key informant in the local community, he agreed and rephrased it using a common saying among villagers: “*rujin xiaodao zhibushang, yanglao zhineng kao qinqing*” (如今孝道指不上, 养老只能靠亲情, “nowadays *xiaodao* can no longer be depended on; eldercare relies only on *qinqing*”). To follow the lead of the villagers, I hereafter refer to this alternative ethical foundation of eldercare simply as *qinqing* ethics.

It will require at least one other article to sketch the contours of this emerging *qinqing* ethics of eldercare. To highlight the similarities and differences between filial piety and *qinqing*, suffice it to pinpoint the following eight features of *qinqing* ethics. First, unlike duty-based filial piety, *qinqing* is built on emotional attachments and intimate relations, thus it operates on moral sentiments and affections. Second, in contrast to the fixed principle of filial piety, *qinqing* is essentially a working relationship that requires that family members constantly and consistently work at it so that they can make it work for them—hence the local metaphor of a balance sheet of a *qinqing* account and the importance of family history. Third, unlike filial piety that prioritizes the continuity of descent line, *qinqing* ethics redefines the purpose of childbearing and childrearing as the reproduction of affective bonding among family members, thus resonating with the ongoing second demographic transition with its low fertility rate. Fourth, unlike filial piety that requires submission and obedience, *qinqing* ethics recognizes the independence and freedom of the junior generation, but in-line with filial piety, it also denies personal boundaries in the encapsulation of parent–child oneness. This leads to the fifth general feature of *qinqing* ethics, namely, the inherent ambivalence and ambiguity in the management of moral sentiments and interpersonal relations, which again sets it apart from filial piety. The sixth feature of *qinqing* ethics, like filial piety, prioritizes the vertical parent–child relationship and keeps horizontal conjugal ties at bay; when the two are in conflict, *qinqing* ethics advocates the former at the expense of the latter. The seventh feature is similar to yet also different from filial piety: while upholding the notion of parent–child oneness, *qinqing* ethics turns the traditional hierarchy on its head and makes the child the primary and superior end. The eighth feature of *qinqing* ethics resembles filial piety in that it draws a sharp boundary between insiders and outsiders and operates based on favoritism within the family group; it is, by nature, a particularistic ethics that cannot be applied to strangers in the larger social setting.

Although my ethnographic findings come from the rural community of Xiajia, the trend of *qinqing* discourse and practice as an alternative ethical foundation of eldercare has been reported elsewhere, and the eight features of the emerging *qinqing* ethics might be more visible and more active among urban families, albeit not necessarily working as a group of norms or in any specific order (Bregnbæk 2016; Evans 2008; Harrell and

Santos 2017; Kang 2014; Liu 2018; Liu 2016; Sun 2017; Tang, Ma and Shi 2009; Zhong and He 2014).

Yet, partially due to the deeply rooted influence of the value of traditional familism and Confucian ethics throughout Chinese history and partially due to the path-dependence patterns in the development of scholarship, filial piety has long been naturalized and it remains the standard paradigm in eldercare research. Consequently, it has become a gatekeeping concept that screens out unfitting information and narrows down the scholarly discourse, sending it into a pitfall of circular reasoning, such as, for example, the lack of filial piety results in a crisis of filial piety which can only be overcome by filial piety, hence the need to promote filial piety.

Researchers must always remain reflective and critical about any gatekeeping concept or any dominant research paradigm so that they keep pace with the rapidly changing social reality and employ new conceptual tools if necessary. This is, understandably, easier said than done. Take my own research as a convenient example. Although I noticed the increasing importance of emotional attachments and moral sentiments in intergenerational relations as well as in conjugal ties during my field research in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Yan 1999 and 2002), and despite my attention to the changing public opinion that disapproved of the old-fashioned patriarchal demand for filial piety (Yan 1997), at that time I still chose to write about the decline of filial piety and analyze the social factors that led to its waning and to the decline in traditional patterns of eldercare (Yan 2003).

In retrospect, I realized that while filial piety was declining in the 1990s, something else must be emerging as an alternative ethical compass because people always act in accordance with certain values and ethical norms to which they subscribe, either consciously or unconsciously. I observed the emerging alternative, but I did not fully recognize its significance because I was used to measuring the real-life occurrences with the “ought to be” model of filial piety. *Qinqing* became a key independent variable for me only after I began to examine and reflect upon the ongoing family changes from the perspective of neo-familism. As far as eldercare is concerned, my revelation did not come until I conducted my most recent fieldwork in 2019 and found out that my own thinking had been entrapped within the framework of filial piety. This led me to replace filial piety with the conceptual tool of post-patriarchal intergenerationality in studying new family dynamics across the generational lines in the early twenty-first century (Yan 2021: 10–19).

It might be tempting to interpret the newly emerging *qinqing* ethics of eldercare as merely another variation of filial piety, such as the reciprocal filial piety in the Dual Filial Piety Model (DFPM) of social psychology (Yeh and Bedford 2003). According to the DFPM, unlike the “authoritarian filial piety” in which children fulfill the needs of collective identification through their submission and obedience to parental authority and power, “reciprocal filial piety” involves a more balanced parent–child relationship wherein children are guided by “gratitude and willingness to repay for one’s parents’ care and sacrifice.” It “fits better with modern values such as democracy and equality and is much closer to the ‘pure relationship’” proposed by Giddens (1992) and thus is often “expressed in voluntary support and expressions of love and care for one’s parents” (Yeh et al. 2013: 278). Researchers have indeed employed the DFPM to explain the changes

in eldercare in rural China, finding the coexistence of both authoritarian filial piety and reciprocal filial piety (Wei and Zhong 2015; and Xie 2020).

The DFPM is generalized from research on intergenerational relations in Taiwan society to capture the increasing importance of emotional attachments between parents and children and the decline in the hierarchical relationship between family role dyads. When it is applied to Hong Kong, the emphasis shifts to the equal relationship between parents and children due to the impacts of Western culture and modernization. In both cases, the center of gravity in family life does not shift from ancestors to children/grandchildren and the traditional notion of father–son oneness is not turned upside down. It is precisely these two core values of neo-familism that have begotten the *qingqing* ethics of eldercare wherein the previous hierarchical order in all aspects of intergenerational relations is inverted and redefined. It is more revolutionary than evolutionary because the values of neo-familism render the pro-parent logic of filial piety obsolete and irrelevant. It follows, therefore, that neither the reciprocal filial piety nor any other modified version of filial piety (see, e.g., Kang 2014; Sun 2017) can capture the rich meanings and profound impacts of the *qingqing* ethics of eldercare under neo-familism.

I would like to add that the emerging *qingqing* ethics originated from ordinary people's improvisational efforts to cope with challenges in real life, and therefore it is expressed primarily by way of ad hoc reflexive responses instead of reflective choices. The long-term consequences of *qingqing* ethics for eldercare remain to be seen. Moreover, *qingqing* ethics may be effective in undermining the ethical foundation of filial piety, but it has not been powerful enough to address the core issues in the looming crisis facing eldercare. To a certain extent, it even might have exacerbated the difficulties of the old-old elders, as I have analyzed in the preceding sections. Furthermore, *qingqing* ethics relies almost exclusively on parent–child oneness and thus restrains itself in the private sphere. Given that familial provision of eldercare alone is not sustainable in the context of the second demographic transition, *qingqing* ethics cannot provide a good solution to establish trustworthy institutions for social care of elders, much less to promote a universalistic spirit of care among strangers in society. In other words, *qingqing* ethics is merely an emerging alternative, not a secret recipe to solve all the problems of eldercare in particular and the much broader needs to provide care in general. Yet, the realization of such an alternative may help us avoid the gatekeeping consequences of filial piety as the dominant paradigm in eldercare research and open up more approaches and perspectives. This is, I would like to reiterate, the main purpose and also the major contribution of the present study.

Concluding remarks

In a nutshell, my case study in Xiajia village demonstrates that the values and practices of neo-familism are altering the ethical foundation of eldercare in a similar way as they did in other areas of family life (Yan 2021). The chief ethical challenges include the shift of the center of gravity from ancestors to children or grandchildren, the inversion of the hierarchical order within the oneness of parent–child identity, the saliency of eldercare *qingqing* discourse derived from the intimate and emotional turn in family life, the importance of family history as the keeper of the balance sheet of *qingqing* interactions, and the emerging pursuit of distributive justice in the sphere of private life. Working together, these challenges have effectively destabilized the principle of filial piety as the ethical

foundation of eldercare and, at the same time, as an alternative they have contributed to the formation of a *qinqing* ethics of eldercare.

Based on the ethnographic findings above, I am humbly making a dual plea: first, it is now time to break the gatekeeping notion of filial piety and to try to think out of the box in the study of eldercare; second, it is equally important to note that a *qinqing* ethics has emerged as an alternative ethical compass for some people in their moral reasoning on and social action in eldercare. In the everyday life of ordinary people, while those who insisted on the former principle of filial piety found themselves in irresolvable conflicts with their adult children and/or grandchildren, the people who proactively shifted to the new alternative seemed to realign intergenerational relations in more cooperative terms. Both the changing tides in social practices and the associated cultural nuances require more scholarly attention. Going beyond the filial piety paradigm to study *qinqing* ethics and its increasingly important role as the moral compass in eldercare provision will shed new light on the sociology of the family as well as the study of care in general.

Abbreviation

DFPM Dual filial piety model

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Author contributions

The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials

Not applicable.

Declarations

Competing interests

The author declare that they have no competing interests.

Received: 3 November 2022 Accepted: 13 March 2023

Published online: 20 March 2023

References

- Bai, Xue, Daniel W. L. Lai, and Aimei Guo. 2016. Ageism and Depression: Perceptions of Older People as a Burden in China. *Journal of Social Issues* 72 (1): 26–46.
- Bregnbæk, Susanne. 2016. From Filial Piety to Forgiveness: Managing Ambivalent Feelings in a Beijing House-Church. *Ethos* 44 (4): 411–426.
- Carel, Havi, and Ian James Kidd. 2014. Epistemic Injustice in Healthcare: A Philosophical Analysis. *Medical Health Care and Philosophy* 17 (4): 529–540.
- Chen, Fang, and Changchun Fang. 2013. "Cong 'jiating zhaoliao' dao 'shenghuo zili'": Qian fada diqu nongcun laoren zhaoliao fangshi yanjiu" (From Family Care to Self-Care: Research on the Elderly Care Model in Underdeveloped Rural Areas). *Shanxi Shida Xuebao Shehui Kexue Ban Journal of Shanxi Normal University [social Science Edition]* 4: 48–53.
- Chou, Rita Jing-Ann. 2011. Filial Piety by Contract? The Emergence, Implementation, and Implications of the 'Family Support Agreement' in China. *The Gerontologist* 51 (1): 3–16.
- Cook, Joanne, and Jieyu Liu. 2016. Can 'Distant Water ... Quench the Instant Thirst'? The Renegotiation of Familial Support in Rural China in the Face of Extensive Out Migration. *Journal of Aging Studies* 37: 29–39.
- Di, Jinhua, and Dandan Zheng. 2016. "Lunli lunsang yihuo shi lunli zhuanxiang: Xiandaihua shi yu xia Zhongguo nongcun jiating ziyuan de daiji fenpei yanjiu" (Ethical Lapse or Ethical Change: On Rural China Family Resource Allocation from a Modernization Perspective). *Shehui (chinese Journal of Sociology)* 1: 186–212.
- Di, Jinhua, Jing Li, and Zhangbao Zhong. 2017. "Zhuanxingqi nongcun daiji jiaohuan de budui dengxing yanjiu" (Research on the Asymmetry in Rural Intergenerational Exchange During the Transition Period). *Zhongguo Yanjiu (chinese Studies)* 22: 58–71.
- Evans, Harriet. 2008. *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

- Giddens, Anthony. 1992. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Grujters, Rob J. 2017. Family Care-giving and Living Arrangements of Functionally Impaired Elders in Rural China. *Ageing & Society* 37 (3): 633–655.
- Harrell, Stevan, and Gonçalo Santos. 2017. Introduction. In *Transforming Patriarchy Chinese Family in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Gonçalo Santos and Stevan Harrell, 3–36. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Ikels, Charlotte. 2004. Introduction. In *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia*, ed. Charlotte Ikels, 1–15. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Jankowiak, William, and Xuan Li. 2017. Emergent Conjugal Love, Mutual Affection and Female Marital Power. In *Transforming Patriarchy: Chinese Family in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Gonçalo Santos and Stevan Harrell, 146–162. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Jecker, Nancy S. 2002. Taking Care of One's Own: Justice and Family Caregiving. *Theoretical Medicine* 23 (2): 117–133.
- Jing, Jun. 2004. Meal Rotation and Filial Piety. In *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia*, ed. Charlotte Ikels, 53–62. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kang, Lan. 2012. "Daicha yu daotong: Xin jiating zhuyi jiazhi de xingqi" (Generational Similarities and Differences: The Rise of Values of New Familism). *Qingnian Yanjiu (youth Studies)* 3: 21–29.
- Kang, Lan. 2014. Being Close while Keeping Space: Research on the New Model of Filial Piety among Intergenerational Discourses. *Contemporary Youth Research* 4: 83–89.
- Lin, Qing, and Jingyu Mao. 2022. 'A New Job after Retirement': Negotiating Grandparenting and Intergenerational Relationships in Urban China. *China Perspectives* 1: 47–56.
- Liu, Wenrong. 2011. "Jiating jiazhi de bianqian yu yanxu" (Change and Continuity of Family Values). *Shehui Kexue (social Sciences)* 10: 78–89.
- Liu, Wenrong. 2016. "Zhuangxingqi de jiating daiji qinggan yu tuanjie" (Intergenerational Emotions and Solidarity in Families During Social Transition). *Shehuixue Yanjiu (sociological Studies)* 4: 145–168.
- Liu, Fengshu. 2018. An Expressive Turn with a Chinese Twist: Young Women's Other-Sex Relations in Three Generations. *Sociology* 52 (5): 950–965.
- Liu, Fengshu. 2020. *Modernization as Lived Experiences: Three Generations of Young Men and Women in China*. London: Routledge.
- Liu, Jieyu. 2022. Ageing and Familial Support: A Three-Generation Portrait from Rural and Urban China. *Ageing & Society* 42: 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X22000861>.
- Lu, Binghui. 2012. "Jiating daiji lunli hexie yu chuantong xiaodao de jicheng he chuangxin" (The Harmony of Intergenerational Ethics and Preservation and Innovation in Filial Piety). *Qilu Xuekan (qilu Journal)* 3: 82–85.
- Lu, Jiehuja, and Li. Zhang. 2017. "Zhongguo laonianren de zhaoliao xuqiu moshi jiqi xingxiang yinsu yanjiu—jiyu zhongguo laonian shehui zhuzong diaocha shuju de yanzheng" (A Study on Chinese Elderly Care Demands Pattern and Its Determinants: Based on the Evidence of 2014 CLASS). *Renkou Xuekan (population Journal)* 40 (2): 22–33.
- Lum, Terry Y. S., Elsie C. W. Yan, Andy H. Y. Ho, Michelle H. Y. Shum, Gloria H. Y. Wong, Mandy M. Y. Lau, and Junfang Wang. 2016. Measuring Filial Piety in the 21st Century: Development, Factor Structure, and Reliability of the 10-Item Contemporary Filial Piety Scale. *Journal of Applied Gerontology* 35 (11): 1235–1247.
- Margret, Mead. 1970. *Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gap*. New York: The Natural History Press.
- Qi, Xiaoying. 2018. Floating Grandparents: Rethinking Family Obligation and Intergenerational Support. *International Sociology* 33 (6): 761–777.
- Qi, Xiaoying. 2021. *Remaking Families in Contemporary China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Raymond, Ngan, and William Wong. 1996. Injustice in Family Care of the Chinese Elderly in Hong Kong. *Journal of Aging and Social Policy* 7 (2): 77–94.
- Shang, Xiaoyuan, and Zhengang Li. 2009. "Shanxi nongcun laonian zhaoliao de ge'an yanjiu" (Aged Care in Rural China: A Case in Shanxi Province). *Renkou Yu Fazhan (population and Development)* 1: 95–102.
- Shi, Lihong. 2021. Losing an Only Child: Parental Grief among China's *Shidu* Parents. In *Chinese Families Upside Down: Intergenerational Dynamics and Neo-Familism in the Early 21st Century*, ed. Yunxiang Yan, 176–193. Leiden: Brill.
- Sun, Yuezhu. 2017. Among a Hundred Good Virtues, Filial Piety is the First: Contemporary Moral Discourses on Filial Piety in Urban China. *Anthropological Quarterly* 90 (3): 771–799.
- Tang, Can, Chunhua Ma, and Jinqun Shi. 2009. "Nüer zhanyang de lunli yu gongping: Zhedong nongcun jiating daiji guanxi de xinbie kaocha" (Ethics and Fairness of Daughters Supporting Parents: Gender Study of Intergenerational Family Relations in Rural Areas of Eastern Zhejiang Province). *Shehuixue Yanjiu (sociological Studies)* 6: 18–36.
- Thomason, Erin. 2021. United in Suffering: Rural Grandparents and the Intergenerational Contribution of Care. In *Chinese Families Upside Down: Intergenerational Dynamics and Neo-Familism in the Early 21st Century*, ed. Yunxiang Yan, 76–102. Leiden: Brill.
- Wei, Hongyao, and Zhangbao Zhong. 2015. Shuangyuan xiaodao, jiating jiazhi yu zhinü shanyang xingwei: Jiyu Zhongguo zonghe shehui diaocha shuju de shizheng fenxi" (Dual Filial Piety: Family Values, and Children's Eldercare Behavior Empirical Analysis Based on China's Comprehensive Social Survey Data). *Nanfang Renkou (south China Population)* 5: 52–63.
- Wong, Yu Cheung, and Leung Joe. 2012. Long-Term Care in China: Issues and Prospects. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* 55 (7): 570–586.
- Wu, Xiaoying. 2020. "Zhaoliao de wentihua jiqi zhengce xuanze: Yige jiating bianqian shijiao de tantao" (Problematicization of Care and Its Policy Choices: A Discussion from the Perspective of Family Change). *Hangzhou Shida Xuebao (shehui Kexue Ban) (journal of Hangzhou Normal University [humanities and social sciences Edition])* 6: 80–90.
- Wu, Xinyue. 2021b. Zhaoliao laodong yu nianling kunjing: jiyu yanglao jigou huliyuan de yanjiu (Care Work and Aging Conundrum: Elder Care Workers in China's Nursing Homes). *Funü Yanjiu Luncong Journal of Chinese Women's Studies* 4: 83–96.
- Xie, He. 2020. "Jiyu shuangyuan xiaodao moxing de nongcun jiating zhinü shanyang xingwei yanjiu" (Research on Child Support Behavior of Rural Families Based on the Dual Filial Piety Model). *Nongcun Jingji Yu Keji (rural Economy and Science Technology)* 21: 254–257.

- Xinyue, Wu. 2021a. "Shichanghua de zhaogu gongzuo: Xing bie, jieceng yu qinmi guanxi laodong" (Commercialized Care-work: Gender, Social Stratification and Intimate Labor). *Shehuixue Pinglun (sociological Review of China)* 7 (1): 75–86.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 1996. *The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 1997. The Triumph of Conjuality: Structural Transformation of Family Relations in a Chinese Village. *Ethnology* 36 (3): 191–212.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 1999. Rural Youth and Youth Culture in North China. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 23 (1): 75–97.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2002. Courtship, Love and Premarital Sex in a North China Village. *The China Journal*, 48: 29–53.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2003. *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2011. The Individualization of the Family in Rural China. *Boundary 2* 38 (1): 203–229.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2015. Parents-Driven Divorce and Individualization among Urban Chinese Youth. *International Social Science Journal* 213/214: 317–330.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2016. Intergenerational Intimacy and Descending Familism in Rural North China. *American Anthropologist* 118 (2): 244–257.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2018. Neo-Familism and the State in Contemporary China. *Urban Anthropology* 47 (3): 181–224.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2021. The Inverted Family, Post-Patriarchal Intergenerationality, and Neo-Familism. In *Chinese Families Upside Down: Intergenerational Dynamics and Neo-Familism in the Early 21st Century*, ed. Yunxiang Yan, 1–30. Leiden: Brill.
- Yeh, Kuang-Hui., and O. Bedford. 2003. A Test of the Dual Filial Piety Model. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 6 (3): 215–228.
- Yeh, Kuang-Hui., Chin-Chun. Yi, Wei-Chun. Tsao, and Po-San. Wan. 2013. Filial Piety in Contemporary Chinese Societies: A Comparative Study of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. *International Sociology* 28 (3): 277–296.
- Zeng, Yi., Linda George, Melanie Sereny, Gu. Danan, and James W. Vaupel. 2016. Older Parents Enjoy Better Filial Piety and Care from Daughters than Sons in China. *American Journal of Medical Research* 3 (1): 244–272.
- Zhan, Heying Jenny, and Rhonda J. V. Montgomery. 2003. Gender and Elder Care in China: The Influence of Filial Piety and Structural Constraints. *Gender & Society* 17 (2): 209–229.
- Zhan, Heying Jenny, Zhanlian Feng, Zhiyu Chen, and Xiaotian Feng. 2011. The Role of the Family in Institutional Long-term Care: Cultural Management of Filial Piety in China. *International Journal of Social Welfare* 20 (S1): S121–S134.
- Zhang, Aihua. 2015. Nongcun zhongnian nüxing de wenqing celüe yu jiating guanxi qidai: Dui Hebei Shangcun gedai zhaogu shijian de yanjiu (The Emotional Strategy and Expectations of Family Relations among Middle-aged Women in Rural China: A Study of Grandparenting in Shang Village, Hebei Province). *Funü Yanjiu Luncong (collection of Women's Studies)* 5: 19–28.
- Zhang, Hong. 2017. Recalibrating Filial Piety: Realigning the State, Family, and Market Interests in China. In *Transforming Patriarchy Chinese Family in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Gonçalo Santos and Stevan Harrell, 234–250. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Zhang, Li. 2020. *Anxious China: Inner Revolution and Politics of Psychotherapy*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zheng, Dandan. 2018. "Getihua yu yitihua: Sandai shi yu xiade daiji guanxi" (Individualization and Integration: Intergenerational Relations from the Perspective of Three Generations). *Qingnian Yanjiu (youth Studies)* 1: 12–22.
- Zheng, Yushuang. 2021. "Falü baowei jiating: Zhonggou xiaodao de fazhi xingxiang" (The Law Protects the Family: Reconstructing the Legal Image of Filial Piety). *Henan Daxue Xuebao (shehui Kexue Ban) Journal of Henan University Social Sciences* 5: 22–29.
- Zhong, Xiaohui, and Shining He. 2014. "Xieshang shi qinmi guanxi: Dusheng ziniu fumu dui jiating guanxi he xiaodao de qidai" (Negotiated Intimacy: Expectations of Family Relationships and Filial Piety among Singleton Parents). *Kaifang Shidai (open times)* 1: 155–175.
- Zhou, Feizhou. 2021. "Yiben yu yiti: Zhongguo shehui lilun de jichu" (Notions of Oneness and of One Foundation: The Foundations of Chinese Social Theory). *Shehui (Chinese Journal of Sociology)* 4: 1–29.
- Zhu, Jinghui, and Qiaoyan Zhu. 2013. "Wenhe de lixing: Dangdai Zhejiang nongcun jiating daiji guanxi yanjiu" (Mild Rationality: A Study of Intergenerational Relationships Among Rural Families in Zhejiang Province). *Zhejiang Shehui Kexue (zhejiang Social Sciences)* 10: 99–105.
- Zou, Xiang, Ruth Fitzgerald, and Jing-Bao. Nie. 2020a. 'Unworthy of Care and Treatment': Cultural Devaluation and Structural Constraints to Healthcare-Seeking for Older People in Rural China. *International Journal of Environment Research and Public Health* 17 (2132): 1–13.
- Zou, Xiang, Jing-Bao. Nie, and Ruth Fitzgerald. 2020b. *Weiqu*, Structural Injustice and Caring for Sick Older People in Rural Chinese Families: An Empirical Ethical Study. *Bioethics* 34 (6): 593–601.

Publisher's Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.