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Perceptions and expectations of filial piety among older Chinese immigrants in Canada

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Abstract

Much of the literature discusses filial piety in general and ambiguous terms. This study, in contrast, investigates specific perceptions of filial piety and parental expectations of filial duty among older Chinese immigrants in Canada. The study is based on thematic analysis of 46 Chinese immigrants in seven focus groups conducted in the Greater Toronto Area. Findings show the perceptions of filial piety varied, but almost all participants had reduced expectations of their children. Nevertheless, they still valued and expected emotional care from their children. The study argues that changes in institutional settings, social policies and welfare systems define parents' support needs and affect their expectations in the host society, while norms and institutional settings in the place of origin influence their perceptions of filial piety.

Keywords: filial piety; immigrants; Chinese; Canada

Introduction

Rapid population ageing and dramatic changes in families have prompted scholars and policy makers to ask who will care for the growing numbers of older people in societies around the world (Walker, 1991; Bass and Morris, 1993; Montigny, 1997; Bengtson and Putney, 2000; Bengtson and Lowenstein, 2017). Will it be the government, the seniors themselves or their families? Western industrialised states have generally assumed responsibility for their citizens' welfare, but this trend appears to have slowed or reversed, with welfare programmes being restructured (Lesemann and Martin, 1993; Clark, 2002; Pavolini and Ranci, 2008; Bengtson and Lowenstein, 2017). In developing countries, families play a primary role in caring for their older members, but this role has weakened and families are becoming less reliable sources of support (Fu and Hughes, 2009; Feng, 2019). Migration, another global demographic 'megatrend' (United Nations, 2019), adds to the complexities and challenges of care for older adults in both host and home countries (Warnes *et al.*, 2004; Warnes and Williams, 2006; Ciobanu *et al.*, 2017; King *et al.*, 2017).

Filial piety, or *xiao*, is a central concept in family care, so much so that in some countries it has become intricately linked with state laws, welfare policies and ageing strategies (China National Committee on Ageing, 1996; Gray and Petrich, 2014; Scheil-Adlung, 2015). However, while norms of filial obligations shape the motivations of adult children who support their older parents, numerous studies have demonstrated that these norms differ across cultures (Dai and Dimond, 1998). For example, Hamilton (1990) points out that even the concept of filial piety in the analysis of Western societies and the concept of *xiao* in the analysis of Chinese societies are not identical, though sinologists borrowed the term ‘filial piety’ to study family bonds of *xiao* in Chinese societies, so that the concept of ‘filial piety now seem[s] to spring from Chinese soil’ (Hamilton, 1990: 78, *see also* Jamieson, 1970).¹ For him, and numerous others as discussed later in the paper, *xiao* is the filial duty of children to their older parents. Hamilton (1990) further argues that in imperial China, the notion of filial obligation reflects impersonal, non-intentional and harmony-seeking fulfilment of social roles, while it means the intentional, directional and consequential individual action in Europe. Fei (1983) argues that in Chinese families, reciprocal support flows between parents and children, while parents in Western families do not expect much support from children. Scholars also stress the differences between Eastern collectivistic cultures which emphasise relationship, harmony and interdependence, and Western individualist cultures which stress independence, autonomy and self-reliance (Ng, 2002; Nisbett, 2003; Kagitcibasi and Ataca, 2015; Li and Cao, 2018). Indeed, philosophers like Simmons (1979) and Slote (1979) argue that in the West, adult children are not morally responsible for supporting their parents at all. Meanwhile, in order to preserve their personal autonomy, elderly people may resist family involvement in care provision, even with the decline of the welfare state in Western countries (Grootegoed and van Dijk, 2012).

Nevertheless, making a bipolar distinction between East and West is too simplistic. In the East, older people also treasure autonomy and independence (Cheung, 2019), and in the West, parent–child relationships can be strong (Bengtson and Roberts, 1991). Historical evidence shows that in 19th-century Europe and America, adult children provided their support to their aged parents, and by co-residence out of necessity (Hareven, 1996; Ruggles, 2003). Scholarly research also demonstrates that adult children in modern Western families provide important support to their older parents, even though children’s motivations and parental expectations may vary from those of their Eastern counterparts (Kendig *et al.*, 1992; Lowenstein and Daatland, 2006). A comparative study of the United Kingdom (UK) and China by Laidlaw *et al.* (2010) found UK-born participants had lower expectations of their children’s responsibility than Chinese immigrants in the UK or Chinese parents in Beijing. The study by Stuifbergen *et al.* (2010) shows that in Dutch families, children’s filial obligations tend to be strong, but they are personalised rather than imposed by norms. For Stuifbergen *et al.* (2010), individualisation does not indicate children’s withdrawal from providing care to parents.

The main aim of the present study is to understand perceptions of filial piety and parental expectations of children’s filial obligations, choosing older Chinese immigrants in Canada as the target population. In the past 30 years, the number of older Chinese adults in Canada has more than quadrupled. In 1991, there were around

45,000 Chinese aged 65 and above, accounting for 7 per cent of Chinese Canadians. Today there are approximately 190,000, accounting for 13 per cent of Chinese Canadians, with 97 per cent born outside Canada.² These Chinese older adults, once predominantly immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan, are now increasingly retirement immigrants from mainland China. Thus, some of these Chinese seniors have grown older in Canada, while others arrived as older adults. The migration experience likely has important implications for the wellbeing of these Chinese seniors. As older immigrants live in a new context, which often differs in institutions, policies and the welfare system from their home society, their perceptions and expectations of what their children will do for them may well have changed. Accordingly, I ask the following three research questions. First, how do older immigrants perceive filial obligations, or in the Chinese context, *xiao* or filial piety? That is, what is their understanding of what children should do for their aged parents? Second, what are their expectations? That is, what do they actually expect from their children, and is there a gap between perception and expectation? Third, what factors shape their perceptions and expectations? I argue that in the host society, changes in institutional settings, social policies and welfare systems will define parents' support needs and affect their expectations, while norms and institutional settings in the place of origin will have influenced their perceptions. I test this argument using data from seven focus group discussions with 46 older immigrant participants in the Greater Toronto Area.

Literature review

In Chinese societies, *xiao*, or filial piety, conceptualised by Confucius (551–479 BC) as the 'doctrine of Heaven' and 'righteousness of Earth,' is a guiding principle regulating care and intergenerational relations within Chinese families. Filial piety has been regarded as a traditional Chinese virtue (Chou, 2011; Canda, 2013), the root of a person's character (Sin, 2019b) and a way of life (Ng *et al.*, 2002). It encompasses a wide array of expected duties or responsibilities of adult children to their parents, elders and ancestors, including respect, loyalty and care. Part of filial piety is the expectation that children will take care of themselves and not cause bodily harm to others; they will maintain the good name of their parents and ancestors (Chen, 1908: 16).

Filial piety or *xiao* has been extensively discussed by philosophers, social scientists, practitioners and policy makers over two millennia, and it remains important in everyday lives in Chinese societies. Despite its longevity, there have been changes in the concept over time. The Confucian conceptualisation of filial piety was itself a refinement of an earlier emphasis on ancestor worship (Bedford and Yeh, 2019). Scholars note other variations and changes in its meaning and underline the social, economic and political factors shaping them. There is little consensus in the literature, however, and a tremendous scholarly debate centres on this abstract, multi-dimensional and fluid concept (Chen, 1908; Jordan, 1998; Therborn, 2004). In addition to the variations in scholarly interpretations of the classical notion of filial piety, industrialisation and modernisation, political transformation, social and cultural change may all have shaped societal norms of filial piety in Chinese societies (Ikels, 2004; Zhan *et al.*, 2006, 2011; Chen, 2017). Some scholars

argue that modernisations have weakened or eroded the traditional filial beliefs (Lee and Kwok, 2005; Feng, 2017; Bedford and Yeh, 2019). The modernisation thesis posits that, as older people lose control of the means of production, their traditional roles in knowledge and wisdom sharing decrease in importance. Furthermore, modernisation increases individualism, economic independence and education of the young, and such forces have devalued older adults and eroded their power and status (Cowgill, 1974; Aboderin, 2004). Following this line of thought, Yan (2003: 189) argues that the rise of individualism may have led to ‘disintegration and ultimate collapse of the notion of filial piety’. Other scholars stress that filial piety has been resilient to modernisation (Croll, 2006), and the notion has survived social, economic and political transformations (Whyte, 2004; Yeh *et al.*, 2013). Even though expectations, attitudes and emotions have undergone significant change, as argued by Qi (2014), filial piety continues to play a significant role in the provision of care and support. Still others say modernisation does not erode filial piety. Instead, the increases in economic resources and education brought about by modernisation actually enable it (Yao, 2001; Cheung and Kwan, 2009). Education, particularly moral education, as argued by Cheung and Kwan (2009) and Thomas (1990), can be a means to sustain filial piety in the face of modernisation. Indeed, the teaching of the *Book of Filial Piety* was part of the school curriculum in classical Chinese education both before and during modernisation (Chan and Tan, 2004).

The state and society may advocate or attack filial piety to achieve particular objectives in different historical eras. For example, scholars like Shang Yang (390–338 BC) condemned filial piety for undermining loyalty to the ruler (Yang, 2017). Intellectuals during the May Fourth Movement (1919) called filial piety ‘moral hypocrisy’ (Huang, 2019) and ‘the source of all evil’ (Chan and Tan, 2004). Later, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), top political leaders galvanised the Red Guards to attack the Confucian notion of filial piety (Feng, 2017). In contrast, in the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), filial piety was officially promoted, and adopted as a means to manage society (Chan and Tan, 2004). Following the market reforms, the ‘one-child’ policy that began in mainland China in the late 1970s and the rapid ageing of the Chinese population, there has been a revival of Confucianism (Bell, 2008), with a concomitant reconstruction of filial piety (Wei, 2017). The state is once again advocating filial piety, this time by legalising children’s obligation to support their aged parents. However, as recent studies suggest demographic shifts may shape modern attitudes, some predict the dramatic increase in ageing may lead to negative attitudes to the older adults (North and Fiske, 2015).

Studies also show that filial piety differs across contemporary Chinese societies, *e.g.* mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, when economic, political, social and cultural transformations differ. Studies have been sporadic, however, and have produced mixed results. In a comparative study of Taiwan and mainland China, Whyte (2004) finds that the filial support system in a city (Baoding) in mainland China is more modern than in urban Taiwan, *i.e.* the filial support system is stronger in Taiwan. A comparative study by Chen *et al.* (2007) finds no difference in filial attitudes among university students in Hong Kong and mainland China, but higher levels of filial behaviour in mainland China than in Hong Kong. Drawing on

large-scale data-sets from the 2006 East Asian Social Survey, Yeh *et al.* (2013) find that filial piety remains potent among all three societies, although the implications and influences of filial piety tend to be more similar in Taiwan and Hong Kong, with China showing differences. Nevertheless, a consistent finding across Taiwan (Hsu *et al.*, 2001), Hong Kong (Cheng and Chan, 2006; Chong and Liu, 2016) and mainland China (Yue and Ng, 1999; Zhan, 2004) is that older generations who retain the value of filial piety have lower expectations of their children than would traditionally be the case.

Some studies looking at overseas Chinese communities have found that filial piety continues to operate (Tsai, 1999; Liu *et al.*, 2000; Lieber *et al.*, 2004; Lai and Suhood, 2009). Others stress changes in concepts of filial piety, indicating the gradual loss of its place in Chinese families (Wu, 1975) and the diminution of its influence (Yu, 1983). There is also evidence to show that the responsibility of parental care is shifting from male to female children in the North American context (Yu, 1983). These studies suggest acculturation plays an important role in shaping filial piety norms and practices (Wu, 1975) and filial piety and care (M Guo *et al.*, 2019). For example, immigrant parents start to modify their expectations and make adjustments during their migrant experience in the host society (Lieber *et al.*, 2004; Lin *et al.*, 2015).

While there is a plethora of literature on filial piety, there are noticeable conceptual and methodological shortcomings in much of that work. Filial piety has been operationalised as a general and ambiguous concept and, as such, it fails to provide clear guidance for research or offer good explanations of practice (Sung, 1998). Scholars often treat the perception of filial piety as a social norm. Other scholars treat parents' expectations of filial piety and behaviour as a social norm. In such conceptualisations, the gaps between parents' and children's perceptions of filial piety or the gaps between parents' perceptions of what filial piety means and their expectations of what their children will actually do are treated as evidence of the erosion of filial piety.

In studies of overseas Chinese communities, scholars often focus on acculturation as driving changes in perceptions, expectations and enactments of filial piety. The acculturation process is seen as a binary interaction between Western individualist and Eastern collectivist cultures (other minority ethnic cultures are seldom discussed). This type of approach both essentialises and oversimplifies cultures (Leung *et al.*, 2020). The institutional settings that shape perceptions and beliefs are ignored, as are older migrants' understandings of filial piety, with the lion's share of research dedicated to the children's perspective.

This study decomposes the concept of filial piety into three elements: parents' perceptions of what filial piety means, their expectations of its fulfilment by their children and actual filial enactments. The approach evokes and builds on the study of Chen *et al.* (2007) on the psychology of filial piety to differentiate filial attitudes from filial behaviours. More specifically, the paper probes the impact of immigration on older Chinese immigrants' perceptions of filial piety, their expectations of how their children will meet their filial obligations, and the factors shaping their perceptions and expectations.

Methods

The study draws on data from a larger project on the health and wellbeing of Chinese seniors in Canada. From mid-May to mid-July 2017, my graduate research assistants and I conducted seven focus groups among mentally intact Chinese people aged 65 and above. Two of the seven focus groups consisted of immigrants from Hong Kong, two groups included immigrants from Taiwan and the other three groups involved immigrants from mainland China. We recruited more participants from mainland China because they account for the majority of Chinese Canadians, and most were recent immigrants – the least studied category. To ensure possible theoretical saturation (Saunders *et al.*, 2018), we recruited participants with a variety of social backgrounds, including age, gender, education level, citizenship status, marital status and year migrated to Canada. We did not recruit any more participants for further focus groups once we had sufficient information about the main issues faced by immigrant seniors. We distributed the fliers in community centres and retirement homes, and contacted senior groups for recruitment. Our community partners, including service agencies and community organisations, assisted in the recruitment. We conducted the focus groups in Mandarin or Cantonese, at the venues of service providers or in community centres. Groups had between six and eight members, with no others present except the moderator and one or two assistants. My graduate research assistants and I, together or separately, facilitated the focus groups. Each lasted about two hours. At the beginning of each session, we trained the participants so that they did not reveal their true names, but used identification numbers when speaking, to retain anonymity. The moderator asked participants two questions: How do you understand filial piety? and What are your expectations of your children's filial obligations? The moderator then probed further about reasons behind filial piety perceptions and expectations. The research assistants transcribed verbatim the audio recordings of the focus groups. The University of Toronto Ethics Committee approved the project. Each participant signed a consent form before the focus group began.

As a focus group has the advantage of promoting in-depth discussion through group interaction (Morgan, 1996), it was particularly suitable for the study of such a complex, multi-dimensional and elusive concept as filial piety.

In each of the focus groups, we started with personal introductions, then moved to migration experiences, family life and community participation, and advanced plan of care. The topic of filial piety was part of the discussion related to family life. We asked in general terms about filial piety, rather than probing participants' family privacies. For example, the moderator simply asked the participants how they understood filial piety in the Canadian context. Participants could elaborate on their understandings of filial piety and supplement these with additional ideas after listening to others. They could use examples to clarify their understandings. The moderator also made sure each participant had a chance to share as much as he or she wanted without interruptions. This led to detailed discussion, mostly about filial piety, both perceptions and expectations, and, to a lesser sense, their children's filial actions. When discussing filial piety, participants talked about their own life experiences and the Canadian context. This shed useful light on their perceptions and expectations and suggested how personal experiences and contextual factors had shaped them.

Using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, I conducted thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2017) based on the original Chinese transcripts, with codes and memos created in English. Guided by grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 1997; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), the open and axial coding processes led to the formation of key categories of perception and expectation of filial piety, and the personal and contextual factors shaping them. The fact that I facilitated one focus group enabled me to understand the context of the discussion and the data quality. Although qualitative analysis is based on careful reading of a text, a researcher needs cultural competence to understand the true meaning of a text beyond the words and put the whole conversation into context (Krueger, 1998). For example, when a female participant complained her daughter spent 'too much' buying her clothing of 'no use', she may not have wanted to show her disappointment but rather to convey a message of her daughter's filial behaviour. Similarly, when a male participant complained that his son was too busy with his work, he might have wanted to convey a message about his son's successful career and how this has brought honour to the family.

Results

Forty-six Chinese older adults participated in seven focus groups. The thematic analysis yielded three broad themes, namely understanding of filial piety, reduced expectations of filial obligations and underlying reasons behind changing expectation of filial obligations.

Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

There were 28 female and 18 male participants. Most were aged between 65 and 84, were married or widowed, had a university degree or higher level of education, and were either Canadian citizens or permanent residents (for details, see Table 1). Among 12 older adults who migrated from Hong Kong, all but one came to Canada before 1997, with the earliest migrating in 1968, and the latest in 2002. Those from Taiwan, a total of 14, migrated to Canada in the 1980s and 1990s. The majority of those from mainland China (17 out of 20) were recent immigrants arriving after 2000, with only three arriving in the 1990s.

Understandings of filial piety

The focus group participants revealed variations in their understanding of the meaning of filial piety. One contrasting perception was *xiao* (孝) versus *xiao shun* (孝順). A 76-year-old woman who migrated to Canada from Taiwan in 1980 believed *xiao* equalled to *xiao shun*. That is to say, *xiao* or piety needs to encompass the element of *shun* (following parents' wishes). She said:

As regards to *xiao*, firstly you [child] need to be filial, and secondly you need to follow [parents'] wishes. It is not *xiao* when you do not follow parents' wishes (光孝不順不行).

Table 1. Characteristics of focus group participants

	N	%
Age:		
65–74	18	39.1
75–84	21	45.7
85+	7	15.2
Sex:		
Female	28	60.9
Male	18	39.1
Marital status:		
Single	6	13.0
Married	27	58.7
Divorced	1	2.2
Remarried	1	2.2
Widowed	11	23.9
Place of origin:		
Mainland China	20	43.5
Hong Kong	12	26.1
Taiwan	14	30.4
Education:		
University or higher degree	19	46.3
High school graduate	13	31.7
Elementary school	4	9.8
Below elementary school	5	12.2
Year migrated to Canada:		
1968–1978	5	11.1
1980–1989	8	17.8
1990–1999	13	28.9
2000–2009	16	35.6
2010–2013	3	6.7
Citizenship:		
Citizen	25	55.6
Permanent resident	19	42.2
Other, not specified	1	2.2

Note: N = 46.

She used an example to explain her point:

My husband passed at 69 years old. Because I did not like living alone, I made my first request, that at least one (among three) of them [children] needs to live together with me. I spoke only once. My eldest son decided to move to live with me. I felt appreciated, not by my son [since it was his filial obligation]. I felt appreciated by my daughter-in-law. Only when my daughter-in-law agreed, could we live happily together as a family.

A 67-year-old man in the same focus group, who migrated to Canada in 1987, did not agree. He believed that filial piety did not mean children had to follow their parents' wishes or even agree with their parents. To him, it was not often the case that both the old and the young had exactly the same ideas. He sensed that older people might hold wrong or unreasonable ideas. In such circumstances, he questioned whether children would still follow their parents' wishes. In such cases, he said older parents should show their 风范 (literally, style) of being a senior. That is to say, parents should not coerce children to do as the parents wish.

One of the central Confucian notions of *xiao* is filial care for parents. Some participants thought children's provision of care when needed was an important element of filial piety. They believed parents would be happy when their children provided support, even when those parents could otherwise care for themselves. One female participant described her 'good' (rather than 'filial') sons and daughters-in-law during the focus group discussion on filial piety:

I have three sons and three daughters-in-law, two living in Canada and one living in Hong Kong. They are all good children. The eldest daughter-in-law used to accompany me to see doctors when we lived in Hong Kong. She continued to help me see doctors after we moved to Canada. I used to live with the second son. Now he worked in the USA [United States of America], I started to live with the eldest son. My son and daughter cooked for me. I am so happy that I did not need to cook, but just read my books.

The majority of participants prioritised emotional care over financial or instrumental care, but they thought a filial child did not necessarily have to live with his or her parents. The lack of financial or instrumental care did not mean children were not filial. Rather, the two basic elements of being filial were seen as respect for one's parents and concern for their wellbeing.

Participants believed that showing respect towards seniors was one of the basic virtues of a filial child. One participant said she educated her grandson on how to speak to his mother with proper manners. She specifically mentioned that it was not necessary to tell children how to become filial. Instead, she used an example to demonstrate what a filial child would do:

Whenever I observed him [the grandchild] not behaving and speaking with bad manners, I asked him to reflect how his father spoke to the grandma.

Concern for parents' wellbeing was another filial virtue, and participants used examples demonstrating it as well. One said the following:

I have only one daughter. I think she does care for us. Such care shows bit by bit in our daily lives. For example, there was a problem of massive number of ants getting into our house. We asked our daughter how to deal with the problem. She searched internet right away, and told us to use black pepper or unknown baits to disperse ants. As regards to those minor matters, she would help when you need them. It shows that she cares.

Another parent who gave examples about how her filial son showed concern said the following:

I felt lonely when I was in China, after the death of my spouse. Now I live with my son in Canada, feeling much relaxed in my life. I came here not long ago, and would have to wait many years before getting the old-age security from the government. My son reminded me not to worry too much, and wished me to be healthy. He made sure that I understood we had health insurance.

Children who take care of themselves and are successful in their careers are also part of the Confucian notion of filial piety, because they bring honour to the family name. A 78-year-old woman who migrated to Canada from Beijing in 2004 believed filial children would take good care of themselves, be healthy, live a happy life and have a successful career. 'It would be great if children do not need help from you', she said. Other participants agreed that a filial child would not cause trouble to his or her parents. One person said he would feel good if his children were doing well in their lives (孩子好, 我们就好). Another said that all would be well if his children did not bother him (不要来找我麻烦就好).

A woman who migrated to Canada from Taiwan in 1988 believed the most important element of filial piety was family harmony. For her, one important condition of family harmony was that each child had a stable job. In addition, she said, siblings needed to treat each other well. Only then could children be truly filial.

Participants generally believed children should pay respect to and worship their deceased parents. One participant said he visited his parents' tombs once a year. Another said he would bow in front of his parents' tombs whenever he visited them. This was the one case in which the participants did not give examples of their children's behaviour, however, suggesting it was an aspect of filial piety they had ceased to expect.

Reduced expectations of filial obligations

Despite their strong understanding of filial piety, almost all participants said they did not expect as much of their children. Nor did they expect their children to act the way they themselves had. One widowed woman (born in 1922, migrating to Canada in 1983) said such expectations 'would lead to family conflicts'. She suggested that older people should retreat a bit (退一步) and face the 'boundless oceans and vast skies' (海阔天空). She explained that only then would older people 'not be bothered by anything, and they could reach peace in heart' (everybody in the focus group laughed at this point). A 70-year-old man who was born in Taiwan said his generation expected very little from their children. He indicated

that he did not need his children to provide financial support. Regarding his expectations, he said, 'If they have time, I wish my children phone me, or visit me.'

Some parents expressed a priority to depend on themselves for their own lives, rather than relying on children for their happiness. One participant thought older people should reflect upon their lives. He said that instead of requesting their children to do this or that, parents should adopt a healthy lifestyle and lead a happy life by themselves.

Some participants indicated that instead of relying on their children, parents could turn to care workers for instrumental support, a finding similar to Lan's (2002) discovery of the subcontracting of filial piety. One participant described her situation of caring for her in-laws in Taiwan to make her case. She went back to Taiwan to care for her mother-in-law for a week, in rotation among siblings, even though the family hired a live-in care worker. She clearly indicated in the focus group that she did not want her children to do the same: 'Everybody now have this idea (not to bother children for old age care).' Another participant thought that instead of having all children filial, it was enough to have one filial child.

One element of the Confucian notion of filial piety is that children honour their deceased parents. Even though the participants talked about doing this themselves, they did not expect their children to do so. One participant from Taiwan said he visited his parents' tombs once a year, but he did not expect the same from his own children. He said he would not bother, even though he complained that the younger generation did not worship their ancestors:

Our next generation did not worship their ancestors. They might forget their family names as well.

A man from Hong Kong also complained but did not see the necessity to make his children sacrifice to him after his death. He said:

Why do you want your children to give a bow in front of your tomb during 清明 (Tomb Sweeping Day) or 重阳 (Double Ninth Festival). You would not even know it after you die. Would it make a difference even if they bow? It would be worse after generations. Your grandsons would not even know what you looked like. It doesn't make sense to force them to bow. They would rather go shopping than visiting your tomb.

A female participant from mainland China stressed the need for filial piety while parents were still alive, not after they died:

Many friends in our generation received communist education of atheism. Nothing remained after death. It is not necessary to follow an elaborate funeral ceremony, and cry to demonstrate grief, after a parent's death.

Nevertheless, she too visited her parents' tombs when she was in China.

Filial obligations: social change, welfare system and institutions

When the study participants discussed filial piety, they focused on contextual factors to explain why they reduced their expectation of children fulfilling their filial obligation. These ranged from rapid social change in general, to specific cultural differences between Canadian and Chinese societies, different degrees of acculturation between parents and children, the Canadian job market for adult children and Canadian welfare policy.

One clear theme that emerged from the discussions was that participants believed the world was rapidly changing, and older people needed to adapt. They should allow the younger generation to keep their independent ideas and move forward. A 65-year-old man from Taiwan talked about the changes in contemporary society and his inability to keep up:

The society has gone through so much change in the recent 10–20 years. You might be able to catch up with the changes in physical environment, but might not be able to catch up with the new rules and values. You will have to leave them [children] alone, rather than asking them to listen to you. Everything will be good when they do not behave badly.

A woman from Taiwan reasoned that adult children were in a better position to understand the dramatic changes in society and the large differences between Western and Eastern cultures. She believed adult children would understand Canada much more ‘accurately’ than their parents.

While they generally agreed that their adult children understood the rapid social changes better than they did, the participants believed their children lacked an understanding of Chinese traditions. One thought older parents could not expect their children to have the same understanding of the Confucian filial piety as they did. She said her daughter arrived in Canada when she was in her twenties. The mother said: ‘My daughter did not understand Chinese traditions. Her sense of filial piety is not strong.’

A man from Hong Kong, now living alone, stressed the importance of family education (家教) in transmitting the cultural meaning of filial piety. He also emphasised the importance of establishing a strong bond with children so they would behave (be filial) when grown up. For him, ‘family education is the key’ to filial behaviour. He said:

Parents should establish intimate relations with children, and often communicate with them, during their childhood. Otherwise, children would distance themselves from you once grown up.

He elaborated that fathers often work outside the family, while mothers spend more time with children and play an important role in socialising children to treat their parents well. He believed that intimate relations between parents was a prior condition for children to be filial. He further sensed that when parents’ relations did not work well, it would be difficult to educate children to be filial to both parents. As he saw it, longer work hours outside the family, less time spent with children and increased marriage breakdowns in contemporary society explained the erosion

of children's filial piety. He also firmly believed that some children are rebellious from birth. Given all this, he said he would feel happy if one among four or five children were filial. As he claimed, it would be 'rare under the heaven' if all children were filial.

A small number of participants touched on the issue of changing intergenerational relationships over the years in the origin and host societies. A man born in 1937 in Taiwan, who migrated to Canada in 1994, revealed that he had gone through a difficult period when he farmed with his parents, and family meant something different to them. He said:

We had parents above us, whom we relied on for our food. How could you survive if they expelled you from the family? Now it is different. Children earned their own living without relying on parents. They do not need to listen to you.

He said he was not able to request that his children treat him as defined by traditional norms.

Some parents said they were financially secure and did not need their children to provide financial support. An 86-year-old man from mainland China expressed his appreciation of the support he obtained from the Canadian government. Even though his two daughters had high incomes, he did not need any economic support from them. He said:

We have two daughters in Canada. They both work with high income. We also have a lot [of money]. Canadian government is relatively considerate. After paying rent, we still have sufficient [money] for food. We do not need them to give (孝敬) us anything [to show their filial piety].

Another man from mainland China expressed similar ideas; he said his children were relieved of providing financial support as the government covered his health-care expenses:

You know I am old now, with health problems from head to toe. Government even provided transportation for my medical care. The government is so considerate. How many people would have such treatment in China? I could not even pay for my medical expenses [if I lived there]. I have been living in Canada for four years. I am satisfied with every aspect of my life living here.

A 90-year-old widow from Hong Kong, who migrated to Canada in 1987, indicated that she had several great-grandchildren and was satisfied with her life. She said she was thankful that she had a better life now and did not expect more. She recalled her hard life while living in Hong Kong at a young age: she worked as a tailor until 11 pm or 12 pm every day, under gas lanterns, lived with nine others in a small room of eight square metres, close to a toilet, and sometimes suffered from hunger. She said she did not have high expectations of her children, and said she could care for herself.

Nevertheless, some parents were not happy when they thought their children were shifting their filial obligations to the state welfare system. One participant

from Taiwan believed the Canadian welfare state influenced children's perceptions of the extent to which the state should support older people. He immigrated to Canada as a young adult and used to ask his two daughters who grew up in Canada whether they would support their father and mother in their old age. 'The government will support you', was the daughters' response. In another research project, I met an older immigrant couple from mainland China who were not happy with their daughter and son-in-law. Instead of arranging co-residence, the son-in-law asked the older couple to move to social housing. They stopped their financial support as well. The reason given by the son-in-law, as told to me by the mother, was that adult children were not responsible for supporting older parents after sponsoring their immigration for ten years. The son-in-law told them that, after ten years, the government should take care of them.

Many participants expressed their concern about their children's work and life as ethnic minorities in Canada and did not want to become a burden. They stated their wishes not to bother their children whenever possible. One 73-year-old woman, who migrated from mainland China to Canada in 2003, worried about her children's job security. She said that unlike their parents' generation who used to have stable jobs in China, children in Canada might lose their employment and need to look for work:

You may have a well-paid job. Yet you may still lose the job and have to look for another job. This may even happen to people who had been working for 20 years. Such situation would be unbearable.

She further indicated that both generations had their own challenges, and parents and children needed to support each other and reach a kind of compromise. Another participant, who migrated from Hong Kong, commented that it was quite difficult for young people living in Canada, and, therefore, parents' expectations ought to change. She said:

They will have to make a living for themselves. You could not just demand them to care for you. You should feel happy when you do not need children to provide any support.

An 80-year-old man who had lived in Canada for 15 years also expressed a desire to avoid being a burden to his children, a comment which gained consensus among participants in his group. He had two sons in Canada, one living in Quebec and the other in Toronto. He and his wife lived independently. The major consideration of having a separate residence was that parents should understand that children had their own lives; older people should not bother them and cause an additional burden. He also thought it could be troublesome for children when parents became sick. He indicated that one of his acquaintances, an older woman of 90 years, had returned to China. He said he would do the same, even though doing so meant that he would need to rely on care workers or live in a nursing home.

A female participant from mainland China, who had been in Canada for 13 years, did not wish to bother her son because he was too busy with his work:

He has to ask for leave in advance if you need his help. It is a matter of fact to get a day or half-day off when children need to help parents with medical care. Here is different.

She also said that her son wanted to ask for a day off to take his father to the airport so he could return to China. She stopped her son and sent the father to the airport by bus. She thought older people living in Canada needed to learn to live independent lives.

While many parents showed an understanding of their children's situations, others were not happy with their children but could not do much about it. One 74-year-old woman from Hong Kong said that she did not care how her children treated her, as her years were numbered. 'How many days could you still be able to eat?', she asked. One couple in their late sixties from mainland China was not happy when their daughter told them not to expect her to provide much care later in life. Her reason was that she would retire at the age of 65, and at that point, they would be 90 years old if they were still alive.

Discussion

This paper aims to understand older Chinese immigrants' perceptions of filial piety and their expectations of their children's performance in this area, as well as the links between immigration and perceptions and expectations. Although the perceptions of the study's participants varied, a point they had in common was that most had reduced expectations of their children.

Despite the differences in perceptions, most followed Confucian thinking. Filial children should respect their parents, show concern for their wellbeing by providing support when needed, bring honour to the family by being successful, avoid causing problems and continue to respect their parents after death. Yet within these broad categories, there were obvious differences. This may indicate the flexibility in interpretations of Confucianism. Obedience of parents, for example, can be seen as an 'Extreme Principle' (Sin, 2019a) or a 'strong principle' (Sin, 2019b). Nevertheless, in today's Chinese societies, including the Canadian immigrant community, it does not refer to parents' *absolute authority* over children, or children's *unconditional obedience* to parents, or children's obligation to support parents *at any cost* (Canda, 2013; Yeh *et al.*, 2013; Q Guo *et al.*, 2020).

With time in Canada, some Confucian conceptualisations of filial piety seemed to have been abandoned or weakened, while others survived. For example, no participants mentioned that a filial child should not travel far or fail to produce children. Such changes could reflect a change in norms related to rapid social change and modernisation in Chinese societies more generally. They are not necessarily the results of migration. In fact, the comparative study by Laidlaw *et al.* (2010) found no significant differences between older Chinese immigrants in the UK and older Chinese residents in Beijing in the belief that their adult children ought to provide care for them.

Scholars often focus on acculturation as an important factor shaping filial piety in the immigrant community (de Valk and Schans, 2008). But acculturation is likely to have been less influential among the older immigrants in this study. Their

perceptions may have been shaped long before their migration, especially those migrating late in life. Furthermore, the extent of their acculturation may have been limited, partly because many had not lived long in Canada, and partly because, at least for some recent immigrants, they had been less exposed to Canadian culture through interactions with mainstream society because of language difficulties or exclusions.

Although filial piety perceptions may be formed over the lifecourse, including pre-migration socialisation experiences, participants' expectation of filial piety was contextually based, related to the practical situations of both parents and children living in the host society as migrants. Parents expected less from their children than what they had given their own parents. The reduced expectations reflect a number of different things: the different degrees of acculturation for parents and children, parents' actual needs shaped by the Canadian welfare system, and children's work and life in Canadian society. Parents expected less if they believed their children lacked an understanding of the traditional Chinese culture, if they could financially support themselves or if they were worried about their children's immigrant minority status in Canada. Instead of financial or instrumental care, they looked for emotional support, a finding consistent with findings for Chinese seniors in the USA (Dong *et al.*, 2012), New Zealand (Li, 2011), Hong Kong (Cheng and Chan, 2006), Taiwan (Sun, 2012) and mainland China (Yue and Ng, 1999; Shi, 2009; Xu, 2012).³ It is also consistent with the modernisation thesis and its postulation that with the commodification of care (Lan, 2002), value priorities will shift towards an emphasis on subjective wellbeing and quality of life (Inglehart, 1977, 1997). Although directly purchased care often involves emotional labour (Wharton, 2009), it has both benefits and drawbacks (Glendinning *et al.*, 2000; Green and Lawson, 2011). This study demonstrates that immigrant parents still value and expect emotional care from their children; no participant mentioned purchased care as a plausible option for emotional care.

The study's findings point to generation gaps in understandings of the roles of the state and the family in care for older adults, as well as generation gaps in perceptions of filial piety. Many older immigrants need their children's help. Though they may not need financial support, they may need help shopping, moving around, seeking health care, dealing with various agencies, *etc.*, and they usually have a smaller social network (Chen *et al.*, 2015; Dong and Chang, 2017; Luo and Menec, 2018). Children are their important, if not their only, source of informal support. Yet their children may stress the role of the state in providing support, *e.g.* through old-age security, social housing and medical care. They may also encourage their parents to maintain their independence. Those generation gaps, if not dealt with properly, may lead to intergenerational conflicts and stress for both parents and children.

Distinction between 心 (heart and mind) and 力 (ability)

When talking about their wishes and their practical expectations, the participants distinguished 心 (*xin*, or heart and mind) and 力 (*li* or ability), based on their judgement of their children's situation. They wanted their children to be concerned about their wellbeing in both their hearts and their minds. Parents saw their

children as being filial when they showed they cared, even when the children could not provide such care as they would wish. Children who unwillingly fulfilled their cultural obligations of care-giving (see Zhang *et al.*, 2019) were not necessarily filial. A child's provision of less care than expected by parents could also be an unfilial child, but motivation was far more important. In a sense, the willingness to care for parents' wellbeing, internalised rather than imposed, might be similar to the Western idea that care for older parents should be a personal choice rather than imposed by social norms (Stuifbergen *et al.*, 2010). The conceptualisation of filial piety as 心 (heart and mind) or 力 (ability) echoes Sung's (1995) theory of the Two Dimensions of Filial Piety, whereby 心 (heart and mind) resonates with emotionally oriented filial piety and ability with behaviourally oriented filial piety. Overall, however, the participants' perceptions of filial piety balanced the two dimensions; they did not separate them.

Distinction between perception and expectation of filial piety

This qualitative study has demonstrated the need to distinguish between perceptions, expectations, enactments and norms of filial piety. Perceptions of filial piety are often normative, indicating what a filial child ought to do for his or her parents. In contrast, expectations are often practical and largely contextually based. The conceptual division of filial piety into normative perception and practical expectation sheds light on the different perceptions and expectations of the older Chinese adults in this study. It could also help explain the differences between older adults' expectations and the receipt of filial care, as well as the different perceptions, expectations and enactments across generations.

The distinction has the potential to clarify scholarly discussions of filial piety. For example, if someone says filial piety is evolving, does she or he mean the norm, the perception, the expectation or the filial behaviour? The distinction could make it easier to understand the mechanisms and processes of whichever evolution that person is talking about. Acknowledging the multiple dimensions of filial piety also adds depth to the discussion, as different elements of filial piety interact with each other in the process of change. For example, parental expectations may be informed by their perception of filial piety and also by their consideration of the real-life situations of both parents and children. Parental expectations, in turn, may shape children's perception of filial piety, as well as children's filial behaviours. Over time, these reshaped behavioural patterns of filial piety may become societal norms. It is also possible that older immigrant parents expect less when children lack the desire (heart) and/or ability to support them. This too could be circular; traditional norms of filial piety held by older generations will be weakened, and give way to new forms of filial piety held by younger generations.

Policy implications

This study has demonstrated that the concept of filial piety, while important for Chinese people, has evolved in the context of immigration. It shows that dynamic change in perceptions of filial piety and expectations of filial obligations of older

immigrants are themselves reshaped by their very social policies and institutional settings in the host society. Therefore, while policies should be informed by the cultural concepts among minority groups of immigrants, policy making should also go beyond cultural assumptions, and take into account the impacts of the policies and institutions themselves in the host society on such concepts and values among the immigrant communities. Regarding care for older immigrants, instead of assuming there is an idealised form of filial piety which would automatically meet the challenges of care for older adults, policy makers should realise that social policy and institutional context in the host society themselves define capabilities in provision of such care among Chinese families. As older parents had reduced expectation of their children's filial obligations, it calls for culturally appropriate care services beyond families.

Within the context of ageing, immigration and multiculturalism in Canada, it may be useful to promote intergenerational dialogue, including discussion of different views of cultural concepts and values such as filial piety across generations in Chinese communities. It helps mutual understanding across generations, building strong family solidarity, and improving the health and wellbeing of older immigrants. It remains as a question regarding the roles of state in promotion, preservation and revitalisation of Confucian values of filial piety as a way to relieve people's reliance on government support in elder care, as currently practised in Chinese societies of Hong Kong, mainland China and Taiwan (Cheung *et al.*, 2006; Bell, 2008; Chou, 2011; Yeh *et al.*, 2013; Yim *et al.*, 2013), in the Chinese communities in Canada. It deserves a separate study and should be discussed further elsewhere.

Limitations

The study has certain limitations. Migrants, including older migrants, are a highly selective group of people. As many older parents immigrate to Canada through their children's sponsorship, the sponsorship itself could be a demonstration of the children's concern, even if the parents are coming to care for grandchildren. When parents believe their children are not being filial, or when intergenerational relations do not work, the children may not sponsor their parents, or their parents may not join them in the first place. Further, when post-migration intergenerational relationships do not work well, some parents may return to their home society. The present study did not capture those parents.

In addition, this was a qualitative study and, as such, was limited in its ability to capture possible differences in perceptions and expectations that may exist across various social groups (gender, age, marital status, education, *etc.*). This is an important issue, especially as existing studies have mixed results. For example, Yoon and Kropf's (2018) study of older Korean-Americans found age, education, income, living arrangements, self-rated health, year of immigration and social support were significantly correlated with filial expectations. But the study by Liu *et al.* (2000) of the younger generation of Chinese in New Zealand found gender, place of birth and Chinese language fluency had no independent associations with filial piety. By the same token, the study of Indian immigrants in the USA by Diwan *et al.* (2011) observed no significant relationships between filial obligation expectations and length of residence. Daphna and Merrill's (2006) study found filial norms

not only differ by gender, generation and historical era, but they also change across the adult lifespan. The study by M Guo *et al.* (2020) of Chinese older immigrants and younger immigrants with ageing parents demonstrated that Chinese older immigrants who had less education, lower levels of acculturation, poorer health and closer relationships with children reported higher filial expectation. Finally, the study did not reveal significant differences between older immigrants from different home societies, *e.g.* mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, but other studies point to such differences.

Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study indicate that perceptions of filial piety vary among older Chinese immigrants. This is no surprise, as scholars also differ in their interpretations of the classical notion of filial piety. What was common among the study's participants was that they had reduced their expectations of what their children would actually do to express filial piety. They expected less from their children compared to what they had done for their own parents or compared to what they believed filial children should do.

This study suggests that a lifelong process, including childhood socialisation and personal life experiences prior to migration, shapes the perceptions of filial piety of older immigrants. Even the participants who migrated to Canada as young adults tended to have traditional ideas about what filial piety means. Is it because Chinese tradition influenced them, or could it also be a reflection of exclusion or a lack of acculturation in Canada?

While home society culture seemed to influence the participants' perceptions of filial piety, the specific context in the host society seemed to shape their expectations of how their children would honour it. While perceptions of filial piety were stable over an extended time, expectations seemed susceptible to change, depending on the circumstances of both parents and children, and the specific context of institutions, social policies and welfare system under which they worked and lived. Parents' expectations largely depended on their needs, and many participants felt they could meet these by relying on themselves, friends or the state, not just their children. Expectations also corresponded to parents' consideration of their children's circumstances and constraints, as well as their judgement about whether their children had the heart and mind (心) and the ability (力) to care for their wellbeing. Immigrant children have their own lives and may have to struggle in the workplace. Older parents' expectations reflected a concern not only for their own wellbeing but also that of their children.

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Ethical standards. The University of Toronto Ethics Committee approved the project.

Notes

- 1 I will, however, use filial piety or *xiao* interchangeably in this paper.
- 2 Author's calculation from the 2016 Census of Canada public use microdata file.
- 3 This may be a reflection of a gap in the Canadian context. In Hong Kong, Lee and Kwok's (2005) study on the differences in expectations and patterns of informal support among 390 older persons showed that adult children were more willing to provide material rather than emotional or psychological support.

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