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INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS IN MODERN CHINA: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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China's demographic transformation has become one of the defining features of twenty-first century global population change. In little more than four decades, the country has undergone a transition from a young, high-fertility society to an ageing one characterized by low birth rates, long life expectancy, and deep social restructuring. These demographic changes are not merely statistical; they have profound implications for the relations between generations, the structure of families, and the moral foundations of social life. Drawing upon a broad review of sociological, anthropological, and policy literature, this article explores the nature and evolution of intergenerational relations in modern China. The discussion begins with an overview of the demographic transition and specific patterns of ageing, then examines the socio-economic conditions of older people and the policy responses of the Chinese state. The second part analyses the cultural, ethical, and societal dimensions of intergenerational relations: the position of youth and older people in Chinese families, the persistence and transformation of Confucian filial norms, and emerging forms of age-based discrimination. Special attention is given to how intergenerational cohesion is articulated in government policy and civil society initiatives. The paper concludes with reflections on China's efforts to create a "society for all ages" and on possible lessons for Ukraine. The analysis demonstrates that contemporary intergenerational relations in China constitute a dynamic synthesis of enduring cultural traditions and adaptive social innovations that together underpin the nation's response to population ageing.

Keywords: China, ageing, demographic transition, intergenerational relations, filial piety, family, civil society, Confucianism.

МІЖПОКОЛІННІ ВІДНОСИНИ У СУЧАСНОМУ КИТАЇ: ОГЛЯД ЛІТЕРАТУРИ

І. К. Шевчук

У статті розглядаються соціокультурні аспекти міжпоколінних відносин у сучасному Китаї в контексті швидкого старіння населення. Демографічний перехід, що розпочався наприкінці ХХ століття, радикально змінив структуру китайського

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суспільства, зумовивши глибокі трансформації в сімейних відносинах, соціальній політиці та культурних цінностях. Автор аналізує наукові підходи до вивчення феномена старіння, соціально-економічне становище людей похилого віку, державну політику у сфері демографії, а також місце молоді та старших поколінь у родині, громаді й суспільстві загалом. Особливу увагу приділено конфуціанській традиції шанування старших, її трансформації під впливом модернізації та глобалізації, а також сучасним формам вікової дискримінації. Проаналізовано державні програми, спрямовані на розвиток міжпоколінної солідарності, і роль громадських організацій у формуванні культури взаємопідтримки. Зроблено висновок, що сучасний Китай поєднує традиційні моральні цінності з інноваційними соціальними практиками, створюючи підґрунтя для формування «суспільства для всіх поколінь». Досвід Китаю може бути корисним для України у виробленні політики міжпоколінної згуртованості.

Ключові слова: Китай, старіння, демографічний перехід, міжпоколінні відносини, сім'я, філософія конфуціанства, громадянське суспільство.

Introduction

China's demographic transition over the past four decades represents one of the most rapid and complex processes of population change in modern history. The combination of declining fertility, extended life expectancy, and large-scale social mobility has fundamentally reshaped the country's demographic and social landscape. In 2023, more than 21 percent of the Chinese population was aged 60 or above, while projections indicate that by 2050 nearly one-third of the population will belong to this age group [UN DESA 2024]. This transition marks a profound turning point in China's development trajectory: the shift from a demographic dividend to demographic pressure, and from a youth-oriented to an ageing society.

Ageing in China is not simply a demographic issue. It is simultaneously a social, cultural, and moral phenomenon. For centuries, Chinese civilization has valued older people as custodians of wisdom, moral authority, and ancestral continuity. Filial piety [xiao, 孝] has been a central ethical principle, prescribing respect, obedience, and care for parents and older people [Hsu 1971; Tu 2010; Bell 2008]. Yet the rapid modernization and urbanization of the last half-century have challenged traditional structures of family and intergenerational relations. The one-child policy, introduced in 1979, altered family configurations in ways unprecedented in Chinese history, producing the so-called "4-2-1" structure: four grandparents, two parents, and one child.

In this context, intergenerational relations have become a key arena of negotiation between continuity and change. Scholars in China and abroad have examined how filial piety is reinterpreted in the conditions of individualization, marketization, and globalization [Yan 2018, 47]. Simultaneously, the state has sought to construct a comprehensive framework for addressing the consequences of demographic ageing, linking policy to long-standing moral and ideological themes such as social harmony [*hexie shehui*, 和谐社会] and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation [*zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*, 中华民族伟大复兴].

This article reviews the scholarly literature on demographic ageing and intergenerational relations in modern China. It proceeds in two main parts: the first addresses demographic trends, socio-economic conditions of older people, and the state's policy responses; the second focuses on social and cultural dimensions: the role

of the family, the experience of youth and older generations, the persistence of Confucian ethics, and the emergence of new forms of intergenerational solidarity. The aim is to identify how demographic change intersects with cultural continuity and social innovation, shaping the moral and institutional basis of intergenerational relations in contemporary China.

Part I. Demographic and Policy Context of Ageing in China

1. Specific Patterns of Demographic Transition and Population Ageing

China's demographic transition occurred within an extraordinarily compressed time frame. While in Western Europe it took more than a century for fertility and mortality to decline to modern levels, in China the same process unfolded within less than five decades. This "compressed modernity" of demographic change is often attributed to the combination of strong state policy, rapid economic growth, and the legacy of collective social organization from the socialist period [Peng and Song 2021, 190; Krings 2022; Zhao et al. 2023].

Fertility declined from about 5.8 children per woman in 1970 to below the replacement level by the early 1990s. The state's family planning policies, particularly the one-child policy, played a decisive role [Government of the People's Republic of China 2021; Asian Development Bank 2023]. Life expectancy increased dramatically, reaching 78.2 years in 2022. The consequence is a rapidly expanding older population, accompanied by a shrinking working-age cohort and a narrowing base of family support.

This transition is marked by regional and social asymmetries. Coastal and urban provinces experience earlier and faster ageing, while interior and rural areas face the dual burden of ageing and outmigration. Rural households are often characterized by "empty nests," where older parents remain after younger generations have migrated to cities. In urban settings, intergenerational co-residence is gradually replaced by "proximity without cohabitation," with older parents and adult children maintaining close contact while living separately.

Scholars note that China's ageing is a *pre-mature ageing* – occurring "before getting rich." While per capita income has grown substantially, the social welfare system remains fragmented. The dependency ratio is expected to rise from 46 percent in 2020 to more than 75 percent by 2050, creating fiscal and social challenges [Feng and Zhang 2020, 556].

2. The Socio-Economic Situation of Older People

The socio-economic situation of China's older population mirrors the country's rapid yet uneven modernization. Although material well-being has improved overall, disparities remain wide between urban and rural residents, between different generations of retirees, and between men and women [Du 2016; Du and Liu 2019].

Pensions and income security

Since the late 1990s, China has gradually expanded its multi-pillar pension system. The Basic Urban Employees' Pension covers formal workers in cities; the Urban and Rural Residents' Pension (established in 2014) extends minimal benefits to those without formal employment histories. Coverage now exceeds 90 percent of older adults, but benefit levels differ drastically: urban pensions may replace 45–50 percent of former earnings, while rural benefits are often symbolic, averaging less than 200 RMB per month [Feng and Zhang 2020, 560]. Women and informal workers remain at particular risk of poverty in old age.

Health and long-term care

Longevity has brought an epidemiological shift from infectious to chronic diseases. Cardiovascular illness, diabetes, and dementia are rising sharply. About 20 percent of people aged 65 and over suffer functional limitations, yet the national long-term-care system is embryonic. Pilot insurance schemes introduced in fifteen cities since 2016 cover only a fraction of the population. Rural areas especially lack institutional care facilities; families shoulder most responsibilities [Lv et al. 2024].

Social participation and inequality

Older people contribute extensively to unpaid family labour, notably childcare and household management. The “kipped-generation household,” where grandparents care for grandchildren while parents work in cities, has become common. However, access to social participation opportunities remains limited. Urban retirees engage in community volunteering and cultural clubs, while rural older people often experience social isolation and limited mobility [Liu and Sun 2021, 290].

Scholars emphasize that material support alone cannot guarantee well-being. The psychological dimensions of ageing – loneliness, perceived uselessness, and loss of dignity – are increasingly recognized in Chinese gerontological literature [Peng and Song 2021, 199]. Ageing is therefore understood not only as a welfare challenge but also as a cultural and moral issue.

3. State Policy on Ageing in China

China’s response to ageing reflects the gradual institutionalization of social policy within a developmental state framework.

Evolution of institutions

China’s institutional framework for ageing policy has evolved alongside its demographic transition. The first White Paper on Ageing (1994) recognized population ageing as a long-term strategic concern and laid the groundwork for a coordinated policy response [Krings 2022]. The Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly (1996; amended 2018) subsequently codified the responsibilities of families, communities, and the state in eldercare.

The China National Committee on Aging (CNCA), established under the State Council, plays a central role in formulating national ageing strategies and promoting public awareness. Closely linked to it, the National Working Commission on Ageing (NWCA) coordinates cross-ministerial initiatives, while the Ministry of Civil Affairs manages social welfare services [Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2021] and the National Health Commission oversees healthcare and long-term care policy [State Council of the People’s Republic of China 2020].

Strategic frameworks

The *Healthy China 2030 Strategy* integrates active ageing into public health policy, emphasizing prevention, health promotion, and age-friendly environments. The *National Medium- and Long-Term Plan for Active Response to Population Ageing (2022–2050)* introduces a comprehensive agenda: improving multi-level elderly care systems, fostering the “silver economy,” and encouraging intergenerational solidarity [Asian Development Bank 2023; China National Committee on Ageing 2023].

Philosophy of policy

Chinese ageing policy combines pragmatic governance with moral discourse. Official documents routinely invoke filial piety and “respect for older people” as core socialist values. Scholars describe this approach as “moralized

policy pragmatism” – a blend of traditional ethics and modern administration [Cook and Powell 2022, 104]. The state positions itself as both facilitator and guardian, expecting families and markets to share responsibility while maintaining ideological legitimacy through cultural continuity [Brown 2012, 54; Xi 2014; Xi 2017].

At the philosophical level, this policy model reflects the Party’s broader strategy of *harmonizing tradition with modernization*. Ageing is thus framed not only as a social or economic challenge but also as a test of moral order and social cohesion. The invocation of Confucian virtues such as filial devotion and communal harmony functions as a moral framework through which the state translates economic rationality into culturally resonant governance. This synthesis echoes the classical Confucian principle of *zhengming* (rectification of names), which holds that social order depends on the alignment of roles and moral duties. In the modern policy sphere, this is manifested in the expectation that each actor – state, family, and individual – fulfills its proper role within the moral hierarchy of care. By appealing to *li* (ritual propriety) and *ren* (benevolence), state discourse presents welfare governance as both a moral and administrative order: the care of older people becomes a ritualized expression of social harmony rather than merely a technical service. Such continuity with Confucian political philosophy reinforces legitimacy by framing social policy as a means of cultivating virtue and maintaining the “Great Harmony” [*datong*, 大同] – ideal described in the *Book of Rites* [Confucius 1885]. In this sense, welfare policy becomes a moral pedagogy – disciplining both citizens and institutions through appeals to shared ethical heritage.

By embedding moral values into bureaucratic practice, the Chinese state reaffirms its ideological authority while extending its reach into intimate spheres of family life. Older people care programs, community services, and intergenerational education initiatives are presented as expressions of both public duty and private virtue. This moralization of welfare responsibilities not only legitimizes limited state intervention in an era of market reform but also sustains the narrative of continuity between socialist governance and China’s civilizational past. The result is a hybrid policy regime – simultaneously pragmatic, moral, and symbolic – that aligns the ethics of care with the politics of legitimacy.

Part II. Intergenerational Relations in Contemporary Chinese Society

1. Place and Role of Youth and Older People in the Family, Community, and Society

Family remains the moral nucleus of Chinese society, yet its structure and functions have changed profoundly. In the traditional patriarchal family, age and gender determined authority; older people possessed decision-making power over household affairs. Modernization, migration, and education have eroded this hierarchy, leading to more egalitarian, negotiation-based relationships.

Empirical studies show that younger generations value independence but still express emotional closeness and filial concern [Yan 2018, 49]. Many adult children maintain frequent contact via digital platforms – an expression of “virtual proximity.” At the same time, they rely heavily on parents for housing, childcare, and financial support, producing new forms of interdependence.

Within communities, intergenerational ties are re-enacted through neighbourhood committees and volunteer organizations that provide spaces for older people and youth to interact. Universities often organize “adopt-a-grandparent” programs,

while retirees mentor young entrepreneurs. These initiatives demonstrate the persistence of relational ethics in a changing social order [Chen and Powell 2021; China National Committee on Ageing 2022].

2. Two Sides of Ageism: Discrimination Against Youth and Older People

Age-related discrimination in China exhibits dual directions: against older people and against youth.

Discrimination against older people

Ageism manifests in employment restrictions, healthcare biases, and social stereotypes portraying older persons as technologically inept or resistant to change. Mandatory retirement at 60 for men and 50–55 for women institutionalizes exclusion. Some employers circumvent anti-discrimination regulations through “age caps” in recruitment. Digital exclusion has become a new frontier of inequality; many older people struggle with smartphone-based payment and transport systems [Liu and Sun 2021, 296; Zhao et al. 2023].

Discrimination against youth

Conversely, youth encounter discourses of moral decline. Media commentaries lament the “lying-flat generation” (*tang ping*) and accuse young people of selfishness or apathy. Such narratives idealize the endurance of older generations and depict youth as fragile or irresponsible. This *reverse ageism* reflects cultural anxiety about value transformation amid rapid social change.

Bridging perspectives

Policy and public rhetoric increasingly advocate inter-age empathy. The principle of *zun lao ai you* (“respect the old, care for the young”) encapsulates the ideal of balanced relations. The 14th Five-Year Plan includes provisions for promoting age-friendly workplaces and intergenerational education. Scholars argue that addressing ageism in both directions is essential for social harmony and sustainable development [Du and Liu 2019; Cook and Powell 2022, 108].

3. Intergenerational Relations in China: Traditions and Current Situation

Filial piety (*xiao*) has been the cornerstone of Chinese moral philosophy since the *Analects and Book of Filial Piety*. In Confucian ethics, *xiao* is not merely a private emotion but a foundation of political order. As Confucius stated, “Filial and fraternal conduct – are they not the root of all benevolent action?” (*Analects* 1:2). The well-ordered family was envisioned as the microcosm of the well-governed state. This philosophical linkage between family virtue and political harmony endures in modern China’s discourse on *social stability*. By maintaining respect within the family, citizens contribute symbolically to the moral coherence of the nation. Thus, the persistence of filial ideals reflects not only cultural continuity but also the enduring Confucian belief that moral governance begins with self-cultivation and extends outward to society. It requires not only obedience but also emotional devotion and ritual respect. In the modern era, *xiao* remains deeply embedded in everyday life, though its expressions have evolved [Anonymous 1880; Hsu 1971].

Sociological research distinguishes between *authoritarian filial piety* – submission to parental authority – and *reciprocal filial piety*, based on gratitude and affection [Yeh et al. 2013, 39]. The former dominated in pre-modern agrarian society; the latter characterizes contemporary urban families. Modern filial piety is thus less hierarchical and more communicative.

While co-residence is declining, intergenerational exchanges remain intense. Financial transfers flow both ways: parents assist adult children with property purchases, while children contribute to parents' medical expenses. Emotional support – phone calls, messaging, joint leisure – has become as important as physical care. The digitalization of filial piety – sending red envelopes via WeChat or maintaining family group chats – illustrates cultural adaptation to technological modernity [Yan 2018, 56].

Importantly, filial piety today is intertwined with gender roles. Daughters increasingly assume caregiving duties, challenging patrilineal norms. Urban couples negotiate between filial duties to both sets of parents, reflecting the democratization of family relations.

4. Intergenerational Relations in Governmental Policy

The Chinese state integrates intergenerational harmony into its broader ideological and policy agenda.

The *Healthy China 2030* blueprint calls for “building a social environment that respects, supports, and cares for the elderly,” while the *14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025)* promotes *intergenerational mutual-assistance communities (shidai huzhu shequ)*. These communities combine housing, healthcare, and social activities for residents of all ages, embodying the vision of “a community for all generations” [Government of the People's Republic of China 2021].

Education and propaganda reinforce these goals. Textbooks include moral-education units on filial duty and gratitude. The state celebrates the *Double Ninth Festival (Chongyang Jie)* as “Seniors' Day,” urging young citizens to honour older relatives [State Council of the People's Republic of China 2021; China Daily 2022]. Media campaigns highlight model families and volunteers who exemplify intergenerational care.

Family ethics become metaphors for national unity: caring for elders symbolizes loyalty to the collective. This alignment of personal morality and political ideology strengthens the state's moral authority while situating ageing within patriotic narratives [Cook and Powell 2022, 108].

5. Role of Civil Society in Promoting Intergenerational Relations

Civil-society organizations and local initiatives increasingly mediate intergenerational engagement. The *China National Committee on Ageing* coordinates with universities, NGOs, and community centres to launch programs pairing students with elderly residents for companionship and skill exchange. “Silver-Age Service Teams” mobilize retired professionals to mentor youth or assist in public projects [State Council of the People's Republic of China 2021; China Daily 2022; Xinxua News Agency 2023].

Religious and cultural associations – Buddhist charities, Christian groups, Confucius Institutes – organize festivals and workshops celebrating intergenerational respect. These activities foster what scholars call “*participatory ageing*”, in which older adults are not passive recipients of care but active contributors to community life [Ji 2020].

Digital platforms have further expanded civil-society capacity. Online volunteer networks connect young people with isolated older people, particularly in pandemic conditions. Government agencies encourage such participation through small grants and policy recognition, creating a hybrid model of *state-guided civil society* [Hasmath et al. 2019].

Though still constrained by regulation, these organizations enrich the moral and social texture of ageing policy, translating state slogans about harmony into lived experience at the community level.

Conclusion: Towards a China for All Ages

The transformation of intergenerational relations in modern China illustrates how rapid demographic and social change can coexist with enduring moral traditions. Ageing has challenged families, institutions, and ideologies, yet it has also catalysed creative adaptations.

Three major conclusions emerge from the literature.

First, China demonstrates the resilience of cultural ethics. Filial piety, though reinterpreted, remains a binding moral principle that sustains intergenerational solidarity even amid economic modernization.

Second, the Chinese state has successfully integrated traditional values into modern policy frameworks, using moral discourse to legitimize welfare reform and social innovation. This moral-political synthesis differentiates China's response to ageing from Western models that rely primarily on institutional welfare.

Third, civil-society initiatives reveal the potential of community-based, participatory approaches to ageing. They show that solidarity across generations can be cultivated not only through family obligation but also through civic engagement and shared cultural practices.

For **Ukraine** and other post-socialist societies confronting similar demographic pressures, China's experience offers instructive lessons. Integrating cultural heritage with modern policy design can strengthen intergenerational cohesion; fostering multi-level governance – family, community, and state – ensures resilience; and promoting civic participation humanizes social policy. Ukraine, like China, faces the dual challenge of rapid ageing and social transformation. The country's post-industrial transition and large-scale migration have weakened traditional family structures, leaving many older adults dependent on limited pensions or distant relatives. Yet Ukraine possesses a rich cultural tradition of intergenerational solidarity, rooted in communal ethics, religious heritage, and the family as a moral centre of life. Revitalizing these traditions within a modern welfare framework could help rebuild trust and social continuity amid demographic uncertainty.

Drawing on the Chinese example, Ukraine might explore how moral discourse can complement institutional reform. Whereas Confucianism in China provides a vocabulary of duty, respect, and reciprocity, Ukraine's ethical resources lie in the Christian-humanist notion of mutual care (*vzayemna opika*) and in the idea of *rodyna* (extended family) as a spiritual community. Reframing social policy through such moral idioms could enhance public legitimacy and encourage citizen participation in welfare and volunteer initiatives.

Moreover, China's emphasis on the integration of state, family, and community responsibilities suggests a model of "shared care," applicable to Ukraine's decentralization context. Local self-government bodies, religious organizations, and NGOs could form intergenerational centres that combine social services with community life – creating, in effect, Ukrainian analogues of China's "communities for all generations."

Finally, the Confucian concept of *datong* – the "Great Unity" of harmonious coexistence – finds a distant parallel in Ukraine's aspiration toward *sobornist*

(spiritual unity and social solidarity). Both notions envision society as a moral community rather than a mere aggregate of individuals. In an ageing and fragmented world, reviving such ethical visions may be as crucial for Ukraine's demographic future as economic policy itself.

Ultimately, the vision of a “China for all ages” transcends demography. It represents a moral and cultural project: building a society in which respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility unite generations in the pursuit of collective well-being. In Confucian terms, such a vision recalls the utopian notion of *datong* – a “Great Unity” in which generations coexist in moral reciprocity and social harmony. The revival of this imagery in contemporary China suggests that demographic governance is inseparable from the civilizational project of moral cultivation. The balance between state pragmatism and Confucian virtue thus defines China's unique pathway toward a humane, culturally grounded model of healthy and active ageing.

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