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# Family income and attitudes toward older people in China: comparison of two age cohorts

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## Abstract

Three hundred and five traditional college students and 159 baby boomers (40–55 years old) in China participated in the study with Kogan's Attitude toward Old People [Kogan (1961) *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 62(1), 44–54] being used. Results from ANOVA showed overall, baby boomers held more positive attitudes toward older people than college students. There was a significant interaction effect between cohorts and family income; that is, the lower family income group in both samples did not differ significantly from each other, it was in the higher family income group that difference was revealed. Baby Boomers in the higher family income group held more positive attitudes toward older people than students in the same family income group. Gender was not a significant factor in either sample. Stepwise regression analyses revealed that family income was a significant predictor of attitude in the Baby Boomer sample, but not in the college student sample.

**Keywords:** attitudes toward older people, baby boomers, college students, income, People's Republic of China

## Introduction

China is becoming an aging country. Among China's 1.3 billion population, the number of older adults is burgeoning. The growth rate of this population segment is 3.2%, almost three times the overall rate. In 2002, there were 120 million peo-

ple age 60 and older, accounting for nearly 10% of the country's total population. By 2030, this age group is expected to reach 20% (Pochagina, 2003). However, China at the moment is not well-equipped with a social security system that will protect the elderly. According to one estimate, only 17% of those 60 and older have a pension, and about two-thirds are financially dependent on their families (China's aging population, 2002).

Traditional Chinese culture has been influenced by Confucianism over the past thousands of years. Its ethics pay homage to respect for older people. Its adages, such as "the elder is a treasure in the family," are strongly emphasized. Older people, therefore, are presumably accorded the highest position in the family hierarchy and are entitled to be respected and honored by the younger generation. From a young age, Chinese children are taught to hold positive attitudes toward their elders and to converse with them in a formal and polite style (Uba, 1994).

However, economic and social changes may have an impact on the status of older people and consequently on one's attitudes toward older people. Modernization and urbanization are believed to promote value systems that either equalize age groups or result in lower status for older people (Cowgill, 1975). Therefore, it will be of interest to investigate if one's attitudes toward older people in China vary by cohorts, family income, and gender.

### **Economic reforms and their impacts**

China has undergone many reforms in the past two decades. These reforms include agricultural, urban housing, medical care, pension, and state-owned enterprise (SOE). As a result, China's economy reached an average annual gross domestic product growth rate of 9.8%. These reforms have transformed China from a socialist planning economy to a socialist market economy (Song, 2003). However, at the same time, these reforms have brought along numerous challenges, among them the high-unemployment rate in urban China. With downsizing the public sector, letting SOE employees go was inevitable. Gu (1999) pointed out that three million SOE workers were laid off in 1993, and that figure went up to 5.6 million in 1995, 11.5 million in 1997, and 11.7 million in 1999. According to Chinese urban residents, being laid off was the top concern, followed by corruption, pollution, crime, and social protection (Lei, 1998).

In contrast to what happened after the reform, pre-reformed employment history was characterized as *iron rice bowls*—a phenomenon to employ as many people as possible to work for the state. This has resulted in a huge surplus of SOE workers. Before the reform, due to the large number of employees, SOEs were under much financial pressure since they were responsible for employees' retirement pension, medical care, housing, and social services (Song & Chu, 1997). As such, many SOEs went bankrupt.

There were several factors linked to the unemployment rate (Song, 2003). Middle-aged workers were more likely to get fired. Mo (2000) found that among those between 35 and 46 years old, 44.6% were laid off. This was consistent with a study in 1997 that revealed 44.2% of middle-aged (40–49 years old) were laid off, though this age group took up 19.2% of the total urban working population (Lei, 1998). Education was another factor. Less educated people were among the first group to be laid off. Female workers had a higher unemployment rate than their male counterparts.

Overall, the development in China has brought much growth nationwide, but at the same time, it also disrupted many families' daily living by introducing uncertainty about their financial security. This was especially true among the middle-aged group who faced greater peril of being laid off.

### **Attitudes toward older people**

As aforementioned, the traditional Chinese culture is governed by filial piety that dictates elder honor and elder respect. Given the shifting demographic trends of older people in China, it is becoming increasingly relevant to study this topic. However, research pertaining to attitudes toward older people in China is still scanty. And, the research paints a less-than rosy picture. Tucker (1992) conducted a comparison study of attitudes toward older people by involving college students in People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Chinese-Americans and non-Chinese Americans in the US. In his study, he found that attitudes toward older people were most positive among non-Chinese Americans, and nearly as positive among Chinese-Americans. Students in China reported the most negative attitudes. Zhan (2004a) found that young people in China today adopted a more liberal view toward family than their parents' generation by expressing preference to maintain independent households from their parents. Other research indicated "declining adherence to filial beliefs and commitments" among Chinese youth (Ho, Hong, & Chiu, 1989). Socioeconomic changes in China gave young people more say over their own lives and family issues, such as marriages, education, and career choices.

The current one-child per family structure and the career opportunities accorded to the youth also have an impact on their attitudes toward older people. Although attitudes and behavior are not always positively correlated, the two have reciprocal influences, e.g., people's positive attitudes toward older people will increase their commitment to elder care, vice versa. Research found that children from one-child families were less committed to elder care when there was a job and care conflict than children from multiple children families. The former were less willing to co-reside with their parents than the latter (Zhan, 2004b). The increasing financial well-being in urban families allowed parents to invest in their only child. Yet, education invested in only children may not be positively related to future elder care (Zhan, 2004b). The attained education allows these young adults to move out of their hometowns for career opportunities or further educational pursuits.

Others argued that, despite all the socioeconomic changes, positive attitudes toward older people still prevails, resulting in Chinese families adopting the corporate group/mutual aid model that allowed family members in separate households, or the so-called networked families, to offer support and assistance when in need (Sun, 2002). One example of this mutual aid model was coresidence between adult children and their aging parents. Logan, Bian, and Bian (1998) found that coresidence was predominantly determined by parental needs, not child needs. Similarly, Zhang (2004) found that coresidence pattern changed over parents' life course, from child-centered to parent-centered when parents aged.

A review of research related to attitudes toward older people done in the West provided some updated information. In the US research studies of attitudes toward older people (age 60 and older) have yielded inconsistent results. Among them, many unveil

stereotypically negative attitudes (Hummert, 1990; Kite, Deaux, & Miele, 1991); some found positive attitudes (Kite & Johnson, 1988).

Palmore (1982) suggested that negative stereotypes of older people were prevalent in American society. However, more recent studies found that negative attitudes toward older people were not as common as previously indicated (Slotterback & Saarnio, 1996). This may be due to a couple of reasons. First, the growth in the population of older people in the US increased their visibility and the contact between younger and older generation. Second, the media, a major force in socializing young people, appeared to project a different picture of older people than it did in previous decades. Bell (1992) documented that older people were being portrayed in a more positive manner on television than they had been in the past.

Furthermore, these attitudes appeared to vary with age of respondents. Older adults seemed to have more favorable attitudes toward their own peers than younger adults did (Bailey, 1991). However, even in older adult cohorts, Secombe and Ishii-Kuntz (1991) revealed that the youngest cohort (55–64) had a more pessimistic view of growing older than the oldest cohort (age 85+).

Studies of contact with older people influences people's attitudes reached conflicting results. Hawkins (1996) found that students who had prior experience with older people were significantly more likely to have positive attitudes toward older adults than those who did not have any contact. However, Chang, Chang, and Shen's (1985) study revealed no significant difference in attitudes toward older people between Chinese-Americans who maintained close contact with their grandparents and those with no contact. They concluded that it was not contact with older people per se, but rather, it was the quality of the contact that mattered. Zhan (2004b) found that among young adults from one-child family, close contacts with grandparents were negatively associated with their willingness for parent care in the future.

Palmore (1982) found that people with more knowledge about older people tended to view older people in a more positive manner than those without the knowledge. Aging parents' financial status was reported to be significant in influencing adult children's attitudes toward their elders. Chow (1993) found that adult children held a more positive attitude toward their elders and related better to them if the latter were economically independent.

## Gender

Yang (1996) stated that in the traditional Chinese family, support for elder was not uniform, rather, it varied by gender. Sons were usually expected to support their parents financially. Gui (1988) in his study found that in rural China, sons provided the most in medical care, spouses second, and daughters the third. Likewise, in other places in China, of those legally responsible for the elderly, 30% were oldest sons, 10% oldest daughters, and 31% other children (Chinese Population Information and Research Center, 1990). Zhan and Montgomery (2003) investigated the changing dynamics of caregiving in urban China against the backdrops of economic reforms and cultural emphasis of *xiao* (filial piety). Their study showed "a decline in the patrilocal tradition of caregiving (p225)." Taking care of elderly was shifting from sons' responsibility to daughters' responsibility. However, the authors were concerned that these female caregivers, with fewer children, more financially dependent, and more likely to live longer, may face challenges in future elder care themselves.

Studies on this topic in other cultures also pointed toward a female caregiving pattern. Neal and Ingersoll (1997) in the US that found daughters devoted more time and were more likely to be primary caregivers. When comparing support for parents with dementia in Korea and in America, Lee and Sung (1997) found that daughters-in-law were the main caregivers in Korea; whereas, in America, daughters were major caregivers. The former group reported a higher score on filial obligation and the latter group reported a more affectionate relationship with their parents.

The notion of having daughters as the caregivers is undergoing change in China. China was reported to have one of the highest female employment rates. With the one-child-per-family policy, parents in urban China were willing to invest in their only child's education, be it a boy or girl. Tsui and Rich (2002) revealed no significant differences in parental expectations and investment, and math performance for boys and girls from only child families. The greater education opportunity granted to women today would allow them to have better job opportunity and to move away from their parents.

In a study of US college students' attitudes toward older men and women, researchers found that college-age respondents, particularly males, were stereotypically gender-specific. Male students tended to view elderly female of all ages and males in the young old category in a more negative manner (Hawkins, 1996). College-aged males perceived elderly males to be untidy, sad, and dependent. They had a more positive attitude toward elderly men than they did toward elderly women whom they saw as unproductive and dependent. They saw older women as nurturing and older men as more intellectually competent and autonomous (Canetto, Kaminski, & Felicio, 1995).

## **Purpose**

Given the shifting demographic trends in China, the study of attitudes toward older people is becoming more relevant. The purpose of this study was to examine differences in attitudes toward older people between two age groups—college students and baby boomers. It investigated if family income, cohort, and gender would influence participants' attitudes toward older people. Kogan Attitude toward Older People (Kogan, 1961) was used for this study.

## **Hypotheses**

1. College students and baby boomers differ significantly in the attitude mean score.
2. In the college student sample:
  - a. Family income would be significant in the attitude mean score.
  - b. Gender would be a significant factor in the attitude mean score.
3. In the Baby Boomer sample:
  - a. Family income would be significant in the attitude mean score.
  - b. Gender would be a significant factor in the attitude mean.
4. In the combined sample, family income, gender, and cohort would be significant predictors of attitude score.

5. In the college sample, family income and gender would be significant predictors of attitude score.
6. In the Baby Boomer sample, family income and gender would be significant predictors of attitude score.

### Participants

Three hundred and five students from two different universities in Guangzhou, a southern city in China participated in this study, and 159 Baby Boomers in Guangzhou and Baoding, a northern city, participated in this study. Both groups were informed of the purpose of the study. The college students filled out the survey in the classroom setting. The Baby Boomers filled out the survey either in their homes or offices. Both sets of data were collected in the summer of 2000. A convenience sampling method was used. In the college student sample, 71 (23%) were males, 230 (75%) were females. One hundred and forty-five (48%) were from a three-generation household family, and 153 (50%) were from a nuclear family. One hundred and three (34%) had a monthly family income of RMB 2000 or less (one US dollar equals ~8\$ RMB), 153 (50%) had a monthly family income of RMB 2000 or more. Students' ages ranged from 18 to 24, and none of them were married when the study was conducted.

In the Baby Boomer sample, 77 (48%) were males, and 76 (48%) were females. Fifteen (18%) were from three generational households, 40 (47%) were from nuclear families, and 30 (35%) were missing data on family structure. Sixty-one (38%) had a monthly family income of RMB 2000 or less, and 79 (50%) had a monthly family income of RMB 2000 or more. Baby Boomers' ages ranged from 38 to 55.

### Instrument

The Kogan Attitudes toward Old People Survey was used for this study. Half of the 34 items were phrased positively, while the other half negatively. This split-half survey has reported reliability coefficients ranging from 0.66 to 0.85 (Kogan, 1961). For this study, the reliability coefficient for all 34 items was 0.75, indicating a moderate level of internal consistency. Participants are asked to rate the items on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1), *disagree* (2), *somewhat disagree* (3), *somewhat agree* (4), *agree* (5), and *strongly agree* (6). One key issue in cross-cultural study was measurement equivalency (Buchko, 1994). In order to avoid or reduce nonequivalent measurements in the English and Chinese versions, the back translation technique was used after the scales were translated into Chinese. The authors, native speakers of Chinese, first translated the instruments into Chinese. The English version of these instruments was then translated back into Chinese by two researchers whose first language is Chinese and second language is English. The researchers compared the translations, checked for discrepancies, and made changes wherever appropriate.

### Data analysis

A new dependent variable was created by averaging the scores for all 34 items, with the 17 negatively phrased items reversely coded. Therefore, the higher the mean, the more favorable the attitude toward older people it denoted. Separate ANOVAs were

performed to detect any significant differences between cohorts (college students versus Baby Boomers), family income, and gender. One stepwise hierarchical regression analysis was executed to determine the relative strength of the predictors (gender, family income, and cohort) of the attitude score when the college student sample and Baby Boomer sample were combined. Two separate stepwise hierarchical regression analyses were performed on the college sample and the Baby Boomer sample to determine the relative strength of the predictors (gender and family income).

## Results

Due to the different sample sizes for college students and for Baby Boomers, Levene's test of equality of error variances was performed. None was significant ( $F = 2.2$ ,  $p = 0.086$ ) indicating the homogeneity assumption was not violated, and the results of the following tests were reliable.

### *Analysis of variance (ANOVA)*

An Analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that Baby Boomers ( $M = 3.98$ ) held more favorable attitude toward older people than college students ( $M = 3.81$ ),  $F(1, 462) = 17.02$ ,  $p < 0.000$ . ANOVA further revealed a significant interaction effect between cohort and family income,  $F(1, 410) = 6.48$ ,  $p = 0.011$ . There was no significant difference between the two age groups in the lower family income level,  $F(1, 163) = 0.54$ ,  $p = 0.46$ . However, there was a significant difference in the higher family income level, with Baby Boomers in the higher income level holding more positive attitudes toward older people,  $F(1, 249) = 27.85$ ,  $p = 0.000$ . Hypothesis 1 was accepted.

In the college student sample, ANOVAs revealed that lower family income group ( $M = 3.81$ ) and higher family income group ( $M = 3.80$ ) did not differ significantly from each other,  $F(1, 255) = 0.097$ ,  $p = 0.76$ ; male students ( $M = 3.88$ ) and female students ( $M = 3.80$ ) did not differ significantly either,  $F(1, 299) = 1.89$ ,  $p = 0.17$ . However, in the Baby Boomer sample, ANOVA revealed that lower family income group ( $M = 3.86$ ) and higher family income group ( $M = 4.05$ ) differed significantly with the latter group holding more positive attitudes,  $F(1, 157) = 8.9$ ,  $p = 0.003$ . Male boomers ( $M = 3.99$ ) and female boomers ( $M = 3.96$ ) did not differ significantly,  $F(1, 152) = 0.287$ ,  $p = 0.59$ . Hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 3b were rejected. Hypotheses 3a was accepted.

### *Stepwise hierarchical regression analyses*

A stepwise hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to determine the relative importance of the predictors (i.e., family income, gender, and cohort) of the attitude score (see Table 1). Results showed that family income had an effect independent of gender and cohort and had the strongest influence on attitudes toward older people. Hypothesis 4 was partly accepted.

Two separate stepwise hierarchical regression analyses were performed on the Baby Boomer sample and college student sample to determine the relative strength of the predictors (i.e., gender and family income). Family income was a significant predictor only in the Baby Boomer sample. Gender was not significant in either sample (see Tables 2, 3). Hypothesis 5 was rejected, and hypothesis 6 was partially accepted.

**Table 1.** Stepwise hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting attitudes toward older people in the combined sample

Variables	Parameter estimates				
	B	SE B	$\beta$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2 (p)$
Without specified order					
Step 1 Gender	-0.091	0.041	-0.109	0.006	0.012 ( $p < 0.028$ )
Step 2 Gender	-0.045	0.042	-0.054	0.049***	0.037 ( $p = 0.000$ )
	Cohort	0.163	0.041	0.200***	
Step 3 Gender	-0.038	0.042	-0.045	0.054	0.005 ( $p = 0.129$ )
	Cohort	0.165	0.041	0.202***	
	Income	0.060	0.039	0.074	

\*  $p \leq 0.05$

\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$

**Table 2.** Stepwise hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting attitudes toward older people in the baby boomer sample

Variables	Parameter estimates				
	B	SE B	$\beta$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2 (p)$
Without specified order					
Step 1 Income	0.196	0.063	0.248**	0.062	0.062 ( $p = 0.002$ )
Step 2 Income	0.196	0.064	0.247**	0.062	0.000 ( $p = 0.953$ )
	Gender	-0.004	0.062	-0.005	

\*  $p \leq 0.05$

\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$

**Table 3.** Stepwise hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting attitudes toward older people in the student sample

Variables	Parameter estimates				
	B	SE B	$\beta$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2 (p)$
Without specified order					
Step 1 Income	-0.015	0.049	-0.019	0.000	0.000( $p = 0.758$ )
Step 2 Income	-0.018	0.049	-0.024	0.004	0.003 ( $p = 0.354$ )
	Gender	-0.053	0.057	-0.058	

\*  $p \leq 0.05$

\*\*  $p \leq 0.01$

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$

## Discussion

A few findings from this study merit discussion. Analysis detected that there was a significant interaction effect between family income and cohort (college students versus Baby Boomers). Those in the lower income level did not differ from each other, whereas Baby Boomers in the higher income group held more positive attitudes toward older people than college students in the same income level. Interestingly, gender was not a significant factor in either sample.

In separate analyses, family income was significant in predicting attitudes toward older people in the Baby Boomer sample with those in the higher income group reporting more positive attitudes. This may be related to the fact that the Baby Boomer was aware of what elder care entailed financially. As aforementioned, the past several decades witnessed steep social reforms such as privatization of medical care, and unstable retirement pension. Financial security was no longer guaranteed. Those with low incomes found themselves struggling with paying bills, and may not eagerly embrace the notion of elder respect, which implied financial responsibilities. Therefore, not being financially secure themselves, their view of older people may be less positive compared to those with more financial security.

In the college student sample, family income was not significant. This may be related to the fact that college students were basically supported by their families in China. They did not contribute to family income, and this reported family income was their parents' hard-earned money. Therefore, the notions of financial management and financial tension may not register in college students the same degree that it did in Baby Boomers. At this point in their life, family income may not have any relationship with their attitudes toward older people.

Overall, Baby Boomers held more positive attitudes toward older people than college students. This was incongruent with studies that socioeconomic development may erode the traditional practice of elder respect among Chinese youths today (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003; Zhang, 2004). Also, Zhan (2004a) reported that children from one-child families were less committed to elder care when there was a job and care conflict than those from multiple children families. The former were less willing to co-reside with their parents than the latter. Although attitudes and behavior were not always highly correlated, this study reiterated that against the backdrops of the one-child-per-family policy, it was no longer warranted that young people today would observe elder respect in the same manner that the ideal tradition depicted. With the education investment, job mobility, and career competition, their goal was to search for the *greener pasture*, thus, in many cases, leaving their parents behind to fend for themselves in their old age.

## Implications

In light of socioeconomic transformations in China, the notion of filial respect has taken on new meaning. As a result, the traditional network of support for old people embedded in the family system only needs to be reconsidered. Family is no longer the panacea for future elder care. The decreasing family size and job mobility have added to the segregation and isolation of family. To continue the deeply rooted tradition of elder respect, intergenerational activities should be encouraged when children

are young. Therefore, various programs should be set up in the school setting to facilitate intergenerational interactions. This study of attitudes toward old people heightens policy makers' awareness that state-funded programs for older adults need to be incorporated into the current model of family care.

At the macroscopic level, attitudes toward older people are influenced by the cultural and social transformations in the country. Currently, without a fully developed state funded retirement system, Chinese government always reiterates the important role of family in the various forms of elder respect. However, with the implementation of the one-child-per family policy and the lengthening life expectancy of older population, Chinese families are turning to the government for some additional support. Thus, the government began to implement national activities to promote an awareness of the needs of the elderly and the need to support them. One of the activities was the government's decision in the 1990s to reestablish, on a formal basis, a traditional Chinese holiday, Elder Day, in honor of the older members of the society. Elder Day is September 9 every year.

Meanwhile, the Chinese government is implementing eight development plans in the community and state levels. These plans include (a) expedite the passing of the laws on population aging that would protect the rights of elderly; (b) establish and improve the social security system for the elderly (support will be based on the cooperative efforts between government, community, family, and individual); (c) vigorously develop medical and health services for the elderly to facilitate self-care; (d) promote the health of the elderly and encourage their participation on a voluntary basis in social and economic activities; (e) create opportunities for the continued education of the elderly; (f) create recreational centers for the elderly; (g) develop social welfare programs for the financial and material support of the aged; and (h) intensify theoretical and applied scientific research on issues related to the elderly (China's Development Plans, 1996).

All these efforts from the state level aim to counterbalance the lowering of social status of older people as a result of modernization and instill in the general public a positive attitude toward them.

### **Limitations**

The small sample size for this study, especially, for the Baby Boomer group, and the non-random sampling method hindered the generalization of this study to its larger population. Kogan's Attitudes toward Older People was established in the 1960s and may not reflect the Chinese culture, though for this study, the reliability coefficient for all 34 items was 0.75, indicating a moderate level of internal consistency. Meanwhile, there were other variables that might contribute to the cohort difference in attitudes. One variable would be geographic location. Baby boomers in this study all resided in two metropolitan cities; whereas, not all college students came from urban areas since college enrollment was not limited to cities, but also rural areas. Therefore, it is highly feasible that some students studying in the two metropolitan cities were originally from rural areas. This may also explain the lower percentage of three generational households in the Baby Boomer sample compared to the college student sample. The geographic difference is likely to skew the pension and family income in both groups. Future studies should involve large random samples with different populations and from different locations.

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