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Contesting Filial Piety.

**State-Public Negotiations over Eldercare Support
in China's Ageing Society**

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Working Paper

Contesting Filial Piety. State-Public Negotiations over Eldercare Support in China's Ageing Society

Yiming Zhang

This article argues that narratives of eldercare responsibility in China's ageing society essentially constitute a power negotiation between state and public discourses over the reconstruction of filial civilisation. Through a critical discourse analysis of policy documents, media coverage, and online commentary, it examines how these discourses competitively reshape the boundaries of eldercare responsibility. The analysis suggests that state discourse seeks to mould filial citizens and redefine the social roles of the elderly through value formation and local governance. Meanwhile, public discourse appears to negotiate and contest the filial obligations of intergenerational support, responding critically to state-imposed expectations. This negotiation may reveal the underlying tensions in China's eldercare modernisation: namely, the structural inequalities between filial obligation and the social welfare system.

Keywords: filial piety, eldercare support, social welfare, active ageing, China

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Introduction

A substantial body of research suggests that population ageing presents significant challenges to pension and eldercare systems globally (Cutler et al., 1990; Uhlenberg, 1992; Harper, 2014). Under conditions of demographic ageing and fertility decline (Ren et al., 2024), the Chinese state appears to have articulated a discourse of active ageing while advancing a model of eldercare support grounded in filial piety (Bao et al., 2022; Zhang, 2024). Active ageing emphasises the activation of older adults' social roles and capacities (Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2013), whereas filial piety, embedded in Confucian tradition, denotes respect, obedience, and material support from the son, while also attributing senior authority to the elderly (Ikels, 2004). Filial norms have arguably been adapted to varying political and economic contexts, as seen in the promotion of daughters' caregiving roles due to the One-child Policy since 1970s (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003; Shi, 2009), or in the constraints faced by rural migrant workers in fulfilling filial responsibilities (He, 2021).

Within China's policy orientation toward active ageing, older people and filial piety have been reframed as valuable resources for national and social development (Peng & Guo, 2016; Lin, 2025). Institutional eldercare, once seen as an ethical exception deviating from filial norms, has increasingly been reconfigured as a familial-like proxy for filial devotion (Zhan et al., 2008; Wu, 2024). The role of filial piety in contemporary ageing China, nonetheless, remains subject to ongoing debate. Some scholars adopt a more pessimistic view, suggesting that emerging child-centric cultural patterns—such as 'graciousness downward' (en wang xia liu 恩往下流) and 'filial piety downward' (wang xia xiao 往下孝)—may indicate a weakening of parental authority and traditional filial values (Cheung & Kwan, 2009; Yan, 2016). Others present a more optimistic reading, contending that the apparent decline in family-based eldercare should be interpreted as strategic responses by family members to external pressures, rather than as straightforward evidence of filial erosion (Liu, 2012; Di & Zheng, 2016).

Ongoing debates on filial piety reveal divergent understandings of 'old age', fundamentally reflecting the varied constructions of elderly individuals and their social relations by multiple forms of power. Foucault (2003, p. 244), in *Society Must Be Defended*, identified a form of biopolitics oriented towards population management, where the elderly were seen as 'individuals who, because of their age, fall out of the field of capacity, of activity,' with social insurance systems positioned as key mechanisms for addressing ageing. Yet in his later work on subjectivity, old age emerged as a vital phase in the formation of the subject, wherein 'you have to be old to be a subject' (Foucault, 2005, p. 126). This shift underscores the dynamic and plural nature of subjectivation. In the Chinese context, persistent contestations among political elites and intellectuals over the meaning of filial piety suggest that the reconstruction of moral norms has become integral to the production of subjectivity. As Rose (2000) notes, modern governmental discourse increasingly mobilises ethical principles to govern conduct, displacing the responsibility of governance onto individuals through the framing of self-regulation as a moral obligation.

In my other work, I have examined how filial piety has been extended and negotiated as both a moral subject and a technique of governance within state discourse, thereby complementing the moral dimension of biopolitics (Meinhof & Zhang, 2022, 2024). This article incorporates public discourse on filial piety to further explore the competing constructions of elder's subjectivity and eldercare responsibility in state and public narratives. Such a comparison does not presume outright opposition between public and state discourse—indeed, certain public narratives may

align with official rhetoric—but rather aims to illuminate the diverse ways in which moral subjects are imagined by the state, government, and the public in responding to challenges of population ageing.

Employing critical discourse analysis (CDA) of policy documents, media coverage, and online commentary (Fairclough, 2003), this article asks: as the accelerated population aging, in what ways do the state and the public renegotiate the ethical foundations of eldercare responsibility through discursive practices? The study suggests that filial piety in contemporary China serve a dual function: as a governance instrument for the state's appropriation of tradition, and as a cultural medium through which the public redefines intergenerational contracts. The following summary outlines the evolution of state discourses on filial piety and China's eldercare system, highlighting the shifting meanings of filial piety and older people's social role within the care infrastructure. By focusing on the state and public narratives of eldercare, the further analysis indicates that eldercare is not merely a matter of economics or policy. Rather, it appears to be a contested process in which the ethical value of filial piety and the social roles of older adults are co-constructed by state and society—more fundamentally, a moral negotiation shaped by changing societal values and the recalibration of governance logics.

State Discourse of Filial Piety, Active Elderly and the Evolution of China's Eldercare Regime Since 1949

In East Asian societies, eldercare has long been conceived as a familial responsibility. The rights and dignity of older people have conventionally been safeguarded through children's fulfilment of a range of filial duties—economic support, daily care, and emotional attention (Ikels, 2004). Yet scholars have observed that the modernisation of East Asian societies has brought varying degrees of disruption to Confucian ethics and familial obligations (Chang, 2010; Yan, 2021a). Postcolonial scholarship suggests that under the developmentalist discourse, East Asian states, like China, use the narrative of 'modernisation or defeat' (e.g. *luohou jiuyao aida* 落后就要挨打) as a justification for social engineering and state pressure to change or disrupt habits of people that are labelled as 'backward' (Meinhof, 2017, 2024). Taking the Chinese state discourse on filial piety as an example, what was once framed as a backward tradition during the revolutionary period has come to be reconstructed, in the context of an ageing society, as a virtuous legacy potentially conducive to national modernisation (Meinhof & Zhang, 2022).

The discourse on filial piety, which fluctuates in response to political and economic conditions, reflects the state's adjustments to systems such as family and eldercare, alongside the disciplining of elderly subjects. Foucault (1988), through genealogical analysis, demonstrated that modes of subjectivation evolve historically, with modern subjects defined as disciplined entities categorised by scientific, medical, and institutional frameworks. As Rose (2001) contends, this process of subjectivation intertwines individual agency and collective welfare, forging power relations between responsible citizens and population quality. Within such paradigms, the normal subject is construed as rational and productive, while elderly populations are systematically marginalised within mainstream societal structures (Foucault, 2003). Nevertheless, scrutiny of post-1949 transformations in China's eldercare systems and filial narratives reveals that, notwithstanding persistent urban-rural (or class-based) inequalities, the state employs disciplinary technologies to mobilise elderly citizens as active subjects in nation-building and social production.

During the Maoist period (1949–1978), eldercare was largely collectivised under the planned economy, with traditional filial ethics disrupted by communist ideology. Lin (2025) describes the work unit (*danwei*) as a welfare community that effectively managed its members' life-cycle needs. At the time, eldercare was predominantly the responsibility of institutions such as government agencies, state enterprises, and rural communes (Lin, 2025, p. 95). Some scholars characterised this period as embodying a form of 'socialist filial piety', noting that familial support remained a key element of daily life, especially in rural areas (Zheng, 2011, pp. 85–86). Others, by contrast, argue that politicised collectivist campaigns—such as Land Reform and the People's Commune Movement—subverted familial ethics and weakened filial norms (Meng, 2008). This attenuation of filiality may be seen as linked to class-struggle ideology. Elderly *danwei* members often enjoyed superior class status and passed on their privileges to their children via welfare entitlements (Tian & Li, 2014). Moreover, some gained access to *danwei*-run care homes, allowing them to rely entirely on institutional support (Hu, 2015). At the opposite end of the political spectrum, those labelled as class enemies—the so-called 'Five Black Categories'—were systematically excluded, leaving them and their families in long-term precarity (Gao, 2016).

This period witnessed institutionalised collective support for elderly care, which engendered filial paradigms and gerontic roles transcending familial boundaries. As Liao (2024) argues within the framework of Chinese legal discourse, older individuals' access to unit welfare derived not from perceived vulnerability, but rather from their status as 'revolutionary elders' whose contributions to revolutionary endeavours constituted social capital. In other words, the state at the time privileged pensioners affiliated with work units who had contributed to socialist construction, granting them preferential access to collectively provided welfare and familial support. Conversely, those beyond this institutional framework faced systemic exclusion from both social welfare and ethical obligations of filial piety. Nevertheless, class-based disparities in welfare provision were framed not as structural deficiencies, but as manifestations of individual ideological commitment. People of that era, including the elderly, measured themselves by the standard of becoming 'socialist new people', disciplining themselves as revolutionary subjects advancing class struggle (Windschrift, 2021).

During the reform and opening-up era led by Deng Xiaoping, scholars generally contend that the burgeoning market economy, alongside the One-Child Per Couple Policy (OCP), bears significant responsibility for the acceleration of population ageing and the underdevelopment of the eldercare system. The market-oriented reforms led to the dissolution of the *danwei* system, resulting in laid-off workers losing access to social welfare provisions and becoming socioeconomically vulnerable middle-aged and elderly individuals (Tian & Lv, 2009; Yang, 2015). The collapse of rural collective economies similarly undermined rural pension systems, increasing reliance on children's filial conduct (Zheng, 2011). This change has exacerbated economic inequality among middle-aged and elderly individuals, closely linking their social roles with personal economic status. Welfare provision has transitioned from collective to individual responsibility. Simultaneously, while the privileged status associated with welfare by work unit has fragmented, people have been restricted to having only one child. Greenhalgh (2003, 2009) and Winckler & Greenhalgh (2005) argue that the One-Child Policy constituted a biopolitical strategy through which the state sought to produce a modern, prosperous and globally competitive population. Complying with the restrictive policy, parents' aspirations for their only child's success and filiality thus emerged as an affective reward. Under such circumstances, the elderly are abruptly rendered highly vulnerable. They experienced insecurity due to both the

inadequacies of formal eldercare support and the erosion of traditional filial piety (Yan, 2003; Ikels, 2006).

Amid public panic over social welfare and filial responsibility, the Chinese government reaffirmed the centrality of the family in eldercare through the 1996 *Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly*, which stated that older people should primarily rely on the family and that family members ought to provide care. Yao (2013) observed that although socialist China long sought to reshape the family as a unit fit for industrialisation and marketisation, the state's limited capacity to offer comprehensive welfare meant that families were left to navigate these demands on their own. Drawing on the notion of 'family strategy', he proposed that urban families developed a 'temporary core family' structure marked by new norms of intergenerational reciprocity. Within this context, while the state promoted filial piety among youth as beneficial to eldercare provision, in practice, many older people emerged as economic providers and moral anchors within the household (Qi, 2021; Yan, 2021b). At the same time, a rationalised family logic appears to have contributed to the stigmatisation of older people unable to support the family economy, such as those in rural, poor, or care-dependent circumstances (Zhan et al., 2008; He, 2021). Thus, during this period, older people were reconceptualised as what Nikolas Rose (1990) termed the 'enterprising self' within neoliberal economic frameworks, with eldercare support correspondingly transitioning from collective responsibility to intergenerational negotiations of filial obligations between elders and their adult children, alongside expectations of individual striving.

As China enters a phase of deep population ageing, filial piety has increasingly been reconfigured as an instrument of state governance. Meinhof and Zhang (2022) argue that filial piety has been connected to a genealogical line of state attempts to shape or improve spiritual civilisation as well as to strengthen Chinese modernisation since at latest the Hu Jintao administration. In 2001, the notion of a 'harmonious society' was introduced and the revival of traditional filial virtues was incorporated in the *Outline for the Implementation of Civic Moral Construction*, promoting the ideal of the moral citizen (Preparation Team, 2001). This orientation has been more pronounced under Xi Jinping's leadership (Kubat, 2018; Lin, 2024). Legal obligations for adult children to care for their elderly parents have been codified. For instance, the 2012 edition of the *24 Filial Action Guidelines* offers concrete behavioural guidelines for adult children (Pang & Lu, 2012). Likewise, the 2013 *Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly* details the rights and obligations of both the elderly and their supporters, including the famous clause encouraging adult children to 'frequent visits home (chang huijia kankan 常回家看看)'. Moreover, the '9073 model'—widely promoted by Party-state media as China's principal elder care model—stipulates that 90% of older adults should be cared for by family, 7% receive community-based services, and 3% live in institutions (Zhang, 2021). In parallel, the state has sought to expand the coverage of basic pension schemes to alleviate the financial burden on adult children. The *14th Five-Year Plan* proposed a 'multi-tiered, diversified' eldercare system involving households, communities and broader societal support (State Council, 2021). The 19th Party Congress similarly underscored the need to integrate filiality and elder care into a coherent policy framework (Xi, 2017). By the 20th Party Congress, the development of a nationally coordinated and multi-pillar pension system was established as a central policy aim (Xi, 2022). These policy documents collectively reflect the state's effort to construct a synergistic framework combining filial piety, legal regulation, and welfare provision—one that implies the continued instrumentalisation of filial piety within China's modernisation project (Alpermann & Zhan, 2019; Meinhof & Zhang, 2024).

Evidently, the evolution of the eldercare regime in China is intimately intertwined with shifts in state discourse on filial piety and elder subjectivation. From collective provision to familial responsibility, to multi-level care, the elderly have occupied an ambivalent position—both active contributors and vulnerable subjects—while filial obligations are continuously negotiated in relation to the socio-economic conditions and emotional labour of intergenerational life (Liu, 2008; Liu, 2016). The subsequent analysis will explore how state narratives seek to normalise active elderly roles and ethical citizens amid ageing—and how these narratives are negotiated by the public.

Methods

This study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) as outlined by Fairclough (1992, 2003) to examine public policy, propaganda documents, and online discussions. Our research team¹ collected 300 documents and 12 online discussions related to filial piety (孝). We analysed 15 speeches by Xi Jinping and 108 texts from the central government's propaganda website Wenming Wang, including 82 articles on moral models awarded for filial piety, as well as moral construction outlines from 2001 and 2019. We also gathered 81 documents from local governments on the propaganda platform Xuexi Qiangguo, with 14 joint publications from central and local governments. The 12 online discussions were gathered from the popular Chinese online discussion board Zhihu and Douban. These materials were retrieved in October 2020, with the 14th Five-Year Plan added later. Additionally, 88 articles were collected from WeChat between 2018 and 2020². A subsample of 524 instances discussing eldercare in the aging society was selected for analysis.

We coded the texts to identify recurring themes related to filial piety, eldercare, and intergenerational support. These themes were categorised into forms of elderly care in an ageing society, including volunteer work, family-based support, and government financial assistance. Illustrative quotations were extracted to demonstrate policy rationales. Drawing on Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), we conducted a clause-by-clause examination of the texts, focusing on rhetorical strategies such as the use of active and passive voice, expressions of causality and certainty, and instances of logical omission.

The theoretical framework evolved in line with the iterative nature of qualitative inquiry (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). I adopted an approach foregrounding the heterogeneous production of ethical discourse, given the diverse representations of filial piety and its relation to elderly care support across agencies. The perspective from the subjectivation (Foucault, 1988, 2005), which views ethics as the self-construction of subjects within networks of power, offers insight into the discursive construction of filial piety and elderly in China. Yet I noticed this process might also be shaped by actors' varying perceptions of structural inequality, which could inform the differentiated moral constructions and subjectivation.

Framing Eldercare Support and Active Elderly in State Discourses

Zhang (2024) views that since 2020, the Chinese government has increasingly promoted the active role of older adults, advocating a China-specific model of active ageing. In the state discourses in our sample, ageing is not portrayed as a burden to families or society but rather

¹ This research is a part of the DFG-funded project 'Civilized Families: Discourses on "Filial Piety" in the Age of the China Dream' (DFG Project No. 424193223). The data was collected and analysed by Dr. Marius Meinhof and me, with assistance of four Chinese master students in sociology at Bielefeld University.

² The search terms were xiao, xiao + civilisation, xiao + the West, xiao + backwardness (luohou)

as a developmental phase within China's modernisation process—one that is claimed to be addressable through the revitalisation of filial piety and improvements in eldercare systems. Drawing on a series of laws, regulations, policy guidelines, and official media reports on elderly care, the state appears to construct the filial citizenship and active older people as a foundational principle for eldercare support. This construction proceeds along two dimensions: value formation and local governance.

I use the term 'value formation' to describe three interrelated phenomena: government propaganda about filial piety, news reports promoting moral models on filial piety, and various campaigns advocating filial behaviors. Within this framework, political elites have redefined filial piety as the ethical foundation of eldercare. This reconstructed concept has further evolved into what is termed 'filial citizenship'—or more fundamentally, a form of ethical citizenship. As Meinhof and Zhang (2022) argue, the Chinese state has framed filial piety as a key instrument for addressing population ageing, reinforcing patriotism, and cultivating spiritual civilisation. Filial piety is thus depicted as both a moral obligation of Chinese modern civilisation and a form of deserved social recognition for the elderly. Moreover, Meinhof and Zhang (2024) highlights how the central government, local authorities, and grassroots organisations engage in divergent yet overlapping interpretations of filial piety, suggesting that the political discourse of tradition remains continuously (re)produced through context-specific articulations. Within the broader ageing agenda, the state selectively refines the meaning of filial piety, positioning it as a critical moral resource rooted in Chinese tradition, which serves the modernisation of eldercare services. It is quite clear in the *14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of the National Ageing Career and Pension Service System* issued by the central government in 2021:

“十四五”时期，我国开启全面建设社会主义现代化国家新征程。党中央把积极应对人口老龄化上升为国家战略...人口老龄化是人类社会发展的客观趋势，我国具备坚实的物质基础、充足的人力资本、历史悠久的孝道文化，完全有条件、有能力、有信心解决好这一重大课题。(State Council, 2021)

During the 14th Five-Year Plan period, our country will elevate on a new journey to comprehensively build a modern socialist country. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China has elevated the proactive response to population aging to a national strategy... Population aging is an objective trend in the development of human society. With a solid material foundation, abundant human capital, and a time-honored tradition of filial piety, China is fully equipped with the conditions, capabilities, and confidence to address this significant challenge effectively.

In the design of public policy, population ageing is conceptualised as an 'objective trend' of human societies—a perspective framed in universalistic terms—rather than being attributed to specific policy frameworks such as China's One-Child Policy and their subsequent consequences (Greenhalgh, 2009; Cai & Feng, 2021). Hence, within objectively measurable demographic ageing indicators, elderly individuals are not inherently associated with vulnerability but rather participate as ordinary citizens in the socialist modernisation drive that addresses challenges posed by population ageing. Simultaneously, filial piety is positioned as an essential element of eldercare support, alongside material resources (economic support) and human capital (labour support), and is claimed to play a pivotal role in 'strengthening family-based eldercare' and 'creating an age-friendly society.' In this context, filial piety is conceptualised as an indispensable moral foundation that has evolved into an institutionalised socio-political orthodoxy. This construct ultimately serves as an embodiment of civic morality, symbolising the Chinese people's enactment of ethical citizenship through culturally sanctioned obligations.

As a supplement to policies and regulations, political media do not construct discourses on eldercare through the relationship between vulnerable parents and responsible children. Rather, the social roles of the elderly, as significant demographic groups in an ageing society, are relatively positively framed. In the discourse of active ageing, the elderly are not viewed as obstacle to social development but as the collective social force that contributes to national modernisation and economic growth. This is shown in the following quote from the most important propaganda platform Wenming Wang, through which the local government communicates the vision of the good elderly. In this local government news report covering Elderly Day celebrations, the Municipal Party Committee Secretary emphasis on filial piety culture and the responsibility of departments at all levels in delivering elderly care services, following with the outlined expectations for senior citizens:

希望全市的老年朋友们坚持科学、文明、健康的生活方式，保持积极向上的良好心态和为人楷模的高尚风范，继续发挥余热，为全市的经济社会发展作出新的更大贡献。(Li, 2017)

We hope that all elderly friends in the city will adhere to scientific, civilised, and healthy lifestyles, maintain a positive and proactive mindset with exemplary moral character, continue to contribute their wisdom and energy, and make new and greater contributions to the city's socio-economic development.

This initiative reflects the local government treat elderly as social contributors. Although such proactive, neoliberal economic narrative risk exacerbating social exclusion among vulnerable elderly populations while obscuring deficiencies in welfare provision (Derks & Nguyen, 2020), this paradigm nevertheless positions elderly individuals as active societal agents. On the one hand, elder people are anticipated to cultivate an enterprising self (Rose, 1990) to sustain active consumer engagement and proactive health stewardship. On the other hand, they are activated as agents that should contribute to social development. The government's expectation for elderly citizens to adhere to 'scientific, civilised, and healthy lifestyles' aligns with the objectives of scientific, civilised, and socio-economic development underpinning socialist modernisation (Meinhof, 2024). Beyond the framework of self-improvement and development discourse, older people are further encouraged to cultivate robust spiritual and cultural lives while exemplifying moral virtues. This integration may be interpreted as a synthesis of Confucianist narratives within development paradigms (Zhang 2024), thereby forging a distinctively Chinese model of proactive elderly subjectivity.

Accordingly, the agency of elderly individuals allegedly persists due to their moral attributes and constitutes a pivotal factor in motivating children's filial devotion. This is exemplified in a local government media coverage from the key propaganda platform Xuexi Qiangguo, which centres on the thematic assertion that 'Before the academy gates, filial piety and virtue abound; wholesome customs prevail (shuyuan menqian xiaoxian duo, minfeng hao 书院门前孝贤多、民风好)'. Through the lens of villager Yanying Zhang's harmonious family life, this news report documents how rural Confucian lecture halls enhance community ethos and social conduct. It aligns the civilising of rural customs with villagers' moralisation, emphasising the holistic development of ethical citizenship. Portrayed as a village moral model, Yanying Zhang is depicted as having made the proactive choice to care for her mother-in-law:

“我婆婆不容易，拉扯 6 个孩子长大，从早到晚，顾了这个，顾不了那个，吃饭时她围着桌子转，都没有坐的窝。”提及过去的生活，50 岁的张延英感慨万

千 [...] “人心都是肉长的，你对她好，她也对你好。婆婆这么大岁数了，还照顾俺来。”(Lv, 2020)

“My mother-in-law had a tough time raising six children all by herself. From dawn to dusk, she’d rush between them—attending to one child only to neglect another. At mealtimes, she would bustle around the table, never having a moment to sit down herself.” Speaking of the past, 50-year-old Yanying Zhang sighed deeply [...] “People’s hearts are made of flesh and blood—treat her kindly, and she’ll return the kindness. Even at her age, my mother-in-law still takes care of me.”

Yanying Zhang’s narrative illustrates that while her mother-in-law no longer participates in economic production, her past contributions to her children (including Zhang herself) remain active and indispensable. Although Zhang, as a daughter-in-law, did not directly benefit from her mother-in-law’s earlier familial sacrifices, she nonetheless expressed empathy for the latter’s hardships. This empathetic address further legitimises women’s sacrificial role in familial caregiving, evident in Zhang’s normalisation of substituting her husband in fulfilling filial duties. This phenomenon not only reflects the gendered expectation of daughters’ filial obligations in post-one-child-policy Chinese families observed by scholars (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003; Shi, 2009), but also exposes the ongoing naturalisation of female elders’ domestic sacrifices within state rhetoric (Qi, 2021; Ji, 2025). Consequently, intergenerational reciprocity between elders and younger family members is predominantly framed as a moral obligation borne by successive generations of women. The portrayal of such intergenerational female sacrifice as both government-endorsed moral models and achievements in filial piety education starkly reveals the gendered construction of eldercare support and the shaping of ‘active ageing’ subjects.

Moreover, local governments perceive filial piety and love not merely as private emotions but as universal societal needs. Moral model narratives, such as volunteers providing sustained care for vulnerable non-kin elders (Meinhof & Zhang, 2022), further highlight how filial obligation is redefined as a societal responsibility, extending the parameters of respect and care from individual family members to the broader elderly population. Thus, the Chinese government has shaped filial values regarding eldercare across the entire populace by objectifying population ageing and institutionalising filial piety, whilst activating elderly subjectivity through development, Confucianist, and gender discourses.

In terms of local governance, texts in our sample argue that filial piety values underpin the construction of multi-tiered eldercare systems through three focal domains: volunteer services, elderly cultural activities, and the development of elderly infrastructure. Specific discursive practices include but are not limited to: (1) filial piety education in schools and communities, (2) the formation of community volunteer teams, (3) celebrating elderly-related festivals, (4) organising elderly cultural activities, and (5) expanding the coverage of elderly care institutions in urban and rural communities. These directions in local governance largely align with the guidance provided in central government documents. Government reports, in general, do not present elderly individuals as a homogeneous service-receiving group; rather, they stratify their social value and adopt differentiated management approaches. For instance, volunteer services for the elderly have been covered by multiple local government media platforms. Notably, party-member volunteers often include elderly individuals themselves, depicting scenarios in which the majority of elderly people assist their peers. This is evidenced in the following excerpt from the Xuexi Qiangguo platform, through which Xinhua News Agency, the mouthpiece of the party, publicises filial piety activities undertaken by local governments, demonstrating the state-endorsed model of elderly respect:

龙里县组建了 800 余名以村寨、社区热心公益事业老人为主的 33 支“老年志愿服务队”，以鳏寡孤独老人作为重点志愿服务对象。每到传统节日，他们都会到敬老院开展送温暖献爱心活动。(Zheng et al. 2019)

Longli County has established 33 “elderly volunteer service teams,” comprising over 800 members primarily composed of seniors from villages and communities who are passionate about public welfare. These teams focus on serving elderly individuals who are widowed, solitary, or without family support. During traditional festivals, they visit nursing homes to conduct heartwarming activities and deliver care to residents.

This report distinguishes between elderly individuals who are actively engaged in public welfare and those who are widowed, solitary, or without family support, establishing a relational dynamic of a helper-helpee and a majority-minority dichotomy. The quantitative comparison of ‘33 service teams and over 800 elderly members’ against ‘priority service recipients’ resonates with the state’s narrative on active ageing that selectively emphasise seniors’ social roles. It constructs physically and economically advantaged elders as agentic subjects whose voluntary contributions serve as a benchmark for societal civility, whereas frail or impoverished seniors become institutionalised as passive recipients. This stratification subtly obscures the structural complexity of ageing, transforming the challenges of eldercare into issues of individual agency, which aligns with the subjectivation that activating people to care and improve themselves by Foucault (1988) and Rose (1990). Furthermore, the binary framework posits that healthy seniors should engage in assisting vulnerable peers to enact their roles as moral citizens, while simultaneously reframing eldercare as a collective community responsibility rather than solely a familial obligation. Consequently, older people are positioned not only as agents of self-improvement but also as contributors to social production, actively advancing policy advocacy and societal development for active ageing through productive volunteering activities. Such discourse effectively transfers a portion of state eldercare pressures onto the elderly cohort itself, institutionalising a governance paradigm of ‘seniors supporting seniors.’ Eldercare support mechanisms thus expand from the emotional and economic assistance of younger generations to the self-maintenance of the elderly’s physical, mental, and economic well-being, along with their political care for the more vulnerable (similar to the government’s ‘sending-warmth’ actions, see Yang, 2015, pp. 86–107).

In addition to the framing of elderly’s active social roles and the moral advocacy in family and community-based eldercare, a local government report from the propaganda platform Xuexi Qiangguo shows the promotion of state financial support for basic eldercare services:

盐湖区政府决定从财政中列专项资金，对每个老年日间照料中心一次性拨付 5 万元建设补助……在全区建设了 150 多家农村老年人日间照料中心，解决了 5000 多名独居老年人的生活保障问题，免除了两万多名外出务工人员的后顾之忧。(Anonymity, 2015)

The Yanhu District Government has decided to allocate special funds from its budget to provide a one-time construction subsidy of 50,000 yuan to each elderly day care center. This initiative has resulted in the establishment of over 150 rural elderly day care centers across the district, resolving the daily living support issues for more than 5,000 elderly individuals living alone and alleviating the concerns of over 20,000 migrant workers about their families’ well-being.

Xinyue Wu (2024) argues that insufficient national fiscal funding has driven the government to promote the development of social forces in the eldercare sector, steering it towards marketisation and professionalisation. Yet, eldercare infrastructure, such as day care centres in the text, has almost become a material manifestation of state-driven filial piety, designed to compensate for the ‘problem’ elderly resulting from inadequate family care support. The rural elderly day care centres, targeting elders left behind by migrant worker children, both illustrate the impact of population mobility on the traditional family care model and imply the severity of filial piety issues within the migrant worker population (He, 2021). While the report primarily highlights local government financial support for care institutions, it indirectly reflects the nationwide fiscal shortfall in elderly care services: the significant disparity between construction subsidies and operational costs, and the insufficient service density implied by the coverage of 5,000 people by 150 centres. Therefore, although the state promotes respect and filial piety for the elderly as generalised ideal, specific older people are still divided and governed in local governance according to their socio-economic status and health conditions.

Hence, eldercare support in state discourse remains closely linked to filial piety and active older people. Firstly, state discourse guide citizens’ value formation through filial principles. This occurs through dual mechanisms: institutionalizing filial piety both as a traditional ethical foundation and as a moral resource for eldercare, which transforms family obligations from individual moral responsibility into societal ethical norms. Concurrently, through evolving Confucian values and gender perspectives on eldercare that cultivate senior subjectivity and construct active ageing identities, filial piety becomes reconstituted as the core of ethical citizenship that recognizes seniors as full members of society. Notably, this identity development has reinforced gender-based divisions in care work. Meanwhile, active ageing narratives tend to conceal the underlying inequalities in such arrangements. Secondly, state discourse promotes local governance targeting seniors. Elderly citizens are framed not merely as active volunteers but as productive agents in care provision for ageing societies. Government rhetoric positions family caregiving and ‘senior-to-senior’ volunteering as central, while characterising the state-operated basic pension system as remaining in the nascent stages of China’s modernisation project – thus relegating it to secondary status in eldercare provision. This discourse reflects Rose’s (1990) theory of subjectivation, wherein eldercare responsibilities shift from the state to individuals. In this process, active elderly individuals and filial citizens become the main providers of eldercare services. Simultaneously, it demonstrates what Meinhof (2017) observed in Chinese modernisation discourse – the promise of a ‘better future’ often blurs current inequalities. Through this narrative, people tend to tolerate the shortcomings of the current pension system while hoping that they and future generations will gain full access to pension benefits after the nation achieves modernisation.

Concerns about Eldercare in Public Discourses

The discussion thus far reveals that the state, through value formation and local governance, reconstructs filial piety as an institutional virtue, maintaining traditional ethical symbols while adapting to modern governance needs. Yet, this discourse faces ongoing public skepticism regarding the ambiguous boundaries of eldercare responsibility. In public discussions, understandings of filial piety and the state’s role in social welfare often present contrasting logics. In our sample, a portion of public discourse endorses the national emphasis on filial piety through the lens of traditional culture, however, the predominant topics are: (1) whether filial piety remains necessary for eldercare in China, (2) what behaviours constitute filial piety, (3) under what circumstances it is moral not to care for one’s parents, and (4) whether filial piety can replace social welfare. These debates do not, as in the state discourse, assume the legitimacy of

filial piety's role in eldercare and its subsequent use, but rather express doubts about the legitimacy of filial piety itself in contemporary Chinese family and social welfare contexts.

Public discourse highlights competing interpretations of state-promoted narratives on filial piety and eldercare, emerging from two distinct perspectives. The first perspective concerns the risks associated with family-based eldercare. While some individuals may hold an optimistic view of the state's eldercare system, they are generally uncertain about receiving filial piety in return from their children. The following comment under the post 'What is it like to get married without children?' from the most popular online discussion board Zhihu directly challenges the normalisation of ethical (filial) citizenship within state discourse:

考虑养儿防老，趁早打消这念头，且不说谈老尚早，以后养老机制越来越好，还怕老无所依？万一养了个啃老的败家子，还不如没有。(Anonymity, 2018)

If you're still banking on raising children to provide for old age, drop that idea now. Not only is it too early to worry about aging, but eldercare systems are only getting better—so why fear being left helpless? What if you end up with a useless son who drains your resources? You'd be better off without them.

The counterexample of the 'useless son' (kenlao baijia zi 啃老败家子)³ undermines the inevitability of the 'raising children as old-age insurance' (yang er fang lao) model under the authoritative filial piety framework. It highlights the decline in reproductive desires and expectations of family-based eldercare among contemporary Chinese youth. Through predictions of an 'getting better eldercare system,' the trust in institutional guarantees rather than moral constraints is emphasized, suggesting that eldercare support may be better secured within the state's institutional framework. Thus, the filial piety tradition, which is re-emphasised by the state as a cornerstone of familial eldercare provision, has come to be reconceptualised in this context as a backward and precarious reproductive-ageing support strategy. Conversely, aspirations towards a robust national pension system—akin to the Chinese modernisation discourse's promise to shed 'backwardness' (Meinhof, 2017)—reflects growing public confidence in the China's better future with modernisation.

Another comment under this post suggests that intergenerational assistance remains the primary mode of elderly care, but it is argued that the institutionalisation of filial piety may be transformed into a reciprocal system of economic and emotional support:

人一老到那时候你就弄不动了，没有那个精力了，有钱你也无法花了，天天呆在家里，除非你是富豪或者高官不存在这个问题，但是大多数普通人还是需要下一代来协助的，不能说是养儿防老，应该说是抱团取暖吧...(Anonymity, 2018)

When one reaches old age and becomes physically incapacitated, devoid of energy, then with financial resources rendered practically unusable while confined to home daily existence. The predicament persists universally except for the privileged few among wealthy elites or high-ranking officials. For most ordinary individuals, reliance on the next generation's assistance becomes inevitable. This dynamic should not

³ According to the Chinese version, 'kenlao' means gnaw up your parents; 'baijia' means destroy the family (wealth); 'zi' means son or child. Therefore, the term 'kenlao baijia zi' used in Chinese means a useless child that ruins the family.

be interpreted through the traditional lens of 'raising children as old-age insurance,' but rather reconceptualized as 'snuggle up for shared warmth'...

In this formulation, family-based eldercare is emotionalised and individualised, affecting both unhealthy elderly individuals and their children. Unlike the state's moral and institutional approaches to family care responsibilities, this perspective argues that wealthy individuals and high-ranking officials are seen as needing less family support. This view reflects the commentator's emphasis on politico-economic factors in understanding eldercare. The distinction here between elderly individuals is not one of active majority versus passive minority, as seen in state discourse, but rather a contrast between the majority with low levels of support and the minority with high levels of welfare. This reflects a view that elderly individuals' social class determines their care model, highlighting structural inequalities in caregiving support. As an individualised interpretation of 'raising children as old-age insurance,' the metaphor of 'snuggle up for shared warmth,' as observed by Yan Yunxiang (2021b) on neo-familism, depicts family members, lacking institutional support, being forced to return to the family unit to collectively resist external risks and pressures. This reflects how filial piety and eldercare support in public discourse have become reciprocal family survival strategies, forming a cognitive disconnect with the state discourse of 'filial piety as the foundation of civilisation' and 'a majority of active older people.'

Beyond the relationship between reproduction and eldercare, some have deconstructed traditional filial piety from the perspective of gender exploitation. Instead of naturalising gender inequality of filial citizenship in state discourse, the public potentially distance themselves from the moral and emotional narratives of familial caregiving. This point is presented in the following quote from another popular online discussion board Douban. It is a response by the original author to other comments in the post 'Is it true that parents always favour sons a little more?' Such posts highlighting rural families' son preference are widely circulated on Chinese online forums, demonstrating the impact of gender on societal attitudes towards eldercare:

每个月也发一点钱给他们（父母）吃饭，保障他们的生命权，感谢养育之恩... 我们这种重男轻女的家庭，没有感情可言的，女儿就是个提款机，养大你就是要让你回报。看清楚本质就赶紧逃。(Zhutouzhunaozhuweiba, 2020)

I give them [my parents] a small amount of money each month for food, ensuring their basic right of survival as a form of gratitude for their upbringing... In our male-centric family, there's no genuine affection—daughters are just human ATMs. Raising you was solely to demand repayment. Once you see the truth, escape immediately.

In contrast to scholarly perspectives that daughters' filial piety challenges the patriarchal framework of traditional filial obligations fulfilled by sons and daughters-in-law (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003; Liu, 2008), the poster self-identifies as a daughter within a patrilineal kinship structure and criticises her parents for instrumentalising her as an 'ATM'. The characterisation of 'daughter = ATM' de-emotionalises parental-filial relations, reflecting the poster's discontent with an unfair dynamic marked by inadequate emotional support coupled with financial demands of parents. Conversely, the reference to 'our male-centric family' implies the son's position as the privileged other, suggesting that parental roles may assume a more positive dimension for male offspring through the provision of both financial and emotional support. In resistance to this intergenerational gender inequality, the poster redefines the boundaries of filial duty using legal discourse such as 'ensuring their basic right of survival,' implicitly rejecting the demand for additional economic support, emotional labour and obedience from female chil-

dren. The argument that ‘raising you means you must repay’ de-links the ‘gratitude for upbringing’ from the state’s promotion of ‘filial virtue,’ reframing intergenerational relationships as debt relations. Parents are thus portrayed as elderly individuals entitled to obligatory material support yet denied reciprocal respect, stemming from asymmetrical intergenerational contributions.

The second perspective on the shaping of filial piety and eldercare support in public discourse involves the structural disclosure of the transfer of social care responsibilities. In the analysis of state discourse, it has been evident that official narratives prioritise filial piety and the agency of older people in eldercare, while positioning family and community-based eldercare as primary mechanisms. This governmental ambiguous stance towards national responsibility for eldercare has been challenged within public discourse. Such challenges, widely observable in online discussions, reflect broader societal debates regarding the boundary of eldercare obligations. This contention is exemplified in commentary from a WeChat article entitled ‘Filial Piety: An Outdated Concept??’, wherein commenters frequently frame filial piety and social welfare provision as mutually exclusive rather than complementary constructs:

用孝道来弥补社会保障，社会福利的缺失，就是用最低的成本干最大的事情，弄几个道德先生摇唇鼓舌的空喊一下，把该社会负担的东西都推给儿女，最简单，最少成本了。(Shizhipinghe, 2011)

Using filial piety to compensate for gaps in social security and welfare is a way to achieve maximum outcomes at minimal cost. By merely relying on hypocritical moral advocates spouting empty rhetoric, society can offload its responsibilities onto individual offsprings — the simplest and cheapest ‘solution’ of all

This comment constructs a critical narrative of the shift in eldercare responsibility towards the familial domain. Firstly, the commenter’s notion of ‘compensate for gaps’ anchors filial piety as a substitute for institutional social assurance, thereby reconfiguring the policy-driven eldercare framework of filial piety, legal regulation, and welfare provision into a zero-sum alternative of filial piety contesting welfare provision. Secondly, the rhetorical appeal to ‘minimum cost’ reframes the state’s endorsement of filial piety as a cost-control mechanism rather than a cultural tradition, while the legitimacy of government-promoted moral models is deconstructed by the derisive notion of ‘hypocritical moral advocates spouting empty rhetoric.’ Finally, through the accusation of ‘offload responsibilities onto individual offsprings,’ the commenter reinterprets the state discourse of shared family-social responsibility for eldercare as a transfer of the state’s social care obligations. In this context, eldercare support is aggressively perceived as a social responsibility of the government.

Moreover, the state’s emphasis on comprehensive coverage of the basic pension system is reconceptualised as a system of institutional inequality characterised by urban-rural disparities. This perspective has been prevalent since the advancement of China’s urbanisation, with scholars widely acknowledging that institutionalised urban-rural disparities (e.g., the hukou system) stratify individuals, social welfare provisions, and people’s access to opportunities (Thomason, 2021; Alpermann & Maags, 2024). In the following WeChat article commentary entitled ‘Comment: The Belief That Westerners Do Not Value Filial Piety Is Groundless’, the author challenges prevailing online criticisms regarding filial piety’s purported obsolescence by demonstrating comparable emphasis on filial devotion in Western societies. The analysis links status quo of filial piety to urban-rural disparities in eldercare support, positing that such systemic

imbalances inherently reflect deficiencies in practising filial obligations within contemporary Chinese society.

在中国，今天的养老制度还不是一种针对全社会的制度，比如说对广大农村的老人来说，他们那点少得可怜的“养老金”还不能支持他们的日常生活，更使得他们离幸福生活很遥远。这样的事实，其实证明了中国人在整体上把对老人的孝道看得很轻。(Wu, 2013)

In China, the current elderly care system has not yet become a comprehensive social safety net. For instance, the meager pensions received by many rural seniors are insufficient to cover their basic living expenses, let alone provide them with a decent standard of living. This reality reflects a broader societal undervaluation of filial piety toward the elderly in China.

This text does not posit filial piety and social welfare as complementary or substitutable constructs but rather proposes a causal relationship between the limits of filial piety and the uneven distribution of eldercare resources across urban and rural areas. Seniors are categorized into rural and urban groups based on their pension levels, with the former being considered unable to meet the standards for a fulfilling life due to poverty. This inadequacy in the pension system is directly linked to the Chinese view of filial piety as undervalued, both undermining the government's narrative of the 'superiority of filial piety culture' and exposing the internal contradictions of state discourse: on the one hand, the state promotes the tradition of filial piety, while on the other, it tolerates structural inequalities in eldercare. Filial piety, therefore, is primarily seen as a result of public pension services, rather than as a supplement to the deficiencies in these services.

These public discourses collectively constitute a counter-narrative to state discourse. While not all public narratives criticise state discourse, our sample demonstrates that regarding eldercare support issues, even when ostensibly upholding filial piety norms, public discourses tend to articulate divergent perspectives from state narratives. By doing so, these discourses add different understandings of family values, thus pluralize the discourse on moral subjectivities. Meanwhile, these discourse samples' core value isn't about charting exact eldercare responsibility distributions but rather exposes how government narratives and public understandings clash on this issue. Public discourse challenges the state discourse on three levels. First, the intergenerational reciprocity of filial piety is questioned. The government promotes filial piety and treats family care as standard practice. However, public discussions reveal that relying solely on children's support creates unstable eldercare systems. Studies show significant gender and class-based gaps in parental support patterns. Second, the alleged complementarity between family-based and state-supported eldercare is contested. Public discourses reject the state's complementary framework. They frame the relationship between government and individual responsibilities as either competitive (zero-sum) or cause-and-effect. The core argument maintains that shortcomings in social welfare systems cannot – and should not – be replaced by family or individual efforts. Third, structural inequalities within eldercare systems and elderly subjectivities are exposed. Departing from state categorisations of multi-layered eldercare and active-vulnerable elderly typologies, public discourses emphasise relational conflicts. They frame eldercare as manifestations of institutional inequality, foregrounding social stratifications through welfare entitlement status and urban-rural divides. Elderly subjectivities are further differentiated by political-economic status (wealth/poverty, elite/non-elite) and gender ideologies (patriarchal/non-patriarchal orientations).

Why then do counter-narratives emerge regarding filial piety and elderly subjectivities? State discourse often adopts a governance-oriented perspective, optimistically attempting to bridge structural issues through shaping moral subjects and supplementary institutions (Rose, 2000; Foucault, 2003). However, public narratives frequently stem from diverse social positions that articulate dissatisfaction with structural inequalities. For instance, middle-aged parents' anxieties about raising 'useless son (kenlao baijia zi 啃老败家子)' amidst nuclear family restructuring and shifting filial authority; rural daughters' rationalised approach to intergenerational relations shaped by patriarchal traditions and emotional neglect; imaginaries of 'snuggle up for shared warmth (bao tuan qv nuan 抱团取暖)' with families due to constrained politico-economic personal conditions; and civic critiques of insufficient pension systems and welfare provisions. Though representing only partial dimensions of China's filial discourse, these counter-narratives effectively expose structural deficiencies in elderly support systems while demonstrating resistance to subjectivation under the state power (Foucault, 1997; Kelly, 2013).

Conclusion

In this article, I explore how the state and the public in an ageing China renegotiate the ethical foundations of eldercare responsibility through discursive practices. Analysing the competing state and public discourses on eldercare support, I realize that at the heart of this process lies a contested understanding of filial piety, the elderly and their social roles.

The state and public discourses appear to diverge in their constructions of older people and intergenerational relations, producing tensions in how filial piety and eldercare support are perceived. In state discourse, filial piety is normalised and older people are discursively activated as ethical citizens through processes of value formation and local governance. Elderly people in general are framed as contributors to national development and moral quality, and as providers of care to less healthy peers. On this basis, the state promotes a model of eldercare centred on familial filial responsibility and voluntary service, with social welfare and insurance positioned as supplementary mechanisms.

In contrast, the public discourse seems to challenge both the normalisation of filial piety, and the agency ascribed to older people, drawing on alternative classificatory logics. Firstly, filial reciprocity and intergenerational exchange have been brought into question under imaginaries of reproductive-ageing risk, with filial piety no longer assumed as a shared basis for ethical citizenship but reframed as contingent upon the quality of familial relations. Filial obligations may thus be increasingly perceived as conditional rather than normative. At the same time, the presumed positive role of older people in national and community eldercare systems appears subject to re-evaluation through classificatory logics of political-economic status (e.g. rich/poor, elite/non-elite), gender ideologies (e.g. patriarchal or not), and urban–rural distinctions. In this context, public discourses seem to reject the state's portrayal of filial piety and welfare provision as mutually reinforcing, positing instead a zero-sum or a causal relationship between them—suggesting that deficiencies in the social welfare system ought not, and cannot, be compensated by families or individuals.

Thus, the debate of eldercare responsibilities is not solely a matter of policy design but also reflects a deeper moral negotiation process linked to societal value shifts and the adaptation of state governance. This process aligns with Rose's (1990) concept of neoliberal subjectivation through state discourse, particularly in the activation of seniors' social agency. It is noteworthy that the activation of elderly social roles is not entirely neoliberal; it also incorporates Confucian

discourse and developmentalist narratives, creating a China-specific conception of elderly subjectivity. In the tension between public and state discourses, Foucault's (2011, p. 238) idea of new forms of subjectivation, shaped through reflection and struggle of the self, becomes evident, although it may remain confined to the discursive realm. From the shaping of elderly subjectivity and the competition within filial piety discourses, the complex relationships surrounding eldercare responsibilities in an ageing society emerge. Indeed, this article may overshadow the structural inequalities underlying eldercare support by focusing primarily on discursive dimensions. A more comprehensive examination of state and public practices in eldercare provision could potentially reveal greater challenges within ageing societies.

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