

## Care and Ageing in North-West and South-West China

**Rose K. Keimig, *Growing Old in a New China: Transitions in Elder Care***

Rutgers University Press, 2021. 195 pp.

**Heila Sha, *Care and Ageing in North-West China***

Berlin: LIT, 2017. 307 pp.

### Omnibus Review by Björn Alpermann

Since China is facing rapid demographic ageing, a lot of scholarly attention has been paid to study how this process plays out within its society. However, most studies focus on the Eastern coastal regions and its metropolises. In contrast, the two books reviewed here examine the issues of care and ageing and what they tell us about larger societal transformations by looking at Xinjiang and Yunnan, respectively. There are several reasons to review them together. Both books share an anthropological approach, use life-course theory as their guide to focus on ageing from the perspective of the elderly, grapple with theories of modernization and individualization in the Chinese context and study somewhat “unusual” organizations as sites of care and ageing. In Heila Sha’s case, this organization is the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC; *Xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan* short: *bingtuan*) — a powerful and complex organization. Its oxymoronic existence is best summarized in a quote from Y. Bao: “[it] is a military, but without pay, it is a government, but it has to pay taxes, it is a corporation, but it has its own society, [and] its farmers join the labour union” (Sha, p.50). It is a wonderful case to show that within China you can find examples for everything — as well as its opposite. Her primary research site is XPCC Tuan 143 in northern Xinjiang, consisting of regiment farms (*liandui*), i.e., villages, alongside the regiment headquarters (*tuanbu*), a rural small town. Taking a life-course approach, she starts by laying out the history of the *bingtuan* from its start as a form of employment for demobilized soldiers in the 1950s. She shows how distinct groups of *bingtuan* elders were created through the various ways by which they joined the XPCC. Significant inequality exists between those properly employed (*zhigong*, mostly male former soldiers) and those later lured or sent to Xinjiang to “support the border” by marrying the ex-soldiers and categorized as *wuqigong* (May 7 workers). Having established this historical and socioeconomic backdrop, the book then tackles the major themes in elderly peoples’ lives, namely: health and self-care; urbanization, housing, and social status; inter-generational support and conflict; long-term care as well as late-life marriage and cohabitation. Facing high health care costs most elderly nowadays take self-care very seriously, as a moral obligation toward their children to not unduly “burden” them. This “burden discourse” (Sha, p.102) is characteristic for contemporary Chinese elderly,

yet strikingly in conflict with traditional notions of “filial piety” (*xiao*). It gives rise to numerous health-promoting practices, some of which make the elderly vulnerable to fall prey to unsavory businesses. New urbanization policies introduced in 2010 and significantly more generous pension payouts for *zhigong* mean that old inequalities have been reinforced and new ones created. While the elderly poor “left behind” in villages (or rather *liandui*) are a familiar finding from all over urbanizing China, a significant number of new *tuanbu* residents are retired *zhigong* living comfortably in their own flats. In fact, there is an inversion of the usual “skipped-generation households” in which grandparents and grandchildren live together in the villages, while the middle generation is absent due to their labor migration to cities: In the *tuanbu* the elderly and the young live in the urban area, whereas the middle generation toils in the fields of the *liandui*. Patterns of co-residence also confound clear-cut categories of tradition versus modernity when elderly parents stay with their single or divorced adult child. Moreover, the usual stereotype of urbanites being more culturally sophisticated than rural dwellers is shattered, when we consider that many of the *bingtuan* elderly now living in towns are illiterate while the younger generations of their children and new in-migrants working the fields have higher educational attainments.

Sha carefully teases apart the various strands of care which connect the generations paying close attention to the way financial and living arrangements interact with traditional notions such as filial piety and modern ones such as independence and individualization. Again, in contrast to most Chinese who formerly worked in agriculture, at least the *zhigong* retirees draw decent pensions which prevents the decline in authority of the older generation observed by most China scholars elsewhere. Studying inter-generational conflicts, she finds: “‘Tradition’ provided discourses that could be strategically drawn upon to legitimate particular arguments, but could be discarded just as easily. Tradition did not dictate decisions; it was manipulated strategically in taking decisions” (Sha, p.194f). Yet, while this malleability pertains to notions such as *xiao*, gender roles prove more persistent. Likewise, when turning to long-term care, she finds that filial obligations and intra-family reciprocity are still operational — despite widespread claims of a moral crisis — but that they are tempered by actual circumstances. Gender and birth order of children continue to modulate care *responsibilities*, yet the individual relationships between the elderly and prospective caregivers are equally important and may determine care *quality*. These relationships often face additional strains when a new partner comes in late in the life of an elderly parent. Late-life marriage and cohabitation are another fulcrum of traditional gender roles, modern ideals of independent lifestyles in old age, moral dilemmas regarding care obligations and family conflicts about financial flows expertly analyzed by Sha. In conclusion, she emphasizes that the individualization thesis only partially applies to China, since family ties remain strong. However, “care arrangements are no longer understood as unconditional obligations, but as a product of ‘negotiated commitments’” (Sha, p. 265).

Though set in a radically different environment, Rose Keimig's study ultimately comes to similar conclusions. The "unusual" organizations constituting her field-sites are palliative care units and eldercare homes in Kunming, capital of Yunnan Province in South-West China. Though historically viewed as remote like Xinjiang, this border region has become a prime destination not just for tourism but also for eldercare services due to its pleasant climate. Like Sha, Keimig is mostly concerned with exploring the perspectives of the elderly themselves on processes of ageing, caregiving and dying — but in an institutional, not a family context. She asks first why institutionalized elderly parents would still insist on calling their children filial, even though this form of care runs counter to any traditionally established understanding of proper filial behavior. She argues that the pervasive "child-centric filial crisis narrative" (Keimig, p.41) is not incorrect but incomplete. It needs to be supplemented with the perspective of institutionalized elders themselves. Her respondents manage to construe their institutionalization as an active move and act of benevolence (*ren*) toward their children to lighten their "burden". Making limited demands of their children is a point of pride among these elders. She recognizes that the care home residents are "ideological pioneers" (Keimig, p. 46). Like Sha, she employs a life-course perspective to disentangle the various generational cohorts within today's elderly and their distinct experiences. This sets the stage for a discussion of how these life experiences are embodied — e.g., past political suffering is seen as reason for current bodily or mental ailments. She argues that new senior subjectivities based on self-reliance arise through novel ways of "active ageing" propagated by state and market forces alike. This chimes with Sha's discussion of self-care practices. Yet, taken to the extreme logical endpoint, this self-responsibilization leads some informants to consider taking their own life when the time has come (Keimig, p.66).

Next, Keimig turns to space and place making practices within the institutionalized care settings on a variety of quality levels. She examines how space can be marked as place when either bodily movement is constrained or the body itself becomes "notoriously leaky" (Keimig, p.84). Observing that place making has as much to do with space as with time, organizational rhythm, and routine, she finds that most elders eventually succumb to the rigid schedules of their care institutions, leading to feelings of estrangement and alienation between themselves, their bodies, and their environments. Within these spaces care is provided in an entangled fashion: Besides the much-discussed relationship of care between parent and child, Keimig also studies spousal care and self-care, both of which play important roles even in institutional settings. There is even scope for community care — be it by faith-based volunteers, mobilized school children or fitter elderly themselves. These forms of care tend to be overlooked in much of the literature. But ultimately, the heaviest burden of care rests on the shoulders of care workers (*hugong*) whose perspectives and lives are examined in some detail. As outside caregivers, they take up a novel role, if one does not count traditional care providers — daughters-in-law — as family outsiders as well (Keimig, p. 109). Yet, many care workers

invoke feelings of filial piety to muster the strength to fulfill these roles. While the institutions provide care through management (*guanli*), care workers do so via attending to the needs of the elders (*zhaogu*) — both with starkly varying quality. Relatives may attempt to improve care quality through small presents to *hugong*, and residents have their own strategies to influence care quality such as flattery. But the ultimate bottleneck is the lack of time experienced by severely overworked care providers.

Finally, Keimig addresses “delayed death” and “chronic living” — conditions routinely encountered in her study sites. She describes how in China, where the self is constituted to a large degree via one’s interpersonal relationships, institutionalization often is equivalent to “social death”. Palliative and hospice services are in short supply and many of her respondents openly expressed the wish to die sooner rather than later, deploring a lack of means to part from life on their own. In Keimig’s words they feel like “living too long and dying too slowly in an era that put[s] a high value on efficiency and speed” (p. 146). In the end, much like Sha, she argues against the simplistic notion of a “moral crisis” in China: While old social hierarchies may be undermined, this is setting free previously disempowered groups such as women (daughters-in-law, in particular) and younger people. *Xiao* is being re-interpreted and weakened, but it is also complemented by *ren* (benevolence). Individualization and atomization are social facts yet coexist with still extraordinarily strong family bonds. Looking at the dynamics of ageing and care from these geographical and institutional peripheries sheds new light on the debate surrounding China’s “care crisis”. Both books offer rich ethnographic detail and complement each other well for courses on social change in contemporary China, family ethics and related subjects.

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