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Practising and displaying *xiao*—young mothers' negotiations of obligations to elders

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Abstract

This article explores young Chinese women's attitudes to and practices of filial piety in northern China. It applies the concept of 'family practices' and 'displaying family' to the Chinese context through the link between *xiao* and *mianzi*. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 34 young mothers, I analyse their narratives to explain how and why filial obligations to their ageing parents matter to them. I first outline how filial obligation is practised through a wide range of activities, before arguing that being filial is not enough: displaying *xiao* is critical to their own and the elders' face and establishing themselves as good, filial daughters and daughters-in-law. By bringing western and Chinese concepts into dialogue with each other, this study contributes to evaluating the continued changes in Chinese families.

Keywords: Filial piety, *Xiao*, Displaying family, *Mianzi*, Family practices

Introduction

Filial piety (*xiao*) has long been considered a traditional element of Chinese society, holding together China's system of familial elderly care, determining who is likely to be a care provider and the types and amount of care that should be provided (Zhan et al. 2008; Zhan and Montgomery 2003). According to Confucian doctrine, *xiao* involves a wide range of behaviours, including respect, obedience, loyalty and financial assistance to and physical care of parents (Confucius 2000). More specifically, the concept of *xiao* indicated that 'adult children should exert themselves to the utmost in the service of their parents, providing satisfaction of material needs and showing reverence and obedience' (Confucius 2000, p.15).

Confucian precepts, *xiao* included, have undergone modification throughout China's long history, but nonetheless, the basic principles of respect and care for the elderly have survived. During the Mao era (1949–1976), the traditional concept of filial piety lost ideological and institutional ground because of the promotion of the ideology of class struggle, revolution and self-sacrifice to build an ideal communist society. However, the reciprocal obligation of each family member was stressed by the Marriage Law of 1950 and subsequent related legislation, which indicated that family obligation was still regarded as a key characteristic of Chinese society even though the traditional notion of filial piety was undermined during this period. When China moved from the

planned and collectivized economy to a more market-based economy in 1978, the mechanism of allocating of goods and labour changed (Cook and Dong 2011). Under the planned economy, the majority of urban working-age women and men worked on a full-time basis in state-owned enterprises. The enterprises provided a wide range of social services, including healthcare, childcare and subsidized housing to retirement pensions. When it came to the market-based economy, the decentralization and privatization of the state-owned enterprise brought an end to the era of lifetime employment, eroding the role of the state and state-owned enterprises as providers of welfare support and services (Cook and Dong 2011). Hence, family care has become more necessary due to the breakdown of earlier forms of state-provided welfare.

Moreover, the one-child policy changed the family structure to 4-2-1 (four grandparents, two parents and one child), which has been seen as a child-centred family structure; hence, the children were deemed to be more likely to be self-focused (Guan 2003). In addition to the new family structure, individualistic ideas have become more prevalent since the Chinese government announced the 'Open Door Policy' in 1978. Individualism is generally understood to involve a right to satisfy self-interest without considering the rights or needs of others (Qi 2015). Yan (2009), for example, suggested that family obligations have weakened under the process of individualization in China. However, a number of studies have shown that filial piety still plays a significant role in Chinese society, even through the attitudes to and practice of filial obligation have undergone change (Lee and Xiao 1998; Sun 2002; Qi 2015). This article adds further to evaluating continued change in Chinese families, arguing that the sense of obligation persists, albeit in new forms and with actual practices often constrained by the demands of life in modern China.

Although the traditional notion of filial piety has been widely viewed as a key factor influencing elder care, little attention has been given to the young generation, especially to women who are likely to be care providers for elder parents, and their understanding of and beliefs about filial piety. In addition, a number of previous studies focused on describing elder care patterns in China without considering the complexity and variety of family obligations and practices in modern China (Zhan and Montgomery 2003; Zhang 2004). Given the significant changes mainland China is currently undergoing, through political reform and marketisation, it is pertinent to question how these changes impact on the exercise of familial obligations. The purpose of this article is to examine Chinese young women's attitudes to and practice of filial piety within the context of economic reform.

In addition to *xiao*, *mianzi* (face) is considered as another significant concept that influences individuals' social life in China. Face has been discussed in the western context by Goffman (1972). He uses it to refer to social behaviours that allow people to enhance their reputation and public image. Although the idea of 'face' can be applied outside China, it has particular importance within Chinese culture and society. Jia (2001) suggested that foreign curiosity about Chinese culture prompted the research interest in 'face'. However, it was not confined to this case. Lin Yutang, a famous Chinese writer and social and cultural critic indicated that 'face', 'fate' and 'favour' were 'three sisters who have always ruled China, and are ruling China still' (Lin 1977, p.186). A number of studies have been conducted by Chinese scholars to consider how the introduction of 'face' may modify the issues identified by the western social theory and how the theory

itself may use it as an explanatory device (Zuo 1997; Zhai 2006). According to Qi (2014), the integration of the Chinese concept of face into mainstream social theory plays a significant role in aiding the process of identifying various aspects of social life.

I apply the concepts of 'family practices' (Morgan 1996) and 'displaying family' (Finch 2007) to the Chinese context and extend them through considering the importance of *xiao* and *mianzi*. Finch's concept of 'displaying families' was developed from Morgan's (1996) discussion of family practices—a research focused on the construction of what a family is and who 'counts' as family. The idea of family practices is seen as essential for opening up the possibility of movement between the perspectives of the observer and the perspectives of family members, as individuals normally just engage in family or other types of practices, without routinely talking about them (Morgan, 2011). This concept builds a sense of the active doing of family through everyday activities, moving away from the idea of family as a relatively static structure. From this perspective, family actors are not only persons referred to as, for example, mothers and fathers, but also can be seen as 'doing' mothering or fathering. Moreover, the term family practices conveys a sense of the everyday and routine, highlighting the value of activities which are usually seen as unremarkable and not worth talking about. In using the term, two linked senses of fluidity are constructed. The first is in terms of the boundaries of any one set of family activities as to who is included or excluded (Morgan, 2011). For example, who 'counts' as family depends in part on who is asking the question and on the circumstances in which the designation of family membership might be considered to be important. Secondly, it also conveys a sense of the fuzziness of the boundaries between family and non-family which means that family practices might also be described in some other ways, such as 'gendered practices' or 'generational practices' (Morgan, 2011). The concept of 'displaying families' expands the idea of 'family practices', because family needs to be 'displayed' seen to be done as well as 'done'. The term display is defined as 'the process by which individuals and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute 'doing family things' and thereby confirm that these relationships are 'family' relationships' (Finch 2007, p. 67). Displaying is understood as an activity characteristic of contemporary families as well as an analytical concept.

In discussing these ideas in conjunction with *xiao* and *mianzi*, I bring Chinese and western concepts together in my analysis, illustrating how concepts can be transformed in transferring them from one cultural or social context to another. According to Qi (2014), such travelling concepts raise the possibility of diverse perspectives on understanding social relations and institutions. In developing this analysis, I draw on Chinese women's narratives of the practice of filial obligation in modern China. I begin by introducing the research method used in this study and the characteristics of my sample. The main ways in which filial piety is practised will then be outlined before exploring the relationship between *mianzi* and *xiao* in displaying family in China.

Methodology

The data presented here derive from a study of work-family conflict for young mothers in Northern China, which explores how they manage childcare, paid work and filial obligation. A qualitative research method was adopted, involving 31 in-depth interviews and one group discussion with three young women. The participants were aged

between 25 and 35. The fieldwork was conducted between July and September 2014. As previous research on contemporary Chinese women's lives generally focused on fast-moving international cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai (Zuo and Bian 2001; Lai 1995; Nathansen Milwertz 2002), Jilin province in North East China was chosen as a representative of the old industrial northern areas. I conducted research in four cities in Jilin province, Changchun, Jilin, Jiaohe and Huangsongdian. Changchun is the capital city of Jilin province and represents a typical provincial northern city. The second biggest city, Jilin, is the only city that has the same name as the province in China. It is viewed as a third-tier city. In addition, the county-level city, Jiaohe, was chosen to include young women's experiences in small cities. In order to understand how young-generation women balance work and life in the rural-urban fringe area, Huangsongdian, a town famous for agricultural production, was included. The purpose of involving these four cities was to approach a diverse group of respondents in Jilin province rather than undertaking a comparative study.

Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. Respondents were sought from various segments of Chinese society in an attempt to include the experiences and views of a diverse range of women. Specifically, the majority of my respondents were married young women with one child, but included a divorced mother, a pregnant mother and a mother with two children. The women had a variety of occupations and educational and income levels, including professional jobs (such as lecturer, marketing manager, a doctor and teachers), government employees, workers in private companies and factories, self-employed women and housewives.

The practice of filial piety

Chow (2006, p.32) identifies three levels of the practice of filial piety: 'providing parents with the necessary materials for the satisfaction of their physical needs and comforts; paying attention to parents' wishes and obeying their preferences; and behaving in a way that makes parents happy and brings them honour and the respect of the community'. Therefore, filial piety not only involves the idea that children should be submissive to the wishes of their parents but also includes the diverse forms of actual observance. Participants in my study practised *xiao* through a wide range of activities, including personal care, economic support, gifts in kind and emotional and moral support. These practices varied depending on the situation of participants and their parents and parents-in-law.

In this study, the participants were aged between 25 and 35 years old and the majority of their parents were aged between 50 and 60 years old. Most, therefore, had parents who were able to live independently and care for themselves. Only eight interviewees said that a parent or parent-in-law required personal care. Personal care refers to 'nursing someone who cannot fully look after themselves and/or performing domestic tasks which they are unable to undertake' (Finch 1989, p.26) (it does not require the care provider and receiver to live together). Different levels of responsibility for providing personal care were required. For example, Juanjuan, from Jilin, had the experience of providing intensive personal care support for her mother-in-law. She said:

Last year, my mother-in-law broke her leg, after surgery in the hospital, she returned home to recuperate. My father-in-law's health situation was not really good at that

time, he was able to take care of himself, but it was difficult for him to look after my mother in law as well as to do the domestic work. I was on my winter holiday during that period. So I took responsibility for looking after my mother-in-law, including cooking lunch, doing laundry and other household work, supporting her with my hand when she was walking and helping her to bath. I spent 3 or 4 hours doing these things everyday. This situation lasted for around 3 weeks until I went back to my work. It is not easy to nurse a sick elder parent, but that's the burden I have to undertake as a xiao daughter-in-law. (Administrator, 32)

Situations such as those described by Juanjuan apparently fall within the range of what is regarded appropriate for a daughter-in-law who has a sense of filial duty. Juanjuan displayed *xiao* through nursing her sick mother-in-law and helping with domestic work. In comparison, other participants indicated a lower commitment for providing personal support: one said she took her father to the hospital every 2 months and another helped to pay bills and read newspaper for her illiterate parents-in-law. Some respondents talked about their experiences of being unable or unwilling to provide personal care due to time availability or geographical distance (see Ruirui and Yueyue's cases on p.25). Hence, different kinds and degrees of personal care were provided by the adult children to meet the elders' needs.

Among my participants, women were the main providers of personal care and were more active in displaying personal care than men. According to Zhan and Montgomery (2003), women spend more time than men performing diverse caregiving duties, with an average of 26.6 h per week compared with 15.6 h for men. It has long been considered that women should be more involved in providing caregiving support while men are responsible for providing financial support.

Economic support is regarded as an important aspect of practising *xiao* in China. Adult children are expected to provide financial support for their parents, particularly for those from rural areas without old-age pensions. Economic support, in the context of this study, refers to the monetary transfer which passes between one individual and another rather than situations where members of a family share resources from a commonly owned pool, which represents a distinctive type of economic sharing between kin. In previous studies, two approaches have been used to explain how monetary support that adult children provide to their older parents is determined and how it varies (Yang 1996; Lee and Xiao 1998). The norm of reciprocity is a cultural universal based on the principle of give and take. The reciprocity approach suggests that financial support given by adult children is a means by which the economic well-being of parents and children can be brought into some kind of balance (Yang 1996). This might provide a partial explanation for the variance in monetary support, but it ignores the possibility that there are other factors that influence intergenerational transactions in China and that reciprocity within families is not necessarily balanced. Another approach addresses the issue of the distribution of support by gender. The gender difference approach argues that attitudes to gendered responsibilities learned in the socialization process affect family support of older people. According to my data, monetary support to older parents is influenced not only by reciprocity and gender but also by whether the provider's parents have a pension and by the number of children the provider has. One of my interviewees, Xiaoli, a 34-year-old worker in a factory in Jiaohe, provides an example of this. She told me:

My father used to be a farmer and does not have any pension after retiring, relying on the subsistence allowance (around 450RMB per month) provided by the government. However, the amount of money is not enough to cover my father's living expenses, particular for the cost of recovering from his illness. So I transfer 300 RMB (30 GBP) to my father every month to support him. My older brother also provides financial support to my father. (Worker, 34)

Chinese adult children's financial transfers were partly determined by the needs of their parents. Some interviewees, however, mentioned that they regularly give money to their parents, regardless of whether the latter needed financial support. The majority of participants indicated that they were prepared to help their parents and parents-in-law financially when necessary. However, money was a sensitive topic; some participants shared experiences of giving financial support but were less willing to discuss the amounts given or their own financial situation, whilst others refused to discuss financial support. Even so, nine young women mentioned that they received financial support from their elders rather than providing monetary support to them. For example, Nanan said:

When I married, my husband and I were not able to afford for an apartment. Both my parents and my parents in law qualified for pension benefits and they were the kind of middle class in a relatively good financial situation. Hence, they provided monetary assistance, paying the down payment for us. They were not expecting us to repay the money. We are not planning to give money to them every month, but we will definitely provide financial support when they need it. (Worker, 29)

Such accounts indicate that economic support between Chinese adult children and the elders were passed not only from the children to their parents but also from the elders to their adult children. In addition, for those parents, like Nanan's, who were financially secure, monetary support was less of a key factor in fulfilling filial obligation. For instance, Qiuqiu, from Changchun, said:

I do not provide any financial support for my parents. Their pensions and savings enable them to enjoy their life. They would like to give me some financial assistance, but I do not accept. We do give gifts to each other for birthdays and holidays. Other than that, we try to be independent financially. (Accountant, 35)

While Qiuqiu places strong emphasis on the independence of nuclear family, which broke from traditional Chinese values and practices, she demonstrated considerable commitment to maintaining the tradition of filial piety in other respects (discussed below).

Gifts in kind are no less important in family exchanges. In addition to personal care and economic support, giving gifts is considered as another aspect of practising filial obligation. Giving gifts is not only an economic exchange, but also a process of high context communication that conveys rich, symbolic meanings (Yue and Ng, 1999). For Chinese adult children, giving gifts is a way to express emotions and show their care to their parents and can be considered as a more informal way to practice filial obligation than giving money. The majority of participants had experiences of giving gifts to their elders and sometimes these were quite extravagant. Chaochao, from Jilin said:

I buy gifts for my parents and parents-in-law for their birthdays and anniversaries. The type of gifts varies, including clothes, home appliances, gift cards, small leather goods or even services, like package tours and massages appointments. It does not really matter what the gift is. I will buy the things they need or they like, so they would feel happy with my *xiaoxin* (caring for parents). I think giving money is a too formal and I prefer to do it in a more flexible and relaxed way of giving gifts. (Teacher high school, 30)

The practice of giving gifts was also said to have a positive effect on strengthening relationships between adult children and their parents. Gifts are one way of demonstrating care for others, but there are less tangible ways of doing this that might be considered as practices of intimacy related to filial piety. One example is emotional and moral support.

Emotional and moral support includes listening, talking, giving advice and helping people to put their own lives in perspective (Finch 1989). Within the Chinese context, emotional and moral support are more about following the advice of the parents, therefore making the parents happy. Some interviewees mentioned that their parents had looked forward to conversations about finding jobs and getting married. Letting them know and listening to their words have been considered as part of *xiao*. The majority of participants said that they would try to make their parents happy and not bring them disgrace. However, some of them did not think that seeking their parents' advice was necessary. Filial piety was not regarded as a significant factor for decision-making; rather, practising filial piety was mainly confined to satisfying parents' physical needs and comforts.

In addition, gender is an essential dimension in the practice of filial piety. In contemporary China, with the dramatic economic development, wider acceptance of western beliefs and the implementation of one-child policy, young women tend to have a better experience of gender equality than the older generation. Under the combined effects of one-child policy, increasingly diverse employment opportunities and good educational opportunities, parents invest in their daughters' education as they did in their sons (Evans 2008). A more matrifocal pattern of care and support (of daughters for their mothers) was reflected in Jackson et al.'s (2013) sample, which was considered as a reshaping of the tradition within modernity. Moreover, in rural families, the daughters' significant role in supporting their ageing parents was one of the concerns for parents in investing resources in daughters as well as maintaining a good relationship with daughters both before and after marriage. The close relationship between daughters and their natal families suggested that the traditional stereotype of a married daughter as 'spilt water' has changed (Yan 2009). In my study, no substantial differences were found in young women's patterns of caring for their own parents and parents-in-law.

***Mianzi* and filial piety**

The interview data revealed that '*mianzi*' or 'face' was an essential cultural concept that influenced the practice of filial obligation. In what follows, I explore how the notion of *mianzi* influences women's practices of and attitudes to filial piety.

Yiyi is a 31-year-old doctor in Jilin who expressed her concern about *mianzi* in relation to taking care of older parents. Yiyi said:

I am the only child in my family. I live with my own parents, so that my mum could help to take care of my little daughter. My husband is also the only child in his family, my parents-in-law are farmers and live in the rural area of Jilin. For my parents-in-law, we give them around 1500RMB (150GBP) every month, visiting them once a month and provide extra financial and physical support when they need. For my own parents, as we live together, I cover all their daily expenses and give some gifts on festivals. Generally, my husband and I would arrange a trip with the four older people annually and we pay for all the travelling expenses. As my parents and my parent-in-law are in good health, they do not need intensive physical care, hence, we do more for financial assistance and enhancing the quality of their life. To be honest, *mianzi* is a big concern in how I practice my obligation to the elders. I would say *mianzi* motivates me to do a good job of taking care of the elders. I don't want to be seen as a mean person and feel embarrassed when talking about what I have done for my parents and parents-in law. (Doctor, 31)

From Yiyi's account, it is clear that the notion of *mianzi* impacted on her practice of filial piety. She expressed an explicit concern about *mianzi*, which was a factor motivating her actions and attitudes to elderly care. In this case, *mianzi* was understood as a thing that can be achieved, lost, saved or at least needed to be maintained, which she explained in detail.

In our social network, we would be judged on how we treat the elders in our family. For example, I may lose *mianzi* if I fail to take the responsibility for taking care of the elders. Now I am considered by my colleagues and friends that as a *xiao* person – the image of a good daughter, daughter-in-law and wife which gains face for me. I am proud and feel happy with that. I think it's important to act properly to maintain face in the modern society. (Doctor, 31)

Yiyi's expression indicated that a person's fulfilment of filial obligation was considered as a means of gaining face. Conversely, it could be considered as way of losing or lacking face if those obligations were not seen to be fulfilled. According to Qi (2011), face or *mianzi* is what a person feels about his or her image as it is seen through the eyes of others in the person's community, social group or wider public. Therefore, face is infused with various emotions. For example, the feeling of pride, honour and dignity is related to gaining face. In maintaining face, persons experience feelings associated with confidence and assurance. When someone loses face, they feel ashamed (Goffman 1972). In this case, Yiyi intended to maintain her face through fulfilling her filial obligation, which was expected by her social group and the wider public. Yiyi gained a sense of happiness, pride and satisfaction through doing the elderly care activities which met the social expectations of an adult child. Moreover, Yiyi's experiences of *mianzi* and filial piety reflected two interrelated forms of face as a self-image conceptualized by Qi (2011). Firstly, face is an image possessed by a person through their interest in how they are considered or judged by others. In addition, face is a social representation of a person, reflecting the confidence, regard or respect others have for them (Qi 2011). On the one hand, Yiyi's self-image was built and shaped through her interactions with others and how she was viewed by others. On the other hand, Yiyi's self-image was also

a reflection of other's opinions of her. As the concept of *mianzi* plays a significant role in social interaction and the operation of each person's social network, a person is expected not only to look after their own face but also to maintain the face of others. For example, Zhenzhen, from Jiaohe, said:

My parents and my parents-in-law live in a same city as me. My mother asks me to come to see her at least once a week, otherwise she would be *mei mianzi* (without face), because her friends in the community would think that she was abandoned by her adult child and regard me as a *buxiao zi* if I do not visit her for a long time which resulted in her losing face. The similar things happened for my parents-in-law, they always mention the clothes, food, cooking devices, nearly all the things that I bought for them to their friends and relatives to show that they have a *xiao daughter-in-law* which would gain face for them. So I get a feeling that filial piety was not only a thing for me, but also an important aspect of the elders' *mianzi* and their social life. I am happy to do the things that would maintain or enhance their *mianzi*. Personally, I think it may also help with keeping a good relationship with elders. (Teacher high school, 26)

Zhenzhen's words show how filial obligation includes the social obligation of giving face to their elders to enable them to maintain their own positions in their social circle. Thus, the achievement of face not only included what society provided to an individual but also involved what that person offers to others in the society. These two sides of face were both accomplished through emotionally inflected social interactions within and beyond families.

In addition, the one-child policy has changed the tradition of multiple caregivers being available for the elder parents. It is common for a married couple (each of whom was an only child) to be responsible for looking after four parents in a family. Consequently, the young generation is more likely to experience conflicts between practising filial obligation and other aspects of their life, such as paid work commitments and raising young children. Placing elderly parents in institutions, which might be seen as a solution to these problems, was a key theme discussed in the interviews with the young women in Jilin and was considered by most of them as a practice that would result in losing face. To explain this further, I first need to provide some information on China's institutional care, before discussing young women's attitudes to and experiences of placing old parents in welfare institutions in relation to the concept of *mianzi*.

Institutional care as a challenge for *mianzi*

In China, it has long been accepted that family members are responsible for caring for elders rather than the wider society or the government. Compared with western countries, in which care for elderly can be regarded as a state responsibility to some extent, no comprehensive welfare infrastructure or system of state provision for elderly care has been proposed in China. Specifically, in 1988, there were only 870 welfare institutions for elders, caring for 46,837 individuals in all of China, out of a population already exceeding 1 billion (Chen 1996, p.115). At that time, Chinese institutional care was generally only provided for elders with 'three nos'—with no children, no income and no relatives—which meant that the vast majority of elders could only rely on their children

for care (Zhan et al. 2008). By the 1990s, the economic reforms led to dramatic structural changes to welfare institutions. The government budget for social welfare services dropped from 0.58 % of GDP in 1979 to 0.19 % in 1997 (Shang 2001). Some institutions had to find their own resources to support their budget, such as business donations and fees paid by individuals.

Over the last decade, however, institutional care for the elderly has slowly increased in China, and multi-functional care institutions and nursing homes have emerged throughout China, particularly in metropolitan areas (Zhan et al. 2008). These institutions include both privately operated and public-owned sectors. According to research conducted by the China National Research Centre in 2003, the percentage of institutionalization among the elderly aged 65 and over is less than 2 %. The cost of admission, boarding and services was covered by the government for the three nos elders. For the 85 % of the institutionalized residents who were not considered as three nos elders, admission and service fees were charged which varied depending upon the services provided and the regional location of the facility (Gu et al. 2007).

How do young women reflect on these changes in institutional care in modern China? To what extent do they see it as an option for their own elders? The interviewees provide different perspectives and opinions. Approximately ten interviewees indicated that familial elder care was an essential component of filial piety; taking care of parents in old age was a significant way to show respect to them. Conversely, to have no adult children to care for one in one's old age meant a loss of face. And placing elders in institutions has been considered *buxiao* behaviour, or being unfilial which resulted in losing face for both the elders and their adult children. For example, Xiaoli, a factory worker from Jiaohe said:

My mother passed away five years ago. My father is 65 years old now, living alone in a same city as me. I have a brother who is 4 years older than me, because I am from the rural area of Jilin, where the one-child policy was not strictly implemented in the 1980s. I haven't thought about sending my father to any institutions or welfare centres. Currently my father and my parents-in-law still have the ability to take care of themselves. In the future, if they were sick or need some assistance on a daily basis, I would consider hiring a living in baomu (carer) rather than leaving them in an institution. From my perspective, your parents raised you up, it is taken for granted that you should take care of them when they get old. Placing elderly parents in institutions gives me a sense of abandoning my parents and destroying the concept of filial piety. It may also be seen as *buxiao* (unfilial) and I would feel "meimianzi" (without/losing face) about that. (Factory Worker, 34)

Xiaoli's expression not only reflected her attitudes to the traditional norm of filial piety but also reflected the social mechanisms of the practice of familial obligation. She echoes the traditional Chinese saying: 'Your parents raised you up, no matter what you do, you would not be able to repay what your parents did for you.' In this sense, Chinese children experience a familial and social milieu in which the sense of obligation to return their parents' love and sacrifice is deeply rooted and has become part of their mentality (Qi 2015). In other words, a sense of obligation for elderly parents has been considered as 'natural' and an inescapable component of parent-child relations

(Ikels 1993). Another interviewee, Yanyan, held more neutral attitudes to placing elderly parents in institutions and indicated that she would make arrangements based on the elders' own choices.

About institutional care, personally I do not have any preferences or comments on it. I would respect my parents or my parents-in-law's own choices. If they prefer to go to the welfare centre, I will try to find the place with good facilities and services and would like to pay for all the costs. If they express their preference for living at home, I will try to balance my life between working outside and looking after the elders and my child, because I am self-employed (working with my husband for our private owned dental care centre), therefore I am kind of flexible on my time arrangement. In addition, it would not really influence our financial situation if I choose to stay at home to take care of the elders and the family. (Self-employed, 34)

Yanyan has resources of both time and money for taking care of the elders and indicated that she could be there to take care of them if needed. Yanyan also mentioned her conversation with the elders on the choice of living in institutions which showed an acceptance of institutional care instead of reliance on adult children's care:

My husband and I already had a conversation about the arrangements for elderly care in my family. Actually, the four elderly parents highlighted the quality of their life rather than emphasized adult children's xiao behaviour. For example, my father-in-law said: "care institutions may provide better and more professional care than family members could, especially for those elders with serious health problems." Similarly, my mother also expressed her concern about the limitations of familial care provided at home when elders have to be alone during the working day. She said: "It would be good to stay in an institution where you have the chance to communicate with other older adults, sharing similar life experiences. The elders in my family are not that traditional people, they do understand our situation as the "sandwich generation" and therefore do not expect us to provide assistance in daily activities and medical care. From their perspective, xiao can be practiced in different ways, including both providing proper care at home and placing elders in institutions. (Self-employed, 34)

As we can see from the conversation Yanyan reports, from her mother and father-in-law's perspectives, being placed in elder care institutions was not treated as renegeing on the obligations of filial piety. Moreover, recognizing the time constraints on the adult children has been a factor that reduced the level of elders' expectations for elderly care and widened the understanding of *xiao*. As we can see from Yanyan's account, on the one hand, she has the resources and shows her willingness to care for her elders. On the other hand, she assumed that she will never actually be called upon to do elderly care. Yanyan's flexibility and her parent's acceptance of institutional care were not common among the interviewees. Only four participants indicated that they saw either home or institutional care as equally acceptable (depending on choices of the elders); three of them were, or used to be, housewives or self-employed. The majority of participants said that the elders in their families expressed their preference for being cared for at home in various ways rather than in institutions.

Jingjing, from Jilin, was the only interviewee who had an elder in an institution. Her mother-in-law was in an elder care centre because, Jingjing said, she was not able to provide physical care due to her paid work commitments and childcare responsibility. She explained:

I am the only child in my family and it is the same for my husband. I have four elderly parents above, one young child below. My mother-in-law had been placed in an elder care centre for more than two years. She had a stroke three years ago, then had limited ability for everyday activities. The fact was that neither my husband nor I could take the responsibility for looking after my mother-in-law by abandoning our job, because we both have to earn money to support the whole family, paying for the electricity bill, laundry, food, my child's study and the services fee for my mother-in-law's care in the centre. As a mother, it is also my responsibility to take care of my young child, paying attention to his study and development. In such a situation, I really have no possibility of taking care of her at home. Putting her in the elder care centre does not mean we are not *xiao*, rather, leaving her at home, we are not able to provide proper care...we have to work; work is very busy and stressful. I am thinking that placing my mother-in-law there is better than leaving her alone at home. (Journalist, 33)

In giving this account, Jingjing was in the process of saving face by explaining the reasons for choosing institutional care and the constraints and difficulties that prevented her from taking care of her mother-in-law by herself. Jingjing's words also summarized the situation of China's sandwich generation of adult children, caught between work commitment, childcare responsibility and elderly care responsibility. Work and childcare responsibilities were found to be two main reasons for adult children to consider placing elders in institutions. It should be noted that the majority of interviewees expressed nervousness and pressure about placing elders in institutions when their work and family responsibilities did not allow them to carry out proper physical care for parents as required by *xiao* (Zhan et al. 2008). Their responses suggested that, in general, placing older parents in an institution is not widely acceptable for the elders and their adult children.

In addition to familial care by adult children or paid carers and institutional care, being cared for by siblings or living with siblings to take care of each other were other choices mentioned by two interviewees. Huahua from Jilin told me that her father-in-law was cared for by his older sister. Another respondent, Lele, from Jiaohe, said:

My parents separated when I was a little girl, my mother had moved to Korea and remarried, my father was now alone in Liaoning (another province in northeast part of China), it takes around 5.5 hours driving from my city to my father's place. I have a 6 month old daughter and work full-time in a high school, so actually I can do really limited physical care for my father. He has high blood pressure, sometimes feeling uncomfortable, therefore requiring assistance for cooking and cleaning. Taking into account of my unavailability (I am the only child), the geographical distance and my father's health situation, we have discussed about asking my aunt to move to my father's house to live together, so they could take care of each other. My aunt

was my father's sister, five years younger than him. She lives in the same city with my father and has no partner or children besides. This idea was resulted from the fact that my father cannot accept the arrangement of being cared in institutions or being helped by nannies who he would treat as strangers and not reliable. So he proposed the idea of living together with his sister. However, it is a complex thing, I have to think a lot about it, for example, do I need to give money to my aunt, because she is kind of helping me to practice familial obligation? If my aunt was sick, what extent of financial support should I provide? It's not as simple as just two old siblings living together. (Teacher, 26)

Lele's words illustrated that providing elderly care was not limited only to adult children and paid carers, but also could involve the elders' siblings. However, a series of questions and problems may arise from such an arrangement, for example, Lele felt confused about her obligation to her aunt, as the moral responsibility was not clear. The aunt would be taking on the daughter's filial obligation, rather than fulfilling her own obligation as a sibling to care. She is therefore a proxy provider of *xiao*, which seems to mean the father's daughter has a filial obligation to the aunt on that basis and not on the basis of the relationship between aunt and niece.

Displaying *xiao*

The concept of *xiao* has historically developed and is generally discussed in the Confucian context. The mobility of social science concepts from one cultural or social context to another has recently been considered as a significant contribution to the development of social science 'on a world scale' (Connell 2007). For example, Goffman's (1972) argument on 'face work' relied on the Chinese conception of face. Conversely, western concepts may help explain the link between *xiao* and *mianzi*. Having discussed filial piety in relation to the concept of *mianzi*, it becomes clear that it is not enough for a daughter or daughter-in-law to be filial, she *has to be seen to be fulfilling her obligations* in order to maintain her own and her elders' *mianzi*. In other words, because of the need to gain and the fear of losing face, *xiao* needs to be displayed. This resonates with the concept of 'displaying families', which was introduced by Janet Finch (2007). The concept of 'displaying families' was developed within the western cultural and social context. Applying it to the Chinese context, incorporating the relevant Chinese concepts, *xiao* and *mianzi*, may aid in understanding the ways the women in my sample practised filial piety.

Finch's concept of 'displaying families' and Morgan's (1996) 'doing family' highlighted the importance of understanding family through social and relational practices. This means that a family is defined more in relation to family activities, rather than just referring to blood or legal ties (Heaphy 2011). The 'doing family' perspective considers families as social projects or achievements. It aims at exploring how families are actually lived. The practice of *xiao* can therefore be seen as integral to 'doing family' in Chinese contexts. The notion of displaying family is used to demonstrate the existence of family bonds and appropriate family practices to other family members and to wider audiences (Finch 2007). Moreover, the need to display is also related to the nature of contemporary family dynamism and contingency. Within the context of the increasing fluidity, diversity and multi-facetedness of family, displaying has become a significant aspect of family life (Heaphy 2011).

Finch's (2007) emphasis on social interaction is central to the idea of display. She indicated that display is 'the conveying of meanings through social interaction and the acknowledgment of this by relevant others' (Finch 2007, p. 77). The concept of displaying, therefore, not only focuses on embodied or visual practices but also includes family narratives. Three key questions were addressed in the development of the concept of displaying families: why is display important in contemporary families? How is displaying done? To whom do 'my family relationships' need to be displayed? Hence, when it comes to experiencing and negotiating obligations within families, the concept of display provides a particular emphasis on who matters, that is the audience involved in displaying. According to my qualitative data, the practice of filial obligation is treated as a process of displaying *xiao* to multiple audiences, such as parents, relatives, friends and colleagues and is closely bound up with maintaining *mianzi*. For example, Jingjing (whose mother-in-law was in an institution), was displaying *xiao* to me as an interviewer, emphasizing that she was not *buxiao* because being in a care home was actually a good arrangement for her mother-in-law. She was therefore showing and seeking to convince me that she was a good daughter-in-law who has fulfilled her filial obligation, and thereby saved face.

The audience for display does not necessarily have to be immediately present in the women's social milieu. Therefore, it is also important to propose the notion of future audience when thinking about displaying. As *xiao* is considered as inheritable through generations, it is the case that aspects of the meaning of filial piety are displayed for future audiences or the imagined audience constituted by individual social actors. For example, Qiuqiu, who stated that she and her parents live independently and in this respect were not traditional, nonetheless, when considering the next generation as the potential audience, went out of her way to instil traditional practices in her son. Whilst she has been released from certain obligations by her elders, she was not releasing her son from his obligation to her in her old age. Qiuqiu said:

I try to do my best to take responsibility for looking after the elders in my family, not only for fulfill my obligation as an adult child, but also for being a moral model for my son and future my daughter in law. My son is 8 years old, he has been at the age to start to observe and to imitate others. One day, he said-'Mum, you treat my grandma well, you bought some beautiful clothes for her. I will do that for you when I grow up'. Then I am thinking that what I am doing actually impacts on my son's behaviour and views on *xiao*. I am also intending to build a good reputation for my family through practicing filial obligations. Therefore, in the future, it would show my daughter-in-law the tradition of good care for the elders in our family, then hopefully she would do a good job in elderly care as well. (Accountant, 35)

In this case, Qiuqiu not only regarded her son as an audience but also imagined the presence of a daughter-in-law as a future audience. We can see that the caring for parents has future ongoing display implications, even though some audience members for such a display may not yet be known. The process of practising filial obligation provided a moment for Qiuqiu to convey a family identity—and reputation.

In addition, audiences are not simply passive observers of displays of family practices but could also determine display. According to Finch (2007), family practices are

constituted by the actions performed and the decisions made by family members. Hence, this suggests that individuals involved in family practices play a significant role in controlling family displaying. For example, one of my interviewees, Dandan, shared her experience of negotiating responsibilities for elderly care with her sister:

I am from a small village in Shandong (a province in Northern China). I moved to Jilin for my undergraduate study, settling down and getting married when I graduated, now I am a teacher in a primary school. My parents used to do some small business in the village, but now they have retired, mostly relying on the financial support from me and my sister. My sister is four years younger than me, she is unemployed and lives in the same village as my parents. When it comes to the question of how we should divide the responsibility for taking care of the parents, my sister said, 'I am hoping that you could do a bit more for the elderly, especially for the financial support. You have a stable job and are in a much better financial situation than me, also you are the older sister in the family.' Then I feel that I have to give money to my parents, otherwise I am *buxiao* and I am not a good sister. (Teacher primary school, 26)

In this case, the older sister was expected to provide financial support for the parents; hence, the expectations for elderly care were influenced by her sister. Here, the display could be considered as a meaning making-activity by family members showing how the decisions and practices of displaying could be controlled and shaped by family members.

One of the key practices of displaying *xiao* is to 'be there' with and for the elders.

'Being there' emerged as a central theme in relation to filial piety in my study. For a number of my participants, a key problem for practising filial obligation was not 'being there' because of a lack of time to spend with elders and physical distances, which meant withdrawing from emotional care and family activities. Geographical distance and time availability were considered as two main reasons which led to the adult children's absence from displaying *xiao*. For example, Ruirui said:

I am in Jilin, my parents are in Tianjin. It takes me at least 6 hours for a single journey from Jilin to Tianjin by train. As such, it's impossible for me to visit my parents regularly. I could only return to my hometown during the national holiday, generally once or twice a year. (Teacher, 32)

Another participant, Yueyue, told me:

There are two children in my family, my son is 6 year old and my step daughter is studying in a secondary school. I have been struggling with being a working mother, taking care of two children as well as my husband and being a competent employee in the company. I feel that I have made use of every minute in my life. I want to spend more time with my parents, having family dinner and travelling with them, but I just have no time for it. (Factory Worker, 35)

Yet, respondents recognized that the elders gained a sense of satisfaction and security through time spent with their adult children. An example was given by Chaochao, from Jilin:

I live in a same city as my mother (my parents separated several years ago and now my mother lives alone). Generally, I take my child to her home on weekends. My mother said- 'I am looking forward to the weekend during weekdays, because you will come to see me, that's the time for me to enjoy tianlunzhile (the happiness of a family reunion). I feel happy everytime I see you. And I know you are not far from me, if I am sick or anything happens, you would be here with me.' Then I recognize that my presence is really important for my mother. I am the person who inspires her and I am her back-up. (Teacher, 30)

By contrast, for those interviewees who were 'not there' to display families, a wide range of ways are considered to fulfill their filial obligation, including communication by phone, giving gifts and money. The range of different kinds of support are described in Table 1.

Table 1 summarizes the interviewee's individual circumstances, along with the care or services that were provided by the young women, outsiders, government or employers. It should be noted that the table only includes the information that was provided by participants through the interviews, which may not include all the services and care that the elders received. The table shows that for the participants whose parents were living in the rural or semi-rural areas without pensions from the government or employer, more financial support tended to be provided compared with the elderly living in urban cities. It also shows that young women with flexible working hours, such as those who were self-employed or housewives, tended to spend more time on personal care and regular visiting.

Concluding discussion

This article discussed Chinese young women's practising of filial obligation in relation to the concepts of displaying family and *mianzi*. It has been found that filial obligation to provide care and support for the elders continues to play a significant role in contemporary China. The practice of *xiao* is constrained by the resources that the adult children have, including time availability, financial situation and geographical distance. The providing of personal care, economic support, gifts in kind and emotional and moral support is also determined by the elders' needs. In addition, fulfilling filial obligation and also being seen to be fulfilling this obligation by others is considered as an activity to gain face for both the adult children and their older parents. Conversely, placing the elders in institutions and the absence of displaying are regarded as *buxiao* (unfilial), which would lead to losing or lacking face.

In this study, the data adds to the evidence of display as a means through which family identities are constituted and reinforced in social networks. The data suggests that display is something that is self-determined but can also be controlled by others and in both cases involves concerns about *mianzi*. With this focus on *mianzi*, the analysis has shown how the absence of display has its own meaning in family life and highlights how aspects of non-display add to the concept of display. For example, for a large section of my participant sample, being present was crucial to fulfilling their obligations to take care of the older parents and maintain familial relationships. Conversely, in terms of potential threats or destabilization of *xiao*, it seemed that when respondents could not 'be there', it does not mean that they have let go of the traditional practice of *xiao*,

Table 1 Individual circumstances and care for elders

	Employment status (women/ husband)	Interviewee's place of residence	Parents/parents-in-law's place of residence	Support for elders		
				Women	Outsider	Government/employer
Chaochao	Teacher in high school/teacher in high school	Jilin	Urban	Giving gifts for birthdays and holidays Weekly visiting	n/a	Pension
Chunchun	Marketing manager/Senior manager in bank	Changchun	Urban	Financial support Gifts in kind	Carer (helping for cooking and cleaning)	Pension
Dandan	Teacher in primary school/ Teacher in high school	Jilin	Semi-rural	Financial assistance	n/a	Pension
Huahua	Teacher/administrator	Jilin	Semi-rural	Financial assistance	Aunt	Pension
Jingjing	Journalist/editor	Jilin	Urban	Pay for institutional care fee	Institutional care	Pension
Juanjuan	Administrator/government employee	Jilin	Urban	personal care (occasional)	n/a	Pension
Lele	Teacher/worker in private company	Jiaohe	Rural	Financial assistance	Aunt	No
Lili	Doctor/business manager	Jilin	Rural	Monthly visiting Monthly financial support Providing extra financial and physical support when needed	n/a	No
Nannan	Worker in power company/ worker in power company	Jilin	Urban	Personal care (occasional)	n/a	Pension Supplementary medical insurance
Qiuqiu	Accountant (divorced)	Changchun	Urban	Gifts in kind	n/a	Pension Supplementary medical insurance
Ruirui	Teacher/accountant	Jilin	Urban	Gifts	Carer	Pension
Xiaoli	Factory worker/taxi driver	Jiaohe	Rural	Monthly financial support	n/a	Subsistence allowance (small amount)

Table 1 Individual circumstances and care for elders (*Continued*)

Yiyi	Doctor/engineer	Jilin	Co residence (parents)/ rural (parents-in-law)	Parents-in-law: Monthly financial support Monthly visiting Extra financial and physical support when need Parents: Gifts Pay for daily expense	n/a	No (parents-in-law) pension and supplementary medical insurance (parents)
Yueyue	Factory worker/factory worker	Jilin	Urban	Gifts	n/a	Pension
Zhenzhen	Teacher high school/ government employee	Jiaohe	Semi-rural	Weekly visiting and giving gifts for both parents and parents-in-law	n/a	Pension

but rather may be trapped in a dilemma and must find alternative ways to display *xiao* through money, or seeking a proxy *xiao* provider, such as the aunt. In addition, even if the older parents do not express a need for support and live independently, the practice of *xiao* may still be transferred to the young generation. By transferring the western concept of displaying family to the Chinese context, I considered that wider relationships and negotiations were involved in the concept. In Goffman's (1972) definition, 'face' refers to individualized identities, everybody has a unique and self-defined face through performance of self in others' presence. However, the self-oriented and individual-based definition does not fully capture the meaning of *mianzi* in the Chinese context. My data reveals that the young women define and locate themselves in relation to others when practising filial obligation and they cultivate morality so that their conduct will not detract from others' face. Hence, Chinese *mianzi* is not just a matter of an individual's behaviour but is shared by others in the relational network. For example, not only do the elders' own actions affect their face, but others, such as the daughter and daughter-in-law may affect the elder's face through their actions. In addition, my data suggests that emotional feeling was another aspect of *mianzi*. It included individuals' desire to satisfy the other's expectation as well as their own, to give face.

The necessity of engaging in particular forms of display is a response to wider societal expectations (Haynes and Dermott 2011), and, in the Chinese case, this can be explicitly understood in terms of *mianzi*. Thus, displays of family are frequently prompted by outsiders and may be imposed on family members. The interviewees' experiences in this study revealed that the traditional Confucian ideology and concept of *xiao* were considered important when thinking about how to practice their filial obligations, and be seen to be practising them. My participants' accounts indicate the importance of acknowledging the wider social implications of the meanings attached to 'doing family' and thus how the concept of display can be usefully applied to various aspects of family life. I bring western and Chinese concepts into dialogue with each other in my analysis, thereby illustrating how concepts can be transposed from one cultural or social context to another and make a new contribution to the understanding of filial piety practices in contemporary China.

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