

Selling for Health: Aging and Family Care in Contemporary China

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ABSTRACT:

According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, since 2022, negative population growth and rapid increase in the elderly population have become the new social reality. With the growth of the aging population, the healthcare industry serving the elderly will enter a golden period of development. The increasing ageing population changes the societal structure: older adults in China are becoming dependent, and antiaging, which makes dietary supplements popular, is prevalent. In the essay, based on the interviews of 15 elders, I define dietary supplements as solving seniors' anxiety about diseases and assuaging their fear of being a burden. On the one hand, this study reveals how China's reforms affect filial piety and promote the dietary supplement market. On the other hand, through the agents of dietary supplement buying and selling, it indicates the shifting building of social networking from professional persuasion (buying from salesmen) to personal bonding (buying from relatives and friends).

Index Terms— Intergenerational relationship, China, ageing.

INTRODUCTION:

The twenty-first century is the century for the elders. The decreasing fertility rate and extended life expectancy increase the percentage of the senior population in many countries. Ageing becomes prominent in China, taking the fastest increasing speed of elders and facing an unprecedented pension crisis. Older adults have become a central discussion topic in biopolitics. (Foucault, 1986) In the 2000s, to relieve the pension pressure, the state began to promote the development of social service systems for older people. At this stage, the power of the market was pushed to an unprecedented level, emphasizing the wide opening of and social capital into the senior care service market and giving full play to the essential role of the market in resource allocation. (Wu, 2020) Dietary supplements (DS) were one of the nourished ageing businesses. Domestic DS became prevalent in China from the 1980s to the 1990s. In 2000, the DS were popular again as foreign DS entered the market. In today, DS are widespread in daily life and closely correlates with older adults.

The essay explains that DS address the elderly's disquiet about being sick and being a burden. It also explains the changes in filial thinking under the influence of reform and opening up, which created business opportunities for DS, and introduces the modern sales of DS

operations. The social mechanisms and value order behind these changes will also be explored.

METHODOLOGY:

My fieldwork locates in a large neighborhood in Dalian. Data from the seventh national census shows that: at present, Dalian has entered the rank of 'deeply ageing' cities, with older people over 60 years old reaching 1.84 million, accounting for 24.71%. Its situation can be an example of how China society is transforming under a new filial ideology. (People's government of Dalian Municipality , 2021) It encouraged public pension institutions by following the state's guiding disciplines in 2000s. The survey was conducted in the Jinxiu neighborhood through constant interviews. Fifteen old people were interviewed, ranging from 62 to 95-year-old.

RESULTS:

A. The Awareness of Vulnerability

Older adults do not realize their vulnerability until they retire and experience physical limitations. Ms. Li , a seventy-four-year-old woman, said, "I never considered my vulnerability before I retired because I felt so energetic and could sweep the large floor daily; however, I cannot lift a small box now, and cancer can take my life anytime." At the physical level, vulnerability divides young and old, as Ms. Li did not realize her ageing before the disease became evident.

Old people's identity stems from not only physical frailty but also the society. The strict labor regulation defines the retirement age. Retirees gain pensions and spare time. It makes them have a different lifestyle from younger people and they can focus more on themselves. "Before, I endured my pains as I had no time to concern about it. With more time, I can be worried about even slight pain. I also had more time to learn about health knowledge." Ms. Li said. (Fieldnotes, January 23, 2023) Concerning more for health, some elders change their diet and frequently go to the square where they exercise in their communities. Their lifestyle becomes different from young people's lifestyle. People, who suffering from diseases and living at a pace distinct from their past, realize their ageing.

B. The Change of Inter-generational Status and Anti-aging

From the authority to the burden, older adults shift a lot in inter-generational families. The political transformations from 1949 that strongly condemned Confucian theories forbade the cultural traditions and destructed clans. The social influence of neo-liberalism during the market reformation since 1979 has led to the fading of Confucian filial piety. Now, seniors lose the dominance of intergenerational relationships, and the state has no effective laws to safeguard the future of older adults. In the new generation, human reproduction is no longer sacred, and the inter-generational reciprocity, just like other reciprocities, has to be balanced

and consistent in exchange. Children can treat their parents badly in moral if they think their parents not fulfilling their duty. (Yan, 2003) The new filial ideology based on rational calculation also rose during the market reformation. Many children make a calculation when deciding whether to treat older people just like an investment. Under the market logic, some old people are “useless” in the family as they cannot earn money through labor. Therefore, they become dependent on a family. Elders also accept the logic of rational calculation. One of my interviewees, Ms. Bai, a ninety-five-year-old woman, reflected upon her own life. She thought that she, even all old people, brought damage to the family, society, and the state. “I have no devotion to the government. I make my family worry. My family will care for and pay for me if I am sick. I have already lived for ninety-five years, and without any more devotion to society, I should leave the world.” (Liu, 2022) Ageing is no longer a natural process that everyone should experience. It is a crisis as society shares the idea: when people are at loose ends, they are at the margins of society.

Ageing in modern days is a crisis not only because of the possibility of being a burden but also because of the weakness it brings. Ms. Li told me that after she had a gastrectomy, she began to want to “baoming” which means extending her life at any possible chance because she realized the fragility of life after she felt unbearable pain. She never wanted to go through this situation again. (Fieldnotes, January 25, 2023)

Of the fear of being a burden and weak, a few senior citizens begin to pay more attention to health by exercising and reading news about nourishing life (Yangsheng). Jogging is quite a joint exercise among older adults. Most of my interviewees knew each other by jogging. Ms. Lu told me that she knew most of her friends in the square of the neighborhood. Many activities happen in the courtyard. Every day, they chat, for the most, about health. Ms. Li told me that she learned most of her health knowledge from her jogging friends. (Fieldnotes, January 9, 2023)

C. Supplements vs. Anti-Supplements

Retirees frequently share experiences about DS inside their jogging friend circles. “This brand of linseed oil is recommended by my friend. There is linseed oil in nearby shops, but I think that is unreliable and of low quality. Only friends' approvals means that they are good. We talk about these frequently.” Ms. Sun, a seventy-four-year-old woman, told me. (Fieldnotes, January 26, 2023) Giving way to two dichotomous attitudes, some favor DSs, believing they can mitigate pain and improve their immune system, and others chide DSs as frauds.

D. Why supplement?

Two reasons lie in the favoring of DSs. First, it is a way for seniors to comfort themselves. Ageing accompanies hearing degeneration, imperception, limited mobility, diseases, and chronic pain. Death can be delayed by modern technology and health care, but ageing cannot

be stopped. Most interviewees complained about health problems that doctors could not solve. Ms. Lu once said, "One of my friends was extremely uncomfortable. She could not sleep well and ate less while her back was aching. When she went to the Dalian Railway Hospital, the doctor looked at her medical chart and sighed, saying he had no treatment options." (Fieldnotes, February 10, 2023) Some DSs advocate that they have the treatment that hospitals cannot offer which older adults find them appealing. For example, Q10, a type of DSs named after an enzyme that activates cells, was gone viral among older adults. Companies advocated for its function in curing cardiac diseases. Almost every brand has a very prominent slogan on its packaging: Promote cellular activity and help maintain cardiovascular health. The slogan targeted what older adults wanted. Mr. Xiu, a seventy-two-year-old man, said, "I have eaten Q10 for eight years. The heart attack disturbed me for a long time and now, as I eat Q10, I think I get heart attacks less frequently." (Fieldnotes, February 1, 2023) After finding hospitals could not cure his frequent heart attack, which was the sequela of a cardiac disease, he became appealed to the functions Q10 advocates. Further, cod liver oil and vitamins appeared in almost every family I interviewed. When I asked my interviewees what it improves, Ms. Sun gave me the answer: "I should take the DS because my immune system degenerates." (Fieldnotes, February 4, 2023) When I ask what immunity means to them, they do not have an exact answer. Ms. Li connected immunity with body strength, arguing, "When the immunity system improves, my leg becomes stronger. " She joined immunity with her physiology, her whole body. (Fieldnotes, January 25, 2023) In her notion, immunity was a "small cosmology" that could make all her organs function. "My bones hurt, and I cannot find exactly where. I went to the hospital many times. When I really saw doctor, I could not say what exactly hurt. It is just pain everywhere. I blamed it to the degeneration of my body." Ms. Wu said. (Fieldnotes, January 26, 2023) Body degeneration is happening around the body and old people cannot find special treatment. Therefore, some old people buy various vitamin supplements. They expect vitamins or calcium as a panacea to improve their "small cosmology". Taking the "panacea" might prove their body without notice, preventing the ongoing pain and the possible severe diseases that might recur. The DS and hospital form a collaborative mode in some old people's mind: the former is an alternative mode for the problems the latter cannot solve.

Also, taking DS is a way for seniors to try not to be a burden. Expect Ms. Bai, all my other interviewees did not identify themselves as a burden, but they also adapted to the new filial ideology. They felt and said they should not bring their children more trouble. Yan Yunxiang divides collective interests and own interests. "Each individual should maintain a proper track of feeling and reason, perform their responsibilities and justice, and make concessions and compromises when necessary for the interest of the collective. " (Yan, "Doing Personhood in Chinese Culture: The Desiring Individual, Moral Self, and Relational Person.", 2017) When seniors realize they are the burdens of families, they will get depressed or feel guilty easily. For Wang Jisheng, the moment he realized he had caused so much trouble was when he came out of surgery. "When I saw my son, he seemed very tired, and I felt guilty. I knew

he had flown in from Beijing for me", he said. (Fieldnotes, January 29, 2023) He thought if he got sick again, it would cause trouble for his family, so he began to care for his body carefully. Ms. Wu told me she did not like eating meat (she never ate beef before she got cancer) and taking the protein powder her daughter bought. However, she had to eat it because her doctor ordered her to replenish protein. She felt guilty that the disease had used up almost all of her and her children's savings, so she ate not only protein powder but also other types of DSs to keep health. Having the disease was a burden she brings to her family. "I could have left all my pensions to my offspring, but now it's all going to mine. " Ms. Wu said. (Fieldnotes, January 27, 2023) Because getting diseases is a way for seniors to waste the next generation's resources, eating DS can prevent disease and not bother the family.

E. Why Not Supplements?

Not all seniors seek this kind of reassurance. Ms. Zhang and Ms. Bai, two interviewees, reacted negatively to DS. They both have basic medical knowledge. Ms. Zhang learned traditional Chinese medicine after retirement, and Ms. Bai was a doctor at the Dalian Railway Hospital. When I asked Ms. Bai how she felt about the DS, she told me, "Most nutrients can obtain by food, so why additional medicine?" I got a similar answer from Ms. Zhang. "I think most people do not have enough health knowledge. They take them blindly. I do not believe the DSs. I think most of them can be obtained from food. If people eat balanced, there is no need for extra. Inversely, the excess can lead to problems. I only eat dietary protein supplements because I am a vegetarian and lack protein. For most old people who love to eat meat, why excess?" They knew what their body needed so they did not believe the DS. They also got strong confidence in their health. Most of my interviewees got chronic diseases, if not severe. However, Ms. Bai and Ms. Zhang had no chronic conditions. It gave them confidence not only in their bodies but also in their ways of maintaining health. They thought jogging and exercising were enough, so "panacea" was not needed.

Economic availability is also a critical factor. Poverty makes additional expenses impossible. Two of my eleven interviewees from different families gave me the same reason: The financial pressure gave them no time to take care of themselves. They had no spare money to pay for a DS. Mr. Ji, who is sixty-seven years old, has a child who got a cardiac disease. His son worked at home to earn some money. However, the money was not enough. Mr. Ji must give his child part of his retirement pension, leaving himself little money. He also needed to take care of his grandson. Mr. Mu had a similar family situation. His son was not reliable. The son was dismissed by the previous company and divorced his wife. Having car accidents twice this year, his son owed a lot of debt. The high economic pressure and limited time made them have no time to worry about themselves. The neo-familism Yan Yuanjiang proposed said that all resources are distributed to the new generation once granddaughters and grandsons are born. It results in the weaker position of elders in families. Families allocate most money to the third generation, but the old age is obligated to care for their children, and their children have no idea of giving back. With such instability of the economy

in their family and most resources provided to the third generation, elders have precarity. Therefore, they stop the anticipation. When Mr. Mu and Mr. discussed their health, they gave negative responses. "The age comes, the disease comes. What I can do is except myself to live longer and die after my son settles down. " Mr. Mu said. He stopped his anticipation of living longer. "We are poor. What is the use of dietary medicine? I hope for enough money for food. " Mr. Ji answered me. Even though they cared about health (Mr. Mu and Mr. Ji, both diagnosed with diabetes, jog daily), they loved to browse online to learn health information, they only had cheap and short-time exercises. Urban middle-class families with specific economic power can have more options, money, and time to practice their nourishing life. In contrast, families with scarce resources are more likely to be economically cramped. They fall into the care dilemma, throwing themselves into desperation and praying.

F. The Old and New Models of Health Care Product Sales

In the 2000s, the government began to promote marketization vigorously. Society began to turn the standard of filial piety into buying supplements. Children commonly emphasized distinguishable exterior behaviors like the quality of food and the tidiness of a room. Wu Xinyue divides negative care, which only concentrates on appearance, and the positive care, which pays attention to older adults' emotions. (Wu, 2020) Early salespeople sold DS by providing positive care. Wang Jicai said one of his friends initially rejected DSs. However, the salesman dialed his friend's number daily, concerning questions about their daily experience and feelings. The friend felt so much hearted, so she started to spend money on DS. Elders and children, as Bourdieu said, "are the mode of a different generation who get the confrontation of habitats due to different living standards. " (Bourdieu, 1977) The two generations cannot understand each other and communicate less frequently. The salesmen ignore the gap, willing to listen to the 'craps' old people's children dislike. Older adults feel that they get a gate to express their feelings. At the same time, they build confidence with sales associates who normally targeted several specific communities and joined in the friend circles seniors formed during exercising. With the intimacy built up, they could easily persuade old people of the effectiveness of DS. Some salesmen also used the reliance of the community. They would say that all people in the community are using it. Even in modern times, sales associates are still using the method. Ms. Li told me that a salesman knocked on her door to sell protein powder, saying all her friends in this building were using it. The method was effective. Many people wanted to buy this as they believe in the choices of their friends. This business model might need a considerably long time to build reliance and trust, but the relationship is long. Once the old people believe salesmen are their "son" or "daughter" that listens to them, they will want to extend the relationship. In addition to sales associates, DS sold in another way: they trick older adults into buying. In 2000, free traveling and lectures that give eggs, bags, daily goods, and gifts appeared, attracting many people. While traveling, sales associates gave speeches. The products were usually low prices with great functions, attracting many older adults.

However, in the 2010s, the domestic DS, with the state's loose regulation, frequently broke out the scandals labeled as poor-quality domestic market in recent ten years. The government increased publicity on the proper identification of health products. The sales associates lost their trust. Ms. Li said, "Now, the dispatch of eggs is still going on. However, we only go to get the eggs but do not listen to their lectures or buy their products." (Fieldnotes, January 27, 2023) The identification of DSs is changed. Many of my interviewees answered that they did not take DS. Ms. Sun said, "I never eat DSs. I think they are all frauds. They are cheap and low quality. I asked my daughter's friend, who is in Australia, to buy glucosamine. I do not believe glucosamine that are sold in pharmacies. Foreign production is better." (Fieldnotes, January 25, 2023) They took the Q10 and glucosamine, which State Food and Drug Administration authorizes as DS. Old people still thought they ate "medicine." The foreign one, for them, is a natural medicine that can be effective. The scandals of domestic DS in the 2010s stigmatized domestic production which only represents ineffectiveness. Seniors now hold negative attitudes toward domestic production. "I normally buy foreign DSs, as they are better functioned and safer. The ones produce in China are under loose control. " (Fieldnotes, February 4, 2023) Mr. Xiu said. As older adults lose faith in the salesman and domestic DS, a new private network replaces the market one. Some people buy and sell these to their relatives and friends. They are the agents of global DS.

Retirees do not believe in virtual online buyers as they cannot see them. The reason they need to find a close friend or relative to buy oversea DSs is the same as why some older adults only find fixed buyers in the market. "When I purchase vegetables in market, it is important for me to find people I know because I can make sure that they offer me the best price and quality. " Ms. Li said. When I followed her to the market, I found that the sellers developed a good relationship with her, usually offering small favors like taking care of her bags or small discount. It is similar to how the new DS selling network runs. The elders want to buy DS. However, they do not believe the buyers online and do not want to purchase goods domestically produced. Therefore, when people around them or friends of people around them can sell DS, they gladly pay the money. Sometimes, a relative, who form a close relationship with one specific brand and promote the goods to their acquaintance, can be an agent buys DS outside of China. Elders who may not want the DS decide to buy them out of the consideration of the harmonious interpersonal relationship. For example, Mr. Wang bought Q10 because one of his relatives promoted the product to him, and he, for the good relationship, could not refuse. (Field notes, February 24, 2023) Compared with the past, the new business mode rebuilds a trust system: the trust in foreign dietary medicine and the faith of relatives. Unlike a sales associate who needs to build faith, acquaintance gets inborn confidence and can sell the dietary prescription faster. However, the range of customers has become smaller as it confines only to relatives. Overall, the new network that develops along friend circles replaces the conventional market network.

CONCLUSION:

In summary, the vulnerability of elders can be divided into two types: inherent vulnerability, which is natural factors that society cannot determine, and situational vulnerability, which is the unequal distribution of resources for the elders. (Wu X. , 2020) People are all independent when our modern society has neo-liberalism as a base. The family allocates resources based on contribution. Seniors, who lost labor capacity, stand at the bottom of the family hierarchy, and become the burden. Anti-aging is a sign of the modern country. Older adults do not want to be a burden, so they want to keep healthy by buying DS. The ulterior incentive of keeping not to be a burden is to maintain the intimacy of families. Through the old and new networks, older adults always consider intimacy essential for buying DS from whom. Older adults, who have become the main character of biopolitics now, should be considered thoroughly. Overall, the idea that older adults are a burden is not inborn, and it is a social construction that develops through modernity. Marginalizing older adults should not be easily accepted as the young will also be the old. The consequence of bias on emphasis on profit-making should be understood, and their influences should be controlled. (Kleinman, 1996)

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