

Intergenerational Responsibility and Resource Allocation: How Personal Beliefs and Family Dynamics Shape Elder Care Decisions among Children in Henan

Wang Xiukun & Ishak Nadiah

Faculty of Business, Hospitality and Technology, University Islam Melaka, 78200 Kuala Sungai Baru, Malacca Malaysia

DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i11/26743>

Published Date: 03 November 2025

Abstract

China's rapidly aging population and declining family size have intensified pressures on adult children to reconcile traditional filial obligations with modern caregiving constraints. This study investigates how intergenerational responsibility and household resource allocation shape children's willingness to support institutional elder care in Henan Province. Employing a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, survey data were collected from 628 respondents across urban and rural strata, supplemented by qualitative interviews. Measurement and structural model analyses demonstrated strong reliability and validity (e.g., AVE > 0.60, Cronbach's α > 0.78). Results indicate that filial responsibility beliefs ($\beta = -0.26$, $p < .001$) and emotional closeness ($\beta = -0.19$, $p < .001$) reduce support for institutional care, while financial strain ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < .001$), resource allocation priorities ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < .001$), and sibling conflict ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = .001$) increase willingness. Moderation analysis further revealed that traditional gender role attitudes strengthen resistance to institutional care, especially in rural households. Qualitative findings highlighted emerging narratives of "conditional filiality," where institutional care is reframed as compatible with filial duty if paired with emotional engagement. Taken together, the study suggests that elder care decisions in Henan reflect a dynamic negotiation between enduring cultural norms and pressing socioeconomic realities. Policy implications point to the need for integrated elder care systems that alleviate financial burdens while aligning with cultural values, thereby enabling sustainable caregiving models in China's rapidly transforming demographic landscape.

Keywords: Filial Piety, Institutional Elder Care, Family Dynamics, Resource Allocation, Henan Province

Introduction

China is aging at an unprecedented pace, and provinces such as Henan—home to both large rural populations and fast-urbanizing centers—are facing immense challenges in adapting elder care structures. According to demographic projections, the proportion of older adults

aged sixty and above will continue to rise steeply in the coming decades, placing considerable pressure on families and the state alike. In this context, elder care has become not only a private family matter but also an urgent social issue that demands systematic study.

Traditionally, caregiving responsibilities have been anchored in the Confucian virtue of filial piety, which prescribes that adult children must provide for and care for their aging parents. This moral foundation remains influential, but it is increasingly tested by contemporary realities such as shrinking family size, labor migration, rising living costs, and competing demands on household resources. In Henan, where economic constraints are acute and cultural expectations remain strong, families often find themselves caught between honoring long-standing values and coping with practical limitations. Understanding how intergenerational responsibility and household resource allocation shape elder care decisions in such a context is therefore both timely and necessary.

This research is important for several reasons. First, it addresses a critical social problem: how families reconcile traditional filial obligations with the pressures of modern life. Elder care decisions in Henan are not only about personal preference but also about the sustainability of family welfare, social stability, and cultural continuity. Second, it contributes to scholarly debates by reframing filial piety as a dynamic rather than static value, showing how it is renegotiated in response to economic strain, sibling dynamics, and gender role attitudes. Finally, the study is beneficial to multiple stakeholders: it provides families with insights into balancing values and constraints, informs policymakers about the need to align elder care systems with both cultural norms and material realities, and offers the academic community a more nuanced understanding of how tradition evolves under demographic transition.

By exploring the interplay of personal beliefs, family dynamics, and socioeconomic pressures, this paper positions elder care not as a binary choice between filial and unfilial behavior, but as a process of negotiation shaped by both enduring values and structural realities. In doing so, it highlights why studying elder care in Henan is not only locally relevant but also globally significant, as other aging societies grapple with similar tensions between tradition and modernity.

Literature Review

Filial Piety and Cultural Values

Filial piety, or *xiao*, continues to be a core influence on elder care decisions in China. However, scholars have observed a shift in how this value is enacted. While traditional expectations persist, younger generations increasingly reinterpret filial duties in practical terms (Yan & Fang, 2021). In rural Henan, filial piety is still invoked as a moral obligation, but financial support may not always translate into physical caregiving (Zhao, 2023).

Family Dynamics and Resource Allocation

Intergenerational caregiving often exists on a spectrum between emotional connection and conflict. Studies show that caregiving relationships can oscillate between disruption and harmony, depending on family structure and communication (Lien et al., 2021). Moreover, economic stress, sibling gender roles, and intergenerational expectations affect how care responsibilities are distributed (Huang, 2018).

Socioeconomic Pressures and Utilitarian Caregiving

The notion of "raising children to support old age" is being increasingly challenged by economic realities. In many cases, utilitarian logic shapes caregiving decisions—children make strategic choices based on limited time, energy, and money (Wei-we, 2014).

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design in order to capture both the statistical generalizability of quantitative survey results and the contextual richness of qualitative narratives. The first stage involved a structured survey with adult children in Henan Province who had at least one living parent aged sixty-five or older. A stratified sampling frame was established to include both urban and rural respondents across developed and less-developed regions of Henan. Within each stratum, neighborhoods and villages were randomly selected, and eligible respondents were identified through household screening. A total of 882 individuals were contacted, of whom 738 began the survey and 628 provided valid responses after data cleaning, representing a response rate of 71.2 percent.

The survey instrument included seven key constructs aligned with the theoretical framework: filial responsibility belief, emotional closeness to parents, financial strain, resource allocation priority to children, sibling conflict, gender role attitudes, and willingness to support institutional care. Each construct was measured using Likert-scale items, with reliabilities verified during a pilot test ($n=52$) prior to the main study. Translation and back-translation procedures ensured linguistic equivalence. Ethical clearance was obtained from the author's institution, and informed consent was collected from all participants.

Data collection took place between March and April 2025 using both tablet-assisted face-to-face surveys (61 percent) and secure online questionnaires (39 percent). To minimize common method bias, sensitive items were positioned in the middle of the survey and self-completed electronically. Data were cleaned through expectation–maximization imputation for small amounts of missingness and multivariate outlier screening. Analytical strategies combined exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). Bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples was employed to assess significance, and mediation, moderation, and multi-group analyses were conducted to test the robustness of the model.

Table 1 summarizes the sampling distribution across different strata, demonstrating the balance between urban and rural respondents.

Table 1

Sampling Distribution

Stratum	Planned n	Achieved n
Urban Core (Zhengzhou, Luoyang)	180	176
Urban Periphery (Kaifeng, Xinxiang)	160	146
Rural Developed (Nanyang, Xuchang)	160	156
Rural Less-Developed (Zhoukou, Shangqiu)	140	150
Total	640	628

Findings

The demographic profile of the sample indicates a balanced and diverse population. The mean age of respondents was 36.8 years ($SD = 8.1$), 52.4 percent were female, and nearly one-third were only children. Approximately 47 percent of respondents lived in urban areas, while the rest resided in rural settings. The median household income fell within the 8,000–12,000 RMB band. Notably, 27 percent of respondents co-resided with at least one parent, while over 60 percent reported weekly in-person contact, suggesting strong baseline ties between adult children and their parents.

The measurement model demonstrated robust reliability and validity. Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) statistics reached 0.892, and Bartlett’s test was significant ($\chi^2 = 3,475.2$, $p < .001$). Factor loadings for all items exceeded 0.64, while average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.60 to 0.75. Reliability coefficients were satisfactory, with Cronbach’s alpha values above 0.78 and composite reliability values exceeding 0.85. Discriminant validity was confirmed through both Fornell–Larcker and HTMT criteria.

Table 2 presents the measurement reliability results.

Table 2

Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Items	Loading Range	Cronbach’s α	CR	AVE
Filial Responsibility Belief (FRB)	4	0.68–0.84	0.84	0.88	0.65
Emotional Closeness (ECP)	4	0.70–0.86	0.86	0.90	0.69
Financial Strain (FS)	4	0.66–0.83	0.82	0.87	0.63
Resource Allocation Priority (RAP)	3	0.72–0.85	0.81	0.88	0.71
Sibling Conflict (SC)	3	0.64–0.82	0.78	0.85	0.60
Gender Role Attitudes (GRA)	3	0.70–0.83	0.79	0.86	0.67
Willingness to Institutional Care (WIC)	3	0.76–0.88	0.85	0.90	0.75

Structural model analysis indicated that filial responsibility beliefs ($\beta = -0.26$, $p < .001$) and emotional closeness ($\beta = -0.19$, $p < .001$) were negatively associated with willingness to support institutional elder care, highlighting the enduring impact of traditional cultural values. By contrast, financial strain ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < .001$), resource allocation priorities ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < .001$), and sibling conflict ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = .001$) all increased willingness, suggesting that practical and relational constraints push families toward considering institutional options. Urban residence also had a small but significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.09$, $p < .01$).

Table 2 summarizes the structural model results.

Table 2

Structural Model Results

Path	β	t-value	p-value	Effect size (f^2)
FRB → WIC	-0.26	8.12	< .001	0.12
ECP → WIC	-0.19	6.01	< .001	0.07
FS → WIC	0.17	5.18	< .001	0.05
RAP → WIC	0.14	4.37	< .001	0.04
SC → WIC	0.11	3.42	.001	0.02
Urban → WIC	0.09	2.88	.004	0.01

Moderation analysis confirmed that gender role attitudes intensified the negative effect of filial responsibility beliefs: in families with more traditional views, the reluctance to support institutional care was stronger. Multi-group analysis showed that the negative influence of filial beliefs was more pronounced in rural households, whereas financial strain exerted greater influence in urban households.

Qualitative interviews added explanatory depth. Respondents often expressed “conditional filiality,” emphasizing that institutional care could still be filial if combined with regular visits and framed as reducing burden rather than neglect. Others described “resource triage,” where financial commitments such as children’s education or housing took precedence, compelling families to consider external care arrangements. Finally, in families with multiple siblings, narratives indicated that persistent conflict often made institutional care a practical solution to avoid prolonged disputes.

Taken together, these findings suggest that willingness to support institutional elder care in Henan is not simply a matter of cultural decline but rather a process of negotiation between enduring filial values and pressing material or relational constraints. Policies that both honor traditional values and alleviate financial and caregiving burdens are therefore essential for sustainable elder care solutions in central China.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that in Henan Province, decisions regarding institutional elder care are far more complex than a simple adherence to or abandonment of traditional cultural norms. Rather, they represent a continuous negotiation between long-standing ideals of filial piety, evolving personal beliefs, intra-family dynamics, and the practical realities of limited economic resources. Although filial piety remains a deeply valued moral compass, it is increasingly expressed in ways that diverge from the conventional expectation of hands-on care within the household. For many families, financial strain, competing obligations such as children’s education, and conflicts among siblings shape the boundaries of what filial duty can realistically entail. As a result, institutional care is gradually being reframed not as an act of neglect, but as one possible expression of filial responsibility, especially when paired with ongoing emotional commitment and regular contact.

This shift suggests that the moral fabric underpinning elder care in central China is not being dismantled but reinterpreted. Younger generations, particularly in urban contexts, demonstrate a willingness to reconcile traditional obligations with modern constraints by adopting hybrid strategies that combine family involvement with professional support.

Conversely, in rural households where filial expectations remain stronger, institutional care is still often perceived as a last resort, yet the growing weight of economic hardship is gradually softening resistance. Gender also continues to play a critical role, with traditional views reinforcing unequal caregiving burdens, particularly for daughters, while more egalitarian attitudes open the space for shared responsibilities and institutional alternatives.

From a policy perspective, these dynamics point to the need for elder care systems that both respect cultural sensibilities and relieve the practical burdens borne by families. Effective intervention requires a dual approach: emotional reinforcement through public messaging that frames institutional care as compatible with filial ideals, and material support through subsidies, affordable facilities, and integrated community-based services. Policymakers should recognize that willingness to adopt institutional care is not an indicator of cultural decline, but an adaptive response to structural pressures. Support mechanisms that ease financial strain, mediate sibling conflict, and challenge rigid gender role expectations are likely to facilitate smoother transitions for families navigating these difficult choices.

In sum, this study underscores that the future of elder care in Henan and similar contexts lies in recognizing the interplay between tradition and modernity. Institutional care will become a viable and accepted option not by displacing filial piety, but by coexisting with it in new forms that reflect both continuity and change. For scholars, this highlights the importance of examining elder care as a dynamic process shaped by cultural, economic, and relational forces rather than a binary between filial and unfilial. For policymakers and practitioners, it offers a roadmap to design elder care systems that are culturally sensitive, financially accessible, and socially sustainable, ensuring that families can uphold both their values and their wellbeing in an era of demographic transformation.

References

- Chen, Z. (2011). *Knowledge and perceptions: Chinese older adults' willingness to use institutional elder care*.
- Deng, T., Fan, Y., Wu, M., & Li, M. (2022). Older people's long-term care preferences in China: The impact of living with grandchildren on older people's willingness and family decisions. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19.
- Huang, Y. (2018). Changing intergenerational contracts: Gender, cohorts and elder care in central rural China, 2005–2013. *Asian Population Studies*, 14(1), 21–35.
- Lien, Y., Hsieh, C.-M., & Huang, H.-M. (2021). A dichotomous relationship of intergenerational caregiving within elderly care: Disruption/Disharmony and Connection/Harmony Across the Generations. *International Journal of Nursing & Clinical Practices*.
- Sun, W. (2014). Utilitarianism in elder-care in rural China. *Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities*.
- Yan, E., & Fang, B. (2021). Elder abuse in Asia. In R. Geffner et al. (Eds.), *Handbook of Interpersonal Violence and Abuse Across the Lifespan*.
- Zhao, L. (2023). China's aging population: A review of living arrangement, intergenerational support, and wellbeing. *Health Care Science*.
- Zhao, Y., & Huang, Y. (2018). Migrating (grand)parents, intergenerational relationships and neo-familism in China. *Journal of Comparative Social Work*.