

**Neoliberalism and the Burden Narrative:
A Case Study in a Private Long-Term Care Facility in Northeastern China**

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ABSTRACT

Historically, the main source of support for China's elderly population has been family caregiving, with deep roots in the Confucian tradition of filial piety. Yet socioeconomic and demographic shifts in the past few decades have made it increasingly difficult for adult children to provide care for their elderly parents, and the number of private long-term care facilities (LTCFs) are growing as a response to the need and demand for an alternative form of eldercare. Existing research on long-term care facilities (LTCF) is limited and focuses on describing the circumstances that lead to the placement of Chinese elders in primarily government-run facilities in large cities. This ethnographic research study seeks to contribute to the current research by connecting a micro-level analysis of the experiences of the elderly Chinese residing in a county-level, privately-owned LTC facility in Northeastern China to the broader forces of China's socioeconomic development and neoliberal ideology. Interviews with 10 residents and 4 employees of the facility reveal that neoliberalism has influenced the elderly's conceptions of self and their relations to other residents, the facility staff, and their family and that it has influenced what the elderly expect and are willing to accept as care in old age. Neoliberal ideology is internalized by residents of the facility, who conceptualize their care needs as a burden on their family and facility staff. These findings demonstrate that the privatization of eldercare in China has contributed to the subversion of the social and relational aspects of care and has emphasized the individual responsibility of the elderly to regulate their own needs.

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, the main source of support for China's elderly population has been the family. This form of eldercare is deeply rooted in Confucianism, where the self is intrinsically tied to one's role relationship with others. Specifically, Confucianism asserts the primacy of the parent-child relationship based upon the idea that an individual's life is connected to and is a derivation of their parents' physical being (Hwang 1999). A child should thus exhibit filial piety, or *xiao*, toward their parents to honor them for bringing them into existence (Hwang 1999) by showing them respect, obedience, and loyalty, as well as caring for them in old age (Zhan and Montgomery 2003). The ideal, then, for eldercare in China and other societies with a Confucian cultural tradition is that an elder's physical and emotional needs are provided for in the home by their children.

Yet, the care arrangement some elderly persons are experiencing in China currently is not in the home, but rather in institutional care facilities known as long-term care facilities (LTCFs). This shift in China's eldercare landscape has been decades in the making, and the role of the state has been unquestionably significant. China's family planning policies have dramatically lowered the fertility rate, or number of children born per woman, while post-1978 reforms have ushered in rapid economic development, urbanization, and social changes. The quickness of these shifts has left little time for China to establish the structures and institutions needed to support an increasingly older population. At the same time, these shifts threaten the ability for adult children to provide care for their elderly parents, as has been custom in China. As both the family and the state struggle to support the elderly population, institutional care facilities have grown in popularity as an alternative form of care for the elderly. In this context, to understand changes in care for the elderly requires a perspective that is not only cultural and historical, but

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also economic and sociopolitical. Specifically, my paper follows the work of Vivian Leung, Ching Man Lam, and Yam Liang, who analyzed how expectations of family care and filial piety have been influenced by neoliberal discourse in Hong Kong, a city that Milton Friedman once described as “the best example of a free market economy” (2019). After conducting 120-depth interviews with Chinese parents, they determined that neoliberal discourse has contributed to the creation of a new moral standard of filial piety—one in which self-reliance on the part of the elderly and self-management on the part of adult children has become the norm.

Unlike Hong Kong, mainland China does not have a history involving British colonial rule and does not boast a fully-fledged free-market economy. However, it has undergone significant economic and social changes following the implementation of market-based reforms that have been both criticized and praised for being neoliberal. These changes are particularly salient in the Northeast, where this study is situated, which had been a powerful industrial sector before the downsizing and privatization of industry led to lay-offs and economic stagnation in the area (Yan 2010). This paper will not engage in a debate on whether or not it is appropriate to consider China neoliberal; rather, it seeks to explore the ways in which neoliberal ideology may serve as just one of many influences on contemporary societal discourse on and attitudes toward eldercare in China. The rise of private LTCFs is a remarkable shift in Chinese practice, and this phenomenon aligns with neoliberal ideology in that the market is being allowed to serve as a substitute for an area of life—eldercare—that is inherently intimate and relational and that it has historically not been allowed to touch. Moreover, the positive attitude towards LTCFs as a suitable form of care for the elderly represents a substantial change in thought, as well as in family relations and human experiences and expectations, which may also indicate a changing understanding of the self as a neoliberal subject characterized by individualism. Yet there is little

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discussion in the existing literature elucidating how neoliberal ideology has influenced eldercare practices and ideals in China. This study aims to examine how the private institutional care setting itself may contribute to the reconstruction of care, self, and the traditional value of filial piety. How are discourses relating to aging, care, and the self articulated within the operations of a privately-owned long-term care facility? And how might such discourses represent and be influenced by larger shifts in China's moral, cultural, and economic landscape?

METHODOLOGY

I conducted ethnographic research at a county-level LTCF in which some of my family members reside, which I will refer to as Sunrise Elderly Service Center. I spent 21 days during December 2019 and January 2020 living in the facility and engaging with facility residents and staff as an active participant-observer. During my first 10 days in the facility, I became acclimated to the facility and spoke to around 70 elderly residents of varying backgrounds. Out of the 70 residents I initially spoke to, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews in Mandarin with 10 of them during the second half of my time living in the facility. These interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours long and occurred in resident rooms or in an unused room that the facility permitted me to use. I also conducted interviews with 4 facility staff members, each of which ranged from 30 minutes to an hour long. I recorded audio and transcribed interviews directly into English with participant consent.

Broadly, I asked residents to describe their lives before moving to the facility, their experience living in the facility and interacting with other residents and staff, and their needs and desires in old age. I asked staff to describe how and why they came to work at the facility, what their job consists of, their interactions with the elderly residents, and their understanding of what

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the elderly need and want. Throughout this thesis, I will be using pseudonyms to refer to my participants.

SAMPLE

The Sunrise Elderly Service Center is a LTCF classified as a *yiyang jiehe*, or a combination of an eldercare facility with a hospital. It is categorized as a “non-profit social project” and receives subsidies from the government, but it is also operated by and beholden to the shareholders who finance the facility.

Of the residents who participated in my study, two were women and eight were men. Two of them were from rural areas and eight were from urban areas; correspondingly, two residents relied on the government and their children’s assistance to cover living costs, one resident relied on a small employment pension, government assistance, and their children’s assistance, and the other seven residents drew from their employment pension. Their ages ranged from 62 to 90 years old, with a median age of 75. Using snowball sampling, my sample overrepresented elderly men and urban elderly who were financially well off. At least half of my participants were on familiar terms with my family, and the existing trust and relationship between them and my family lent itself to their desire and willingness to participate in my research. Those same residents tended to share a similar educational and cultural background as my family members, who are of a relatively higher socioeconomic class.

The facility staff who participated in my study included a male physician, a building manager, a member of the kitchen staff, and a member of the cleaning staff. Much of my understanding of how staff interact with and view residents is based on my single interview with one building manager, Ms. Liu, as building managers have the most intimate interactions with

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residents of all the staff. They are responsible for engaging with the residents on a daily basis, checking up on the residents under their purview, ensuring that they are comfortable and that their needs are met, and responding to any question or concern.

NEOLIBERALISM: A DEPARTURE FROM TRADITIONAL ELDERCARE

David Harvey poses that neoliberalism is “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2005:2). The role of the state is to create and manage such an institutional framework, often by deregulating and privatizing public and state-owned enterprises, decentralizing power and accountability from a national level to local levels, and decreasing social provisioning by the state. Within a neoliberal framework, the state is not expected to completely withdraw from the public; rather, it must actively intervene to create the conditions necessary for markets to facilitate exchanges in human life wherever possible. This logic arises from the conclusion that markets are responsive to the desires and choices of the individual in a way that the state is not, such that markets are more effective and efficient in meeting demand and allocating resources.

Under neoliberalism, humans are presumed to be rational and autonomous, able to make choices based on an internal calculation of risk and benefit in pursuit of their own self-interest (Gershon 2011). The ideal neoliberal self assumes full responsibility of their needs and choices and is constantly managing and developing their abilities and skills to adapt to the mechanisms of the market (Brown 2003). In this context, social relations are also regulated by a rational calculus, where “relationships are two or more neoliberal collectives creating a partnership that

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distributes responsibility and risk so that each can maintain their own autonomy as market actors” (Gershon 2011:540).

Neoliberal ideology clearly exerted an influence on policy making in China in the decades since the 1980s. After Mao's death in 1976 and the end of the devastating Cultural Revolution, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) faced a crisis of legitimacy as a result of the failures of Maoist socialism and central planning “to guarantee the most fundamental material needs of the peasant majority” (Weber 2018:8). Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the CCP undertook a series of experiential and pragmatic-minded reforms intended to improve the material realities of the Chinese citizenry and integrate China into the global economy (Rofel 2007). These reforms included the de-collectivization of agriculture and communes, the implementation of the household responsibility system, the creation of Township and Village Enterprises, the introduction of the dual-price system in state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and the eventual privatization of most small and medium-sized SOEs; all of which served to transition China into a competitive, market-oriented economy (Weber 2018, Harvey 2005).

The social security function of both the communes and the SOEs were eliminated by way of these economic reforms. The dissolution of the communes in rural areas led to the loss of collectively provided social goods such as medical care, while the privatization of SOEs in urban areas led to the disintegration of the “iron rice bowl,” or guaranteed employment with welfare and pension benefits (Harvey 2005). Additionally, the Chinese welfare system underwent structural changes in the 1990s, such that funding for welfare services were cut from 0.58% GDP in 1979 to 0.19% GDP in 1997 (Zhan, Luo, and Chen 2012). Inasmuch as neoliberalism requires privatization, decentralization, and decreasing social spending, China has implemented economic reforms that make use of neoliberal theory, albeit without fully embracing private property rights

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and unfettered foreign investment, and not without contention within the CCP and in society at large (Weber 2018).

While neoliberalism does not fully explain or characterize the Chinese economy or Chinese society, it has become relevant to the Chinese experience in that it has shaped the contemporary economic and social landscape in China and how Chinese citizens consider themselves and their choices in such a landscape. Individuals have had to learn how to navigate new systems and power relations—Wang Hui points out that the economic reforms resulted in the “decentralization of power and interests,” where resources that had formerly been managed and dispersed by the state were transferred to localities, such that social advantages and interests were reorganized (2004:13).

Yet neoliberal ideology presents a challenge to the ideals of Confucianism, wherein the self is fundamentally relational and moral value is found in cultivating relationships and interdependencies with others. In contrast, neoliberalism valorizes the superiority of the market as the means through which autonomous and self-interested individuals act, and it is the market through which individuals should seek care if they cannot care for themselves (Wrenn and Waller 2018). The market is assumed to be responsive to needs as they are made evident, upon which it should be able to conjure up goods or services to address those needs. Such an understanding of the market has been criticized by scholars, for the market often fails to allocate scarce resources or public goods in a just manner. Further, quality care specifically has both an affective and a time dimension, both of which are aspects that are difficult to quantitatively measure and assign a price. Intimate care often requires simply “spending time with another, listening to stories, [and] observing care receivers,” and these activities are incompatible with the efficiency required of tasks purchased on the market (Tronto 2013:121).

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The Chinese government seems to recognize the inability of the market to meet the care needs of all of the elderly population. The Ministry of Civil Affairs has assumed the responsibility of being the primary financing body for the “Five Guarantees” program, or *wubao*, a social welfare program originally financed collectively by communes before rural reform. Elderly Chinese who have no family caregivers or sources of income are eligible for five categories of assistance: food and fuel; clothing, bedding, and pocket money; housing with basic necessities; medical care; and an adequate burial funeral (Xu and Zhang 2012). As for general recommendations for care for the elderly, the Chinese government’s most recent Five-Year plan for 2016-2020 details that the vast majority, or 80%, of eldercare should be home-based, while 15% should be community-based and only 5% should be institutional (Fang et al. 2015). Clearly, the Chinese government is asserting that the family should assume the primary responsibility for caring for the elderly population. Along with this plan, the Chinese government has also evoked traditional Confucian ideals to stress the importance of the family’s role in caring for the elderly. In 1996, the Chinese government enacted the *Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly*, which officially and legally outlined adult children’s responsibilities to provide for their elderly parents. In 2013, the government passed a revised version of the law, extending the number of articles of the law from 50 to 85 (Liu 2017) and emphasizing the family’s responsibility to care for the affective needs of the elderly: “Family members should care for the spiritual needs of the elderly and must not ignore or neglect them. Family members who live apart from the elderly should frequently visit or send a greeting to the elderly persons” (Serrano, Saltman, and Yeh 2017). Yet, while the law justifiably draws attention to the plight of many elderly in China, Heying Zhan, Baozhen Luo, and Zhiyu Chen suggest that it is important to note that the legal regulation of filial piety is occurring in a context where social

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welfare programs for the majority of the elderly in China are inadequate (2012). Meanwhile, government policy offers favorable financial incentives for opening nongovernmental eldercare institutions in the form of tax exemptions, lower costs for utilities, lump-sum compensation for construction, and subsidies for each occupied bed (Zhan, Luo, and Chen 2012). In this light, the codification of filial piety seems to signify that the central government is renouncing its responsibility to assist in providing social welfare for the elderly and choosing to instead rely on the family and the market to provide care for the elderly, even as both institutions struggle with adequately doing so.

China's current eldercare landscape thus exhibits tensions between competing visions of care for the elderly, informed by both traditional understandings of care and neoliberal ideology. These values inform not only the national conversation on who has the responsibility to care for the elderly but also how elderly residents of the private LTCF in which I conducted my research conceptualize their experience of care. By using neoliberalism as a framework, I aim to better contextualize the changing care experience of the elderly Chinese.

FINDINGS

The elderly residents I interviewed chose to live in Sunrise Elderly Service Center because of a combination of three factors: (1) they believed that the environment of the facility was suitable to the needs of the elderly, (2) they believed that their children were unable to provide the care they need, and (3) they believed themselves to be a burden on their children. In this paper, I will primarily focus on the last reason.

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The Burden and Choice Narrative

The elderly residents I interviewed articulated five main reasons why they believed themselves to be a burden on their children. They mentioned that the lifestyle of elderly persons and children conflict, that their working children do not have time to care for them, that living at home would inhibit their children's ability to care for their nuclear family, that their children are experiencing financial difficulties, and that they could not tangibly contribute to their children's household. Ms. Chang specifically asserted that she didn't want to feel like she was dependent on others: "If my health is good, I like to do work and not rely on my children. I don't want to stay in their home. I would just rather be independent." This was echoed by another resident, Ms. Xiong, and alluded to by yet another resident, Mr. Tan. Although traditionally, children often cared for their elderly parents in accordance with the phrase *yangerfanglao*, meaning that children ought to reciprocate and care for their elderly parents in return for being raised, Mr. Tan questioned the phrase's validity:

When they were small, they don't have the mental ability... it's normal that we serve them. When we worked, we would send them to daycare. But once old, it can't be the same. We need to ease some of their burden. We chose to come here to do that.

For Mr. Tan, the Confucian notion that children owe their existence to their parents and thus should care for them in old age is no longer paramount, suggesting that the fundamental relationship between children and their parents has shifted and filial piety has been reconstructed. For Mr. Tan, when his children were small, their dependency on him was inevitable. In contrast, he believes that he can choose to not be dependent upon his children in old age and that he should strive to make that a reality.

From this, Mr. Tan and other facility residents look to the market to care for them and speak of their residency in a LTCF as a choice they made willingly. Mr. Wei acknowledges the

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adequacy of the care of the facility in just that way: “I think it’s pretty good here. If I didn’t, I could leave. Why? Because I chose to live here. Because there are facilities everywhere.”

Another resident, Mr. Fan, agreed and was emphatic about the purpose of the facility and why the elderly residents choose to live there:

We all come here because one, for our children and two, for ourselves. To make it easier for our children, because our children are all out elsewhere working (*dagong*) because they need to make a living. Their children are studying, going to school, they need money. If we stayed at home, we would affect them. By coming here, our children have the time to go elsewhere to earn some more money. So, coming here, we come here of our free will (*ziyuan*).

Mr. Fan is clear that he made the choice to live in Sunrise Elderly Service Center out of care for his children. He believes his children can be more successful if they do not have to worry about caring for him on a daily basis. He does not fault his children for not exhibiting traditional filial behaviors; rather, he turns a critical eye on himself and rationalizes his and his children’s behavior by construing his care needs as a burden on his children.

In this way, Mr. Fan and other residents utilize neoliberal ideas of autonomy and self-management to understand themselves as rational market actors who choose to live in this particular LTCF rather than choose any other eldercare option. Although Mr. Fan states that he chose to live in the facility of his own free will, his options have also been restricted by the harsh economic landscape in which his children find themselves. Ilana Gershon reflects that under neoliberalism, championing freedom in terms of choice ignores that “decisions are made on a prestructured terrain [and] people’s choices are between limited possibilities, with the structural reasons for the limitations systematically overlooked” (2011:540). Inasmuch as Mr. Fan’s choice to live in the facility is an autonomous and self-empowering decision, it is also a representation of the insidious way in which neoliberal understandings of the self assert the value of economic success and self-sufficiency over the fundamental need of humans to receive and give care.

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The Elderly as a Burden on Facility Staff

The elderly residents' understanding of themselves as a burden on their children largely contributed to their decision to move into the facility. Yet once living in the facility, they also conceive of themselves as burdens to the facility staff. Mr. Zhang, Mr. Wei, and Mr. Fan were particularly conscious of the large resident to building manager ratio, where building managers have to oversee the needs of an often-overwhelming number of facility residents. Ms. Liu, the sole building manager I interviewed, made this evident when I asked her, "What does a happy elderly person look like?" She replied:

Every day, they are helping each other. When they see that other elderly are facing difficulties, they go and help them. Or if they notice that there's some work that needs to be done that they can help with, they'll help, like picking up plates. It indicates that they're mentally healthy. If they weren't, then they wouldn't bother about caring or helping. They won't make difficulties for the building managers—they know that our jobs aren't easy. Because there are so many elderly people.

Ms. Liu views the elderly residents who are able to manage their own needs in a more positive light than other residents, and this favoritism was recognized by residents. Ms. Liu stresses the value of the elderly assisting the facility staff with facility operations, including helping out other residents who are facing difficulties. Therefore, not only must the elderly take responsibility for themselves and refrain from engaging with the facility staff, but they should also assume an active role in doing tasks that help relieve the facility staff's burden. Indeed, some elderly residents are asked to assist the kitchen staff in making facility meals, thereby subsidizing facility operation costs.

The sentiment expressed by Ms. Liu serves to socialize the facility residents into adjusting their behavior in recognition that how they choose to live affects the lives of the other people in the facility with whom they interact. As such, residents are conditioned to ask for help from facility staff only if they feel that it is absolutely necessary, since not doing so could risk

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taking staff services away from someone else who might need it more.

DISCUSSION

Many of the elderly residents choose to live in the facility because they conceive of themselves as inhibiting their children's ability to fully participate in the market-oriented Chinese economy. In the facility, the elderly residents learn to regulate their needs in an effort to minimize the burden on the facility staff to oversee the immense number of facility residents. By moving into Sunrise Elderly Service Facility, the elderly residents engaged in a seemingly more appropriate fee-for-service exchange than relying on their children for care. Yet the paid building managers in Sunrise Elderly Service Center are often unable to deliver on the affective and time dimensions of caregiving due to the reduced staff size associated with the profit maximization goals of private institutions. In such institutional care settings, care has become at risk of being reduced to a privilege only doled out as time permits and that primarily concerns commodified care tasks.

The overarching narrative of the elderly as a burden on their families and facility staff is underpinned by neoliberal discourse that views elderly persons as unable to continue to further develop themselves as human capital and thus having nothing left to offer society. Instead, the Chinese elderly see themselves as a burden in that they inhibit the ability of their children to act as ideal neoliberal subjects and successfully operate as rational economic actors. In that sense, the Chinese elderly also make use of neoliberal ideology to rationalize the changing realities of filial behaviors from their children. Rather than view their children as unfilial, they relabel themselves as "independent" individuals capable of making "choices" to relieve their children of the "burden" of caring for their parents. Under this neoliberal scheme, relational notions of self

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and caring activities are devalued in favor of the development of valuable skills to survive in a competitive marketplace.

Many of the elderly residents of Sunrise Elderly Service Center have internalized the ideals of personal responsibility and self-management instead of demanding time, energy, attention, or other services that could take away resources from their family members or facility staff. Caring activities by adult children are still considered legitimate, but only for tasks such as an occasional call or visit that fulfills emotional need—and only when adult children are not busy—or in the context of adult children caring for and nurturing their own children. In contrast, caring for the elderly offers little economic return or practical benefit, as insinuated by Ms. Xiong, Ms. Chang, and Mr. Tan, and is thus not a valuable activity. What this ignores, of course, is the fact that humans are dependent and vulnerable beings, and that everyone needs care at some point in their life: “While the elderly do have particular needs, there is a danger in trying to think about the care needs of the elderly as separate from the broader context—everyone has caring needs. Elderly people care for themselves, and they also care for their families, their friends and neighbors, [and] their communities” (Tronto 1998:19).

The relevancy of neoliberalism in analyses of Chinese phenomenon is debatable due to its divergence in characteristics from Western understandings of neoliberalism, particularly in consideration of the role of the state. Additionally, other ideologies and belief systems in China have offered and continue to offer competing visions of morality and the organization of society. The attitudes and experiences of my participants could also be traced back to the collectivist way of thinking under Maoist socialism, wherein the individual was expected to manage their needs so that the socialist unit could operate as smoothly as possible. However, a private facility ran by shareholders is much different than a socialist commune or work unit. In reorienting themselves

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in such a context, facility residents must navigate the commodified nature of the facility where assistance is stratified by economic class rather than bureaucratic or political status. Furthermore, the elderly residents of Sunrise Elderly Service Center made a choice to live there, whereas Chinese citizens in Maoist China had no choice for where they were assigned to work and reside, and the choice itself is rationalized as one of personal responsibility and autonomy, made primarily on behalf of their children. This understanding suggests that the elderly residents utilize Confucian values and neoliberal practices to inform their decision to live in the facility, while the discourse within the facility may represent an intersection of the Maoist socialist legacy with neoliberal practices to form a self-enterprising subject. In this way, collectivism is not wholly incompatible with neoliberal understandings of the self; rather, the underpinning values of both ideals can affirm each other and operate in tandem.

CONCLUSION

Behind the choice of the elderly residents to live in Sunrise Elderly Service Center was an internal reconciliation of traditional values with their desire to care for their children in a drastically altered economic reality. From this emerged a narrative that care for the elderly is a burdensome task; one worth less than activities that could directly lead to economic value.

The choice to live in Sunrise Elderly Service Center represents a shift of the burden of eldercare from the family to the market to the individual in the market, and the elderly residents are often left to care for themselves in the facility. However, even though moving into the facility may be construed as an act of individual choice on the part of the elderly, it is also fundamentally an act of care for their children. In this way, the elderly who choose to live in Sunrise Elderly Service Center do not fully embody the neoliberal ideal of the rational individual—and not

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because they are, at times, dependent on the care of others. Rather, their choice is not self-interested, but one made for the sake of their children.

Although the traditional relationship between children and their parents is very explicit about children's filial duty toward their parents, it is not so specific about the duty of parents to their children. Culturally, Chinese parents are often expected to take responsibility to help facilitate the success of their children, yet this success has become increasingly characterized by economic prosperity, overshadowing the traditionally primary obligation of the children to see to their parents' needs. As the cultural expectation for how parents should behave toward their children is less defined, neoliberal ideology provides a theoretical framework in which the elderly residents see themselves as rational actors who are able to calculate and weigh their interests such that they choose to live in the facility, principally for the purpose of facilitating their own children's ability to better act as autonomous economic agents.

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