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Rethinking Neo-familism:

An Analysis of Extended Family Life Experiences of the Left-behind Rural Elderly in Contemporary China

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Abstract

The research seeks to answer the research question of *How do we interpret the life experiences of the left-behind rural elderly in relation to extended family?* And particularly, it inquiries about that: *in their family life, what kind of strategies do they apply to navigate the balance between individual and family interests?* To answer the question, the research combined neo-familism and life course theory, collecting data through semi-structured individual interviews, the focus group, and research diaries. The individual interviews were held with three households, respectively comprised of one widowed man, one couple, and one widowed woman. Yet, the focus group was conducted with one couple. Adopting the concepts embedded with the theoretical framework, the findings were assessed using a thematic analysis strategy. The research findings revealed several patterns manifesting transformations of family life in contemporary China, which are downward transfers, intergenerational interdependence, individual agency, and intimate turn. Furthermore, based on these trends, the research would argue that the senior generations in rural China attempt to prioritize family interests by enabling the offspring, staying in rural areas, and working until they drop. These practices provide the senior generations with a crucial way to achieve family prosperity and harmony, which is in line with the context of neo-familism.

Key words: family change, aging, intergenerational dynamics, intimacy, agency, rural China, migration, social-historical shifts
Words: 19305

Table of contents

1 INTRODUCTION 1

1.1 Research Purpose and Question 2
1.2 Contextual Background 3

2 LITERATURE REVIEW 6

2.1 Rural Elderly in China 6
2.2 Intergenerational Dynamics in Contemporary Rural China 8
2.2.1 Transformation of Filial Piety 9
2.2.2 Arising Grandparenting 10
2.3 Conclusion 12

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK 14

3.1 Neo-familism in Contemporary China 14
3.1.1 Intergenerationality, Individual Agency, Intimacy 15
3.1.2 Descending Familism and Intergenerational Interdependence 17
3.2 Life Course Perspective 18

4 RESEARCH DESIGN 20

4.1 Ontology and Epistemology 20
4.2 Methodology 21
4.2.1 Case Sampling 22
4.2.2 Positioning Myself in the Research 25
4.2.3 Data Gathering 26
4.2.4 Data Analysis 28
4.2.5 Reliability and Validity 29
4.2.6 Challenges and Limitations 31

5 FINDINGS 34

5.1 Huai 34
5.1.1 Adulthood 34
5.1.2 Parenthood 35
5.1.3 Grandparenthood 36
5.1.4 Perceptions of Family Life 37
5.2 Mei and Dong 38
5.2.1 Adulthood 38
5.2.2 Parenthood 39
5.2.3 Grandparenthood 40
5.2.4 Perceptions of Family Life 42
5.3 Yue and Peng 43
5.3.1 Adulthood 43

5.3.2 Parenthood 44
5.3.3 Grandparenthood 45
5.3.4 Perceptions of Family Life 46
5.4 AI 46
5.4.1 Adulthood 46
5.4.2 Parenthood 47
5.4.3 Grandparenthood 48
5.4.4 Perceptions of Family Life 49
6 DISCUSSION 51
6.1 "THIS IS RESPONSIBILITY" 51
6.1.1 Descending Familism 51
6.1.2 Intergenerational Interdependence 53
6.2 "TO HAVE A GOOD FAMILY" 55
6.3 TENSIONS BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY INTERESTS 59
6.3.1 Enabling Offspring 60
6.3.2 Staying in the Village 61
6.3.3 Working Until They Drop 65
7 CONCLUSION 68
8 REFERENCES 72

1 Introduction

In rural China, it's a common phenomenon for young adults to migrate to cities in search of more substantial incomes once they reach adulthood, leaving their elderly parents and, in some cases, as well as their young children behind while providing intergenerational support afar. In conjunction with this phenomenon, the elderly might assume the responsibility of caring for their young grandchildren. According to Yan (2021, p.8), this social mobility results in the separation of generations and disrupts the previous order of intergenerational relations. Therefore, the ties and interactions between the grandparent and the grandchild have been strengthened in rural families and thus more complicated intergenerational dynamics have emerged in contemporary China.

The emerging interactions between grandparents and grandchildren have gained significant attention on both global and domestic dimensions. In a global context, Izuhara (2010, p. 15) argues that extended intergenerational kin becomes increasingly available due to the issue of global aging, and particularly, grandparents become more prominent within family relations. On a domestic level, Yan (2021, p. 2) points out the declining dominance of the nuclear family and the rise of multigenerational families both worldwide and in China. However, little has been written in relation to the subjective experiences of the rural elderly in China. Yet, according to Cao (2019, p.4), for the elderly population in China, especially in rural areas, the family still serves as the main source of care and support. Thus, intergenerational interactions and ties have profound impacts on the rural elderly's welfare. In this sense, looking at their subjective experiences within the family is also a crucial

step to study the welfare of the rural elderly in China. Based on these insights, the research attempts to shed light on the subjective experiences of the rural elderly in relation to extended family life. The main target is to interview the elderly who are left behind in rural areas while their adult children have migrated to and settled down in urban areas. Particularly, the targeted elderly group also have experiences of assuming the role of caring for their grandchildren.

1.1 Research Purpose and Question

This research focuses on the rural elderly who have been through huge social-historical transitions since the establishment of the Republic of China and are staying in villages while adult children have migrated to urban areas. In those families, the aged grandparents have taken or are taking the roles of caregivers of their grandchildren. The research attempts to shed light on their experiences in relation to extended family life, wherein they have adult children being afar and assume the responsibility of caring for their grandchildren. Particularly, the transformations of family discourses and practices are expected to emerge from their subjective experiences under socioeconomic transitions. By speaking for the left-behind grandparents, the research aims to amplify the voices of this marginalized group within contemporary society regarding social and family welfare.

Concretely, the primary research question guiding the investigation is as follows: *How do we interpret the life experiences of the left-behind rural elderly regarding extended family?* Narrowing the focus, the research sheds light on their situation of being left behind and their experiences of grandparenting. And digging deeper, the research inquiries about that: *In their family life, what kind of strategies do they apply to navigate the balance between individual and family interests?*

To sum up, the following chapter reviews the literature regarding the living situation of the elderly group in rural China and the intergenerational dynamics in contemporary China within the context of migration. Chapter 3 illuminates the theoretical framework, comprised of neo-familism and life course perspectives. Chapter 4 introduces the qualitative methods for data gathering, including interviews and research diaries. Additionally, thematic analysis is employed as the strategy for data analysis. Chapters 5 and 6 respectively present findings and associated discussion based on the theoretical framework. At the end of the research, Chapter 7 presents a discussion of the research's conclusions and limitations.

1.2 Contextual Background

When discussing rural China, there are certain contextual details that require attention for a more comprehensive understanding. Providing contextual information, here are two essential events occurring in contemporary China: agricultural collectivization and the one-child policy.

In 1958, with a strong ambition to achieve economic progress and a great belief in the interdependency of agriculture and industrialization, the leader of China between 1949 and 1978, Mao Zedong, ordered the conversion of rice fields into factories overnight and implemented the policy of agricultural collectivization in 1950 (Mai, D. T., 2015, p. 6) During the collective period, the people's commune was established in rural areas in order to organize all the private properties and compelled peasants to reside and labor collectively. Moreover, agricultural collectivization resulted in restrictive labor mobility by operating the Household Registration Regulation. This regulation, commonly known as the *hukou* system in China, refers to a migration law that was imposed in 1958, banning the free labor movement (Sun, S., Lopez, R., & Liu, X., 2017).

However, agricultural collectivization ended following Mao's death in 1978 and the new era started with Deng Xiaoping's opening-up strategy. Subsequently, the massive rural-to-urban migration trend started in the mid-1980s when the state started to ease restrictions on labor migration. The largest within-country migration has been witnessed, involving more than 221 million individuals in 2010 (Fingerman, K. L., Huo, M., & Birditt, K. S., 2020). Meanwhile, according to the National Office on Aging of China, it was estimated that approximately 37% of the total elderly population which refers to 40 million, had been left behind in rural China by 2011 (He, C., & Ye, J., 2014, p. 353).

Regarding the one-child policy, it should be dated back to the 1950s and 1960s, when the baby boomers started. It was saliently influenced by the principle, "more people, more power", which was advocated by Mao. During that time, China's total fertility rate once reached more than six births per woman in the early 1960s (Banister, J., 1987). However, the government was concerned about the overpopulation problem and further acknowledged that controlling the population could be beneficial for improving people's living standards and thus could lift China from poverty. It is a wildly held view that Chinese national family planning started from the advocacy of "Later, Longer, Fewer" in 1973, which refers to later marriage, longer intervals between the first and second child, and fewer children which could be no more than two of one couple. Subsequently, the Chinese government launched the coercive one-child policy in 1979 to restrict many families to a single child (Zhang, J., 2017, p.141). Nevertheless, the concerns about the consequent aging population and low fertility rates had been increasing. In 2015, the one-child policy was officially replaced by a universal two-child policy which limited families to two children. Furthermore, a relaxation to a three-child limit was enacted in May 2021. When it comes to July 2021, all the limits for family sizes and

penalties for exceeding them were removed, suggesting that China comes into a new child-rearing era.

2 Literature Review

This section provides a review of research on the elderly in rural China. It starts with portraying the living situation of the rural elderly with regard to welfare, emphasizing the inadequate public support toward the group and the consequently crucial role of family support and self-support. Furthermore, it emphasizes the impact of the left-behind phenomenon on intergenerational dynamics in rural China.

2.1 Rural Elderly in China

The studies on rural elderly in contemporary China highlight the inadequate social welfare toward this group particularly regarding public pensions. Regarding public support toward the rural elderly, it is essential to consider the reforms that have taken place, particularly the introduction of the rural social endowment insurance in 2009. Concerning this enactment, rural residents aged 18-59 can participate by paying premiums, while those aged over 60 receive pensions without making payments. This reform is often regarded as a context for examining the living situation of the rural elderly with a focus on public support.

However, many studies indicate that the reformed social welfare system has limited influence on the life quality of the rural elderly. For instance, Shen, Li, and Tanui (2012, p. 297) examine physical health, economic status, elderly care, and loneliness by conducting a survey in rural China, arguing that a significant portion of the rural elderly population in China encounters health, financial, and social service challenges, even with

the aforementioned project's assistance. Similarly, Cai, Giles, O'Keefe, and Wang (2012, pp. 30-32) systematically analyze the support among the elderly in rural China, with an emphasis on the public pension system. They highlight the remaining vulnerable position of rural elderly who lack sufficient coverage by safety nets and do not receive adequate benefits from the evolving national pension system.

Numerous studies suggest that due to insufficient public support, rural elderly rely heavily on family support. Cao (2018, p.4) argues that as the family serves as the major welfare source for the rural elderly, intergenerational relations and ties play an influential role in the context of everyday family life in rural China. China, as a country in East Asia, has long been profoundly impacted by Confucianism, which emphasizes the traditional family values of filial piety. The idea of filial piety, as the guiding principle for intergenerational relationships, suggests that adult children support their aging parents through co-residency and financial assistance (Lin, J., & Yi, C., 2011, p. 109). Consequently, given the context in China, filial piety could be considered as a crucial conceptual lens to perceive intergenerational relationships. However, filial piety, the fundamental rationale for intergenerational relationships has been challenged in contemporary China concerning the social and economic reforms. For instance, Xu (2001, p. 318) draws a general picture of family support practices for the rural elderly, arguing that although China's filial laws demand children to care for their aging parents, uncertainties arise when children refuse to provide support due to various reasons, both internal and external. However, among those external factors, it is vital to pinpoint the influence of marketization and the massive migration of people from rural areas to urban areas in search of employment, which will be discussed later.

Yet, the rural elderly also play a role in supporting themselves concerning their reliance on their own labor income (Cai, F., Giles, J.,

O'Keefe, P., & Wang, D., 2012, p. 2). By conducting the survey and interviews, de Brauw and Rozelle (2004, p. 91) study the phenomenon in which the elderly in rural China continue to work into advanced old age. They argue that the reasons behind this phenomenon derive from not only the absence of formal pension plans but also the necessity to sustain the household's assets of both them and their children. This highlights the influence of family on the behaviors of the rural elderly, as they consider both personal financial needs and their family's welfare. In this sense, the research would incorporate both the influences of individual needs and family institutions into the exploration of the rural elderly's living situation. Furthermore, this phenomenon of persistence in work is evident in the research findings but is interpreted with nuanced rationales.

In conclusion, the lack of coverage of social security and limited access to social welfare result in the significance of self-support and family support for the rural elderly. Thus, to comprehensively understand the living situation of the rural elderly from a sustainable perspective, it is essential to focus on the family institution. Particularly, as stated above, it is essential to shed light on intergenerational dynamics surrounding the rural elderly within the given context, which will be discussed further below.

2.2 Intergenerational Dynamics in Contemporary Rural China

As stated above, the intergenerational dynamics have profound impacts on rural elderly's lives due to their heavy reliance on family support. To further discuss intergenerational dynamics in contemporary rural China, both upstream and downstream flows are concerned here. The discussion on intergenerational dynamics in the upward direction focuses on filial piety

and the corresponding transformations in contemporary China, whereas the discussion in the downward direction centers on the arising grandparenting in rural families. Yet, the downstream and upstream intergenerational flows are intertwined in the multigenerational family life.

2.2.1 Transformation of Filial Piety

As aforementioned, the traditional family values of filial piety, which have long served as the principle for intergenerational relations in China, are being challenged in contemporary society. Numerous studies argue that the deviations and persistence of filial piety are both observed in rural China, in light of the economic and social reforms on the macro-level. Ikels (2006, pp. 387-397) argues that the de-collectivization and the relaxation of barriers to migration, which started in the early 1980s, are essentially considered the impactful economic shifts on family life in rural areas. As a result of these reforms, young individuals were provided with opportunities to migrate, seek employment independently, and live away from their parents. This transition brought an undermining attack to the traditional family value of filial piety, except for the obligation to support parents. Whyte (2020, p. 355-356) also affirms the continuity of filial obligation, arguing that its maintenance is not solely attributed to Confucian tradition prevailing over the pressures of transformation but also to the socialist institutions established during the era of Mao Zedong.

Concerning the transformations of filial piety, scholars adopt distinct concepts to rethink the intergenerational relations and ties within the given context of the rural elderly being left behind. For instance, Luo and Zhan (2012, p. 69) apply the intergenerational solidarity theory to investigate the impact of functional solidarity (intergenerational support associated with elder care) on normative solidarity (filial piety) within families having

migrated children in rural China. Empirically, diverging from the traditional value of filial piety, Guo, Chi, and Silverstein (2012, pp. 1114-1125) identify a unique pattern of distant reciprocal ties, which suggests the concept of reciprocity in intergenerational relations between migrated adult children and their left-behind elder parents. Cong and Silverstein (2011, p. 102) focus on the intergenerational exchange of time and money resources between older parents and their adult sons in rural China. They argue that compared to non-migrant sons, migrant sons offered higher marginal financial support to parents in exchange for childcare support that they received from their parents. This specific focus on sons derives from the patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal principles, according to Song, Li and Feldman (2012, p.399), which underpinned traditional Chinese families. Consequently, in traditional families, the parents anticipate fundamental support from sons and rather than daughters. Yet, they also argue that the role of daughters in supporting parents has been enhanced in conjunction with rural-to-urban migration.

Although some scholars touch upon the influence of grandparent caregiving within the upstream intergenerational dynamics, their focus is limited to the generational relations between parents and children. This emphasizes the need to address grandparenting in the discussion of intergenerational dynamics within rural families.

2.2.2 Arising Grandparenting

The intergenerational dynamics in rural China also present a new pattern of downward interactions, which is essentially manifested in grandparenting. As previously mentioned in the introduction, the unique relations and ties between grandparents and grandchildren are reinforced in rural China within the context of rural-to-urban migration of adult children. Young

grandchildren remaining behind is attributed to the close link between children's access to education and the place of origin, which refers to the *hukou* system as mentioned above. Furthermore, this situation demands grandparenting caregiving from the rural elderly (Thomason, E., 2021, p. 82). Regarding this topic, scholars adopt diverse perspectives, including economic, sociological, moral, and emotional dimensions.

Scholars underscore different rationales behind the grandparenting practice in rural China. Silverstein and Li (2007, p.68) advocate a three-generation family model rooted in reciprocity, guided by a quid-pro-quo approach in resource transfers between older parents and adult children. Findings also highlight mutual elements, where childcare support reinforces adult children's ability to reciprocate. In Merrill Silverstein's subsequent study, gender is considered when examining the downward financial transfers within grandparenting. The result suggests that, besides the impact of economic resources, monetary transfers to grandchildren exhibit a notable cultural aspect, with a focus on paternal grandchildren, particularly grandsons born to first-born sons (Silverstein, M., & Zhang, W., 2020, p. 1049). Moreover, Thomason, E. (2021, pp. 76-78) emphasizes the notions of suffering and family harmony which contribute to interpreting the rural elderly' grandparenting experiences. He argues that narratives about suffering enable grandparents to emphasize their emotional contributions to the family, enabling them to frame their experiences as morally virtuous and socially beneficial.

Regarding this topic from the subjective experiences of the rural elderly, many scholars focus on impacts of grandparent caregiving on their subjective well-being. Some scholars argue that rural grandparents with perceptions of filial children and harmonious families tend to experience higher levels of life satisfaction (Xu, L., & Chi, I., 2011, pp. 154-158). Moreover, in another research, they validate the potential benefits of grandparenting for greater life satisfaction of the rural elderly (Xu, L., Wu,

B., Chi, I., & Hsiao, H. Y., 2012, p. 288). In contrast to the study aforementioned, where economic resources are recognized as significant in the context of grandparenting practices, some scholars (Wen, M., Ren, Q., Korinek, K., & Trinh, H. N., 2019, pp. 153-154) find that income does not serve as a moderator of rural elderly individuals' happiness.

However, there is a considerably smaller amount of literature that focuses on rural Chinese grandparents while the left-behind children are extensively discussed (Wen, M., Ren, Q., Korinek, K., & Trinh, H. N., 2019, p. 145). However, the limited literature provides a focus on familial emotions to examine the subjective experiences of the rural elderly in relation to extended family life, which will be further considered in the theoretical framework. Moreover, the limited research fails to address the authentic and comprehensive experiences of being left behind as well as assuming the role of grandparenting caregiving.

2.3 Conclusion

In review, the literature collectively highlights the importance of studying the family institution in the topic of rural elderly in contemporary China. Furthermore, it underscores the new patterns of intergenerational dynamics surrounding the left-behind rural elderly, concerning the transformation of filial piety and the arising grandparent caregiving. These findings portray the setting of the left-behind rural elderly's extended family life, further contributing to the contextualization of their experiences and perceptions.

However, there are several notable gaps in the existing literature concerning the topic. One refers to the inadequate explorations of the authentic and comprehensive experiences of the left-behind rural elderly, extending beyond the role of grandparenting. This gap could be filled by studying the whole picture of the left-behind rural elderly's family life from

their own perspectives. Moreover, there is a lack of a framework to study intergenerational dynamics surrounding the left-behind rural elderly, from a perspective that concerns both upstream and downstream and bridges macro and micro influences. This indicates a necessity to find a unifying theory to explain those transformations in family life, which is neo-familism introduced in the following chapter. Last but not least, a perspective that concerns the influences of both historical and individual shifts is missing. Thus, the research, as shown in the following chapter, adopts a life course perspective to fill this gap.

3 Theoretical Framework

This section will introduce theories and concepts which are applied to answer the research question. The research places neo-familism, a perspective particularly suitable for the study of contemporary Chinese families, at the core of the theoretical framework. Among those concepts embedded in this theory, the notion of intergenerationality takes the central role, highlighting individual agency and intimacy as crucial elements for comprehending the tensions between individual and family interests. Additionally, descending familism and intergenerational interdependence are adopted to capture the new patterns of intergenerational interactions, contributing to a deeper understanding of intergenerational dynamics. Concerning their life experiences under huge socioeconomic transitions, research on the rural elderly provides a chance to look at the influence of macro shifts and the correspondent individual shifts on their perceptions. Thus, as complements, the concepts of agency and timing derived from life course theory are adopted as a lens to explore the connection between macro-level shifts and individual experiences and further, to investigate the interfaces between intergenerational dynamics and societal and individual shifts.

3.1 Neo-familism in Contemporary China

Traditional familism is ethically constructed through the discourse of obligations and self-sacrifice of the junior generations, as opposed to focusing on personal rights and self-realization (Garzon, 2000, p. 46).

Regarding the context of contemporary China, Yan (2021, p. 15) distinguishes the new trend in terms of the altering identity of the individual, family dynamics, and the interaction between the individual and the state. Neo-familism, in Yan's discourse, refers to new discourse and practices, which have emerged since the early 2000s, utilizing familism as a primary strategy to seek both individual happiness and family prosperity through the collective endeavors of a multi-generational household. This suggests that both parallels and divergences have emerged in relation to traditional familism. While the prioritization of family interests persists, individuals who commit themselves to traditional values often struggle to uphold their beliefs within the rapidly transforming social environment (Yan, 2021, pp. 15-16). Embedded with this perspective, several notions are adopted to examine the social practices emerging in contemporary family life. Specifically, it selectively adopts concepts to particularly understand the findings and answer the research question.

3.1.1 Intergenerationality, Individual Agency, Intimacy

Intergenerationality is adopted as the core concept to describe the nuances in intergenerational dynamics, moving beyond the sole focus on structured relations across generations (Yan, 2021, p. 13). This indicates its capacity to capture the interactions among intersecting generations essentially concerning the arising grandparenting. As the research focuses on the life experiences of left-behind rural elderly regarding the extended family, wherein grandparenting takes a significant role, this notion is a crucial approach to interpreting the family dynamics within the given context.

Furthermore, this notion of intergenerationality illuminates the impact of the individual agency on intergenerational interactions, highlighting subjective experiences such as intimacy, affection, and moral reasoning

(Yan, 2021, p. 13). While traditional familism highlights obligations and self-sacrifice of the junior generation, neo-familism suggests that familial emotions are considered increasingly important in family life. Additionally, the intimate turn in Chinese families, in the discourse of neo-familism, also signifies the new pattern of family power relations in which individuals prioritize intimacy and family harmony over their authority or power within the family institution (Xiao, S., 2021, pp. 170-171). This concept opens the gate for the research to capture the familial emotions that emerge from the life experiences of the rural elderly.

In addition to intimacy, another subjective aspect of family life introduced by the individual agency is manifested in the desire for self-development. In the claim of Yan (2018, p. 199), individual interests were legitimized due to the historical transformation of the Chinese family from a communal unit to a private life. As a result, individual happiness came to be valued in conjunction with the interests and happiness of the family (Yan, 2018, pp. 199-200). However, the relations between individual and family interests seem to exhibit greater complexity in actual practices. While the prioritization of family interests remains as a core belief, neo-familism also stresses that how individuals understand themselves and how they function within the transformed family life is dependent upon their personal capacities and experiences (Yan, 2021, p. 18). This indicates the arising conflicts between personal and family interests. Pragmatically, in the volume of neo-familism, Huang (2021, p. 127) adopts the concept of individual agency in the exploration of intergenerationality, arguing that friendships among urban grandmothers enable them to cope with the tensions between personal pursuits and family duties. As their urban counterparts, the research sheds light on the individual agency of rural elderly with experiences of grandparenting. Yet, involved in the volume of neo-familism, the study conducted by Qi (2021, p. 115) presents a distinct pattern, in which grandparents might selflessly prioritize the well-being of

the entire family without anticipating reciprocal benefits. The study also finds that experiencing a sense of obligation and offering assistance to family members encompasses intricate emotions and beliefs (Qi, X., 2021, pp.116-117). This offers an additional perspective for comprehending how the individual agency is enacted in the lives of the rural elderly as they navigate the complicated balance between personal and family interests.

3.1.2 Descending Familism and Intergenerational Interdependence

As complements, descending familism and intergenerational interdependence could contribute to a deeper understanding of intergenerational dynamics around the left-behind rural elderly. According to neo-familism, descending familism is used to conceptualize the downward flows of love, care, and resources from the senior generations to the junior generations, which is emerging in contemporary Chinese families (Yan, 2018, pp. 191-192). In contrast to traditional familism, which emphasizes glorifying one's ancestors, descending familism signifies a shift toward facilitating the younger generation (Yan, 2021, p.16). In the research, this trend is reflected in the grandparenting strategy, wherein the rural elderly assume the responsibility of caring for their grandchildren. It signifies a downward transfer to their adult children, wherein they become surrogate caregivers for enabling their own children to pursue economic benefits and ultimately achieving greater family happiness. This is because that, according to Yan (2021, p. 17), family happiness is tangibly measured by family prosperity in contemporary China.

Intergenerational interdependence also serves as a crucial concept for understanding the intergenerational dynamics within contemporary Chinese families. Intergenerational interdependence not only refers to the

filial obligation, as previously discussed in Chapter 2, but also encompasses the integrated unity of parents and children (Yan, 2021, p. 16). This perspective raises the question of whether individuals integrate their children's development into their personal accomplishments. This concern enables the research to explore how the rural elderly view their own roles and encounters in the process of supporting their offspring. Yet, as stated above, intergenerational independence arises from the increasing importance of the ethics of the self, which has strengthened the value of autonomy and self-expression (Jankowiak, W., 2021, p. 217). However, according to Qi (2021, pp. 113-114), intergenerational independence is evident within the senior generation through their aspiration for economic independence, except in cases of serious illness. And many of them express the reluctance to become a financial burden on their children. In this sense, this notion provides the research with a perspective to understand the life decision of staying in rural areas.

3.2 Life Course Perspective

According to Mortimer and Shanahan (2003, p. 7), life course theory was developed in response to the need for a range of conceptual and methodological tools to study life patterns and their dynamics in time, to understand individuals' social pathways, their developmental outcomes, and their relationship to personal and social-historical circumstances. In this sense, life course theory provides a scope to see the connection between socio-historical shifts with individual social pathways, trajectories, and turning points (Mortimer, J. T., & Shanahan, M. J., 2003, p. 8). As Yan (2021, p. 10) emphasizes the important role of the senior generation's perspective of family life transformation as they have experienced the past script. Consequently, the focus on the life experiences of the senior

generation suggests the applicability of the life course perspective to the research.

Furthermore, according to Mortimer and Shanahan (2003, pp.11-13), life course theory contains several principles, including life-span development, agency, time and place, timing, and linked lives. Among these notions, the research selects agency and timing to explore personal experiences regarding the topic. First, the notion of agency refers to the idea that individuals take agency in shaping their own life course by making choices and taking actions in response to social and historical factors (Mortimer, J. T., & Shanahan, M. J., 2003, p.11). Regarding the research, it could be reflected in the case where the senior generations assume the role of caring for their grandchildren as reaction to the socio-economic shifts such as rural-to-urban migration and urbanization. Also, this notion is emphasized by the neo-familism perspective, as aforementioned. Yet, more reflection of individual agency is expected to emerge in the research. Second, the notion of timing refers to the idea that the developmental origins and consequences of life changes, events, and behaviors differ based on when they occur in an individual's life journey (Mortimer, J. T., & Shanahan, M. J., 2003, p.13). This concept is intricately linked with the idea of trajectory, highlighting the crucial influence of subsequent life phases on the construction of individuals' life courses. This concept underscores the research design, as will be discussed in the Chapter 4, which adopts a life history approach, focusing on individual experiences across various life stages — from childhood and adolescence through adulthood, parenthood, and grandparenthood. By doing so, it provides the research with a traceable trajectory of individuals' experiences within the context of family life.

4 Research Design

As stated above, the research applies a combination of neo-familism and life course perspective as a theoretical framework to interpret the life experiences of the left-behind rural elderly regarding extended family, particularly focusing on the strategies they adopt to balance individual and family interests. Yet, the research aims to move beyond these theories and creatively involve new insights that emerged in the field. This indicates the necessity of conducting a hybrid deductive and inductive strategy to particularly understand the phenomenon. To sum up, the research is rooted in constructivism and interpretivism, adopting a qualitative strategy. It combines interviews and research diaries to gather qualitative data. Concerning data analysis, thematic analysis is conducted to generate themes and concepts out of the data which is presented as transcribed interviews and extensive field notes.

4.1 Ontology and Epistemology

It is indispensable to discuss this research design regarding ontology and epistemology in order to clarify the methodological position later in this chapter. While ontology refers to the nature of reality and what exists to be understood, epistemology refers to ways that how we know and learn about the world and how we generate knowledge (Ritchie et al., 2013, pp. 4-7). In summary, the research is rooted in constructivism and interpretivism.

In terms of ontology, there are two positions that are commonly considered: objectivism and constructivism. While objectivism suggests

that social entities should be independent of social actors and that the actions of social actors should be driven by external factors, constructivist assumptions consider social entities an emergent reality continuously constructed and reconstructed by social actors (Bryman, A., 2016, pp. 32-34). The research, which attempts to explore how individuals balance individual and family interests, indicates that individuals as the actors in the given context are not acting in accordance with external factors. In this sense, the research believes that the family is not an objective entity exclusively shaped by social transitions. Rather, individuals play an active role in constructing reality and this determines the constructivist position for this research. In this sense, the constructivist position is more appropriate to investigate the research objective.

In terms of epistemology, positivism and interpretivism are the two philosophical considerations primarily discussed in social research. Positivism asserts that the social world could and should be understood in a way similar to the approach conducted in natural science (Ritchie et al., 2013, p. 9). While interpretivism suggests that to understand the social actions of humans, it is essential to interpret the meaning that attributes to their acts rather than external forces (Bryman, A., 2016, pp. 28-30). As the research attempts to interpret the life experiences of the left-behind rural elderly individuals, the appropriate epistemological position for this research should be grounded in interpretivism.

4.2 Methodology

To sum up, a qualitative strategy is suitable to generate the answer to the research question. With regard to the research question, it is necessary to explore their experiences and corresponding interpretation by means of storytelling within their self-expressed narratives and accounts. As claimed

by Alan Bryman (2016, p.36), qualitative research contributes to theory generation rather than testing, and emphasizes how individuals interpret their social world. In this sense, qualitative data serves as the appropriate source for the research. To do so, interviewing and research diaries are combined as a method to gather life stories and the corresponding interpretations of those experiences. Specifically, I selected a village situated in Chongqing, a city located in the southwest region of China. From this village, I selected and interviewed four households in total, consisting solely of elderly members, who are all over 60 years old. For data gathering, I conducted semi-structured interviews and documented my observation before and during the interviews. To analyze the gathered data, NVivo helped with the coding process and thematic analysis was conducted to generate codes, themes, and concepts. Yet, I essentially focused on those in relation to intergenerational dynamics.

4.2.1 Case Sampling

As claimed by Alan Bryman (2012, p. 417), the process of sampling includes two levels: the sampling of contexts and the sampling of participants. It suggests that certain areas should be targeted for conducting the research. Subsequently, units should be selected within the area as the research subjects. Regarding this research, the sampling of context is a village located in the rural area of Chongqing City in China. The reason for selecting this area is that there has been an increasing number of mismatches between people's place of residence and place of household registration in the municipality of Chongqing, indicating the massive internal migration happening in this city (Cheng, M., Duan, C., 2021, p. 290). Also, the ability to speak and understand the local dialect approved me, as a researcher, to efficiently interview the local people who could not

speak Mandarin, the official language in China. Also, the selection of this specific village is due to my personal connection which could strengthen the feasibility of the participants sampling and the establishment of rapport between the researcher and the subjects.

In terms of the sampling of participants, I adopted a purposive sampling strategy, which emphasizes the research question and the criterion that the individuals being researched should meet (Bryman, A., 2021, p. 428). This strategy enabled me to find the rural elderly whose adult children have migrated to urban areas. As aforementioned, it is crucial to involve the participants who have experienced both the previous and transformed family scripts, particularly in the context of significant societal transitions such as collectivization and de-collectivization. Consequently, I selected informants who were born between the late 1940s and late 1970s.

Yet, I recognized in the field that due to the issue of aging and inadequate financial and medical resources, it is common to see the left-behind grandparents who have lost their spouses. Concerning this phenomenon, I decided to include both widowed and un-widowed elderly in my interviews. Bryman (2021, pp. 422-423) argues that the samples which are selected with regard to socio-demographic characteristics could enable a detailed exploration of the phenomenon. Based on this statement, I believe that by doing so, the research could have a diverse array of accounts in terms of the individual shifts which are considered as a significant driving force for individual understanding and functioning.

To initiate my research in the field, I first contacted the person in charge of household administration in the village. With the gatekeeper's help, my entry to the field was guaranteed. Additionally, I was able to be familiarized with the local household configuration in order to find and engage with participants. According to the information given by the gatekeeper, there are many households in which only the elderly stayed at home working as peasants. And it is very common for adult children to

migrate to cities while leaving their young grandchildren back home being cared for by the elderly. Moreover, they informed me of the common daily routines of the local peasants such as when they went to the field for farm work, and when they had meals. By doing so, I could schedule the time of visiting those selected households. In addition, during my research in the field, I participated the farm work almost every day in the afternoon. By observing and communicating with the people I met there, I found out that most people showing up in farm work regularly were over 60 years old. The only young woman I met on the hill told me: “Only old people are staying in this village as there is a lot of farm work to do. I am living and working in the city but I currently don’t have much work so I would rather come back to help my mother-in-law.”

I visited four households and interviewed one widowed man, one widowed woman and two couples. The first household consists of a 67-year-old widowed male named Huai, whose spouse passed away three years prior to the time of writing. Currently, he plays a significant role in taking care of his son’s two children. The second selected household consists of a couple, Mei and Dong. While Mei was born in 1952, Dong was born in 1946. Particularly, when I was in the village for research, their daughter-in-law was temporarily visiting due to Mei’s illness. The third household I visited is comprised of a couple, Yue and Peng, both in their late 70s. While Peng was born in 1946, Yue was born in 1947. The last participant, Ai, was born in 1947. She lives alone in the village after the passing of her husband. Among the four households, all of them live alone for the majority of their time, while adult children have migrated to and settled down in urban areas.

4.2.2 Positioning Myself in the Research

During the research journey, concerning data collection, interpretation and presentation, the researcher could inevitably shape the generation of knowledge (Ritchie et al., 2013, pp. 22-23). This suggests the significant importance of self-reflection, whereby I consider my own role and the influence of my age, gender and background on the research process.

I arrived at the village with the identity of a granddaughter to a person who migrated to urban areas over twenty years ago. Although I occasionally visited the village during my childhood, I did not form lasting memories or establish a strong connection with this place and its residents. However, this identity provided me with a more accessible approach to integrating into village life and initiating conversations. When I encountered villagers on the street, they would ask: Which family is this young girl from? The query about my family background always became the starting point for most interactions with the locals.

Also, I, as a young female, encountered much welcome from the elderly. For instance, Ai, during our initial street encounter without prior arrangement, spontaneously invited me to her home after learning about my purpose to interview people. She exhibited a positive attitude toward sharing her experiences, according to herself, noting that young people typically had little interest in the narratives about the past. Additionally, Huai exemplified a strong eagerness to be interviewed and to have a chance to speak his mind. In his words, “Except for you, no one would come and listen to us.”

Considering my educational background, my upbringing in a materially privileged environment and a privileged educational background contributed to an intricate position of me in the research. When I attempted to participate in their agricultural activities, I was advised by local people to stay away, according to them, as I was an educated university student.

This identity, however, contributed to establishing rapport with the informants. The gatekeeper, for instance, consistently highlighted my status as a university student and a researcher when introducing me to potential informants, aiming to reinforce their willingness to participate in interviews.

4.2.3 Data Gathering

In the research, I adopt semi-structured individual interviews, the focus group and field notes to achieve data gathering. The individual interviews and the focus group are based on the life history interview but embedded with some open-ended questions to help informants elaborate their life stories. The field notes are documented on the basis of my observation in the field and my self-reflection as a researcher.

As the research aims to explore the left-behind rural elderly's life experiences, the life history approach seems to be a suitable approach. Since it focuses on individual life stories and interpretations that individuals give, is a suitable method for data gathering. Moreover, it is also consistent with the life course theory which is adopted in the theoretical framework. Since the life history approach emphasizes the processual aspects of social life, suggesting how events unfold and interrelate in personal lives (Bryman, A., 2012, pp. 488-489). However, during the informal interactions with local people, before the interviews were conducted, I found out that the life history approach is not perfectly suitable for the research. Since it refers to a method to conduct unstructured interviews and completely relies on people's own voices. But the local people encountered challenges in spontaneously providing intricate descriptions and insights. This suggested the necessity of having a list of questions to introduce the topics in relation to extended family life and to follow up and collect their thoughts and perceptions of the events and experiences. In this sense, I persisted in

conducting life history interviews but included some open-ended questions. To clarify, I would identify the data-gathering strategy of the research as a semi-structured interview incorporated with a story-telling strategy.

Regarding the interviews, I covered a wide range of subjects: their earliest memories, their dreams, hopes, joys, and sufferings; their careers; their life stories essentially in relation to parenting and grandparenting. To follow up, some open-ended questions were also included, such as "How do you feel about when this event happened", "How do you think of this event?" and "What influences do you think it brings onto you?". In addition, their perceptions of their positions in extended families were collected through the questions as follows: "What kind of differenced do you think you make in the family?" and "What kind of roles do you think you play in the family life?"

As the interviews were conducted to collect life stories through the lifespan, the length of individual interviews and the focus group varied from one and a half to two hours. Moreover, I chose their own house as the interview locations, because interviews were time-consuming and many of the topics are associated with personal thoughts and emotions. Consequently, it is important to assure participants an environment where participants feel safe and comfortable.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, field notes were conducted as an approach to enrich the gathered data. I documented my experiences since I entered the field. The notes included the geographic description of the village, my encounters, and conversations naturally occurring with the local people before semi-structured interviews started. I also recorded what I have seen and felt when interacting with key informants. To be concrete, it refers to the observation of their living conditions, their body language, facial expressions and the emotions they expressed during their storytelling. Additionally, I also documented the reflexive data, which refers to the researcher's own sensory and emotional experiences (Kara, H., 2020, p.

103). It prompts me to reflect on my own position and its influence on the research process.

4.2.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis involves three stages which are transcribing, coding, analyzing. To analyze the gathered data, the research starts with transcribing the audio recordings of semi-structured interviews into texts. As the transcripts and the organized field notes serve as the resource of data, they are imported into NVivo, a software adopted in the research for coding. During the coding process, codes, categories, and themes in relation to the topic are identified and generated. In terms of data analysis, the thematic analysis strategy is applied in order to make sense of the life experiences regarding the conflicts between individual and family interests.

All the interviews were held in the regional dialect used in Chongqing and recorded as audio. As Mandarin is the only feasible option to convert spoken content into written form in the research, it is indispensable to transcribe the audio interviews from the dialect into Mandarin. After transcription, coding and analysis in the research would be conducted in English. According to Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006, pp. 3-4), thematic analysis is a method of searching for themes that emerge for describing and interpreting social actions. And social actions should be understood in connection with subjective experiences within the world of common sense where individuals are living in. This is in accordance with the research's standpoint, in which individual shifts are impactful on their practices and understandings of themselves and the world. In addition, Boyatzis (1988, p. 4) argues that thematic analysis could be used as a method to make sense out of seemingly unrelated data. This is also in accordance with the research design in which four different families are

studied together and the patterns crossing the interviews are expected to be compared. Thus, it is a suitable approach to analyzing data for the research.

Pragmatically, according to Boyatzis (1988, p. 4), thematic analysis starts with coding which aims to capture an important moment out of data and to encode it. Subsequently, it involves the process of generating and refining themes. Therefore, repeating for all the interviews, I started with reading through the transcriptions and fieldnotes to familiarize myself with them. Then I extracted the codes to capture the stories and participants' perceptions in relation to the topic and put them under the trajectory of their life span. The framework of trajectory adopted here refers to progression through various life stages, particularly including adulthood, parenthood, and grandparenthood. Moreover, their perceptions of their current and future positions within the family sphere are also considered to fulfill the interpretation of their life span. Putting the codes together, I subsequently identified first-order themes, clustered themes, and second-order themes under the theme of trajectory, aiming to develop an understanding of participants' personal accounts. During the process of reviewing them and applying them back to the materials, these themes were refined, split, combined, or discarded. Furthermore, the research also defined, named, and described themes, serving as the basis for discussion (Neuendorf, Kimberly., 2018, p. 213).

4.2.5 Reliability and Validity

According to Ritchie et al. (2013, p. 354), the concepts of reliability and validity are central in the discussion of generalization, applied to assess the quality of the research. As these concepts are developed from natural sciences and are further applied to quantitative research, their applicability to qualitative research remains a topic of discussion.

Concretely, reliability refers to the replicability of research findings, indicating whether they can be repeated when conducting another study using the same or similar methods（Ritchie et al., 2013, p. 355). According to Madill et al. (2000, p. 17), reliability is only suitable for assessing qualitative analysis which is rooted in a realist position in terms of epistemology. Thus, evaluating the reliability of research rooted in constructivism might pose a challenge. However, Ritchie et al. (2013, p. 356) state that the nature of the phenomenon generated by study participants and the meanings they have attached to it could demonstrate the replicability of research. Regarding the research, the individual experiences under certain socioeconomic shifts, such as collectivization, de-collectivization, and migration wave could potentially manifest among a different set of study participants. This could be seen as a contribution to the reliability of the research.

Validity refers to the correctness or precision of research, manifested in its ability to depict a phenomenon with deep and authentic detail, whereby it reflects the language and meanings attributed by study participants (Ritchie et al., 2013, pp. 356-357). The validity of the research is evident in two aspects: transcribe language and a variety of data-gathering methods. First, although the research is presented in English, the interviews were conducted in a dialect of Chinese. Thus, carrying out the transcription in Chinese enhances the authenticity and trustworthiness of participants' narratives in their native language. Second, the research adopted both individual interviews and the focus group, derived from the considerations about dynamics between the interviewer and the interviewees. I initially conducted the individual interviews with a couple individually as I believed it could give participants more space to express themselves. However, when I conducted the individual interviews with the household of Mei and Dong, some challenges happened. Mei, the female participant, sometimes gave ambiguous answers and said she could not

remember many things as she is getting old. And Dong, the male participant, also provided some contradictory information. This led me to reconsider the dynamics among interviewees. Compared to individual interviews, the strategy of conducting focus groups could create dynamics among participants and thus contribute to collective sense-making in action and more fully articulated accounts through participants' own language (Wilkinson, S., 1998, p. 188-195). In this sense, The research adopted the focus group within one couple, aiming to evoke the dynamics between them and demonstrate various perspectives of the life stories and thus contributing to a more detailed and accurate recalling of family experiences.

4.2.6 Challenges and Limitations

However, the research contains several limitations regarding the sample size, translation considerations, ethical considerations, and bias and subjectivity.

First, the inclusion of merely four households might be seen as a limited sample size, potentially affecting the breadth of data collected and the achievement of data saturation (Bryman, A., 2012, pp. 425-426). However, the research focuses on the data depth, aiming to achieve it through conducting in-depth interviews.

Second, translation might have the impact on the research. As stated above, the interviews were conducted in a dialect of Mandarin. Yet, there are some dialectical phrases conveying the ideas that the Chinese official language, Mandarin, is unable to carry. Thus, transcribing the audio recordings into Mandarin in a written form could cause deviation from the original story and interpretation. However, I attempted to maintain the phrases that participants used in the dialect in order to authenticate the ideas that participants attempted to do.

Third, regarding ethical considerations, it is crucial to emphasize the role of my gatekeeper. As previously mentioned, in order to integrate into village life, I sought support from this person, who was responsible for local household administration. Through doing so, I attempted to utilize his network and connections within the local households. However, the research process inevitably exhibited a pattern of asserting power and authority. Despite my efforts to ensure consent from key informants for interviews, the unique position of my gatekeeper might have introduced power-related influences on them, pressuring them to accept and participate in interviews regardless of their own volition.

As the last point, bias and subjectivity might have impacts on the research process, which could be derived from both the researcher and the researched participants. According to Somekh and Lewin (2005, p. 344), bias refers to an inherent tendency to perceive the world, and consequently interpret data from a specific standpoint. Thus, the researcher's bias and subjectivity could be shaped by personal experiences and knowledge. As a researcher, my personal knowledge has limited my understanding of the authentic living situations and experiences of the researched group. However, to counterbalance this subjective bias, I conducted observations and informal conversations with local residents to familiarize myself with the local community. This strategy enriched my understanding of the research subjects. Furthermore, my academic background has unconsciously shaped the language I use in daily interactions. Occasionally, this led me to pose questions that diverge from the researched group’s everyday dialogues. For instance, when I inquired about Dong's relationship with his grandson, he exhibited a sense of confusion and solely emphasized their biological relations. Moreover, the subjectivity of the researched participants should also be concerned as an important part of the challenges. As stated above, although I attempted to counterbalance this issue by adopting open-ended questions, villagers still exhibited reserved

characteristics and less autonomy in sharing intricate life stories, their feelings, emotions, and interpretations.

5 Findings

This chapter attempts to picture the life stories of the subjects in sync with historical and personal shifts. It is organized chronologically starting with their childhood and going into adolescence, adulthood, parenthood, and grandparenthood. However, the data in relation to their childhood and adolescence serves as the description of samples which has been addressed above. Thus, the data presentation only includes the other life stages. Among them, it gives some marks on the significant personal events and their perceptions of family life which were provided during the interviews. In sum, the findings are presented by tracing the trajectory of the key informants' experiences through adulthood, parenthood, and grandparenthood. In addition, their perceptions of family life are also included.

5.1 Huai

5.1.1 Adulthood

In terms of Career, Huai experienced a double life juggling two jobs: as a migrant handyman as well as a peasant. Huai pictured the collective farm work, introducing the working points system for evaluating people's work and contribution to collective development. As he put it in his own words:

"The work points we received from farm work were so few... Like you worked for the whole day... like carrying the manure, digging the farm, if you were good, you could get 10 points. Like you girls who are not good could only get 8 points… Then at the end of the year, if you had extra points,

you could receive money. Otherwise, you were supposed to make up by giving money… (You had to make up when) In your family, more people were eating, but only one person was working… like there were many idlers in your family."

At the age of 21 in 1976, he went out of the village with other brothers and acquaintances from the neighborhood to earn more money. But in the absence of job opportunities, he would rather return to the village for collective farm work. Since people had to make up by giving money to the production team if being absent from collective farm work. However, he still valued being a migrant worker because *"you worked more and gained more"*.

Huai's marriage in 1982 resulted in family division, which was a huge transition occurring after the marriage of the young man. Huai articulated it as:

"As you started your family like I got married in 1982… then you lived separately and drifted apart. The family property was divided up and given to each kid. And then you did it yourself when a gift-giving occasion happened in the neighborhood. That's how you started a family. Yeah, when you got married and had children, you got separated from the original family… (After getting married), Then we built a better house and started our own family."

5.1.2 Parenthood

Huai and his wife have three children who were respectively born in 1983, 1988, and 1998. When Huai and his wife had their second and third kids born, the one-child policy was enacted with strict restrictions and sanctions. Regardless of the strict restrictions, he and his wife still decided to give excessive births. But his wife had to hide somewhere else to avoid the

supervision. Yet, he rationalized the family decision for additional children as:

"a girl did not meet our requirements, we wanted a boy."

The second story that was addressed in Huai's narrative is the divorce of his adult son. In search of better job opportunities, the son and daughter-in-law relocated to another city. However, the daughter-in-law eventually left him without any notice to be with another man whom she had communicated with online. Being upset and frustrated, the son returned to the village and took custody of his two children. In the exposition of his son's marriage and the subsequent divorce, Huai interpreted his role as: *"As a father, I could not say much about it"*.

5.1.3 Grandparenthood

As aforementioned, Huai was taking care of the two grandchildren solely as his wife had passed away, daughter-in-law had left and divorced with his son, saying:

"My daughter-in-law was paying for their tuition before. But after she left… My son doesn't have much money. He needs to pay for the mortgage. And he smokes. That also costs a lot each month."

In his narratives of grandparenthood, Huai delivered many complaints about grandparenting the two young grandchildren, stating that:

"I also told the two kids… you came live in my house… I'm not supposed to take the responsibility. Your parents just left."

"*I always tell the two kids.. it was because of them… I need to take care of them.. that I stayed in this village. Otherwise, I would go to the city and find some work to do there"*

Also, Huai apprehended displeasure about his grandparenthood, stating that:

"*Sometimes you will be upset if they do something wrong. You need to educate them. They are being fearless… I told them that I pay for their education and almost everything and I don't feel good about it. So they need to behave well. I said they should help me a bit with housework. I need to do farm work so I got no time to keep the house clean. It was really hard."*

However, Huai's narratives conveyed worries and hopelessness about the grandchildren's future in terms of inadequate education. He said:

"I don't think there's any hope for them. Their father said he would only support them until they finish elementary school. If they are such bad at studying and can't pass the entrance exam.. just drop it."

"You need to be educated or you can't survive in this society".

Moreover, he identified his lifelong position to discipline and support his grandchildren. Huai also expressed worries about his health condition and his grandchildren's future, stating that:

"And I told them that I could support you as I live. One day if I die, who else would support you? Now, the families are all separated, who could take care of you? As you can see, my family is like… if I was not sticking here, who could deal with it?"

5.1.4 Perceptions of Family Life

In Huai's narratives of life history, he interpreted his position within the extended family from different perspectives. Huai said:

"I'm in the position that… looking at my offspring. I hope they can go out of the village, earn some money and do well."

"I feel like if there's any work I can do, I will still go for it. As long as I'm able to. I'm like the person who can't stay home and rest. If I can work and make some money, I will do it. If I can't move anymore, I can't make money anymore, I'll just drop it."

In addition, he expressed a sense of insecurity and fear about his health condition. Huai stated:

"*I'm afraid of getting sick. And sometimes I feel afraid that those diseases could not be cured*". He also described himself as a vital member of the family: "*If I die, this family would be screwed*".

Considering the entire family, Huai said:

"*All the relatives, like the extended families, we need solidarity. We are not supposed to get mad at each other. And we need to do the gift-giving thing when it's necessary. No one wants the whole family to be torn up. As I'm still able to... I hope everyone could have a positive mindset. Then it's easier to have a good life"*.

5.2 Mei and Dong

5.2.1 Adulthood

Mei's adulthood started early as she married Dong through matchmakers at the age of 18, in 1969. After getting married, Mei left her natal family and moved into the inherited housing of her husband to start a new life with him. They started their own life depending on the family property they received from the family division.

In Dong's narratives of his adulthood, he focused on the marriage which he started at age 20, and his career as a migrant worker:

"We settled down at age of 20 and followed the aforementioned relative to 'make stone'. We used to travel a long way to work, or even walk a long way there. We did any sort of hard labor."

Regarding his career and life prosperity in his adulthood, Dong conveyed a commitment to his identity as a craftsman. He placed a higher

priority on crafts work rather than farm work, as being a craftsman provided him with greater economic benefits and a more equitable work environment.

5.2.2 Parenthood

The first kid in Mei and Dong's family was a girl, born when Mei was 20 years old in 1972. Unfortunately, they had a second child who tragically passed away at an early age. Subsequently, they decided to have another kid, despite the existence of the one-child policy with forced abortion and penalties. Dong rationalized the decision by stating that:

"At that time, we were thinking of having two children. If we had two, when we became old, they could discuss things together. It meant that if anything happened to us, they, as siblings, can try to solve it with each other's help. If we pass away, they can discuss and buy coffins and the things needed for the funeral, sharing the expenses for different items."

Regarding their parenthood, while Dong stressed the poor housing condition and the delicate health of his young children, Mei pondered striking a balance between farm work and childrearing as the most challenging experience.

Moreover, in the discussion of her children's adulthood, Mei centered her narratives around her son. She said:

"Normally, they would give us money, like when we are sick and need medical treatment, they would provide financial support. If something is happening, like this time when I was not feeling well, my daughter-in-law came back. Whenever there's an issue at home, they rush back to help. But if there's nothing urgent, they would stay outside… My son and daughter-in-law are the same. They often call and advise me not to do too much farm work and to take care of my health..."

“(Adult children) bring us happiness, I guess. They have grown up and now give us money and come back to take care of me when we are sick.”

5.2.3 Grandparenthood

When their children entered into their adulthood and started their own families, Mei and Dong both portrayed the period concerning the one-child policy. To have additional children beyond the allowed limit, their daughter-in-law had to conceal herself outside the village to avoid fines. Regarding this, Mei and Dong reiterated the importance of siblings in family life, providing similar insights as they did in their narratives about parenthood, stating that:

"I just wanted to have one more child, so that their next generation would have someone to discuss things with. If there's anything, they can go ask their older siblings." (Mei)

"With two children, there is always someone for them to discuss things with." (Dong)

When it comes to their experiences of grandparenting, they explained it as:

"In the past, we were the ones taking care of the grandchildren. Our son and his wife worked outside and couldn't manage to look after their children. If they had to take care of the children, they wouldn't be able to earn money, and the family needed money."(Mei)

"There was no one who could take care of the young children. We thought that coming back to take care of the children… was for our son and his wife, the next generation, so they could earn more money outside." (Dong)

Mei described her experiences of grandparenting on a day-to-day basis as:

"When I was taking care of them, I didn't allow them to play in dangerous places or jump around outside, since I was afraid that they might fall. I didn't let them climb trees either, as it might dirty their clothes. When they were studying… I couldn't read, I could only recognize a few basic characters. They brought their homework back for me to see, and if they had made mistakes), I scolded them. While if they had correct answers, I encouraged them."

In Dong's account, he emphasized his role and responsibility in disciplining his grandchildren, advising them to be cautious and avoid misbehavior. Yet, Dong expressed the family's concerns about the relationship between his adult children and young grandchildren due to the long distance, stating that:

"*At the age of one year and eight months, we brought him back and took care of him until they entered elementary school. Their mother (referring to his daughter-in-law) would only come back during the Chinese New Year holidays. Initially, their mother was not willing because she was afraid that the children would grow distant from her in the future. I reassured her that it wouldn't happen. So, when they came back, we didn't interfere and let them stay with their parents. As soon as their parents left the next day, we started looking after the two children. How did we take care of them? It's not about using physical punishment to control them; it's not like that. Children grow up, and there's a certain process they go through – being mischievous, climbing trees, jumping around – we were just concerned about their safety, so we watched over them."*

5.2.4 Perceptions of Family Life

Mei conveyed the significant importance of enabling the young generation in her life, as she remarked:

"Thinking that we have descendants… we just do whatever work is available, and if they give us some money, we can live a little better. Now, our children have grown up, they have left the rural area for work; Things have been getting better and better. That's what I want, I don't have any other desires... But when I think about it, I feel like I've achieved this much. It's just that we sent the children away from here. We used to be frustrated in the countryside, having to work in the rain or sunshine, but they don't need to do that anymore; they can stay indoors. Everything we had in mind has been realized."

However, Mei expressed her desire and choice to remain in rural areas while all her offspring migrated to urban areas. At the end of the interview, she conveyed the idea that she still wanted to move to urban areas and live with her offspring.

In addition, Dong described his current life as:

"Now that we are in our old age, we may have some health issues like high blood pressure and high blood sugar. Based on these things, they would remind us to be cautious about our diet. When we become unable to walk or take care of ourselves, they will have even more responsibility. They will be by our side, taking care of us. That's what responsibility is."

Regarding his future life, Dong stated:

"When we get old, there's another thing on my mind... If I have to die, I'd rather die quickly, if I get sick, I'd rather die right away. If you're lingering between life and death, it's frustrating for the next generation who takes care of you… Who can bear taking care of someone who can't take care of themselves for a year or six months? But, of course, the next

generation will definitely take care of me. If they don't take care of me, who will? This is the responsibility…"

5.3 Yue and Peng

5.3.1 Adulthood

Peng and Yue spent their whole life working on the farm. Peng recalled the era of agricultural collectivization, stating that:

"During that time of collective production, everyone would engage in agricultural work. People would chat with each other while holding hoes in the fields, but there was no substantial grain output… Life back then was difficult."

Peng and Yue arranged a wedding in 1968. When Peng recounted their simple wedding, Yue felt embarrassed about it. Furthermore, similar to other key informants who grew up during that era, Peng and Yue experienced family division right after marriage. They described it as:

"When we divided the family, my parents gave us two liters of rice to start our new family." (Peng)

"At that time, we lived in a house made of mud walls. His parents built it." (Yue)

Regarding the relationships with their own parents during adulthood, Peng characterized his re as "*strained*" or "*not good*". However, Yue showed little concern about her relationships with her original family. But during Peng's exhibition, Yue interjected to rationalize it as a normal pattern. According to her, it was common for individuals to become self-reliant when they entered adulthood, especially after starting their own families, while parents also focused on their own affairs. She described it

as a matter of *"each person taking care of themselves,"* especially in terms of consuming food.

Peng and Yue expressed similar perspectives about their single-lineal career as peasants. They remarked that:

"We have been farming all the way until now, without going to work or doing business. There are no other ideas. And even if you have regrets, it's because you don't have the ability for that. (Peng)

"My dream is that I can work and produce every day, make things, and have enough food and clothing every day. (Yue)

5.3.2 Parenthood

Peng and Yue had three children born respectively in 1969, 1972, and 1975. Similarly, they discussed the strict sanctions associated with the one-child policy. Besides, Peng and Yue recounted the financial difficulties they encountered in terms of food scarcity and poor housing conditions. Furthermore, Peng and Yue highlighted the difficulties they encountered in striking a balance between collective farm work and childrearing. They described it as:

"When I was doing farm work, I would carry them on my back… Others would get eight points for their work, but I only got seven points because I had a child on my back." (Yue)

"I carried our youngest daughter while doing farm work. During the collective evaluation, every time, I would get one point less because they said I would work slower with a child on my back." (Peng)

They continued to mention that all their adult children had migrated to urban areas and settled down there. Yet, Yue and Peng mentioned the financial, physical, and substantial support they receive from their adult children.

5.3.3 Grandparenthood

Yue and Peng's narratives of grandparenting were centered around their son's side. They explained that their daughter's children should be taken care of by the paternal grandparent. Born in 1994 and 1996, their grandchildren's births posed challenges for the family. Yue described this period as "tough," and Peng specifically mentioned the confiscation they faced due to their non-compliance with the policy.

During their grandparenthood, Yue and Peng emphasized the health conditions of their grandchildren. Recalling the life-threatening incident of their grandson, they said:

"As long as our grandchildren are healthy and not sick, everything is good. But if they get sick, it's frustrating. Our grandson broke his leg before, and we had to take him to the hospital in the city for surgery. We were very anxious since he was our only grandchild. Only my husband and I were at home..." (Yue)

"I was also feeling extremely anxious. It was twenty years ago when our grandson had surgery in the city for his leg, it cost really much. Money was not easy to make back then, unlike now…" (Peng)

Peng and Yue pondered grandparenting as much easier due to their improved financial well-being, stating that:

"We used to buy snacks for our grandchildren, regardless of whether they wanted them or not, when the economy was better…" (Yue)

"Do you think these kids nowadays are like the kids back in our time? In those days, as long as we made sure they had three meals, it was enough… Unlike the kids nowadays who need someone specifically to take care of them, we couldn't do that back then." (Peng)

Regarding their current relationships with grandchildren, they mentioned those, on both paternal and maternal sides, who have migrated to urban areas. Peng and Yue expressed their concerns about the high cost

of city life but understood that they would not be willing to come back due to job opportunities in the city. Yet, they expressed a strong sense of affinity toward the children of their daughters, as evident in their regular visits and the financial and emotional support they provided.

5.3.4 Perceptions of Family Life

Regarding their present roles in the extended family, Yue conveyed her perception based on her destiny of being a peasant. She stated:

"... In the next generation, we have only one son and one grandson – everything we have done is for them… It's like they say, we are all caretakers of the family, looking after the house for them… We don't have any other ideas; we accept things as they come… We are born as we are, unlike others who have education and capacities and can think differently. How can people like us do that? We are not capable of such things."

Rather, Peng declined his contribution to the family:

"I haven't done much for the family. If the descendants come home and want to eat rice, that's my responsibility, and I can provide it for them. If I ask for money, they will give me some. I don't have much money, so I can't do much for them… I don't feel like doing anything anymore because there's nothing much I can do. I just stay at home doing nothing. When the descendants give me some money, I use it to buy some food if we don't have any. Occasionally, I can grow some vegetables on my own."

5.4 Ai

5.4.1 Adulthood

Ai entered into marriage at the age of 20 in 1968. She moved in with her husband and settled in a house that was inherited through family division. Recalling the early phase of her marriage, Ai perceived the pervasive poverty as the toughest challenge she encountered. She remarked that such difficult circumstances were not unique to her family, but rather a common experience shared by many families in the neighborhood.

In terms of career, Ai dedicated her life to housework and farm work. She essentially emphasized the significant role of money during the era of collectivization. She articulated it as:

"What can we do? Without money, we can't make up for our work points. Because we had no money, the production team took away our big cabinet and assessed how much money it could offset. In the final settlement, if there was no shortage of money, they would give us some food; otherwise, we had to continue to make up for the money. We had to find money anyhow, either by doing business or working in agriculture. If we didn't have any specific skills, we had to do some farming."

5.4.2 Parenthood

In the early years of her marriage in 1968, Ai gave birth to her first child, followed by the second in 1970, the third in 1972, and the fourth in 1974. Ai recounted her stories in association with the one-child policy, poor housing conditions and challenging childrearing. Ai did not face those sanctions, as she gave birth to her youngest child just before the one-child policy implementation. Regarding housing, Ai described the small size but mentioned their "plan" for housing development, which they had achieved later. Additionally, she described her experience of handling physical childcare without much help from her husband, who focused on farm work in the commune and later started a small business. Despite

these hardships, she praised her well-behaved and mature children compared to children of other families, stating that:

"Slowly they became older and started to work… I became a little happier. You don't know that some children are very noisy and annoying, and some children from other families… They steal, fight, and disobey, which is very irritating. Our children are obedient, mature, and very hard-working. They are very good children"

However, regarding the presence, she portrayed herself as a person being free to enjoy life without worries, due to the financial support from her offspring. As she put it in her own words:

"My children are very good and filial. They buy me food and clothes when they have time… I'm very happy about it (laughs), I have money to spend, I don't worry about food or clothes, and my life is getting better and better."

5.4.3 Grandparenthood

Diverging from all the other informants, Ai's narratives primarily focused on her oldest daughter's family, while other informants manifested their grandparenthood in the sons' families. Concerning the one-child policy, the oldest grandchild did not result in a fine, but the third grandchild incurred a significant penalty due to the policy's strictness at that time. Ai cited her husband's perspective for rationalizing their family decisions, stating that:

"Money can't bring more people or move., but kids can. Watching the children happily running around in the courtyard brings joy to adults."

Ai explained the family's decision to grandparenting her daughter's children as:

It was just that we lived nearby, and the mother-in-law of my eldest daughter passed away. The father-in-law also lived far away, and at that time, my eldest daughter's financial situation wasn't very good… We took care of the child together, and we didn't separate our households because my son hadn't gotten married yet."

Ai described her busy daily work in her own words:

"When I was free, I would take care of my grandchildren. I would cook while carrying the child on my back, waiting for the people who were working to come back and prepare their meals. It was a tiring and exhausting day with hardly any time to rest. At that time, I also had to take care of feeding the pigs and cutting grass for them. There were so many tasks to do every day. How could I not do anything? Only by working can we all have enough food and clothing."

She also stressed the sense of responsibility in providing care to grandchildren, stating that:

"Taking care of the child requires a strong sense of responsibility. I have to take good care of my grandchildren, ensuring they don't get sick or misbehave."

Moreover, in terms of the current relationships with the grandchildren, Ai expressed the feeling of happiness in her own words:

"It's lively when the whole family comes back and gathers. When our children and grandchildren come back, we need four tables for everyone to sit at. Watching the grandchildren play and have fun, it brings a lot of happiness (laughs).

5.4.4 Perceptions of Family Life

In her perception of family life, Ai stated that her mission was accomplished as her children had all grown up and started their own families. Considering

her position in the family life, she essentially valued her health condition, stating that:

"During weekdays, I still do some tasks like feeding chickens and gardening, but my family doesn't allow me to work in the fields. Because I'm old, and if I fall down, I will burden the children… It does add burdens, and we need money for medical treatments… I believe I should take good care of my health and not burden the next generation. If I burden them, we will all face difficulties."

"Their own family needs to cover their own expenses for living, so it's not possible for them to solely support the elderly… So, we shouldn't burden the children further. Otherwise, we would feel sorry. Life is good now, and I can move around freely. Do I really need someone to cater to my every need? We mustn't think that way, we shouldn't expect to enjoy all the benefits from our children. No matter how close a family is, conflicts can arise."

"If you want to live and spend time with your children, the lifestyle of the elderly is different. For example, the elderly need to eat softer food, while young people prefer harder food. This can still have an impact. Elderly people should still pay attention to their living conditions, so as not to increase troubles and difficulties for their children. Young people have their own pursuits and struggles. If you add to their burden, they will definitely feel uncomfortable…"

Ai felt worried about aging, stating that she might be not able to move and do anything in the future. She saw herself might become a person *"who only knows how to eat"* and described it as *"with no meaning"*.

Moreover, she valued family harmony and solidarity, stating that:

"*I have already achieved everything, and we are very content. The family is united and harmonious; we don't get divorced or divide the family due to conflicts. To have a good family, unity among family members is essential. I am very satisfied with the current situation."*

6 Discussion

To analyze the data presented in the previous chapter, the theoretical framework will be applied here. However, rather than the historical and individual focus that was addressed above, a thematic analysis will be conducted as an approach in accordance with the theoretical concepts addressed in the theoretical framework, which respectively are: descending familism, intergenerational interdependence, agency, and intimacy. This section aims to discuss Neo-familism in the given context and to answer the research question as follows:

How do we interpret the life experiences of the left-behind rural elderly in relation to extended family?

Sub-inquiry*: In their family life, what kind of strategies do they apply to navigate the balance between individual and family interests?*

6.1 "This is responsibility"

6.1.1 Descending Familism

In the discussion of descending familism, Yan (2021, pp. 112-113) stressed the refashioning of downward transfers in which the grandparents offer intergenerational support to adult children and their grandchildren, undermining the traditional expectation for the junior generations to sacrifice for the sake of filial piety. Following this idea, the downward transfers are reflected in the findings through the surging importance of

grandparenting within rural family life. Concretely, the senior generations exhibited a sense of responsibility for downward transfers, as Dong said:

"*We had the responsibility of taking care of the children, it was our duty.*"

Yan (2021, p. 86) also argues that these rearrangements of caregiving caused by the migration wave enable grandparents to contribute to the family. Thus, by assisting their adult children in childcare, the senior generations allow the adult children to focus on economic pursuits. This reasoning behind downward transfers is also highlighted in the findings, as demonstrated by Mei's explanation of grandparenting:

"If they (adult children) had to take care of the children, they wouldn't be able to earn money, and the family needed money."

Partnering with Mei, Dong also took the role of caring for the grandchildren. To do so, he quit his own career as a crafts worker in urban areas. As he put it into his own words: *"There was no one who could take care of the young children. We thought that coming back to take care of the children… was for our son and his wife, the next generation, so they could earn more money outside."*

As stated above, descending familism is manifested in the diminishing spiritual importance of the descent line, which, in turn, challenges the traditional expectation for the younger generations to make sacrifices for the sake of filial piety (Yan, 2021, p.16). The former consequence is evident in the research in which the key informants rarely expressed concerns about glorifying ancestors. Rather, in their perceptions of family life, they placed themselves in the roles to support and enable the development of offspring in a bigger world. In traditional Confucianism, the value of filial piety is emphasized through the saying "父母在,不远游", which can be translated as when parents are alive, children should not travel far. This conveys the idea that children should remain close to their parents and take the responsibility of caring for them.

In contrast to the traditional values, the senior generations exhibited strong desires for offspring to leave the countryside. Since they considered it as a means to stay away from laborious work which they had endured for their entire life and perceived these shifts could bring prosperity to the family. Huai and Mei said:

"I'm in the position that… looking at my offspring. I hope they can go out of the village, earn some money and do well." (Huai)

"Now these children have all grown up. They go to work and leave the rural areas, and they are getting better and better. ... Anyway, thinking about this, I also believe that I have achieved this. That is, sending the children away from here." (Mei)

6.1.2 Intergenerational Interdependence

Despite dedicating their time and energy, rather than perceiving it as an unreasonable burden or sacrifice, the senior generations view their contribution as enabling offspring and aiding family development. This standpoint echoes in the perspective of neo-familism, emphasizing intergenerational interdependence (Yan, 2021, p.16). However, rural families present a pattern following the tradition of family division. It is a traditional family practice in which family property is divided in alignment with the patrilineal descent, reflecting the idea of family nuclearization in reform-era China (Yan, 2021, p. 256). Findings present the fact that the senior generations in the research exerted family division not only with their natal families but also with their children. However, after their sons started their own families, the senior generations provided childcare support for their sons' nuclear families since the adult children chose to migrate for economic pursuits. This indicates that, although the continuity of family division addressed the notion of the nuclear family,

intergenerational interdependence takes a significant role in rural families in contemporary China. For instance, Huai identified the interdependent relationship between him and the offspring:

"If our offspring are capable of managing things, we could have an easier life. But if they are not, you have to work until you die".

In addition to the childrearing support provided by the senior generations for their adult children, intergenerational interdependence is further evident in the sense of reciprocity occurring in their interactions. More specifically, the research findings reveal a pattern in which the senior generations express concern with reciprocity of fair financial support and physical and emotional care for their offspring. They still expect the upward obligation as a return from the offspring. For instance, Yue characterized the support she received from her children as a way of acknowledging and reciprocating the hardships she endured for parenting and grandparenting, as she said:

"I feel the same. Now these descendants take care of our food and clothing, and they also know that it wasn't easy for us to raise them."

Similarly, Dong exhibited an expectation of adult children's responsibility in taking care of their elderly parents especially those who lost capacities for self-care. He considered his offspring's support as the only option he had to live when he lost physical mobility. As he put it in his own words:

"When we become unable to walk or take care of ourselves, they (adult children) will have even more responsibility. They will be by our side, taking care of us. That's what responsibility is…If they don't take care of me, who will? This is the responsibility…(Dong)

However, as discussed above in Chapter 3, the volume of neo-familism also presents a pattern in which the senior generations, regardless of a return of their downward transfers, try to maintain good health and physical mobility to "not burden their adult children",

suggesting the value of their independence and the sense of agency in shaping their own lives (Qi, X., 2021, pp. 113-114). Correspondently, the research findings present the fact that the senior generations exhibited reluctance to be a burden on their offspring. This perception was shaped by their concerns about aging and health conditions. As articulated in her own words:

"I believe I should take good care of my health and not burden the next generation. If I burden them, we will all face difficulties." (Ai)

6.2 "To Have A Good Family"

As stated above in the theoretical framework, in addition to the focus on intersecting generations, which refers to grandparent and grandchild, the notion of intergenerationality sheds light on individuals' subjective experiences in family life by introducing the influence of individual agency (Yan, 2021, p.16). Within the theory of ne-familism, the exercise of intimate power is emphasized as familial emotions are increasingly important in the contemporary Chinese family. This transformation is manifested in the findings where the senior generations deeply value the emotional satisfaction they feel from supporting offspring and they also prioritize harmony within family life.

First, the research findings exhibit a pattern that the senior generations value the happiness derived from childrearing. They convey the idea that more children could add excitement and liveliness which is in line with the context of neo-familism (Thomason, E. 2021, p.87). For instance, Ai cited her husband's perspective to express the perception of prioritizing the joy of parenting and grandparenting over economic well-being. As she put it in her own word:

"Money can't bring more people or move, but kids can. Watching the children happily running around in the courtyard brings joy to adults."

Second, the research findings exhibit the fact that the senior generation's happiness developed from praising their grandchildren's good behavior and obedience. As Ai said:

"Slowly they became older and started to work… I became a little happier. You don't know that some children are very noisy and annoying, and some children from other families… They steal, fight, and disobey, which is very irritating. Our children are obedient, mature, and very hard-working. They are very good children."

These aforementioned findings offer evidence of the shift towards an intimate focus within family life, as emphasized by neo-familism. It specifically aligns with the argument drawn by Qi (2021, pp. 116-117) that grandparents derive emotional satisfaction and self-fulfillment from providing care to their grandchildren.

Moreover, the senior generations perceive their personal happiness and affection with offspring based on material support and emotional care that they received from the offspring and expressed happiness. As Mei and Ai said:

"(Adult children) bring us happiness, I guess. They have grown up and now give us money and come back to take care of me when we are sick." (Mei)

"My children are very good and filial. They buy me food and clothes when they have time… I'm very happy about it (laughs)." (Ai)

Moreover, the emotional payback also underlines the non-compliance they implemented toward the one-child policy. The one-child policy is considered as the essential driving force in the transformation of family configuration in China (Yan, 2021, p. 7). It strengthened the descending familism, whereby it contributed to the result of the family having a single child, leading all the family members to consider the only kid as the hope

of the whole family. However, the research findings reveal a distinct pattern that rural families attempted to have more children, regardless of the penalties associated with the one-child policy and their economic difficulties. The belief in deriving emotional satisfaction from offspring's upbringing underlines the non-compliance of the one-child policy. For instance, Yue justifies their family's decision to have additional children by stating:

"It's just like when you wear clothes, you always want to have two sets of clothes to change into and wear. The same goes for having two grandchildren; there's even more to talk about."

The research findings also bring to light another noteworthy pattern, in which the senior generations present a strong emphasis on valuing family harmony. This is in line with the perspective presented in the context of neo-familism. It underscores the deviation from traditional filial piety norms that traditionally require unconditional submission of younger to older generations (Yan, 2016, p. 244). Instead, the focus is on maintaining an intimate relationship as a crucial goal of family life. As Ai said:

"The family is united and harmonious; we don't get divorced or divide the family due to conflicts. To have a good family, unity among family members is essential."

Furthermore, the research findings reveal a pattern where the senior generations might prioritize it even if it demands them to concede their authority within the family. It aligns well with the perspective of neo-familism, which suggests that individuals might be hesitant to actively pursue greater decision-making power or engage in discussions about family affairs in order to preserve intimate relationships (Xiao, S., 2021, p. 171). An illustrative example comes from Huai, who mentioned his son's marriage and subsequent divorce, positioning himself within the family as a person who should yield his authority over family matters. As Huai put it in his own words:

"As a father, I could not say much about it."

The concession of authority for the maintenance of intimacy within the family is also evident in Dong's narratives. Dong distinguished his role as a grandparent from that of a parent, particularly in terms of childrearing responsibility. This differentiation derived from the concerns expressed by the daughter-in-law, who feared that her migration and separation from her children might lead to a strained parent-kid relationship. As Dong elaborated in his own words:

"*Their mother (referring to his daughter-in-law) would only come back during the Chinese New Year holidays. Initially, their mother was not willing because she was afraid that the children would grow distant from her in the future. I reassured her that it wouldn't happen. So, when they came back, we didn't interfere and let them stay with their parents. As soon as their parents left the next day, we started looking after the two children."*

Moreover, Huai's life stories also revealed a pattern of seeking family harmony and cohesion, irrespective of the personal sacrifices he endured. Diverging from other informants, Huai expressed distinct perceptions of providing childcare support for adult children. Specifically, Huai expressed dissatisfaction and frustration with providing financial, physical, and educational support to his grandchildren. He considered it an unfair responsibility and felt like he sacrificed his opportunities for work by staying in the village for caregiving. As Yan (2021, p.18) argues, individuals determine their own position and functional role based on their own life circumstances and personal capabilities. Based on this statement, Huai's perceptions could be understood under the influence of the hard personal life situations, in which, according to my fieldnotes, I noticed that Huai had a more financially challenging life compared to the other informants. Regardless of these negative emotions derived from hardships, Huai decided to stick to the situation, whereby he adopted family harmony and consistency to justify his contribution and sacrifice for enabling and

supporting offspring. This is evident within the volume of neo-familism, where Thomason (2021, p. 80) argues that rural grandparents endure suffering to enable family harmony. As Huai said in his own words:

"And I told them that I could support you as I live. One day if I die, who else would support you? Now, the families are all separated, who could take care of you? As you can see, my family is like… if I was not sticking here, who could deal with it?"

"All the relatives, like extended families, need solidarity. We are not supposed to get mad at each other. And we need to do the gift-giving thing when it's necessary. No one wants the whole family to be torn up. As I'm still able to... I hope everyone can have a positive mindset. Then it's easier to have a good life".

6.3 Tensions Between Individual and Family Interests

Although neo-familism emphasizes the prioritization of family interests over individual interests, the pragmatic pattern of contemporary family life exhibited a complex and paradoxical relationship between individual agency and family organization. This feature addressed by Neo-familism primarily focuses on the younger generation who had grown up in the era of globalization and the information revolution, holding stronger self-awareness and determination to pursue individual development and happiness (Yan, 2021, p. 25). Nevertheless, the research sheds light on the senior generations who had grown up in the Mao era, contributing a distinct angle to the understanding of the balance between individual and family interests. The discussion of tensions between individual and family interests is based on the aforementioned patterns that emerged within

family life in terms of descending familism, intergenerational interdependence, individual agency, and intimacy. Overall, the tensions between individual and family interests could be concluded into three aspects within the senior generations' life, which respectively are: enabling offspring, staying in rural areas, and working until they drop.

6.3.1 Enabling Offspring

The tensions between individual and family interests are manifested within their experiences of enabling offspring. Specifically, as discussed above, in the research, the senior generation adopted the strategy of grandparenting to liberate their offspring from childcare to join the migrant wave for greater economic pursuits, which is also manifested in the context of neo-familism (Thomason, E., 20201, p. 86). In the research, the senior generation perceived enabling offspring's development and ultimately improving the family's financial well-being as tasks they should dedicate their lives to achieve. This is also evident in the context of neo-familism, where Yan argues that individuals ought to conduct their own lives for family interests (Yan, 2021, p. 255). As Mei said:

"*... I feel like I've achieved this much. It's just that we sent the children away from here.*"

As aforementioned, the senior generations conveyed a strong desire of supporting offspring to "*walk out of the village*". Because they considered staying in farm work as laborious and believed work outside the village could be less physically demanding and bring more economic benefits compared to their experiences of laborious farm work. Based on these insights, the notion of family prosperity, particularly in relation to financial well-being, takes center stage in family dynamics. The senior

generation actively incorporates this notion into their personal aspirations, leading them to extend support to their offspring in pursuit of prosperity.

Moreover, the senior generations also made trade-offs between individual and family interests during grandparenting, wherein they prioritize family harmony over their own interests. As aforementioned, the research findings present a pattern where the senior generations viewed their assistance in childcare as a pathway to fostering family harmony. This perspective is notably exemplified in the narratives of individuals such as Huai, wherein he prioritized family harmony over personal hardships and sufferings. The central role of family harmony is also emphasized in the pattern where individuals might yield their authority to maintain intimacy within intergenerational relationships, which is in line with the context of neo-familism (Xiao, S., 2021, p. 171). An illustration of this can be found in the narratives of Dong, as shown above, where he willingly undermined his own authority in grandparenting to preserve the closeness between his daughter-in-law and his grandchildren.

6.3.2 Staying in the Village

Another significant life experience of the senior generations manifesting the tensions between individual agency and family institution is their decision to stay in the village. This life decision is in close association with their identity of being an elderly, a peasant, and a caretaker.

The senior generation conveyed apprehensions regarding the prospect of living with their adult children in urban areas, fearing it could heighten family conflicts. The concerns of growing older and having limited means to support themselves in urban settings are manifested in the research findings. Consequently, they worried that residing with their adult children in cities might place them in a position of heavy financial

dependence on their offspring – a situation they strongly wished to avoid, as previously mentioned. The senior generations also expressed concern about co-residency with offspring in urban areas could increase conflicts within the family. Specifically, they conveyed the idea of being elderly resulted in their limited ability to support themselves in urban areas. In this setting, their co-residency with adult children in urban areas could lead to their heavy reliance on offspring financially, which is a situation they are unwilling to experience as aforementioned. As Ai said:

"Their own family needs to cover their own expenses for living, so it's not possible for them to solely support the elderly… So, we shouldn't burden the children further. Otherwise, we would feel sorry… we shouldn't expect to enjoy all the benefits from our children. No matter how close a family is, conflicts can arise."

Moreover, Ai emphasized the impacts of differences in living habits between generations on family life when living together. She considered that co-residency could result in heavy reliance and subsequently lead to rising conflicts within the family. She said:

"If you want to live and spend time with your children, the lifestyle of the elderly is different… Elderly people should still pay attention to their living conditions, so as not to increase troubles and difficulties for their children. Young people have their own pursuits and struggles. If you add to their burden, they will definitely feel uncomfortable…"

The mentioned concerns align closely with the principles of neo-familism, where the senior generations are resistant to imposing extra burdens on their offspring (Qi, X., 2021, p. 113). Moreover, their choice to remain in the village to avoid conflicts could be seen as a strategy to maintain intimacy and harmony, the primary goal highlighted by neo-familism in contemporary family dynamics (Xiao, S., 2021, p. 171).

The second apprehension that emerged in the research findings, shaping their decision to stay in the village, refers to their identity as

peasants. The senior generations viewed this identity as predestined and considered themselves as people born and destined to reside in the village. They perceive it as a constraint that hinders them from engaging in urban life. This is exemplified by Peng's account, where he expressed a sense of frustration. In his own words:

"We have been farming all the way until now, without going to work or doing business. There are no other ideas. And even if you have regrets, it's because you don't have the ability for that."

Similarly, following the life's path shaped by her rural upbringing, Yue perceived herself as different from those who had received sufficient education and possessed capacities to pursue distinct lives, as she said:

"We are born as we are, unlike others who have education and capacities and can think differently. How can people like us do that? We are not capable of such things."

The last apprehension shaping their decision to stay in rural areas is their self-understanding as a caretaker for the whole family. It particularly suggests that the senior generations consider housing preservation as an important aspect of family interests, and they ought to conduct their lives to achieve it. In the informants' life histories, the division and inheritance of family property, which include food and housing, was perceived as an important part. These challenges were commonly encountered by rural families in Mao's era, in which the senior generation usually started their own families from impoverished living conditions and limited amounts of grains. Moreover, the reconstruction and improvement of housing was considered as a significant plan for them for achieving better prosperity. These discourses and practices manifest the significance of housing in the senior generations' lives. This significance also aligns with the senior's self-understanding as a person to "keep the house" for the entire family. As Mei articulated in her own words:

“Even if I'm too old to move, this house, it always needs someone to look after it. They would like us to stay with them, but if I leave, the house will be a mess with no one to clean the grass next to it”.

Similarly, Yue also saw herself fulfilling the role of "*keeping house for offspring*." She viewed this role as a natural outcome of aging and being less physically active. According to her, keeping the house would create a place where her offspring could return and stay in their old age, echoing the sense of seeking family consistency. Importantly, she shed light on the influence of other people’s saying, reflecting the influence of traditional customs. In her own words:

“Anyway, in our family… everything is for them (referring to the offspring). It's like what they say that we are people who keep the house, looking after the family home for them.”

However, controversies between individual desires and family interests also emerge in findings. For example, although Mei emphasized the decision to remain in the rural area was her own choice, she later conveyed a contrasting idea that if possible, she would still like to migrate to the urban area for co-residency with the younger generation. As she put it in her own words:

“I can’t have them (children) stay here. I would prefer my children to stay at home, then it would be more enlivened, but they all have to work. I just want to stay at home, here… But I still want to go.”

This indicates that the senior generations are likely to prioritize decisions that serve the family’s benefits over their individual preferences. This trend is consistent with the context of neo-familism, where scholars argue that individuals are morally obligated to shape their lives, whereby they could benefit the family (Yan, 2021, p. 255). In this context, the notion of self-fulfillment is closely intertwined with family development for the senior generations.

6.3.3 Working Until They Drop

The research findings exhibit a pattern of the senior generations' persistence in working. It is consistent with the research mentioned in the literature review, where in de Brauw and Rozelle (2004, p. 91) stress the continuity of the elderly work despite the advanced old age. Furthermore, this pattern indicates that *qinlao*, a Chinese term that is translated as the quality of laboring diligently, takes an important role in the senior generation's self-realization. In the volume of neo-familism, Erin Thomason (2021, p. 87) argues that persistence in work provides the senior generation a means to fight against the trap of becoming useless, giving moral grounding to their everyday lives. In line with this argument, Ai expressed concerns about aging and felt worried that she might be not able to move and do anything in the future, she described this situation as "*with no meaning*". And she saw herself might become a person "*who only knows how to eat*". Similarly, Huai expressed a commitment to remain engaged in the workforce for as long as possible, as he said:

"I feel like if there's any work I can do, I will still go for it. As long as I'm able to. I'm the type of person who can't stay at home and just rest."

The accordance between exerting the virtue of being diligent and contributing to family development could be perceived within and beyond the historical context. According to Erin Thomason (2021, p. 87), he argues that this value was focused on benefiting the entire nation during the collective era. The research findings reveal a similar pattern where the virtue of laboring diligently derived from the senior generation's experiences of food scarcity, the advocates of working, and the critics of idleness in the collective era. According to their narratives of collectivization, the family was taken as a unit in terms of work points and food distribution. The making-up principle was made for families in which working people are much less than the food-consuming people who were

identified as idlers. In the informants' narratives, food was associated with the productivity of the family unit, causing the fear of idleness and advocacy of diligent labor. Furthermore, these values were considered as a measurement scale for personal growth and fulfillment within the family sphere. For instance, Ai compared her past life with that of the young, stating that being diligent was the only way for her to survive in that difficult time. As she put it in her own words:

"Working hard has always been a part of my life; I loved to work when I was a kid because I knew that I would sustain myself if I did not work hard…We needed to be diligent... In those days, how could we not be diligent? We must be hardworking. If we weren't diligent, we would have starved (Laughs)."

Moreover, regarding the virtue of laboring diligently, Erin Thomason (2021, p. 87) further argues that the entrepreneurial spirit seemed to remain a key role in unifying the family both ethically and morally. In line with it, the research finds that being valued as an important individual virtue, laboring diligence also serves as a means to achieve family interests in terms of collecting wealth and maintaining harmony. Remaining in work could help the senior generation consistently generate financial benefits and thus contribute to the senior generation's independence from the junior generation. It echoes in the senior generation's desires to not burden their offspring, as they consider it as an important part of achieving family harmony. For instance, Ai expressed a feeling of frustration that she could do nothing for it and no one would stay around her as all the children would have their own business to mind. She said:

"If you add to their burden, they will definitely feel uncomfortable… I can't expect others to serve me and attend to my every need. We must not have such thoughts and expect to enjoy our children's blessings, as it can lead to conflicts within the family..."

Building upon the aforementioned insights, *qinlao* serves as a crucial way in which the senior generations could comprehend their hard work and contributions to the family. This practice offers them a means to collect ethical, economic, and moral benefits. By doing so, they could prevent idleness and laziness, maintain productivity, and in turn, collect economic benefits, ultimately fostering self-reliance and contributing to a more harmonious family life.

In summary, the research findings reveal the pattern of descending familism, intergenerational interdependence, individual agency, and intimate power within rural families in contemporary China. Based on these patterns, this research would argue that the senior generations tend to prioritize family interests by enabling the offspring, staying in rural areas, and working until they drop. These practices provide them with a crucial way to achieve family prosperity and harmony, which is in line with the context of neo-familism.

7 Conclusion

The aging population has been an issue worldwide (Bloom, D. E., Canning, D., & Lubet, A. ,2015, p. 80), and China is no exception. Yet, the issue in the developing world could be more concerning due to inadequate social welfare resources. In China, an aged group that should be drawn significant attention to is the left-behind rural elderly. As stated by Yao and Li (2000), a significant proportion of elderly individuals reside in rural China, where many state welfare provisions are absent. This indicates the significant importance of family support in the life of aged population in rural China. Yet, the family support patterns are also under transformation in contemporary society. The traditional patterns are underscored by the prevailing conventional filial norms, which refers to the unconditional obedience and support from the junior to the senior generations. However, under the context of rural-to-urban migration and urbanization, it is common to see that adult children migrate to urban areas for economic pursuits, leaving their aged parents, and in some cases, their young children behind in rural areas. This phenomenon contributes to complicated dynamics between the intersecting generations, which refers to grandparent-grandchild ties and interactions. Therefore, the family script has been challenged by this left-behind phenomenon, resulting in the transformation of both family discourses and practices in contemporary China. Then how is the living situation of the left-behind rural elderly in contemporary China, and how to understand and interpret their life situations and experiences remain as a huge concern to explore the welfare of this marginalized and precarious group.

In this setting, the research focuses on the life experiences of left-behind rural elderly, particularly focusing on their situations of being left behind and their experiences of grandparenting. To generate a deeper understanding, the research employs the context of the neo-family perspective, which emphasizes the tensions between individual and family interests. This perspective offers a focus on exploring the family life of left-behind rural elderly, wherein the research investigates the strategies they adopt to balance their personal interests with family interests. In addition to neo-familism, the research further adopts the notions of agency and timing, which are derived from the life course theory. They are used to explore individuals' life trajectories in relation to a broader context of socio-historical shifts, and further investigate the intersections between macro-level shifts and individual experiences and perceptions. Subsequently, to pragmatically carry out the research, as a researcher, I visited a village, which is located in the southwest region of China, and conducted semi-structured interviews and research diaries to collect the researched group's life experiences and their corresponding perceptions.

Through thematic analysis, the research indicates a transformation of filial piety in contemporary rural family life, manifested in the patterns of downward transfers, intergenerational interdependence, individual agency, and intimate turn in modern rural Chinese families. All of these notions are derived from the context of neo-familism, which is placed at the center of the theoretical framework. Specifically, downward transfers are manifested in the grandparenting strategy adopted by rural families to achieve greater family financial well-being. Intergenerational interdependence, in addition to the downward transfers aforementioned, refers to the upward mobility of the younger to older generations in terms of financial, physical, and emotional support. Although upward support is also considered as reciprocity sought by the senior generations, they also convey a strong desire not to place a burden on their offspring. Moreover, by adopting

individual agency and intimacy, the research reveals that the senior generations highly value the emotional fulfillment derived from supporting offspring and emphasize the pivotal role of family harmony. Based on these trends, the research would argue that the senior generations in rural China attempt to prioritize family interests in terms of family prosperity and harmony. Across the samples, the practices for benefiting the whole family are manifested in three decisions: enabling offspring, staying in the village, and persisting in work. Concretely, the senior generations perceive fostering their offspring's development and enhancing the family's financial welfare as life-long commitments. When facing conflicts between individual and family interests, they attempt to make self-sacrifices to achieve the latter due to the pivotal position of harmony in family life. The decision to stay in the village is closely associated with the individual identity of being an elderly, a peasant, and a caretaker. Concerning the aging issue, they perceive co-residency with the offspring could increase conflicts between generations. Moreover, the senior generations perceive being born a peasant in rural areas has hindered them from pursuing a life in urban areas. Last but not least, the senior generations assume the role of taking care of the housing, as housing preservation is a crucial part of striving for family interests. The other life decision made by senior generations in rural China refers to persisting in work. This commitment is rooted in the value of laboring diligently, which is translated from a Chinese term "*qinlao*". The virtue provides the senior generations a doorway to navigate their hard work and contributions to the family, whereby they could collect ethical, economic, and moral benefits through the excise of the virtue. The findings of the research align with the context of neo-familism, emphasizing the prioritization of family interests over individual ones, as well as individual agency's influences on the tensions between them. While neo-familism tends to give a comprehensive description and explanation of the transformation occurring in contemporary Chinese families, the research

provides substantial evidence that supports developing this perspective, with a specific focus on the senior generations in rural China.

Nevertheless, as stated above in Chapter 4, the research contains several limitations in relation to the sample size, translation considerations, ethical considerations, and bias and subjectivity. In addition to these, the limited scope of this research may hinder a comprehensive portrayal of the left-behind rural elderly's living situations. Although the perspective of the senior generations is valuable, an exclusive focus on it could introduce bias from subjects. However, this bias could be counterbalanced by incorporating the perspectives of junior generations, which are also important for illustrating intergenerational dynamics. Moreover, certain patterns that emerged from the data remain unaddressed in the research due to word constraints. For instance, across the samples, all the households investigated chose to have additional children, despite the constraints posed by the one-child policy. Furthermore, they provided consistent reasons behind this phenomenon are rooted in boy favoritism and patrilineal norms, and these patterns offer valuable directions for future studies of rural families.

8 References

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