

Civic engagement of the oldest-old in Shanghai

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ABSTRACT

Background. In China, and throughout the world, there is ever-increasing interest in civic engagement and older adults. Civic engagement can be construed as an element of the broader theoretical framework of social capital. Social capital, which has been defined as “features of social organisations such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” is also linked to health and well-being which is of great interest to ageing individuals and societies. Social capital is complex and can be understood in a broad societal context as well as in individual behaviours. This paper examines the relationship between contributory behaviours within a familiar circle and civic engagement in a group of the oldest-old Chinese in Shanghai.

Methods. A total of 349 community-dwelling Chinese, aged 80 years or older, responded to questions on health, living arrangements, social integration, contributory behaviours, and civic engagement. Civic engagement consisted of volunteering or belonging to a group or organisation, organising events and participating in a senior centre. Participants were recruited from household registrations in Shanghai and the response rate was 99.7%. The data were submitted to hierarchical regression analyses using a two-step block entry, with civic engagement as the dependent variable. Step one entered socio-demographics, health status, and living arrangements. Step two entered social contact and contributory behaviours with family, friends, or neighbours.

Results. Social contact and contributory behaviours with family, friends, or neighbours were found to be significant predictors of civic engagement.

Conclusions. In this group of the oldest-old Chinese, civic engagement was not a replacement activity for social contact or contributions to family, friends, or neighbours.

Key words: Aged, 80 and over; Chinese; Social responsibility

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the landmark MacArthur longitudinal studies of successful ageing,¹ gerontologists throughout the world have sought to identify and quantify factors that predict a good old age. Of particular interest to individuals and societies are lifestyle behaviours which associate with greater well-being. They include those which could be categorised

as productive, contributory, active, social, or, more recently under the broader theoretical framework of social capital. Social capital has been defined as “features of social organisations such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.”²

There may be no society on earth that has a greater need to mutually benefit from the social capital

inherent in an older generation than the people of China. At present, 11% of China's 1.3 billion people are aged 60 years and older, with a predicted rise to 28% by 2040.³ Among China's ageing population, those aged 80 years or older comprise a distinct group of particular interest. These 'oldest-old' are predicted to exceed 100 million by 2050.⁴ To put these demographics in context, the entire population of the United States is projected to be 420 million by 2050.⁵

Social capital, civic engagement, and well-being

There are competing and complex terms and concepts that stream into the rubric of social capital. Social capital can be a collective resource embedded in communities and societies and it can also be a resource found within individuals.^{6,7} Dimensions of social capital include productive ageing, active engagement, civic engagement, contributory behaviours, mutual aid, social integration, social support, volunteerism, memberships, trust, and participatory behaviours. All capture and quantify varying dimensions of a domain that is consistently linked to better mental and physical health and overall well-being in late-life.^{6,8-10} Studies in diverse parts of the globe such as Finland,¹¹ Columbia,¹² rural China,¹³ and French immigrants to Canada¹⁴ find a consistent and positive link between social capital and health. These studies underscore societal benefits with international implications, whereby such behaviours result in fewer dependent older adults. This was reflected in the general assembly of the United Nations Resolution 56/38, which resolved to promulgate volunteering as a means of promoting individual well-being and civic engagement.¹⁵

With the greying of the world now upon us comes the recognition that older adults are a vast and capable resource that needs to be understood and nurtured. Whatever can facilitate ageing favourably is of imminent interest. This is reflected in Bengtson's paper¹⁶ on the importance of theory building and gerontology, in which theory is presented as an initial step in the how and why process that influences what empirical research is based upon. The how and why of social capital and well-being provides the impetus for this study. In particular, it examines relationships between social contact and contributory behaviours within a close social circle and the likelihood of being

actively engaged in civic behaviours in a group of the oldest-old Chinese in Shanghai. Civic engagement has been defined as organisational involvement, volunteerism, club membership, and voting.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ The one element that seems to bind civic engagement together is that these are active and participatory behaviours that extend beyond a familiar circle of family, friends, and neighbours. The question this study seeks to answer is whether or not there is a significant relationship between behaviours within a familiar circle and a broader civic engagement.

Civic engagement and Chinese elders

Active participation and contributions to family and familiar members of the community are not unusual behaviours for an older Chinese. In the pure Chinese tradition of *xiao*, or filial piety, older adults are expected to play a meaningful role in the family and community and thus ensure harmony with nature, others, and even themselves.²⁰ In the traditional Chinese family and community, members are part of a collective exchange of instrumental, tangible, and affective support. There are longstanding roles and expectations for older members that involve contributions of instrumental and affective support to family, friends, and neighbours.²¹ Moreover, these ageing traditions ensure that older adults are socially integrated and productive.^{22,23} Although such expectations and behaviours are changing as China becomes more open to external influences, for the oldest-old Chinese these traditions are still very much a part of their daily lives.^{24,25} Much of the literature on active engagement and Chinese elders is conceptually connected to Rowe and Kahn's model of successful ageing, which proposed that there are three broad pathways to a successful old age.^{1,26} One is absence of cognitive impairment, another is absence of disease and disability, and the third is active engagement (consisting of on-going social relationships and productive activity).^{1,26} Civic engagement falls within the active engagement path.

In Kendig's²⁷ review of international literature on successful ageing, it was noted that there was a "serious shortfall of social science research in the Asia-Oceania region". There are exceptions to this shortfall and some of the relevant studies follow. In the realm of successful ageing, one study of the Hong Kong Chinese population, which included the oldest-old, determined that the dimensions of

functional status, emotional status, cognitive status, and productive involvement were minimally related.²⁸ Further, it was also noted that there is a shortage of studies of voluntary activities in Asian societies.²⁹ However, in the literature on volunteerism among the Chinese, some cohort differences have merged. One study of Hong Kong Chinese³⁰ reported the volunteering aspirations of adults aged 45 to 59 years, and found that the 38% who planned to volunteer after retirement were more likely to have had higher levels of education and higher incomes. Reasons given were psychosocial, i.e. deriving meaning and positive feelings from helping others. The authors compared this to the 3.8% of Hong Kong Chinese older adults who were currently volunteering and noted that such individuals were actually less likely to be educated or financially secure.³⁰ One other study of Hong Kong Chinese adolescents found that older adolescents were more likely to volunteer.³¹ A survey of participation in voluntary service among 1488 Chinese in Shanghai, aged 16 years and older, reported cohort differences based upon the type of activity. Beautifying the environment was highest among those in the 16-to-25-years age-group and providing technical services was highest among the 26-to-35-years age-group. Assisting the old and weak was highest among the 36-to-45-years age-group, and civic activities, such as protecting social security, was highest among those aged over 56 years.³²

Even so, there is little information on civic engagement and older Chinese, particularly in Mainland China. One focus group study of middle-aged and older Chinese in Hong Kong did identify themes of engagement with an activity or society, as factors that enable positive ageing.³³ A Shanghai study of successful ageing, which included questions on club attendance and social activities, did not have enough of the oldest-old to draw conclusions about that age-group.³⁴ Another study in Taiwan, which surveyed 584 Chinese, aged 65 years or older, asked the respondents to rate the relative importance of 23 successful ageing concepts. The highest rated concepts were health, independence, living with family, and emotional support. However, the survey did not include questions on civic engagement.³⁵ Given the fact that the oldest-old population is usually portrayed as frail and dependent, it is important to study older adults from different perspectives (e.g. civic engagement).

This study

In the gerontology wisdom there is a school of thought that, in lieu of opportunities for active engagement within work roles, family, or friends, there should be structural opportunities to be actively engaged.³⁶ Perhaps because of that widely accepted view, there has been scarce investigation into the simultaneity or complementary nature of being socially integrated and contributory within a familiar group, while also participating in civic engagement. However, the Berlin Aging Study of collective, productive, and political participation of the very old found that social participation is cumulative and participating in one type was associated with participation in the other types.³⁷ Another study of contributory behaviours and culture in the oldest-old in China and the United States found group affiliation to be a predictor of contributory behaviour in both groups.³⁸ It has also become accepted folklore of traditional Chinese culture that the family is central and the primary arena for social integration and productivity. Thus, the study reported here provides an unusual insight into the civic engagement behaviour of the oldest-old in Shanghai by examining the associations between the independent variables of social contact and contributory behaviours with family and friends and the dependent variable of civic engagement.

METHODS

Participants and sampling

The Shanghai Research Center on Ageing, a government sponsored research institute, conducted face-to-face in-home interviews with 349 community-dwelling Chinese older adults aged 80 years or above. The questionnaire had sections dealing with socio-demographics, health, living arrangements, civic engagement, and social contact and contributory behaviours with family members and friends. Participants were recruited from two neighbourhoods in each of five districts in Shanghai, namely: Xu Hui, Huang Pu, Yang Pu, Zha Bei, and Nan Shi. Random selection was made from household registration forms in each neighbourhood. Of 350 older adults contacted, 349 agreed to be interviewed. Thus, the response rate was 99.7%. Such a high response rate is not unusual in officially sponsored research in China.^{39,40}

Dependent variable

Civic engagement was measured by asking respondents if they had engaged in the following activities: volunteering for any group or organisation, belonging to any group or organisation, organising events (such as performances and holiday and birthday celebrations), and participating in a senior centre or any other group. A summative scale from 0 to 4 was created to reflect the level of civic engagement. The alpha value for this summary variable was 0.68.

Independent variables

Demographics and self-rated health

The following demographics were recorded: subjects' age (measured as actual year of age), educational level (1=illiterate to 5=college or above), marital status (1=married, 0=other), financial circumstances (1=not enough, 2=enough, 3=more than enough), and living arrangement (1=living with family, 0=other arrangement). The self-rated health (1=poor to 5=excellent) was also recorded.

Social contact

Social contact was divided into two categories, one included contact with family and the other targeted contact with friends or neighbours. Frequent contact was at least weekly face-to-face contact, telephone calls, or mail (=1), and less than weekly (=0).

Contributory behaviours

In this study, contributory behaviours included the following: giving gifts or money, providing companionship, giving comfort, visiting the sick, cooking meals, shopping, giving advice, making repairs, caring for someone who was ill, and household tasks. Respondents were asked if they had behaved in any of these contributory ways to family, friends, or neighbours in the previous month. The range of contributory behaviours was 0 to 10. The alpha value for contributory behaviour to family was 0.62 and to friends or neighbours was 0.50. The development of the contributory behaviour measure was reported in a previous study.⁴¹

Data analysis

In order to determine the separate contributions of socio-demographic characteristics, health status, living arrangements, social contacts, and contributory

behaviours, a hierarchical block design was used for regression analyses. The first step was to include the socio-demographic characteristics, health status, and living arrangements. The second step was to add social contact with family, friends or neighbours, and contributory behaviours to family, friends or neighbours. The SAS 9.1 was used to construct variables and conduct data analysis.

RESULTS

TABLE 1 provides descriptive analysis for our oldest-old sample. **TABLE 2** (with models 1 and 2) shows the results of hierarchical regression analysis with the civic engagement dependent variable. In model 1, individuals who had a higher level of education and self-rated health status, and were not currently married, were more likely to have a higher level of involvement in civic engagement. Model 1 explained 14% of the variance for the civic engagement measure. In model 2, while adding social contact and contributory behaviour measures, education, self-rated health status and marital status were still significant variables in the model. In addition, contributory behaviours (i.e. number of contributions to family and number of contributions to friends or neighbours) were significantly related to civic engagement activities. Social contact measures had a mixed impact on civic engagement. While high levels of contact with friends and neighbours were positively related to the engagement, frequent contact with family members appeared to have a negative association. However, by adding variables to model 2, the explanatory power was doubled in comparison to model 1. Model 2 in step 2 explained 28% of the variance for the civic engagement measure.

DISCUSSION

This study yields some useful findings supporting the existence of relationships between different levels of contributory and participatory behaviours. Other studies have emphasised the importance of micro- and macro-level determinants of social capital.⁴² However, this study was not designed to examine a link between levels of contributory behaviours and other outcomes in this particular group of oldest-old Chinese. The positive relationship between social contact and physical and mental health was already established in earlier studies,⁴³⁻⁴⁵ and that connection is what prompted this examination of connections

TABLE 1
Characteristics of the sample (n=349)

Characteristic	Mean (SD) or No. (%)
Civic engagement score (range, 0-4)	0.71 (0.99)
Belonged to organisation or group	102 (29%)
Volunteer	24 (7%)
Participated in senior centre or group	60 (17%)
Organised events	11 (3%)
Demographics	
Age (range, 80-90 years)	83.6 (2.3)
Female	215 (62%)
Lived with family	325 (93%)
Married	135 (39%)
Financial adequacy*	
More than enough	139 (40%)
Enough	180 (52%)
Not enough	28 (8%)
Education†	
Illiterate	101 (29%)
Primary school attended	118 (34%)
Middle school attended	92 (26%)
Some college attended	17 (5%)
College Degree or alternative qualification attained	20 (6%)
Self-rated health	
Excellent	22 (6%)
Very good	43 (12%)
Good	76 (22%)
Fair	151 (43%)
Poor	57 (16%)
Social contact	
Frequent contact with family	242 (69%)
Frequent contact with friends or neighbours	183 (52%)
Contributory behaviours	
No. of contributions to family (range, 0-8)	1.50 (1.7)
No. of contributions to friends or neighbours (range, 0-5)	0.45 (0.87)

* Data from two questionnaires were missing

† Data from one questionnaire were missing

between contributory behaviours. Our findings that education and health are positively associated with being actively engaged in the community are fairly consistent with studies of older adults in western societies, and even more so in the very-old.³⁷ The findings that age, living with others, and financial adequacy were not significant in this respect, were not consistent with western studies. The latter results could be due to lack of variation in the sample, i.e. all the subjects were aged 80 years or over, 95%

lived with their families, and over 90% reported financially adequate (enough or more than enough). The financial adequacy of this group likely reflects a unique government policy instituted in 1990, in which the Chinese government guarantees a pension programme for its oldest-old citizens living in urban areas.⁴⁶ The finding that the 61% of the participants who were not married were more likely to be engaged in the community makes intuitive sense. Not having a marital partner can create a social void. However,

TABLE 2
Hierarchical regression analyses for civic engagement (n=349)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
	b (SE)	b (SE)
Age	-0.04 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)
Female	-0.04 (0.12)	-0.17 (0.12)
Financial adequacy	0.03 (0.09)	0.05 (0.08)
Education	0.21 (0.05) [†]	0.19 (0.05) [†]
Married	-0.30 (0.12) [*]	-0.31 (0.11) [†]
Self-rated health	0.20 (0.05) [†]	0.14 (0.04) [†]
Living with family	0.28 (0.20)	0.14 (0.19)
Frequent contact with family		-0.23 (0.11) [*]
Frequent contact with friends or neighbours		0.34 (0.10) [†]
No. of contributions to family		0.10 (0.03) [†]
No. of contributions to friends or neighbours		0.31 (0.06) [‡]
R-square	0.14	0.28

* p<0.05

† p<0.01

‡ p<0.001

not being married in this group does not mean social isolation as 95% reported living with family. Each of these results gives credence to the notion that there are cultural variations in civic engagement. Learning more about civic engagement behaviours within cultures has important implications. For example, a study of social activities and cognitive function of older Chinese in Taiwan found that, even in a family-centred social structure, "participation in social activities outside the family may have a bigger impact on cognitive function than social contacts with family or non-relatives".⁴⁷

In this study, it is the associations between civic engagement, social contact, and contributory behaviours with family, friends, or neighbours that pique interest. The social contact and productive contributions reflected in their responses are very consistent with Chinese ageing traditions and it is reasonable that these oldest-old would follow a traditional path. Such interactions within a familiar circle also fit into the western concept of socially normative behaviour for older Chinese. The one exception in these findings might be the negative association between social contact with family and civic engagement. This could be due to a cohort effect in this oldest-old sample, who may still adhere to traditional expectations for Chinese women whose role and function was primarily confined to the family. In the traditional culture, to extend behaviour beyond

the family was considered inappropriate, though these traditions may well be changing.²⁵ However, the simultaneous or cumulative nature of the remaining activities raises the question: is civic engagement an unusual behaviour in East Asian cultures?⁴⁸ Civic engagement, particularly volunteerism, is considered a normative replacement activity in western cultures which has a defined transition from paid employment to retirement. In China, the concept of civic engagement and community involvement of older adults is only now becoming more familiar, and the Chinese government has established senior centres to encourage participation in activities such as dancing, Tai Chi, workshops, and birthday parties.

Even though our study was conducted in China, the results have far-reaching implications. For instance, a study of ethnic Chinese immigrants to the United States reported that those with strong ethnic identifications, who associate mainly with their own ethnic group, tend to withdraw from civic participation, or belong only to groups whose membership reflects their own ethnicity.⁴⁹ This type of social withdrawal may also have far-reaching implications for all immigrants. The World Values Survey, which included 65 societies and 75% of the world's population, found that cultural values persist despite immigration and modernisation.⁵⁰

The results reported here may raise more

questions than provide answers. In that sense, they draw attention to the very important area of civic engagement in late-life. Hopefully, this study will engender more research into civic engagement and older Chinese. A cross-national comparison of voluntary association memberships, which explored the relationship between religion and civic culture, came to a similar conclusion.⁵¹ It proposed that “a systematic comparison of the influence of traditional Asian religions, such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, to that of Christianity, would be a valuable contribution to the literature on civic engagement.”

Finally, there are many limitations in this study. They include the relatively small sample size, the limited geographic locale, and lack of objective measures. The findings reported here nevertheless provide a rich basis for further studies of the cumulative and complementary nature of socially engaged behaviours. Although this study did not specifically seek associations between participatory behaviours and greater well-being, its conclusions provide the platform for programmes and policies to encourage those who are socially engaged to become civically engaged.

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