

Elderly Care for Bereaved Parents Following the Death of an Only Child in Mainland China

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Abstract : Due to the Confucian emphasis on filial piety and an undeveloped social welfare system in mainland China, adult children are both socially and legally obliged to care for their parents, including financial assistance and physical care as well as emotional and social support. Thus a family-centred care pattern for elderly people has been firmly established in China. However, because of the nationwide 'One Child Policy', over one million parents are excluded from such care because of the death of their only child and, therefore, their primary caregiver. Without their child's support, these parents must manage the day to day challenges of growing old alone, with little support from society. By overturning established expectations of a 'good' elderly life, the loss of an only child may be accompanied by social and self-stigmatization, pushing these bereaved parents to the margin of society and threatening their economic, physical, emotional and social well-being. More importantly, since the One Child Policy was implemented from the late 1970s and early 1980s, the first generation of bereaved or 'Shidu' parents has reached an age at which those parents need elderly care. However, their predicament has been largely ignored. This paper reports on a qualitative interview study that found elderly care to be the main concern for Shidu parents' everyday life. The paper identifies and discusses the concerns these bereaved parents raised about the prospect of having nowhere to turn at a time of increased need for financial, physical, social and emotional support in old age. The paper also identifies how Shidu parents have been coming together in grief and negotiate to make their predicament known to the government and wider society and to re-define their elderly life by rebuilding a sense of 'family'.

Keywords : culture, bereavement, China, elderly care

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