# The Issue of Intergenerational Equity in the Context of Population Aging: From the Perspective of Confucian Ethics

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**Abstract:** As the aging population continues to grow in China the issue of intergenerational equity in the field of old-age security has become increasingly prominent. Through a comparative study of the liberal theory of intergenerational equity, this paper shows that at least in the contemporary social context of China, filial piety still acts as an important moral foundation and value basis for the intergenerational distribution of old-age support resources. The emphasis on an intergenerational contract based on filial piety not only presents a theoretical perspective transcending liberalism for addressing the issue of intergenerational equity in the context of contemporary China, but also provides significant and irreplaceable institutional resources. Starting from the Confucian family-centered theory of social justice and through the reconstitution of traditional ethical resources, this paper explores a family-centered, multi-level old-age security system to cope with the issue of intergenerational equity against the backdrop of population aging.

**Keywords:** old-age security system, intergenerational equity, the family, filial piety, the Confucian theory of justice

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## Population Aging and the Crisis of Intergenerational Equity

In the context of global population aging, the reform of the old-age security system has become the most highly regarded and controversial ethical-political issue worldwide. As early as the 1980s, discussions about "intergenerational equity" in the field of old-age security swept across the major developed countries in North America and Europe, and have continued to the present day, which profoundly affect the reform agendas and policy orientations of contemporary Western welfare states. Scholars have reached the consensus that the most important social and historical context for the issue of "intergenerational equity" is global population aging (Wisensale, 2003). Population aging is caused by two factors: low fertility rate and prolonged life expectancy. The direct consequence of these factors is the change in the old-age dependency ratios. One is the increasingly expanding retired population, which consumes ever increasing amounts of pension and medical care resources, and the other is the sharply reduced labor force and the corresponding decrease in funds transferrable to retired populations in the future.

This long-term trend in the demographic structure poses serious challenges to the sustainability of the funds for old-age insurance and medical insurance. What is even more challenging is that it undermines the "intergenerational contract", the moral foundation on which the old-age security system is highly dependent. The essence of the old-age security system is a political system that rationally allocates resources between the economically active members of society and those who are already inactive. Therefore, it inevitably contains an intergenerational contract as its ethical premise. The current working generation is obligated to support the retired, and in return, the current working generation is entitled to the same level of support upon retirement from the working generations in the future. However, the trend of population aging presents an unfair prospect, which possibly breaches the intergenerational contract. The current and future working generations will have to make ever increasing insurance contributions, but when they retire, the financial support received will have shrunk considerably. Some researchers refer to it as the pension entitlement crisis. It is not difficult to see that China's old-age security system is also facing the crisis of intergenerational equity caused by population aging. China is rapidly becoming an "aged society", and will eventually have to support the world's largest aging population. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, in 2000, China's population aged 65 and over accounted for 7% of its total population, meaning that China had officially become an aging society. This ratio climbed to 11.4% in 2017, coming close to the international standard of 14% that marks an aged society. At the same time China's fertility rate has remained lethargic. The recently published *Green Book of Population and Labor: Reports on China's Population and Labor (No. 19)* shows that the negative growth of China's population is already unstoppable. Under the combined effects of these factors, the issue of intergenerational equity has become an

imminent crisis for China's old-age security system. Statistics demonstrate that the support ratio of basic old-age insurance has dropped from 5:1 at the beginning of the system to 2.8:1. In 2015, old-age pension funds ran to deficits in six provinces. According to the estimates of relevant institutions, by 2022, old-age pension funds in half the provinces of China will have less revenues than expenditures, and among these pension-deficit provinces, some face the increasing risk of their accumulated balances being depleted (Wang, 2019).

In the face of the looming crisis in old-age security, attention has naturally turned to the Western developed countries that have entered the stage of an aging society and thus have gathered more experience in coping with related issues. At present, the discussions about intergenerational equity in Western developed countries have led to two competitive solutions: The first is a classical liberal one, which advocates a "privatized" old-age insurance system to minimize the part of pensions paid from public funds through the social security system. The ethical basis of this solution is that the old-age insurance system under the pressure of population aging will inevitably fall into a pension entitlement crisis as mentioned above, and this means that the intergenerational contract that requires the younger generation to support the older one has been financially broken (Hammer, Istenč, & Vargha, 2018). The second solution is based on the liberal theory of contracts, which advocates the establishment of a Rawlsian social contract between generations. Its ethical basis lies in the belief that the intergenerational contract can be transformed into prudential distributions (of scarce resources) in the different life stages of the same person.

However, when we come back to the issue of intergenerational equity in the context of China, we find that neither of these solutions will readily address the problems that China is facing. The first option is obviously not suitable for China's conditions at the current stage when its social security system is not yet well developed, and the problem of regional inequality is severe. The second option, based on the contract theory features excessive individualism, which one-sidedly restricts the solution in the national welfare system funded by the public sphere, and completely excludes the intergenerational exchange of support in the private sphere. As we will see below, this liberal mode over-reduces the content of the intergenerational contract, and therefore will fail to maintain an equilibrium of intergenerational transfers, which is rich in content and flexibility and precisely needed by an aging society full of uncertainty.

In addition, the liberal mode deviates from the moral intuition of Chinese people when it comes to a key point regarding the issue of old-age support. In the eyes of Chinese researchers, old-age support is never a simple issue of social welfare and security, and the achievement of the order of old-age support is directly linked with the survival or abolition of the ethical order. Compared with their Western counterparts, Chinese scholars appear to pay equal (if not more) attention to intergenerational equity within the family, and regard social phenomena like declining filial piety or "downward intergenerational transfers of familial resources" as dangerous signs of intergenerational equity out of balance (Che, 1990; Di & Zheng, 2016; He, 2009; Yan, 2009).

In China's cultural values, the consideration of intergenerational equity necessarily transcends the dualistic division of the private sphere and the public sphere. Discussions on the issue of "intergenerational equity" in the Western context are often focused on whether a specific age group (such as the baby boomer generation of the United States) takes an unfair share in the competition for public resources; while the focus of such discussions in the context of China is not on the aspect of intergenerational competitions, but on the risk of imbalance in intergenerational solidarity.

This difference in the perspective of values should not be viewed merely as a purely cultural preference. On the contrary, it conceals critical ethical resources for addressing the issue of intergenerational equity in the sphere of China's old-age support. This is precisely the subject that this paper attempts to explore. In fact, rather than providing a universal solution, the discussions on intergenerational equity in the West have instead led to the following understanding: Intergenerational equity is essentially an open question, and the answer depends largely on how to interpret the intergenerational contract that forms the operational foundation of the old-age security system. While the criteria of justice and fairness can only be formulated through the intergenerational contract, the different interpretations of intergenerational contract modes also constrain the means that can be used to pursue intergenerational equity, and ultimately affect the achievement of such pursuits.

Intergenerational contracts are highly culture-specific, which means that when measuring the intergenerational equity of a country's old-age security system, the influence of culture and traditional values must be fully considered. To properly cope with the crisis of intergenerational equity in the field of China's old-age security, we need to return to our own cultural roots to find ethical growth points that can integrate tradition with reality, and to develop protective barriers through appropriate institutional transformations to preserve intergenerational solidarity under the pressure of population aging. This is a historic task for China's reform of its old-age support system and a long-term and complex subject. This paper will explore a fundamental question of this subject from an ethical perspective: Is China's traditional intergenerational contract of old-age support and its interpretation of the equilibrium of intergenerational transfers still the important starting point for achieving intergenerational equity in the historical context of the current Chinese society? If it is, then what kinds of theoretical visions and institutional resources does it provide for the realization of intergenerational equity?

## The Feedback Model and Intergenerational Contract in the Context of China

As early as the 1980s, Fei Xiaotong, a famous Chinese socialist, distilled the "feedback model" as a Chinese traditional model that maintains the equilibrium of intergenerational transfers among social members. Fei (1983, p. 7) strictly distinguished his model from the "relay model" in Western society. To manifest the distinction between the two models, the

formula for the Western model is F1→F2→F3→Fn; while the formula for the Chinese model is F1←→F2←→F3←→Fn (F stands for generation, → represents upbringing, and ← indicates old-age support). The primary difference between the two models is whether the children's obligation to support their parents is recognized, and the difference at a deeper level lies in their different interpretations of the intergenerational contract. The relay mode presets a one-way, individualism-oriented contract; while the feedback model treats each subject (Fn) as an integral part of a common network of giving and feedback, and the intergenerational contract that maintains the equilibrium of intergenerational transfers can only be established on the basis of this network. This "feedback model" based on Confucian filial piety is not only the ethics practiced daily by countless Chinese families, but also a dominant perspective for Chinese scholars who study intergenerational relations and old-age support models.[①] With the changes in social cultures and family structures, more and more social studies and surveys have revealed the decline of the traditional feedback model in the field of old-age support, as well as the intergenerational inequity caused thereby. The feedback logic is replaced by the exchange logic of market-orientation and the rational economic man, or by the idea of "downward intergenerational transfers of familial resources", in which parental duty is one-sidedly emphasized. The result is that parents who have put in so much time, money and labor for their children are forced into a position that allows them to become vulnerable to exploitation. In some rural areas, the elderly are in a position of extreme vulnerability because of an imbalanced intergenerational relationship and the inability to receive sufficient support from state welfare sources due to historical and institutional factors. These conditions make their lives very difficult in their later years. The crisis of old-age support in rural areas caused by intergenerational imbalance has become a serious social and ethical issue (Chen, 2009; Guo, 2001).

Under the impact of the feedback model, the issue of intergenerational equity in the Chinese context points to a full-scale crisis consisting of two levels. On the macro level (the level of public life), intergenerational conflicts are rooted in the imbalance between the contributions made by different generations to the welfare system and the benefits they receive from it in return. The core of the crisis on the macro level is whether the state welfare system can afford to provide pensions and medical benefits for an increasingly large elderly cohort. On the micro level (the level of private life), the intergenerational crisis is caused by the imbalance of intergenerational support within the family, especially manifested as a kind of unilateral demand of the children for their parents' support, or the so-called phenomenon of "downward intergenerational transfers of

① Social survey data from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s shows that family-based old-age security is still an effective system in contemporary Chinese society, despite that this system faces various challenges, especially in rural areas. Furthermore, the Constitution of the People's Republic of China stipulates that adult children are obligated to support their older parents. Article 21 of the Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China also stipulates that adult children are under the obligation to support their older parents. When adult children fail to perform this obligation, their older parents who are impoverished or incapable of working have the right to request their children to pay alimony. Since old-age support is a comprehensive issue involving ethics, politics and social practice, it is inevitably influenced and restricted by its cultural environment. For Chinese people, the most important cultural factors are family values and filial piety.

familial resources". The core of the crisis on the micro level is whether the traditional feedback model of old age support that advocates family responsibility can work effectively in a modern society.

Compared to the Western perspective, which usually focuses only on intergenerational conflicts at the level of the welfare system (the macro level), the Chinese perspective not only adds a micro level but also causes a subtle yet profound shift in the interpretation of the nature of the intergenerational contract. We can identify this shift as a transition from the intergenerational "competition model" to the "interdependence model", both based on the experience for generations at different times. As pointed out incisively by German phenomenologist Klaus Held (2003, p. 2003), there are two kinds of experiences in a lifespan, one is the "ephemeral experience of time", and the other is the holistic "generative experience of time". The ephemeral experience of time is based on everydayness, our day-to-day calculations of time. The dominant theory of intergenerational equity in the West is based precisely on the logic of this day-to-day calculation, which interprets intergenerational conflicts as the competition for scarce resources among different generations (i.e. different age groups that have entered the state welfare system) and defines intergenerational equity as the calculation of fair shares of distribution for discrete age groups. The generative experience of time is based on the original parent-child and familial experience, and through the parent-child experience, "it transcends the calculation of individual days, overlooks life as a whole, and places one's life cycle from birth to death (including the process of growing and aging between birth and death) in the sequence of generations" (Held, 2003, p. 254). The generative experience of time originates from the finiteness of human existence as well as the interdependence and interconnections at the core of life. The traditional feedback model of old-age support resonates precisely with this in-depth experience of time, which implies an intergenerational contract based on a family-centered model of interdependence between generations. Unlike the Western model, which only focuses on the linear relationship between generations in the welfare system, the intergenerational contract of the feedback model looks at the entire life cycle when measuring the intergenerational "give-and-take" relationship between generations, and tends to transcend the rigid division between the public and private spheres. The distinction between the two models has political, social and ethical implications that are profound and complex. This paper will explore, from the ethical perspective, how the generative experience of time leads us to go beyond the Western liberal model towards the idea of intergenerational equity that embodies the principle of the Confucian theory of justice.

## Family and Filial Piety as the Basic Context for Interpreting Intergenerational Equity

Through the comparative study of the model based on the liberal theory of contract, I will articulate the critical importance of the intergenerational contract based on the generative

experience of time to address the issue of intergenerational equity. The "Prudential Lifespan Account" devised by American bioethicist Norman Daniels has been selected as the representative of the model based on the liberal theory of contract in this paper for two reasons. First, Norman Daniels is the pioneer in applying Rawls's theory of justice in the field of old-age security systems, and it can be said that his position represents the dominant model adopted by the Western liberal democratic societies to deal with the crisis of intergenerational equity. Second, Norman Daniels explicitly denied filial piety as the value basis for the allocation of resources for old-age support, and filial piety is precisely the ethical and cultural foundation of the Chinese traditional feedback model of old-age support.

From the perspectives of real life and ethical argumentation, Norman Daniels gave his reasons for excluding the principle of filial piety. First, with the changes of living conditions and production patterns of society, state welfare systems have replaced the family as the primary provider of old-age support. Thus, returning to the family-based model is nothing but going against the tide of history. Second, the children's filial obligation to their parents cannot be reasonably deduced simply from the fact that their parents have brought them up, or at least, this cannot indisputably determine the contents of the children's filial obligation to their parents. Here, Daniels' argument can be considered a replica of Kant's classic argument. The core of Daniels' arguments is that the parent-child relationship can never achieve equality. The parents' obligation to their children is imposed by their choice to become parents, but their children have no reciprocal functions (i.e. the children do not have the freedom to choose to be children), so the children do not owe anything to their parents (Daniels, 1988, p. 29). After ruling out family and filial piety as options, Daniels deployed the "thick veil of ignorance" devised by Rawls to determine a fair distribution ratio between generations through a purely public approach. He advocated that from the life cycle, the transfers of wealth between different age groups should be interpreted as the transfers among different stages of one's life. The distribution ratio thus established is completely individual-oriented, although it takes the form of intergenerational transfers on the surface.

From the Confucian perspective, the theoretical framework of Norman Daniels' theory of contract will encounter serious challenges in at least three aspects. First, filial obligation cannot be restored to an ethical relationship based on equivalence. In the eyes of Confucianists, the family relationship is primarily a type of "one-body" relationship: "The relationship between parents and children is just like the relationship between herbs and their flowers or seeds, or the relationship between trees and their roots. They are the two aspects of one body. The vitality (*qi*) in them is the same, even though they have separate lives. Therefore, parents and their children are closely connected with each other even though they might be physically apart. They have the same concerns, worry about each other's problems, and can also sense each other's sadness. They will care for each other in case of sickness, rejoice with each other in situations of happiness, and if any of them dies, the rest will mourn the dead together. This is what is referred to as a bond of flesh

and blood." (*Chapter of Jing Tong*, *Lüshi Chunqiu*, also known in English as *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals*) The metaphor of "one body" not only means that family members belong to a community, but also highlights the moral obligation of mutual care and support between family members. This moral obligation is characterized by its unconditionality. For example, my mother had a serious illness, and I had to take care of her. Although this is an unfortunate incident, it is not unfair to me in any sense, because this is precisely the requirement that is inherent to the nature of family relationships. In other words, being a member of the family means being accepted into a network of giving and receiving, in which my most pressing needs will always be answered. Given the vulnerability and finite limits of human existence (that is, everyone is subject to early childhood, sickness, injury, physical impairment, and old age), this network of giving and receiving, with the family being its typical example, constitutes the basic goodness of human life, as well as a fundamental condition for the prosperity of mankind. More importantly, the roles of a giver and recipient in this network are interchangeable. What puts us in the role of a giver is the care we received when we were in the role of a recipient. When the liberal mode conceives the parent-child relationship as one between equal atomic individuals, it really denies the fact that the lives of parents and children are deeply connected through intergenerational succession, and therefore denies the generative experience of time. Instead, the Confucian interpretation of the parent-child relationship presets a community of giving and receiving. The moral obligation between parents and children is based on the interchangeability of the role of caregiver in this community of care, rather than the equivalence between parents and children. Confucius once made a famous comment.

> It is only three years after his birth that a child is able to leave the arms of his parents. Now a period of three years' mourning for a parents' death is universally observed throughout the Empire. As to that man, I wonder if he was one who did not enjoy the affection of his parents when he was a child! (*The Analects of Confucius – Yang Huo*)

This comment can be viewed as intuitive evidence of the logic of the Confucian interpretation of the parent-child relationship. The Chinese traditional feedback model of "F1←→F2←→F3" can be regarded as the institutionalization of this logic. Each "Fn" is a subject of liability, and the intergenerational dependence and solidarity are realized through the interchange of duties. In general, Confucianists believe that in order to correctly understand the ethical contract and the order of old-age support between generations, it is necessary to start from the family and the recognition of the interdependence between generations. Whether the original ethical position of the family should be recognized is the first key point of dispute between Confucianists and liberalists over the issue of old-age support.

The second serious challenge that the model devised by Norman Daniels will encounter is the identity problem of the subject who makes the choice. The Norman Daniels's model supposes that the individual behind the thick veil of ignorance (in the original position where they know nothing of themselves, not even their own age) will inevitably choose the most equitable way to distribute

the basic goodness of society rationally throughout their lifespans. However, would such a solitary and abstract individual truly be able to realistically imagine his/her aged life and predict the values he might be holding in the old-age stage of their lives? If this question cannot be answered with certainty, then the Norman Daniels's model will face the "problem of non-identity", thus jeopardizing his core claim that the interpretation of lifespan should be able to treat every stage of life impartially (Waymack, 1991).[①] In order to integrate the various stages of life, what we need is not only "imagination", but more importantly, a common language and practice to grasp the overall meaning of the life course. For the latter, it is obvious that family plays an indispensable role and provides an important context. It is only in this context that the individual life course will be endowed with its full significance and be understandable to the public.

A theoretical advantage of the Confucian feedback model is that it links the changes of the subject's age to that of their ethical position in the community of giving and receiving, thus forming a coherent narrative. It is no coincidence that people's intergenerational position in the family largely matches their intergenerational position in the welfare system. By translating the issue of intergenerational justice into the issue of distribution for the individual at different stages of life, Norman Daniels essentially severs the intergenerational connections and blocks the interactions between the welfare system and other social mechanisms, reducing his idealized intergenerational distribution ratio to a castle in the air.

The third challenge can be considered the logical extension of the first. The liberal theory of social contract is based on the strict distinction between the private and the public spheres, and its main context for interpreting justice is the relationships between adult citizens who can fully cooperate in the public sphere. This explains a basic premise of the Norman Daniels's model, that is, intergenerational equity can only be addressed within the general framework of the theory of social justice, and filial piety in the sphere of private life shall not be the basis of public policy. However, if the argument mentioned regarding "the first challenge" is established, that is, the moral obligation of old-age support is first based on the recognition of intergenerational dependence and the recognition of the family as the basis for the network of giving and receiving, then Rawlsian theory of social justice is insufficient to cope with all the reasonable and fair requirements of old-age support. As pointed out by the acclaimed American Communitarian ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre, when the Rawlsian theory of social justice is based on an abstract society rather than families or schools, it ignores two important factors, namely, the needs of family members as well as the contribution each member makes to the common cause of the family and the benefits that they are entitled to therefrom. Both factors provide the basis for the distribution of benefits (Voorhoeve, 2015, p. 117).

Moreover, the standard of justice required to maintain a network of giving and receiving is completely different from the standard of Rawlsian justice. It is assumed in the latter that people's

① The criticism of "non-identity" of the "the prudential lifespan account" is largely an extension of Waymack's research.

basic needs are stable and homogeneous, and we can rationally calculate the optimal way of allocating resources to achieve a state of Pareto Optimality. However, in a network of giving and receiving, what is defined as "justice" giving is not what one has ever received, nor even what s/he can reasonably expect to receive, but exactly what is needed by those in need. Simply put, what one owes to his/her parents is what they really need, and no budget or rational optimization can be preset for this kind of obligation, and the same is true for what the parents owe to their children. This also explains why we will never be able to identify the state of Pareto Optimality in the familial context. On the contrary, family members often accept relatively small or short-term disadvantages in order to improve the life of a family member (sometimes simply to satisfy their wishes), including sacrificing their own interests for the overall benefit of the family (Noddings, 2006, p. 58).

The justice of family life is often manifested in achieving overall fairness for the whole network over time through this partial "unfairness". Similarly, Confucianists would find it is misleading for the Norman Daniels's model to confine intergenerational equity in the theoretical framework of social justice. If the discussion on intergenerational fairness starts only with a mature and rational man, then this discussion has from the outset neglected the true basis of the human condition represented by the issue of old-age support, namely vulnerability and dependence. The essentials of life are inseparable from the state of dependence at both ends of the lifespan: early childhood that completely depends on parental care, and debility in old age. The whole life course is wrapped in the network of reciprocal care, and the change of ages will also be manifested necessarily as the change of roles from a care giver to a care recipient. So long as human existence is potentially subject to vulnerability and dependence, this network of mutual care and support is an indispensable starting point for dealing with intergenerational relations and equity. Therefore, in the Confucian view, the Rawlsian theory of social justice is not well-justified because the starting point of its exploration skips the fundamentally interdependent relationships between generations.

Now let us get down to the most basic question in the discussion about intergenerational equity, Is there a contract between generations to maintain the intergenerational transfer of resources? If there is a contract, what is it based on? The biggest difference between the Confucian answer and the liberal answer is that the former insists that the family is an indispensable context for answering this question. The intergenerational contract is rooted in the original model of family relations based on interdependence and solidarity, and the answers to questions about intergenerational equity must "start from the family". Correspondingly, the best context for defining "intergenerational equity" is not the individual itself, but some shared expectations and obligations of the individuals during their aging process and generational succession. These shared expectations and obligations are rooted in the intergenerational dependence and solidarity practiced every day and are presented differently in accordance with various social cultures and ethical situations. As the family is the primary ethical context in which intergenerational

dependence and solidarity are practiced, it will inevitably play a key role in the theory of intergenerational equity. The appeal of Confucianism in this regard largely and precisely comes from its deep insights into the nature and function of the family.

## Intergenerational Equity in the Perspective of the Confucian Theory of Justice

Regarding the nature of Confucianism, views of the current academic circles vary. The three most common and popular labels are "Heart-minded Confucianism", "Political Confucianism" and "Religious Confucianism" (Zhao, 2015). This paper adopts a broader definition, which interprets Confucianism as a life system that comprehensively sets the order of human society, and uses this system as the foundation for reconstructing the Confucian theory of distributive and social justice to cope with the challenges of the modern lifestyle (Chen, 2008). Although the issue of intergenerational equity in the field of old-age support is largely a "new" problem in the context of modern socio-economic structures, especially against the backdrop of population aging, it does not mean traditional ethical resources represented by Confucianism are no longer applicable. Although China needs to absorb many Western elements to complete its modernization, in the sphere of daily life the "Confucian order of justice" still has a desirable appeal and to a large extent helps to maintain the smooth operation of social and ethical relations. Just as this paper attempts to demonstrate, the feedback model of old-age support not only presents a theoretical perspective that transcends liberalism, but also provides critical and irreplaceable institutional resources for addressing the issue of intergenerational equity in the field of old-age support in the context of China. The question is how the Confucian theory of justice should be reconstructed to match its basic qualities and critical commitments to the needs and conditions of society to help meet the real-life challenges of our contemporary world.

Specifically, I believe that a Confucian theory of justice can at least lead us to the following three important revelations.

First, the Confucian ideal of a just society is based on the family and clan. As stated in *Mencius – Li Lou, Part One*, "The root of the empire is in the state. The root of the state is in the family." The family is viewed as the foundation and center of a society of justice. From the perspective of distributive justice, although the family is not included in the social sphere, it is still considered the foundation of the entire society, and it sets the boundary at the first level of the social sphere. Therefore, the principle of family-centered priority in social distribution must be established first. Even though modernization has detached the family from some of the functions that it used to undertake (such as production), this does not change the fact that the family is always an important sphere of distribution in social life. Kinship and emotional ties have not made the family a domain beyond the reach of distributive justice, as some scholars believe. On the contrary, the family domain has its own principle of justice and is closely related to other domains in social life because of its extended influence (Walzer, 2002, p. 301). When it comes to the order

of old-age support, Confucianists believe that the participants in the intergenerational contract are not discrete groups of different ages, nor simply isolated individuals (who respectively belong to different generations), but different generations that engage as a whole in the intergenerational give-and-take relationship through the family. In terms of maintaining intergenerational equity in the field of old-age support, the family is not an irrelevant factor as the liberalists believe. Instead, it is a key actor and an indispensable mediator that balances the give-and-take relationship between generations. Different from the Rawlsian intergenerational contract, which only aims to achieve fair distribution across different generations through one-way, successive state pension insurance systems, the Confucian intergenerational contract focuses on the mutual support that is readily and constantly occurring across generations. Since the parents keep transferring resources to the children through public and private channels until they start to work and support themselves; the working children are naturally obligated to feedback and support the parents. This kind of support includes both the old-age support within the family and the income transfers to the parents through the old-age welfare system. The key to maintaining and improving intergenerational equity lies in sustaining and strengthening the bond of intergenerational solidarity. When it comes to public policies, the Confucian idea of intergenerational equity emphasizes balancing old-age welfare and child welfare and tends to leave more room for family autonomy.

Accordingly, the principle of fair distribution between generations should not be based solely on the rights and economic conditions of deserving individuals. The most important factors are not individual rights or what people might deserve but the intertwined lives and obligations of different generations. As pointed out by Fan Ruiping, the classic Confucian theory of social justice is primarily concerned with how to promote and enhance the realization of the inner goodness of ethics like benevolence and righteousness (*ren yi*); and the Confucian view of justice calls for the perfection of one's moral nature in relation to others (*ren*, or benevolence, is a typical example), instead of focusing solely on one's own rights or needs (Murphy & Weber, 2006, p. 111).

Rooted in the virtues of filial piety, the Confucian feedback model in fact supports the two-way transfer of services and resources within the family. Not only do adult children support their older parents, older parents also continuously help their adult children, including giving them financial aid. This traditional intergenerational relationship has spawned a mechanism that can be called "the ethics of responsibility" (Yang & He, 2004). Out of their own sense of responsibility and love for their offspring, the elderly will also try to ease the burden on their adult children's family by looking after the grandchildren, cutting back on their (the elderly's) own needs, sharing household duties, providing direct financial aid, etc. It is misleading to simply consider the elderly as a burden on society. On the contrary, the two-way support transfers are dominant in the relationship between older parents and their adult children most of the time.

These two-way exchanges help to alleviate the pressure of intergenerational inequality within the state welfare system. The reverse transfer of resources from older parents to their adult children

can effectively reduce the pressure of pension contribution on the younger generations while the reverse support from older parents to their adult children is also an important supplement to the state welfare system, as parental support and assistance to the children is often more suited to their needs and ensures a more efficient allocation of resources. Relevant sociological and political studies have shown that the existence of mutual support between generations in the family makes it possible to mediate and reconcile the intergenerational conflicts of interest at the micro level, that is, old-age support within the family can provide a buffer space for the pension reforms of welfare states. If the old-age support within the family declines, the whole old-age security system will have to depend heavily on social insurance alone, and this approach of "walking on one leg" will entail huge systematic and institutional risks (Liu, 2008, pp. 59-66). Therefore, whether from a macro or micro perspective, intergenerational equity needs to be regulated and maintained at a deep level through families as the basic units of society. Although the phenomenon "downward intergenerational transfers of familial resources" does exist in Chinese society, it does not mean that old-age support within the family has failed in modern China, but only means that filial piety needs to be re-interpreted in the new context. Some scholars point out that Chinese families are going through a reconstitution characterized by "descending familism", which focuses on "the functional benefits of intergenerational solidarity, the redefinition of filial piety as well as related behavioral changes, and jointly fostered intergenerational solidarity and unity" (Yan, 2017, p. 9).

Although Confucianism believes that supporting the elderly is the primary obligation of the family, there is no "crowding-out-effect" of the government's responsibility. Instead, whether the family is competent in fulfilling this responsibility is also an important indicator for measuring whether a society is fair and just. The Confucian idea of benevolent governance requires the government to help families fulfill their responsibilities of caring for the elderly. It includes helping families to accumulate appropriate materials, human and social resources, as well as providing direct old age support and services for old-age care. Mencius said,

*Mencius*

> Therefore, an intelligent ruler will regulate the livelihood of the people, to make sure that, for those above them, they shall have sufficient means to serve their parents, and, for those below them, sufficient means to support their wives and children; that in good years they shall always be abundantly satisfied, and that in bad years they shall escape the danger of perishing (*Mencius – Liang Hui Wang* Ⅰ).

Mencius even put forward the specific criteria for families with abundant resources and considered such criteria as the foundation of benevolent governance.

> If your Majesty wishes to require this regulation regarding the livelihood of the people, why not turn to that which is its essential step? Let mulberry-trees be planted about the homesteads with their five *mu*, and persons of fifty years may be clothed with silk. In keeping fowls, pigs, dogs, and swine, let not their times of breeding be neglected, and persons of seventy years may eat flesh. Let there not be taken away the time that is proper for the cultivation of the farm with its hundred *mu*, and the family of eight mouths that is supported by it shall not suffer from hunger (*Mencius – Liang Hui Wang* Ⅰ).

If the affluence of all members of the family is the goal of distribution for the society and government, it is only natural that those who are not protected by the family network of giving and receiving should be given priority in receiving appropriate government support. The Confucian theory of social justice advocates that the government should give priority to four types of people when distributing its resources.

> There were the old and wifeless, or widowers; the old and husbandless, or widows; the old and childless, or solitaries; the young and fatherless, or orphans—these four classes are the most destitute of the people, and have none to whom they can tell their wants, and King Wen, in the institution of his government with its benevolent action, made them the first objects of his regard (*Mencius – Liang Hui Wang* Ⅱ).

In terms of old-age support, this means that government has the responsibility to play an alternative role in case of family function failure. It's worth mentioning that the approach of the government and family "sharing the responsibility" as advocated by Confucianism is fundamentally different from the "defeminized and government-centered" model prevailing in the construction of welfare systems in Western countries. The latter attempts to replace family responsibility with government responsibility and even to crowd out the family. As pointed out by the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama, if the state has simply taken over the role of the father, the welfare state does not eliminate the social cost of a family breakdown, but rather shifts it from the absent father to taxpayers. And this even creates perverse incentives for "defamilization" and further undermines social capital (Fukuyama, 2015, p. 71; Yi, 2018). In the same way, the one-sided emphasis on social pension systems will detach people from "the intimate relationship with their parents" and keep them from "taking care of their own elderly parents and extending the same care to the elderly in general", thus eventually undermining social solidarity. The provision of resources that overly rely on "public children" is not only inefficient in

distribution, but also prone to the risk of intergenerational conflicts. Since the family is the source and transmission medium of intergenerational solidarity, the need to protect the family roots requires a sustainable and fair old-age security system in the context of an aging era.

The Confucian theory of justice advocates a concept of intergenerational equity that transcends the dualistic division between private and public life. Intergenerational equity cannot be abstracted into certain distribution ratios. Instead, it must be realized in a family-centered network of care and support that is rooted in interdependence and the generative experience of time. In this network, individual, family and state responsibilities complement each other. Starting from the concept of intergenerational equity, the Confucian theory of justice supports, at the institutional level, the construction of a multi-dimensional old-age security system with the family at its core, a state welfare system as its main framework, and community service as its basic infrastructure. This rationally built model of old-age security will not only continue the Chinese cultural and ethical traditions, but also effectively integrate the macro and micro levels of the old-age support system and reconcile the conflicts of interest between generations. However, it needs to be clarified that the design logic of the family-centered old-age support system should not be misinterpreted as exempting the state from its responsibility for old-age security but letting the family bear the brunt of supporting the elderly alone. On the contrary, in the Confucian vision of society, the family is the buffer zone between the individual and the state. Correspondingly, the perspective of the Confucian theory of justice always focuses on how to leave sufficient space for family autonomy and functionality in the close interaction between family and state responsibility. This kind of vision in fact puts forward higher, not lower, requirements for state responsibility. It requires the state to not only take due responsibility for old-age security, but also establish a social policy system that safeguards family values and embeds the issue of allocating old-age resources into a network of interdependence among the members of society at a deeper level to promote intergenerational harmony and reduce the risk of intergenerational conflicts in the field of old-age security.

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