



## In Asia, aging parents get more help from daughters than sons

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Parents in developing Asia tend to spend more on sons but receive higher returns from daughters, turning on its head an age-old belief that sons—not daughters—take care of their aging parents.

This is true in the People's Republic of China, where children are expected to help their parents based on Confucian philosophy, which values filial piety and altruism.

Data show that investments in daughters paid off better than money spent on sons. Daughters gave back to their aging parents financial support, and helped with tasks like shopping, housekeeping, accounting, food preparation, telephone calls, and transportation.

This behavior among parents and their children is seen in both rural and urban areas, although rural families tend to rely more on children because they have less access to pensions. Rural communities had more latitude under the largely urban one-child policy. Under this policy, extra children were not eligible for generous government subsidies for health, childcare, and education. The data suggests parents should consider spending more on their daughters as they can be a viable source of support in their old age. Authorities should also push for policies that will encourage parents to do so, by giving education subsidies to females or financial incentives to parents having baby girls.

Many societies prefer to invest in sons, particularly in patriarchal Asia, where the eldest son inherits the bulk of the family wealth, carries on the family name, and is expected to care for his parents in old age.

Daughters leave the family on marriage, and their responsibilities transfer to the family of her husband.

In 2013, the PRC introduced a law requiring children to take care of their parents or face fines and possibly jail time. In cities across China, newspapers headlined elderly parents

being dumped by the roadside because the family no longer wanted to support them after they got too old to work around the home.

The PRC's urban one-child policy, aimed at containing its burgeoning population, caused a demographic shift—with some 55 million more men than women, which will soon create major social problems—as families tried to have sons rather than daughters. The shift of population to urban centers challenged the traditional concept of the extended family and encouraged the nuclear family.

The China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study, a nationally representative data set of Chinese residents aged 45 and above, shows that parents invested nearly twice more in college education and marriage gifts for sons than for daughters.

Parents spent 3,319 yuan—about \$500—more on sons than daughters for their college education in households with either just a daughter or son, and 1,397 yuan (about \$212) more on sons in households with both sons and daughters.

Using data from the 2013 China retirement study, which generated a nationally representative data set of Chinese residents aged 45 and above, parents invested nearly twice as much in sons than daughters in terms of education and marriage gifts. Although sons are expected to support their parents, the elderly were more likely to receive monetary and other support from daughters.

Parental investment can be measured in the amount spent on upbringing, education, and a child's wedding. Sons often receive expensive family heirlooms of jade and gold, as well as gifts of cash, valuables, a house, and help in raising children.

Sons are still viewed as an important source of support in the PRC, and parents who have at least one son were less likely to enroll in a pension program, and parents who expect old-age support from sons were more likely to match-make their sons with daughters-in-laws who would be more suited to household production.

Given that parents have traditionally relied on their children for old-age support in developing countries, there needs to be a change in thinking, by both governments and society. Recognizing that daughters can be more valuable than a son to a parent in old age

would go a long way to redressing gender imbalance in developing countries, and creating a more equal and more productive society.

This episode is based on research done for ADBI by Christine Ho of the School of Economics, Singapore Management University.

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