**Low-cost leisure and the hysteresis of habitus: An inquiry into elderly leisure in China**

**Introduction**

Post-reform China faces the *de facto* impossibility of the society breaking away from the structural outcomes of past times, a major one being reversing the demographic structure (Kim and Lee 2007)(Riley 2017). Largely due to the one-child-policy began in the 1980s, China is seeing an unprecedented aging population, that is growing even faster than Japan and Western European nations (Chen and Powell 2012)(England 2005). A recent official report warned of an annual growth in the elderly population of 7.46 million up to 2040 (Zhang 2018).

The rise of the elderly population raise many question about how to ensure the wellbeing of such a population. Chinese gerontologists have extensively documented the well-being conditions of elderly Chinese, demonstrating the importance of social activities and leisure for subjective well-being (Su *et al.* 2006; Zhang and Zhang 2015). However, as Zhang & Zhang notice in their own study, the analysis of the relations between social activities for the elderly and well-being has mostly been investigated through a macrocospic perspective, which poorly shows how leisure cause satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Besides, Chinese elderly leisure activities are also a concern for economists since a great deal of research has reported the absence of elderly population in consumption culture (Miles 2007). While the central government is making am attempt to “activate people’s consumption potential” (PRC State Council 2018), and optimists start to envision the future promotion of “full prosperity” (*quanmian xiaokang*) through cultural consumption as a pillar of the economy (Wang *et al.* 2017), elderly low spending on leisure has become both a puzzling and challenging phenomenon (Wang *et al.* 2017).

To further understand Chinese elderly leisure activity, this article emphasizes the historical and social factors that interfere with these consumption practices. It aims to demonstrate that the elderly in China are less eager to spend money on their leisure and travel activities, not only due to their present status but also a *hysteresis* of their *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984). Through the concept of *hysteresis* of habitus[[1]](#footnote-1), we shed light on the fact that elders’ schemes of perception, action, and feelings are deeply rooted in the collectivist morals of the Maoist period and the Confucian ethics of devotion to family members (Madsen 1984; Yan 2003). We show that the older generation’s *habitus* has dissuaded them from embracing the new hedonist and individualist culture because for them, past cultural factors and economic scarcity have shaped and supported their parsimonious use of resources to the point where they tend to feel guilty about spending on their leisure and travel activities.

The specific influence of habitus hysteresis on elder’s travel and leisure consumption will be excavated from an analysis of the China Family Panel Survey Data 2014. Applying Mannheim’s theory of generations (Mannheim 1972), we will try to model how household consumption for leisure and travel are bonded to a cohort commonality. While previous studies already demonstrated the influence of residential status, cultural and economic on household expenditure and lifestyle, we will measure the influence of generational habitus, net of those factors.

In the first part of our result section, two binary logistic regression models underline that elders born before the reform and opening up, and the elders who experience the Great famine, are more likely to have no expenditure on travel and leisure compare with individuals belonging to younger generations.

Following the same logic, the second section proposes a robust linear logistic regression showing how generational location, influence the travel and leisure expenditure. Due to the skewness of travel and leisure expenditure, our two models dependent variable will be the logarithm of leisure and travel and leisure expenditure, while the independent variable are generally the same as for the binary logistic models.

By addressing this elders travel and leisure expenditure, the article challenges the oversimplified justification for a “grey market” (Gunter 1998) of high potential in China. More importantly, it contributes to the existing literature on ageing by showing how the specific socio-historical circumstances constitute crucial background factors shaping elderly leisure enjoyement.

**Litterature review**

Elderly Chinese travel, leisure and consumption is a recent and critical concern for both economists and gerontologists.

For economists, the growing importance of the elderly population supposes the development of specific care markets, products, and public policies in order to match the specific demands of the elderly. If the primary concern of economists is still the health care and psychological demands of the elderly, some of them have investigated how Chinese elderly spend their time and their money when retirement comes. According to authors like Li et al., elderly Chinese consumption patterns after retirement are puzzling. Li et al. observed that retired people reduce “work-related expenditures and expenditures on food consumed, but it does not have a significant effect on the expenditures on entertainement” (Li *et al.* 2015: 440).

This research suggesting that elderly Chinese are using their time to focus on cost-efficient activities or low cost activites, rather than spending on leisure has been regularly confirmed by later investigation. In a paper comparing the life after retirement of urban and rural dwellers in China, Su et al. noticed that 72.9% of the rural elderly did not travel in the year preceeding their survey. For the elderly urban dwellers, 19.2% of them never travelled, whereas 56.1% of them have travelled once (Su *et al.* 2006: 392). Those reccurent observations have invited researchers to present the senior market in China as one that is not yet mature (Chen and Powell 2012) or is a real marketing challenge (Croll 2006). Many still imagine the possibility of freeing the elderly population from saving and familial investment, and releasing their consumption potential (Bin and Rui 2006; Croll 2006; Ma and Zhang 2011). Such belief could be as deceptively simple as the Western idea of “the third age” (Laslett 1987), presuming that a new and fresh stage of life can be accepted by older consumers in China with little difficulty.

Unlike their parallel generations in Western societies, such as baby boomers in the U.S. who have experienced the development of mass consumption society (Gilleard and Higgs 2009), the present elderly population in China have lived most of their life under a society dominated by collectivist ideology and material scarcity. In analyzing their consumption, as an undervalued alternative to the framework of lifestyle and individual choice, this article will underline the common social processes generating observable patterns of consumption (Warde 2005; Warde 2014). More specifically, we will argue that the past experiences and ethics of the life under communism are still encouraging elderly Chinese to perceive self enjoyement and spending for leisure as a guilty pleasure. By underlining this phenomenon we fill a gap in the existing literature, which until now, mainly explains the low consumption pattern of elderly Chinese as a result of the necessity to save for medical care and old age dependency (Kim and Lee 2007)(Curtis *et al.* 2015).

Simultaneously, this article deepens the understanding of well-being in later life, which has been explored for decades by gerontologists (Adams 2004; Hilleras *et al.* 2001). In China, as in many other countries, researchers have verified the “activity theory of ageing” (Li *et al.* 2006). As Adams et al. explained, this theory underlines the fact that “social and leisure participation enhance well-being”(Adams *et al.* 2011: 685). By showing the uncomfortable emotions procured by spending for self-enjoyement, and the proudness that Chinese elders have while sacrificing for their offspring, we are refining the “activity theory of aging”. More precisely, we draw attention to the fact that the conditions making leisure participation pleasurable are highly related to past and present socio-historical context and ethics.

This finding was made possible by a theoretical break redefining “elderly” through Karl Mannheim’s concept of generation. Previous work, such as that of Suzman and colleagues (Suzman *et al.* 1995) and Le (Le 2015) characterized age as a life-cycle factor and emphasized biological features of particular periods that affect consumption, especially healthcare. These works understand age as an indicator of the biological cycle of human reproduction, a turning point to enter later life such as being “over 65 years old”, as suggested by the United Nations[[2]](#footnote-2), and “over 60 years old” as in Chinese law[[3]](#footnote-3), or any other positivist breakpoints. In contrast to these purely objective and mechanical criteria, this article understands age and the elderly as Karl Mannheim framed them, that is, through the radical social changes that define them as a “community of location” (*Lagerung*). Although many scholars who have written on the issue of generations in China, referring to Mannheim’s work, paid only lip service (Bonnin 2013), the elderly population in China indeed fits into its theoretical presumptions. The elderly population in China underwent a series of nationwide disruptions including war, revolution, and famine. Practically, these shared experiences constitute their “participation in the common destiny of the historical and social unit” (Mannheim 1972: 291). Moreover, within this common participation, a social bond would define the actuality of the generation, which is created by their exposure to their social location (Mannheim 1972: 288) (*Lagerung*) in China’s transitional times.

Appendix:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Dependent variable (travel + leisure expenditure: Yes/No) | Model1 | | Model2 | |
| Born after the Reform and opening up [omitted]) |  | |  | |
| Born Before the Reform and opening up | -0.79 \*\*\* | |  | |
|  | (0.09) | |  | |
| Age (non-elder born after 1962, experienced no famine/revolution [omitted]) |  | |  | |
| 53-65: Born under communist regime, the cultural revolution generation (1949-1961) |  | | -0.42 \*\*\* | |
|  |  | | (0.08) | |
| above 65: Experienced with wars (before 1949) |  | | -0.34 \*\*\* | |
|  |  | | (0.10) | |
| Household income group ( First quartile omitted) |  | |  | |
| Household income group / Second quartile | 0.31 \*\* | | 0.31 \*\* | |
|  | (0.10) | | (0.10) | |
| Household income group / Third quartile | 0.76 \*\*\* | | 0.78 \*\*\* | |
|  | (0.10) | | (0.10) | |
| Household income group / Fourth quartile | 1.23 \*\*\* | | 1.24 \*\*\* | |
|  | (0.10) | | (0.10) | |
| Household income group / Fifth quartile | 1.83 \*\*\* | | 1.83 \*\*\* | |
|  | (0.11) | | (0.11) | |
| Highest diploma (Middle school or below [omitted]) |  | |  | |
| Highest diploma (High School) | 0.68 \*\*\* | | 0.71 \*\*\* | |
|  | (0.08) | | (0.08) | |
| Highest diploma (Vocational college) | 1.26 \*\*\* | | 1.34 \*\*\* | |
|  | (0.14) | | (0.14) | |
| Highest diploma (Bachelor and ab.) | 1.56 \*\*\* | | 1.68 \*\*\* | |
|  | (0.20) | | (0.20) | |
| Hukou (rural [omitted]) |  | |  | |
| Hukou urban | 0.73 \*\*\* | | 0.68 \*\*\* | |
|  | (0.07) | | (0.07) | |
| medical expenditure (in RMB) | 0.00 | | 0.00 | |
|  | (0.00) | | (0.00) | |
| Communist party (no [omitted]) |  | |  | |
| Communist party (Yes) | 0.31 \*\* | | 0.31 \*\* | |
|  | (0.10) | | (0.10) | |
| N | 5361 | | 5361 | |
| AIC | 6049 | | 6101.08 | |
| BIC | 6128.64 | | 6186.71 | |
| Mac Fadden | 0.188 | | 0.181 | |
| Adj. Mac Fadden | 0.184 | | 0.177 | |
| Dependent variable (log of travel + leisure expenditure :) | Model1 | Model2 | |
| Born after the Reform and opening up [omitted]) |  |  | |
| Born Before the Reform and opening up | -0.102 |  | |
|  | (0.080) |  | |
| Age (non-elder born after 1962, experienced no famine/revolution [omitted]) |  |  | |
| 53-65: Born under communist regime, the cultural revolution generation (1949-1961) |  | -0.122 | |
|  |  | (0.085) | |
| above 65: Experienced with wars (before 1949) |  | -0.526\*\*\* | |
|  |  | (0.104) | |
| Household income group ( First quartile omitted) |  |  | |
| Household income group / Second quartile | 0.106 | 0.107 | |
|  | (0.134) | (0.133) | |
| Household income group / Third quartile | 0.282\*\* | 0.293\*\* | |
|  | (0.126) | (0.125) | |
| Household income group / Fourth quartile | 0.630\*\*\* | 0.646\*\*\* | |
|  | (0.123) | (0.122) | |
| Household income group / Fifth quartile | 1.231\*\*\* | 0.266\*\*\* | |
|  | (0.123) | (0.081) | |
| Highest diploma (Middle school or below [omitted]) |  |  | |
| Highest diploma (High School) | 0.321\*\*\* | 0.266\*\*\* | |
|  | (0.080) | (0.081) | |
| Highest diploma (Vocational college) | 0.773\*\*\* | 0.677\*\*\* | |
|  | (0.106) | (0.107) | |
| Highest diploma (Bachelor and ab.) | 0.953\*\*\* | 0.869\*\*\* | |
|  | (0.123) | (0.122) | |
| Hukou (rural [omitted]) |  |  | |
| Hukou urban | 0.137\* | 0.187\*\* | |
|  | (0.079) | (0.078) | |
| medical expenditure (in RMB) | -0.000 | -0.000 | |
|  | (0.000) | (0.000) | |
| Communist party (no [ommitted]) |  |  | |
| Communist party (Yes) | 0.032 | 0.099 | |
|  | (0.090) | (0.091) | |
| Household size | -0.048\*\* | -0.064\*\*\* | |
|  | (0.022) | (0.022) | |
| Intercept | 6.092\*\*\* | 6.092\*\*\* | |
| N | 2558 | 2558 | |
| Residual Std.Error | 1.679 | 1672 | |
| Df | 2545 | 2544 | |
| \*\*\* p < 0.001; \*\* p < 0.01; \* p < 0.05. |  |  | |

1. See Chapter on hysteresis, pp.131-151 in (Grenfell 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. "WHO | Definition of an older or elderly person". Who.int. Retrieved 2016-04-04. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)