

# The Formation of Social Networks of the Passive Older Migrants in Shenzhen, China

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## ABSTRACT

Passive older migrants, as one kind of group among the diverse elderly migrants through the process of mobility, is underexplored. The formation of their social network can promote their integration in the place of inflow. Based on interviews and observations, this study concludes as: the internal social network of older migrants in Shenzhen is centered on the dependent family intergenerational relationship. It shows the feature of similarity aggregation through the process of constructing external relationships, which are temporary and unstable. Geographical, occupation and hobby similarity contributed the formation of external relationships.

**Keywords:** social network, older migrants, dependent family intergenerational relationship, similarity.

## INTRODUCTION

Industrialization and globalization are rapidly changing the pattern of population distribution, and 'mobility' has become an inevitable phenomenon of the world with much research attention (Wu & Wen, 2016). Due to the process of mobility produces new social relationships and cultural meanings, and has an effect on place networks and spatial production, it is necessary to analyze the impact of mobility on the life practices of different groups (Sun, Zhou, Wang, Zhu, 2016; Lewicka, 2011).

As one of the mobility groups, elderly migrants have drawn much attention in ageing and sociological studies (Torres & Glicksman, 2019; Sandra, & Serrat, 2019). However, scholars illustrate that diversity among the group of older migrants cannot be ignored (Palladino, 2019). For example, social and economic status, transnational lifestyle, the reason for migrating are all factors that may affect the diversity (Torres, 2013; Ciobanu, 2019). In China, large-scale family migration is emerging and gradually replacing the original pattern characterized by individual mobility (Gaubatz, & Lin, 2017). More and more elderly people migrate from one place to another with their children. Unlike other types of elderly immigrants adopting a transnational lifestyle or returning to their country of origin following retirement (Palladino, 2019), or for the purpose of family reunification abroad (Caidi, Du, Li, Shen & Sun, 2020), most of those older migrants come to the city passively due to the need of their children for caring the grandchildren. Their behaviors are most for release the burden of their sons or daughters. This phenomenon is very specific in large cities with high living pace of life like Shenzhen, because young people are under huge pressure to live. However, such special and increasingly common group has been underexplored (Jiao, Yin, Shen, & Huang, 2020).

Palladino (2019) pointed that one of the topics requires specific research attention is the relationship that older migrants establish with the places they inhabit. Undoubtedly, the establishment of social network is one of the ways that older migrants connect with places. The connections between people and groups can be treated as social networks. The network can be seen as all direct or indirect connections between individuals or groups, including groups of friends, and even further away, friends of friends (Group of "Introduction to Sociology", 2011). Scholars have highlighted the importance of a network of supportive relationships, acting as a practical resource in later life (Palmberger, 2017; Walsh, O'Shea, Scharf, Murray, 2012). The interpersonal communication, social network and lifestyle of the elderly will change significantly due to the flow of children, and the impact of various changes will eventually settle on the subjective feelings and mental health of the elderly (Tang & Zhang, 2020). The establishment of new social network relationships plays an important role in reducing social isolation and enhancing social integration. There is a need to explore more microscopically how the social network relationships of the elderly who migrate in different places are expanded (Yang, 2018).

The behavior of passive older migrants will be impacted by the Chinese culture and context. For example, Chinese philosophical traditions, combined with eastern collectivist values can affect old people's experiences of involvement in

tourism volunteering(Dashper, Li, He, Zhang, Lyu,2021). This study aims to solve the following problems:1) How does the establishment of social relations among the passive older migrants in Shenzhen under the shape of Chinese culture? 2) What characteristics appeared in this process? The current research aims to focus on a special older migrants group and explain the behavior of the group.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Retired immigrants are usually applied to descriptive the mobility group of the older migrants. In terms of research content, existing research mostly focuses on their motivation, behavior and experience, impact on the destination, spatial distribution, and attitudes of both the host and the guest towards the destination development (Hall,2014). Some scholars have found that the vast majority of the interviewees said they gathered with relatives and friends and invited them to their second home. Another 45% of the interviewees said they interacted with people who are familiar with their primary residence and have a second home here. These results show the extension of social networks across space, and it also explains how retired immigrants integrate their familiarity with their lives and personal relationships in their primary residence into their second-home lifestyle(Keemun, Musa,2013). For this kind of older migrants, they have strong autonomy and selectivity, including the choice of inflow place, lifestyle, etc, while the passive older migrants belong to the family mobility and dependent mobility.

In China, although the research on the passive older migrants have gradually increased, the research has not yet formed a system with descriptive research dominated. In the Chinese literature, this group has a special name called 'Lao piao zu', which means the drifted old people. Current research mainly involving the formation mechanism, integration problems, difficulties encountered and solutions.

Xu &Hua(2018)pointed out that the formation of the 'old migrants' is influenced by the interaction of a variety of structural forces, mainly including the impact of market economy, social security, the push and pull of traditional culture and the regulation of national system. Yang & Qian(2018) identified that the social integration problem of older migrants is relatively serious, the social and psychological integration is not optimistic, and community participation, interpersonal communication and belonging sense are the lowest. The factors influencing the social integration of old migrants are mainly reflected in community support, the subjective initiative of themselves and family atmosphere. It is found that the happiness and emotional experience of the elderly after coming to Beijing will affect their physical and mental health and their willingness to settle. Among them, the lives of the rural elderly are more affected and the difficulties of social integration are more obvious(Zheng,2020). Jiao et al(2020) explores the relationships among the perceived social support, mental resilience, cognitive function and loneliness of the migrating elderly. Chen&Yang(2018) pointed out that the changes in the living environment of the old migrants force them to make changes in their concepts and behaviors, which leads to the problem of urban integration.

Scholars are also interested with the problems faced by the older migrants. Su(2019) pointed out that the old migrants are facing the embarrassing problem of making a living under the dual background of leaving their hometown and social exclusion in the place where they move in, and with the increase of the number of old drifters, they are becoming more and more serious. Zhao&Yu(2018) found that there is a dilemma of medical insurance in other places for the cross provincial older migrants. Cheng(2018) concluded that current situation of urban adaptation of the older migrants can be divided into four aspects: economy, cultural life, psychological adaptation and external support.

From the above, we can find that the social network construction of the older migrants needs to be explored. For the reason that Grandchild care is related to larger social networks and the association between grandchild care and depressive symptoms is fully mediated by social networks( Tang,Sun,Xu,2020). And social networks is always linked with mental health (Singh, Singh, Arokiasamy, 2016).

## **METHOD**

This study selects Shenzhen as a case, mainly based on the following considerations: 1) Shenzhen is the forefront of China's reform and opening up city. People constantly move in because of its great job opportunities, among which young people who move out of their "root" place, cannot solve the problem of taking care of their children, contributing to the formation of the older migrants. This is representative of urban development in China. 2) Shenzhen is a city of immigrants. Under the slogan of 'You can be a Shenzhen citizen as long as you come', the exclusion sense of migrant population has been weakened.

This study draws on semi-structured interviews and extensive participant observation. Thirty-one older migrants in Shenzhen were interviewed about their daily behaviors with the people around from June to December, 2019. Community parks, mainly Wankecheng community, Lianhua Mountain Park and Eco Plaza in Overseas Chinese Town were chosen, as these are places where older migrants gather. Both male and female participants were engaged in this study, with a higher prevalence of females. Participants' age ranged from close to 60 and beyond 70 years old, with a prevalence of people aged in their 60s. Face-to-face interviews has been conducted with the older migrants. Who they connect in Shenzhen and How they build the network around have been asked. Each interview lasted between 20 and 90 min. The transcripts have been applied into the research with the format of No.- Gender.

Together with the interviews, observation was conducted as well. The community of Wankecheng became the setting of my participant observation, which I lived for 7 years and gradually built trust with participants. The community is next to a big telecommunications company, which recruits many young people. Thus, there is a boom of passive older migrants for baby-caring.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Dependent Family Intergenerational Relationship**

The dependent family intergenerational relationship is the core of the social network among older migrants in Shenzhen, which is also the foundation of structuring other social networks. In Shenzhen, the spatial relationship of older migrants is centered on their relatives, closely related to the migration due to family factors. "Giving-type" is their main feature, and meeting the family needs becomes their primary task.

"In my hometown, my friend circle is very good. There are mahjong players, singers, dancers, and all kinds of activities I can take part in. However, I don't have any own time here, which is all spent to my family. For example, they like my braised pork, braised pork feet and steamed pork with flour. They always expect me to do it, by the way I can hold it. I don't have leisure activities in Shenzhen, I just look after my kids (01-female)."

"Mainly staying with relatives, because I have few acquaintances and friends in Shenzhen besides my children. At present, I haven't participated in any social activities, and most of my time is spent on taking care of kids (04-female)."

"I don't have friends here. My neighbors and I are just nodding friends. My usual contact is mainly with relatives (09-male)."

Taking care of grandchildren is an important form of social participation for the elderly, which is of practical significance to close family relations, enhance the network of friends, and promote active aging (Wu Haixia, 2019). Therefore, based on family intergenerational relationship, the network of older migrants in Shenzhen is relatively stable. For example, some interviewees pointed out, "I may not willing to stay in Shenzhen very much, but if my children need me, I will stay in Shenzhen as long as they need (06-female)." There will be some psychological loneliness, but also understandable. "I don't think I'm very satisfied with my life right now. It's just that I feel lonely and unfit. I feel empty in my heart. But as for happiness, it's certainly very happy to be with my children and grandchildren (06-female)."

### **Similarity aggregation characteristics of external relationships**

In addition to the family intergenerational relationship, the social network of older migrants in Shenzhen presents the similarity aggregation characteristic centered on the residence. In other places, their children's living space is the first space that the elderly contacts with, and their scope of activities is also expanded accordingly. In this space, they will form the following relationships due to various similar characteristics.

First, Forming around grandchildren of the same age. The main reason for the elderly coming Shenzhen is to help their children overcome the problems of their children's growth. Therefore, the most easily formed relationship is the interactive circle of children at the same age with living space and reading space as the core. "I am familiar with those who are about the same age as my grandson and can play together. We push the baby carriage around together at first. Gradually we get familiar and I also talk about my previous work and some family stuff (08-female)." This kind of relationship can be formed not only with the elderly group, but also with other age groups. "I often get news from other mothers about going to school and going to tutoring classes, and then tell my son together with my daughter-in-law. I know those mothers in the community, and I go to chat as well (20-female)."

Second, expanded because of the similarity among fellow townspeople or colleagues. Due to the characteristics of al-

lopatry, the social communication of the elderly will basically inquire about each other's hometown. It is easier for the older migrants in the same province to form a new relationship. For one thing, due to the unique feelings of fellow townspeople in the Chinese context, individuals in Chinese society naturally live in a network that they can't choose. People who stick to local life attach themselves to their families, relatives and fellow townspeople (Zhai Xuewei, 2011,86). For another, it is easier for fellow-locals to overcome the language barrier. Although we all strive to integrate into mandarin, there are still some communication barriers caused by the educational background of the previous generation. Therefore, on the basis of children's familiarity, due to the existence of the relationship between the villagers, and under the influence of the similarity of language and living habits (such as shopping) in the same region, people from similar regions are more likely to form relatively close spatial relationships. For example, an interviewee (20-female) mentioned that "those grandmothers are from Hubei, sometimes I can't hear them clearly." The interviewee (03-male), who is from Northeast China, also mentioned that "we often go to the dumpling restaurant opened by northeast villagers together." At the same time, it is easier for people with similar occupations to talk about topics that can be exchanged in depth. For example, respondents (20-female) and (11-female) who are both teachers can talk about retirement wages between the two places.

Third, formed by participating in social organizations. Older migrants in Shenzhen like to participate in leisure activities, such as dancing, Tai Chi and other groups nearby if time permits. The public space, like park and other free space of the community have become important places for the elderly to participate in activities. "After joining this group, I go to sing and do exercises in the daytime, and I practice in the evening when I am free. We have a wechat group, and we have some activities to go out which are announced online."

There are also some of them who join the volunteer group. "(I usually contact with, added by author) the volunteers in our group, as well as senior university students, I still have many friends(01 – female)".

The expansion of social network relationship is conducive to the expansion of the elderly activity space. Under the lead of some opinion leaders, there are some followers. "Our teacher usually gives us some health lectures and sends us a hospital brochure. This teacher has a lecture training class. Many of the elderly who have attended discuss whether to take the children to have a look after coming back (08-female)." In addition, the activity space for the elderly also extends outside the residential area, and the space scope for shopping and traveling together is also expanding. "Last time I went far to buy vegetables with others taking a few bus stops. They said it was cheap there, but I was too tired to go (08- female)." "we just went to Lianhua Mountain to take photos some time ago, where was holding a beautiful flower show. Recently, we went to Gankeng town. I followed those grannies, and if I were alone, I would not go. We also went to Nanyou to buy clothes, and the grannies shopped for a really long time (17-female)."

Under the influence of social networks, the elderly also gradually accept new social ways, such as joining wechat group, sharing various activities in the group, arranging trips, and sharing travel photos. It can be said that the development of technology provides convenience for the construction and expansion of the relationship between the older migrants in Shenzhen. "We have a wechat group. There are many people in the group. For example, we did not notice in the group when we went shopping in Laojie. We were afraid of too many people, but still about 10 people had come (08-female)", "the videos and photos we take will be shared in the group, and I will keep browsing (17-female) when I am bored at home later."

No matter in which way the relationship network is formed, older migrants in Shenzhen will form a unique information dissemination network, which is sensitive to events in Shenzhen, especially for promotion, price reduction and other information. For example, during the Double Ninth Festival in 2019, Shenzhen Happy Valley conducted a free visit to the park for the elderly over 60 years old. The elderly spontaneously organized groups in the same area to visit the park through public praise. For another instance, the policy of free public transport and subway for the elderly over 60 years old in Shenzhen in 2019 has effectively improved the activity space of the elderly group, more elderly people go out together, and even expanded the space scope of buying daily vegetables, choosing places that are far away but relatively cheap.

### **Instability of external relationships**

Compared with the interpersonal relationships in their hometown, the social network formed in Shenzhen is unstable and mobile. The main reasons are as follows: 1) Shenzhen is a city with great liquidity, not only in the external liquidity, but also in the internal liquidity. The older migrants' living space changes with their children's living space, while the

younger's living space is affected by their children's education and work changes. Therefore, the social network formed by older migrants based on the living space is unstable and temporary. Once the space moves, the network will be interrupted or weakened. "Our kid XX (child's name) is going to primary school after kindergarten. His parents rent a house in Futian (21-female)", "my son is going to work in Dongguan, so we are going with him (22-female)" "HB's (child's name) father applied to work overseas, his mother is going to take Hb with him, and his grandmother went home, so we haven't been in touch for a few years(08-female)."

This instability is also reflected on the randomness of the elderly's leaving, which is mostly affected by family factors. For example, "SW's (child's name) grandfather came a few days and left. I said that I couldn't bring two grandchildren here alone and needed him to be here. He didn't listen to me, and his daughter-in-law couldn't persuade him. We can't help (23-female)", "XB's father stays at home all day without work, and her grandmother went back. Not long.(17-female)" "there is an elder to take care of in my family, I have to go back every other time(15-female)."

### **Influencing factors of social network construction**

The behavior of older migrants in Shenzhen is constrained by relevant conditions. The main premise is to have their own time, and the elderly group whose grandchildren has already gone to school has more own time. Different kinds of relaxing ways are formed based on this. First, self-relaxation, which means staying at home for sports or entertainment by oneself. "I haven't been used to life here entirely though I have been here for two years, because I usually work in my hometown, and here I suddenly get off, and I feel a little bit of loss. Usually, my leisure activities may be watching TV at home, at most go to the park. Sometimes I like to go shopping, but other things I would not." Secondly, moderate type. They communicate with people outside, and participate in recreational activities in the community or adjacent areas, such as square dance and playing cards. Third, the deep participation type. They join different organizations, such as senior university and Shenzhen volunteer, and their lives are relatively varied. "In addition to voluntary work, I study in the University for the elderly. The University for the elderly here is divided into streets. Every street has a university for the elderly (01 - female)."

Besides, whether they have retirement wage also has a greater impact on their activities. Older migrants with retirement wage are more likely to enjoy life, while those without retirement wage have to take part-time jobs to make a living. For example, some old people will collect the cartons of the community, join the cleaning team of the community, or go out to do some manual work by themselves.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The increase of regional mobility of the elderly population is not only an inevitable result of economic development, but also a reflection of traditional Chinese intergenerational support (Yang, 2018). Older migrants in Shenzhen are passive in the choice of destination and dependent on their children's choice of living space, which is different from the seasonal migrants in the study. However, current researches have not paid enough attention to this group. Based on the in-depth observation and interviews of the older migrants in Shenzhen, this study analyzes their social network construction when they live in Shenzhen, and complements theoretical research on the relationship construction between the elderly mobile group and the local community. The conclusions of current study are as follows.

- 1) The social network of older migrants in Shenzhen is centered on the dependent family intergenerational relationship, and all starts from the connection with their children and grandchildren.
- 2) The social network shows the feature of similarity aggregation through the process of constructing external relationships. On the one hand it is formed because of the geographical characteristics. The geographical group is based on the special or geographical connection among members, including neighbors, fellow-townsmen and other specific forms. On the other hand, it is a result of interest. The interest group is based on members of the same or similar interests, hobbies, aspirations, including what is commonly known as a variety of amateur groups. Older migrants in Shenzhen will take their residence as the core and form a circle around their same-age grandchild. This circle is not limited to the elderly, but will spread to the neighborhood and other age groups. In addition, due to the similarity of hometown and occupation, more frequent social network will be formed. Finally, following their interests, there will be some fixed leisure groups appear. Joining leisure groups will expand the activity space of old migrants in Shenzhen, through like leaving the common familiar living space, to a more distant space for entertainment, leisure activities under the leadership of opinion leaders. This result echoes the finding of Ji&Fan (2019), which believe that sports can play an important role in solving the problem of social integration of 'older migrants', and its mechanism is to stimulate the subjective initiative

of integration, promote equal interaction, emotional connection, self-empowerment and network construction. Zhao & Lin(2020) also identified leisure involvement had an impact on the social integration of migrants.

3) The external relationships formed by old migrants in Shenzhen are temporary and unstable. As mentioned above, the residence of the elderly changes with the mobility of their children. Whether it is the change of the living space of the children due to their school or work problems, or the change of the living space of the elderly due to their own departure from Shenzhen, all of which will lead to the interruption or weakening of the new social network formed by the elderly.

4) Time is an important limiting factor for the elderly to participate in leisure or other interesting group activities, and the elderly's own economic situation, such as whether there is a retirement wage, will also affect their social network construction. The development of social media is conducive to the establishment of new social network relationships among old migrants in Shenzhen.

5) The elderly generally think that their social network formed in Shenzhen is weaker than it is in the hometown. Many say they are only nodding acquaintances here, but relationships in the hometown usually form at the basis of long-term relatives and work relationships. At the same time, the social network in Shenzhen does not involve the function of social resources, organization and management, but only the daily life contact.

Many researches have pointed out that the development of social network plays an important role in the social integration of the elderly. Building new relationships is a way to reduce loneliness. When old people leave home, the dimension of life should not be confined to the intergenerational relationship of family. For example, Wang Huang, Li, Pan & Yang(2020) pointed out that support from friend circle has a positive impact on the exercise participation of the elderly, and the more support, the more likely the elderly are to participate in physical exercise. Social network expansion also plays an important role in the health of the elderly left their hometown.

At the same time, this study also has some limitations. First, the diversity of the older migrants in Shenzhen is not fully considered, such as the length of residence, the life cycle (the age of grandchildren), and the availability of surrounding leisure space. Second, we can further study the relationship between the establishment of social network and their psychological changes.

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