

Intergenerational Emotional Interaction in Aging Society: Changes and Reflections under Social Pressure

Hou Wenyan*

School of Political Science and Law, University of Jinan, Jinan, China

**Corresponding Author*

Abstract: With the acceleration of population aging, intergenerational emotional interaction has become a critical dimension of family relations and social integration. Understanding its transformation under contemporary social conditions is essential for both theoretical development and policy design in aging societies. Drawing on a qualitative research design, this study utilizes in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 42 participants from younger and older generations to examine how modern social pressures reshape intergenerational emotional interaction. Focusing on the frequency, modes, and emotional content of interaction, the study analyzes the combined effects of work and economic pressure, urbanization-induced spatial separation, and the digital divide. The findings reveal a structural tension conceptualized as "stable emotional identification but imbalanced interaction." While emotional attachment and normative commitment between generations remain relatively stable, everyday interaction has become less frequent, more fragmented, and increasingly instrumental. This imbalance reflects the constraints imposed by broader socio-structural conditions on the enactment of emotional ties. Furthermore, traditional cultural values, particularly filial piety, continue to function as a moderating mechanism that sustains emotional identification despite reduced interaction. However, existing institutional arrangements remain insufficient in supporting sustained and meaningful intergenerational emotional exchange. The study contributes to the literature by integrating multiple structural pressures into a unified analytical framework and by highlighting the shift from function-based dependence to emotion-based connection in intergenerational relations. It also underscores the need for coordinated

interventions, including family-supportive labor policies, community-based interaction platforms, and digital inclusion initiatives, to strengthen intergenerational emotional bonds in aging societies.

Keywords: Population Aging; Intergenerational Emotional Interaction; Social Pressure; Structural Constraints; Family Cohesion

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Population aging now exerts a strong influence on family organization and intergenerational relations. In China, this process has developed in parallel with rapid social change, so its effects on family life are especially visible. Urbanization and migration have weakened the stability of traditional co-residential arrangements. Families separated by geography have therefore become increasingly common (Liang, 2021; Li, 2026).

The spatial and social reorganization of family life has reduced routine contact across generations. Emotional ties are less often sustained through everyday shared practices, although their significance has not declined. Previous studies show that intergenerational emotional support is associated with greater life satisfaction and lower loneliness among older adults. Emotional connection thus remains closely tied to family cohesion and later-life well-being (Hu, 2016; Song et al., 2019).

Recent research also notes a widening gap between what family members expect emotionally and how often they actually interact (Du, 2024; Li, 2026). Closeness may still be valued, but everyday conditions leave fewer opportunities to express it. This gap points to a broader change in family relations: functional dependence has become less dominant, while emotional connection has taken on greater

importance.

In this context, the present study examines how modern social pressures reshape intergenerational emotional interaction. Addressing this issue can clarify ongoing changes in family relations and inform social governance in an aging society.

1.2 Research Questions

Under social transformation, intergenerational emotional interaction is influenced by forces outside the household. Migration associated with urbanization, heavier workloads, and generational differences in communication habits and technological adaptation have changed how emotional connection is maintained (Li, 2026; Liang, 2021).

Many younger adults have limited time and emotional energy because of long working hours and financial pressure (Han, 2022). Older adults may experience shrinking social networks and greater physical distance from adult children. These conditions make their emotional needs more difficult to satisfy.

Traditional forms of intergenerational contact therefore fit less easily with contemporary family life. Emotional connections between generations are not static; they are continually adjusted through everyday negotiation.

This study focuses on two main questions:

First, how have the frequency, modes, and content of intergenerational emotional interaction changed under modern social pressure?

Second, how do these changes influence family cohesion and intergenerational integration, and which strategies could help sustain emotional connection?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Aging Societies and the Transformation of Family Structures

Population aging is more than a demographic shift. It also reshapes family organization, intergenerational relations, social resource allocation, and the distribution of support responsibilities. Studies of aging show that demographic transition often occurs together with changes in caregiving arrangements, household composition, and intergenerational support.

In China, urbanization, declining fertility, and large-scale internal migration have given this

transformation a specific form. Traditional family structures have been reorganized. Intergenerational co-residence has declined, and geographical separation within families has become more common (Liang, 2021; Li, 2026). As a result, interaction is no longer grounded mainly in daily proximity. It is increasingly maintained across distance. Spatial separation reduces routine communication, alters emotional and caregiving support, limits face-to-face contact, and increases reliance on indirect communication.

Family support is no longer organized only around functional dependence. Material assistance now exists alongside emotional exchange and symbolic interaction. In some cases, emotional support partly takes the place of direct functional support. Emotional interaction can therefore be treated as an independent and important dimension of intergenerational relations (Li, 2026). Through affective ties, families may continue to preserve cohesion, support older adults' psychological well-being, and maintain intergenerational solidarity under changing social conditions.

2.2 Intergenerational Emotional Bonds: Theoretical Perspectives

Intergenerational emotional bonds sustain both family cohesion and individual well-being. Earlier studies have associated emotional support with lower loneliness and higher life satisfaction among older adults (Hu, 2016; Song et al., 2019).

From a theoretical perspective, intergenerational relationships include emotional, functional, and normative dimensions. Within this multidimensional structure, emotional interaction has become an increasingly important means through which families maintain cohesion. Material support and emotional communication do not necessarily shift in parallel. Filial piety and related family norms still shape expectations about responsibility. Yet contemporary social conditions place clearer limits on actual emotional exchange between generations (Du, 2024; Li, 2026).

Social transformation has also increased generational differences in values, communication practices, and expectations for family relationships (Ji, 2025). These differences affect emotional interaction and, in fast-changing settings, can lead to misunderstanding or tension between younger and older family

members.

2.3 Transformation of Intergenerational Emotional Interaction

Recent studies indicate a noticeable change in intergenerational emotional interaction. In many families, the frequent contact associated with co-residence has been replaced by more irregular communication across greater distance (Li, 2026).

Digital media and online tools give family members new ways to stay in touch. Still, mediated communication often conveys less emotional depth than face-to-face contact and cannot fully substitute for direct emotional exchange (Wang, 2025).

These conditions create tension within intergenerational relations. Family members may continue to feel attached to one another, but their interaction can become less frequent and less meaningful. The tension reflects a structural gap between emotional expectations in the family and the forms of contact allowed by everyday life.

Reduced interaction may also influence older adults' well-being. This issue matters because emotional support is closely related to psychological health and social integration (Hu, 2016; Song et al., 2019).

2.4 Modern Social Pressure and Intergenerational Relationships

Modern social pressures have altered the conditions under which generations communicate emotionally. Their influence does not arise from a single source but appears through several connected dimensions.

Work and economic demands first reduce younger adults' capacity to engage with family members. Long working hours, financial responsibilities, and career competition leave less time for contact. They also consume the emotional energy needed for sustained communication with older relatives (Han, 2022; Xue, 2025).

Urbanization adds another constraint by placing family members farther apart. Migration has dispersed many families across different locations. The pattern is particularly clear in rural areas, where older adults often remain in their home communities while younger generations leave for work (Liang, 2021). As distance grows, interaction tends to become less frequent and emotional connection may weaken.

Digital inequality further affects intergenerational communication. Digital technologies increase possible channels of contact, but many older adults struggle to use them comfortably. This difficulty limits their participation in online interaction (Wang, 2025). These pressures often overlap in daily family life. Work constraints reduce available time, spatial separation makes mediated contact more necessary, and the digital divide weakens the quality of that contact. Together, these conditions can increase emotional distance between generations.

2.5 Cultural and Institutional Contexts

Traditional cultural values continue to shape intergenerational relationships despite these pressures. In China, filial piety and family-oriented norms still provide a basis for emotional identification between generations (Du, 2025; Li, 2026). These norms may help preserve attachment when direct contact becomes less frequent.

Institutional support has developed more slowly. Current policies focus mainly on material security, such as pensions and healthcare, while emotional well-being and intergenerational interaction receive less attention. Community services also often lack stable mechanisms for organizing continuous and meaningful engagement between generations (Shang & Wang, 2025; Zhang, 2025).

This mismatch between persistent cultural expectations and limited institutional provision points to the need for more comprehensive policy responses.

2.6 Research Gap

Although previous research has deepened understanding of intergenerational relations, several issues still need closer examination.

First, many studies discuss structural conditions and individual outcomes as separate issues, so the links between social pressure and emotional mechanisms remain insufficiently examined. Second, the dominance of quantitative research leaves limited space for participants' subjective experiences and for the emotional meanings embedded in intergenerational interaction (He, 2023; Ma, 2014). Third, economic pressure, spatial separation, and technological inequality are seldom examined together within one framework.

This study responds to these gaps through a

qualitative analysis of how modern social pressure shapes intergenerational emotional interaction and family cohesion. It makes three contributions. First, it places work and economic pressure, urbanization-related spatial separation, and the digital divide within one analytical framework. Second, it uses in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to examine how younger and older generations understand their emotional relationships. Third, it develops the framework of "stable emotional identification but imbalanced interaction," which explains how emotional bonds may remain strong at the level of identification while daily interaction becomes less frequent and less emotionally substantive.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative design to examine how intergenerational emotional interaction changes under modern social pressure. Emotional bonds between generations emerge from subjective experience, social context, and everyday family practices. Standardized quantitative indicators alone cannot capture these processes fully. A qualitative approach is therefore suitable because it allows the analysis to attend closely to participants' lived experiences, emotional perceptions, and understandings of intergenerational relationships (He, 2023; Ma, 2014).

Quantitative methods can measure variables and identify broad patterns, but they are less suited to explaining how emotional interaction changes within specific social and cultural contexts. Qualitative inquiry allows these processes to be traced in greater detail. It can also uncover emotional dynamics, implicit expectations, and underlying tensions that structured surveys may miss.

The study combines in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The interviews gathered personal narratives and individual interpretations of intergenerational relations. The focus groups examined shared understandings, collective norms, and generational differences. Using both methods broadened the empirical material and made it possible to compare individual accounts with group-level perspectives. This design supports a contextualized analysis of intergenerational emotional interaction across different social settings.

3.2 Participant Selection

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling because they had direct experience of intergenerational emotional interaction. The sampling strategy emphasized depth and diversity rather than statistical representativeness. It therefore incorporated perspectives from different social contexts.

The final sample included 42 participants, with 21 younger adults and 21 older adults. Younger participants were aged 18-35 and were selected only when they maintained regular contact with older family members, including parents or grandparents. This criterion ensured that their accounts came from ongoing intergenerational relationships. Older participants were aged 60 or above and were selected for communicative ability and direct experience of interaction with younger generations.

Participants were drawn from both urban and rural areas and differed in education and occupational background. Urban participants accounted for 59.5% of the sample, and rural participants accounted for 40.5%. This distribution reflected differences in socio-economic environment and family structure. The relatively balanced educational composition also increased sample heterogeneity.

The sampling strategy included several family contexts, such as urban nuclear families, rural left-behind elderly households, and families separated by migration and employment. These cases represent different forms of intergenerational emotional interaction and place the analysis within the complexity of contemporary family life (Liang, 2021; Li, 2026).

3.3 Data Collection

The data came from semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. These methods are appropriate for studying emotional interaction and subjective experience (He, 2023). The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to address the same core topics with all participants while leaving room for personal elaboration.

The interview guide focused on four areas: interaction frequency, forms of emotional expression, the influence of social pressure, and expectations for ideal emotional relationships. These topics gave structure to the interviews without limiting participants' narratives. Each interview lasted about 45-60 minutes. After

informed consent was obtained, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and completeness. In total, 21 interview transcripts formed a major part of the empirical material.

Four focus group discussions were organized to collect collective perspectives and observe how participants responded to one another. Younger and older participants were assigned to separate groups. This arrangement encouraged open expression and reduced possible intergenerational power effects. Each group included five to six participants, which allowed varied views while keeping the discussion manageable.

The focus groups discussed difficulties in intergenerational communication, the role of digital technology in maintaining relationships, and expectations for community and policy support. Each discussion lasted about 90 minutes and produced qualitative material through participant interaction.

After the interview and focus group materials were combined, the dataset contained about 85,000 Chinese characters. This material provided the empirical basis for identifying patterns, developing themes, and interpreting the complexity of intergenerational emotional interaction.

Before participation, all respondents were informed of the study purpose and procedures, and informed consent was obtained. Participation was voluntary. Respondents were told that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Personal identifiers were removed during transcription, and pseudonyms were used when reporting the findings. With participants' permission, all interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded. The data were stored securely and used only for academic research.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. This method helped the researcher identify recurring patterns in the interview and focus group materials and interpret their meanings in a systematic way. The analysis moved through an iterative process. First, the interview and focus group transcripts were read line by line. Analytically relevant statements were identified and assigned initial codes that summarized their main meanings. Through open coding, the analysis remained

grounded in the original materials while allowing repeated ideas, expressions, and experiences to emerge from the data.

Second, codes with similar meanings were compared and grouped into broader categories. At this stage, relationships among codes were examined and organized into coherent clusters. Four main themes were developed: the current state of emotional interaction, the influence of social pressure, cultural moderation mechanisms, and the need for policy support. These themes captured the main dimensions of intergenerational emotional interaction in participants' accounts.

Finally, the main themes were refined and divided into 12 sub-themes to capture more specific variations within each category. The researcher returned repeatedly to the original transcripts to assess whether the themes represented participants' experiences and whether relevant perspectives had been missed. This iterative comparison strengthened the interpretation and helped maintain consistency between the empirical evidence and the analytical claims.

3.5 Research Rigor

Several procedures were used to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. Data triangulation was achieved through the combined use of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. This approach allowed patterns to be compared across sources and reduced reliance on a single method.

The coding process also involved repeated comparison with the original transcripts. Codes and themes were revised when necessary to keep the analysis consistent with participants' accounts and to reduce the risk of overinterpretation. This procedure preserved a clear link between the empirical material and the analytical claims.

Peer review provided an additional check on the analysis. Researchers in sociology reviewed the coding results and offered feedback on possible bias, unclear categorization, and theme development. The themes were then revised through discussion so that they reflected the data more accurately.

Together, these procedures enhanced the credibility and reliability of the analysis. They also supported an empirically grounded interpretation of the transformation of intergenerational emotional interaction.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Current State of Intergenerational Emotional Bonds: Stable Identification but Imbalanced Interaction

The findings point to a clear tension in intergenerational emotional relations. Emotional identification remains relatively stable, but the practices through which family members express it have weakened. Participants from both generations described strong emotional attachment and continued moral recognition of intergenerational obligations. Younger participants often regarded care for older relatives as a responsibility they should maintain. Older participants frequently connected emotional contact with their own well-being.

This identification was not always accompanied by sustained interaction. One younger participant explained, "Even though I don't have much time, I still feel it is my responsibility to care about my parents. But most of the time, I can only ask simple questions over the phone." This account indicates that emotional commitment may persist even when communication becomes brief, routine, and limited in depth.

Participants' accounts also indicated a decline in the frequency, range, and emotional depth of interaction. Older adults in rural areas often had few chances for face-to-face contact, especially when their children had migrated for work. In urban families, contact was also often reduced to brief phone calls or occasional visits. One older participant stated, "We only see each other during holidays. Most of the time, we just exchange a few words on the phone."

These patterns suggest that intergenerational interaction is increasingly centered on routine and practical matters. Conversations usually address health, daily needs, or other functional issues rather than emotional exchange. This finding aligns with the idea of "intimacy with distance" (Li, 2026), in which emotional identification persists while interaction is constrained by structural conditions. It also supports the view that emotional interaction is shaped by external pressures as well as internal family dynamics (Du, 2024).

4.2 Modern Social Pressure: Core Driving Forces of Emotional Alienation

The analysis indicates that modern social

pressure plays a major role in weakening intergenerational emotional interaction. These pressures operate through connected dimensions, including work and economic constraints, spatial separation, and technological barriers.

4.2.1 Work and Economic Pressure

Work and economic demands limited younger adults' ability to maintain emotionally meaningful contact with older family members. Participants frequently mentioned long working hours, competitive employment conditions, and financial pressure. These conditions reduced both available time and emotional energy.

One participant described this difficulty directly: "I leave home early and come back late almost every day. Even when I have time, I feel too tired to talk in depth with my parents." The account suggests that work-related fatigue affects both the frequency of communication and its depth and quality.

As a result, interaction between generations often becomes more functional. Communication is increasingly treated as an obligation to fulfill rather than as voluntary emotional exchange. Conversations tend to focus on practical matters, and affective expression becomes less visible.

This finding accords with previous research showing that work pressure can reduce emotional investment in family relationships (Han, 2022). It also shows how structural constraints become emotional distance in everyday family life. Time scarcity and economic pressure reshape the conditions under which family members interact.

4.2.2 Spatial Separation Caused by Urbanization

Urbanization and migration have altered intergenerational interaction by increasing physical distance within families. This pattern is especially visible in rural families. Older adults often remain in their home communities, whereas younger relatives move to cities for employment.

One older participant described the experience in these terms: "My children work in another city. We only meet a few times a year, and the house feels empty most of the time." This statement shows that spatial separation is experienced not only as geographical distance but also as emotional absence produced by long periods apart.

In urban contexts, physical distance may be less obvious. Regular contact can still be limited by long commutes and demanding daily schedules. Family members may live in the same city yet

meet only infrequently in daily life.

These findings are consistent with research linking spatial separation to lower interaction frequency and weaker emotional ties (Liang, 2021). They also point to a broader shift from co-residential and routine contact toward more fragmented relationships maintained across distance. Under these conditions, ordinary family practices provide less support for emotional connection.

4.2.3 Digital Divide and Technological Barriers
Digital communication has widened the channels through which generations can stay in contact, but access to these channels remains unequal. Younger participants commonly used messaging applications and video calls. Many older participants, however, had difficulty using these tools effectively.

One older participant explained, "My children often ask me to use video calls, but I don't know how to operate them, so we end up talking less." This account shows that communication technology does not automatically increase interaction when older adults encounter practical barriers to its use.

Participants also described digital contact as emotionally limited. Online exchanges were often brief, fragmented, and focused mainly on information rather than affective expression. Mediated communication therefore remained only a partial substitute for face-to-face emotional exchange.

This finding is in line with research suggesting that digital interaction may weaken emotional intensity in intergenerational relationships (Wang, 2025). It also indicates that technological development does not by itself ensure stronger emotional connection. In some situations, it may reproduce existing inequalities between generations.

4.2.4 Integrated Effects of Structural Pressures

The pressures discussed above are closely interrelated. Work demands reduce the time available for family interaction. Spatial separation makes mediated contact more necessary. The digital divide then weakens the ability of such contact to sustain emotional exchange.

Under these overlapping conditions, stable emotional connection becomes more difficult to maintain. Intergenerational emotional alienation should therefore be understood as the product of several interacting pressures rather than as the outcome of a single isolated factor.

4.3 Cultural Moderation: the Buffering Role of Traditional Values

Traditional cultural values continue to influence intergenerational relations even when modern social pressures restrict daily interaction. Filial piety and family-oriented norms still provide a basis for emotional identification. They help sustain attachment when direct contact becomes less frequent.

Older participants often interpreted younger family members' limited availability in adaptive terms. One participant stated, "I know they are busy with work, so I don't want to bother them too much. As long as they are doing well, I feel relieved." This account suggests that emotional expectations are being adjusted. Some older adults no longer rely solely on frequent contact or direct attention. Instead, they understand intergenerational ties through tolerance, concern, and mutual adjustment.

These findings indicate that traditional values do not operate only as fixed behavioral rules. They also serve as flexible emotional resources. Under contemporary conditions, they are reinterpreted and may help preserve intergenerational harmony when interaction is constrained.

In rural settings, kinship networks and community relationships may partly supplement emotional support from the family. Their compensatory role remains limited, however. Cultural norms can ease emotional alienation to some degree, but they cannot fully resolve structural pressures linked to work demands, spatial separation, and technological inequality (Du, 2025; Li, 2026).

4.4 Policy and Social Support: the Need for Institutional Intervention

The findings indicate that institutional support has not fully addressed the emotional needs contained in intergenerational relations. Policy provision remains largely centered on material security, such as pensions and healthcare. Emotional well-being and family interaction receive less sustained attention.

Participants called for more organized forms of intergenerational engagement. Community-based arrangements, including shared activity spaces and communication platforms, were seen as possible ways to support contact between generations. Several participants also stressed the need to improve older adults' digital literacy so that communication barriers can be reduced.

Institutional intervention should improve the conditions that allow family relationships to be maintained rather than replace family functions. Flexible work arrangements, community programs, and digital inclusion measures may reduce the structural constraints that limit emotional interaction.

Intergenerational relationships require coordinated support from families, communities, and policy systems. Without such coordination, emotional distance between generations may continue to grow under contemporary social change (Shang & Wang, 2025; Zhang, 2025).

5. Conclusion

This study examined how intergenerational emotional interaction changes under modern social pressure in the context of population aging. The findings show that intergenerational emotional bonds have not simply weakened. Rather, they contain a structural tension. Emotional identification remains relatively stable, partly supported by traditional family values such as filial piety. Actual interaction has become less frequent, less intensive, and lower in quality. This tension is described as "stable emotional identification but imbalanced interaction" (Li, 2026; Du, 2025).

The analysis further shows that this transformation is linked to the combined effects of work and economic pressure, urbanization-related spatial separation, and the digital divide. These pressures interact and reduce opportunities for emotional exchange. Intergenerational contact therefore becomes more task-oriented and less affectively expressive. Theoretically, the study contributes to existing research by showing that intergenerational relationships are moving from function-based dependence toward emotion-based connection. It also clarifies that emotional alienation arises from multiple structural pressures rather than from a single cause.

Strengthening intergenerational emotional interaction requires support across family, community, and policy domains. Policy design should go beyond material provision and attend more closely to emotional well-being, community-based interaction spaces, family-supportive work arrangements, and digital inclusion for older adults (Shang & Wang, 2025; Zhang, 2025; Wang, 2025). This study is limited by its qualitative sample and by the specific urban-rural contexts included in the analysis.

Future research could use larger and more diverse samples, compare different regions and family types, and combine qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the long-term dynamics of intergenerational emotional change.

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