

Preparation for Old Age Among Childless Older Adults: A Qualitative Study of Bereaved Only-Child Parents in China

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Abstract:

In the context of China's rapid modernization, shrinking family size, and the erosion of traditional family-based support systems, older adults—particularly those without children—are increasingly responsible for planning their later years. This qualitative study explores how bereaved only-child parents in China prepare for old age particularly considering the profound challenges posed by their bereavement and the absence of adult children. Through in-depth interviews, the study examines the complexities of preparation across multiple domains of life, highlighting the emotional support, financial security, daily practicality, and end-of-life concerns faced by this population. Two central factors—available resources and personal motivation—are identified as key determinants of preparedness, leading to four distinct typologies: comprehensive preparation, sporadic preparation, "go-with-the-flow," and resignation ("giving up on themselves"). Each typology reflects varying degrees of vulnerability and risk in later life. The study offers recommendations for social policies and support practices tailored to the unique needs of childless older adults in China.