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Intergenerational Family Relationships and Old-Age Volunteering: The Perspectives of Older Chinese Immigrants in Greater Sydney, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Embedded in the framework of intergenerational solidarity, this paper explores the interactions between older immigrants' participation in volunteering activities and intergenerational family relationships in the Chinese community in Sydney, Australia. The study investigates the effects of volunteering on the lives of older Chinese immigrants. It draws on 57 in-depth interviews and 6 focus groups with older immigrants, the vast majority of whom were from China. The findings suggest that volunteering among older immigrant parents is shaped by intergenerational family relationships. Volunteering serves to improve the wellbeing of older people who would otherwise suffer from social isolation and often helps to mend strained family relationships. For older Chinese immigrants, volunteering provides a means to access public services, navigate social service systems and reduce dependency on their children, thereby fostering functional, normative and affective solidarity. This study also uncovers the interconnectedness of the six dimensions of intergenerational family relationships, showing that when adult children actively support their older parents' volunteering, it benefits the elderly immigrants, their families as well as the broader community. The paper calls for better preparedness for aging in the context of immigration, advocating for capacity-building initiatives for both older immigrants and their adult children.

1 | Introduction

Volunteering is participation in voluntary activities or voluntary work in not-for-profit organisations and is done without or with minimal financial reward (Dury et al. 2015). Old-age volunteering refers to the participation of older adults (age 60+) in voluntary activities (Erlinghagen and Hank 2006). It is an important way for older people to contribute to the community and a useful strategy for combatting social isolation (Crittenden 2019). Evidence shows that older Chinese immigrants in Australia are less likely to volunteer than locals or other immigrant groups of similar ages (Warburton and Winterton 2010). This phenomenon has been explained by the need to look after grandchildren and the cultural factor that Chinese older people tend to prioritise family and friends (Rochelle and Shardlow 2012; Sundeen et al. 2007). However, if we look at volunteering in their countries of origin, where grandparents commonly take on a substantial share of childcare responsibilities to support their adult children, older Chinese individuals volunteer extensively (Shea 2017; Cheung et al. 2006; Chan et al. 2021; Liu et al. 2020). Therefore, the reasons behind the low participation of Chinese elders in volunteering after immigration require further examination.

Existing research has documented the barriers that older immigrants face when attempting to volunteer and integrate into the host society, including challenges related to language, culture, infrastructure, access to information and family care responsibilities (Goll et al. 2015; Paull 2009; Southby et al. 2019; Windsor et al., 2016). In this article, we argue that to understand older immigrants' voluntary activities in a host society, it is necessary to delve into the family relations that older people have to depend on after they immigrate. We use the intergenerational solidarity framework to capture a broader range of relationships. The article is structured as follows: We first review the literature on intergenerational relationships and volunteering of older immigrants in Chinese communities and identify the gap in the literature. We then construct an analytical framework that is built on the concept of intergenerational solidarity. Following the methodology section, we present the research findings. The discussion and conclusion section discusses how our research contributes to the literature and outlines possible policy responses.

2 | Intergenerational Relationships and Volunteering of Older Immigrants in Chinese Communities

There has been a growing body of literature on the intergenerational family relationships of immigrant families in recent years, showing a broader spectrum of relationships than previously assumed (Liu et al. 2018). The filial piety tradition (to support aging parents) continues to function globally among Chinese families and provides both material and emotional support to family members after they migrate (Sneed and Chan 2023). However, there are intrinsic weaknesses in the system, and it is challenged by the stress associated with changing health conditions and growing care responsibilities (Dong and Xu 2016; Guo et al. 2016; Lin et al. 2015; Sneed and Chan 2023). Aging in a foreign environment adds to the challenges (Cao 2021; Hamilton et al. 2022). The stress may impact the parent–child relationship, which may become conflictual, estranged, or even abusive (Guo et al. 2016; Lin et al. 2015; Lee et al. 2014; Yang et al. 2022). Guo et al. (2020) argue that the intergenerational family relationships after the immigration of older parents are varied and fluid and that the immigration of the older parent/s is more likely to be successful if service providers in the host countries take into account the family context when assessing needs and service interventions. This point is not only useful for service considerations but also for understanding the choices of older immigrants and their families in different contexts and identifying gaps in the support system that aim to achieve better social integration for older immigrants.

The interaction between intergenerational relationships and volunteering can take several forms:

- One generation volunteers to benefit another generation. For example, older people work as volunteers to provide services to the younger generation. A more specific example could be older immigrants acting as mentors in schools (Elli and Granvill 1999). Alternatively, younger adults volunteer to support the older generation by, for example, co-habiting and care support (Hadley et al. 2021). In both situations, the volunteers and the recipients have the potential to benefit from the voluntary activities (Windsor et al. 2008).
- Intergenerational volunteering, that is, different generations volunteering together, may also support intergenerational bonding (Mali 2014; Santini et al. 2018).
- Organised intergenerational volunteering programmes also have the potential to facilitate the improvement of intergenerational relationships (Santini et al. 2018; McCrea and Smith 2014).

The existing literature focuses on the benefits of volunteering for intergenerational relationships within a community context, overlooking the complexities of volunteering in a host country with unfamiliar societal and cultural norms for the immigrant population. The family's perspective, especially how adult children influence older people's participation in volunteering, is not explored in depth. It is not clear what actually happens within families regarding volunteering decisions and how family relationships can be shaped by participation in volunteering. This article contributes to filling this gap. In-depth knowledge of volunteering dynamics by older Chinese immigrants is critical, as volunteering has the potential to significantly shape the dynamics of immigrant families.

3 | Intergenerational Solidarity—An Analytical Framework

Unlike younger immigrants who can rely on networks such as work and schools for support, older immigrants have to rely on their adult children and the adult child's family to start a new life in a context where they do not speak the dominant language and know very few, if any, people outside the family. Therefore, whether older parents and their adult children can together address the problems that the former experience is potentially crucial for the successful integration of older immigrants. In light of this, we use a framework of intergenerational solidarity to capture the different perspectives of family relationships that can enable and/or benefit from the social participation of elders.

Existing studies suggest two opposing perspectives on intergenerational relationships: intergenerational solidarity and conflicts. The former emphasises the positive features of the relationships between generations (Roberts et al. 1991). Bengtson and Roberts (1991) established the six-dimensional intergenerational solidarity in aging families, which has been used to evaluate the family strength and opportunity structure for interaction. Intergenerational conflicts emphasise the tensions and disagreements between generations (Urick et al. 2017). Others argue that solidarity does not have to be positive in connotation and thus can be adapted to include conflict, that is, a solidarity score may be positive or negative (Lin et al. 2017). In this article, we use the intergenerational solidarity framework to include both positive and negative relationships, thereby providing a more comprehensive framework for analysing family dynamics. Table 1 shows a framework of different dimensions, definitions and values of intergenerational solidarity based on a summary provided by Torabian et al. (2022).

TABLE 1 | Intergenerational solidarity.

Dimensions	Definition	Solidarity (positive)	Conflicts (negative)
Associational solidarity	Interaction & activity frequency and type	Integration	Isolation
Affectual solidarity	Positive sentiments and feelings	Intimacy	Distance
Consensual solidarity	Attitude and value agreement	Agreement	Dissent
Functional solidarity	Resource and support exchange	Dependence	Autonomy
Normative solidarity	Commitment to familial obligations	Familism	Individualism
Structural solidarity	Interaction opportunities	Opportunities	Barriers

Source: Adapted and compiled by the authors drawing on Torabian et al. (2022).

We use this framework to analyse how old-age volunteering interacts with different perspectives of intergenerational solidarity. Furthermore, we expand the framework to include volunteering by older family members and older people from other families in the community. This helps us understand how participation in old-age volunteering in an immigrant family can affect the parent–child relationships and how volunteer activities by older people in the community may change the dynamic of parent–child relationships in an immigrant family other than their own.

4 | Older Chinese Immigrants in Australia

The immigration status of older Chinese immigrants in Australia ranges from having citizenship to being permanent residents (PRs). Some face challenges, such as being unable to renew their PR visas while onshore, requiring them to travel frequently between their home countries and Australia. These varied immigration statuses can impact their ability to engage in community activities, including volunteering. Furthermore, there are no explicit statistics showing the number and status of older Chinese immigrants in Australia as the Chinese population migrates from a number of countries. Figure 1 shows the volunteering rates of people aged 60 and over in Australia. We can see that the volunteer rate for individuals born in Australia is, on average, higher than the rate for those born in Asia or in China. As there were no statistics showing all ethnic Chinese people in the 2021 Census, we use two different sets of data (older immigrants born in Asia and born in China) to show the possible range of volunteering participation rates. Asian immigrants would include most Chinese immigrants to Australia, but also some non-Chinese. These data show that Chinese immigrants' volunteering rate falls between the orange line and the green line. Therefore, we can conclude that the volunteering rate among Chinese immigrants is significantly below the national average for all Australians, as depicted by the red line. This is the case for all age groups.

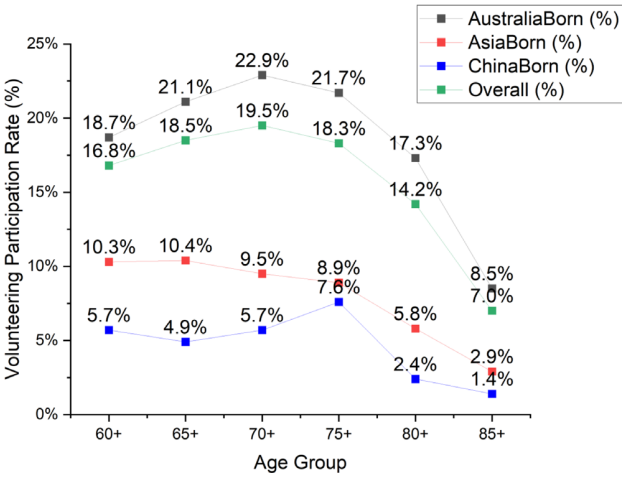

FIGURE 1 | Average old-age volunteering rate by age and birth country in Australia (2021). 1. 5% sample, with 1.25 million records. Overseas visitors were excluded from the analysis, as were 65,290 residents without a clear volunteering status and 225,437 who stated 'NA' Among the remaining 958,704 residents, 814,190 reported that they were not volunteering, and 144,514 reported that they volunteered. 2. It is important to note that the Census data may underrepresent older Chinese immigrants who may not respond to the Census request. However, as we only report the proportion of volunteers, the lower participation rate is still very likely to hold even if there was under-reporting. Data source: ABS, 2021, chart produced by the authors of this paper.

5 | Methodology

Semi-structured interviews (1to 1.5 h each) were conducted with 57 older Chinese immigrants. In addition, we conducted six focus groups (around two hours each) with 52 older immigrants. The participants were a mix of volunteers and service recipients (non-volunteers), which allowed us to capture the rich experiences of older immigrants and their families. We focused on the older immigrants'/parents' perspective in this research. Understanding the experiences, needs and expectations of older parents is essential for examining the factors that contribute to intergenerational solidarity within Chinese families (Katz, 2009; Kumar and Williams 2021). The Chinese immigrants we included in this research were retirees aged 56 to 83[1] who did not complete their education in Australia. The field research was conducted in two settings, CASS Care Ltd. and the Sydney Senior Learning Society (SSLC).

- The social service provider, CASS Care Ltd., is a social service provider in New South Wales, Australia, that specialises in servicing the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

(CALD) population. It provides services for over 6,500 families weekly and has around 700 formal staff members and over 350 voluntary workers.

- The SSLC is a civil society organisation that was established in 2018 and is officially registered as such. This organisation was initiated and organised by a group of older Chinese immigrants. The main motivation was to create an organisation that would alleviate the long-standing social isolation faced by older Chinese immigrants in Australia.

Qualitative data collection involved two phases. In the first phase, from March to April 2022, we conducted in-depth interviews with 37 volunteers from CASS. Our focus during this phase was volunteer activities associated with senior leisure activity groups. In the second phase, from March to July 2023, we conducted 10 in-depth interviews with older Chinese volunteers and 10 non-volunteers. In this phase, we also organised three focus groups at CASS, with each group consisting of 7–11 participants, and three focus groups at SSLS, each comprising six participants. The focus groups were a mix of older volunteers (22 from CASS and 9 from SSLS) and non-volunteers who received voluntary services (12 from CASS and 9 from SSLS).

While interviews are effective in getting in-depth data, focus groups allow participants to engage with each other's ideas, which can lead to new insights and discussions that might not arise in one-on-one interviews. Group interaction can stimulate perspectives and opinions that may not emerge otherwise (Morgan, 1996).

For the 2023 phase, we expanded our research to include volunteers from diverse sectors within community services, such as mental health, aged care, early learning and migrant settlement services. This broadened scope aimed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of volunteerism among the elderly. We included both volunteers and non-volunteers, particularly older immigrants who benefit from these services, to assess the broader community impact of volunteer work and identify barriers to increased volunteer participation among older immigrants.

It is also worth noting that one of the focus groups consisted of elderly volunteers who immigrated from various Asian countries, including China, South Korea, India, Malaysia and Vietnam. This intercultural group allowed us to explore the impact of volunteerism on the community with a particular focus on social integration.

The interviewees and focus group participants were selected with the help of the two organisations. Invitations were circulated to registered service users/members. Given that participation depended on the responses from the targeted population, there was likely a selection bias. Specifically, those more inclined toward social engagement might have been more responsive to the invitations. We also recognise that we may not be able to reach those who have stopped volunteering due to its negative impact on intergenerational relationships. Despite this potential bias, we do not believe this impacted the study. Our objective was to map various relationships, and most respondents had extensive interactions with a diverse range of older individuals, including those unlikely to participate in research. Therefore, they were able to provide examples from their experiences with non-participating older individuals.

The interviews and focus groups covered three key themes. The first theme was for both volunteers and non-volunteers; that is, the challenges they faced in Australia and their relationships with their adult children. Secondly, for volunteers, we examined what prompted them to volunteer and how they perceived its impact on themselves, their families, and their communities. We also explored how they found their way to become volunteers and their children's role, if any, in this journey. The discussion with the non-volunteers focused on why they had decided not to volunteer.

The analysis of the qualitative data was done via an iterative, inductive process, starting with open coding of qualitative data to develop themes, followed by further reduction and recoding to identify core themes. To minimise potential meaning loss in translation from Chinese, interviews were coded directly into themes in Chinese, then translated into English by bilingual researchers and organised using Nvivo software. All translations were double-checked by experts fluent in both languages.

Of the 57 in-depth interviews, 54 were conducted in Chinese (Mandarin and/or Cantonese). The focus groups were conducted in Mandarin, with the exception of the intercultural group, which used English. As shown in Table 2, two-thirds of the respondents had very basic English or no English at all. Less than a quarter, specifically 21 out of the 109 respondents, could functionally communicate in English. The average age of the participants was 68. A significantly higher number of older immigrant women participated in the research for two main reasons. Firstly, Chinese females retire much younger than males (see footnote 1), allowing them to immigrate to Australia at a relatively young age. Additionally, responses from participants suggest that women are generally healthier than their husbands when they reach the ‘old-old’ and ‘oldest-old’ stages. Many female volunteers mentioned that a major barrier to future volunteering is the need to care for their husbands' deteriorating health.

A range of volunteer activities was reported by the interviewees. Examples included service support volunteers who were formally registered as volunteers. The first category of activities involved a wide range of settlement support, such as form filling, knowledge sharing, referral services and translation. The second category of activities was companion services including home visits, phone call companionship, driving and patient support. The third important group was the seniors' activity organisers who received basic training from CASS or support from SSLS. In addition, there were informal volunteers who provided ad hoc support at events and activities, such as festivals and performances, group learning, physical exercises, and excursions. A number of volunteers provided peer support (haircuts, cooking) or community services (gardening, street cleaning, assisting in local elections and religious services).

TABLE 2 | Status of the older immigrants who participated in the interviews and focus groups (2022–2023).

	Interviews (volunteers + non-volunteers)		Focus Groups (volunteers + non-volunteers)
	CASS ($N=46$)	SSLR ($N=11$)	CASS + SSLR ($N=52$)
Sex			
Male	$N=4$	$N=2$	$N=18$
Female	$N=42$	$N=9$	$N=34$
Ave. age	69.6 years old	68.2 years old	66.8 years old
Language[a]			
Mandarin	$N=37$	$N=11$	$N=33$
Cantonese	$N=16$	$N=0$	$N=10$
English	$N=11$	$N=0$	$N=10$

[a]Some interviewees are proficient in more than one language, so the aggregate number is larger than that of the participants.
Source: Data collected by the research team.

6 | Strained Family Solidarity as A Result of Immigration

All of the interviewees reported that they came to Australia with high hopes that they would live with their children as a large, harmonious family and that their children would look after them and they, in turn, would help by looking after the grandchildren, etcetera. They anticipated a better-quality life after migration. They knew there would be culture shock, but few anticipated how difficult it would be to integrate. Most of them were blindsided by the fact that they had to depend on their children for almost everything. Not speaking English and having no knowledge of the social security system were major impediments:

> The most difficult thing is, when I walk in the street, I cannot understand anything written, not a single word. I did not even know that I was entitled to concession when taking public transport. It was so expensive, and I paid the full fare. Even my daughter didn't know my entitlement... I literally became blind, deaf and mute. It felt like I was confined in a dark box.
>
> (Interviewee 39: 66yo female volunteer)

Many of the interviewees perceived that they could not rely on their children. A frequent term used by the interviewees was: 'Our children have their own lives'. The participants said they felt guilty for having to rely on their children. However, they could not return to their home country. Some had sold their homes before moving to Australia. Some interviewees expressed the unpleasant feeling of '寄人篱下(jiren lixia)', a Chinese term meaning living under someone else's roof, which also implies depending on someone else for a living. However, not all interviewees agreed with this term as it refers to living with people other than one's own children. A person using this term when living with their children means that there was a strong sense of being an outsider in the household. The sense of alienation could be more serious if the son-in-law or daughter-in-law could not speak the same language. As a focus group participant (FGP) mentioned:

> I have little communication with my son-in-law [who does not speak Chinese]. We just nod at each other when we see each other in the morning. Now he's become frustrated about this weird family relation, and I have to avoid staying with him alone in the house.
>
> (FGP, male, non-volunteer)

In a filial piety culture, it is common for parents to say, 'I have raised you and therefore you should repay me'. In our interviews, the interviewees rarely expressed this sentiment, however, interviewees who volunteered on the telephone helplines (also known as the 'Connect Call Services'[2]) reported that people phoning in often said that they felt their children failed to display any gratitude. The lack of gratitude evoked deep disappointment. It is not clear why the interviewees did not express this themselves during the field research. It could be because those receiving telephone support were even more isolated.

The older immigrants complained that their adult children often underestimated the difficulties of learning a new language in old age and navigating a new system without basic language skills. Some children suggested that the parents should be more independent, and so they showed 'tough love' by not doing everything for their parents. However, this often made the parents feel helpless. An older volunteer who assisted with settlement services commented:

> I answer calls from older people...Some children were not helpful at all. The parents just arrived (in Australia) and they needed to fill in forms to attend (immigrant) classes. The children did not even help to fill in the registration form. They just said to the parents, 'This is too troublesome. I can't deal with so many requirements.

> Go ask the volunteer to help you, okay?' It is not just a small number of parents suffering from this. I estimate about 80 percent of older parents suffered in this way.
>
> (FGP, female, volunteer)

Does this mean that there is no intergenerational affection? A focus group participant commented that it was more about a lack of time:

> Even if the children love the parents very much, they may not be willing to fill in all the forms for them. I know a physician said to his father, 'This is too much. I cannot fill in all these forms for you. Please find someone who is willing to help you and I can pay for the services'.
>
> (FGP, female, volunteer)

Also, some adult children have limited English, and the bureaucratic requirements are beyond their capacity. As one interviewee commented,

> Sometimes my kid doesn't know how to deal with all the bureaucratic stuff. It is me who tells my kid what to do after consulting with the volunteers.
>
> (Interviewee 54: 63yo female, non-volunteer)

The quotes highlight that the onerous bureaucracy associated with immigration settlement and access to services may strain the solidarity between parents and their adult children, that is, the functional solidarity is undermined because of parental dependency. The children are keen to bring their parents to Australia and live with them, but they are not prepared to be responsible for their constant need for support. Affectual solidarity could be dissipated by bureaucratic demands over time. Sometimes consensual solidarity is challenged even among the highly educated, as one respondent lamented:

> My daughter said her values are different from mine. She often scolded me for all the 'wrong' things I said ... I received the best higher education in China and paid for her to study here ... What is at the bottom of all this? ... She thought her education was superior ... They have benefited from the traditional values we hold, and we have looked after their children.
>
> (FGP, female, non-volunteer)

Examining the immigration experience and the family dynamics of these older immigrants, we can see that while parent migration boosts structural solidarity, that is, increased interaction opportunities and associational solidarity (activity types and frequency), it may undermine family solidarity in other dimensions: affectual solidarity (diminished positive sentiments), consensual solidarity (more attitude and value disagreements), functional solidarity (inadequate resources and efforts), and even normative solidarity, leading to unfulfilled familial obligations. In the worst cases, the parents and children become estranged, and the older people are left to their own devices. As a 'Connect-Call' volunteer recalled:

> Among the 21 older people who I call regularly, 15 live alone. These home-alone seniors have one thing in common—they all have children in Sydney, but they just cannot get on well with their children. Their adult children are not helpful at all when it comes to form filling or smart-phone troubleshooting.
>
> (Interviewee 16: 66yo female, volunteer)

Our interviewees who did home visits also pointed out that conflicts or disappointment with their children are frequently discussed by the older people they supported. A participant told of how his relationship with his son had broken down and the situation was also impacting on his relationship with his wife:

> I don't want to stay here anymore, and my son says if you want to leave just get yourself an air ticket. My wife agrees with my son!... So I started to look for a job to support myself, but with no success.
>
> (FGP, male, non-volunteer)

The interview excerpts above highlight how old-age immigration can place significant pressure on Chinese immigrant families, making it challenging for older individuals to achieve social integration. Furthermore, their adult children may struggle to provide the necessary support. In the next section, we explore the experiences of several families to demonstrate how encouraging older parents in immigrant households to engage in volunteer activities outside their homes, along with the support they receive from other older volunteers, can help alleviate family stress and foster social integration.

7 | Interactions Between Volunteering and Family Solidarity

In this section, we present the empirical evidence that illuminates the external–internal interactions between volunteer activities by older Chinese immigrants and intergenerational family relationships within Chinese communities.

7.1 | Support From Older Immigrant Volunteers: A Supplement to Family Functional Solidarity

Older Chinese immigrant volunteers have provided essential support to other immigrants whose families experience weakened functional solidarity. Our field research shows that formal and informal volunteering, particularly in assisting with bureaucratic processes, provides vital support. For example, older immigrants navigating the early settlement period often require help with essential tasks like filling out forms for bank accounts, photo IDs or government services. Older immigrants, when they arrive in Australia, do not necessarily have access to government-funded settlement services and often have to resort to informal support networks or even strangers that they meet in public spaces. Volunteers frequently step in to offer this assistance—particularly for tasks like form-filling. For example, SSLS set up a course

where volunteer teachers advise older people how to fill in forms. CASS Care Ltd. also has volunteers who are usually older immigrants who had benefited from CASS services in the early days of their immigration, helping newcomers to fill in forms. Many receive help from their peers in adult migrant English classes or assistance in accessing Centrelink[3]. In recent years, in some local areas with large Chinese immigrant populations, public libraries have become hubs for volunteer-led form-filling support, offering an essential service to these transitioning communities. Additionally, members of seniors' activity groups, who are often older immigrants with access to cars, take turns to drive those in need. Such support not only fosters greater mobility and social engagement but also alleviates the burden of transportation on adult children. Non-volunteers have expressed deep appreciation for these efforts:

> The volunteers not only drive us to the activity groups. Their help extends to taking us grocery shopping and doctor visits. These 'little favours' they offer are of great help!
>
> (FGP, female, non-volunteer)

The counselling services offered by social service providers such as CASS Care Ltd. rely on older volunteers, who often serve as callers offering emotional support and practical advice. These services play a crucial role in alleviating the stress and anxiety faced by older immigrants (Coughtrey and Pistrang 2018). Intergenerational conflict frequently arises as a topic during these counselling sessions, highlighting the complexities of family dynamics in immigrant households. A volunteer who regularly provides form-filling assistance and basic accounting knowledge emphasised the importance of this kind of peer support:

> We immigrants are often in need of basic common sense of Australian society. I wish someone had helped me when I just arrived in Australia to avoid a lot of pitfalls.
>
> (Interviewee 47: 70yo male, volunteer)

Through these contributions, volunteers address gaps in family functional solidarity, easing the caregiving responsibilities typically shouldered by adult children. Moreover, older immigrant volunteers often draw on their own settlement experiences to guide newcomers, alleviating the stress and anxiety associated with immigration and adaptation.

7.2 | How Adult Children Influence the Volunteering Participation of Older Parents

Family relationships can influence whether an older parent volunteers. The interviews and focus groups revealed several types of intergenerational relationships. One is mainly transactional; the parents and children agree before immigration that the parent(s) will look after the grandchildren and help with household chores. When the parents are keen to migrate and put pressure on their children to bring them to Australia, or when the parents cannot pay for the immigration costs themselves, they have less bargaining power.

Another type is a protective relationship. Either the parents or the children could be the dominant side in the protective relationship. Some parents are upset by their children's poor work-life balance when they have to look after young children and work full-time. As explained by an interviewee who cannot volunteer and has no intention of volunteering in the near future:

> My daughter now has two kids, both in primary school... Now that I'm here... I help with school drop-offs and pick-ups. My daughter and her husband both have jobs, so I am the one who does housework. Before my husband and I were here, my daughter and son-in-law were really struggling. Now my husband also helps with gardening, laundry, cooking, endless housework, but it is essential for a family.
>
> (Interviewee 48: 81yo female non-volunteer)

Some adult children do not understand why their parents take on paid work or volunteer work outside the home. This attitude is premised on the notion that older people are supposed to just relax at home and enjoy being served and looked after by their children. Older people working outside the home would bring shame to the children as they would be perceived as unfilial. An example is the founder of the Sydney Senior Learning Society. Although he is making a major contribution to the Chinese community, he is constantly thinking about quitting:

> Many people, sometimes my son, would ask 'Why are you putting so much effort into volunteering? Is this because you crave fame?'. So I probably should stop and just spend more time with my family.
>
> (FGP, male, volunteer)

Being relieved from childcare burdens is a primary reason older people decide to participate in volunteering. When the grandchildren grow up, older people have more free time. Some children worry that their parents may feel lonely and encourage them to go out more and meet other people. Sometimes the older parents feel that they are less needed at home and venture out to participate in some activities.

Being independent from their children and grandchildren motivates older Chinese immigrants to actively search for social activities. Some older interviewees no longer live with their children. Participating in social activities enhances their mental health. Besides making new friends, volunteering adds a sense of achievement. They feel that they are contributing to society. A volunteer in her eighties is proud of her long-term contribution:

> One of my sons moved back to China and the other one settled in the US. I am very busy and happy working as a volunteer here. When I go overseas to visit my children, the older people I help would miss me very much.
>
> (Interviewee 43: 80yo female, volunteer)

Other volunteers when reflecting on their volunteering mentioned that they 'found a sense of belonging', 'felt useful again' and 'felt purpose in life'.

However, not all attempts at volunteering result in sustained participation. Some interviewees cited a lack of time or inflexible schedules as reasons for discontinuing their involvement. These challenges highlight the need for more adaptable volunteering opportunities that can accommodate the varying lifestyles and commitments of older individuals. In one case, an interviewee engaged in frequent volunteering when his adult children were on parental leave. However, when they both returned to full-time work, the interviewee had to give up volunteering to take on full-time caregiving responsibilities. While this shift limited his ability to participate in community activities, he did not express any resentment; instead, he remarked:

> It is a pity that I cannot volunteer more... After all, the next generation's development is the most important thing for us.
>
> (Interviewee 19: 63yo, male, volunteer)

This sentiment highlights a common perspective among older Chinese immigrants: while they value volunteering, family responsibilities often take priority. Volunteering can improve family relationships by enhancing the parents' mood and reducing tension at home, but stopping it may reverse these benefits. However, community engagement does not always require formal volunteering. Older adults can stay socially active through other means, such as community groups or informal gatherings, which can similarly support family harmony. Thus, while volunteering is valuable, it is not the only path to fostering better family dynamics.

The interviews and focus groups provide an explanation of the trajectory of Chinese old-age volunteering as shown in Figure 2. Volunteering was often delayed because of the expectation that parents would care for their grandchildren. People started or returned to volunteering when the grandchildren became more independent.

7.3 | Changing Family Dynamics Through Volunteering: Strengthening Family Solidarity

Volunteering not only has the potential to benefit older Chinese immigrants but can also reshape family dynamics and foster new forms of intergenerational solidarity. Many adult children initially view their parents' participation in volunteering with scepticism, concerned that it may detract from their caregiving activities or family time. However, over time, they come to recognise the positive impacts, both practical and emotional, that volunteering has on their parents. For instance, one interviewee who had struggled with depression found renewed purpose through volunteering. Her daughter actively supported this transformation by helping her practice skills learned in smartphone training classes. This support not only strengthened their bond but also contributed to the interviewee's improved mental health:

> My daughter helps me to review what I learned in smart-phone training classes, so that I can go back to my activity group and pass on the skills to other people. ... She is happy about my change since I started volunteering because I have gradually stopped taking anti-depressants.
>
> (Interviewee 16: 65yo female volunteer)

Volunteering also provides older immigrants with valuable information and skills that benefit their families. Through community engagement, they learn about welfare benefits, legal assistance and child-rearing advice, which often directly support their children's households. These practical contributions

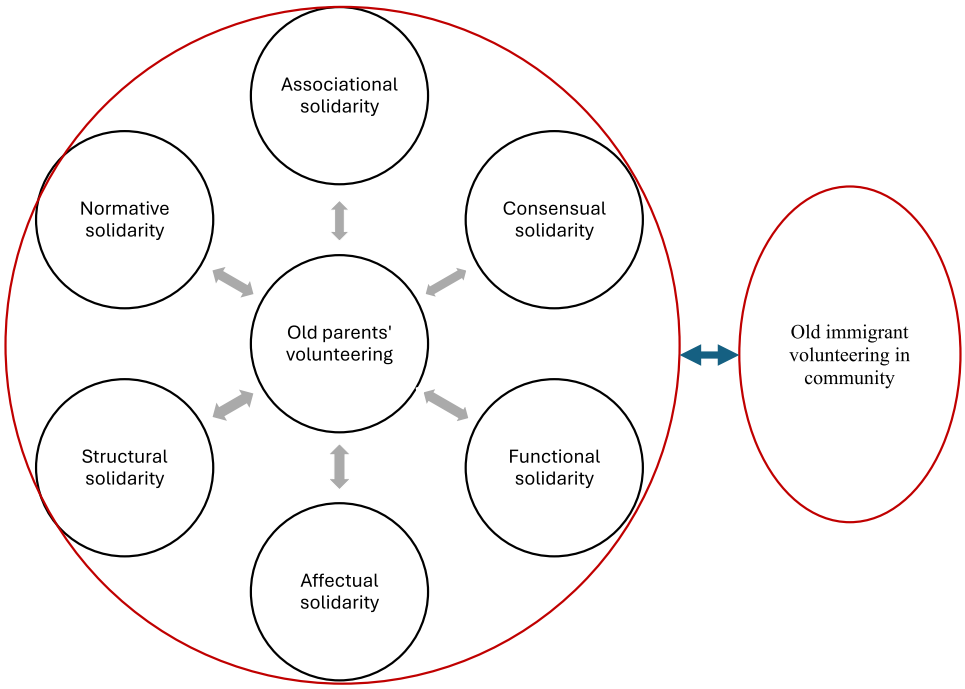

FIGURE 2 | Older immigrants volunteering and intergenerational family solidarity. *Source:* Drawn by the authors.

shift the traditional caregiving dynamic, positioning older parents as active contributors to the extended family's overall well-being.

> After learning about these topics (services, pensions, taxations), they go back home and educate their children.
>
> (Interviewee 10: 70yo, male, volunteer)

Moreover, some children become inspired by their parents' volunteer work and decide to also participate in volunteering. They assist with logistical tasks or join community events, reinforcing family solidarity through shared efforts. One volunteer leader proudly shared how her daughter became an integral part of her dance group's operations:

> My daughter helps me with the logistics for our dancing performances. Costumes, stage set-ups, you name it. The garage of my daughter's house is taken up by things needed for the dancing group.
>
> (Interviewee 7: 60yo female volunteer)

These examples illustrate how volunteering can transform family relationships. Parents gain independence and self-worth, while their children develop a deeper appreciation of their parents' contributions. In some cases, the entire family becomes involved in volunteer initiatives, creating shared value across the generations. This dynamic not only enhances family solidarity but also embeds the values of community service across generations. For example, a senior management staff reported that their end of year celebration has now become a family event where many older immigrants and the volunteers working for the organisations come with their children and grandchildren. Some children helped organise the events, donate food and purchase the artwork or crafts of the older people to support their parents and show appreciation to SSLS volunteer teachers. Volunteering also equips older immigrants with valuable information and skills that benefit their families. Through their community engagement, they learn about welfare benefits, legal assistance and child-rearing advice, which often directly support their children's households. These practical contributions shift the traditional caregiving dynamic, positioning older parents as active contributors to their families' well-being. This involvement not only eases the burden on adult children but also empowers older parents, fostering a more reciprocal relationship within the family.

These examples demonstrate how volunteering can transform family relationships. Older parents gain independence, self-worth and a renewed sense of purpose, while children develop a deeper appreciation for their parents' contributions. In some families, volunteer work becomes a shared activity, strengthening bonds and embedding the values of community service across generations.

Beyond changing attitudes toward volunteering, older adults' participation in community activities can directly enhance family solidarity by reducing intergenerational tensions. When parents and children share the same houses, the lack of personal space can strain their relationships. Volunteering provides an outlet for older parents to engage with the broader community, fostering a sense of autonomy and reducing their reliance on children for social and emotional support. As participants in the focus group explained:

> My child said, 'Mom, it's great that you volunteer—you can chat with others instead of being bored at home'.
>
> (Interviewee 9: 70yo, female, volunteer)

> I really enjoy volunteering, and it also helps my children at home by reducing their stress.
>
> (Interviewee 8: 73yo, female, volunteer)

This shift helps parents maintain their independence while alleviating the pressure on children to constantly manage the parent–child dynamic. It promotes healthier boundaries and mutual respect, ultimately strengthening family bonds. Children may feel relieved as their parents gain a social life outside the home, creating a more balanced relationship dynamic.

7.4 | New Trends in Intergenerational Relationships and Volunteering

Recent trends reveal the differences between older immigrants and newcomers. It is necessary to note that when the interviewees talk about older immigrants, it is not about age, but about how many years a person has lived in Australia. The newcomers were more proactive and would not want to count on their children for information only. They actively sought to learn about Australian society, their social rights and entitlements. The differences have been frequently brought up by many interviewees. For example:

> Immigrants of my generation, perhaps, didn't know much about things like the pension system or taxes, as we were busy working. ... Nowadays, many newcomers were keen to invite experienced people to tell them about the information.
>
> (Interviewee 10: 70yo, male, volunteer)

Unlike earlier immigrants who worked very hard in Australia and were often socially inactive for quite a long time, many newcomers were financially better off as they arrived in Australia and want to maintain active social lives by engaging in community activities early on. Even if they still have to fulfil caregiving duties, they are not keen to be confined to these responsibilities. They resist the expectation to solely provide family caregiving, as reflected in their comments:

> Why ask me to stay home cooking every day? If I keep doing this for years, I'll feel lonely and frustrated. So, when friends invite me to go out for a break on weekends I don't want to babysit.
>
> (Interviewee 18: 73yo, female, non-volunteer)

> Every Sunday I go hiking with friends. Although my family needs my help, these activities (volunteering as a teacher of photography and hiking) are important to me.
>
> (Interviewee 19: 63yo, male, volunteer)

These statements highlight their determination to carve out time for personal and social fulfilment, even while supporting their families.

Some newcomers, particularly those with prior social or international experiences, are more proactive in negotiating their caregiving roles. Aware of the challenges of isolation faced by older migrants, they communicate their expectations to their children even before migrating. One participant shared:

> My daughter is very proactive. She gathered information and helped me join in various activity groups on Wechat before I landed in Australia.
>
> (Interviewee 46: 65yo female)

By setting clear boundaries and expectations, these individuals ensure that their caregiving responsibilities are balanced with opportunities for social engagement.

Beyond socialising, some older immigrants take their involvement a step further by becoming volunteers. These individuals, often highly educated or experienced in leadership roles, view volunteering as a way to contribute meaningfully to their communities while maintaining personal fulfilment. They actively advocate for flexible caregiving arrangements to support their volunteer work. For example, volunteer teachers at SSLS successfully negotiate scheduling adjustments to accommodate their caregiving duties.

These evolving dynamics—expressing the need for socialisation, negotiating care arrangements and pursuing volunteer opportunities—demonstrate a growing sense of agency among recent older Chinese immigrants. This marks a significant departure from earlier generational norms, reflecting a shift toward more balanced and fulfilling intergenerational relationships.

8 | Discussion and Conclusions

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of intergenerational family relationships and older immigrants' volunteering in the Chinese community. Our findings regarding the challenges of immigration on intergenerational family solidarity echo existing studies. First, different generations do not necessarily share the same understanding of the importance of maintaining intergenerational solidarity. There are potentially different attitudes toward roles and values as well as care responsibilities (Chun and Lee 2006). Second, immigrant family solidarity ranges from strong solidarity to weak solidarity (Baykara-Krumme and Fokkema 2019).

The study confirms that volunteering by older Chinese immigrants is shaped by intergenerational family relationships. It shows two levels of interaction. The first is in-family interactions. The parents' involvement in volunteering can be influenced by adult children's ability and willingness to help their parents to be more socially engaged. It may also be affected by the initial arrangement between children and their parents before the latter immigrate. When the children and parents were more proactive before immigration, such as making plans or children facilitating parents joining social groups in advance, parents' participation in volunteering has the potential to ease family tension and, in some cases, result in greater involvement by the adult children in voluntary activities. The second outcome is that the voluntary activities of older immigrant volunteers may help some families overcome the challenges resulting from weak functional solidarity.

Our research also found that the six dimensions of intergenerational family relationships as conceptualised in Bengtson and Roberts (1991) and Torabian et al. (2022) are pertinent and often interconnected. For example, if the weakened functional solidarity persists over time, other dimensions of family solidarity could dissipate as well. Our research shows that after immigration, even if the adult children are supportive initially, many of them are not ready to be forever on call to support one or two heavily dependent parents. Similarly, not all older parents are ready to give up their social lives completely to work for their children's families for an extended period. When either side realises that the support is not up to expectations, conflicts may emerge and the overall intergenerational family solidarity can be weakened. In this sense, older immigrant volunteering has provided the needed cushion to immigrant families or older people in need of assistance and helped to maintain healthier relationships in the long run. Figure 2 conceptualises the multiple dimensions, directions and levels of interactions identified in our field research. The left panel of Figure 2 shows the six dimensions of family solidarity, and the big red circle shows that these six dimensions are interlinked. Within families, volunteering of older parents could interact with inter-generational relationships and outside the family, old-age volunteering in the community can potentially support immigrant families under pressure. Intergenerational family relationships can also directly impact the supply of older volunteers in the community. The bi-directional arrows show the directions of impact.

The combination of inside and outside family interactions is important as it highlights the issues as well as the agency of the community. We are aware that volunteering does not necessarily have positive impacts (Stephens et al. 2015). However, for the older immigrants who had suffered from serious social isolation, imperfect social relationships are better than nothing. Without the volunteers from other immigrants in the community, an older immigrant not receiving support from their children could be trapped in isolation. They are vulnerable. When we include the potential to receive volunteer support from peers, the older immigrants' position is potentially much stronger.

Guo et al. (2020) suggests that to optimise the social integration of older immigrants, it is necessary to combine the strength of filial piety culture and social service support. Our research suggests that the same can be said in the context of supporting older people to be socially integrated through volunteering. Filial piety culture is, to some extent, potentially a morally defined safety net for older parents. It can reduce the demand on

the host country/society to provide direct support to the older immigrants, as their children feel morally compelled to take up substantial responsibilities. In the rare cases of better preparation prior to immigration, we have observed fulfilled parents who take great pride in their children's support and express strong bonds between parents and children. The parents also mentioned that their children were very supportive of the parents spending some time out of home to volunteer. However, our research also shows that we cannot assume that adult children would necessarily support their parents in Australia. After spending years outside China, it is very possible that the adult children will be less willing to follow traditional Chinese values, especially if there is no social pressure for them to do so. Leaving aside the reluctance to conform to cultural expectations, our research also finds that both parents and the children may not be aware of the implications of moving abroad at a later age. They only realise that it is not easy after the parents arrive in Australia. The children cannot always tell that their parents are in need of help. Some also do not realise the importance of helping their parents to adapt to the new environment. When there is an absence of children's support, the parents may need external support. As discussed at the beginning of this paper, external support can directly target older people. However, this approach itself cannot automatically identify the people in need.

Older immigrants who showed an interest in volunteering but were unable to do so identified three main barriers: caregiving responsibilities within the household, limited access to volunteering information, and a lack of awareness about the benefits and processes of volunteering. These findings also suggest that despite the benefits of volunteering, older Chinese immigrants are less likely to participate. This is not only due to social and cultural barriers and family care responsibilities but also because of a lack of understanding from their adult children regarding guardianship responsibilities, the need for social integration of their parents, and the availability of social support.

Our research highlights the importance of supporting adult children to help their parents become more socially engaged. Figure 1 illustrates the childcare burden experienced by older Chinese immigrants, with the kink in the chart showing how this burden eases as grandchildren grow older, leading to increased volunteering after the age of 65. While many adult children are willing to support their parents to engage in volunteer activities, they often need guidance to do so effectively. Bridging this gap requires capacity building for adult children. Preventative measures could be taken as early as the pre-immigration stage, such as providing information packs that outline the support needed to help parents settle and integrate socially. These packs could be displayed in public spaces—libraries, train stations and stores—targeting not only older individuals but also their adult children. Additionally, promoting community-based volunteerism is essential to ensure socially isolated older people can engage more actively, while also leveraging the potential of older immigrants to support their families and contribute to community building.

In conclusion, aging out of place has been identified as a serious challenge for older Chinese immigrants (Chen et al. 2022). Older parents following their adult children to live in another country are potentially fraught (Han et al. 2019). Economic support aside, they face the usual immigration challenges—culture shock, disorientation, inability to communicate in the dominant language, navigation issues and social isolation (Kim 2017). Volunteer support and participation in volunteering do not only benefit the older people and their families materially, that is, gaining a better understanding of the social welfare system and developing social networks, but also psychologically.

Author Contributions

Bingqin Li: conceptualization, investigation, funding acquisition, writing – original draft, methodology, writing – review and editing, formal analysis, validation, project administration. **Yiran Li:** conceptualization, investigation, methodology, writing – review and editing, formal analysis, project administration, data curation, validation. **Alan Morris:** conceptualization, investigation, funding acquisition, writing – review and editing, methodology. **Youqing Fan:** investigation, funding acquisition, writing – original draft, visualization, formal analysis, methodology. **Xin Gu:** methodology, software, visualization. **Ilan Katz:** funding acquisition, writing – review and editing.

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Disclosure

Reimbursing interviewees for their time is now an accepted practice (Morris 2015). It certainly helped with recruitment, and we do not feel that the modest remuneration coerced people to participate.

Ethics Statement

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee, ethics approval number HC220768.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1] China's statutory retirement ages is set at 60 for men and 55 for female officials and 50 for female workers (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of PRC 2019).

[2] CASS launched the "Connect Call for Chinese Seniors" in 2012 to help and encourage Chinese seniors to stay in touch with the community. CASS trains volunteers to provide regular phone calls to seniors.

[3] Centrelink delivers payments and services by the Australian Government for families, retirees, carers, people with disabilities and people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/).

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