

Changing Norms in the Dynamic of Contemporary Chinese Urban Families: A Case Study on Childcare Support

LI Wenwen*

Abstract

This study explores how multigenerational family members negotiate intergenerational relationships and reconfigure family norms through childcare practices in contemporary Chinese middle-class families. The study draws upon semi-structured interviews with seven young wives, all of whom are only daughters, from various cities in China. The study found that intergenerational relationships were significantly tilted in favor of the wife's side, and the power of the maternal family was intensified by providing childcare support. In the wives' narratives, tension and conflict with in-laws were the main reason alienating them from each other. Moreover, traditional family norms have gradually transformed. The husband's parents were more likely to hold traditional values, such as a preference for multiple children or boys, but their influence has been considerably diluted. On the other hand, the maternal family has selectively rejected, accepted, or modified traditional norms through their achieved power, and exploits traditional norms to further their advantage.

Keywords:

Family norms, multigenerational collaboration, maternal power.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the horizon of family research has gradually expanded from developed economies, such as European countries, the United States, and Japan, to developing countries and emerging economies, such as those in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In revising and critiquing the classical family modernization theory, which is derived from advanced capitalist economies, academics have continued to discern its limitations. Family research has called for new theories. Chang (2010) developed the theory of compressed modernity to interpret the “highly complex and fluid social system” in Asian areas, which are characterized by the dynamic coexistence of tradition and modernity. However, in Asia’s ongoing compressed modernization, the interplay between tradition and modernity and the mechanisms by which they coexist remain unexplored. In the pursuit of new family theories, detailed empirical examinations are crucial as they provide factual foundations for the hypothesis regarding family changes. It is only through extensive empirical analysis that shedding light on the specific mechanisms of family change, as well as their underlying causes, becomes possible.

This study is one such endeavor. Through an interview survey, this study conducted case studies on Chinese urban middle-class families. It first analyzed the actual living conditions of these interviewed families and then explored how multigenerational family members negotiate daily interactions within the constraints of reality and constantly modify and reconfigure traditional family norms. This study provides insights into the dynamics and specific mechanisms of changing family norms.

I CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS AND EXISTING LITERATURE

1. The Decline of Parental Authority and the Rise of Maternal Relations

One of the most prominent theories in family studies is the family modernization theory—a set of propositions that aim to explain the impacts of industrialization on family changes. To date, this theory has been criticized and revised repeatedly, and academic consensus has been reached on its validity and limitations (Thornton, 2005). It suggests that the dissolution of the family-based mode of production during industrialization led

to a decline in parental authority across various regions (Thornton & Fricke, 1987). Based on prior research, this proposition also applies to pre-1980s Chinese families. From 1949 to 1979, individuals in China were de-embedded from traditional kinship networks and re-embedded into party-state institutions (Yan, 2010). Consequently, parental power has declined significantly, whereas the younger generation has gained considerable independence and autonomy (Parish & Whyte, 1978; Yan, 2003). Gender equality, freedom of marriage, and independence were encouraged by state-dominated projects of social transformation (Yan, 2003).

Nonetheless, a decline in parental authority does not necessarily mean a significant drop in intergenerational relations. In China, even during the socialist planned economy period without mobility in the labor market, most adult children stayed geographically close to and maintained close ties with their parents (Whyte, 2005). This indicates that the self-disciplined nuclear family described by the family modernization theory has not been the dominant style in China. Instead, the changing intergenerational relationships evolved into a redefinition of filial piety and a rise in descending familism, in which the junior generation was described as “caring and supportive but not obedient” by the senior generation (Yan, 2016). In his work, Whyte (2020) terms this family shift “continuity and change.”

Another noteworthy change in Chinese families is an increase in married women’s intimacy with their parents. Multiple studies have shown that, compared to sons, married daughters provide as much—if not more—monetary assistance and daily care to their parents (Whyte, 2005; Xie & Zhu, 2009). In particular, following the one-child policy,¹⁾ singleton daughters enjoyed unprecedented parental support and maintained close relationships with their parents (Fong, 2002). Moreover, only daughters displayed a strong willingness to fulfill their filial duties when their parents grow old, even regarding themselves as equivalent to sons (Liu, 2008).

2. Intergenerational Intimacy and Individualized Familism

Since the 1990s, new dynamics of intergenerational relations have

1) China implemented the one-child policy in 1980. Owing to reasons such as low birth rate, China adopted a two-children policy in 2016 and further expanded it to a three-children policy in 2021.

emerged under market-oriented reforms. In a market-oriented context, people are disembedded from party-state institutions, and due to deficiencies in the welfare system, they have no choice but to turn to their families. Facing new uncertainties and risks, families have become the most important mechanism for individuals to reorganize and rebuild their sense of security (Yan, 2016). Multiple studies have consistently shown that flexible intergenerational solidarity exists among diverse Chinese families (Cui & Jin 2015; Guo et al., 2012; Ma, 2016; Yang & Li, 2009).

Research on working mothers in Europe shows that career women in European welfare states also have to rely on informal support networks to combine their professional and family lives to varying degrees. The labor market behavior of these European working mothers is based not only on weighing costs and benefits but also on cultural factors (Gerhard et al., 2005). During interpersonal negotiations, the dimension of viable reflexivity between available private and public resources, action, and cultural meaning is crucial and quite different from a simple presupposition of rationality (Knijn et al., 2005; Tobio & Trifiletti, 2005).

Regarding childcare support, prior research has shown that grandparents in southern European countries with inadequate welfare programs act as mother savers, providing intensive childcare to support their daughters/in-laws to stay in the labor market (Herlofson & Hagestad, 2012). Baker and Silverstein's (2012) comparative study found that intensive grandparenting is often accompanied by adverse selection into the role in the United States and positive selection into the role in China. Raschick and Ingersoll-Dayton's (2004) study also suggested that grandparents in rural China who engage in culturally important childcare activities may gain great satisfaction from enacting such valued family roles.

Particularly in urban China, with the deepening of marketization reform, parental power has been revived. Owing to high living expenses in urban areas, marriage formation is difficult without parental support, and most young adults need financial assistance from their parents for the down payment on a house, which considerably increases parental influence. Yan (2015) pointed out that the more competitive and riskier a society becomes, the more likely it is to seek protection from parental authority. Yan's study also found that, instead of arranged marriage, a new trend of arranged divorce (parent-driven divorce) is emerging in Chinese cities. The reason for divorce is usually incompatibility between the parents on

both sides, and the parents lead the negotiations on property division in the divorce court, whereas the young couple spends time on their phones. This implies an extraordinary degree of parental influence over the lives of young adults who live under the protection of their parents (Yan, 2015). Yan's argument echoes Chang's concept of "individualization without individualism" (Chang & Song, 2010). There is a loosening of marriages among the younger generation, which may suggest individualization or de-familialization. However, young adults are not characterized by typical individualism and remain closely attached to their parents.

The revival of parental authority does not simply mean regression to traditional family norms, which in China, are patriarchal and emphasize family cohesion and holistic interests (Fei, 1999). However, old features such as paternal bias and family centeredness are now blurred in inter-generational relations. Shen (2013) proposed the concept of the "iFamily (individual family)" when she found that individuals in a family have different family identities. Irrespective of the living arrangement, the young wife regards her husband, children, and her parents as family members, whereas the young husband believes that it should include his wife, children, and parents on both sides. Older adults recognize themselves and all their own children's families as family members, excluding the children's in-laws. This indicates that the wife does not consider her in-laws to be family members, and the wife's parents do not treat their married daughter as per traditional norms, an outsider. Yan (2016) also argued that the return of parental authority does not signal family wholeness but is instead a battle over the benefits that older parents expect for their adult children. In addition, some scholars take a gender perspective and use the term "bilateral" to capture this dynamic in intergenerational relations (Ji, 2020; Ochiai, 2019).

In summary, studies on changing family norms in China can be divided into three phases: before the 1990s, during the 1990s, and after 2000. Prior to 1990, research focused on the impact of socialist reforms on families, as evidenced by the decline in parental authority and the rise of maternal relations. In contrast, after 1990, with the deepening of market-oriented reforms, the social and economic environment changed substantially, and the mechanisms of family change became distinct from those of previous times. Since 2000, family research in China has focused on imbalanced intergenerational collaboration (Liu, 2021), which is char-

acterized by a tendency for resources to flow to the younger generation and by a revival of parental influence.

Prior research has profiled the intergenerational intimacy and growing power of the maternal side in Chinese families. However, there is hardly any evidence to date on how family members reconstruct their behaviors and thoughts through daily interactions in specific life situations. Thus, using data from interviews with seven married Chinese urban women, this study elaborates on the dynamics of family behaviors and norms in intergenerational interactions. It uses grandparental childcare support as an entry point as childcare support involves multigenerational family members and allows for a better understanding of the interactions among multigenerational family members. By analyzing the childrearing and work–life situations of these families, this study reveals how family members continue to reshape and reconfigure existing family norms under the given conditions and how the relationships are negotiated to ultimately lean toward the wife’s side. This study extends previous research by providing a micro-foundation for the hypothesis of intergenerational change with detailed evidence. Nowadays, family changes are becoming increasingly diverse and complex, and macro theories such as the family modernization theory cannot account for all the changing mechanisms. This paper serves as a case study to provide theoretical explanations for the up-to-date family changes.

II DATA AND METHOD

This study aims to reveal the changes in family norms in China by employing a case study. What is the case that will illustrate these changes? First, the main driver of changing family norms was the growing strength of the wife and her parents. Second, the wife’s parents need to be able to exert influence on the young couple, which consequently affects the entire intergenerational relationship. Highly educated young wives are likely to possess relatively qualified human capital and a family status (Li & Tsutsui, 2021). When young wives are only children, they tend to have closer relationships with their parents (Fong, 2002), at which point the power of the maternal family is likely to be fully exploited. Therefore, this study targets urban families in which the wife is highly educated and the only child. To keep the study firmly anchored in intergenerational interactions,

this study focuses on a major topic that involves multigenerational collaboration in China, namely childcare support; therefore, the research subjects were families with a little child who needed intensive care (except for respondent D²⁾).

Semi-structured interviews with seven female respondents were conducted from August to October 2019 through social networking service (SNS) text chats, lasting approximately 45–60 minutes for each participant. The investigator was introduced to the seven informants through acquaintances. All information was gathered through conversations with the wives. Survey items focused on specific details of interactions among multigenerational family members and attitudes toward the conventional family norms of each family member. During the survey, respondents were asked about their current child-raising situation, their relationships, and dealings with the couple's parents, whether they intended to have a second child after the enactment of the second-child policy, and each family member's preference for boys and multiple children. Table 1 presents the general information of the participants.

Table 1. General Information of the Respondents and their Families

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Age	26	29	29	25	30	27	25
Education Degree	University	University	Master	University	University	Master	University
Years of Marriage	1	3	1	1	7	1	2
Residency	Xinjiang	Jiangsu	Tianjin	Shenyang	Tianjin	Jiangsu	Jiangsu
Occupation	MD student	Company employee	Teacher	Unemployed	Teacher	Company employee	Company employee
Number of Children	1	1	1	0	1	1	1
Gender of Children	Male	Female	Female	–	Female	Male	Male
Age of Children	0	1	0	–	5	1	0

2) Respondent D was preparing for pregnancy at the time of the survey, and the parents of the husband and wife were actively involved in the young couple's lives as a backup for childcare support.

Age of Spouse	26	29	30	27	30	28	27
Occupation of Spouse	Police	Realtor	IT Professional	Self-employed	Company employee	Company employee	Programmer
Age of Mother	50	54	55	51	55	49	48
Age of Father	54	57	57	52	57	50	50

As shown in Table 1, the young wives all had a bachelor's degree or higher educational qualification, and most of them had regular jobs. The husbands also worked full-time. In these families, the grandparent generation was still in its prime, and the main theme of intergenerational relationships was childrearing, not yet concerning the issue of care for older adults. In the following analysis, the patterns and features of contemporary multigenerational family life are first presented, and the changes in family behavior and family norms are further explored.

III A PANORAMIC VIEW OF MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILY LIFE

1. Career-oriented Women

Modernization theory suggests that modern families are self-disciplined with a gender division of labor, where men are breadwinners and women are homemakers (Parsons, 1943).³⁾ In addition, subsequent studies have found that the gender division of labor is diversified across social strata with different logics. The middle-class logic of “concerted cultivation” necessitates a giving over of oneself to the demands of the role of mother, while the poor and working class holds a logic of “natural growth” (Bianchi, 2013). While in China, dual-career families have been mainstream since industrialization. Of the seven respondents in this study, except for one graduate student (respondent A) and one who had just resigned (respondent D), all the other five were in regular full-time employment. Among the five incumbents, two were teachers, and three were company

3) The modern family, as depicted by Parsons (1943), is a product of capitalist society. China's socioeconomic conditions are different from those of capitalist countries; see Chen (2014) for more details on the connection between family modernization theory and China's family studies.

employees (see Table 1). Although they were married and had children, they did not intend to quit their jobs. Despite having newborns who require intensive care, young mothers typically tend to focus more on their work; therefore, it can be argued that career development is of great significance to them.

According to the “Special Rules on the Labor Protection of Female Employees” in China, “the maternity leave of female employees shall be 98 days, including 15 days of antenatal leave.” Maternity leave in China is rather short compared to that in advanced capitalist states. However, in the interviews, the respondents did not complain of insufficient time; on the contrary, several women expressed frustration about the career stagnation that resulted from taking maternity leave:

“The raise is gone, and so is my promotion.” (Respondent B)

“Year-end bonus is gone, and the promotion next year, which I’ve been expecting, also gone.” (Respondent F)

“I got a C for the annual audit and a tiny, tiny bonus.” (Respondent G)

The highly educated working women in this study were heavily committed to their careers and considered it necessary.

“I still got a chance to be promoted, so I’m just gonna focus on my career.” (Respondent B)

“I think I’m going to get back to work as soon as possible.” (Respondent F)

“I’ve got to focus on my job when I get back to work...I need to be financially independent.” (Respondent G)

That of the school teacher is an in-system occupation in China, and teachers enjoy similar benefits and stability as civil servants, which is why maternity leave did not affect the careers of respondents C and E. However, this does not mean that teachers have an easier job than compa-

ny employees, given that all five working mothers talked about having a busy schedule; Respondent E said, “I am really busy at work.”

Facing the life event of having a child, the young mothers’ concern was not the lack of time and energy to watch the baby but that childcare could stall their promotion. In the interviews, they expressed frustration at being held back at work but not their guilt of not spending enough time with their families. Instead of complaining about their short maternity leave, they were planning to return to work before using up their leave. For career-oriented young mothers, allocating more time to their families is simply not an option.⁴⁾

Highly educated women are strongly motivated to pursue career development in a competitive social environment with rising living expenses. Employment policies since China’s socialist planned economy have also made most families adapt to a dual-earner family style. Although prior studies indicate that child-centrism exists in Chinese families and that family resources tend to flow to children (Ji, 2020; Yan, 2016), no particular motherhood norms exist in China. The findings of this interview suggest that the companionship of the mother herself was neither emphasized nor valued. All these factors incentivize highly educated women to prioritize their work between family and work.

2. Intensive Grandparenting Support⁵⁾

In this study, six husbands were employed full-time, except for one self-employed person. The corollary of a dual-earner family is an urgent need for outside childcare support. Facing the tricky issue of work-family balance, childcare support from parents and in-laws has become a lifeline for young wives. All the respondents reported receiving intensive grandparental support, and several of them said that they could not even imagine the situation without the grandparents’ help.

4) Currently a hot topic in Chinese society, involution describes the unwanted and irrational competition in a highly competitive social environment. Involution permeates various aspects of social life, and adults or teenagers—whether at the workplace or at school—are wrapped up in involution.

5) Regarding grandparenting in China, a large body of research has been accumulated targeting skipped families (families in which parents work elsewhere, leaving only grandparents and children at home), which mainly focuses on the impact of parental absence on children’s education. As this study focuses on how intergenerational relationships are tilted toward the wife’s side, the discussion on grandparenting in skipped families is not further developed. See Du et al. (2007) and Zheng (2008) for details.

“My mom helps me...they (my parents) are not yet retired, so I take care of the baby by myself during the day.” (Respondent A)

“My mother-in-law takes care of the baby during the day, and I take care of her (the baby) myself at night... Before I go to work, my mother-in-law comes to my house. After I get off work, she goes back to her house.” (Respondent B)

“Basically, my parents take care of the baby. When my husband and I get home from work, we do it together.” (Respondent C)

“My mother takes care of all the jobs (childcare).” (Respondent E)

“My mother handles the weekdays, and my husband and I handle the weekends” (Respondent F)

“My mother-in-law helps me with the baby.” (Respondent G)

A, who was out of school, and G, who was on maternity leave, took care of their baby along with their mother or mother-in-law. Except for these two mothers, the other four mothers left their children with their grandparents all day. Among them, B watched the baby by herself after work; F left the baby with her parents completely on weekdays, including after work hours, and E did not even take care of the child on weekends. The grandparents acted as full-time nannies, and some worked extra hours. However, there was no evidence of grandparents receiving monetary reward or compensation from young couples in return. Older grandparents were more likely to dig into their own pockets to buy toys and other stuff for their grandchildren. For example, respondent E talked about her father spoiling the granddaughter too much by buying whatever she asked.

Are Chinese older adults willing to care for their grandchildren? Are there any other solutions, such as hiring a nanny? Currently, in China, nannies are available, but the employment system is not yet well developed. Most nannies come from rural areas and have received no formal training. In recent years, there have been multiple news reports of nannies abusing babies, which have created an extreme distrust of nannies.

“Too many baby abuse stories have scared the hell out of me...it’s much better to just leave the baby with my parents,” said respondent C. Moreover, the “star nannies” with a good reputation can normally be only afforded by a handful of wealthy families.

Chinese older adults are generally willing to help with childcare; this is partly because of the cultural climate in China, where older parents usually feel obligated to contribute to the upbringing of their grandchildren, which is considered natural. An extreme case of normative orientation is B’s mother-in-law.

“My mother-in-law doesn’t really want to help me babysit at all, but she believes it’s an obligation.” (Respondent B)

Other than B’s mother-in-law, most older adults readily offer childcare support. In addition, seniors feel enriched by providing childcare support; not only does it help fill their free time, but it can also make their presence and voice felt. Although full-time childcare is extremely exhausting, especially for older adults, they still feel happy doing so. A part of the interview shows the following:

“My mother prepared everything for me before I went into labor...I rely on my parents too much and I know that.” (Respondent A)

“My parents are more than willing to help me take care of the baby.” (Respondent C)

Although D has not yet had a baby, she has already received childcare support from both her parents and in-laws.

“My parents and in-laws said they cannot wait any longer to babysit my child.” (Respondent D)

The normative values embedded in grandparental childcare support help older parents better cope with physical exertion and enable them to constantly devote themselves without seeking material rewards. During the interviews, conflicts between older parents and adult children over different styles of baby care were observed, whereas conflicts arising from

older adults complaining about exhaustion or asking for rewards never arose. For young couples, the only option is to gratefully accept parental support as the alternatives are slim to none; however, this is not necessarily a negative image. As discussed in the following section, multigenerational collaboration is still an effective way to run a family, even if it has its own set of problems.

Thus far, multigenerational collaboration in the form of childcare support among Chinese urban middle-class families has been characterized. Next, the specific situations and features of these intergenerational interactions are explored.

3. Wife's Side vs. Husband's Side

When young couples receive childcare support from their parents, do they prefer the husband's or wife's parents? Confucianism and patriarchal traditions indicate that family life in China is centered on the husband's side (Fei, 1999). Both in the past and at present, childcare has mainly been assumed by female family members. Nevertheless, in conventional ways, wives perform domestic work under the supervision of their mothers-in-law; therefore, the husband's family plays a greater role in intergenerational relations.

However, the respondents in this study showed a different tendency from the average Chinese family, that is, a tendency to favor the maternal family. For example, of the seven families, four were nuclear families consisting of couples with children (except D without children). Two respondents reported living with the wives' parents, and only one lived with their husbands' parents (Table 2). All respondents either lived with or in proximity to their own parents in the same city; however, regarding the husband's parents, except for co-residence and proximate residence, Respondents C, E, and F lived far from their in-laws. This is partly because of the relatively high socioeconomic status of these wives, therefore the sample can hardly be considered representative enough.

Table 2. Respondents Living Arrangements and Childcare Situation

	Living Arrangements	Childcare
A	With own parents(Husband absent)	Wife & Wife's mother
B	Couple and child	Wife & Wife's mother-in-law
C	With own parents	Wife's parents
D	Couple	-
E	Couple and child	Wife's mother
F	Couple and child	Couple & Wife's mother
G	With parents-in-law	Wife & Wife's mother-in-law

Evidence of intergenerational relationships tilting toward the wife's side is more pronounced in parental childcare support. Of the six cases in this study, four received help from the wife's parents and two from the husband's parents. The wife's side was twice that of the husband's side, which was not a coincidence but the result of the negotiations within these families.

It is worth mentioning that the respondents in this study were all highly educated, and only daughters from well-off families. Although co-residence with the husband's parents is still predominant in urban Chinese families, the wife's high educational attainment enhances the connection to her parents in terms of both living arrangements and mutual help (Li & Tsutsui, 2021). In this study, the young wives had at least a bachelor's degree and were mostly stable earners, which enabled them to have a considerable voice in family decision-making. As suggested by the modernization theory, that individuals' economic independence increases their autonomy of choice. Meanwhile, being the only daughter increased their intimacy with their parents, which also increased the latter's presence. Several young mothers explicitly expressed from the very beginning that they did not want their husbands' parents to be involved in childcare.

“My in-laws live close by, but they don't babysit. Even though they come to visit every day...I do not really expect them to look after my baby either.” (Respondent A)

“My in-laws live in the countryside and basically don't watch the

baby. I would prefer not to leave the baby with them anyway.” (Respondent C)

A and C received childcare support from their respective mothers. While intimate with their parents, they were unsympathetic or indifferent toward their in-laws. In other cases, various conflicts between young wives and their in-laws were observed.

“My mother-in-law and I have different thoughts, we fight...I think additive foods are harmful to the baby, but my mother-in-law always acts like it does not matter...She always says that’s how her son was raised, and she is really stubborn.” (Respondent B)

“We (My mother-in-law and I) have different thoughts. I choose to believe in the new (baby care) methods on the Internet, but my mother-in-law does not and thinks it is unnecessary...I mean there’s no right or wrong. I am a new mommy and I have no experience, so we will just have to work it out.” (Respondent G)

Both B and G received parenting support from and had disagreements with their mothers-in-law regarding baby care methods. B and her mother-in-law turned to fights, whereas G showed more appreciation. F had serious disagreements with her mother-in-law that they could not resolve, and they eventually drifted apart.

“Actually, my in-laws used to help me with the kid before. However, there was too much conflict, and it did not work out, so they (in-laws) eventually went back to their own house... like I produced less breast milk, so I planned on using formula. But my mother-in-law said no, and she literally forced me to drink drugs to stimulate lactation, which she learned from her folksy ways... it really drove me crazy...she does not even listen to others and she’s so incredibly stubborn.” (Respondent F)

In case of disagreement on childrearing, the young mothers and their in-laws often stuck fast and refused to be influenced; they were constantly at each other’s throats. In addition to arguments regarding childcare

methods, they also had other disagreements.

“I had conflicts with my in-laws even before the wedding, so I just don’t want to get involved with them too much.” (Respondent C)

For C and F, conflict with the in-laws was the main reason why the young wives chose to alienate their husbands’ parents. Owing to the pre-marital conflict, C did not wish to remain in contact with her in-laws ever since the wedding. While F would have accepted childcare support from her in-laws, she had to break it off because of irreconcilable conflicts.

In stark contrast, in cases where the wives’ parents provided support, respondents generally reported the sympathy and cooperation of their parents.

“Of course, we are different generations, with different ideas (about baby care) ...But they (own parents) listen to me, so there’s basically no problem.” (Respondent A)

“They (own parents) totally listen to me, I am absolutely relieved...They even voluntarily use the computer and smartphone to learn new baby care knowledge. So, I can concentrate on my work.” (Respondent C)

“We’ve (E and her parents) got no problem.” (Respondent E)

“I can’t stand my in-laws...I think it’s best to leave the baby with my (own) mother.” (Respondent F)

The four respondents who received assistance from their mothers reported no problems in having a good relationship with each other. The wives’ mothers showed patience and compatibility; they were willing to try their best to adjust themselves and learn new knowledge about childcare to meet the demands of the young mothers, which could largely stem from the affection of the mother for her only daughter.

In this study, the traditional sense of intergenerational interactions centered on the husband’s side no longer exists. Not only are intergenerational relations numerically biased in favor of the wife’s side, but also in

terms of the nature of multigenerational interaction, the husband's side no longer holds an absolute advantage. Wives do not obey their mothers-in-law; rather, they have endless quarrels. If possible, the young wife would choose to separate from her in-law midway and turn to her parents for assistance. Simultaneously, several respondents gravitated toward their mothers from the beginning and were emotionally detached from their in-laws. Moreover, most young couples received childcare support from the wives' parents and generally enjoyed good rapport with each other. The wife's parents do not overly seek obedience from the younger generation, and they are willing to change themselves to meet the young mother's wishes.

IV THE DYNAMICS AND RECONSTRUCTION OF TRADITIONAL VALUES

1. Children: Number and Gender Preferences

Traditional Chinese families mandate succession by male offspring, whereas girls usually have no inheritance rights. Therefore, the preference for male offspring is ingrained in traditional values. During the one-child policy period, the government's fertility restrictions caused many female babies to be aborted, which distorted the gender ratio at birth. Another old saying, "more sons, more happiness," is an expression of the Chinese preference for multiple children; however, after tremendous socioeconomic changes, do Chinese families still prefer more children and boys?

Based on this study, the answer would be no. First, regarding the preference for multiple children, among the 28 family members and couples (one pair of parents or in-laws was counted as one because they gave their opinions jointly) from seven households, as shown in Table 3, only 12 said that they wanted a second child. As can be seen, these 12 responses are almost concentrated in three families, namely families A, B, and D. Therefore, was there anything special about these three families? Did they simply want to have more children without any specific grounds? The answer is that there was something unique.

Table 3. Willingness for a Second Child

	Wife(Respondent)	Husband	Parents	In-laws
A	●	●	▲	●
B	×	●	●	●
C	▲	▲	▲	●
D	●	●	●	●
E	×	▲	×	●
F	×	×	×	▲
G	×	×	▲	▲

● Willing ▲ Both fine × Unwilling

Respondent A was a graduate student who took a break from school to give birth. She did not work and had no income. Her parents helped her with the baby and took on almost all of her financial burden. She immersed herself in the joy of being a new mother and hoped that the second child would be a girl based on the old saying of “儿女双全 (having both son and daughter),” which indicates good fortune for having children of both genders. A’s husband and in-laws had the same thoughts.

“Friends around me generally don’t want a second child, but I like children...I hope the second one is a baby girl...My husband and in-laws also want a second one...My husband and I are both only children, thus we hope our children can grow up with siblings so they won’t feel lonely.” (Respondent A)

However, it is intriguing that A’s parents, who were financially and physically burdened with childcare responsibilities, were less passionate about the second-child idea. A’s parents said that they were fine with or without a second grandchild, although they did not say outright that they did not want one. Still, their attitude was in stark contrast to the A couple and in-laws. If A needed to undertake the childcare burden herself, which would only be a matter of time, she may reconsider it.

Respondent D’s entire family wanted to have two children; yet the thought was founded on the fact that they did not have any children at the time of the study, and they certainly had not experienced the expenses or

physical burden of childcare.

The closer case to the traditional sense of multiple children preference is family B.

“Personally, I do not want a second kid...My husband and our parents all want one, but they leave the decision to me.” (Respondent B)

B’s families showed a deep appreciation for the childcare burden and work–life balance issues. Although they had a clear preference for multiple children, this preference was considerably diluted. The rest of the family members would respect B’s feelings.

The only case of a typical preference for multiple children is E’s in-laws.

“My in-laws want a second child, it doesn’t matter if it’s a boy or a girl, they just hope for more kids.” (Respondent E)

E’s in-laws made it clear that they wanted more grandchildren. However, as they are not very close to the E couple, they have little say.

“We both live in Tianjin City, yet they (in-laws) don’t help with the baby. So, I just ignore whatever they said.” (Respondent E)

The remaining 16 answers were either strongly opposed to a second child or did not hold a clear opinion. Considering the cultural context in China, there is a good chance that these neutral attitudes are more inclined to not want a second child; they may just feel awkward saying it outright because their preference for multiple children is ostensibly expected. Older people, in particular, are more accustomed to a softer tone.

Based on Table 3, among the seven young mothers, four were firmly against a second child, and one of them was neutral. The reasons are clear: education costs, childcare burden, and work–life balance issues.

“Childcare is just tough, I just do not think I can handle one more kid...education costs are huge...I want to guarantee my own time or focus on my career.” (Respondent B)

“I have no second child plan...Childcare is too exhausting; I do not want to add more burden to my parents (who are taking care of the baby right now).” (Respondent C)

“Absolutely no (second child). No more available babysitter in this family...My parents do not agree (on a second child) either... we are not baby people...Childcare makes me sick...There’s also an education issue.” (Respondent E)

“Hell no (second child) ...too overwhelming...I want to focus on my career.” (Respondent G)

The respondents’ statements ranged from “already swamped with one child” to “babysitting is just nauseous,” expressing their strong resistance to taking on an additional childcare burden. As they have the responsibility of raising children, young mothers are conscious of the upcoming challenges. All informants were prepared to invest in their children’s education, which is why they repeatedly stressed their educational expenditure. In child-centered family life, providing the best resources and creating the best environment for children have become the goals pursued by parents. B said, “I hope to give all my love to my only daughter,” indicating that not having a second child is also for the sake of the only child.

Interestingly, the attitudes of wives’ parents and their in-laws show a stark contrast. Table 3 shows that five in-laws wanted a second child, and two were neutral. However, among the wife’s parents, two opposed a second child, three were neutral, and only two explicitly said that they wanted one. Where does this difference originate? Should all members of the older generation not prefer more grandchildren? If the in-laws’ preference for more children reflects the influence of patriarchal traditions, where do the objections of the wives’ parents come from? The reasons for this are closely related to daily life scenarios. This study found that family members with high involvement in childrearing tended to oppose a second child, whereas those with low involvement tended to maintain a preference for more children. This is primarily why the husband’s parents tend to prefer multiple children, whereas the wife’s parents do not.

As discussed, most wives tend to maintain intimate relationships with their parents. The wife’s financial strength enhances her autonomy of

choice, which enables her to refuse to associate with in-laws and turns to her parents; and the maternal family’s childcare support increase the influence of the wife’s side, thus the husband’s side no longer holds a dominant position. The connotation of this preference for multiple children has changed significantly; it is no longer based on the reality of intensive patrilineal kinship interactions, but instead, it is precisely members with low engagement in family decision-making and little voice who hold this idea. This value becomes an illusion without a realistic grounding.

As for the preference for boys, what is the situation? In the case of those who had no intention of having a second child, it can be argued that the respondents were satisfied with the gender of the first child and had no particular preference. As they had settled for only one child, they had also subliminally muted their gender preferences. Among the responses of those who wanted to have a second child, as shown in Table 4, only two wished for a boy, both of whom were in-laws. One of them was involved in childcare (B’s in-laws) and the other was not (C’s in-laws). Possibly, B’s in-laws’ preference for a boy was closer to the traditional sense, whereas that of C’s in-laws was closer to the “illusion” of preference noted above. Moreover, two families expressed a preference for one girl and one boy; however, these were the two families with greater uncertainties, as discussed above: A had not taken on the responsibility of raising the child herself, and family D did not yet have any children. The findings above suggest that the preference for boys had weakened considerably among the interviewed families, which is consistent with the findings of Xu et al. (2018).

Table 4. Gender Preference of the Second Child

	Gender of child	Respondents	Parents	In-laws
A	Male	Female	Female	▲
B	Female	×	▲	Male
C	Female	▲	▲	Male
D	—	1 Male 1 Female	▲	▲
E	Female	×	▲	▲
F	Male	×	×	▲
G	Male	×	▲	▲

× Unwilling for a second child ▲ Both fine

2. The Last Name of the Child

In Chinese patriarchal tradition, the last name represents a family lineage. Children normally take their fathers' last name. The children of the young couple are “孙子女 (grandchildren)” to the husband's parents and “外孙子女 (outside- grandchildren)” to the wife's parents, indicating that they do not count as real members of the maternal family. Although this phenomenon appears less common in this study, this idea still exists.

“My mother thinks taking care of the baby is the business of my mother-in-law...she said, doesn't the child take the father's surname?” (Respondent B)

Family D also valued the last name.

“We want two children, one takes my husband's surname and one takes mine...We made an agreement before the wedding.” (Respondent D)

It can be observed that the notion of last names still exists, although it has been reconstructed in the dynamics of intergenerational interaction. For the D family, last name inheritance is not entirely predicated on patrilineal logic but rather a benefit that is gender-free and accessible to anyone. As discussed, the wife's parents maintained a close relationship with the young couple by providing childcare support, thus enhancing their own voice and presence. It appears that they wanted to use their increased influence to exploit their further advantages, such as negotiating for the children's last name. Consequently, the connotation of the last name norm is transformed, shifting from patriarchal logic to plural logic, which includes lineage inheritance, negotiation, and competition between paternal and maternal families. The type of logic that plays a decisive role depends on the circumstances.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study analyzed the intergenerational practices centering on childcare support in Chinese urban middle-class families, revealing the process

whereby multigenerational family members adjust their behavior and reconstruct their values under certain conditions. Its most significant finding is that, in these urban middle-class, dual-earner families, the wife's voice increases significantly because of her heightened economic autonomy. When receiving grandparental childcare support, wives no longer follow the traditional practice of being assisted by their mothers-in-law. Their voices give them the strength to reject this preconceived notion and cease to endure the conflicts of dealing with their in-laws. As an alternative, they turn to their parents for assistance. Parenting support from the wife's parents further reinforces the voice of the maternal family. In intergenerational interactions, the influence of the maternal family gradually grows, such as through the wife's refusal to consider her in-laws' opinion on whether to have a second child and gender preference of the child and instead maintain a view that is more consistent with that of her own parents. In addition, statistics show that the preference for male offspring has generally weakened in China (Iwai and Yasuda, 2009).

The wives in this study received childcare support from their parents for two reasons. On the one hand, wives reported feeling more satisfied with their own parents; they also had the strength to refuse to associate themselves with their in-laws. On the other hand, the wife's parents were willing to provide childcare support. Conventionally, when a daughter marries, she is an outsider to the maternal family, and the wife's parents are not obligated to offer help. However, in contemporary China, only children are typically closely attached to their parents, and only daughters enjoy the love and financial investment of their parents since childhood. As discussed earlier, only daughters feel responsible for taking care of their parents in old age, and parents do not treat their married daughters as outsiders.

As discussed above, the increase in the wife's voice acts as a driving force leading to changes in family behavior and norms. The working mothers in this study consciously valued their professional life and financial independence, which is the key to their voice. Young wives place extra importance on their earning ability, bonus and promotion, and increased economic ability enhances their agency of choice, empowering them to disregard traditional customs. Why does this phenomenon occur, and why do young mothers strive to pursue their careers while sacrificing their children's companionship? In Japanese families, the "three-year-old myth"

stipulates that the child must be cared for by the mother herself until the age of three; doing otherwise will be harmful to the child's development. In addition, in Europe and the United States, the concept of companionship is significant for family values. Why is this not the case for the interviewed families? This article argues that this is because of the increasingly competitive climate in Chinese society, in which people's behavior is becoming increasingly market- and demand-oriented. Values that can adapt to this demand-driven principle are more likely to survive; otherwise, they are replaced. This is why the voice gained from professional life and financial independence was emphasized by these wives, who exercised such power to change old behavioral patterns and family values.

In this study, under the market-oriented and demand-driven principle, the survival space of old values is squeezed. The strategy employed by working mothers is to maximize the use of private childcare network support to pursue professional development and financial independence in an increasingly competitive social environment, which in turn has brought about changes in previous family behaviors and family orders.

According to the narratives of the respondents in this study, despite the demanding and exhausting work, it is evident that grandparents in these urban Chinese middle-class families are readily available to provide childcare support. Not only are they aware of the cultural implications and significance of childcare support, but they also proactively use this practice to claim their voice. This is how the voice of the maternal family continues to be enhanced in this study.

The analysis in this study found that the mechanisms of change in family values are fluid. One factor may modify the conventional values in the opposite direction, and an increased maternal voice has the potential to weaken and strengthen traditional norms. Maternal families selectively reject, accept, or modify traditional values in intergenerational interactions. Moreover, it can be argued that the way in which a particular factor acts on certain values depends on social context. In contemporary urban China, the competitive social environment and demand-driven principles have highlighted the voice that comes with the wife's economic ability. Arguably, these dynamics and normative changes are aimed at creating an optimal strategy for families to negotiate between resources and needs, which ultimately leads to the reconfiguration of intergenerational relations.

This study has several limitations. Owing to the highly specific focus of this study, it lacks representativeness. The findings of this study may not be generalizable to the non-highly educated or non-only-child female population; therefore, research on diverse families is required. Moreover, as this study collected information only from the wives' narratives, the analysis may be biased; for example, mothers tend to place more importance on their children's educational inputs than fathers, which in the eyes of the latter may not seem as important. Moreover, how young wives themselves comprehend their earning power and whether their behaviors in the professional and domestic spheres are intentional or unintentional deserve further study. In addition, although this study sheds light on changes in family norms related to childrearing, it is only one part of multigenerational relationships. Mechanisms of changes in different aspects of intergenerational relations may or may not be the same, and further empirical research is required regarding other relevant issues, such as care for older adults, through which to explore the normative changes in other aspects of intergenerational relationships as well as the dynamics and mechanisms of such changes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers whose constructive comments have greatly benefited this article. I owe special thanks to Dr. Junya Tsutsui for his insightful comments on multiple drafts of this article. I am deeply indebted to Miss Rong Zhang, who is an alumna of Ritsumeikan University, for assisting me in collecting the research data for this study.

REFERENCES

- Baker, L. and M. Silverstein (2012) "The Wellbeing of Grandparents Caring for Grandchildren in Rural China and the United States," in Sara Arber and Virpi Timonen (ed), *Contemporary Grandparenting: Changing Family Relationships in Global Contexts*, UK: The Policy Press.
- Bianchi, S. M. (2013) "The More They Change, the More They Stay the Same?: Understanding Family Change in the Twenty-first century," *Contemporary Sociology*, 42(3): 324-331.
- Chang K. S. (2010) "The second modern condition? Compressed modernity as internal-

- ized reflexive cosmopolitization”, *British Journal of Sociology*, 61:444-464.
- Chang, K. S. and M.Y. Song (2010) “The Stranded Individualizer under Compressed Modernity: South Korean Women in Individualization without Individualism,” *British Journal of Sociology*, 61(3): 539–564.
- Chen, X. (2014) “Modernization Theory on Family and the Contemporary Family in China: A Literature Review,” *Chongqing Social Sciences*, 237: 67-72.
- Cui, Y. and X. Jin (2015) “Intergenerational Relationship in Migrant Families in the Context of Rural to Urban Migration: a Typological Analysis,” *Population Research*, 39(3): 48-60. (In Chinese)
- Du P., Y. Li et al. (2007) “Influence of Floating Population on their Families,” *Population Journal*, 161: 3-9.
- Fei, X. (1999) *The Institution of Reproduction*, Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Fong, V. L. (2002) “China’s One-child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters,” *American Anthropologist*, 104(4): 1098-1109.
- Gerhard, U., T. Knijn and A. Weckwert (2005) “Introduction: Social Practices and Social Policies,” in Ute Gerhard, Trudie Knijn and Anja Weckwert (eds), *Working Mothers in Europe: A Comparison of Policies and Practices*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Guo, M., I. Chen and M. Silverstein (2012) “The Structure of Intergenerational Relations in Rural China: A Latent Class Analysis,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74: 1114-1128.
- Herlofson, K. and G. O. Hagestad (2012) “Transformations in the Role of Grandparents Across Welfare States,” in Sara Arber and Virpi Timonen (ed), *Contemporary Grandparenting: Changing Family Relationships in Global Contexts*, UK: The Policy Press.
- Iwai, N. and T. Yasuda (2009) *Family Values in East Asia*, Kyoto: Nakanishiya Press.
- Ji, Y., H. Wang, Y. Liu, R. Xu and Z. Zheng (2020) “Young Women’s Fertility Intentions and the Emerging Bilateral Family System under China’s Two-child Family Planning Policy,” *The China Review*, 20(2): 113-141.
- Knijn, T., I. Jönsson and U. Gerhard (2005) “Care Packages: The Organisation of Work and Care by Working Mothers,” in Ute Gerhard, Trudie Knijn and Anja Weckwert (eds), *Working Mothers in Europe: A Comparison of Policies and Practices*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Li, W. and J. Tsutsui (2021) “Gender Differences in Intergenerational Relationships in Contemporary Urban China,” *Japanese Journal of Family Sociology*, 33(2): 157-170.
- Liu, F. (2008) “Negotiating the Filial Self: Young-adult Only-children and intergenerational relationships in China,” *Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, 16(4):409-430.
- Liu, W. (2021) *Living in the Heart: Family Intergenerational Relations and Filial Practices in the Transition Period*, Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House.

- Ma, C. (2016) "The Structure of Adult Parent-Child Relationships in Chinese Families of Urban Areas and Effects of Social Class," *Chinese Journal of Social Development*, 3: 44-70+243. (In Chinese)
- Ochiai, E. (2019) *21 Seiki kazoku e: Kazoku no sengotaisei no mikata, koekata (The Japanese Family System in Transition)*, 4th ed., Tokyo: Yuhikaku.
- Parish, W. L. and Whyte. M. (1978) *Village and Family in Contemporary China*, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Parsons, T. (1943) "The Kinship System of the Contemporary United States," *American Anthropologist*, 45: 22-38.
- Michael, R. and I. D. Berit (2004) "The Costs and Rewards of Caregiving among Aging Spouses and Adult Children," *Family Relations*, 53(3): 317-325.
- Shen, Y. (2013) "Individualization, Changing Urban Family Identity, and the Rise of Women in China," *Academia Bimestrie*, 2: 64-71. (In Chinese)
- Thornton, A. (2005) *Reading History Sideways: The Fallacy and Enduring impact of the Developmental Paradigm on Family Life*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Thornton, A. and T. E. Fricke (1987) "Social Change and the Family: Comparative Perspectives from the West, China, and South Asia," *Sociological Forum*, 2(4):746-779.
- Tobìo, C. and R. Trifiletti (2005) "Strategies, Everyday Practices and Social Change," in Ute Gerhard, Trudie Knijn and Anja Weckwert (eds), *Working Mothers in Europe: A Comparison of Policies and Practices*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Whyte, M. and Y. Hong (2005) "Continuity and Change in Urban Chinese Family Life," *Open Times*, 3: 62-79. (In Chinese)
- Whyte, M. (2020) "Confronting Puzzles in Understanding Chinese Family Change: A Personal Reflection," *Chinese Journal of Sociology*, 6(3): 339-363.
- Xie, Y. and H. Zhu (2009) "Do Sons or Daughters Give More Money to Parents in Urban China," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71(1): 174-186.
- Xu, A., J. DeFrain and W. Liu (2018) *The Chinese Family Today*, London: Routledge.
- Yan, Y. (2003) *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949-1999*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- (2010) "The Chinese Path to Individualization," *The British Journal of Sociology*, 61(3): 489-512.
- (2015) "Parent-driven Divorce and Individualisation among Urban Chinese Youth," *International Social Science Journal*, 213-214: 317-330.
- (2016) "Intergenerational Intimacy and Descending Familism in Rural North China," *American Anthropologist*, 118(2): 244-257.
- Yang, J. and L. Li (2009) "Intergenerational Dynamics and Family Solidarity: A Comparative a Study of Mainland China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan," *Sociological Studies*, 3: 26-52+243. (In Chinese)
- Zheng, Y. (2008) "Grandparenting in Chinese Urban and Rural Families," *Academic Exchange*, 174: 124-126.

