



Why grandmothers take care of grandchildren? Research of middle-class elder women in Chinese cities

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Abstract. In China, many grandmothers are taking part in caring for grandchildren. The paper focuses on urban middle-class families with grandmothers as their caregivers. It is analyzed the gender bias and the structural oppression faced by older women in China with evidence from some in-depth interviews in Beijing and Shenzhen, these two metropolises. In addition, the author analyzes why grandmothers should take care of their grandchildren from macro and micro levels, combined with information from feedback and the living conditions of these interviewed elderly women. The discipline of thousands of years of traditional culture, family values, and patriarchal society influence elderly women, who naturally become grandmothers. Moreover, the middle-class economic condition and limited social institutions for kids and the elder also restricted women's choices. In response, the author puts forward corresponding countermeasures.

Keywords: Elderly Women, Caregiver, Retirement, Grandmother.

1 Introduction

It is rare to see the actual topic of feminist discussion. Only on Women's Day can women make a sound; at other times, it is mostly silent. Middle-aged and young women, with or without the awakening of feminist consciousness, there is a big gap between these female groups themselves. Only a few middle-aged and old women are affected and decide to refuse to become caregivers. However, more of their efforts are taken for granted by men, their families, and this patriarchal society.

Those women are squeezed in their career choices and only occupy the layout on Women's Day. This means that middle-aged and elderly women have undertaken a lot of work under the premise of de-sexualization, but these women have not received corresponding attention. Elderly women in China are faced with the dilemma, and when they make a choice, they are trapped in a "being chosen" condition, regardless of work or life. The overwhelming number of female advertisements for Women's Day only treat women as consumers and target more young women.

This paper will analyze a group of middle-class grandmothers in urban China. The paper focuses on their life and why they have decided to take care of their grandchildren, due to their own willingness or without alternatives. From the perspective of society and culture, China's tradition is different from other Asian countries, which

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S. Yacob et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2023 7th International Seminar on Education, Management and Social Sciences (ISEMSS 2023)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 779, https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-126-5_35

influences women's choices. From the micro level of individuals, the paper will discuss their emotional relationships, psychological explanations, economic foundation, family structures, burdens, etc. It will explore how these motives interact with each other to establish a connection between family members and society and how these conditions reinforce their parenthood.

2 Case Study: Life of the Elderly Women

In order to pay more attention to the diversity of grandparents' life in the urban middle class, especially women, the author interviewed four mid-age females in Shenzhen and Beijing, both metropolises of China. Two of them are raising their grandchildren, and two of them do not have grandchildren yet.

The first grandmother in Beijing is Madam Yang. Yang is 66 years old and has cared for her granddaughter for 9 years. In other words, she has cared for her granddaughter after retirement. Yang's daily routine is getting up at 5:50, going to her son's home, and cooking breakfast for the whole family. After breakfast, she must send her granddaughter to school and buy food for dinner. Yang says lunchtime is the most relaxing time for her because, during this time, the son and daughter-in-law are not home, so she can cook simple meals without being constantly ordered by them. Around 15:00 or 16:00, Yang must pick up her granddaughter after school or accompany her to training class. In the evening, Yang must cook and wash the dishes for the whole family. After this was all done, around 21 o'clock, she could return to her rented house. This has been her daily life for nearly ten years.

Yu et al. argued that there is a motherhood penalty on salary for every childbirth in a Chinese family. It depends on the mother living with her parents or parents-in-law because of the patriarchal nature ^[1]. Gary and William's research on gender wage inequality support that women's economic base is worse than men's ^[2] because they have systematically favored men for decades, and women's employment is always associated with taking care of their children. These two studies show that the biological mother is more helpful to her daughter in caring ^[1,2]. However, Yang's example shows that as a mother-in-law and a member of the husband's side family, she has also made great efforts to take care of her granddaughter. In fact, the pressure brought by having children has not improved. Due to the unpaid contribution based on consanguinity, the responsibility boundary is blurred. From the beginning, Yang only took care of her granddaughter, and it was inevitable that she gradually took over the housework of the whole family of her granddaughter.

The second case in Shenzhen is Madam Lin. Lin is 63 years old and has two granddaughters. Compared with Madam Yang, Lin is satisfied with caring for her grandchildren. Because she is local, there is no need to leave her house. She lives with her daughter and supports her daughter and son-in-law in buying a house. This condition applied to research that maternal grandmother is more likely to help her daughter ^[3]. Lin and her daughter made a consent that just helps them take care of grandchildren for 3 years, and after that, they must live independently. Lin's duties are more on cooking and picking up granddaughters when parents have no time. But unlike the first case, Yang has

almost taken care of the trivial matters of the granddaughter's family.

The third case in Beijing is Madam Zheng, who lives without children or grandchildren. Zheng is 64 years old. She has a son who has studied abroad for many years, so she can live alone without the burden of caring for her grandchildren. Taking good care of her health, hanging out with her friends, and dancing in the square at night constitute her retirement life. In addition, there is also anxiety for her because of does not have grandchildren. Other women at the same age almost became grandmothers, so they could talk with each other about the rising-up stuff. Getting involved in social interactions is a little bit hard for Zheng.

The last case in Shenzhen is Madam Ban, another target without grandchildren. Ban is 59 years old. She is more open than most Asian parents on childbirth. Ban's attitude toward taking care of grandchildren is clear; she refuses to take this part of the responsibility. In Ban's view, she has her own life. And she does not want to live like the first case.

Besides, the author collected the situation in some rural areas of China and found that women caring for their grandchildren is equally bad. Shangyi et al. conducted studies on the gender bias of grandparents caring for grandchildren in rural Chinese areas, which clarified that grandmothers spend more time than grandfathers^[3,4]. What's more, the sense of belonging in caring for babies in a rural area in China, women are more likely to see their efforts as non-labor, while men could see themselves as farmers, not grandfathers^[3]. This could be related to Bruno's and Daniela's idea about the elderly women in Europe, who are overburdened by their work and caring for their grandchildren^[1]. Chinese elderly women in rural areas also suffered from sacrificing the opportunity to do farm work for income and spend a lot of time caring for grandchildren^[3]. In a patriarchal society^[5] where caring for grandchildren is not regarded as a formal job to be respected, women are trapped in structural poverty. Until today those middle-class older women in cities also face some of the same dilemmas.

3 Analysis of Motivations

From these cases of these elder women, it can be inferred who has the burden of childhood and who does not. Besides, grandmothers could be divided into those who seek this kind of life and those who refuse it. Natural of these lifestyles is the responsibility transition and overburden on older women.

The author believes the traditional attitudes towards women and family culture cause the latter 4 situations. Besides external factors such as traditional culture and social environment, the stereotype of the older generation on the role of women has been formed for a long time. Women themselves decide on grandchildren care; even they do not know if it is their true thoughts or the outside factors that let them have this choice. Besides the traditional attitudes that shaped women's choice of childcare, some objections also lead women to this seemingly limited choice. In other words, the retired women's economic situation, emotional connection with their grandchildren, personal sense of belonging, and family structure also shape the phenomenon of grandparents taking care of their grandchildren in China.

In addition, grandmothers' emotions both from her selves or to grandchildren, author here analyst these two from the start from individual social roles. These two reasons, of course, are related to traditional concepts. However, grandmothers' emotions from herself focus on external pressure from the perspective of social macro, while emotions to grandchildren consider personal emotional output from the perspective of grandmothers themselves. Counter to the fourth research on non-optimistic attitudes toward grandmothers' mental health condition, Notter indicates a good mood for grandmothers caring for grandchildren because of more opportunities to engage in society [6].

In the first case Madam Yang, her words show that before her retirement, she was planning to take care of her granddaughter just because life did not have other choices. All she wants to do is becoming a grandmother. Although she did not know then, the responsibility she would bear in the future would be so heavy and extremely hard. However, for Madam Yang, talking about her granddaughter's joy can offset most of the hardships of buying food and cooking. It can be seen that emotional bonds, feelings of being needed, and the obligation of traditional women greatly influence Ms. Yang's choice.

The above attitude brings a question: why could Yang only look for emotional needs from the vertical generation of her granddaughter but not from the horizontal level of herself, her friends, and her career? To answer this question, Yang's family structure is an excellent point to break through. Yang is the first kind in her family and has many younger sisters to care for. After marriage, Yang has a son and a younger daughter. In Chinese tradition, the son is always better than the daughter. In other words, the daughter would build a relationship with other men in the future, not belong to her original family. However, the son who inherits his father's surname will marry and build a family, which in their eyes, is a member of the family of origin. This is the tradition in Yang's view. Also is the opinion of many old generations in China.

In addition, Yang, a retired female, was supposed to take care of her grandchild after her son married. It is because of the Chinese social environment. For decades, people always cared about if their neighbor had a son or daughter if their grandchild was a boy or girl, their salaries, their lives, and all about the small things they want to get to know and make comparisons to see which one is better, who is more affluent, who has a son and so on. People judge other lifestyles. There is only one model to live. Yang, as a part of an urban citizen living with neighbors with curiosity and a son with a traditional marriage attitude, the grandchild's birth in her family is, as expected, perfectly usual and even a happy event to be celebrated.

Living in this social and cultural environment, if Yang, a retired woman, does not have a job or grandchild, her life would be filled with neighbors' asking and pressure. Then she could send this childbirth pressure to her son and daughter-in-law. In this way, as a woman shaped by others and the external environment, she becomes the driving force in a deeply rooted patriarchal society because she does not have other choices.

Except for the macro reasons, the economic conditions, emotional needs, and social solutions, these objections could not be ignored. Koeske and Krowinski found gender inequality in social work pay, where women are lower than men [2]. Besides, Arpino and Bellani indicated better mental health conditions among grandparents with many grandchildren [7]. In other words, an emotional bond between grandparents and

grandchildren enables grandparents to enjoy their loving life. As they age and retire, the elderly lose their social character from their careers and their children as parents. They search for something to fill this blank or sense of loss. Working as a caregiver for grandchildren is a natural and common way for most women after retirement, especially in China, because of the emotional value of both economic and consanguinity.

4 Reasons for the Dilemma of Elder Women

Changing the culture and tradition of thousands of years is difficult. Elderly women in China have experienced traditions and family values for decades, which stay in their minds. When they are young, they find a good man and get married, and then have children at an appropriate time. When they are old or retired, they naturally become grandmothers, caring for babies, spending their time and money, giving up their possibilities, and providing emotional support.

However, under such circumstances, the traditional culture presupposes that any member of the family, whether son or daughter, will get married. In fact, in modern society, many people will not choose to enter a marriage relationship now. Then these traditional presuppositions are broken. In other words, people would likely build a new relationship without limitations of family or their characters as family members. In this case, they would take themselves to the first level. For example, if a woman without gender bias decides only by starting with what she wants, things would be different. Then, whether a woman chooses to care for her grandchildren or not is acceptable. The cases of some interviewees in the research show similar attitudes.

Because of economic reasons, not all parents can afford to hire babysitters, even those urban middle-class families targeted as the object of research. Limited economic conditions would be a reason why they do not choose babysitters. Because in the metropolis, salaries are higher than in small cities. Parents must consider costs when planning, so using their own mothers to some extent advantage over hiring babysitters. Because, as a grandmother, there is a natural emotional bond that does not have to be built over time. However, parents and children need time to conform if they hire a new babysitter. In addition to grandma's unconditional love for her grandchild, economic consideration is the most realistic factor. Grandmothers do not need to be paid to look after grandchildren, which is the logic of most parents in China. Everything is rationalized because of consanguinity, ignoring the time cost and labor costs of grandmothers. However, there is no doubt that the cost of hiring a babysitter for the same service is very high.

In addition, the working conditions are with apparent sexual distinction for elderly women without specific knowledge or technics, thus leaving baby-caring the only "decent" way of life. In order to hire women, whether it is employees, employers, or groups receiving services, this noticeable gender difference has been invisibly erased or ignored when hiring women. Because in the patriarchal society, men occupy dominant positions, they put their physiological needs, family status, and career map first. Then they spread their needs to women of different ages and places so that they can distribute them in the remaining resources.

Dantong et al. also has a study on the rural areas of China, which shows that the mental health status of elderly women should be carefully observed as grandmothers participate in grandchildren for a longer time than grandfathers do [4]. Although this paper targets urban elderly women, Dantong's view could support the existence of gender inequality in caring for grandchildren in China. However, the author disapproves of Dantong's attitude towards encouraging grandparents' moderate participation in caring [4]. The author supports that the role of "grandmother" is only the secondary character that others define. It is necessary to have autonomy as "human beings" whether they participate in raising grandchildren or not. Combined with the rural situation mentioned before, why grandmothers naturally become caregivers could be answered by the lack of parents' family responsibility. However, grandmothers do not want to see their daughter or son lose their jobs or income because they are with their children, so they sacrifice themselves. [1,3]. It is common in prosperous cities and rural villages in China that grandmothers take full responsibility for their grandchildren.

5 Solutions from the Society and the Family

Changes in culture and value systems would take decades and with people's joint effort, which is problematic. It is necessary to establish an adequate economic foundation and social institutions. No reliable institution or organization can participate in this work, even in Chinese megacities such as Beijing and Shenzhen. Thus, caring for children is transferred from parents and society to grandparents, especially grandmothers. Parents in a metropolis take lots of time to work and commute. Besides, children's after-school time is always earlier than parents' off-duty time. This time gap is filled by retired grandmothers in many families.

Besides, in the author's view, institutions should not only refer to kids but also include those grandmothers. In other words, more institutions should be set up for older retired women who can become a grandmother. Ideally, there are some institutions for the interests and personal hobbies of older women, such as music, painting, dancing, or calligraphy. It is based on developing women's interests and diversifying their lives as human beings rather than as mothers, sisters, and grandmothers. Under this condition, the older women's emotional needs would be fulfilled with hobbies, friends, and the same values, not only restricted to their grandchildren. If a group of people has shared values and the same hobby, they can quickly build friendships or companionship based on gender, humanity, and interests. It does not prevent grandma from becoming caregivers but provides a new choice for older women.

The author believes diversifying older women's life constructions would shape healthier family relations. Such as Yang's case in Beijing, she is far from her hometown without friends and only works for her son and daughter-in-law. She is supported by a small quantity of emotional feedback from her granddaughter. Even from Yang's view, she is trying her best to look after the whole family, but there are still quarrels and dissatisfaction. After years of having no-friend or other close family members to talk to, Yang spends her spare time wandering around the corridor. According to Yang's description of herself, there are symptoms of slow response and slow speech speed

caused by caregiver life and loneliness.

Grandmother will inevitably be disappointed when she pays more for one thing than she receives in return. However, if her life is not limited to the caregiver, the happiness she receives may be compensated by other things. When Yang's life is only occupied by caring for her granddaughter, most of her emotional ups and downs are related to family chores.

Research from Bruno and Daniela on older women in Europe pointed out that with dual roles in their work and as a caregiver, there is a risk for grandmothers under pressure [7]. Even though it is a study of European society, it also enlightens that for grandmothers, except for their family characteristics, their social status is affirmed. Suppose they ignore the personal value of older women and acquiesce that they must bear family responsibilities. In that case, it will undoubtedly burden the older women who have yet to retire [7]. However, if we pay attention to the pressure of elderly women who have jobs, should Chinese women who retire naturally become "grandmothers"? The author's answer is no.

These older women's children, i.e., parents of the kids, should also take responsibility for their little kids and elder parents at home. The responsibilities that the parents should have born are often passed on to the older generation. When the way or results of caring for the elder differs from that of parents, the elder has become the object of parents' blame. In this case, grandmothers suffer from their sense of imbalance in return, and even heartache caused by their children, and economic benefits are even less. This could also explain why nowadays many younger relatives do not choose to get married. At the same time, they suppose that it is not necessary for grandparents to take care of grandchildren. Just like the previous interview, the second and last cases were Madam Lin and Madam Ban. One said that she would not be a caregiver for her grandchildren, and another set a plan of providing help to take care of grandchildren instead of caring indefinitely. This would be a manifestation of the independent consciousness of the older women in the contemporary city. In addition, in Chinese megapolis it is very normal for grandmothers to take care of grandchildren. In fact, it is even more common in the all the cities and villages in China.

6 Conclusion

In Vann's research on gender in 2017, women were accessories and sexual objects of colonial men [8], which shows that women had been at a disadvantage level for many years. Besides, another research on women, abortion, and crime rate pointed out a positive relation between abortion legalized and a decrease in crime rate [9]. In addition, John Tosh analyzed that men were not allowed to show weakness under the influence of masculinity so that they had strong positions in both society and family during the Victoria era, while women were restricted to work for the whole family, due to lack of social, political and economic status [5]. Much literature is focused on the physical and mental stress of older women in caring for their grandchildren. There are rarely academic studies of women's character in a patriarchal society for thousand-year.

Whether it is the feudal era thousands of years ago, or the modern society, in Europe

or Asia, we can see that middle-aged and older women are independent in employment, retirement, and personal choice in the patriarchal society. However, in fact, they are in a marginal state. This paper originates from the case study, focusing on the present situation of retired older women with grandchildren in contemporary China cities. Collecting the life and psychological state of several older women with grandchildren and without grandchildren, the paper summarizes the economic, social, public opinion, and ideological difficulties faced by older women. Wu et al. research has also supported that the grandmother as a caregiver tends to be with low-quality mental health conditions [10]. Furthermore, put forward that if we aim to change this situation, we truly see the plight of older women and provide them with the opportunities to make their own choices. Both society and the family support culture and social institutions so that older women can truly see the diversity and possibilities of life.

The life of older women is related to the whole of society. In a patriarchal society, men and women are disciplined to be strong or weak, right or wrong. This value nowadays is still recognized by many elderly generations in China, especially by women. However, the author believes that everyone, whether man or woman, can be themselves and make their own decisions. Males can undoubtedly be encouraged if they want to take care of their families. Today's conditions have yet to develop to this ideal level.

This paper only focuses on small groups in urban China and analyzes only the number of metropolises in China for retired urban middle-class women. It is necessary to enlarge the research group of different levels of women because women's restrictions on choices are structural. The embodiment of the independent consciousness of the elder only exists in a small group of educated and economically affluent urban middle-class women. In contrast, the awareness of feminism among some women in rural areas is even worse. However, these actions and attitudes of feminism have not been widely accepted or even popularized in China, and there are no linkages among these awakened female groups.

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