



Dilemma and Breakthrough: A Study on Motherhood in China

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Abstract. This paper systematically reviews and examines the current situation, practical dilemmas and breakthrough paths of motherhood in China. In the era of low fertility, motherhood has evolved from a private issue into a public concern related to population reproduction and sustainable social development, undergoing an unprecedented restructuring. Based on an analysis of the conceptual evolution of motherhood, this paper explores the maternal practices of urban middle-class women from the dimensions of institution–practice–experience–institution, and reveals the institutional roots of the motherhood penalty and the practical differentiation and core dilemmas of maternal anxiety. Findings show that contemporary Chinese motherhood is characterized by multiple transformations, including duty intensification, educational brokerization, and digitalization. The absence of fatherhood, and the lack of high-quality public childcare services form the structural background of maternal dilemmas. Resolving these dilemmas requires transcending the privatized framework and moving toward socialized sharing of responsibilities. New circumstances demand new institution and the construction of a fertility-friendly society.

Keywords: Motherhood; Intensive Motherhood; Motherhood Penalty; Fertility-friendly Society

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Chinese is experiencing a period of rapid transformation. Low fertility, education rat-race, and difficulties for women to return to work have elevated motherhood from the private sphere to the core of public concern and academic research. Motherhood is no longer merely a family responsibility, but a complex practice resonating with workplace, social issues, culture and institutions.

As the primary bearers of childbirth and childcare, women's fertility decisions are constrained by career development, time costs, economic pressure, care resources and social support. An irreconcilable contradiction has emerged between individual fertility costs and social demands for population reproduction. Maternal dilemmas not only

impair women's development, well-being and self-efficacy, but also directly depress their fertility intentions, leading to fertility rate is persistently below replacement level in China.

With the boom in social media, terms such as intensive motherhood, education competition among mothers, absence of fatherhood and motherhood penalty have become buzzwords in public discourse, reflecting that maternal pressure has shifted from an individual experience to a social consensus. Social media and parenting platforms have further idealized standards of motherhood; narratives of the "perfect mother" have intensified women's self-discipline and anxiety, significantly raising the public visibility of motherhood as a social issue. And anyone living in high public visibility is inevitably under great pressure & anxiety.

How do contemporary urban middle-class women in China practice motherhood? What dilemmas do they face? How do institutions, culture and family structures reshape maternal experiences? How can motherhood move from private burden to public solutions, as well as achieve the integration of childcare, self-fulfillment and social value?

1.2 Concept Definition

Motherhood consists of women's physical practices, emotional labor and daily activities in parenting. Identically, it involves women's self-perception, value judgment and identity construction of the maternal role. These three dimensions intertwine to form the complete connotation of motherhood.

Intensive Motherhood, proposed by American sociologist Sharon Hays, refers to an ideology of motherhood centered on children, relying on expert guidance, involving intense emotional and time investment, and emphasizing maternal self-sacrifice^[1]. In the Chinese context, it manifests as a parenting model of meticulous care, scientific upbringing, full-time companionship, wholehearted support, maximized educational investment etc.

Motherhood Penalty denotes the systematic negative impact of childbirth and maternal status on women, including lower employment rates, wage cuts, blocked promotion, career interruptions and workplace discrimination. It results from the overlap of gender inequality in the labor market and unequal gender division of labor within the family, and represents the core institutional manifestation of contemporary maternal dilemmas^[2].

1.3 Literature Review

Western motherhood research emerged from the second-wave feminist movement, evolving from criticizing the oppressive nature of motherhood under patriarchy, to emphasizing the subjectivity and diversity of maternal practices, and then focusing on work-family conflict, motherhood penalty and policy intervention. Scholars have revealed the social construction of motherhood, critiqued the myth of the perfect mothers, explored the role of institutional support in alleviating maternal pressure, and

formed an interdisciplinary research system covering feminism, sociology and demography.

Domestic studies focus on urban middle-class maternal practices, work–family conflict, educational rat-race and the remaking of motherhood, digital motherhood, quantitative analysis of the motherhood penalty, childcare services and fertility support. Jin Yihong and Yang Di identified the phenomenon of education competition among mothers^[3]; Yang Ke revealed the transformation of motherhood into educational brokerage^[4]; Shen Chao quantitatively analyzed the diachronic evolution of the motherhood penalty^[5]; Wu Xiaoying explored the indigenous paradoxes of motherhood^[6], producing findings rooted in the Chinese context.

Existing studies have enriched understanding of Chinese maternal practices, but they are insufficient in exploring the “conspiracy” of the state, enterprises and families to construct a fertility-friendly society. This paper tries to construct an integrated framework to advance motherhood research.

2 Institutional Dilemmas of Motherhood

The dilemmas of motherhood first manifest as institutional constraints: gendered fertility policies, workplace discrimination, insufficient high-quality childcare systems and weak social security collectively shape the structural motherhood penalty.

2.1 Quantitative Data Analysis of the Motherhood Penalty

Childbirth has long-term impacts on women’s employment. Data show that women’s employment probability drops significantly within 0–3 years after childbirth: by approximately 6.6% after one child, and a further 9.3% after a second child^[7]. Their occupational status rarely recovers to pre-childbirth levels within 8 years, making career interruption a forced choice for most mothers^[8].

Research based on the China Health and Nutrition Survey (1989–2015) shows that the annual average wage growth rate gap between mothers and non-mothers reached 1.6%, and the negative impact of childbirth on women’s wages has continuously strengthened. Market-oriented enterprises’ avoidance of fertility costs has further amplified the penalty effect.

2.2 Underlying Causes of Institutional Dilemmas

First, gendered design of maternity leave systems.

Current maternity leave policies center on women. Parental leave is hard to implement, and non-transferable paternal leave policy is not made, reinforcing the gendered division of “childcare as women’s responsibility”, fails to achieve gender-sharing of childcare duties, and strengthens workplace discrimination.

Second, Shortage of inclusive and high-quality childcare services.

High-quality and inclusive childcare services for children aged 0–3 have long been deficient. By the end of 2023, there were only 4.5 childcare places per 1,000 people for

children under 3 years old, with the coverage rate of inclusive childcare below 50%. Insufficient supply, uneven quality and high costs force families to rely on mothers or grandparents, further increasing the maternal burden.

Third, enterprises hidden labor costs.

Maternity insurance and leave costs are borne by enterprises. However, a large number of small and medium-sized enterprises do not offer any maternity leave benefits. Moreover, although many provinces have started to extend maternity leave for women, overly long maternity leave is not only detrimental to women's return to work but also may cause them to reduce working hours after returning to work due to their habituation to family life^[2]. All these create a vicious cycle of childbirth–discrimination–penalty, making motherhood an “identity burden” for working women.

Quantitative research shows that motherhood penalty can explain 47% of the fertility decline^[5]. Women's career block, childcare pressure and reduced quality of life after childbirth directly suppress fertility intentions, making maternal dilemmas a major obstacle to sustainable population development.

3 Practice, Transformation and Cultural Dilemmas of Motherhood

Under the constraints of institution and cultural norms, motherhood has undergone prominent transformation in China. Urban middle-class women, present three core features: intensification, brokerization and value overload of motherhood.

Due to scarce educational resources and meritocratic competition, education has become the main channel of social class advancement, placing mothers in charge of children's academic performances. From preschool on, mothers manage planning, tutoring and school selection, so “education competition among mothers” has become the core of maternal pressure as well as the increasing anxiety among middle-class mothers.

Meanwhile, educational marketization has turned mothers from caregivers into “educational brokers”. They screen information, collecting and integrating extracurricular resources, schedule learning and mediate home–school relations, providing emotional support and counseling, acting as professional managers for their children's development. Childrearing demands massive time, energy and money, making motherhood highly instrumental and overloaded. Beyond physical care, mothers also center on children's mood: constant comfort, counseling and moral guidance leave mothers mentally strained, fatigued, lowered well-being and lowered self efficacy.

Digital technology brings about “digital motherhood”: Social media parenting groups, online education platforms, and parenting apps have become new fields for maternal practice. While digital motherhood provides informational support, it also intensifies the homogenization of maternal standards and the spread of anxiety, forming an online–offline disciplinary system for motherhood.

Traditional Chinese parenting culture emphasizes that a mother's virtue lies not only in kindness but in education. The educational responsibility of mothers has long been highly valued. Now this tradition combines with educational rat-race and translates into the practice of "education competition among mothers". The core of motherhood has shifted from daily care to educational investment, and children's educational achievements have become the key criterion for judging a "good mother". Mothers, as primary caregivers, are drawn into fierce competition, which further increases their burden in a self-reinforcing involution.

Modernity constructs parenting as a specialized, scientific and perfectionist project, setting impossibly high standards. Women face a dual dilemma as "ideal workers" and "ideal caregivers": the workplace demands full dedication, while family expects selfless caregiving, creating irresolvable role conflict. By contrast, the third national survey on the status of women reveals that over half of working mothers were primarily responsible for helping their children with their homework, while only about 1/4 fathers take on this role^[9]. Fathers' absence from daily childcare becomes the final straw that breaks mothers' spirit.

In China, motherhood still carries a central paradox which manifests as three conflicts: family priority vs. individual priority, child-centered vs. self-fulfilled, traditional responsibility vs. modern consciousness.

Women both affirm the value of the maternal role and desire self-development; they undertake traditional maternal duties while pursuing gender equality. This tension permeates maternal practice.

Attributing maternal dilemmas to individual choices or family conflicts is a typical pitfall of privatized discussion. The essence of the motherhood paradox is a product of deficient public institutions and unequal gender culture. If childbirth and raising children are considered as part of the reproduction of labor, then the motherhood practices are no longer private issues of the family, but rather macro-level components of social reproduction called "social reproduction theory". According to this theory, the root of various inequalities in the family precisely lies in the privatization of reproductive labor and its subordinate position compared to productive labor, thus they advocate breaking the boundary between public and private to enhance the public concern and social responsibility. In this way, the predicament of motherhood can be explained as women and families privately bearing the public responsibility of social reproduction, so the paradox of motherhood stems from the separation of public and private in the so-called "production and life system" and the absence of public care, leading to a social reproduction crisis^[6].

4 Breakthrough: Sharing of Motherhood

To break through the dilemmas of motherhood, it is necessary to transcend private solutions and build a sharing mechanism to restructure parenting responsibility from a "natural duty of mothers" into a public responsibility shared by families, enterprises and the state.

4.1 Return of Fatherhood

Fathers' absence is a major structural factor behind the excessive burden of motherhood. Promoting the shift of fatherhood from absence to return is a key path to achieving gender equality in parenting responsibilities. Women undertake more than 70% of daily care, educational companionship, and emotional communication. Fathers mostly act as "assistants" or "bystanders", with involvement remaining superficial and intermittent^[10].

And, moreover, it is even suggested that if a women want her husband to share childcare and other household chores, she'd better learn to praise her husband. Try to imagine how an exhausted and overloaded mother can provide emotional value to a father who carries half of children's bloodline and is natural to take on half of the responsibility for raising children. This infantile way of thinking of fathers urgently needs to be changed.

Experience from Nordic countries shows that mandatory, non-transferable father-specific leave quotas are effective in boosting paternal participation. Countries such as Iceland and Sweden have established exclusive, non-transferable parental leave for fathers, reducing the gender gap in career interruption rates by nearly 80%.

China should institutionally draw on this experience, reform its parental leave system, and use rigid institutions to promote deep paternal involvement.

4.2 Transformation of Cultural Narratives

First of all, the myth of perfect mothers should be deconstructed.

Media narratives should be changed from "how to be a perfect mother" to "how mothers can be subjects". Acknowledge the limitations of motherhood and women's individual values, reject self-sacrificing maternity, and advocate rational concepts of moderate and imperfect parenting.

The discourse of co-parenting should be advocated and the cultural shackle of "innate maternal instinct" should be broken. The whole society should for a consensus that child-rearing is shared responsibilities of parents.

The significance of father involvement should be promoted. During the process of raising sons, mothers should encourage sons to participate in household chores and help looking after younger siblings, so as to not only educate them to become themselves, but also to cultivate them to become future fathers. Every woman cannot complain about her husband's absence in the parenting process, meanwhile raising such husbands for the next generation of mothers. On many occasions, women only have themselves to rely on. Each small change, when accumulated, will constitute a significant step for society's progress.

4.3 Build a Fertility-friendly Society

Developing enterprises into a "triple-win" situation with families and the country is essentially important, transforming support for fertility from a business cost into a

sustainable investment. The key lies in designing a "win-win" rather than a "zero-sum" institutional arrangement.

First, cost-sharing mechanism. The state reduces the cost of employing women of childbearing age for enterprises, such as offsetting corporate income tax based on the number of employees on maternity leave, reducing the portion of maternity insurance costs paid by enterprises and special incentive funds. Government-purchased services or rating bonus points are provided to enterprises that offer childcare and flexible working arrangements.

Second, value transformation path. Identify the hidden benefits brought by fertility support, enhancing the employer brand, and obtaining policy resources. A "family-friendly enterprise" certification can be established and linked to bidding, and low-interest loans.

Third, intergenerational feedback design. Encourage enterprises to provide childcare training and intergenerational activity days for employees' parents. The state offers tax deductions for innovative projects that combine enterprise pensions and childcare.

The key is to break the old triangular relationship of "enterprise cost, family benefit, and state convenience", and build a new equilibrium where "enterprises gain talent dividends, families have development space, and the state wins population dividends".

5 Conclusion and Prospect

Contemporary Chinese motherhood faces three dilemmas: institutional motherhood penalty harms women's careers; practical rat race, brokerization and digitalization cause mental and physical burnout; and cultural conflicts produce pervasive anxiety and a paradox of oppression and empowerment. Motherhood has become a public issue critical to fertility, gender equity and social sustainable development. Its structural roots include father absence, insufficient public childcare, privatized birth costs and traditional gender norms. The solution lies in socialized sharing: reform institutions to share birth costs, strengthen social childcare and employment support, and transform culture toward equal parenting.

This study establishes an integrated institution–practice–experience–institution framework and identifies Chinese motherhood's distinctive features: new familism, education-driven remaking and digital embeddedness. It highlights the public nature of maternal struggles and connects motherhood research to population policy and gender equality, enhancing both theoretical depth and practical relevance.

Future research may examine urban and rural, class and regional differences in motherhood. Policy efforts should advance childcare legislation, parental leave and anti-discrimination measures to build a fertility-friendly society, freeing women from excessive maternal burden and achieving gender equality and population sustainability.

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