

“A New Job after Retirement”: Negotiating Grandparenting and Intergenerational Relationships in Urban China

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ABSTRACT: Based on interviews with 120 adult only children and their parents in urban Tianjin, this article shows how grandparenting becomes a crucial site for the intergenerational negotiation around childcare, family obligations, and the unfulfilled aspirations for individualisation. While only child couples rely heavily on their parents for childcare, a lot of tensions are involved in this process. Although grandparents do not always willingly embrace the heavy burden of intergenerational childcare, their concern about elderly care sometimes compels them to nevertheless take up the work. Through providing a nuanced picture of grandparenting in urban China, this article seeks to reveal the changing ideas of family obligation and responsibility, as well as the social transformation in China that underpins such change. It argues that the individualisation process is far from finished, as reality is pulling people back to solve problems within the family.

KEYWORDS: grandparenting, only child couples, generation, individualisation, social change.

Introduction

In 2020, the story of a 56-year-old woman who went on a solo road trip in China went viral online.¹ Escaping from an unhappy marriage, the heavy burden of housework, and caring duties, the woman finally decided to fulfil her dream – a road trip around China – after she felt that she had fulfilled her “responsibility”: taking care of two grandchildren until they were old enough to enter kindergarten. This is a vivid example of how grandparents increasingly shoulder the duty of intergenerational childcare, and many of them regard it as a moral duty to fulfil before they can actually seek their own dreams and preferred ways of living after retirement.

This article regards grandparenting as a crucial site to explore the relationships between the first generation of only children in China and their parents, thereby revealing the social change regarding family obligations and individualisation. Grandparenting is a widespread phenomenon in China. Recent statistics have shown that 60 to 70% of Chinese children below the age of two are mainly taken care of by their grandparents, and 30% solely by them (Zhong and Peng 2020). China’s transition from state socialism to market socialism in the early 1980s has led to the transformation of the social welfare system, with the state shifting its role from the provider to the facilitator of welfare, through which people

are increasingly encouraged to rely on themselves, one’s family, or marketised means to meet their social reproduction needs (Lin and Nguyen 2021). The state’s withdrawal from public childcare provisions is also evident, with the dismantling of work-unit-based childcare provision in urban areas and the shrinking of publicly funded childcare systems compelling people to resolve childcare responsibilities by individualised means (Zhang and Maclean 2012; Du and Dong 2013). This more often than not results in grandparents overwhelmingly bearing the childcare responsibilities for their adult children.

Increasing scholarly work is emerging that focuses on the widespread phenomenon of grandparenting in both rural and urban China (Silverstein and Cong 2013; Qi 2018; Peng 2020; Zhang 2020). However, many of these studies include the perspectives of only one generation in regard to grandparenting, making it difficult to gain a fuller understanding of how grandparenting is negotiated between two generations, and the many discrepancies and inconsistencies between their perspectives. Based on qualitative data collected from 2015

1. Joy Dong and Vivian Wang, “A Chinese ‘Auntie’ Went on a Solo Road Trip. Now, She’s a Feminist Icon,” *The New York Times*, 2 April 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/02/world/asia/china-roadtrip-feminist.html> (accessed on 30 May 2021).

to 2016, which involves interviews with 30 only child families (including both only child couples and their parents) and participant observations in urban Tianjin, this article bridges this gap by adopting a bi-generational approach to grandparenting by including outlooks from both parents and grandparents' generations. More specifically, it asks: how is childcare negotiated between only child couples and their parents? Who takes responsibility for the bulk of childcare? What are the tensions involved in negotiating childcare responsibilities, and how do family members draw on the changing values regarding family obligations to negotiate intergenerational childcare?

Rather than prioritising the perspectives of one generation, this article gives equal weight to both adult couples and their parents' voices, even when the two generations hold drastically different views toward the same issue. We believe that the divergent views that only children and their parents hold highlight the complexity involved when the two generations are negotiating grandparenting. More importantly, the different views they hold are also largely shaped by their different generational experiences in relation to specific social and cultural contexts. By using grandparenting as a lens to further understand such intergenerational negotiation, this article also seeks to offer a critical interpretation of the individualisation thesis (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Yan 2003, 2010; Wang and Nehring 2014; Barbalet 2016), and to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on individualisation and family transformation (Yan 2016, 2021) in contemporary China.

Intergenerational childrearing, individualisation, and social change

An increasing amount of literature focuses on the widespread phenomenon of grandparenting in China in the past ten years. Due to the lack of a public childcare system and the scarcity of affordable and reliable private childcare, grandparents are overwhelmingly participating in taking care of their grandchildren, in both rural and urban China (Chen, Liu, and Mair 2011; Liu 2017; Qi 2018; Zhang 2020; Zhong and Peng 2020). The extent to which grandparents are involved in childcare is also noteworthy, as most grandparents provide extensive childcare to their grandchildren, and a large amount of care work is involved (Chen, Liu, and Mair 2011). Grandparenting in the context of rural-urban migration has received a lot of scholarly attention, whether on grandparents caring for the "left behind children" (*liushou ertong* 留守兒童) of migrant workers in rural areas (Silverstein, Cong, and Li 2006), or on "floating grandparents" (*laopiao* 老漂) who join migrant couples in urban areas to care for their grandchildren (Qi 2018; Peng 2020; Zhang 2020). This article focuses on grandparenting outside the context of internal migration, as it focuses on how local, only children families negotiate grandparenting in urban Tianjin.

Existing literature has sought to understand grandparenting from the perspectives of family obligations and norms (Chen, Liu, and Mair 2011; Qi 2018), gendered division of labour (Zhong and Peng 2020), intergenerational reciprocity (Goh, Tsang, and Chokkanathan 2016), the elderly's ageing experiences (Zhang 2020), and the emotional and symbolic meaning of intergenerational relationships (Qi 2018). To be more specific, social exchange theory or reciprocity

are important themes in this literature, meaning that grandparents are involved in childcare with the expectation that they will be repaid by their children in their later lives, especially in the form of old-age care (Goh, Tsang, and Chokkanathan 2016; Peng 2020). Recent studies also highlight the significance of "emotional and symbolic aspects of intergenerational ties" in facilitating grandparenting, and the fact that grandparents may be motivated by their affection for the grandchildren, thereby providing care to them without expectations of reciprocity (Qi 2018: 763). This article adds to the existing literature on grandparenting by highlighting how grandparenting has become a crucial site of intergenerational negotiation, which is deeply shaped by different experiences and values held by different generations.

The One-child policy in the late 1970s has made the only child family a common family type in urban China. The first generation of only children this research focuses on are mostly post-1980s (*baling hou* 80後), and they were mostly in their thirties by the time of the research; their parents are generally from the 1950s and 1960s, reaching their sixties or seventies in the 2010s. The first generation of only children have grown up under a historical background that was completely different from their parents'. Unlike their parents, the first generation of only children were seldom influenced by the ideas of primacy of the collective. They grew up in an era in which individualisation was emerging alongside rapid social transformations (Yan 2003).

This article argues that the first generation of only children and their parents show different degrees of individualisation, which shapes their negotiations and expectations towards sharing childcare. As Yan (2010) rightly argued, individualisation is not exactly the same as individualism. Individualism is a term used to describe a process of how a person becomes an independent and autonomous individual, disembedded from existing social categories, while individualisation illustrates a different relationship that the individual has with society (Beck 1992). Rather than becoming isolated, individualisation leads people to pay more attention to their interactions with other people. Due to the fact that an individual becomes disembedded from the system, before making a decision they will have to negotiate, compromise, and try to get support from others in order to achieve their purpose (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Therefore, individualisation does not necessarily produce a "selfish" society. Rather, individualisation encourages individuals to focus on themselves, whilst on the other hand, it can cultivate people's moral standard of altruism. As an individual, one does not automatically stop caring about others. Actually, living in a highly individualised society requires a person to stay social and rational and to care about others in order to manage and organise their own lives (*ibid.*).

Although Chinese society is indeed moving towards a higher extent of individualisation, which is manifested by the rise of individuals and the decline of familism (Yan 2003, 2010), it is rightly argued that individualisation remains an ambition rather than an achieved status in China, as the state still plays a decisive role in shaping people's private lives (Wang and Nehring 2014). A poignant example would be how state-sponsored institutions such as the *hukou* (戶口, the household registration system) deeply shape young people's dating practices in Beijing (*ibid.*).

Despite the continued influence of the state, there are also debates about how individualisation is shaping family relationships, especially intergenerational relationships in China. Yan's earlier work on individualisation and the Chinese family paints a rather bleak picture in which individualisation leads to the decline of moral behaviour and the disintegration of the family bond (2003, 2010). However, his more recent work recognises the growing intergenerational intimacy and the salience of intergenerational codependence, what he calls “descending familism” or “neo-familism,” which demonstrate the continuity of the Chinese family's individualisation, rather than its reversal (2016, 2021). By proposing the lens of “post-patriarchal intergenerationality,” he urges us to gain a more nuanced understanding of intergenerational interactions when the senior generation's dominance is declining, and when both parents and grandparents pour their love, attention, and care on the flourishing of the grandchildren (2021). Neo-familism also captures the delicate negotiation between prioritising family interests versus pursuing individual happiness, and how people seek to achieve their individual happiness through prioritising the collective welfare of the family (*ibid.*: 15). These new developments on individualisation and the Chinese family point to the importance of continuing to understand this evolving process through multigenerational lenses. Therefore, this article seeks to contribute to this ongoing dialogue by focusing on the intergenerational negotiation around grandparenting between the first generation of only children and their parents' in urban Tianjin.

Methodology

This article is based on qualitative data Lin Qing (the first author) collected from 2015 to 2016 in Tianjin, which is broadly representative of major cities in China, and it is one of the four municipalities directly controlled by the central government that gave a relatively positive response to the family planning policies (Hou 2004). Tianjin effectively and strictly implemented the national family planning policies, and the birth rate of Tianjin witnessed similar changes to that of the country overall from 1978 to 2015. The research subject consisted of two generations: the first generation of only children born under the family planning policies, and their parents. Thirty families of adult only children formed the research sample, and four members of each family (the only child couple, one parent of the only son and one parent of the only daughter) were interviewed. As a result, a total of 120 respondents were interviewed. These 30 families were randomly chosen from three large-scale housing compounds, including a relatively old compact living community in Nankai District, a housing compound mainly for middle school staff and their families in Hexi District, and an upscale, gated community in Heping District. These three housing compounds were chosen because they comprised residents from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and because the researcher had personal networks there to facilitate the initial access. Following the first convenient sampling, snowball sampling was used to recruit participants, with the aim of maintaining the diversity of the sample as much as possible. Among them, 33% of the informants subjectively consider themselves to be

of high socioeconomic status, 48% of them deem themselves as of medium socioeconomic status, and 19% of them believe themselves to be of low socioeconomic status. Additionally, 59% of the informants are female, as more grandmothers participated in the interviews. In eight of the 30 households, grandparents live with their adult children.

All participants were given information sheets prior to the interview. Each informant was interviewed face to face and separately, which helped to produce greater candour and involvement in the interview, since each interviewee's responses would not be affected by other people's responses or presence. Interviews usually lasted approximately one to two hours, depending on how much the informant was willing to share. Each interviewee was guaranteed that everything they talked about would never be mentioned to any others, especially their family members. All the interviews were conducted and transcribed in Chinese. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to refer to informants. Their identifiable information such as residential or working addresses were removed. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data, with the aid of NVivo software in storing and coding transcripts.

Grandparenting: A naturalised option of childcaring

This research firstly reveals that grandparenting is very common among the interviewed families. All of the interviewed only children rely to some extent on their parents or parents-in-law for childcaring. Some grandparents live with their children and take on most of the childcare work, while other grandparents and their in-laws take turns helping with childcare. Consistent with existing literature, grandmothers become the ones to shoulder most of the care work (Zhong and Peng 2020). More importantly, grandparenting seems like a normative choice for many families, as the young couples regard grandparenting as the natural choice when considering childcare arrangements. Some of the grandparents from both the maternal and paternal sides also seem to share a sense of responsibility in caring for their grandchildren. Sometimes a second grandchild further complicates the picture, as grandparents from both sides need to negotiate the “fairest” way to do grandparenting. Below is an example of how an only child couple understands the sharing of childcare with their parents.

Lihua and Mr Yao are both working full time. Their first daughter was brought up by Lihua's mother Mei, and Lihua just had a second daughter. Unlike with their first child, the younger girl is now taken care of by Mr Yao's mother Juan. Lihua's mother is quite satisfied with their childcare arrangement:

Before our second granddaughter was born, we made a deal with my daughter that her in-laws would also take charge of grandchild care. As the first child was raised by us, now it would be their [paternal grandparents] turn to look after the second one. We, after all, took advantage of the deal. We began to raise our elder granddaughter six years ago when we were still energetic and healthy, so we can enjoy a relatively easy life now. You know, it is not an easy thing to

take care of children, so we let their other grandparents look after them this time. Although I still have to take Lanlan [first grandchild] to school, I am quite relaxed and have much more time to enjoy my life.

This extract shows how Lihua's mother Mei regards grandparenting as a natural responsibility for grandparents from both sides. Having fulfilled her "obligation" of helping to raise the first grandchild, she now thinks that the paternal grandparents should take the primary responsibility for taking care of the second one. However, how did they get the "chance" to take care of the first-born granddaughter and "retire" when the second granddaughter was born? The interview with Lihua reveals some of the negotiations that led to these arrangements:

My parents-in-law do not speak Mandarin, which makes me worry about my daughter's language learning and accent. My parents-in-law are not educated people, and that was another reason why I did not want them to look after my child at that time. Besides, I think it's much easier to negotiate with my own parents, so I asked my parents to help taking care of my older daughter. It is really a long journey to raise a child. As my parents are not in good health at present, I think it is time for my parents-in-law to take on the baby caring work. Since both my husband and I are only children, it is not fair for my parents to do all the work.

This extract illustrates that Lihua thinks it is "fair" for her parents to look after the first child and her parents-in-laws to take primary responsibility for the second child. The "worries" that made her unwilling to ask for parents-in-law's help following the birth of her first child did not seem to trouble her after she had her second daughter. Lihua saw her parents-in-law as an alternative choice, especially since her parents were not in good health. Moreover, she does not plan to look after the second child alone because she thinks it is the grandparents' responsibility to look after the grandchildren.

Whilst Lihua and her mother seemed quite happy with the childcare arrangements, Mr Yao's mother Juan was not completely satisfied with being responsible for the second grandchild, saying:

Now I spend almost all my time on my second granddaughter. Unlike in the past, there is no nursery school at the workplace anymore, and people cannot take their children to the office. Everything about childcare now can only be coordinated within the family. When our first grandchild was born, I asked my son if they would like me to look after her. My son told me that it was a tiring job, and he would let his mother-in-law do more caring work. To be honest, we were happy to hear that. Since then, his mother-in-law moved in to live with them. At that time, I thought I was free from troubles, and sometimes I went to help them with some cooking. But my daughter-in-law required too much, and she asked me to speak Mandarin to my grandchildren. However, I have spoken Tianjinese my whole life, so I felt a little bit embarrassed at their place. Now her grandpa and I look after our younger

granddaughter almost every day. The young couple live in their own place on weekdays, leaving their younger daughter with us. They pick her up to take her to their own home on weekends and send her back on Sunday afternoon or night. Frankly speaking, sometimes I feel that their daughter was born for us [she laughs]. They live a comfortable and easy life, but his father and I have to be busy with the child... Still, the less trouble the better. If I talked to them, they would consider it complaining. And I will count on my only son in the future. After all, we did not offer much help with the first child, and I do not want my daughter-in-law's family to find fault with us in terms of childcare. As a result, I will do whatever they ask me to do now.

The intensity of this childcare arrangement has become a burden that the only son's mother feels obliged to continue providing. Juan's reflection also reveals how her understanding of childcare is shaped by her generation's experience of work and childrearing under a specific social and cultural context. As she almost nostalgically mentioned in the interview, her generation's childrearing experience was deeply shaped by the socialist work unit system (*danwei* 單位), which meant that the work unit provided its member with "a complete social guarantee and welfare services" including childcare (Bray 2005: 4). She recalls that period of childrearing as much easier in the 1980s and 1990s. During that time, increasing numbers of women entered the workforce and many enterprises set up kindergartens for their staff's children. Taking children to work became one of the most common routines for many urban industrial workers. However, this arrangement gradually faded away towards the end of the last century, and unlike the work unit welfare system, employers are no longer responsible for offering nursery schools for their employees' children. Instead, the heavy burden of providing childcare has been increasingly farmed out by companies due to China's shift away from collectivist welfare towards marketisation (Du and Dong 2013). While the Chinese government has not yet proposed any systematic and operable policies and measures to help families with childcare, especially dual-income families who usually struggle with balancing their careers and childcare (*ibid.*), grandparents seem to be the most appropriate and sometimes the only option to take on childcare work.

Although with reluctance, Juan has chosen to accept the mission of childcare anyway and remains silent about her dissatisfaction to the young couple. She also mentioned the importance of maintaining a good relationship with them, taking her own elderly care into consideration. Such concern for elderly care is common among our informants, as the state's rollback in providing for old-aged care also means that families shoulder the most responsibility in terms of providing both childcare and elderly care (Shang and Wu 2011). However, her son Mr Yao provided another perspective on the childcare arrangements within his family:

We are too busy to take care of our children. Lihua works in a foreign investment company, and I am busy working as well. My wife's mother clearly proposed that the second child was supposed to be taken care of by my parents. So, we left our

second daughter with her paternal grandparents. Luckily, my parents have retired, and I think childcare is a good way for them to kill time.

Despite the fact that grandmothers from both sides recognise grandparenting as involving hard work, Mr Yao seems to downplay the intensive work involved in grandparenting as he regards it as a way for his parents to “kill time.” What is striking is how both Lihua and Mr Yao consider their parents as naturally responsible for taking care of their children. This suggests that young parents’ concept of parenting is undergoing great change. With self-awareness and individualism increasing, the traditional Chinese family norm of filial piety has gradually changed (Yan 2003). Based on this data, young only child parents appear to be increasingly striving for freedom and personal development, and this can be achieved by taking full advantage of their parents’ sense of duty towards their children and grandchildren.

Meanwhile, with worries over their old-aged care, grandparents are compelled to take care of their grandchildren with the hope that their children will repay their effort in their later life. The remarks of Mr Yao’s mother also reveal how the different generations’ experiences shape their different understanding of childcare. Further, the lack of public support compels people to resort to individualised means to solve the problem, whether regarding childcare or old-age care, although not all grandparents willingly embrace such arrangement out of selfless dedication to the family.

Selfless grandparents or a different extent of individualisation?

Although many informants in this research, including only child couples and their parents, “naturalise” the idea that grandparents should take the responsibility of raising their grandchildren, it does not mean that all grandparents wholeheartedly embrace such ideas and practices. Echoing existing research, grandparents have a great deal of ambivalence when it comes to childcare, and they use different strategies to negotiate childcare responsibilities, demonstrating their agency in dealing with novel situations (Qi 2018; Zhang 2020). Moreover, our research shows that the grandparents’ generation also demonstrates a tendency towards individualisation, as they prioritise their individual needs rather than family obligations when negotiating intergenerational childrearing.

Some scholars believe that in the deep-rooted idea of family ethics, elderly people in China regard it as ideal for them to take on the primary responsibility for their grandchildren’s care (Goh and Kuczynski 2010). Under the influence of this tradition, elderly people perceive grandchildren care as extending the family and the continuity of the clan, and as a result they gradually form a new mindset of dedication, not only to their grandchildren but also to their children (Chen, Liu, and Mair 2011). This literature suggests that grandparents offer to undertake the responsibilities of caring for their grandchildren, devoting their remaining years to every stage of their grandchildren’s growth. In this process, the elderly become happy and at peace (Song, Li, and Li 2013; Young and Denson 2014). However, our data challenges such simplistic views of grandparents’ care, showing at the very least that the grandparents’ “selfless dedication” is not applicable to all only child

families. Across the sample, many of the grandparents do not think it is their obligation or responsibility to raise their grandchildren. Some of them even suggest that childcare is forced upon them by their children.

For example, when Mr Xiong and his wife were asked to take care of their grandson, he developed a plan that enabled him to refuse his son’s request. Mr Xiong was a retired leader of his company, who could receive an appreciable sum of pension every month. Despite this, he looked for a part-time job after taking care of his grandson for a few months. During the interview, he explained his reasons for choosing to work again after retirement:

After my grandson was born, his grandma moved in to live with him, being busy with cooking, washing clothes, and cleaning the home every day. When I retired, our one-year-old grandchild was sent here to live with us. The little boy was so naughty that we could hardly find any moment of quiet. It would be OK if we only looked after him for a few hours in a day, but I really could not bear it all the time... Now I would rather go to work than stay at home looking after my grandson. My wife was thoroughly exhausted as well, plus she is not in good health. I do not think she could do the cooking and the other household work for an extended period. So, I personally do not agree with looking after our grandson all on our own. We are old now, and we need to enjoy our later life. My wife always asks me to take her travelling when we have time. But how can we have time if we have to look after the child all the time? If they want to hire a babysitter, we could pay for it. But it is impossible to leave the child with us all the time. However, you know, it is inappropriate to directly refuse to care for our grandchild because it seems to be a tradition for grandparents to do this. I therefore told my son that as we were old, we planned to purchase a new flat with an elevator, and I needed to go to work to earn more. As a result, my grandson was not left with us all day anymore.

Contrary to some literature (Song, Li, and Li 2013; Young and Denson 2014), Mr Xiong suggests that he did not see grandson caring as a form of spiritual sustenance. Rather, the strains of this new job forced him to return to work. Mr Xiong is quite independent, and his strategy to avoid childcare was unique in the sample. He does not take it for granted that he is obliged to be a babysitter. He believes that he has the right to enjoy his life in retirement instead of supporting his child and grandchildren. His son, Jianguo, said:

My dad never did any housework in his life. He was busy before, but after he retired, he still preferred to be restless. My dad is really different from other grandparents who enjoy staying with their grandchildren. When I was a child, my parents sent me to live with my grandparents. And I did not return to live with my parents until I went to primary school. Maybe they did not know the difficulties of childcare only because they never did it before. As my dad is going back to work now, and my mum is not in good health, I have to ask my parents-in-law to help us more with the child.

Jianguo is actually dissatisfied with his father's escape from childcare. This extract suggests that he believes his father is obliged to help raise the grandson. When his father does not devote himself to grandparenting as expected, Jianguo attributes it to what happened in his own childhood. He thinks his father cannot understand the difficulties of young couples working and caring for children at the same time because his father failed to do his duty in his childhood.

Like most urban workers in that era, Jianguo's parents, who were born in the late 1950s, were devoting more energies to work rather than to their children. As a result, a number of them were sending their children back to their hometown to be cared for by relatives. Unlike the "intensive parenting" that became popular in China in recent years (Gu 2021), parents paid much less attention to children during that time. Most people believed that their children would grow up in any case, and consequently they chose many other alternative childrearing options rather than devoting intensive time and energy to raising their child. Interestingly, when the first generation of only children has been unable to balance their work with childcaring, they also regard their parents as the best option for childcare, just as their parents did in the past. At the same time, they expect their parents to do what Zhang (2020) calls "intensive grandparenting," which not only adds to the elderly's heavy workload of grandparenting, but also differs drastically from elderly people's previous experiences of childrearing.

Whilst most of the parents in the sample have retired, some of them still have jobs. Dr Gao, for example, runs a private clinic with her husband in Cangzhou.² Their daughter and son-in-law are both doctors in a big hospital in Tianjin. The couple is regularly busy with work, and sometimes have night shifts. Although the child's paternal grandparents are retired, when the child was born, all four grandparents were asked to go to Tianjin to assist with childcare. Dr Gao expressed her deep dissatisfaction with the arrangement:

I am really reluctant to visit my granddaughter in Tianjin. I have a clinic with my husband, and we need to work there every day, but the child's paternal grandparents have retired. Why can't they help more with childcare? Every time when they look after the child for a month, they will find a variety of excuses to go back home, like attending someone's wedding, or some relative being in hospital. When they leave my daughter's place, my daughter will be too busy to take care of everything. She taught my granddaughter to call me, telling me how much she misses me. I know what my daughter is thinking, so I joke to my granddaughter that I do not miss her. Honestly, my granddaughter is really clever and cute, but I am also really unwilling to take care of her on a long-term basis. It is not convenient to live with them away from my place. Besides, it is unrealistic to purchase property in Tianjin, where all the properties are too expensive. If we really moved to Tianjin, everything related to childcare would fall on us. Now when we go to Tianjin, we have to close our clinic... When we stay in Tianjin, we spend a lot on grocery shopping and buying something for our granddaughter every day. It means that we stop earning to spend money.

Dr Gao's reluctance to commit to childcare mainly relates to the fact that she is still working, and she believes that the retired grandparents are better placed to look after the child. However, the husband's mother, Mrs Zhao, thought differently:

Our generation caught up with birth control, and most families thus have only one child. In the past, *nainai* (奶奶, paternal grandmothers) often took care of their grandchildren, because grandmothers-in-law had to look after their son's children. Now we all have only one child in our families, and it is reasonable enough for all of us to take care of the grandchild together. I know that my in-laws still run a clinic, but the child cannot stop growing up till our retirement. And it is illogical that all the retired are supposed to stay at home looking after their grandchildren. There is no end to making money, and they need to stop where it should stop. Therefore, we require taking turns with them in looking after our granddaughter.

The paternal grandmother thinks that all four grandparents should be expected to take care of their granddaughter together, while the maternal grandmother believes that those who have time should take on more responsibilities. In this case, as the main childcare providers, neither of the grandmothers regard it as their obligation to look after their granddaughter. This raises questions about how adult children view their parents' commitment to childcare. Dr Gao's daughter, Zhang Yuan, said:

Before marriage my husband and I imagined that we would be unable to manage our family well because of our busy jobs. But at that time we thought that we were both only children, and our parents were not involved with any other children, so it would not be a problem for them to help us with childcare in the future. Now two sets of parents take turns coming to help us with our daughter. But, you know, my mum has her own clinic and is sometimes unwilling to come here, while my mother-in-law usually finds excuses to go back home after a couple of weeks. But our daughter is too little to be left alone at present. So I have to try my best to make everyone happy and satisfied. I always buy them new clothes and shoes, and sometimes take them out to dinner at some good restaurants. The world has changed [sigh]. I remember that when I was a child, my grandparents offered to look after me. Why do grandparents prefer not to help with childcare nowadays, especially when they are still in good health? It is unfair that they do not want to provide care for the children but expect their children to support them later in life. No one lives an easy life. It does not make any sense that people only enjoy their lives without considering others' feelings or pressure. When we are young, we have to struggle with our work and childcare. When our children grow up, our parents will be old, and we will have to take care of them. Whenever I think about it, I feel exhausted. Anyway, I feel lucky that my daughter can be well taken care of all the time. I can understand all my parents' concerns.

2. A prefecture-level city in eastern Hebei Province, which is approximately two hours' drive from Tianjin.

Zhang Yuan has a busy job that makes her rely on her parents or parents-in-law for childcare, and she also believes childcare is an obligation for the whole family to share. However, when she said “It does not make any sense that people only enjoy their lives without considering others’ feelings or pressure,” she was making an excuse for transferring the childcare work to her parents and parents-in-law. Using the parents’ generation as a solution to childcare and as a means of meeting personal demands of adult only children was common amongst the sample.

In this case, every family member considers the childcare arrangement from their personal position and interests. This shows the tendency towards individualisation within the first generation of only children’s families. Rather than being held by duties, tradition, and obligations, this case clearly demonstrates that individuals make choices and arrangements according to individual needs, rather than prioritising family. It suggests that with the development of individualisation in contemporary urban one-child families, the family can be a means or a challenge to accomplishing one’s personal goals.

Not only is the only children’s generation showing the tendency towards individualisation, but also the post-1950s and 1960s parents’ generation is showing increasing awareness of individual benefit and wellbeing. However, the extent of individualisation is different between the two generations as the post-1950s and 1960s generation is still constrained by grandparenting. Although Dr Gao is unwilling to leave her clinic in her hometown, she still goes to Tianjin and acts as a babysitter when the other grandmother leaves Tianjin. The paternal grandmother, Mrs Zhao, wants to pursue a vibrant life after her retirement and not be constrained at home, but she still spends a lot of time with her granddaughter. Relying on their children for elderly care in the future is one of the main reasons for the post-1950s and 1960s generation to do grandparenting as a kind of exchange, so the grandparents’ generation shows slower progress than their children’s generation on the way of individualisation.

Such negotiation is gendered as well. Echoing previous research (Zhong and Peng 2020), ours also reveals a clear pattern that mothers and grandmothers disproportionately share more childcare responsibilities than fathers and grandfathers. Some fathers in the sample regard childcare as something for their parents to “kill time,” whereas grandfathers tend to find ways (e.g. work) to escape the heavy burden of childcare, as they still consider grandmothers to be the main carers according to traditional gender norm. Although the gendered dimension of grandparenting is not the main focus of this article, as it deserves a separate paper in its own right, it is important to note that mothers and grandmothers are disproportionally involved in the care for their child(ren) and grandchild(ren). Therefore, the conflicts that arise regarding childcare also happen more frequently between mothers and grandmothers, as will be demonstrated in the following section.

Conflicts and codependency

Much existing research highlights the contradictions and conflicts involved in intergenerational childrearing, especially when the two generations tend to hold different kinds of parenting knowledge

(Xiao 2016; Zhong and Peng 2020). These conflicts are also evident in this research. Many informants did not express their complaints straightforwardly, while some informants poured out their feelings directly to the researcher. For example, Longlong’s mother, Yong Mei, mentioned how the two generations’ different ideas towards childrearing had caused strains in her relationship with her mother-in-law. Yong Mei said:

They [parents-in-law] always asked me to take care of my child in their old ways, which are outdated. They think infant formula is not as good as the rice flour they cook themselves. They also believe baby diapers do not breathe, so they usually do not let my son wear them. Awful.

Although many of the tensions existing between Yong Mei and her mother-in-law are due to their different opinions, the latter expressed her ideas as follows:

In any case, never say you do not want to take care of your grandchild. Your kids will hate you if you say so. Although you brought up your children while suffering from a lot of difficulties, although you loved them when they were children, you won’t be able to count on them when you are old if you refuse to help them when they are struggling in society. We for them, them for us. With time flying we will eventually be too old to eat and move. The time when we need their care will be much longer than the time we have looked after our grandchildren. It will be much easier to look after a little child than to look after an old patient who lies in bed all day long. If I do not choose to look after my grandson, my daughter-in-law will have a reason for not looking after me in the future. My own son will undoubtedly repay my upbringing, but I deeply doubt my daughter-in-law will. The relationship between her and me has just been cultivated since her marriage with my son. If I fail to build a good relationship with her, I will suffer losses in the future.

Although tensions clearly exist in terms of childcare, some only children’s parents still take this job because they feel that they must rely on their children to help with elderly care in the future. The above extract illustrates that the grandmother was afraid of suffering losses in her later life if she could not build a good relationship with her daughter-in-law in the present. This is especially true when family-based care remains the most prevalent form of elder care in contemporary China, with sons and daughters-in-law as main carers (Shang and Wu 2011). Whilst this could be interpreted as a very instrumental view of relations, the mutual dependence in only child families is evidence of how only child couples depend on their parents for childrearing, but the parents also come to rely on their children for their care in later life.

Although firmly holding individualistic cultural ideas, the generation of only children also has greater dependence on their parents despite reaching adulthood. In fact, there is a popular term to describe adult children’s overdependency on their parents – *ken lao* (啃老, parent consuming), which has attracted scholarly attention (Liu 2017). In some cases, only children’s parents

have a strong desire for control that manifests itself in childcare arrangements. For example, Xiuyu's mother is unhappy about the fact that her daughter would rather search the Internet for parenting advice rather than turning to her for help. At the same time, Xiuyu also expresses her distress over how she has been constantly questioned by her mother in terms of her parenting ability:

My mother would not listen to me and thought she was right all the time. It is right that my mum raised me, but it is not true that she has never made mistakes. Why can't she listen to me? Will I hurt my own son? Sometimes it is really difficult to communicate with her. She cannot listen to what I say, so I buy what she does not let me buy. Luckily, she is my mother, and at the worst we will quarrel with each other. But I never dare to do so with my mother-in-law.

Xiuyu and her mother's negotiation are referred to in existing research pointing to the pattern of "mothers teach, grandparents feed" (*yan mu ci zu* 嚴母慈祖) proposed by Xiao (2016: 5), itself designating power relations between the two generations regarding childrearing: while grandparents provide extensive practical care to their grandchildren, they are not dominant in decision-making regarding the kids. It is usually the young mothers who make decisions, while grandparents tend to be marginalised in this process (*ibid.*).

In our data, it is common to see only children and their parents or parents-in-law having different opinions on parenting. For those who come to look after their grandchildren from a long distance, it makes them uneasy and disturbed to live in their children's home and economically rely on their children temporarily. Some grandparents offer help with enthusiasm, but their attempts are sometimes snubbed. Whilst the parents want to share their parenting expertise, the younger generation has been deeply influenced by the latest parenting ideas, and most of them have formed their own childcare knowledge. As individuals in their independent nuclear families, they may think the two generations are supposed to have an equal position in decisions relating to children. Therefore, they usually do not accept their parents' "old" and "outdated" experiences. Because of those contradictions and conflicts, some young only child couples are reluctant to give up power in parenting. Some of them are confident that they are parenting based on scientific research, and that going against their parents' opinions is doing the right thing for their own children. On the other hand, their parents, who have typically been in a position of dominance within the family, feel upset at this loss of control and this disregard for their experience in childrearing.

Conclusion

This article contributes to the emerging literature on grandparenting in China, as it regards grandparenting as a crucial site to understand intergenerational negotiation between the first generation of only children and their parents. Rather than prioritising one generation's perspectives, this article gives equal weight to both generations' voices, highlighting the discrepancy,

contradictions, and sometimes conflicting views both generations hold when it comes to childrearing and family obligations. This article firstly demonstrates how grandparenting has become increasingly common and even normalised as the best choice for childrearing, amid the lack of public support towards childcare. Secondly, we contend that many grandparents regard childrearing as a heavy burden instead of regarding it as a natural family obligation that one has to fulfil from the perspective of familism. Some of them even strategised to escape from this arrangement, especially grandfathers. Thirdly, many grandparents, particularly grandmothers, stayed to take care of their grandchild(ren) anyway, despite the dissatisfaction they may have regarding this arrangement and the conflicts that arise due to both generations' different experiences and expectations towards childcare.

Despite all this ambivalence, contradictory views, and conflict, both generations showed a strong sense of codependency and solidarity. With the lack of social support, families become "a common enterprise and the most reliable welfare agency for its members in today's China" (Liu 2008: 426). When parents and children need to closely rely on each other, whether in terms of old-aged support or childcare, individualisation remains an ambition rather than an achieved reality (Wang and Nehring 2014). Our article echoes Yan's (2016, 2021) recent work in showing how the growth of individualisation goes hand in hand with the rise of neo-familism, through which individuals "invoke familism as the primary strategy to pursue both individual happiness and family prosperity through collective efforts of a multi-generational domestic group" (2021: 15).

Meanwhile, this article goes further to demonstrate that the tendency towards individualisation exists to a different extent among the first generation of only children and their parents' generations. Here, "generation" has a two-fold meaning, as it refers to both familial generation and social generation, and these two dimensions of generation clearly intersect with each other when it comes to grandparenting. The first generation of adult only children shows many characteristics of individualisation. They put their own needs ahead of their parents', pursue a better material standard of living than their parents, prefer to live independently, and leave many difficult issues such as childcare to their parents. Only children become individualised quite quickly, whereas they are still the group of people who rely on parents most. This seems to be paradoxical, but it is quite closely related to social development in China. Such changes and the reform of policies have brought about a lot of pressure, and this encourages the younger generation to request a lot of support by taking full advantage of the traditions and norms of Chinese family life.

With the only children's generation continually raising awareness of their rights and emphasising their personal interests, their parents are consumed by them under many circumstances. However, the parents' generation also takes the road of individualisation as they sometimes evaluate their own benefits first and do not always compromise with their adult only children. Although these only children's parents grew up in the era of collectivism, they have kept pace with social reforms. During the process of social reform, individuals of different generations, different genders, and different classes acquired asymmetric information, which led them

to different degrees of individualisation. In general, our interview data demonstrate that parents make more contributions to their children than what their children give to them, while parents rely less on their children. This may be because the only children's parents are relatively young and do not need too much daily care from their children. The reform of the social welfare system and deficient social elderly care services also limited the development of individualisation of the parents' generation.

Therefore, rather than being “disembedded” from existing social systems such as family, individuals change the ways they relate with others “in the arrangements of the institutions and organisation which provide their social existence” (Barbalet 2016: 11). Individuals are never living completely for themselves. Although they do show a greater tendency towards individualisation in China, the practical realities are pulling them back to solve the problems occurring within the family. Like the only children and their parents in this research, while they pursue their individual wellbeing, they are inevitably twined together.

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