

Chapter 3

CHANGING MOTHERING PRACTICES AND INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY URBAN CHINA

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People have different attitudes to how the baby should be brought up; even different grandparents have different attitudes. I know lots of fights about that, so it's not easy. And a lot of men will say 'you got the grandparents to help you so why are you still complaining?'
But actually I found that it's not easy for mothers.

(Lin Jie)

In the very first interview I conducted for my research project on mothering ideals and practices among well-educated mothers in Beijing, Lin Jie, a thirty-two-year-old mother of a ten-month-old boy, kept returning to the significance of grandparents. Initially I had no ambitions of studying intergenerational interactions, yet this aspect became central to all of the following interviews. It was emphasized to such an extent that I began to wonder what these troubles, and even fights, that Lin Jie speaks about, tell us about mothering in contemporary urban China. The intergenerational conflicts emphasize a changing mothering culture where different approaches to childcare coexist in the family. This might in itself not be surprising. Mothering practices encompass both the production and nurturance of children. Mothers do not simply replicate their own upbringing but adapt and rethink their motherhood in a given context. Even

though mothers' practices might not be intentionally transformed, they change, at least to some extent, from generation to generation. In urban China, the one-child policy and rapid economic growth have challenged and changed Chinese family norms, ideals of parenting as well as the value of children more fundamentally than in most other societies. China indeed presents one of the most radical examples of state engineering of reproductive culture in the world and is, as such, an interesting case to study the differences between former generations' childcare practices and what mothers aspire to perform today.

This chapter contributes to the understanding of intergenerational relations and normative parenting practices in rapidly changing societies. In the late 1970s, China's one-child policy was formulated in an attempt to reduce the rapidly growing population, which threatened new visions of a modern, competitive nation in the global world. The ambition was to foster a population that could compete with the highest norms of health and education on a global scale (Woronov 2009). Women were asked to reduce the quantity of children but improve the quality, so as 'to reproduce less in order to nurture better' (Anagnost 1997: 214). Several scholars have placed the Chinese population project in the frame of Foucault's notion of biopower (Zhang 2009; Greenhalgh 2009; Binah-Pollak 2014; Jing 2000). The centrality of the family in the Chinese state's aims of producing healthy children highlights the link between the general ambition of improving the population and individuals' desire for care. By the concept of biopower we might detect how the mere quantitative problem of the number of children was expanded by a problematization of the correct management of children (Foucault 1980: 172–175).

The one-child policy's emphasis on fostering 'modern' children in whom parents invest heavily undoubtedly has an impact on everyday practices of mothering and childcare. Scholars have found that as the ideal outcome of reproduction shifted from a large quantity to a supreme quality of children, an emphasis on new and more scientific approaches to childcare emerged, largely influenced by Western discourses on childcare (Fowler, Gao and Carlson 2010; Binah-Pollak 2014; Woronov 2006). Orna Naftali has shown how a new emphasis on children's rights (2009) and a psychological discourse on childhood (2010a, 2010b) developed over recent decades, and Harriet Evans found that from the late 1990s, women's magazines began to include sections on 'parents' schools', which educated women to care for their child through appropriate means (Evans 2010: 996).

In some respects, these studies can be placed in a long (Western) tradition of feminist work on the medicalization of motherhood. Medicalization covers, in the words of Adele Clarke et al., ‘the processes through which aspects of life previously outside the jurisdiction of medicine come to be construed as medical problems’ (2003: 161). Although some medicalization theories provide a simplistic, negative picture of reproduction in contemporary societies, holding a rather naïve approach to what is natural and sustaining a binary between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, ‘old’ and ‘new’, these theories have provided important insights into changing reproductive cultures. While I, to some extent, build upon this literature, my focus is not on whether motherhood has become more or less medicalized. Rather I am interested in the narrative construction of self implied in mothers’ emphasis on what is ‘new’ and ‘scientific’. This enables the close examination of their apparent rejection of the older generation, alongside their continual dependence on grandparents, and of how these narratives interact with normative expectations of motherhood. While the mothers in my study made distinctions between ‘old’ and ‘new’ knowledge, I understand these distinctions as part of narrative identity work that communicates something about the mother’s self and with whom or what they wish to identify (Faircloth 2009: 15; Yuval-Davies 2006: 202). These are stories that do not necessarily correspond to their actual everyday practices. Therefore, we should understand their distinctions of ‘old’ and ‘new’ as a desire to fashion a particular kind of mothering self and not as a simple rejection of grandparents or a judgement on the older generation as truly old-fashioned. In many cases the grandparents are also well-educated and live in urban areas – factors that have been seen as constituting a ‘modern’ life. Nevertheless, I argue that the younger generation’s longing for expert-led childcare approaches has influenced the intergenerational power relations in the family, which traditionally have been embedded in an order of filial piety.

China has a long cultural tradition of filial piety with obligations to respect the aged. Yet scholars suggest that contemporary children are valued by their parents and grandparents to such an extent that Chinese society has shifted its focus from the elderly to the young (Ho, Peng and Lai 2001; Chen, Liu and Mair 2011; Goh 2011). This shift has been echoed in the popular and academic debates on China’s spoiled ‘Little Emperors’ (Jing 2000; Croll 2006). In a thought-provoking article, Shen (Shen 2011) argues that a transformation of power relations in urban Chinese families has occurred not necessarily between women and men, but between generations.

She finds that power has moved from the old to the young, making the older generations appear almost as servants to their children. My empirical material to some extent supports these changes. However, I find that child-centred ideals coexist with respect for the older generation and that this coexistence causes clashes in everyday practices of childcare.

In an attempt to broaden the understanding of reproductive cultures in urban China, I will pursue stories of intergenerational encounters as they unfolded in my interviews with mothers. As I did not interview the older generation, my ambition is not to cover a full spectrum of intergenerational negotiations. Instead, I present stories of the younger generation, their thoughts and troubles, while I leave the stories of the grandparents to be told by others (Whyte 2004; Shen 2011). Three questions in particular guide the study: what conflicts occur between these two generations? What do they tell us about the changing practices of parenting? And how do these practices affect intergenerational power relations? I first present my empirical departures and methodological concerns. Then I move to the question of who the caregivers in these families are, finding that childcare remains a feminized, if not maternal activity. Following the notion of 'multiple caregivers', I explore how the younger generation of mothers attaches meaning to generational differences in childcare as well as the conflicts that appear in everyday practices of caring for young children. Moreover, I point to how the younger mothers' own childhood experiences of absent parents make them doubt the grandparents' knowledge. Finally, I discuss the changing power relations in the extended family.

Empirical Departures

The chapter emerges from a study of twenty-three interviews with urban, well-educated, Chinese mothers, working in white-collar jobs, the vast majority of whom had only one child, aged between three months and three years. Most of the women were born in the early 1980s as the one-child policy's first generation of only children. The interviews were loosely structured, recorded and transcribed in full. As I do not speak or understand Chinese, I conducted most interviews in English or with interpreters in cases where the mother exclusively spoke or preferred to speak in Chinese. I aimed to have an ongoing dialogue about my ideas and topics, which meant that I met up with several of the people I interviewed to talk further over

a coffee. These conversations were beneficial for exploring their recognition of topics that I picked out from my empirical material. I also worked with two students from Peking University as interpreters. They both had knowledge of gender studies and can be regarded as co-constitutive of the process of knowledge production. I encouraged them to take part in the interpretative work, asking about their interpretation of the person we had just interviewed, a topic we had covered, the place where the interviewee lived or something that had been said in the interview.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews are an approach that is flexible enough to grasp unexpected stories and complexities. I let my interviewees talk at length on topics about which I would never think of asking them or about which I could not immediately see any point in talking. I believe that an open approach is especially crucial when working in a context that is (for the researcher) unfamiliar. It allowed me to explore how intergenerational practices mattered in these Chinese families to a greater extent than I had anticipated. Most mothers were eager to discuss intimate details of their lives. One mother spent almost two hours telling me about her increasingly difficult relationship with her mother-in-law, starting from when her daughter was born two years ago. I left the interview touched by the tensions that she had described. Not all mothers had such profound troubles. Yet most faced challenges, and intergenerational disputes became one of the central perspectives I developed for understanding experiences of mothering among this group of women.

Who Cares?

In most of my interviews I asked the mothers to draw circles representing a normal day in their own and their child's life. In the drawing of the child's day, I asked the mother to include a note on who performed the caring task or activity. My motive for asking for these sketches was to understand the parental division of care. The drawings, however, came to illustrate how grandparents played a central role in childcare. Figure 3.1 shows a normal day in the life of Xu Hua's eight-month-old daughter Gaigai.

Xu Hua lived with her husband in the home of her parents-in-law, which also included a housekeeper. She was an entrepreneur who worked in her own tea shop. This made her both flexible and very committed to her job. During a normal day, her daughter spent

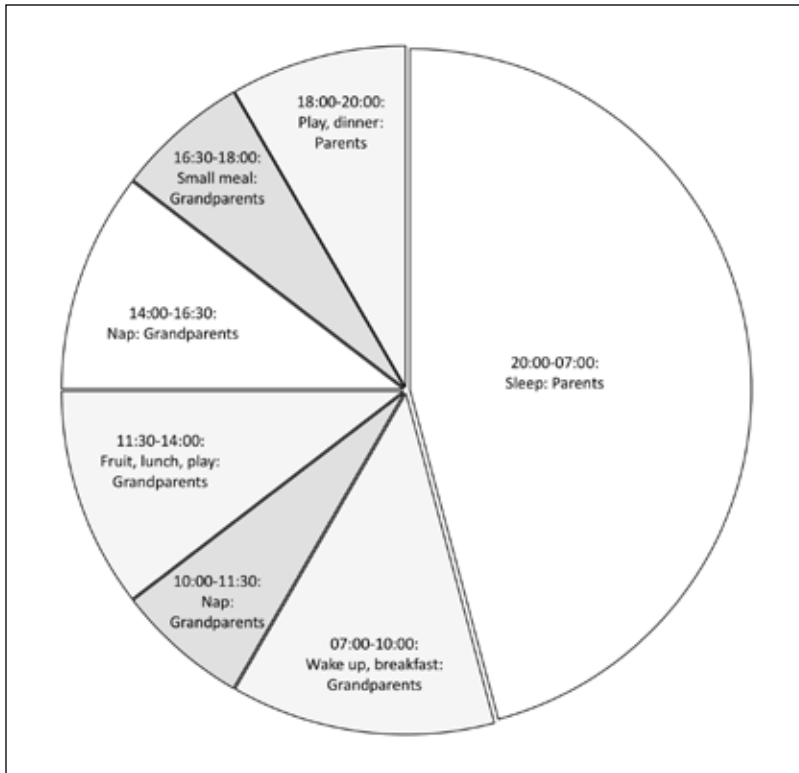


FIGURE 3.1. A day in the life of eight-month-old Gaigai

two of her waking hours with her parents, while the grandparents took care of her, played with and fed her for the rest of the time. As she was still too young to attend the public kindergarten, the grandparents were indispensable for managing the daily childcare tasks.

Generally, the mothers I interviewed talked about sending their child to kindergarten at the age of three, but there is little formal childcare available before children reach that age. Life in urban China, and especially life with a child, requires that both parents work full-time. While women comprise almost half of the labour force (forty-four per cent (Trading Economics 2012)) and additionally spend a lot of time travelling in the megacity of Beijing, there is a lack of institutional childcare for infants.

The intergenerational dependency in contemporary urban China challenges mainstream theories of modernization, which point to the declining role of the extended family and towards smaller nuclear formations. Intergenerational coresidence has been seen as a

sign of the persistence of tradition and thus is held in contrast to modernization (Logan and Bian 1999: 1254). Although the one-child policy has certainly produced smaller family units, nuclear family arrangements are not as prevailing as these theories predicted and coresidence of multiple generations is still comparatively common in modern China (Chen, Liu and Mair 2011: 11–12). Around forty-five per cent of adult children coresided with their parents in 2002 (Zhang, Gu and Luo 2014). However, public figures on coresidence are often misleading as many households do not register as such. Coresidence patterns among the twenty-two women I interviewed showed that only two had not been living with or depending on grandparents on a daily basis. Supporting Esther Goh's (2011) finding that paternal grandparents were most involved in childcare, the mothers I talked to were twice as likely to live with their in-laws as to live with their own parents. Although the inclusion of more caregivers challenges understandings of mothers as primary caregivers, this does not necessarily break with traditions that make women responsible for reproduction. Instead my research confirms the findings of other studies that show the older generation of mothers and mothers-in-law are more likely than their male counterparts to help with childcare (Yi and Wang 2003: 107).

The involvement of grandparents in childcare should not just be understood as a legacy of tradition. As Carrie Liu Currier argues, the decreasing fertility rate and resulting smaller families offer greater opportunities for including grandparents in childcare, as the older generation can adjust their circumstances more easily to help their only or few adult children (Currier 2008: 373). Grandparents are able to do so, as the retirement age in China is fifty-five for women and sixty for men. The persistent intergenerational reliance does not negate the existence of problems at the level of lived family life. John Logan and Fuqin Bian (1999) found a discrepancy between what people prefer and their actual living arrangements in urban China. A survey in Shanghai showed that while more than half of all children under three were mainly raised by their grandparents, most families were dissatisfied with this model (Zhang 2007). Xu Hua, the mother of Gaigai, articulated the ambivalences of their current situation and talked about how she would prefer the generations to live separately and for Gaigai to attend a kindergarten:

We are planning to buy an apartment. My in-laws are very traditional, they prefer that more family members live together so maybe they won't allow us to move even if we buy an apartment ... From my

own point of view it's better to live together just me and my husband, but according to the conditions of the family where my in-laws are very old and not in good health I have to take care of them. Besides, they love our baby very much and we live together in harmony, so it's not a problem to live together, but I would prefer to live separately.

While the grandparents were Gaigai's main caregivers, Xu Hua's words reveal that the intergenerational coresidence is not just a matter of helping Gaigai's parents but is also spurred by ideals of filial piety in which older family members expect their children to support and assist them in old age. In fact, children's duties to support their parents are to some extent a legal obligation (Evans 2008). While these ideals do not necessarily belong to the younger generation of mothers, they can be difficult to resist while simultaneously upholding harmonious family relations.

In Western societies the mother appears as the primary caregiver, with other family members in secondary roles. However, we need to be careful in applying this Western model to familial engagement in China, which often includes the extended family. That the newborn child needs care is obvious and cannot be changed through cultural interpretations of the child. However, who provides that care is not a biological fact (Moi 2005). In order to capture the Chinese care arrangements, I use the concept of 'multiple caregivers' suggested by Short et al. This suggests that care by mothers and others, such as grandparents, might coexist and the different sources of care might complement each other (2001: 919). This plurality is also captured in the so-called '4-2-1 model', which has been used by scholars to describe the family structure that emerged after the one-child policy. While this model often refers to the burden that single children may face in caring for their elderly family members, it also describes a new structure where four grandparents and two parents care for one child (Goh 2011). In the families I looked into the '4-2-1' pattern varied, as it was often just one grandparent, the grandmother, who cared for the child and often only for a limited period, after which institutional childcare and/or a nanny took over. Moreover, some did not live together with the grandparents, but lived nearby and depended daily on their help – a structure that has been termed 'the networked family' (Whyte 2004: 112). Arguably, these families challenge theories that predict the decline of the extended family. Although some women I talked to, such as Xu Hua, ideally preferred the nuclear family, the actual support of grandparents made their everyday life practically possible.

‘All This Is What My Mother Cannot Do’

In this context of the everyday practical negotiation of childcare between multiple caregivers, it is useful to examine in greater depth what caused the conflicts between younger mothers and the older generation. I begin with one mother, Li Jiaying, who worked as a junior researcher. When I first met her, she was very concerned about how her future career would unfold. After having interviewed her, I met with her again in spring 2014, when she immediately began to express her troubles in finding a new form of childcare for her daughter, who was nearing her third birthday. Her own mother, who had previously looked after the child, had left to care for her husband, who had broken his leg. In caring for her daughter, Li Jiaying now faced a choice between three options: her father-in-law, who already lived with them, hiring a nanny, or attending a private nursery. Her reflections introduced a hierarchy of possible caregivers, ascending from nannies to grandparents and then ‘teachers’, as she called the people working in the nursery. Nannies would not provide good enough care as they tended to be more concerned about not making the parents angry than about the child’s development. Li Jiaying exemplified this with the story of a nanny who worked for a family in her community and who strapped the child in the pram instead of letting it play. The reason for this, she said, was the nanny’s fear of a bruised and dirty child, an appearance that might upset the parents. The grandparents, on the other hand, would care, but sometimes too much, leading them to spoil the child. Moreover, grandparents seemed to lack a sensitive approach to children and could not stimulate the child. Instead, Li Jiaying talked at length about the attractiveness of the new nursery that she had finally chosen for her daughter. It seemed especially to be the teachers’ educated approaches that appealed to her. For instance, she mentioned how the teachers ‘introduced their curriculum to me, they said it’s based on Gardener’s eight types of intelligence, you know, they are from foreign, they say they are from Hong Kong, I had a doubt about that, but at least they are aware that there are things like that’. During our talk Li Jiaying pulled out a crumpled paper note from her bag. It was her daughter’s daily assessment report. Stating the name of the nursery and her daughter’s name at the top, the paper contained a schematic review of the child’s day. It stated how much she had eaten, drunk and slept, her temperature observed three times during that day, and recorded the eight times a teacher had inquired whether she needed the toilet. In a written statement the teachers

stated that the child had had a good day, how she had played and how her mood had been. While this can be read as an assurance of the nursery's competence, it also contains information about ways of approaching childcare that were understood to be desirable.

This raises the question of why this form of childcare is so appealing to mothers like Li Jiaying. Scholars have argued that scientific approaches stand as a global hallmark of modern mothering as well as a sign of being Western or internationally minded (Naftali 2009; Woronov 2006). I suggest that the mothers I interviewed drew on these symbols in their narrative self-making. Most of them read foreign childcare literature and many of them saw their encounters with me as an opportunity to acquire information on Western practices, asking me how mothers in Denmark, or more widely 'in the West', would feed, care for and educate their children. At the end of one interview, one couple asked if I would recommend a good educational course for their two-year-old daughter. In another, I was asked about breastfeeding practices in Denmark. While the desire for scientific approaches was often valued as a sign of Western modernity, expertise also worked for them as an objective assurance of good childcare and hence as a way to ensure their child's best possible care (see also Goh 2011: 5). One mother, He Lihua, who worked in an international I.T. company, for instance explained how she 'cherished the baby very much so I just took the doctor's suggestion'. Although most of these inquiries into Western mothering styles were formulated as something to strive for, the mothers did not admire Western practices without reflecting on them, but critically assessed different methods and often simultaneously followed Chinese traditions, such as postpartum rituals and practices of Chinese medicine. He Lihua told me that her husband, who was employed in the same I.T. company, had alongside his work decided to begin studying traditional Chinese medicine in order to care for the family. In another interview we exchanged views on whether my Danish mother faced joint problems because she had not appropriately performed any postpartum rites, and several mothers I talked to expressed concerns about the bitterness of Western medicine.

The mothers' stories generally revolved around their preparations to become a mother, how they obtained their knowledge and to whom they entrusted childcare. Mothers' reflections also explored the older generation's practices – often so as to distinguish between what they preferred themselves and what their mother or mother-in-law did. A thirty-eight-year-old mother, Wu Xiaodan, who owned a small company offering accountancy training, mentioned a range

of things that she thought her own mother, who lived with them, could not provide for the child in the same way that she herself could. These things encompassed a broad range of activities, from carefully choosing the child's food and sport activities to making the child enjoy listening to piano music. As she said, 'all this is what my mother cannot do'. Their stories about childcare were teeming with these distinctions, which were often expressed through a contrast between 'old' and 'new'. One mother, Bai Feifei, who was employed in an insurance company, expressed this, saying, 'We are both the only child in our family and our parents are very old. And the knowledge about childcare from our parents cannot catch up with the new ideas. They still hold old ideas. There is no help.'

The complaint of 'no help' should arguably not be understood in the sense of a lack of practical assistance – grandparents surely did help – but as an absence of desired knowledge, which meant that the mothers seldom turned to their parents for advice on childcare. Instead, the younger mothers consumed large amounts of expert knowledge. This confirms Ann Anagnost's suggestion that grandparents can help by taking care of the child, but they are not authorities on the parenting style that emphasizes the science of child-rearing. This is a style of parenting that, as she describes, 'addresses the subjectivities of modern parents who are, in turn, themselves disciplined to consume knowledge and commodities appropriately' (1997: 215). Wang Shu, a thirty-two-year-old part-time teacher and mother to an eighteen-month-old child, recounted how she would always compare the advice she received from her mother-in-law with 'the things that the doctors told me and what I read in books'. She most frequently followed the doctors' advice.

While mothers seemed to use the 'new' as a marker of modern or good mothering, I also wish to examine the meanings encapsulated in the 'old'. One meaning appeared to be lay experience, constructed as the opposite of the modern, internationally-informed knowledge. This was expressed by Zhang Mei, a twenty-eight-year-old mother working in a bank: 'I think the old generation is different. Now we get more international information through fast internet. So the way of thinking has been broadened. In the past times, the old generation only judged everything from their own experiences, some of which may not be correct.'

As Elizabeth Murphy argues, constructing childcare as an area of scientific expertise often works to make experience-based knowledge inferior (2003: 444). However, in the stories of the mothers I talked to, the 'old' did not just appear as experience oriented,

but as referring to ‘only the basic’. The mothers’ stories of gaining knowledge were positioned in contrast to what they described as the grandparents’ simpler approaches. Mothers spoke of how the older generation was too concerned with basic needs, such as warm clothes or fresh air. Nutrition was ‘reduced’ to categories of ‘hungry’ or ‘not hungry’; as Li Jiaying sceptically put it, ‘well, in their eyes the good way of raising kids is to avoid diseases, stay healthy and avoid crying’. One should understand this in the context of the younger mothers’ own upbringing in the early 1980s, when the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution coincided with the very gradual opening-up of China to international influences. Women at that time were often strongly oriented towards work, there was greater poverty and many faced a shortage of food (Goh 2011: 64; Yi and Wang 2003: 102). Several mothers described how their own mothers had just ‘got married and had a child’ without any notion of the more systematic approach that they themselves demanded. Sun Yi, a twenty-nine-year-old mother, who worked in a bank, told me:

Our parents don’t think that having a baby is a big thing. When they were pregnant, they just gave birth. It was a very easy thing [for them], no matter the pregnancy, the birth, the child rearing, it was very easy for them. Now it seems that everything is very complicated. From the beginning of pregnancy, you begin to prepare for it.

The ongoing preparations not only meant quite laborious activities, but they were also connected to a moral imperative of mothering. Lu Meili, a thirty-two-year-old mother of a four-month-old infant, expressed this: ‘In my opinion, you must have a lot of knowledge to be a good mother. If you have a lot of knowledge, your ideas will be different. In fact, a child is a mirror of the parents. When you raise a child, always keep improving.’ Lu Meili’s expression reveals several important points. As she establishes a link between child and parent, the mother’s knowledge becomes the foundation for the child’s future as well as of her parental worth. By constantly acquiring knowledge, the mother shows herself to be well-informed, responsible and thus competent in caring for her baby. Moreover, by using the word ‘different’, Lu Meili’s longing to become a good mother takes a distinctive form. If we understand the stories of inter-generational childcare negotiations as part of mothers’ self-making, we see how these distinctions play a part in constructing a certain type of mother subject. The stories of ‘new’ and ‘old’ can be read as a way of distinguishing themselves as more ‘modern’ than the former generation. These acts of distinction, however, can cause tensions.

The Older Generation's Absence and Lack of Experience

The younger mothers' desire to perform modern mothering does not, however, capture everything at stake. The mothers also doubted the older generation's competence in influencing their grandchildren's care because of what they described as a lack of experience. The mothers often emphasized the stark differences between the way that they were brought up and the ways they raised or wished to raise their child. This was, for instance, expressed by thirty-one-year-old mother Luo Yan who told me, while looking back at her own childhood:

They sent me to a nanny when they went to work and picked me up when they got home. When I was ill they sent me to the hospital and after I recovered, they sent me to the nanny again. That was what my father told me. What I can remember is that when I was four or five years old, I stayed in a small room [while her parents were at work], just like this one [we are sitting in a bedroom], they locked the door and my cousin played in the yard and I could see them through the door, but I could not go outside with them. That's the way I have been raised ... but nowadays, because we have just one child, the grandmothers will fight with each other to raise the baby, so our baby is really happier than we were, you know, has a good life, has a better life than we had.

A profound point in the stories of their own childhood experiences was generational differences in attitudes towards working life. In the Mao era, paid work had been a guiding principle for people's worth. Slogans such as 'women hold up half the sky' highlighted women as crucial agents within society. Women who were too absorbed by family matters were seen as selfish (Short et al. 2002: 34). Until 1988 women were only entitled to fifty-six days of paid maternity leave. A national regulation that protected female workers in 1988 stated that maternity leave should be extended to ninety days with fifteen days prior to delivery (Jacka 1990). In 2012 maternity leave was extended from ninety to ninety-eight days. While changing practical childcare provision, the extension of maternity also introduced new ideals of balancing work and family life. As He Lihua, a thirty-eight-year-old mother of two children, described: 'I think at that time their maternity leave was only fifty-six days, one and a half months, very short, they need to go to work, work very hard, you know my parents, that generation is a different generation, they worked very

hard, work first and family second, it's different.' He Lihua seems to recognize the former generation's practices in her mother-in-law's approach to her:

My mother-in-law, she just encourages me to fight more and to get a better position, earn more money. I don't think that's my best choice, because then I need to spend much more time [at work], I don't want to travel a lot, I need to stay at home with my kids ... She always says 'don't worry about your home, don't worry about your children, we will take good care of them, just go to work'.

Mothers' emphasis on approaching childcare differently from the former generation might be fuelled by their own childhood memories, which many described as marked by their parents' absence. Most of the mothers also recalled that their parents had been very strict, maintaining harsh discipline and authoritarian attitudes. Several mothers explained how they had in fact been raised by their grandparents. He Lihua interpreted this by saying, 'that generation is a different generation, they worked hard so they just left the kids with their parents, I was not raised by my parents'. By looking back from a contemporary, more child-centred culture to the earlier relative absence of parents, women's desires for a more intensive mothering style are increased. However, this absence can also stimulate their mistrust with regard to the older generation's childcare abilities. The thirty-four-year-old mother and university professor Gao Yun told me how her mother did not know how to take care of her grandchild. When I asked her what she meant, she explained that her mother had relied on her mother and therefore 'didn't get the time to practise, she is supportive and she will support other people, but she does not directly know how to handle the baby'.

These stories of absent or distant parents were told in both hurtful and loyal ways. Although some believed that they did not have a 'good relationship' with their mother, they did not express much anger or judgement – at least not to me, which is of course not the same as saying that they were not angry. Although they were able to contextualize the earlier childcare practices, it was difficult for younger women not to interpret them through the contemporary ideologies of more intensive parenting to which many of them aspired. Although they expressed an understanding of the specific and unavoidable historical circumstances in which they had grown up, the mothers opposed this way of taking care of children. In this way, individual memories, popular historical narratives, moral beliefs and

normative assumptions all coexist and interact in shaping individuals' lives, their familial support, and how practices of care are transmitted between generations.

Changing Intergenerational Power Relations

Studies of familial power relations often focus on the gendered dynamics between husband and wife, while neglecting other relations in the family. Yet previous research argues that in contemporary China generational power dynamics have been especially subject to change (Shen 2011; Yan 1997). Chinese societies have traditionally been organized around a system of filial piety, which places an obligation on children to obey their parents. From this it also follows that, when there are disputes, husbands must take their parents' side in familial discussions, so that the daughter-in-law is left in the wrong (Yan 1997: 204). While scholars (Binah-Pollak 2014; Naftali 2009) argue that the new scientific discourse on children has distanced contemporary childcare from former authoritarian practices, few have discussed how this change unfolds in intergenerational power relations. Here I argue that the mothers' use of expert-based knowledge to some extent offers them an opportunity to resist the authority of the older generation, so that the celebration of science is one concrete foundation of the destabilization of power. This is an aspect which is closely tied to, but not reducible to, the one-child policy. I approach the negotiations of childcare through the concept of power/knowledge in Foucault's twofold sense. According to Foucault, power and knowledge are inextricably linked. Practices of power always create knowledge and knowledge constantly affects power relations (1980: 52). Thinking about power and knowledge as entangled makes it possible to see how familial orders are destabilized, as an emphasis on scientific knowledge produces new subject positions in the family. Foucault's articulation of power is not in the sense of having power over somebody, but instead power is conceptualized as what offers the subject particular opportunities to act. While there is a tendency in theories of medicalization to see mothers as docile or passive (e.g., Apple 1994), I emphasize how the mothers in my study actively use scientific knowledge to empower themselves.

The mother, Gao Yun, experienced significant conflict with her mother-in-law, in whose house they lived. The disputes covered most areas of their cohabitation. Gao Yun expressed her concerns

about how her mother-in-law always cooked the same food for the daughter, invariably went to the same places, and never tried to challenge her conservative habits. She explained that this, however, had not been clear to her at first as she, and everyone else, regarded her mother-in-law as an expert:

She used to be a children's doctor so many people regard her as the authority, as an expert, so at the very first even my mom who is also a doctor, but a Chinese doctor, not specialized in children, would listen to her. We thought that whatever she said, it's correct. Well, my husband still thinks so, but gradually we began to think that she just has an opinion, she's not an expert in any sort of objective way, she just has her own ideas.

Gao Yun here reveals how elderly family members are not necessarily dismissed. Their professional status and education, here their position as doctors, can offer them authority. We can discern a conflict between the two grandmothers in which the Chinese doctor is positioned lower than the paediatrician specialized in Western medicine. The relationship between Chinese and Western medicine is highly complex and ambiguous. Western medicine cannot be assumed to be interpreted as always superior to Chinese medicine in practices related to motherhood (see Raven et al. 2007). However, what concerns Gao Yun is what counts as scientifically measurable, or as she puts it 'objective'. Here the Western-educated doctor appears as a greater authority, at least until she finds out that her mother-in-law fails to follow the neutral standards that she believes characterizes this form of science.

Like Gao Yun, several other mothers recounted how they avoided other people's 'opinions' as they were too subjective, too interfering and often contradicted the advice literature. Through their use of expert knowledge they became confident enough to challenge other forms of knowledge. As such, using the experts could be a strategy to negotiate with grandparents. In spite of attending a training programme, the thirty-two-year-old Ma Chunhua described herself as a full-time mother. After Ma Chunhua gave birth to her daughter, her mother had insisted that she followed the postpartum tradition of *zuoyuezi*, a tradition that tells new mothers to avoid a range of things such as showering or brushing one's teeth in order not to get cold, to eat 'hot' food, and to rest for the first month after birth. Ma Chunhua felt uncomfortable performing these practices and when asked about which of these things she specifically did, she instead told me how she tried to avoid them:

I really asked the doctor to be there when my mom was in the hospital, I asked them to come to the bed and give us the training and they came in the room and told us that as a mom I need to have a shower, I need to brush my teeth because it's better for the baby, so my mom thinks it's science, he [the doctor] should be good, it should be right ... So she just accepted it, even if she knows that traditionally we can't do that.

What Ma Chunhua expresses here is that she is not in a position to negotiate with her mother by herself. She therefore draws upon the position of the doctor – a position that her mother also recognizes as sufficiently powerful – to challenge her traditional principles.

The interview excerpts above show how mothers perform an empowered self by drawing upon certain systems of knowledge. That expert knowledge offers the younger mothers a way to empower themselves does not mean, however, that we should understand the older generation as powerless. Grandparents are doubted as competent caregivers, but this does not mean that they are immediately neglected or disrespected. Rather, the mothers struggled to negotiate with them in order to uphold harmonious relationships and a sense of themselves as good daughters and daughters-in-law. The repeated stories about grandparents made me aware that the older generation was not only important in the sense that they took part in childcare, but also that they could serve as a point of reference for good mothering. As Dorte Staunæs (2003) argues, demarcation figures are not necessarily powerless persons, because their potential as destabilizers can be extensive. Furthermore, the authoritative power of the older generation might be less pronounced than before the Chinese modernization project, but it has not disappeared. Although grandparents might be placed at the periphery of the celebrated mothering culture, this does not position them on the margins of all family spheres. The stories that Ma Chunhua told in relation to the first month after birth serve to illustrate this. Ma Chunhua reported how her mother took the initiative to move into the younger couple's apartment after birth, as 'she thinks she needs to look after me'. Ma Chunhua had not encouraged her to do so. She told me that she did not understand her mother's decision because they were not close and did 'not have a good relationship'. In fact, Ma Chunhua had already hired a nanny to help out. However, she explained that she saw no opportunities to prevent her mother, 'because, you know, she is my mom, sometimes I can't refuse her'.

Although my study corroborates Shen's finding (2011) that the power of the older generations is declining in urban China, Shen gives an impression of a strongly subjugated older generation without a voice. As I did not talk to the older generation, I do not argue that grandparents do not feel exploited or powerless. My findings, however, show that the younger mothers could not easily dismiss the older generation and that (especially) the mother-in-law is a central figure in the younger generation's childcare practices. The mothers were often deeply troubled by the presence of the older generation and often felt that they had no opportunities to resist their ideas. While the links between power and knowledge provide an insight into how mothers might assume new positions, it is too simplistic to work exclusively from this form of power in intergenerational relations. Although some grandparents took part in the power and knowledge negotiations, the power of the older generation might be better understood within another structure where knowledge is not necessarily the expression of power, but where status is determined by traditions, such as filial piety. Filial piety works as a one-way directed power that gives parents absolute authority over children (Ho 1996: 155). As Goh describes, filial piety upholds a hierarchical power structure in the family, in which the elderly, and men in particular, have absolute control (2011: 3). While being less linked to (scientific) knowledge, the emphasis on patriarchal obedience resembles the non-modern form of power, which Foucault assigned the authoritarian supreme master. The importance of filial piety alongside the strong faith in scientific knowledge suggests that traditional and modern powers coexist in contemporary urban China rather than eradicating one another.

Conclusion

The relationship between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law has been described as one of the most difficult in the Chinese family (Goh 2011: 54). I did not find that conflicts depended on whether a mother was talking about her relationship with her mother or her mother-in-law. Gender differences did prevail in these conflicts, however, so that negotiations about childcare took place with grandmothers and not grandfathers. While one might predict that intergenerational dependency would decline due to modernization, the one-child family has changed the importance of, but not decreased, intergenerational support. In exploring the stories of the

younger generation of mothers about intergenerational practices of childcare, it becomes clear that several matters are at stake. By using a semi-structured interview approach I opened up for stories of intergenerational conflicts and support that I, as a Danish researcher, had not expected. I believe, too, that working with interpreters also enhanced the cultural sensibility that is crucial when working in a foreign setting (Liamputtong 2010). Besides this, my analysis in particular emphasizes three concerns.

First, the younger generation of urban and well-educated mothers is highly attentive to scientific models of childcare, which they conceptualize as a modern and beneficial approach. They seek scientific knowledge to empower themselves as well as to negotiate care practices with grandparents.

Second, the mothers' distrust of the older generation is not only due to their categorization as lacking modern, scientific knowledge of childcare, but also because of the mothers' own childhood experiences, when parents were often not the principal caregivers. At the time of the younger mothers' own upbringing, women's identities were centred on being good workers, leaving less time for family matters. This means that they regard the grandparents' generation as having little or no practical experience of childcare.

Third, changes in how modern authority is negotiated between generations can partly be conceptualized through the close connection between power and knowledge. Through reference to Foucault, I explored how expert knowledge produces certain empowered senses of self. The mothers seem to use this empowerment to negotiate childcare in the family and to some extent challenge the authority of the older generation. However, while the younger mothers negotiate childcare from a paradigm of modern scientific knowledge, they also acknowledge the power of the older generation that is founded in a tradition of filial piety. Filial piety in this sense stands as a one-dimensional form of power, which is closer to what Foucault described as centred around obedience to the sovereign, 'the father who forbids' or delegates orders (1978: 85). Foucault suggests that '[t]he mythology of the sovereign was no longer possible once a certain kind of power was being exercised within the social body. The sovereign then became a fantastic personage, at once archaic and monstrous' (1980: 39). Following this interpretation, we might expect that the power of the older generation should decline as it meets new expert-led knowledge. However, while grandparents in some ways are understood to be 'archaic', they do not unambiguously occupy a position that makes them 'monstrous'.

Although knowledge becomes central to the younger mothers' narratives of self-making as a way to express their (be)longing to modern mothering, their sense of self is also constructed in relation to filial expectations. As Elizabeth Croll also points out, despite intergenerational differences, young people in many ways still adhere to filial obligations (2006: 482). Grandparents still have respect and power, which cannot easily be dismissed. While they might not be able to offer the sensitive, high quality care desired by the younger mothers, they are a great practical help and indispensable for managing daily tasks.

As such, Chinese family structures blur theories of modernization. On the one hand, the one-child policy has led to smaller family sizes, child-centred and scientifically-informed parenting – all traits that are seen to characterize Chinese modernity. Yet on the other hand, the older generation plays a crucial role as caregivers, even though they may lack the expert touch. This challenges theories of modernization that suggest linear processes moving towards the greater autonomy of the younger generation. Although the older generation is not supported by the same unquestionable honour taught by the paradigm of filial piety, the younger generation does not feel capable of simply rejecting them. Intergenerational practices of childcare are dynamic and multidirectional, thus creating ambiguities for mothers. They strive for the newest knowledge of childcare at the same time as they depend on and share practices of care with the older generation.

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