Not Just a Business Transaction: The logic and limits of grandparental childcare assistance in Taiwan

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‘NOT JUST A BUSINESS TRANSACTION’
The logic and limits of grandparental childcare assistance in Taiwan

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Key words: Confucianism, gender, grandparental childcare, labour force participation, Taiwan

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How does the presence of grandparents in the household impact the gendered division of childcare responsibilities between spouses? How does it compare with market-based care? Drawing on in-depth interview data, this study finds that Taiwanese grandparents treat childcare assistance as their moral responsibility. Mothers express more appreciation for assistance from their own mothers than their mothers-in-law. Fathers appreciate the role of both their parents and their in-laws. The analysis suggests that the character of intergenerational relations is one of the factors mediating the degree to which married women’s entrance into the paid labour force results in the perceived childcare deficit.

A social order based on rituals has, as a precondition, a tradition that offers effective solutions to life’s problems (Fei Xiaotong, 1992 [1947]).

Given its importance in maintaining the social order, it is no surprise that childcare has been a major concern of academics, journalists, policy-makers, and not to mention parents. Arlie Hochschild (2003) used the term ‘care deficit’ to describe and analyse how contemporary social trends (such as economic restructuring and state inaction) have expanded the need for care, while contracting its supply. There is, moreover, a substantial scholarly literature on caring and ‘care regimes’; this literature addresses numerous aspects of care, including care in relation to other housework, delegation of responsibilities, acceptable substitutes for parental care and gendered differences in decision-making surrounding care responsibilities (Duncan and Edwards, 2003; England and Folbre, 2003; Folbre, 2001; Gornick and Meyers, 2004; Himmelweit, 2000). Most of this scholarship focuses on the nuclear family, which is the ideal-typical household type in the industrialized West, and tends to situate its analysis in relation to changing marital dynamics.

While existing studies have enhanced our understanding of the dynamics of care, their value for understanding care for children in non-western societies deserves further study and clarification. This article explores gendered and intergenerational processes of negotiation, motivation and satisfaction of
childcare delegation in nuclear and extended households in a newly industrialized and historically Confucian-influenced society, Taiwan. In the latter half of the 20th century, Taiwan experienced rapid demographic changes such as declining fertility rates and increasing life spans. There was also the large-scale entrance of women into the paid labour force, which accompanied rapid economic modernization, as shown in Table 1. Moreover, the increase in the rate of female labour force participation between 1980 and 1998 was significantly high among mothers of children under age six – 71.6 percent compared with 24 percent of those with children above six (Yi, 2002: 344).

The living arrangements of the elderly in Taiwan, however, have changed only incrementally. According to the 2000 Population and Housing Survey, Taiwan-Fukien Area, Republic of China, 58 percent of people aged 65 and over lived with their adult children (Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, 2000). This pattern contrasts sharply with that observed in the industrialized countries of the West, where a high proportion of elderly individuals and couples maintain their own households.

This article considers the central question of how the presence of an older generation in households affects the division of childcare between spouses. A series of specific questions about such households is addressed: Does it affect the childcare time of mothers and fathers differently, and does this vary according to whether the care is provided by maternal or paternal grandparents? Do mothers and fathers respond to this differently? What do people look for in grandparental care, and how do they see it as different from other care substitutes? Drawing on 37 in-depth personal interviews with

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Source: Chu, 2002: 69.
recent Taiwanese immigrant couples and individuals in Canada, my analysis suggests that gender relations and intergenerational relations are intimately intertwined, and that the character of intergenerational relations in a given society contributes to the degree to which married women’s entrance into the paid labour force results in the perceived care deficit of their children.

**Care deficit and changing gender relations**

In many countries, one of the most important socioeconomic changes in the 20th century was the increase in married women’s paid labour force participation. This change led to anxieties about inadequate care for children (Blankenhorn, 1995; Garey et al., 2002). However, as Hochschild (2003) pointed out, in advanced industrialized countries, with the exception of Japan, multiple social trends have converged to expand the need for care while contracting its supply, creating a ‘care deficit’ in both private and public life. For instance, ‘in public life, the care deficit can be seen in . . . state cuts in funds for poor mothers, the disabled, the mentally ill, and the elderly. In reducing the financial deficit, legislators add to the care deficit’ (Hochschild, 2003: 214). Indeed, the literature has highlighted several factors that have contributed to the ‘care deficit’: on the one hand, financial crises of the welfare states and the attendant failure to respond to the changing needs of families and their dependants (Dizard and Gadlin, 1990; Folbre, 2001; Hochschild, 2003; Jencks, 1997), the emerging ‘familial’ governance in the corporate world that encourages long working hours (Hochschild, 1997) and the low value placed on care-giving work ‘mother used to do’ (England and Folbre, 2003; Hochschild, 2003); and on the other hand, the lengthening of the life span and the increasing need for eldercare (Garey et al., 2002).

Some studies have also enhanced our understanding of the degree to which married women’s entrance into the paid labour market may contribute to the extent of the problem of care deficit on the home front. For example, Gornick and Meyers (2004) examined the ways in which welfare state policies support parents in their efforts to balance employment and care-giving responsibilities and the degree to which such policies encourage gender-egalitarian divisions of labour at work and at home. Hochschild (2003: 217) concluded that ‘women have undergone this change in a culture that has neither rewired its notion of manhood to facilitate male work-sharing at home, nor restructured the workplace so as to allow for more control and flexibility at work’. Himmelweit (2000: 18) rejected rational choice models for understanding changes in caring behaviour and argued that ‘any contemporary deficit of care may have to do with being in transition between a gender-divided society and a more equal one’. Duncan and Edwards (2003) offered ‘gendered moral rationalities’ – ‘primarily mother,’ ‘primarily worker’ and ‘mother/worker integral’ rationalities – to explain the paradoxical fact that mothers’ uptake of paid work varies systematically according to the welfare
state regime, while different mothers make completely different decisions when they live in the same national policy context. However, most studies tend to assume the nuclear family as a household type: hence, changes in childcare have been analysed in the context of changing marital relations, especially how changes in women’s role vis-a-vis men influence parent-child relations.

In this article, I argue that gender relations, including spousal relations, are inevitably embedded in larger kinship structures with varying cultural norms and expectations. Thus, when mothers are employed in paid work, one may ask: are grandparents available and willing to provide childcare assistance and should grandparents be expected to do so? How do parents feel about such assistance?

Childcare assistance and intergenerational relations

Studies of intergenerational relations tend to look at grandparent–grandchild relations, without paying much attention to the middle generation (adult child or parental generation). For instance, Landry-Meyer and Newman (2004) studied role transition from grandparent to grandparent-caregiver in the US in cases where they have legal custody of grandchildren. They found that the enactment of a grandparent-caregiver role conflicted with the expected traditional role (e.g., visitation, spoiling). These views did not include ‘active parenting’ (Landry-Meyer and Newman, 2004: 1022). King et al. (2003) showed that the relationship of young Americans with their grandparents varies significantly according to the rural–urban ecology: rural youth enjoy more frequent contact with paternal grandparents and receive more help from all grandparents than urban youth, while urban youth report higher levels of conflict with maternal grandmothers than rural youth. Giarrusso et al. (2001) studied affection and consensus among Euro-American and Mexican American grandparents and their adult grandchildren; they suggested that ‘when grandchildren of either ethnic group perceived themselves to be similar in attitudes and values to their grandparents, the gap between level of affection was significantly smaller’ (Giarrusso et al., 2001: 456).

However, as Gauthier (2002) concluded in her study of grandparent–grandchildren relationships in Belgium, the role of the parents is critical. She identified three types of grandparents: educational subcontractors, specialists and passive grandparents, and speculated on the importance of the role played by parents: ‘they could be compared to level-crossing keepers between the two extreme generations. In some cases they will grant “full powers” to their parents, in other cases they will prevent them from playing any role, grandparents thus become passive’ (Gauthier, 2002: 306).

Unlike most studies, Andrea Hunter’s (1997) article, ‘Counting on Grandmothers: Black Mothers and Fathers’ Reliance on Grandmothers for Parenting Support’, investigated grandmothers’ childcare assistance from the
viewpoint of parents. Hunter found that mothers and fathers did not differ in their nomination of grandmothers as the person they could count on for childcare assistance and parental guidance. However, mothers were more likely than fathers to rely on grandmothers for both childcare assistance and parenting advice. Fathers were more likely than mothers to rely on grandmothers for childcare assistance only. Moreover, factors affecting parents’ reliance on grandmothers for parenting support varied by gender. For mothers, family closeness, the number of generations in multigeneration family lineages, residence in the rural South, and family proximity were related to increased reliance on grandmothers for parenting support. Among fathers, being employed and family proximity increased their reliance on grandmothers (Hunter, 1997: 251).

Among recent studies conducted in Confucian-influenced Asia, Won and Pascall (2004) studied the Korean gender regime through an examination of the childcare policies, and concluded that the state still plays a residual role, and the private sector and the family assume primary responsibility for childcare. Their interview data with mothers show that mothers’ accounts of their lives center on a “childcare war” played out beneath the apparently harmonious Confucian surface, with resisting husbands supported by powerful mothers-in-law and daily struggles over the management of services (Won and Pascall, 2004: 270).

In Confucian-influenced societies, however, maternal grandparents and sons-in-law are also beneficiaries of such assistance. In such societies, do fathers and mothers feel the same about maternal and paternal grandparental childcare assistance?

Market vs non-market childcare
As Ehrenreich (2001) and Hertz (1986) noted in the context of the nuclear family in advanced industrialized nations, the struggle over equal sharing of domestic labour between wives and husbands has been reoriented on the basis of class; childcare now is done by poorly paid women who have to meet their own childcare needs. Wrigley and Dreby (2005) analysed differential fatality rates between three forms of paid childcare in the US between 1985 and 2003: childcare centres, nannies working in children’s homes and family daycare providers working in their own homes. They found that the fatality rate for children who receive childcare in private homes is significantly higher than that for children in childcare centres. They concluded that centres are the safest form of market-based childcare because they afford children multiple forms of protection. For instance, centre staff members are monitored by experienced directors, supervisors and co-workers, and they also receive more training than most caregivers in private homes. However, with little professional training, without supervisors or co-workers, and often paid very little for long hours of work, even some experienced caregivers can lose emotional control.
Wrigley and Dreby's study showed that the care of young children can be a stressful and demanding job, and that improved safety will only come with more resources and closer regulation of care in a market-based exchange. However, in a non-market-based exchange, what might ensure high-quality care? England and Ffolkes (2003: 62) postulated that such care 'often requires long-term commitments or "contracts" characterized by emotional connection, moral obligation, and intrinsic motivation' and that such implicit contracts 'are especially important for the well-being of dependents such as children, the sick, and the elderly, who are seldom in a position to renegotiate them'.

Using survey data of mothers of preschool-aged children who were living in the Detroit metropolitan area in 1986, Kuhlthau and Mason (1996) investigated the determinants of the type of childcare used by mothers of preschool-aged children. They found that 'when women feel that parental care is best for preschool-aged children, even those of kindergarten age, they are more likely to seek out a relative to care for their children than if they feel otherwise'. Thus, they contend that 'relatives do not appear to be chosen simply because they are readily available and inexpensive. Many women prefer them as caregivers for their children, presumably because they see them as providing care that is closer to what they themselves provide than is the care provided by unrelated caregivers.' While statistical analyses of patterns of childcare are undoubtedly important, understanding the subjective perceptions of parents is equally critical, especially how parents themselves explain the childcare choice. What do they look for in grandparental care, and how do they see it as different from other care substitutes?

Previous studies of childcare in Taiwanese households

According to the 1995 Survey of Children's Living Status in Taiwan, the mother was the primary person who took care of preschool children. Approximately 52 percent of preschool children were cared for by their mothers (Ministry of the Interior, 1995). In other words, at least half of the children under age 3 were cared for by their mothers in 1995. Based on the 2000 Women's Marriage, Fertility and Employment Survey, 82 percent of married women reported that they were employed before marriage, but only 50 percent were still employed at the time of the survey, representing a 32 percent reduction. Moreover, in the same survey, when the respondents were jobless and expressed no desire to seek employment in the coming year, roughly 39 percent cited 'providing childcare' as the main reason (Directorate-General of Budget, 2000).

Researchers concerned with human resource management also found that marriage and childbearing are the two most important factors affecting the continuity of female labour force participation (Chang, 1996; Chien and Hsueh, 1996). Yi (2002: 334) estimated that when a Taiwanese woman marries, 'there is a nearly 30 percent chance that she will be asked to quit her job.'
If she remains employed, there is another ten percent chance that she will finally leave the labor force at childbirth.

Nevertheless, the overall rate of increase in female labor force participation from 1980 to 1998 was more salient among married females with children younger than 6. This suggests that some married women manage to remain active in the labor market after marriage or even after childbirth. The 2000 Women’s Marriage, Fertility and Employment Survey showed that along with the expansion of married women’s labor force participation, childcare provided by grandparents and other relatives had the highest increase compared with other forms of childcare. Specifically, while 85 percent of married women and men were the primary childcare givers for their youngest child in 1980, only about 72 percent were so in 2000. Concomitantly, childcare provided by parents and other relatives of respondents increased from about 13 percent in 1980 to 21 percent in 2000. In an earlier study, Liu (1985) found that paternal and maternal grandmothers together outnumbered hired sitters for children younger than 3, making kin the predominant source of childcare for preschoolers in Taiwan.

In sum, both empirical research and national surveys suggest that children younger than 3 seldom receive childcare provided by institutions. Moreover, married women in Taiwan still assume the role of primary childcare providers. Finally, grandparents provide most help for parents with children in this age group. These studies, however, have not answered the following questions: How is childcare negotiated in extended-family residences? What motivates the older generation to offer childcare assistance to young couples? Does it matter whether the caregivers are paternal kin or maternal kin? What are the implications of this intergenerational division of childcare labor for gender relations? I explore these questions in the sections following the discussion of data collection and analysis.

**Method and data**

The 37 in-depth personal interviews with Taiwanese immigrant families were conducted in Vancouver, Canada, in 2003. I recruited my informants through snowball sampling, beginning with four key informants. The informants all have at least 20–30 years of working and living in Taiwan before their immigration to Canada in the 1990s and early 2000s, and thus their experiences in childrearing in the Taiwanese context provide relevant data for this study. It might be argued that data based on interviews with Taiwanese expatriates in Vancouver call into question the validity of this study. However, my informants — both mainlanders and Taiwanese — were reporting their experiences of childrearing when they were between the ages of 20 and late 40s in Taiwan. Indeed, the interviews show the enduring force of traditional concepts of filial piety, which continue to be recollected even after relocation to Canada. In this connection, one may note that Ruth Benedict’s (1946) *The Chrysanthemum*
and the Sword was based entirely on interviews with Japanese expatriates, immigrants and prisoners of war in the US. For all its limitations, this book remains one of the most important contributions to the literature, especially on the influence of cultural norms on social behaviour.

I contacted the married couples whom the key informants recommended, and at the conclusion of each interview, I asked the participant or the couple to suggest another Taiwanese couple who might be willing to talk to me about their work and family lives in Taiwan. Once a participant agreed to be interviewed, the interview usually took place at his or her residence. The interviews typically lasted one-and-a-half hours. All interviews, conducted in Chinese, were audio-taped, transcribed and translated. The final list of respondents consists of 16 married couples and five married individuals whose spouses were not in Canada at the time of the interview. These interviewees' socio-professional characteristics are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

To ensure their privacy, the interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms. A total of 11 individuals had experience of living in patriarchal households, 18 individuals had experience of living in nuclear households and eight individuals had experience of matriloclal residence in Taiwan.

There are several studies focusing on the determinants of living arrangements, such as individuals' age, education, income and their spouse or children's characteristics. The results are mixed. For example, in terms of the effects of individuals' ageing on the possibility of co-residence with married children, Mason and Lee (2004: 224) showed that 'the proportion of seniors living in extended households rises significantly as seniors age'. Frankenberg et al. (2002), however, found that the age of the older generation is not related to co-residence. They did find, however, that 'working [on the part of the older generation] reduces the likelihood of co-residence'.

In addition, the jury is still out on whether co-residence is a constraint or a wish. For instance, on the one hand, Hermelin and Yang (2004: 442) find that 'the elderly with more education frequently prefer independent living, and their income and occupational attainments permit them to achieve this goal more often than those with lower education levels'. That is to say, if the seniors have sufficient financial resources to exercise that option, they would not co-reside with their children. On the other hand, there is substantial counter-evidence from other research. In a recent study, Yi et al. (2006) suggested that 'the multigenerational patrilocal household has been a cultural ideal shared by gentry and peasant alike... Research from Taiwan also shows that in history and in contemporary society, this familistic residence pattern is actualized whenever the family situation permits.' In sum, there is conflicting evidence on whether co-residence represents an ideal and for whom.

This study provides more empirical evidence for the view that co-residence reflects more the interests of the younger generation than those of the older one. This is consistent with the conclusion of Frankenberg et al. (2002). My interview data reveal that the younger generation asks for and appreciates
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a Income measured as monthly income in New Taiwanese dollars. According to the exchange rates back in the 1990s, on average, US $1 equated New Taiwanese $27.5.
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the older generation’s childcare assistance, and that the seniors are willing to offer daily childcare assistance when they are healthy. However, it is also true that in this study, some of the grandparents were retired or widowed, and thus co-residing served their interests as well. In addition, Weinstein et al. (1990: 225) note that, statistically, matrilocal residence is more likely among the mainlander population in Taiwan, ‘presumably because the husband’s parents were less frequently available’. In this study, there are both Taiwanese and mainlander married couples in matrilocal and patrilocal residence.

Data analysis

As in other developed countries, when goods and services were available through the market, wives whose husbands’ income was in the upper brackets or whose own earning ability was strong could buy themselves a solution to the ‘problem’ of housework. This, in effect, allowed the couples to avoid a potentially emotional confrontation on the issue of gender equity in the distribution of housework and care work. What is noteworthy in the interviews is that it is typical for a married Taiwanese woman with small children (e.g. 52-year-old Laura Zheng) to compare her income not to her husband’s but to a babysitter’s fee. The result of the comparison has a strong potential for determining whether the woman in question will participate or remain in the labour market.

_Interviewer:_ Why didn’t you seek paid employment and hire babysitters?
_Laura Zheng:_ I did, but it was difficult to find an appropriate babysitter, and I was worried when I worked. So I took care of the kid myself later on. Also, when I hired the babysitter, the expenditure was no less than my own salary. My salary almost went straight to the person who took care of my child. I earned NT$30,000 monthly, and her fee was in the order of NT$27,000. So when I worked, I only made very little, but I was worried. . . . In the end, I would rather just take care of my child by myself.

Fifty-five-year-old Anne Lin expressed a similar sentiment:

_Interviewer:_ Who was responsible for childcare?
_Anne Lin:_ Before my eldest son was 6 years old, I spent 10–12 hours a day to take care of him. After he was 6 years old, I started working and spent maybe 4–5 hours a day with him.

_Interviewer:_ Why didn’t you hire a babysitter to care for him?
_Anne Lin:_ It was not easy to find a babysitter. Moreover, the cost [of hiring one] was not less than my earnings.

These testimonies suggest that the comparison between the babysitter’s fee and the mother’s income determines whether she becomes a full-time mother, and with each additional child, it would make more sense for her to stay at home. However, not a single married man in my interviews made that comparison. The gender line is protected despite the fathers’ participation at home, and women tend to be the ones discouraged from staying in the paid
labor force as a result of such calculations. In this sense, the issue is not that of ‘comparative advantages’ (Becker, 1981); rather there emerges a ‘politics of comparison’ that is obviously gendered.

Husbands’ childcare time may be affected by their wives’ work hours in nuclear households, but not in extended households. Such household differences suggest the possibility that the presence of the seniors in extended households may, first of all, mediate the relationship between women’s employment and their time spent on childcare. Second, it may modify the degree to which husbands adjust their childcare participation in light of their wives’ employment.

However, the presence of the older generation only represents a promising structural opportunity, not a definite solution, to the ‘childcare deficit’ that working couples are aware of in nuclear households. What is the process that transforms a structural possibility into a real solution?

*Grandparents’ perception of moral responsibility*
Married women’s march into the paid labour force means that many couples are unable to care for their children on their own, and that the existing family structure of patriarchal or matriarchal residence may be mobilized to provide relief. Indeed, grandparents seem to know that they are expected to care for their grandchildren, even to the point that two sets of grandparents compete with each other to care for the same children. Fifty-three-year-old Patrick He recalled the fight between the paternal and maternal grandparents to provide childcare for his children:

*Interviewer:* Why did your mother-in-law take care of your daughter?

*Patrick He:* My daughter was the first third-generation [child] in my wife’s family; therefore, my parents-in-law held the baby tight even when my mom visited. Because we have more siblings in our family, my mom said, ‘Fine, let them have the baby’. When we had our second, my mom said, ‘No, if they took both, other people would gossip’.

*Interviewer:* Gossip about what?

*Patrick He:* If my parents don’t take care of their grandchildren, and let my wife’s parents do it, people would say that my family is not responsible. Therefore, when we had our second child, my mother took care of him.

Gossip is a form of social control, generally enacted when people violate social norms. Patrick’s mother believed that if she did not offer childcare, she would be violating the normative expectation in Chinese societies that paternal grandparents, much more so than the maternal grandparents, should provide childcare support. In contrast, Barranti (1985: 344) reported that the grandparents in American society in the mid-1950s seemed to endorse a ‘pleasure without responsibility’ orientation. In a more updated study, Landry-Meyer and Newman (2004) also reported that for American grandparents, active parenting is not part of tradition, which contrasts sharply with the orientation of the Taiwanese grandparents, as suggested by my respondents.
Not 'just a business transaction'
Taiwanese grandparents may offer childcare assistance because they believe it is normal and responsible to do so. If so, how do married couples perceive grandparental childcare assistance? I asked working couples why they involved their own parents to care for their young children, rather than hire babysitters. They articulated the unique value of grandparental childcare, as seen in the following typical comparison between paid babysitters and grandparental childcare made by Catherine Wei:

Interviewer: Why did you ask your mother to help with childcare?
Catherine Wei: If my children were not taken care of by my mother, my mind would not be at ease. If I had to hire an outsider, I would rather quit.

Interviewer: Why worry if the child caregiver were not your own mother?
Catherine Wei: If it were someone else, that person would be doing it for the income. In other words, you cannot be sure that what she has given you was with her heart. It was basically just a business transaction [siong he jiaoyi]. In terms of care from the heart, I cannot trust that person completely. Therefore, even if my salary were double or triple the amount of the babysitter’s fee, I would rather have just [quit and] cared for my child.

Interviewer: What’s different about your mother?
Catherine Wei: My mother would give 100 percent. She was also more experienced, more compassionate, and would cook for my kids every now and then... other people wouldn’t have done that. Childcare has to come from my mother or my mother-in-law because we trust them. We don’t trust outsiders [saején].

In other words, for Catherine Wei and a majority of working mothers in my sample, a potential babysitter can, by all means, be loving and caring, but the fact that the exchange is a business transaction means the nature of the relationship is impersonal, detached, capricious and self-interested. These characteristics are in sharp contrast with how the respondents characterized childcare provided by the older generation: intimate, affectionate, loyal and collaborative. These different characterizations are not accidental. They reflect the pattern of Chinese social organization whereby each social relationship is sustained by a specific type of ethic. Thus, it is sociologically implausible for childcare provided in a business context to be considered as nurturing; instead, it is perceived as precluding ethical qualities, such as loyalty and intimacy, which are ascribed only to childcare provided in a familial context.

Married women: which set of grandparents?
While the comparison made between care given by hired babysitters and grandparents may favor the latter, data from interviews with mothers suggest that their shared attachment to the child is an important source of tension with parents-in-law, but not with their own parents. For reasons of power and authority, when parents-in-law and daughters-in-law with children perceive the same situation differently, daughters-in-law cannot always communicate their feelings. The following experience of 48-year-old Sarah Liu is illuminating.
Interviewer: If there was disagreement or tension, what was usually the situation?
Sarah Liu: The way to raise children. Parents-in-law usually are very fond of their grandchildren. My children are really great [weida] in their eyes. When children were not behaving, my father-in-law would not think of their behaviour as requiring correction. He would view the same behaviour as a cute act [koei de singwei].

Interviewer: So, what did you do when you encountered this situation?
Sarah Liu: I would not say a word in front of my parents-in-law. I would respect their opinion. I would not say anything. However, when I brought the children into their room, I would tell them that although their grandparents approved of their action, I did not.

Forty-eight-year-old Clara Cheng also noted that communication between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law tends to be more formal than between mothers and daughters.

Interviewer: From your point of view, what's the difference between childcare assistance from your mother-in-law and from your mother?
Clara Cheng: In fact, I don't think there was substantial difference, because their love would not be insufficient. My child is their own family to both my mother-in-law and my mother. I felt that their love was the same and their intentions were equally good.

Interviewer: How was communication between you and your mother or between you and your mother-in-law?
Clara Cheng: Of course, it was easier to communicate with my own parents. This is natural. When there was indeed a problem, we could talk more, and I did not need to worry about 'how' to communicate in terms of phrasing. With my mother-in-law, ultimately I still needed to be polite and more cautious in my choice of words.

Sometimes inhibition against arguing with mothers-in-law can become traumatic. Fifty-three-year-old Marjorie He received childcare aid from both sides of her family for her two children. She compared the two experiences.

Interviewer: Why did you spank your daughter?
Marjorie He: My mother-in-law did not like my daughter, so I spanked my child right in her presence. 'You don't like her, right? I will hit her then.' I was really silly at that time. My husband later asked me why I would do such a stupid thing, and I realized that behaviour did not make any sense. However, at that moment, I just felt that, since you were my mother-in-law and I could not argue with you, I could only embarrass you by spanking my daughter... my mother-in-law felt really awkward standing beside me when I hit my daughter and my mother-in-law knew I was mad at her.

Interviewer: Did this happen with your own parents?
Marjorie He: My father and I also disagreed about my son's behaviour, and he criticized me. I was angry, but I could fight with my own parents... you cannot do that with your mother-in-law. You could only hold your anger inside or show her by taking it out on the children. If you fight with your mother-in-law, other family members would say that you did not have a decent upbringing [iuqiao buhuan]. Furthermore, if neighbours knew, you'd really be in trouble. So I never argued with my mother-in-law, but... I could argue with my parents.
This incident is suggestive of how a married woman’s identity as an obedient daughter-in-law can be more salient than her identity as a mother, and reveals the importance of the relationship between the parents and grandparents.

The ambivalent feelings daughters-in-law had about receiving childcare assistance from mothers-in-law was in sharp contrast with the affirmative and unreserved comments daughters made about their own mothers’ childcare help. Lillian Wong exemplifies this in the following conversation:

Interviewer: Why do you prefer your mother to care for your child?
Lillian Wong: Because your mother would treat your child as if she were her own child.
Interviewer: Meaning?
Lillian Wong: She gave birth to me . . . we are family . . . she would be more careful and care with her heart, naturally.

Thus, the older generation’s childcare assistance is experienced differently by married women, depending on whether it is a mother–daughter relationship or a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship. In the latter, married women are caught between two identities as mothers and daughters-in-law, and their course of action reflects attempts to reconcile these two identities.

Married men: no preference

Overall, the interview data found that married men raised no question about ‘which set of grandparents’ cared for their children and experienced virtually no difference between childcare assistance from their own mothers or mothers-in-law. For them, it was just ‘the older generation’ (zhàngbéi). For example, 55-year-old Nicholas Wei did not live with his mother-in-law, but received childcare help from her:

Interviewer: Who was responsible for childcare?
Nicholas Wei: My wife and my mother-in-law.
Interviewer: How much time did it take to care for the children?
Nicholas Wei: I really wouldn’t know . . . they took care of them after school . . . I was out for business social events. There was no time [for childcare].

Forty-six-year-old William Chu and 53-year-old Daniel Chao both lived with their own parents and their wives and children. They described their parents’ childcare assistance matter-of-factly.

Interviewer: Who was responsible for childcare?
William Chu: When my wife was busy, my parents helped.
Interviewer: What’s the effect of having one child or two children on your job?
Daniel Chao: No difference. At that time, the only thing that was on my mind was making money. The focus was on work. Children . . . because my wife and I were both busy, we did not pay much attention to them. My parents helped a lot. Each family has a different story, and some don’t have helpers. Our parents were happy helping take care of the kids.

Interviewer: Did you have any argument with your parents about childcare matters?
Daniel Chao: Not that I remember. There might have been some disagreement. But, there was nothing significant.
These examples suggest that for married men in various living arrangements, the availability of the older generation’s childcare assistance entails no male role conflict as sons-in-law or as fathers. The lack of role complications is also reflected in an earlier example in which the husband asked his wife why she would do such a ‘stupid’ thing as spank their daughter. It seemed that the wife took a course of action to perform the role of daughter-in-law properly by feigning agreement with her mother-in-law, arguably at the expense of her role as mother. However, from the husband’s standpoint, it was difficult to catch the subtlety and complexity of female role performance.

In fact, not only did married men experience no role complications, but their primary role as economic providers within the family was also strengthened. Comments such as ‘I really wouldn’t know’ and ‘I don’t remember’ suggest that married men are disconnected from issues of childcare when the older generation is available.

The gendered differences in response to the older generation’s childcare assistance is less a function of intrinsic ‘gender’ differences per se, but more of the power and authority structures experienced by men and women. Thus, both married women in matrilocal households and married men in either patrilocal or matrilocal households unreservedly appreciate the older generation’s childcare assistance. Nevertheless, which set of parents (their own parents or their in-laws) is in question for women as a group, while for men this does not appear to be much of an issue. Such patterns exist even though the background of the interviewees varies in terms of level of income, education, family configuration and ethnicity (as noted in Table 2 and Table 3).

There are two elements in my explanation of such gendered differences and both have to do with the notion of ‘filial piety’. First, childcare has not been man’s ‘territory’ or ‘responsibility’ in Chinese culture. Second, mothers-in-law hold authority over daughters-in-law, and this contributes to the ambivalent feelings that married women have over the older generation’s assistance. Wong (1997: 516) pointed out that ‘under the Confucian familial order, Chinese women’s reproduction was to fulfil the narrow sense of xiao [filial piety] and to continue the patriline’. In other words, childbirth and child-rearing are married women’s responsibility. Moreover, as Tan (2004: p. 228) noted, obedience is the main constituent of daughters-in-law’s filiality:

Ban Zhao’s Admonitions, the earliest extant instructional text for women, applies Confucian thought and practice to the life of married women. Quoting from the Analects as well as works that had gained the status of Confucian classics by the Han dynasty – the Odes, the Book of Changes, and the Book of Rites – Ban Zhao counselled her audience to obey their mothers-in-law without questioning, regardless of her personal opinion, so that she is ‘like an echo and a shadow’.

According to the Book of Rites, ‘disobeying her parents-in-law was one of the seven grounds for divorcing a woman, while having mourned her parents-in-law for three years was one of the three circumstances protecting a woman from being divorced’.
Does the presence of the older generation in the household facilitate or hinder gender equality? This article suggests that the answer is not straightforward. On the one hand, married couples in nuclear households are more likely than their counterparts in extended households to meet childrearing issues in a traditionally gendered way (i.e. by keeping married women at home), even when married men reallocate their time to respond to childcare demands. On the other hand, in extended households, the gender line is protected, not by calculating the opportunity cost of the woman's employment in terms of a babysitter's fee, but rather through discouraging men from participating in childcare in the private sphere. Indeed, married women in extended households may consider themselves fortunate because the availability of the older generation makes the association between babysitters' fee and a mother's income irrelevant. Laura Zheng stated that her mother-in-law believed that 'a woman should go out, rather than staying at home all day' and the mother-in-law offered her childcare assistance to encourage Laura's seeking paid employment. In this way, the mother-in-law's help enabled this woman to enter the labour market, which enhanced her gender equality in the public sphere. However, as we saw earlier, men in extended households are disconnected, even absolved, from issues of childcare. Therefore, gender equality is not promoted at home.

In conclusion, the gender line is guarded in different ways in nuclear and multigenerational households. The nuclear household structure facilitates men's participation in the domestic sphere, but potentially hinders women's participation in the public sphere. In contrast, the presence of the older generation in the extended household encourages women to play a more active role outside the home and provides a seemingly more nurturing environment for the children of employed mothers, but the traditional gendered division of childcare labour in the family remains unchallenged.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Hochschild (2003) highlighted the often invisible social implications, including benefits and costs, associated with each prescription for the problem of the care deficit. The main challenge for the American public, according to her, is how not to retire women to the home, while making sure that the care children receive is sufficient and personal. In the case of Taiwan, as reported by interviewees in this study, it is possible to achieve such a goal through routinized childcare assistance provided by grandparents. To recapitulate, parenting is not seen by the interviewees as an exclusive activity of biological mothers. The prevalence of childcare assistance from kin, especially grandparents, has accompanied Taiwan's economic modernization, where the increase in married women's labour force participation has played an unequivocally critical role (Chow, 2002). More importantly, Taiwanese parents articulate their belief that grandparental childcare is qualitatively comparable to mothers' care, and both are conceptualized as a better option than paid
help. Thus, in addition to Kuhlthau and Mason's (1996: 561) study of mothers' choice of childcare, this study provides evidence from a non-western society for their argument that 'employed mothers turn to relatives for childcare partly out of preference, not just because relatives are inexpensive'.

Unlike American grandparents, for whom active parenting is not part of the tradition (Landry-Meyer and Newman, 2004), Taiwanese grandparents seem to treat childcare assistance as their moral responsibility, to the point where maternal and paternal grandparents fight over the care of the same children. The consensus between grandparents and parents that grandparental childcare is more ideal than hired nannies is in line with England and Folbre's (2003: 62) assertion that 'high quality care often requires long-term commitments or “contracts” characterized by emotional connection, moral obligation, and intrinsic motivation'. For these Chinese parents, an 'intergenerational contract' or 'intergenerational relations', rather than an impersonal spot market provides the context in which trust, affection and loyalty may be found. In the absence of a well-established childcare service industry where conditions promoting children's safety, as identified by Wrigley and Dreby (2005), exist, it may not be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that the emotional connections and moral obligations that accompany grandparental childcare assistance serve as forms of control and protection, especially for young children.

This analysis further suggests that the older generation's childcare assistance affects the childcare time of mothers and fathers differently. Married couples in nuclear households are more likely than their counterparts in extended households to meet childrearing needs by keeping mothers at home due to the comparison between a babysitter's fee and the mother's wage, even when fathers reallocate their time to respond to childcare demands. In extended households, grandparental help makes such comparisons irrelevant and enables married women to enter the labour market. The presence of the older generation in the households, thus, complicates concepts such as 'gendered moral rationalities' in that generational moral obligations can mediate such rationalities so that spouses, regardless of gender, become 'primary workers' who can participate in the workforce. This study shows, however, that mothers and fathers feel differently about grandparental childcare assistance. Mothers often express more appreciation for childcare assistance from their own mothers than their mothers-in-law. Fathers unreservedly appreciate the role of both their parents and their in-laws in childcare assistance.

In the most recent study of grandparental childcare assistance in Taiwan, Yi et al. (2006: 1042) analysed panel data of 2500 seventh graders in northern Taiwan in 2000 and found that 'half of teenagers were raised in co-residence living arrangement with grandparents. . . . The early family experience of being cared for by paternal grandparents produces significant positive effects on adolescent–father relations and negative adolescent–father relations if cared for by maternal grandparents'. In this connection, the findings of this study imply that, on the one hand, the positive adolescent–father relations
may be accompanied by uneasy relations between the mother and paternal grandparents. On the other hand, although negative adolescent–father relations result from maternal grandparental help, the help itself is better received by married women themselves.

As in various other forms of social and economic benefits distributed through the family system, obvious issues exist with this model. First, any kind of ‘family support’ is inherently selective. Not every working couple has access to willing — and, more importantly, able — elders who can provide childcare assistance. The absence of public institutions in the solution means that some parents may fail to meet both the demands of work and family, not because of their lack of ambition or ability, but because universal support for parents is non-existent. Second, from the elders’ point of view, the cultural notion of ‘family responsibility’ can potentially clash with their individual well-being. The interview data analysed here reflect the experiences of the younger generation (i.e. the working couples). However, as in other cases involving giving and receiving care, caregivers often have to make considerable, but invisible, psychological and emotional sacrifices, as well as material sacrifices in order to achieve the task of care. Finally, this study shows that when the division of childcare labour by gender is redistributed vertically along intergenerational lines, it tends to support the traditional gender role assignments in the family. The presence of the older generation thus leads us to qualify Himmelweit’s (2000) argument that a society may be apparently moving from a gender-divided society into a gender-equal one in the paid labour force by encouraging women’s participation in the ‘modern’ economy, but remain ‘traditional’ in the division of childcare labour in the family by discouraging men’s participation.

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