



Sibling structure, distributive norms, and negotiation for mothers-in-law's assistance in rural South China



Clara Wai-chun To*

Department of Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Institute of Education, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, New Territories, Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Context: Recent studies of parent–adult child relations using a network family approach have paid increasing attention to within-family differences and the role of in-laws in parent–adult child exchanges. However, the effect of sibling structure on the allocation of childcare and household help provided by older women, the negotiation process among in-laws and the underlying principle(s) have been under-examined. Purpose and methods: Based on ethnographic and interview data collected from 28 women in rural South China, this article examines the effect of sibling structure on mothers-in-law's assistance in the context of economic reform, and the role of cultural norms and daughters-in-law in the negotiation process using a family network perspective. Findings: Since the late 1970s, the sibling order of husbands and the presence of their unmarried brothers have negatively affected the bargaining power of young married women and their access to childcare assistance from their mothers-in-law. In terms of household help, sibling size and the equity principle have prevented mothers-in-law in larger extended families from providing assistance during both the pre-reform and reform periods. Although the equity norm is a pivotal moral resource for daughters-in-law in negotiating parental support, other competing norms, particularly parents' obligations to their unmarried adult sons, may set limits on their claims and bargaining power. Implications: Findings demonstrate that the distribution of childcare and household help provided by mothers-in-law are results of intra- and intergenerational negotiation among daughters- and mothers-in-law, rather than simply a dyadic parent–child relationship. Competing norms and daughters-in-law also play important roles in the negotiation for parental help.

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Introduction

There is growing recognition in the literature on gender and age relations that rather than simply being recipients of support and care, older women are increasingly providing assistance to their adult children in the forms of childcare and household help (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001, 2006). The literature on parent-to-adult child relations and grandparenting has long examined parental caregiving as an instrumental or practical component of intergenerational transfers or exchange (Soldo & Hill, 1993). The

latest development in intergenerational transfer studies moves beyond the parent–child dyad to examine the issue from the extended family network perspective (Cong & Silverstein, 2011a; Davey, Janke, & Savla, 2004; Eggebeen, 1992; Leopold & Raab, 2013; To, 2013; Tolkacheva, van Groenou, & van Tilburg, 2010; Van Gaalen, Dykstra, & Flap, 2008), paying attention to the lineage factor by considering daughters and in-laws as providers of elder care and family support (Cong & Silverstein, 2008a, 2008b; Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003).

Although these studies have made major inroads into our understanding of parents' caregiving behavior in exchange for old-age support in the context of a larger family network, few have made their provision of childcare and household help as

* Tel.: +852 2948 8447; fax: +852 2948 8018.
E-mail address: clarato@ied.edu.hk.

the center of inquiry. In addition, the negotiation dynamics and their underlying distributive norms, the effect of sibling structure and the role of in-laws (particularly daughters-in-law) in negotiating the practical support of parents have been under-examined. Because most of these studies are cross-sectional, the effect of socio-economic changes on parent-to-child support over time has also been underexplored.

This article focuses on rural Guangdong as a case study to examine the effect of economic reform in rural China on parents' provision of assistance to their sons and daughters-in-law according to sibling order, the presence of unmarried brothers and the number of sons. The analysis pays special attention to the role of equity norms and cultural discourse in the hierarchy of parental obligations on mothers' support in childcare versus other kinds of practical help in rural China. Putting the subject in an extended family context, the article examines the dynamics of intra- and intergenerational negotiation among daughters-in-law and the mothers-in-law as well as the conditions according to which distributive norms may enhance or confine the bargaining power of young married women in negotiating assistance from their mothers-in-law.

Background

Elderly women's support of adult children

Although research on intergenerational exchange and gender and age relations has long examined parents as care recipients, recent studies have highlighted how parents, particularly mothers, contribute as caregivers and helpers to ensure the well-being of adult children in both Western (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Sarkisian, Gerena, & Gerstel, 2007; Settles et al., 2009; Timonen & Arber, 2012) and non-Western societies (Chen, Short, & Entwistle, 2000; Goh, 2009; Sun, 2008). Until recently, most of these studies focused on the individual attributes of parents and children and/or the parent-child dyad that favor instrumental help, often in relation to other types of transfers (e.g. financial) provided either concurrently or at a previous time under the solidarity framework (Cox, 1987; Soldo & Hill, 1993). Western studies have generally found that the provision of help from seniors is associated with individuals who are younger, have a higher education, have a higher income and more assets, are in better health and are less disabled. Southeast and East Asian studies have similarly shown that support from parents is associated with seniors who are women, are married, co-reside with their children, have a higher education, are employed, have greater economic resources, are in better health, are less disabled and have more potential recipients (see Verbrugge and Chan (2008) for an extensive review of these two literature streams).

The network family approach

Recent studies have highlighted the importance of examining intergenerational exchanges within the larger family context (Bengtson, 2001; Cong & Silverstein, 2011a; Davey et al., 2004; Eggebeen, 1992; Leopold & Raab, 2013; To, 2013; Tolkacheva et al., 2010; Van Gaalen et al., 2008). They have called for an examination of within-family differences and variations in parents' giving among children, i.e., the exchange between the

parents and each child in a family rather than the children as an aggregate (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010; Sutor, Pillemmer, & Sechrist, 2006). Studies have revealed a complex pattern that is dependent on the kinds and direction of support available. Although parental provision of socio-emotional support to one child is likely to be enhanced when the parents give support to their other children (enhancement), child-to-parent support decreases when the parents receive support from their other children (compensation) (Spitze, Ward, Deane, & Zhuo, 2012). Cong and Silverstein (2011a) found that in rural China, parents received more emotional support (but not financial support) from their children when the parents provided more childcare for their other children. Mothers may equalize the socio-emotional support given to one child by helping their other children with practical support, or vice versa (Kalmijn, 2013).

Gender and kinship

In addition to situating intergenerational transfers within the network family approach, a few studies have highlighted the significance of gender and lineage. However, the majority of these studies, including those taking the gendered extended family perspective (Cong & Silverstein, 2011a), focus on the daughters and sons in the family of origin (Connidis & Kemp, 2008; Hequembourg & Brallier, 2005; Whyte & Xu, 2003; Xie & Zhu, 2009) rather than on in-laws (however, see Cong & Silverstein, 2008b; To, 2013; Willson et al., 2003). Studies have increasingly highlighted the importance of exchanges between in-laws in patrilocal and patrilineal societies (Walker, 2009; Wenger, 2009) like rural China. Although the daughters in these societies are not obliged and are less likely to provide and receive instrumental support to and from their birth mothers (Cohen, 1998; Cong & Silverstein, 2011a; Yang, 1996) than those in Western societies, the latest studies of elderly support have revealed the important role of daughters-in-law in parental well-being (Cong & Silverstein, 2008a, 2008b) and the distribution of old-age assistance among siblings (Cong & Silverstein, 2012; To, 2013; Zhang & Wang, 2010). Other studies of grandparenting in China have pointed out that mothers-in-law are responsible for a great deal of domestic work (Goh, 2009) and are expected to serve as alternative caregivers for children as a parental obligation in exchange for old-age support (Cong & Silverstein, 2011a, 2012; Secondi, 1997; To, 2013) or to support the mother's work outside the home (Chen, 2004; Chen, Liu, & Mair, 2011; Sun, 2008).

Gaps in the literature

Although these studies have made valuable inroads into our understanding of the factors affecting parent-to-child transfers, this study aims to address a few of the under-examined gaps. First, since these studies mostly focus on time-for-money transfers between two generations of family members, few studies have instrumental help or caring labor as the focus of study or as distinctive categories of analysis,¹ nor do they

¹ A few exceptions examined the provision of hands-on care versus instrumental help to elderly parents but not parent-to-child assistance (Brandt, Haberkern, & Szydlik, 2009; Leopold & Raab, 2013; Walker, Pratt, & Ebby, 1995).

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