

Rethinking Motherhood: Intergenerational Childcare Negotiation Between Grandmothers and Mothers in Rural-Urban Migrant Families in China

Guo Xinran(郭馨冉), Sophia University

Intergenerational childcare collaboration is a common child-rearing pattern among rural-urban migrant families in China, with childcare interactions providing a crucial context for negotiating motherhood between grandmothers and mothers. Early studies on the “left-behind children” problems primarily focused on the negative consequences of parent-child separation, suggesting that maternal migration led to children’s psychological and behavioral problems, as well as lower academic performance compared to their non-left-behind peers. Underlying this biased discourse, grandparents, particularly grandmothers, have frequently been portrayed as backward caregivers who fail to provide sufficient educational support, discipline, and emotional communication to left-behind children. While existing research has discussed how grandmothers and migrant mothers respectively care for left-behind children in the context of family separation, few studies adopt an intergenerational perspective to examine how they negotiate and arrange the division of childcare responsibilities, particularly in relation to economic support, emotional care, and children’s education. To fill these gaps and enrich the discussion, this study addresses two research questions: (a) How do migrant mothers and grandmothers understand and perform left-behind (grand)children’s childcare regarding economic support, emotional care, and education? (b) How do migrant mothers and grandmothers negotiate and arrange the intergenerational division of (grand)childcare across the above three aspects?

Mothers and paired grandmothers in two-generational migrant families were selected as research participants because they represent not only successive generations within families but also two distinct cohorts of migrant women shaped by different sociohistorical contexts in China. Drawing on qualitative data from grandmother-mother dyads collected in one of China’s major labor-exporting provinces, this study compares the mothering narratives of two generations of migrant women and details their negotiation processes over the childcare arrangements of left-behind (grand)children. The study reveals the dual nature of grandmothers’ involvement in shaping migrant mothers’ mothering experiences. On the one hand, many grandmothers, having once been migrant mothers themselves, alleviate the physical childcare burden on the migrant mothers and play multidimensional roles in bridging and facilitating emotional bonds between left-behind grandchildren and their migrant mothers. On the other hand, intergenerational disagreements and conflicts, particularly in economic and educational aspects, are prevalent in this study. These childcare tensions arise from the two generations of migrant women’s differing formative experiences during childhood and their distinct occupational trajectories in their respective transitions to motherhood, leading to intergenerational emotional ambivalence. They also heighten migrant mothers’ psychological pressure as they attempt to assert their autonomy and competence within caregiving arrangements. Moreover, grandmothers’ long-term involvement in childcare invisibly reinforces the gendered division of labor, as they express strong expectations for migrant mothers to assume the role of primary breadwinners while maintaining mother-centered communication preferences rather than migrant fathers. These findings challenge the dominant stereotype of migrant mothers as irresponsible parents embedded in the “left-behind children” discourse and highlight the significant yet ambivalent role that grandmothers play in shaping motherhood trajectories within the context of family separation in China.

Key words: Migrant mothering, Grandmothering, Rural-urban migration