

# Patterns and Trends of Grandparenting in China

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Increased life expectancy and much reduced child mortality in most countries around the world means that more and more people live to be grandparents and experience an extended period of grandparenthood. Becoming a grandparent is associated with many important changes in relationships, life styles, and activities (Crosnoe and Elder 2002; Elder 1994; King, Russell and Elder 1998; Uhlenberg and Kirby 1998). In many societies around the world, grandparents provide care and assistance to their grandchildren. The levels of care provision range from occasional helping to full-time custodial care. At the micro level, the amount of grandparent caregiving is often driven by the needs of the parents. Examples include weekend babysitting to allow adult children some relief from parenting, or surrogate parenting as a response to a crisis situation in which the parents are unable to fulfill their parental responsibilities. At the macro level, social norms and structural contexts influence the extent of grandparent caregiving in different settings. For example, in the United States, the majority of grandparents do not provide routine care for grandchildren, conforming to a norm of noninterference in intergenerational relationships (Cherlin and Furstenburg 1986). In an East Asian country such as China, where Confucian heritage prescribes a strong tie between parents and their children throughout life, it is normative for grandparents to provide care on a consistent basis for their grandchildren (Chen, Short, and Entwisle 2000; Hermalin, Roan and Perez 1998; Olson 1990; Unger 1994).

While literature on family structures in China is abundant (Chen 2004; Davis and Harrell 1993; Logan, Bian and Bian 1998; Parish and Whyte 1978; Whyte 1996; Zeng 1986, 1991), and grandparents are often identified as important alternative childcare givers (Chen, Short and Entwisle 2000; Hermalin, Roan and Perez 1998; Parish and Whyte 1978; Unger 1993), detailed information is lacking about the care of grandchildren by grandparents in China. While we know that parental coresidence with adult children is common (Bian, Logan and Bian 1998; Chen 2001; Guo 2000; Logan, Bian and Bian 1998; Zeng 1986, 1991), not much is known of the extent of care a co-residing grandmother or grandfather provides. We know that adult children and parents who do not live together frequently interact and exchange help, at a much higher level than what is common in Western countries (Bian, Logan and Bian 1998; Whyte 2003; Unger 1993). However, less is known about the degree of care involvement for non-coresiding grandparents.

This paper serves the following purposes: 1) I will describe the extent of grandparent caregiving for the first time using a dataset across multiple provinces and across rural and urban areas in China; 2) I will document the trends of grandparent caregiving across an eleven-year period and explore its association with changing demographic trends in China; 3) I will extend my research beyond the boundary of the household, by examining the involvement of co-residing versus non-coresiding, paternal and maternal grandparents in a family and cultural context. I will use a longitudinal dataset, China Health and Nutrition Survey (CHNS, 1991, 1993, 1997, 2000) to perform these analyses.

In China, there has been no systematic descriptive study of the extent of grandparenting. However, the issue of co-residence between parents and adult children has been studied extensively (Bian, Logan and Bian 1998; Chen 2001; Lavelly and Ren 1992; Yan, Chen and Yang 2003). Historically, the extended family was the ideal family type in China, although there was great variation in the size and composition of the family (Fricke, Chang and Yang 1994). The ideal of the large five-generational extended families where all the sons lived under the same roof of their parents was only typical for those who were wealthy and the privileged (Fei 1939; Freedman 1958; Kuroda 1994). However, it was common for parents to live together with at least one of their adult children, usually the oldest son (Fricke, Chang and Yang 1994). In addition, family and kinship ties were often guided by a strong patriarchal and patrilocal tradition.

Despite some recent declines in levels of prevalence, the tradition of patrilineal and patrilocal extended family is still important in contemporary China. According to data from the 1990 Census, around 27 percent of the households in China contain three-or-more generations, and 73 percent of the population aged 65 and above lives in households made up of two or three or more generations (Guo 2000). In a study of two of the largest cities in China, Logan, Bian and Bian (1998) found that 21 percent of the adult children (with at least one living parent or parent-in-law) lived with parents and that 67 percent of the parents lived with at least one adult child. Studies have documented that coresidence often reflects family adaptive strategies, e.g., fulfilling the childcare needs of the adult children (Logan and Bian 1999; Chen 2004). Other studies have gone beyond the household context. Unger (1993) noted the strength of “network families” in urban China, with non-coresiding parents and adult children maintaining strong contacts in life. A study in which I was the first author found that both grandparents living in the household and grandparents living nearby significantly reduced maternal childcare hours (Chen, Short, Entwisle 2000).

So far, we know that both coresiding and noncoresiding grandparents provide frequent help and that paternal grandmothers are more likely to help. However, many questions remain unanswered. What is the average number of hours of childcare hours provided by coresiding grandparents? To what extent does the involvement of non-coresiding grandparents help? Is there any change in the trend of caregiving provided by paternal and maternal grandparents respectively, as the patriarchal tradition is undermined? Is there any urban and rural difference in grandparent caregiving? I intend to address all these questions specifically in this paper, using data from the China Health and Nutrition Survey.

The China Health and Nutrition Survey, which began in 1989, is an ongoing collaborative project of the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina, Institute of Nutrition and Food Hygiene, and the Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicine in Beijing. Drs. Barry Popkin and Ge Keyou are the directors of the UNC group and the Chinese group respectively. The survey was designed to study how social and economic transformations in Chinese society affect the nutritional, demographic, and health status of its population. It has collected panel data on

individuals, households, and their communities. The survey covered eight provinces and autonomous regions in China: Liaoning, Jiangsu, Shandong, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Guangxi, and Guizhou. Two provinces are coastal; four are located in central China; and two are mountainous southern provinces. A third of China's population (approximately 450 million) live in these provinces, which vary substantially in geography and economic development. So far, five waves of data (1989, 1991, 1993, 1997, 2000) have been collected.

From the household roster of the CHNS, it is easy to identify whether there are any children under age 6 living in the household. Because the CHNS asks about each household member's relationship to the household head and asks each household member whether his/her mother or father lives in the household or not, I know whether the grandparents are living in the household and can further distinguish between paternal and maternal grandparents. Literature on the living arrangements of parents often ends here and assumes that grandparents provide help in childcare if they coreside with their grandchildren. With the CHNS data, I can examine the assumption, because there is detailed information on childcare in the household survey.

The CHNS asks two different sets of questions about childcare. First, the CHNS asks *all household members over age 6* whether they spend any time feeding, bathing, dressing, holding, or watching children age 6 or under who live in the household, and if so, how many hours of childcare they provide. This will allow me to capture the extent of caregiving provided by grandparents, which could range considerably from one household to the next. In addition, starting from 1993, the CHNS asks each household member whether, and for how long they spend time caring for children for other households.

Second, if there are children under age 6 living in the household, the CHNS (1991, 1993, 1997, 2000) asks whether the child is being cared for: 1) in the household; 2) in the home of the child's paternal grandparents; 3) in the home of the child's maternal grandparents; 4) in the home of other relatives, or 5) in childcare centers. A follow-up question is asked on the number of hours of childcare if the child is being cared for elsewhere. This set of questions is extremely useful in that it allows me to assess the extent of grandparent caregiving beyond the household.

In this study, I restrict childcare to the care of preschool children. Grandparents could also provide care for school-age grandchildren. However, the CHNS does not collect any information on the care of older children. I argue that care for older children is not as demanding as care for younger children and therefore its effect on health may not be as strong. I will nonetheless test the effect of the presence of grandchildren aged 7-14 on the health of grandparents.

To my knowledge, there has been no study that systematically documents the extent of grandparent caregiving in China. I will select a sample of households with children aged 6 and under in the 1991, 1993, 1997, and 2000 waves of the CHNS. The 1989 data only collected information on childcare if grandparents lived in the household. If the

child was cared elsewhere, I know the hours of caregiving, but do not know whether the child was being cared for by grandparents or not, because they were included into one crude category, “in the home of a relative.” Because my goal is to document the scope of grandparent caregiving both in and outside the household, I will not include the 1989 wave in the study.

I will describe the patterns of grandparenting in a variety of ways. First, I will examine the proportion of preschool children who are under the care of grandparents. Second, among those who are cared by grandparents, I will document the location of the care, i.e., whether it took place in the parents’ household or the grandparents’ households. Third, I will examine hours of childcare provided by grandparents by location. Further, I will distinguish between care provided by paternal and maternal grandparents. Since China is a traditionally patriarchal and patrilineal society, I expect to see a much higher involvement of paternal grandparents. However, I also hypothesize that maternal grandparents’ involvement may increase over time, as social norms in China are undergoing dramatic changes. One of our previous studies (Chen, Short, and Entwisle 2000) suggested that the presence of maternal grandparents in the household significantly reduced mother’s childcare load, although coresidence with maternal parents was still not common in the early 1990s. I will also compare the pattern of grandparent caregiving in urban and rural areas. On the one hand, because urban mothers are more likely to engage in wage work, which is least compatible with childcare due to its inflexible schedule, I expect a higher level of involvement of grandparents. On the other hand, because no pension system is available for the elderly in rural areas, grandparents may feel more obligated to help with childcare, because they are more dependent on their children for old age support. Finally, I will analyze the trend of grandparent caregiving. As fertility and mortality have continued to decline in the 1990s in China, grandparents can potentially devote more time to each grandchild with fewer grandchildren and longer life. On the other hand, delay in the timing of births for mothers could mean that grandparents may be too old to provide any help. In addition, intergenerational solidarity could be undermined over time as Chinese society undergoes dramatic social, economic and cultural restructuring.