FAMILY CHANGES IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA: A REVIEW OF PARENTING AND FATHERHOOD

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Both traditional cultural values and the social and economic changes taking place in modern Chinese society have created a social context that is unique and different from western society. On one hand, the long history of Confucianism and Taoism that emphasizes man’s authority and women’s obligations are still the crucial elements in people’s lives. On the other hand, the changing social development, such as the changes in men’s and women’s statuses, the changes in family structure and the implications of the one-child policy in recent years, has given mothers and fathers’ roles their own specific meanings. By discussing Chinese families in sociological terms, this study of parenting and fatherhood will extend understanding family life in contemporary China in the context of accelerating change, especially in the cities.

Keywords: Chinese families, urban China, family changes, fatherhood, contemporary China

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Without question, families and parents are of central importance in children’s lives. In The Handbook of Parenting: Theory and Research for Practice (Hoghughi and Long, 2004, p. 5), ‘parenting’ is defined as “purposive activities aimed at ensuring the survival and development of children” and it is regarded as a positive and nurturing activity towards children. For most of the families, children’s parents are the main care-givers.

The concept of care is a component of everyday life for both parents and children. The relationships between parents as the carer and children as the ‘cared for’ thus become one of the foci of family relationships. “Care is a double‐edged concept which overlaps with a variety of other concepts including power and control” (Brannen et al., 2000, p. 3). Put more explicitly, the responsibilities of parents as the care-giver are intended to produce positive consequences for the well-being of children. However, they also give parents power and control over

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their children. The constraints children receive from their parents may result in different responses from children. In addition, “people become committed to accepting certain sorts of responsibilities, to particular individuals, over time” (Finch and Mason, 1993). It may be found that people do not always agree upon or recognize defined responsibilities as parents; however, they still acknowledge specific responsibilities to their children. For example, parents may agree with some general principles such as they should take good care of their children. However, they still have different views about the ‘right thing to do’ as a mother in practice (Finch, 1989). It is through negotiating their responsibilities that commitments are developed and emerged (Finch and Mason, 1993). It is also worth noting that people’s feelings of commitment to their role becomes more powerful when they develop their role by themselves, rather than having it imposed by a third party (Finch and Mason, 1993). In conclusion, parents hold different views of their own care-giving roles in particular circumstances and the responsibilities and constraints of care lead to diversity in parent-child relationships.

The significance of parents in children’s lives lies not only in being attachment figures, but also in being role models (Abbott and Langston, 2006). Meanwhile, there is some evidence that fathers’ and mothers’ roles in parenting are differentiated by their gender. Fathers were found to be different from mothers not only in the time they spend with the children, but also in the way they ‘do parenting’ with their children (Golombok, 2000). According to Golombok (2000), less time and fewer conversations spent with children made children feel fathers were more distant than mothers. However, fathers are the ones who provide security for the family when things go wrong. One cross-cultural study from 27 countries including vast geographical and cultural regions of the world found out that mothers are generally more actively involved in the family than fathers (Georgas, 2006). Furthermore, there are numerous studies showing that fathers are very active in their financial role and mothers focus more on their emotional roles and routine household responsibilities in general (Ferri and Smith, 1996; Welsh et al., 2004; Lewis and Welsh, 2005).

Family life and the ways families are constructed have changed rapidly in many places in the world. The main characteristics of these changes are the changes in the position and responsibilities of men and women in the family (Cabrera et al., 2000; Georgas, 2006). Equality in men and women’ education and employment provide more freedom for women. However, constantly increasing opportunities for women’s occupational and educational development worldwide have not resulted in equal pay, sharing domestic roles and equal child care in the family (Mirsky and Radlett, 2000; Adams, 2004). Gender equality for both men and women are still far from a reality (Mirsky and Radlett, 2000; Adams, 2004).
On the other hand, changes in gender-status in society have already been reflected in changes in responsibilities in the parenting roles in contemporary families. Men are expected to share equal responsibility for domestic roles (Adams and Trost, 2005). In today’s modern society, the emergence of new ideas of the father have raised the possibility of men sharing work equally in the family with mothers. To a greater or lesser extent, men nowadays are more involved in the family and they generally have an aspiration to be more active (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2006). Throughout the last few decades, there has been an upward trend in both parents’ involvement in childcare (O’Brien and Shemilt, 2003). Therefore, it can be argued that the changes in family structure, expectations of fathers’ roles and women’s status in society encourage fathers to be more involved in child care.

Growing evidence suggests that many families in the west are experiencing dramatic transitions in their form and composition (Lewis and Lamb, 2007). The traditional married, heterosexual, two-parent household with children, living together, is no longer seen as the only family structure in the west (Anyan and Pryor, 2002). The consequences are that the meaning of intimate connections in the family has changed and that blood and marriage ties no longer the only important elements in the concept of family. However, the core ideas of sharing resources, caring, responsibilities and obligations among the members still connect people together (Silva and Smart, 1999; Smart et al., 2001). For example in Britain, the size and composition of households have gone through some changes since the 1970s: an increased number of one-person households (from 17% in 1971 to 31% in 1998); a decreasing number of dependent children living with married or cohabiting parents (from 31% in 1979 to 21% in 2002) and a large increase in lone parent families (from 8% in 1978 to 27% in 2002) (Office for National Statistics, 2002). Moreover, the number of children who live with a single-father has increased over the last few decades (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2006). The consequence of this change is that more and more families in Britain are going through family breakdown and restructuring. According to the Office for National Statistics, among the couples who were divorced in 2002 in England and Wales, 55% of couples had children under the age of 16 (Office for National Statistics, 2005). This means that many children may go through a difficult time, experiencing unhappiness and a feeling of being unloved. Some studies show that children living in families undergoing this kind of transition may suffer more emotional problems and school failures (Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001). However, family process factors such as family warmth, quality of social relationships and levels of conflict were also found to be an important factor that affect children’s psychological well-being and quality of family members (Lansford et al., 2001). When children are given more freedom to make their own decisions and more chances to talk to parents about their problems, they have more positive feelings about their restructured family lives.
(Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001). Although this family restructuring is an inescapable pathway in many children’s lives, they can usually manage to go through it and establish a new way of looking at their family which is different from children who have never experience family changes (Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001). The finding from a study of 230 high school students indicated that 80% of children see love, care and support as the main criteria for being a family, while fewer think that blood relations, whether or not living in the same household, or legal ties, are as important (Anyan and Pryor, 2002). However, in this study Chinese children see blood relations and intergenerational relationships as more important than other non Chinese children (Anyan and Pryor, 2002).

In China, the same trend of family transition is happening. More and more couples have experienced divorce in Chinese society and the divorce rate has gone up every year. According to the BBC News (2008), there were 1.4 million people filing for separation during 2007. However, the standard nuclear family consisting of a married couple and one child is still the main family structure in the cities (Tang, 2005; Wang, 2006a). In both West and the East, these changes in societies and families create a variety of family forms, and a diversity of views about men and women’s parenting roles and no single mother’s or father’s role can be universally accepted in the context of cultural and family diversity.

1. Parenting in urban China from a sociological perspective

Cultural diversity is a significant element in shaping parents’ role since it affects many facets of family life, such as type of the structure of the family, parenting roles and responsibilities and values (Hartley, 1995; Luke and Luke, 1998; Sullivan, 2003). It is suggested by Fery (2003) that a social perspective rather than a biological or psychological perspective is crucial to understanding “what sort of involvement are people actually requesting from men with families and children, for what purposes, to what ends” (Fery, 2003, p. 61).

Parenting in China has an important contribution to make to current debates concerning the roles and responsibilities of parents in a world under globalization. The Chinese families are of particular interest because the main Chinese family structure is different from most of the western countries. Most of the family are dual earner families and have only one child. Both parents working full-time changed the pattern of parenting and there is less time left for families since both parents work long hours. Besides, strong influences of westernization and globalization have produced diversity in parental values and the way people parent. As for parents’ role and what fathers and mothers actually do in Chinese families, they must be viewed closely “within the context of family, community, culture and current history” (Cabrera et al., 2000, p. 133).
Both social and historical contexts have shown to shape the new concept of family life in China and thus lead the way in new parenting. According to the youth development study (Sun and Kang, 2000), parent-child relationships in contemporary Chinese families are rather equal since around 36% of young children regarded their mothers and fathers as friends. Parents were not seen as authority figures but were welcomed as friends in the family and thus children had more say in the family. This was consistent with another study about social transition and family changes in China (Xiong, 2000), which showed that in modern society children influenced the parents in lots of ways such as their attitude towards life, their values and the knowledge of fashion and new technologies. The interactions between children and parents help to develop a new way to conduct parent-child relationships. Many parents adopt the role of playmates or friends with their children. Not surprisingly, these influences were most welcomed and accepted by parents from urban areas rather than rural areas.

Next, I will explore parenting in urban China by looking at family values, the status of men and women, family changes, and thereby try to better understand parenting and fatherhood in the modern Chinese society.

2. Family values in China

Confucianism and Taoism play fundamental roles in the Chinese family life and they are still dominant in Chinese people’s attitudes towards society and families. These cultural values are deeply rooted in people’s lives and they can be traced back thousands of years. For example, Confucius was born in about 551BC; after his death in 479BC his theories were widespread in Asian societies. As Confucius claimed, there are “clear hierarchies between elder and younger, male and female, and ruler and ruled” (Abelmann, 1997; Laroche et al., 2007, p. 114). As in the family, there is strict discipline about being obedient to men and to elders. Without doubt, fathers have been the authority in the family. As for childrearing, parents believe in “Guan” which means control or governance (Xu et al., 2005). This is mainly because Chinese parents are expected to be the first teacher of the child” (Xu et al., 2005).

The traditions are that in the family, fathers also play an important role for the children. “Zi bu jiao, fu zhi guo” (it is father’s fault if the child is not taught properly) emphasizes the authority of fathers and their duty towards their children. The relationships between the father and the son have been crucial in the family (Lynn, 1974). The son is expected to continue the whole family line and they are always the focus of the family. The girl is expected to get married and have a new family eventually and is less important.
These traditional Chinese values and beliefs also define the roles for both males and females in the family. “Nan zhu wai, nv zhu nei” (men take care of things outside the family whereas women take care of things inside the family) is a commonsense saying for most people (Shek, 2006). The old Chinese saying “yi jia zhi zhu” (the master of the family) and “chu jia cong fu” (a married woman should obey her husband) clearly state the statuses of the women and the man in the family (Shek, 2006).

3. Men and women in modern China

There is a population imbalance between male and female populations in China (National Bureau of Statistics, 1997; National Bureau of Statistics, 2007). According to the National Statistical Yearbook 2007 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2007), men exceeded women with around 51.5% of the population over the period between 1998 and 2006. However, the sex ratio at birth of boys to girls has started to rise dramatically in most of the places in China from 1980 (Li, 2007). In 2000, the birth rate of boys and girls was beyond ordinary level in most areas of the country (Cai, 2005; Lu, 2005). The factors that causing this rise of sex birth rate are complex and they vary in different periods and areas (Li, 2007). Some researchers argue that one reason for the continuing discrepancy between the number of men and women in the population was the gender discrimination which is rooted in traditional Chinese culture in favour of sons and men. Women’s low status in Chinese society is one reason why women prefer to give birth to a son rather than a daughter (Li, 2007). The widespread use of B-type ultrasonic during pregnancy which enables people to choose to have abortion if it is a girl also may explain the gap between the number of male births over female births (Lu, 2005; Li, 2007).

Tusi Ming (2002) comprehensively reviewed the status of men and women in Chinese society. He argued that prior to 1949 when the People’s of Republic of China was established, agriculture was the main source of income for the family. As men were regarded as being stronger than women physically, they produced more for the family. Men were also regarded as the authority in the family and the society, while women were seen as inferior to men according to traditional Chinese culture’s patriarchal ideology. Women were the ones who took care of the family, but did not have the chance to be educated. In Shanghai, 83.5% women who were over fifteen years old could not read or write in the early 1950s (Sha, 2000).

There is evidence of changes in attitudes towards women’s status in modern society. However, it seems that there are still a great number of people who hold traditional values. The two national surveys of women’s status in 1990 and 2000
provided detailed data about women’s status by both women and men’s responses (The Second Wave Research Team of Chinese Women Status, 2001). The question on women’s authority in the family and society was posed by asking “Should women avoid to be superior to men in society?” There were 18.5% women agreeing with this opinion in 2000, which was 2.9% lower than among men. Relating to the share of housework, women were the ones who did most of the housework. Along with increases in women’s labour-market participation, there are still traditional pressures for women to be good housewives. Wives were reported to do more than 85% housework including cooking, dish washing, doing the laundry and cleaning. This was again confirmed with more than half of women and men both agreeing with the idea of men’s role as primarily outside the home and women’s role inside the home”. Therefore, it suggests that we cannot ignore the importance of China’s long established traditions in doing research on Chinese society.

Since 1949, several policies were implemented to improve women’s status by the government. National laws on women’s rights such as The Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women, the Marriage Law, the Law of Labour intended to end gender discrimination both in the family and in the society. According to Shanghai Women’s Records (Sha, 2000), the percentage of women in the labour market increased from 1949; 19.2% women in 1949, 22% in 1955 and 45.6% in 1990.

Since 1986, nine years of compulsory education were granted to improve women’s status and the government provided free education for every child. In Shanghai, the rates of girls in higher education had risen 8.6 times, 18.2 times for secondary schools and 2.6 times for primary schools between 1949 and 1990 (Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau, 2007). In 2006, 10.4% of people (around one million people) did not have any formal education, of whom nearly three quarters (72.7%) were women (National Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Women are gaining more and more rights in Chinese society. However, efforts are still needed to narrow the gap between men and women in many aspects of women’s lives.

4. Family changes in China

Especially in urban China, more women go to school and enter the labour market (Sha, 2000). Most work full-time and this is a difference compared with some Western countries. According to the Shanghai Statistical Yearbook 2007, there were 35.5% women working in the year of 2006 (Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau, 2007). This inevitably created a high proportion of dual wage earner families in China.
There is a strong debate about the one-child policy in China, which was originally instituted in 1979 to control the population. Most areas fully implemented this policy, especially in urban areas. According to the National Population and Family Planning Commission of China (2004), the national average one-child birth rate was around 90% from 1995-1997, and it has stabilised around 94% since 1998. In China, there are numerous researchers endeavouring to investigate the impact of the one-child policy on families. Studies of parent-child relationships and their influence of children found that parents thought that the relationships between one-child parents and children were closer and parents did more activities together with the children (Feng, 2002). Meanwhile, studies also showed that parents’ had high expectation of their children’s educational outcomes and future careers (Hao and Feng, 1998; Feng, 2002; Zhao, 2006). Overall, there are more similarities than differences between the social development of only-children and children with siblings, such as personality, life skills, social communication and educational aspirations (Feng, 2000).

The structure of families has changed dramatically since the introduction of the one-child policy. The changes in family structure were not only the result of the national birth policy, but also the influence of changing life styles in the context of different economic and social conditions (Tang, 2005). To understand the impact of these changes it is necessary to understand the way in which family structures are classified in China. Chinese family structure is generally based on the biological and generational links among family members. There are five main family structures: the nuclear family (he xin jia ting), which consists of parents and perhaps one or more children (this includes single-parent families); the single-line extended family (zhi xi jia ting), in which parents live with one of their children plus their child’s spouse, and perhaps grandchildren too; the multi-line extended family (fu he jia ting), in which parents live together with two or more of their married children and their children’s spouses, and perhaps grandchildren; the sibling family (can que jia ting), in which siblings live together without parents; and finally the single-person family (dan ren jia ting), in which one person lives alone (Wang, 2006a). The traditional Chinese household was the single or multi-line extended family living under one roof (Qi and Tang, 2004), called “san dai tong tang” (three generations living together). But urbanization means that it is no longer the most common type of household. Instead, there is a new extended family structure which is a result of the one-child policy, called the ‘4-2-1’ (si er yi): four grandparents, two parents and their only-child who do not necessarily all live under the same roof. The ‘si er yi’ has become a popular research term in China and is used particularly to indicate the problems the only-child generation is facing, such as increased filial responsibilities of one child for older family members and bringing up the younger generation (Wen, 2006).
After the one-child policy, more and more households have one child, father and mother living together. The economic growth also enables more people to buy their own flats or houses once they get married, compared to the older generation. Thus, most families live separately from their parents once they are married. The nuclear family appears to be the main family type in urban China (Tang, 2005; Wang, 2006b). In a study of urban family structure which was conducted in 1982, 1993 and 1997, in five big cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Nanjin and Chengdu, the data revealed that the number of nuclear households was increasing rapidly during those fifteen years and that it was the main household structure in the cities (Liu, 2000). This is consistent with the Statistics from the National Population Census (National Bureau of Statistics, 2005): the average household size was 4.33, 4.43, 4.41, 3.96 and 3.44, 3.36 people in 1953, 1964, 1982, 1990, 2000 and 2004 respectively. The number of generations living in one household is also decreasing and two generation families are the main family model. For example, there were 44.2% nuclear families with only child in Shanghai in 1993 and 64.5% in 1998 (Shen et al., 1999). In 1998, two generation families consisted of 74.5% of all the families and three generation living together became less popular (18.13% in Shanghai) (Shen et al., 1999). But beyond the rise of the standard nuclear family, the growing divorce rate in the last twenty years or so has resulted in more and more people living alone or as single parents (Xu and Ye, 2002). According to Xu and Ye’s national study of the divorce rate between 1980 and 2000, Xin Jiang was the only province where it had not gone up and in the big cities it rose dramatically (Xu and Ye, 2002). Shanghai had the biggest increase of all, rising seven fold during that period (Xu and Ye, 2002).

Another consequence of the one child policy is that it created an environment in which care is directed to a boy or a girl. An unintended consequence is to create strong interests from parents in children’s education whatever their gender (Liu, 2006). The one child policy created the basis for a relatively equal position in education for both boys and girls, compared with the traditional gender bias against women and girls in former times (Tsui and Rich, 2002; Veeck et al., 2003). Parents with high expectations for their children’s academic achievement are widespread (Tsui and Rich, 2002). Using data from 1,040 eight grade students in three schools in the city Wuhan (Tsui and Rich, 2002), the study explored the differences between single-girl and single-boy families with regard to parental expectations and investment in children’s education. The study found that both children and parents hold strong academic aspirations regardless of children’s gender.
5. Fathering in China

Today, studies of parental impact on child development account for a large proportion of research in social science relating to families. However, whilst there is abundant research about mothers’ relationships with children, there is less research about fathers’ relationships. Whether there are differences between male and female parents’ influences on their children’s development has not yet been conclusively answered. However, it will be incomplete if we only focus on researching children’s relationships with their mothers.

There is abundant research which suggests that highly involved fathers have a positive impact on their children, especially in the west (Harris et al., 1998; Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2006). In the Chinese context, the research on fatherhood has grown in the past 20 years (Jankowiak, 1992; Shek, 1995; Shek, 1998; Shek, 2000; Tsui and Rich, 2002; Liu, 2006). A study of urban Chinese parenting during early childhood (Jankowiak, 1992) found that mothers continued to have most responsibility for childcare, whatever the child’s age. However, fathers were more likely to be involved when the children were old enough to speak and play. A longitudinal study of adolescents’ perceptions of differences between mothers and fathers in Hong Kong found that children perceived parents very differently (Shek, 2000). The research showed that fathers were perceived to be “less responsive, less demanding, to demonstrate less concern, but to be more harsh, and paternal parenting was less liked” (Shek, 2000, p. 135). Shek also concluded that there were some cultural factors evident in the results. Chinese traditional culture advocates the image of a “strict father and a kind mother” (Ho.David, 1987; Liying, 2003), exemplified in the saying “a man drops blood but not tears” (Shek, 2000, p. 143), emphasizing the tough, strong but less expressive male role in the family and community. Women’s and men’s different roles in Chinese society also help to account for the results. The old saying “Men take care of things outside the family, whereas women take care of things inside the family” (Shek, 2000, p. 143) still seemed to prevail for most couples in the latter study. However there are limits to the conclusions that can be drawn from this research, particularly because it only looked at adolescents in Hong Kong, where the family structure and cultural background are different from those in mainland China, even though they are all rooted in traditional Chinese culture and society. More evidence from mainland China is necessary to understand Chinese society. Similarly, it is questionable how far research based on the west is applicable to Chinese society (Shek, 2006). Even if there are some similarities between the two different societies, there is still the question of how to explore Chinese society using western theories.

Relating to fathers’ role in parenting, a pioneer study of father involvement also stressed the importance of considering social class and economic related
values. The research found the higher the educational level of both parents the more active the fathers were in the parenting role, even though the fathers with high levels of education worked the longest hours. The well educated fathers were found to be more involved in lots of domestic tasks relating to the care of the children, including taking courses on parenting during wives pregnancy, bathing their children, chatting with children (Xu, 2003).

However, the area of fatherhood study is still under developed, compared with the large volume of research in the west. The differences of cultural backgrounds and social values in Chinese society and western society lead to the question of how and to what extent research carried out in the west can be applicable to the Chinese context. Furthermore, whether and how fathers practice their parenting in Chinese society remain to be addressed.

6. Conclusion

There are a growing number of studies about parent-child relationships and fathers’ influence on children’s development in the west. However, little is known about Chinese parents and their relationships with their children. Both traditional cultural values and social changes in modern Chinese society have created a social context that is unique and different from western society. On one hand, the long history of Confucianism and Taoism stresses men’s authority and women’s obligations. These are still crucial elements in people’s lives. On the other hand, the wider changes in Chinese society and the changes in men’s and women’s labour market status, the changes in family structure and the one-child policy have given the roles of mothers and fathers their own specific meanings.

According to The World Population Clock (2006), the population of China reached more than 1.3 billion in 2006. Without doubt, China has the largest population of mothers and fathers in the world. This implies that “if any theory aims to be universally applicable, relevant data from Chinese people must be collected” (Shek, 2006, p. 276). This article endeavours to provide an overview of parenting and fatherhood in urban China, by attending to the sociological features of contemporary China and Chinese families. Moreover parents’ and children’s gender, as well as other factors, especially social and family background, affect parent-child relationships and children’s development (Milkie et al., 1997). How fathers are involved in daughters’ and sons’ lives in the Chinese social context is a crucial step in understanding the significance of parent-child relationships.
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