

**Ageing – a burden or blessing:  
Comparison between grandparenthood in  
Xiamen and Singapore**

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Abstract

Diverging from the dominant research effort which has discussed the impact of China's graying demography and the impending problem of supporting an ageing population, this paper looks at the aged as important contributors to contemporary urban Chinese families in China. This paper challenges the homogenous stereotypical 'unproductive', 'dependent', 'burden to society' images which many have accorded to older persons after their retirement from gainful employment in mainland China. The ethnographic and survey results (N=1627) show grandparents to be an integral part of the process of raising grandchildren and of family life in urban Xiamen. It is therefore, necessary to have a better knowledge of the sacrifices they make in playing the caring role, in terms of surrendering leisure activities, personal development, social networks, and compromising their need for intimacy. The scenario of grandparents providing childcare in Xiamen is compared and contrasted to their counter parts in Singapore to demonstrate the relative lower sense of agency in the former in intergenerational negotiations. This paper urges family and society to attend to the needs of the older person so that grandparenting can be a more fulfilling experience.

Key words: grandparents, China, intergeneration, childcare, obligation

**1. Introduction and background**

This paper hopes to raise awareness of the invaluable contributions older adults make to contemporary urban Chinese families in Xiamen by providing child care to grandchildren and helping with household chores. It elucidates the sacrifices made by the elders in order to play this caring role and the integral part they take in family life. Although the fast greying demographic profile in China is an undeniable trend, the lopsided stereotypical view of aging being a 'burden' to society which is adopted by Chinese researchers and policy makers should be checked. A survey of scholarly publications on aging in China within the year 2006 showed a dominate emphasis on the impending anxiety over a fast greying population. A electronic database search on the China Academic Journals with the key words 'lao ren' (old

persons), 'lao nian' and 'lao ling' (old age) revealed the following results. Out of 78 publications in the Chinese language, 61% (N=48) of them treated aging as a problem to be solved. 27% (N=21) of them studied the specific needs of older persons in China. About one percent of the publications examined the policy and economic implications on aging. Only a negligible 0.02% (N=2) publications considered aging in a positive light. A similar survey was conducted on the English academic databases Proquest and Ebscohost. The location of the search was limited to China. Out of the 16 publications, 12 of them treated aging as a problem to be solved or with specific needs. Three out of the 16 publications accorded aging a neutral or positive connotation. There was a pervasive use of terms like 'dependency', 'problem', 'needing care' to label the aging population in China. These are blanket generalizations and portray the older adults as liabilities and social problems to be solved. The stereotypical tag placed on the elderly leads to two possible negative outcomes. First, the Chinese elders are generalized into a homogenous group that needs help and care. Second, this use masks the positive contributions made by these older adults in their families, communities as well as society. Angus (Angus & Reeve, 2006) has aptly pointed out that these assumptions about older people which are taken for granted have implications for societal perceptions, attitudes and may even permeate into social practice. She believes the negative view of older people obscures the reality that older people by and large have the same needs as the rest of the community, that is, needs for housing, health care, recreational opportunities and social interaction. The scenario of grandparents providing childcare in Xiamen will be compared and contrasted with the situation in Singapore. It demonstrates the relatively limited choice, alternatives and sense of agency available to the grandparents in Xiamen compared to their counterparts in Singapore.

### *Background - Reasons for grandparents' involvement*

This section discusses the prevailing family trends that account for the phenomenon of grandparents becoming actively involved in providing child care to grandchildren in urban Xiamen. These trends are, namely, the high labor force participation by women in China and a prevalent preference of co-residence between the three generations. The scenario in Western countries appears to be that grandparents usually come into the picture to provide child care when a crisis occurs (Goodman & Silverstein, 2006; Hayslip *et al.*, 1998). The situation in China is quite different. Women's participation in the labor force is extremely high, as high as 85% for women of working age (Zhu & Guang, 1991). Moreover, women are constrained by limited flexibility in work arrangement, especially with waged jobs. Waged jobs are also generally full time work requiring eight hours a day, six day a week. As working part time is generally impossible in the current work culture in China, this eliminates a key strategy used by women in other countries to balance work and child care demands (Sheng & Settles, 2006). Short (Short *et al.*, 2002) found that women in China attach high priority to their work. She also asserted that women do not compromise their work schedule after childbirth. The current research echoed Short's findings as 87% (N=281) of the respondents surveyed in Xiamen said it was either 'very necessary' or 'necessary' for a woman to have a job. One of the reasons that mothers in China are able to maintain outside work despite the shortage of child care facilities for infants and a general mistrust towards domestic helpers (Goh, 2006) lies in the availability of alternative child care providers, and grandmothers were identified as the most important caregivers. Therefore, having grandparents residing under one roof was a practical living arrangement. With grandparents in the household, Chen (Chen *et al.*, 2000) found that women (the middle generation) are

35% less likely to be involved in intensive child care tasks. The prevalence of three generational co-residence is reflected in the non random sampling survey (N=389) conducted in Xiamen where 61% of the respondents reported have grandparents residing under the same roof. It was argued elsewhere (Goh, 2007) that three compelling factors make it difficult for the Chinese grandparents not to offer help, namely, familial expectation, society's definition of normative behavior for grandparents as well as the self imposed sense of duty.

## **2. Literature and framework**

In the last two decades, most western research on grandparenting has been largely investigating the nature of grandparenting from the view of those grandparents who have custodial care of their grandchildren owing to drug abuse, marital break down or incarceration of the adult child. These studies examined the demands and responsibilities placed on grandparents who had to parent their grandchildren (Smith & Drew, 2002). However, grandparents providing childcare on a full time basis is a common place in China even when their adult children's families are intact. Hence, existing western research is not a very useful frame of reference for studying grandparents providing childcare in the Chinese context. Indigenous research on Chinese grandparenthood is still limited with the exception of a study done by Falbo (1990) examining the impact of grandparents on children. Much changes have taken place in China since the beginning of the 1990s and new research effort is needed to understand the current situation in China.

In this study, we refer to the framework in the *Grandcaring Study* by Goodfellow and Lavery (2003) to examine the empirical data from China. The *Grandcaring Study* is a relatively recent study conducted by Goodfellow and Lavery in Sydney (2003a) which seeks to gather the perspectives of grandparents on their role

as informal carers of grandchildren on a regular basis. Echoing Smith and Drew's (2002) assertion, they believe research should move beyond description of the nature of contact between grandparents and their grandchildren to developing a wider conceptual framework that supports the heterogeneity of grandparents and their relationships (Goodfellow, 2003b). From the qualitative data that emerged from the *Grandcaring Study*, Goodfellow proposes a framework that aims to capture the diversity and choice made by grandparents in providing regular childcare. According to Goodfellow, the degree of satisfaction grandparents experience in their role as child care giver is related to the nature of their choice, that is, whether they have the choice of the satisfaction of negotiating with their adult children. The author also discovered some grandparents did not exercise their choice option as their were more concerned for the well-being of the family as a whole. Hence, she advocates for support for grandparents playing this role. Moreover, Goodfellow highlights the phenomenon that grandparents' contribution as regular childcare providers is usually unrecognised, under-valued and under-resourced. In adopting this framework as a template in examining the empirical data from China, we will also assess the usefulness of this framework in the Chinese context.

### **3. Research methods**

To achieve the research goal of understanding the intergenerational dynamics across three generations in urban China, the first author (here after referred as 'the researcher') employed the ethnographic approach of prolonged immersion in the field between March and September 2006. She followed five families with active grandparents' involvement in providing child care in Xiamen, an island situated in the south-east Fujian province of China. One of the earliest Special Economic Zones, Xiamen island has a population of one million. These five families were recruited through the

network of a key liaison person in the field. This mode of recruitment was useful in negotiating entry into these families as the researcher was a foreign researcher. According to Yang (1995) traditional as well as contemporary Chinese are well known for their strong reliance on interpersonal relations as the basis for social behavior. Having a trusted and respected person acting as the key liaison person in the field lent a degree of trustworthiness to the research project. The six-month stay allowed the researcher to build trust and interact, observe and participate in activities with all the cohorts of the families. In the last two months, after the rapport was strong and established, the researcher conducted in-depth interview with all the families members (N=25). These ethnographic data provided in-depth insights into the micro dynamics otherwise not accessible through survey questionnaire or one-time interview without understanding of the context of the interviews. All the interviews were recorded with consent and the voice recording was later transcribed. All the field diary, field notes and memo kept over the six months together the 25 transcripts were analysed carefully with the aid of the qualitative software Nvivo 7 to ascertain the various layers of meaning. Within case data display was first made to achieve in depth analysis of each family case. Themes surfaced within all cases were used to conduct cross-case comparisons. Data sets collected from the different generational cohorts (namely grandparents, parents and grandchildren) were used to juxtapose and illuminate the different dimensions of the same issues being examined. Triangulating these data sets also helped to enhance the trustworthiness of this piece of research work.

The ethnographic data was supplemented by large scale survey conducted between mid December 2006 and mid January 2007. Twenty-nine primary schools from the main Xiamen island, which comprised of *Huli* and *Shiming* zones,

participated in the survey (N=1627). The questionnaires were distributed via teachers who were attending a teachers’s training course on ‘Understanding and Enhancing Mental Health of Primary School Students’ organized by the Education Bureau for all teachers in the larger Xiamen . Instructions were given to students to bring the survey forms home for their parents to fill in and return to the class teachers. The survey ascertained information on intergenerational dynamics across three generations particularly pertaining to child rearing issues. The following section provides a broad brush picture of the results of this large survey.

*Research Context*

Of the 1627 families surveyed, 54.6% (N=889) did not have grandparents involved in providing childcare. Forty-five percent (N=738) had one or more grandparents actively providing childcare. The table below illustrates the various types of living arrangements across the generations so as to enable the grandparents to provide childcare. It is interesting to note a high incident (39%) of three generational coresidence in Xiamen.

**Table 1: Living Arrangements and patterns of childcare provision of three generational families in Xiamen**

Living arrangement	Frequency	Percentage
Grandparents stay with adult children and grandchildren under the same roof	296	39.0
Grandparents provide ad hoc childcare	140	18.3
Grandparents stay close by adult children	124	16.2
Grandparents stay with one adult children and take care of grandchildren from different households	92	12.0
Adult children send grandchildren to grandparents and collect them daily	44	5.7
Grandchildren stay with grandparents during weekdays and return home on weekends	37	4.8
Grandparents split up in different locations to provide childcare	30	3.9
Total	763	100

Grandfathers who were providing childcare were largely from the age bracket between 61-70 years old. Grandmothers however, tend to start at a younger age range, that is, between 50-70 years old. Hence, most of these grandparents would have retired from gainful employment. The results also revealed something intriguing, more than half (52.7%) of these grandparents were financially independent. Only a negligible number of grandparents depended on their adult children's monetary contributions (N=47). From the short term point of view, grandparents seemed to be at the giving end of the equation. They were not receiving tangible rewards for devoting their time and energy in providing care to their grandchildren. This results is congruent with another dimension of the data collected. When asked whether they would show their appreciation to their older parents for providing childcare, a considerable proportion (51.2%) of the middle generation indicated there was no need to do so. Only one quarter of them made regular financial contribution to the elderly.

#### *Research participants*

Each of the five families reflects different nature of grandparents' involvement in providing child care to the grandchildren. The intention was to recruit a diverse range of grandparental participation in the sample. The authors will indicate these families with the letters K, B, T, W and H. A brief description of each family will be provided here to facilitate discussion in the subsequent sessions. Grandparents K were retired professionals. Grandfather K in his late seventies was a retired doctor from a local hospital. Grandmother K in her early seventies was a retired accountant. Since they had two adult sons, they had to split up between two locations in Xiamen island in order to help take care of the two grandsons in two households. During weekends, grandmother K would travel several hours to visit her husband and travel back on Sunday night to the younger son's home. Grandmother B was relatively young, barely



60 years old. Since her retirement at 55 from the state run railway service, she had been staying with her adult daughter so as to help take care of the 5 year old granddaughter. Grandmother B's own marriage was chronically strained. Hence, staying with her adult daughter was an escape route for her own unhappy marriage. Her daughter was recently divorced and she felt the obligation to make herself available as a mother as well as a maternal grandmother although she often complained about the conflictual relationship between herself and her adult daughter. Grandfather and grandmother T always travelled as a dyad. They were in their late and early seventies respectively. Both of them were retired high government officials and thus enjoyed a husband combined retirement pension. They chose to help periodically with their adult daughter's family with childcare and chores. They alternated between their home town in Fuzhou (capital of Fujian province, about three hours bus ride away from Xiamen) and Xiamen island. Preferring to stay in Xiamen during summer and winter months, Grandparents T saw themselves as playing a buffer role in their adult daughter's volatile marriage with her occasionally violent husband. The W family was an interesting combination of both the paternal as well as the maternal grandmothers, both retired from state run factories at the age of 50 and both actively rendering child care. Maternal grandmother W, an 80 year old widow, resided under the same roof as her adult daughter, son in law and grandson. Despite her advanced age, she was still active, healthy and mobile. She helped in meal preparation for the family. Paternal grandmother W, 59 years old, and her husband stayed with their elder adult son's family within the same estate. Paternal grandmother W was also helping to care for her elder son's daughter who was 11 years old. These two adult siblings deliberately moved into the same housing estate so that they could enjoy the benefits of having the two sets of grandparents help to

provide child care for the two households. The last family, which I would name the H family, reflected another category of grandparental involvement. Grandparents H, both in their mid fifties, were migrant workers from rural Sichuan. Their adult son, who was also a migrant worker in Xiamen, divorced three years ago. He felt he could not take care of his two sons, seven and ten respectively. Hence, grandparents H intervened, took over and have played the role of surrogate parents since then. Grandfather H was a security guard making 800 Yuan per month. Grandmother H, who was illiterate, helped to supplement the household income by working as a part time cleaner earning an income of 300 Yuan per month. Their adult son could not afford to make much financial contributions to the up keeping of the two grandsons, hence, the H family survived on the combined income of 1,100 Yuan (approximately US\$140).

#### **4. Analysis**

##### *Services offered by and sacrifices made by grandparents*

Little is known about the contributions of this cohort of grandparents playing the child minders' role to the contemporary urban Chinese family. This section explains in detail the sacrifices made by these nine grandparents in my sample. Since face saving and not washing dirty linen in public is an integral element of Chinese culture (Hwang, 1987), we attributed the grandparents' willingness to share with the researcher their honest feelings to the trust that was built over the six months period. Besides, she was a foreign researcher and that might have lowered their defences as I would not be staying in the same community long term.

##### *Life revolved around grandchild*

Grandmother K said taking care of the grandson for the past four years was more tiring than working as a full time accountant. A typical day for grandmother K

revolved entirely around her seven year old grandson. At seven in the morning she would have to wake grandson up and get him ready for school. Grandson slept with grandmother on the same bed. She would then fix breakfast for the child. After breakfast, she would walk him to school about ten minutes away. Grandmother K had serious hip problem and walked with a limp in her left leg. Oftentimes she could not catch up with the child and had to resort to yelling at him when he jaywalked. On her way back from taking him to school, she would do marketing for the day at the neighborhood stalls. Grandmother K would spend the rest of the morning cleaning the house and doing chores. She claimed that both her son and daughter in law were working full time and the load naturally landed on her. At noon time, she would walk to school to pick up her grandson. It was a practice for school children to go home for lunch before returning for another half day school in the afternoon. It was not uncommon for grandmother K to wait for a long time at the school gate, from ten minutes to an hour, before her grandson was released from class. The teachers would detain children in class to complete any unfinished school work. Grandmother K felt that was very tough on her legs as she had to stand all the time at the school gate. After fixing herself and grandson a simple lunch, she looked forward to a short siesta. Her energetic seven year old grandson however, did not care for siesta and wanted grandmother to play with him. At about 1:30pm, grandmother would walk the child back to school. The peaceful few hours in the afternoon was the only time where grandmother K could catch a breath before she started to prepare dinner for the family and get ready to pick the child up from school at 4pm. When her adult children returned from work, they would supervise the child's school work and grandmother would do the dishes after dinner. In the evenings, grandmother K would watch some TV programs before retiring. Grandmother K's feelings and sacrifice can be best

reflected by one of her remarks, “This is the life of having children and grandchildren, to give and give all my life, I am really very tired.” (Extract from field diary). Grandmother K confided in researcher that her dream of retirement was a time of freedom. She was hoping to enter the ‘laorendaxiu’ (University for elders) and to spend more time with her husband as they had lived apart for many years owing to work commitments. But all these could not be realized. The other grandparents in the sample also had similar experiences of inflexibility in their schedule. However, two grandparents were glad to revolve their schedule around the grandchildren. Both maternal and paternal grandmother W felt caring for grandchildren was the only meaningful thing they could do after retirement. They did not have alternative plans and hence, no grievances about the lack of freedom.

#### *Lack of social network and social activities*

All the grandparents, except the pair of migrant workers who embarked on rural urban migration more than a decade ago, had to relocated from their home town to Xiamen so as to take care of their grandchildren. The relocation had direct impact on the grandparents’ social network. Grandparents T who shuttled between Fuzhou and Xiamen described to me what it was like for them to be away from their friends, colleagues and neighbors in their home town.

Grandmother T: “Whenever I go back to my home town, all my friends said they missed me...when I go back I would get to play badminton or poker games with my friends”.

Researcher: “When you are in Xiamen you don’t have time for all these?”

Grandmother T: “Oh, no time at all, I am so busy fixing the three meals for the family here...also, there are so many chores to attend to. I used to go for exercises back home, but now I don’t get to do it in Xiamen”.

Researcher : “It is a big sacrifice!”

Grandmother T: “Yes, to me it is a huge sacrifice, I don’t get to play any games here, also I gave up all the prizes I would have won if I had taken part ... Actually it is not the material gain I am after, it is the recreation that I miss”.

Researcher: “Yes, a kind of recreation!”

Grandmother T: “Over here [Xiamen] I feel very lonely, alien to the environment. I can’t speak the language [the local dialect is min nan hua]. Two years ago I tried to join in a dance group in a neighboring primary school, but I could not make it. During that time, TT [the grand daughter] was in kindergarten and I had to take her to and from school. I am a very optimistic and sociable person, I love to have activities, but now my life style is very different. Well, since I am old now, I have to accept it.”

(Extract from transcript of interview with grandmother T)

Grandmother B also relocated to Xiamen from another county in Fujian province after retirement from Railroad service, in order to care for the then new born grand daughter. After her adult daughter’s divorce, she felt a greater sense of obligation to stay on so as to render assistance to her. However, she described her life in Xiamen as one of isolation.

Researcher: “So how do you create some fun or enjoyment for yourself since you are stuck here doing housework and looking after your grandchild day after day. It can become a drudgery.”

Grandmother B: “Yes, it can be quite boring. Well, I will take a walk in the estate, or go to the market. Sometimes, I will go to the bookstore to read books. I look at travel guides or maps etc.”

Researcher: “Do you have friends in Xiamen?”

Grandmother B: “Very few. One older lady staying in a nearby block, she called me on the phone and asked me to visit her in her apartment twice and went shopping once. I don’t like to trouble people...In fact I would love to enjoy my own life. I like to go travelling, take pictures. But I can’t, I need to be here.”

(Extract from transcript of interview with grandmother B)

Although grandmother B’s husband had also relocated to Xiamen, she had limited contact with him as they had chronic strained marital relationships. Grandparents T and grandmother B were the older persons who experienced an increasing sense of isolation by uprooting themselves from their social network in order to render childcare to their grandchildren in urban Xiamen. On the other hand, the two grandmothers of the W family and grandparents K who had more of their extended family in Xiamen island experienced a lower degree of isolation.

#### *Compromising older persons’ marital life*

Although without published statistics to support the observation, from talking to people in Xiamen during my six month ethnography work, the researcher learned it was not uncommon for grandparents to live apart in order to care for offspring from different married children. Since the middle generation looked to grandparents as a reliable source of childcare (Goh, 2006), and especially if the grandchildren were very close in age, the grandparents might have to compromise their own marriage by living apart to care for these growing grandchildren. This scenario was best demonstrated in the case of grandparents K. According to grandmother K, when their younger son’s child was born, her son requested her to render childcare. Grandmother K thought it was only fair if she helped out since the older couple had helped with caring for the

child of their elder son. She hesitated for while since it meant she had to live apart from her husband. After some struggles, grandmother K obliged. The situation of this older couple was not too bad as the two households were both within Xiamen island. The older couple got to meet during weekends. The logical question I would ask as a researcher following this observation is: Whether the marital quality of older couples was being considered as secondary to their obligations and responsibilities towards their children and grandchildren? How would the Chinese older couple and their adult children view the grandparents' own needs in terms of intimacy, sex and marital bond? Minichiello (Minichiello *et al.*, 1996) asserts that sociocultural factor is one of the key determinants of sexual behavior since it influences people's sexual role within a group, as well as the beliefs and values of the group to which they belong. Owing to the limitation of the scope of this study, these questions were not answered. It will be interesting for future researchers to investigate further into the cultural perceptions of the need for intimacy of grandparents in China.

#### *Physical exhaustion*

Physical exhaustion was a common theme that surfaced in the data. For instance, from the 17 pages of transcripts of interview with Grandmother K, the Chinese word 'lei' (tired) appeared 16 times. It reflected the extent of the stresses and strains grandparents experienced in playing full time child minders. When grandmother K started to care for her grandson four years ago, she was in her mid sixties. At the time of the interview she was approaching seventy years old. Her hip and leg problems had increased. Making four trips back and forth from school on foot daily was taking a toll on her. At the end of my six month's stay in Xiamen, grandmother K finally reconciled her own inner struggles between a strong sense of self imposed obligation towards her son and her need to take care of her health. She

mustered her courage to express to her son and daughter in law her wish to relinquish the caring role. If not for the orthopaedic surgeon's order for her to undergo a major hip operation, it would have been difficult for grandmother to make this decision. Grandmother B told me she found that she had aged quickly over the past five years taking care of her granddaughter.

Grandmother B: "I devoted myself whole-heartedly [in caring for the granddaughter], I really feel my physical condition has deteriorated very fast. If you look at my photo five years ago, I looked very young. Now I have lost a lot of weight, I can't wear all those old clothes anymore. I was happier then."

As for the other older couple, grandparents T, who were in their seventies, they felt the shuttling between Fuzhou and Xiamen was most physically demanding on them. The bus journey took about three hours. Grandmother T, although still very healthy and active, suffered from serious motion sickness. Giddy spells and vomiting were the symptoms she had to endure. She claimed that the bus rides were most unbearable to her.

#### *Full time surrogate parents*

It was very interesting to observe how the pair of migrant worker grandparents H took on the role of full time surrogate parents to their two grandsons without complaints. Despite their economic difficulties and lack of stable jobs, I never heard them utter any grievances about their caring role. Instead, they seemed proud to take on this load. Grandfather H told the researcher:

"Grandfather taking care of grandson is a heaven given duty...life is hard, but when they are grown up, things will be much better. Every year passes very quickly, each year comes and goes, the children will be grown up in no time.



By then, they will be independent and do not need to depend on you anymore.”

(Extract from transcript of interview with grandfather H).

Grandfather H would call from his work-place frequently to check on the two boys, to monitor their movements and ensure they had finished their school work. He was reprimanded and penalized by his boss for using the phone too often. The two grandsons and grandparents cramped into small dilapidated quarters inside the migrant workers' slum located on the eastern part of Xiamen island. Grandmother H, an illiterate woman, cooked, washed and worked part time to supplement the family income. She also collected used plastic bottle for recycling so as to earn some extra income. Both grandparents treated the boys as if they were their own children. Despite the low income, the grandparents started to accumulate small sums towards an educational fund with the aim of sending the elder grandson to university. Their target was to save up RMB20,000 for this purpose. They told me they would just eat rice and preserved vegetables so as to save up enough for the grandsons.

## **5. Discussions**

### *Obligation or choice*

The data presented above may give the reader a downbeat impression of grandparenthood amongst those sampled cases. However, this should not lead one to assume that the grandparents were ready to give up their roles as child minders or stop rendering help to their adult children. On the contrary, intergenerational cohesion is still strong in China. Whyte (2005) in his large scale survey in the city of Baoding found that both grandparents and their adult children tended to see the advantages of co-residence between the generations as outweighing the disadvantages. He also reported that both parents and grown children genuinely offer multiple forms of

assistance to each other. In the current study, a survey of the middle generation (N=389) showed the adult children had a relatively high level of expectation of their elderly parents. 30% of them thought providing child care was the kind of support which grandparents should render to their adult children. A small 4% of them thought it was an obligation on the part of the grandparents. On the other hand, 48% of them believed grandparents could choose with their free will whether to render help. And 17% of them assumed it was a mutually beneficial relationship between the adult children and their elderly parents. The sense of obligation, however, did not come only from the adult children. From the researcher's interactions and observations of the grandparents, most of them had this self imposed sense of responsibility. Almost all of them found it impossible to say 'no' to their adult children. Therefore, the interplay of expectation from the middle generation and self-imposed sense of responsibility by the grandparents worked like a double-bind requirement that weighed heavy on the older persons.

#### *Satisfaction and choice*

The issue of choice therefore, warrants some attention. Researching on grandparents caring for grandchildren in Australia, Goodfellow (2003) asserts that tension arose when grandparents encountered the dilemma between altruism (joy and pleasure of caring for grandchildren) and exploitation (sense of being unrecognised and undervalued); freedom to pursue one's own interests versus familial obligation; intergenerational responsibilities versus retirement choices; and balancing their own work and grandchild care responsibilities. These dimensions of choice proposed by Goodfellow may not all be applicable to the Chinese context. For instance, the dilemma between balancing one's work and grandchild care may not exist amongst the Chinese grandparents. The stipulated official retirement ages in China are 60 for

men and 55 for women (Lu, 2006). All the grandparents in the study had retired. The relevant question is whether these older adults had prior plans for their post retirement years. For some older adults like the two grandmothers from the W family, caring for grandchildren was the best thing they believed they could do. These two older ladies (one was 59 years old and the other 80 years old) chose to devote themselves in this caregiving role. In fact, the 80 year old grandmother W (maternal grandmother) had cared for grandchildren from her other adult children since her retirement thirty years ago. This grandmother had seven adult children. Two of her oldest daughters were grandparents themselves and she was a great grandmother. It was an example of the 'co-existence of multigenerations' postulated by Bengston (2001). It was also a clear demonstration of how the older adults like grandmother W, could make significant contributions to Chinese families by rendering decades of grandchildren care after her retirement. She seemed contented with this role and did not feel she had missed out on anything. The same attitude held true for the grandparents H. As surrogate parents to the grandsons, they felt it was their duty to do so. There was no complaints or regrets about the sacrifices they had made. One similar characteristics amongst these four grandparents (the two grandmothers from the W family and the migrant worker grandparents from the H family) was their low educational level. Amongst them, only grandfather H had some post primary education, the women were near illiterate. It raises the interesting hypothesis of whether less educated grandparents are more willing or face less sense of dilemma when asked to play the role of caring for grandchildren.

The rest of the grandparents from the T, B and K families all had tertiary education, except grandmother B who had a post secondary education in a technical college in Nanjing. From an analysis of the data, we learnt that all these five

grandparents had alternative post retirement plans. However, most of them could not materialize these plans as they were pulled into caring for grandchildren. They also seemed more open to sharing the negative aspects of their child minders' role. These grandparents had alternative plans: for instance, travelling, participation in sports and games, dancing, doing community work, continuing education, spending more time with spouse etc. Grandparents T had to cut down on all these social activities in order to travel to Xiamen. The rest of the grandparents could only abort their plans once the grandchildren arrived. Comparing with the lower educated grandparents discussed earlier, the highly educated group of grandparents tended to express more readily the sacrifices they had made for the younger generations. They also felt the missed opportunity on the freedom to carry out their own plans. However, we believe the Chinese grandparents need not feel compelled to choose family obligation over individual plans. The challenge is whether the older adults and their families can come to a compromise so that all the needs of the different generations can be taken into consideration. The case of Singapore where the older adults could explicitly express their needs in the process of intergenerational negotiations will be demonstrated in the following section.

*Availability of alternatives, choice and strategies*

It is interesting to compare and contrast the situation of grandparents caring for grandchildren in Xiamen with their counterparts in another predominantly Chinese city in Asia, namely, Singapore. Like the women in China, it is a norm for mothers, especially well educated women, to remain in the workforce. The common place of dual income families in Singapore is inevitably supported within the familial realm by grandparents who assume the role of caring for their grandchildren. Although grandparents who co-reside with their children and grandchildren are often seen as

*naturally* providing child care, it is equally common for grandparents – especially grandmothers who stay apart from their children to be the main caregivers of their grandchildren. The various patterns of such childcare arrangements range from the ferrying of children to and from their grandparents on a daily basis to the staying-over of the children during weekdays, while parents become weekend parents who only take over childcare one or two days a week. It is also common for the working middle generation to end up having dinners regularly at their parents/ homes while visiting their own children, thus creating a pseudo-multigeneration living arrangement during the weekdays where grandparents become busy with not only caring for their grandchildren, but also fixing dinners for their adult children.

The reliance of the middle generation on grandparents to provide child care, coupled with the dependence on the family for elder care reflects the government policy which promotes intergenerational ties aims at strengthening the solidarity of the relationship within the rubric of interdependence in traditional Asian family (Teo et al, 2006:123). A policy directly related to the role of elderly as grandparents is the grandparent caregiver tax relief introduced since August 2004 and available to working mothers (who are Singapore citizens with children age 12 and below) whose child is cared of by unemployed grandparents.

At one glance, grandparents in Singapore seem to fall into the same reluctant position with grandparents in China who have no choice but to provide grandchildren care for the sake of their children. However, further research on grandparenting in Singapore by researchers in Singapore (such as Teo et al 2006, Thang, 2005) have found it more appropriate to understand grandparenting as a negotiated process, where grandparents exercise their agency and choice. The strategies adopted by the grandparents in negotiating their roles so as not to be physically (and emotionally)

overburdened in their retiring years are predominantly the following. First, we have observed that grandparents do drawing a clear boundary between parenting and grandparenting, as one respondent in Teo et. al's book claimed,

“Because this grandchild is not my responsibility, it is my children's responsibility...” (Teo et. al., 2006:125). The clear position taken by the grandparents allow them to place their interaction with their grandchildren in comfortable closeness. In Cherlin and Furstenberg Jr. (1986)'s terms on the styles of grandparenting, grandparents in Singapore are increasingly opting to adopt the companionate style with sufficient involvement, leaving the responsibility of disciplining the young to their own parents.

In addition to a clear boundary, the more visible strategy relates to the policy provision for foreign domestic maids in Singapore. Domestic help rendered by foreign women who serve as housekeepers and carers of the old and young has become quite an expected presence in Singapore households. At least one in seven households in Singapore employ domestic maids (The Straits Times, 17 February 2003); the country has at least 140,000 domestic maid living among families in Singapore. The emerging norm for parents with young children to engage foreign domestic maids suggests the maids in households as a strategy by grandparents for help to relieve them of the strenuous role in caring for children. It is not uncommon to hear grandparents saying that they will only care for their grandchildren if they are provided with domestic maid so that they play the role of 'supervisor' to the maid (Teo et.al., 2006:127). In fact, the availability of domestic maid help grandparents to decide on their engagement with caring for their grandchildren, as reflected in a report on qualitative data from older respondents about grandparenting,

“I occasionally go over to see them now, but they are not home from work. They do have maid. Since I am not working now, do feel concern and will go over and take a look.... They did ask me to help. As I have not care for children for long time, I am still considering. Since they have a maid, I may help out then.” (GP - H - Cs - FC 20) (Thang et. al., 2006).

The availability of child care centres in Singapore is another form of viable alternative for both the parents and grandparents. There is a range of child-care services in Singapore, for pre-school children (about 700 centres), infants (about 60 infant care centres from two months to eighteen months old) in Singapore, and primary school children (after school care centres) (Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, 2005). This contrasts with situations in Xiaman, where after-school programmes are mostly run informally by private individuals or profit making enterprises. It seems the lack of such alternatives like domestic maids and child care facilities makes it harder for the grandparents in Xiamen to reject rendering care to their grandchildren.

#### *Choice and intergenerational negotiations*

How does the situation in Singapore discussed in the prior session help us situate and better understand grandparenting issues in China? What is the micro intergenerational dynamics within contemporary Chinese families? Goodfellow (2003) claims that the degree of grandparent satisfaction with their role as regular providers of child care is directly related to the nature of their choice. According to Teo and associates (2003), “...there is a continuous negotiation and adaptation between the older and middle generations with regards to living and childcare arrangements, as agency becomes stronger or weaker. The resolution also reflects the relative abilities of individuals to assert their preferences” (p.341). So far, studies

have shown that grandparents in Singapore were more ready to negotiate with their adult children and assert their choice when requested to provide grandchildren care. It seemed there was a lack of such dynamic negotiations between the generations in Xiamen. I found Hwang's (1987) explications of the Chinese cultural interpersonal behaviors useful in understanding this phenomenon. He postulates that the Chinese categorize social relations into three groups, namely, instrumental tie; mixed tie and expressive tie. The expressive tie is generally a relatively permanent and stable social relationship. In traditional Chinese societies, the family is deemed as the most important primary group and one's expressive ties. In situation of conflict, or facing dilemma, it is not uncommon for those within expressive ties to delay decision making. This may account for the lack of initiative on the part of the grandparents in this study to decline offering help even when their own needs were largely ignored. If the older person usually resorts to delaying tactics in coping with demands for grandchildren care, concerted effort has to be invested by academic, researchers, community workers so as to campaign for the older persons. Public awareness should be raised on the possible opportunity cost incurred by grandparents when they feel obliged to provide full time grandchildren care. Adult children can be more sensitive towards the grandparents' needs for social activities, personal time, social networking and need for intimacy.

## **6. Conclusion and recommendations**

This paper challenges the stereotypical image of the aging population in China depicted by most social researchers. We present the rarely discussed dimension of how older adults play the role of caregiving to their grandchildren and making invaluable contributions to contemporary Chinese families. Instead of viewing old persons as frail, sick, and dependent, we need to see them as capable of being



assertive, educated, independent and contributing members of society. This study explains how these grandparents make sacrifices in order to serve the junior generations in urban Xiamen families. Much length is devoted to discussing the sense of obligation these Chinese grandparents feel towards their adult children and grandchildren. This paper elucidates how the lack of alternative childcare facilities coupled with the overarching Chinese cultural norms of defining relationships within families restricted the grandparents' sense of choice. To enrich the discussion, comparison is made with Singapore to better understand possible strategies and choices available to grandparents. Through the paper, we also address the limits of the social choice theory in understanding grandparenting in the Chinese context, as equity may not necessarily be the guiding principle for human interactions, especially between family members. Social gerontologists should investigate the cultural implications of intergenerational dynamics in China and the impact on the quality of life of post retirement older adults in China. According to Mehta (2005) elderly women in Asian societies appear to be more on the giving rather than the receiving end. In China and other countries where younger couples are often both working, elderly women frequently act as the most important member within the household in the care of the whole family.

Data from Xiamen gives a clear illustration that grandparents made a significant contribution to families and society by enabling married women to remain in the work force. However, China social policy planners in China, should not assume that all grandparents would choose to be child minders. Grandparents' agency should be recognized. Measures to relieve grandparents from the heavy burden of full time child care may include more childcare and after school programs as well as community support programs to provide emergency relief to grandparents when they

cannot attend to their grandchildren due to occasional unforeseen physical conditions. Primary schools may consider optional lunch programs for school children so as to relieve grandparents of the load of ferry the children to and from school and meals preparation. Work place policy should consider building in some elements of flexibility for working mothers so that the grandparents are not left with the sole responsibility of grandchildren care during the day. As pointed out by Goodfellow, grandparents are potentially a community resource that can benefit both adults and children, this resource should not be exploited at the expense of the well being of the older adults.

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