

The Change and Continuity of Family Life in Chinese Urban Area

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Abstract: This paper studies the change and continuity of intergenerational relationship in Chinese family life by comparing Baoding of Mainland China with its counterpart in Taiwan's urban area. The author holds that, in Baoding, the system and norms formed in 1950s have provided protection for the majority of the elderly and helped build up a strong intergenerational network that satisfies both parents and their grown-up children. The pattern of filial support for parents and the micro-system that helps shape such a pattern compares Mainland China favorably with Taiwan (of the corresponding period) in terms of "modernity".

The paper, based on the research statistics of intergenerational relationship in Baoding of Mainland China in 1994 and similar researches done in Taiwan's urban area in 1989 and 1993 respectively, is to examine the prediction of inter-contradiction in family life pattern. Albert Hermalin engaged in the research in both Baoding and Taiwan area. Also, we adopt some same or similar questions and sample designs in the research of Baoding and Taiwan, for example, some research questions of Taiwan in 1989 are adopted in the research questionnaire in Baoding, which provides us an important opportunity to estimate the family pattern of modern Chinese from comparative aspects. Following, I firstly introduce what we can see from the research statistics of Baoding, which related to the relationship of both parents and their grown-up children of 1002 citizens whose age are above 50 years old, and they were selected in random.

It has two features in the samples of Baoding parents. First of all, the proportion of couples alive is very high (above 88%, even the proportion of selected citizens whose age is above 70 years old takes up 2/3). The relatively high proportion means that, in Baoding, the majority of the elderly

can not only get emotional support from mates, but also achieve economical support, which reduces the need of depending on their grown-up children. However, if they divorce or become widows or widowers, their need of depending on their grown-up children will be more universal.

Secondly, all the majority of the elderly have several grown-up children, and their children all may provide support for them. Some commentators worry that “the one-child policy” of Mainland China would affect future pension issues, however, the selective parents in Baoding have completed fertility before the policy enforced in 1979. Actually, in Baoding, one couple has 3.2 grown-up children on average. As to the potential of children care for the elderly, the more important is most grown-up children (nearly 90%), selected among interviews in Baoding, still live in Baoding. Therefore, each parent has three grown-up children living in the same city, and their children can offer help for them in general.

Due to the socialist employment system of Mainland China and lack of labor market, it is low geographical mobility among the grown-up children. Specifically, in the Mao Zedong era, urban youth were normally arranged to work at local places by state, and very difficult to change their original occupation or residences voluntarily, except for some special situation, for example, someone graduated from the best university. In fact, at the beginning of 1970s and 1980s, the government had implemented a policy which allowed parents working in state-owned enterprises to retire early and arranged their grown-up children to work in the same enterprises. In view of the “replacement” policy, grown-up children lived with their parents in the same cities and worked for the same enterprises. In all, in the Mao Zedong era, though the official opposed Confucian culture, because of such kind of Chinese-style socialism and lack of labor market, most grown-up children maintained close relationship with their parents. Even the economy reform started in 1978, it had not changed the situation of low mobility much until the mid-1990s.

However, in Baoding, the family structure looked not so “tradition”. It is true that 64% of parents lived with one or more children, but in cases of two generations living together, quite a few of relative young parents lived with single grown-up child. (Readers should remember that the samples of Baoding parents include those whose age is 50 years old). Only 35% of parents lived with married children in their stem family, but not traditional big family. Normally, in such kind of stem family of Baoding, parents lived with their married sons three times than with their married

daughters.

Among those whose age is above 60 years old, nearly 40% of them lived in co-family. While the main family form of Baoding elderly is stem family, which means the elderly live with their own mate or with one or several single children more. In other words, in Baoding, it is not prevalent and necessary that the elderly live with their married children. Actually, 60% of the elderly had lived with their grown-up children separately. Compared with the past and contemporary countryside of Mainland China, the situation of 1994 seems to indicate that the proportion of the elderly living with their married children has dropped sharply.

It should be stressed again that, in Baoding, parents living alone does not mean that they don't have the children that can live alone with. As mentioned above, most of them have several children, and their grown-up children have already married. Therefore, the elderly think it is no necessary to live with their married grown-up children, and does not often have the preference of living with their married children. Statistics seems to indicate there is a growing acceptance of pattern called "network family", which means the grown-up children live not far away from their parents and provide filial support for their parents. If so, parents have no need to live with their married children for pension security.

Besides, the decreasing possibility of elderly parents living with their married children has relation with socialist features of Mainland China, which refers to urban housing controlled by government. Since 1950s, housing market had no longer existed, and private property had become rare. Even in 1994, the situation was still the same that most urban residents mainly got public housing from working units. Therefore, it had same situation with other socialist countries, such as small living space, poor environment, and symbolic rent. (14) When the grown-up children got married, they normally had replacement eligibility in their own working units if their parents' house can not accommodate them. In the 1980s and 1990s, it had set off an upsurge of public housing construction. In order to shake off crowded living conditions, elderly parents and children were willing to live separately on the condition of getting new house. Determined by the nature of socialist housing system in Mainland China, co-family living patterns are not often seen as desirable goal, but a temporary choice.

In agricultural and other forms of societies, all the elderly are concerned about the problem of

financial security, which comes from the grown-up children's support. In the past, there was an old saying that "having sons for elderly security, and the more sons you have, the more happiness you will get" in China. How about the current situation of Baoding? It need emphasize that most parents own their own income, subsidized public housing and medical insurance, so they have no need to depend on their grown-up children. In overall situation, among 85% of the elderly having incomes, 25% of them have only wage income, 51% of them have only pensions, and 9% of them have incomes and pension. In this aspect, men's situation is better than women's, for men can not only continue to work with wage, but also conform to the requirement of getting pensions easier than women. For example, among the elderly whose age is between 50 and 59 years old, 82% of men were still at work, while only 30% of women did. While among the most elderly whose age is above 70 years old, 96% of them can get pensions, and only 29% of women did. The difference comes from socialist employment system of Mainland China, such as women early retirement provision of the Soviet, women with informal jobs or working in small collective enterprises without pensions. However, because of a little proportion of widows or widowers, most non-income women have spouses who have incomes. In Baoding, only 3% of the elderly don't have income and pensions. In other words, most of the elderly have no necessity to depend on their grown-up children's financial support, which is just seen as subsidiary.

Though the grown-up children's financial supports are not necessary for their parents, how much the degree of such support is? We have studied two forms of financial support, including support of cash, food, clothes and other entities. In general, only 1/4 of the elderly got cash support and above 1/3 of them got entity support, also, the older of the elderly, the higher of both proportion. We expect that most grown-up children would provide cash or entities support, but the actual situation is absolutely different. We have this expect not because of logic, but based on parents' need. Even about 19% of Baoding parents adopt more "modern" pattern, they always provide cash for the grown-up children. At the same time, only 3% of parents say that they did not get cash support or the grown-up children's support can not meet their need. In other words, even it is the low proportion of financial support provided for the elderly parents by grown-up children, which does not indicate grown-up children's financial supports just play a supporting role.

Except financial support, what about the situation of other aspects between the relationship of the

elderly parents and grown-up children? In the research of Baoding, we have put forward some issues related to parents and children, involving several aspects of intergenerational relationship. These problems reflect on consistent and positive depiction. Generally, parents often have various communication ways with their children. For example, in our samples, though only 42% of the grown-up children live with their parents, other 30% of them say they everyday go to visit their parents, and most of the remaining 28% of them say they go to visit their parent only slightly less. Among parents whose age is between 50 and 59 years old or above 70 years old, respectively less than 1% and 11% of them get help from grown-up children on bath and clothing aspects, but 1/3 of them have their children help to do household chores. Also, in the situation of financial aid, only a few parents say they have not got what they need. Ranging from 75% to 90% of the elderly parents say their grown-up children respect and take consideration of them, and above 95% of parents say they are satisfied with emotion consideration provided by children. However, among our survey of parents and children, from 60% to 65% of them think the custom of respecting for the elderly in China has decreased slightly in the past 20 years. While there is no evidence indicates that intergenerational relationship has been suffering from serious erosion in Baoding.

Though the net result of intergenerational communication is grown-up children providing support for their parents, it does not mean only seniors get benefit from the relationship. In the past, parents used various ways to help their children, such as helping them enter good schools and find good jobs, providing money for their marriage, and providing houses for them. To many grown-up children, their parents' helps still continue in different ways, for example, parents help to take care of children, go shopping, do housework, give suggestion, and solve specific life problems using private relationship. Until not long ago, the society does not emphatically provide service or convenience for consumer. Therefore, even most young couples have full-time jobs, if they don't get support from their parents, they are still difficult to handle the need of city life.

However, we had expected to find some sign to prove apparent difference of mind and value between parents and their grown-up children. According to trend of Chinese society, all current references pay attention to rapid changes of culture or society, and mazy politics changes result in

experiential difference between parents and grown-up children. In fact, we find some steady difference on the research of parents and grown-up children's social and political attitude. Generally speaking, compared with grown-up children, parents give more support on traditional socialism and outdated values, while children seem to approve individualism more. It also has generation gap in the aspects of music, movie, TV and reading, for parents prefer to watch traditional patterns (such as Chinese traditional drama) and social styles (such as revolutionary movie), while children prefer to appreciate international type of music, movie and other culture products.

However, Baoding's statistics shows shared attitudes with regard to family obligations and filial support between generations. Even though differences actually exist, it's commonly not the parents but the adult offspring who hold that they should make more sacrifice to meet parental needs. Both the parents and the adult offspring tend to believe that advantages outweigh disadvantages in an extended family, one often of several generations. Additionally, the advantages and disadvantages that the two generations concretely mentioned are more or less the same. In Bao Ding, 92% out of the adult offspring and 82% among the seniority think advantages are in a dominant position. We may doubt that their ethic notion of "family altruism" leads to the exaggerated intergenerational harmony and a fade of family togetherness. Nevertheless, our statistics indicates parents and adult offspring do provide diversified assistance mutually.

What can account for those discoveries? Owing to a lack of record on Baoding's bygone, we can not draw a definite conclusion that filial support weakens in the wake of the passage of time. But one thing for sure, no evidence is found in Baoding's investigated statistics that parents are suffering from their offspring's ignorance or disrespect. All in all, no indication is found in our statistics in Bao Ding that parents are confronted with a crisis of disrespect from their offspring.

We find that for most of the forms of attending parents, the adult sons and daughters who do not live their parents take no less care than those who live with parents. To be specific, sons and daughters lived with parents help a lot more than those who don't do housework, while in the

aspects of taking care of bodies, providing fund, giving food or clothes, both of them give nearly same support. In general, the relation modal of “network family” mentioned above that old parents live alone with support from grown-up children, seems to take the place of this mentality that parents lived at least with one grown-up child being with them.

Does the nature of the “net” on which the old parents depend change? Do married daughters offer more help to their parents and parents in law? The status from Baoding proved in many aspects that the traditional filial piety based on the father-son relationship had changed. In the answers to the duty to the parents, the married daughter had the same attitude as that of the son. Among the married children who live separately with their parents, the daughter visits the parents as frequently as the son. In the types of help they offer (e.g. taking care of their health, taking over daily household chores, offering money or other things, etc), the married daughters do the same as their brothers do, or more. To try to explain this change, we can only guess that the parents now depend on their sons and daughters equally. But this discovery is quite impressive. Parents from Baoding said that both their daughters and sons are obedient and take good care of them. Compared with the past, the filial ways change a lot. Now the daughters play a role as important as the son in offering help to their parents. Therefore, it is not so important whether the daughters are married or the parents live with their daughter-in-law.

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