

Preschool Child Care Arrangements in China

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Childrearing, as one of the most important family responsibilities, is traditionally presumed to be undertaken exclusively by mothers. But increasing female labor force participation curtails mother's home time, thus bringing working mothers the tension caused by work and family conflict. This family change also compels researchers to re-examine the gender-based division of labor among family members, especially married couples. U.S. studies show that, though mothers still do the majority of childcare work, fathers' participation in child care has increased in the past 30 years (Casper & O'Connell 1998; Bianchi 2000; Bonney et al. 1999).

The tension experienced by Chinese mothers due to work and family conflict could be extremely high, since Chinese women's labor force participation rate is among the highest in the world. Socialist ideology promoting gender equality in work encourages women, including mothers of young children, to participate in economic activities outside the family. But gender equality ideology may not necessarily penetrate into family life. Research shows that Chinese women still undertake most housework (Short et al. 2002).

This study examines the preschool (0-6 years old) childcare arrangement and its determinants in Chinese families. While Chinese mothers of preschool children assume the majority of childcare responsibility, my analysis using data from China Health and Nutrition Survey shows that mothers are not solely responsible for daily care of preschool children, which is quite time-consuming. It demonstrates that there is a considerable variation in childcare arrangement across households, which requires comprehensive investigation. Chinese families employ different strategies to relieve the tension Chinese mothers experience caused by the conflict of work and family. This study consists of three parts: first, the study focuses on the division of child care labor between mothers and fathers; second, this study investigates the contribution of kinship to childcare in Chinese families; the third part examines the role of childcare service purchase.

Previous research on child care in China focuses exclusively on maternal responsibility (Short et al. 2002; Chen et al. 2000). Chinese fathers' involvement in child development is understated in the previous literature. My analysis shows that Chinese mothers of pre-school children on average spend four times more time with children than fathers do, whereas there is a large variation across households in fathers' participation in childcare. Previous studies on the division of household labor use one or more of three theoretical explanations: relative resources, time constraints, and gender-role ideology explanations (Shelton & John, 1996). This study employs these theoretical frameworks to explore the underlying mechanism for the division of childcare labor between mothers and fathers.

The relative resources explanation argues that the family members with more resources negotiate their way out of housework. According to this explanation, I expect that the smaller the gap between mothers' and fathers' education and/or income the more equal the division of childcare labor.

The time availability explanation suggests that mothers' and fathers' participation in housework depends on their paid work hours if employed in labor market. I expect that mothers' work hours reduce their time with children and enhance fathers' involvement in childcare. On the other side, I expect that the longer fathers work, the less childcare labor they contribute and the more responsibility mothers assume.

The gender ideology theory argues that wives and husbands with more egalitarian attitudes will have a more equal division of household labor. Caring for young children is traditionally viewed as the mothers' responsibility. Thus, I expect that inequality of division of childcare labor between mothers and fathers is associated with traditional gender attitudes. Since the data I use do not have direct measures of gender attitudes, I employ the relative say of husband and wife in decision of household expenditure as an indicator of gender attitudes.

Second, childrearing in China may go beyond parental responsibilities, also depending on the family's supportive network. Students of Chinese studies are well aware of the strong family ties in China and their importance to family life. In China, it is quite common for grandparents to help care for grandchildren when the older generation lives with or close to their adult children (Chen et al. 2000). However, the exchange between grandparents and their grown children is mutual; that is, taking care of elderly parents is the inescapable responsibility of their adult children, which may compete for time and money with their own childcare responsibilities. This thesis studies the influence of family ties on child care considering intergenerational mutual exchange.

Third, families with working mothers might use purchased service to relieve the burden of daily childcare (Oropesa 1993). In China, mostly in urban areas, sending preschool children to kindergarten is quite common due to the high labor force participation rate of mothers of young children. I expect that use of childcare service reduces parents' burden of childcare labor. Since mothers assume the majority of childcare responsibility, I expect a larger effect of purchased service on mothers than on fathers.

This study uses the data from China Health and Nutrition Survey, which is a longitudinal survey covering eight provinces in China: Liaoning, Jiangsu, Shandong, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Guangxi, and Guizhou. Although the survey is not nationally representative, the eight provinces are geographically diverse and vary in level of economic development. The data contain detailed information about time allocation for home activities, including childcare and time spent in a variety of economic activities (wage job, farming, raising livestock, fishing, and small household business).

The China Health and Nutrition Survey is a panel study and time allocation data are available for five waves: 1991, 1993, 1997, 2000, and 2004. For the majority of households with preschool children, there are more than two observations available over time. Exploiting the panel design, this study estimates fixed-effect models to test theoretical hypotheses. There may be some unmeasured and constant household characteristics that are associated with the factors of interest here. Leaving those characteristics uncontrolled would result in biased estimates. The advantage of fixed-effect model is by controlling for those unmeasured and constant household characteristics, unbiased estimates can be achieved.

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