

# Skipped-generation Households and Intergenerational Relationships

—Analyzing the Reasons for Grandparenting in Rural China—

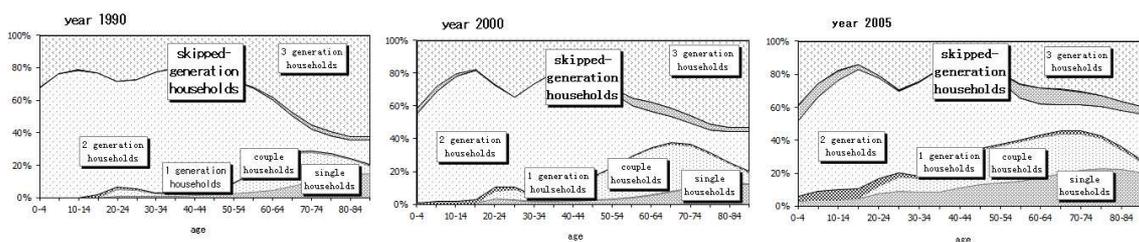
Zhang Jiuyan

Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology, The University of Tokyo

## 1. Introduction

In skipped-generation households, grandparents raise one or more grandchildren without the support of the parents. Recently, in China, the number of such households has dramatically increased. Comparing the national population census for the years 1990, 2000, and 2005, we found that 0.50% of the population lived in skipped-generation households in 1990; by 2000, the percentage increased to 1.73%; and by 2005, the percentage was 3.89%. In other words, there was approximately a seven-time increase in the percentage in just 15 years. Focusing on the number of children under 14, we found that the percentage of children who lived in skipped-generation households increased from 0.49% in 1990 to 7.51% in 2005, that is, almost 15 times in 15 years. The percentage of the elderly (i.e., those over the age of 60) also increased about four times, from 2.22% of the population in 1990 to 8.43% in 2005.

Figure 1 Age distribution of household populations by household type



Source: Guo, 2008

The tremendous increase in the number of skipped-generation households in China is an important phenomenon that highlights the changes in families and intergenerational relations. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of scholars in Japan. For example, according to Ikeoka (1997), skipped-generation households are “an important household type that cannot be ignored.” Additionally, Ishihara (2005)

believes that If we look at the number, not only of current skipped-generation households but also typical households that at some point have experienced skipped-generation arrangements, then the figure becomes all the more significant. To understand the increase, we must first understand why skipped-generation households emerged.

## **2. Literature Review and Research Questions**

The causes of the emergence of skipped-generation households in both urban and rural areas have been investigated in previous studies. Some studies concluded that the increase in dual-career couples and unbalanced modernization in urban areas led to the emergence of skipped-generation households (Ikeoka, 1997; Wang, 2006a,b; Guo, 2008). Much of the current parent generation comprises dual-career couples that have little time for child care. On the other hand, the grandparent generation typically comprises retirees who have the time and energy to take care of grandchildren. Additionally, in cities, the degree of modernization in the inner and outer city areas differs. Most young couples live in outer city areas, where the quality of education is lower than in inner city areas, so to ensure that their children receive a higher quality of education, these couples send them to grandparents, who often live in inner city areas (Wang, 2006a,b).

Other factors contributing to the increase in the number of skipped-generation households in rural areas are the increase in migrations from villages to cities and the urban-rural dualistic social structure due to China's household registration system (Wang, 2006a,b; Guo, 2008; Ishihara, 2009). Industrialization and urbanization have created job opportunities and caused rural laborers to migrate to cities in search of employment. However, because of the household registration system, these laborers cannot receive the same social welfare privileges as urban citizens. They are paid low wages and are given inadequate housing facilities; thus, they often do not have enough resources to raise their children in cities. Further, children of rural migrant laborers cannot attend the same schools as urban children.

While studies have clarified that the aforementioned factors have significantly

contributed in increasing the number of skipped-generation households, they have failed to address an important issue: whether or not grandparents' provision of child care for grandchildren, or "grandparenting," is inevitable. In the modern trend toward nuclear families, it has not yet become inevitable for grandparents living separately from their children to provide child care for grandchildren. In cases where grandparents refuse to provide full-time child care for grandchildren and where parents go to cities to work, the parents have to take the children with them to the city, or one of the parents (usually the mother) has to stay behind with the children as homemaker.. Therefore, the increase in skipped-generation households essentially depends on grandparents' amenability to providing full-time childcare for grandchildren.

To investigate the factors that contribute in making grandparents amenable to providing full-time child care for grandchildren, I focus on rural areas, because in China, about 69.13% of elder skipped-generation households are in these areas.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, few studies have focused on these areas. The old Chinese sayings 「含飴弄孫」 (to mouth malt sugars and dally with one's grandson) and 「伝宗接代」 (to carry on the family line) are noted in some related studies (Li, 2004; Huang, 2006). A life that involves "mouthing" malt sugars and "dallying" with grandsons is considered a good elderly life, and carrying on the family line is considered the most important responsibility of elders. In sum, therefore, grandparenting appears to be (1) a norm and (2) inevitable.

Consciousness of tradition appears to be an important factor influencing grandparents' decision to take up full-time childcare. However, few studies confirm this. Therefore, whether or not grandparenting is a traditional norm should be investigated. This study examines whether grandparenting, considered a cause for the increase in skipped-generation households, is a norm by analyzing the reasons that grandparents agree to provide full-time child care for grandchildren.

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<sup>1</sup> Elder skipped-generation households are those with a "single elder over the age of 60 who is living with minor" or an "elder couple over the age of 60 who is living with minor." According to the 2010 census, 13.71% of elder skipped-generation household were in cities, 17.16% were in towns (Zhen), and 69.13% were in villages.

### 3. Methods

To examine the norm of grandparenting in rural China, the thinking and behavior of its elder citizens must be studied; hence, from May to June 2011, grandparents living in the village of Hecun (pseudonym) in Henan province were interviewed. Henan province is located in central China, and in 2010, the percentage of its elder skipped-generation households was 3.8. Some studies have suggested that Henan province has many social security issues common to rural China (Zhao & Zhang, 2007). The average annual income of Henan province was 7293 yuan in 2010, and its annual agricultural income was 2978 yuan. The registered population was 767, but without the migrant workers who went to work in the city, the population was 478. The total number of households was 191, and 16 (or 8% of the total) were skipped-generation households.

Table 1 List of interviewees

Household	Type of household	Number of grandchildren under child care	Years as a skipped-generation household	Grandparent ages	Grandchildren ages	Household income (In yuan)
A	SG	1	0.5	GF: 49, GM: 49	2	10000
B	SG	3	8	GF: 63, GM: 61	4, 8, 11	15000
C	SG	5	3	GF: 58, GM: 59	7, 8, 11, 15, 16	10000
D	SG	6	6	GF: 64, GM: 66	6, 7, 8, 13, 19	2000
E	SG	3	10	GM: 61	12, 14, 17	2000
I	SG	2	1	GF: 62, GM: 65	2	10000
K	SG	2	2	GF: 44, GM: 43	2, 3	2000
L	SG	3	7	GF: 59, GM: 60	1, 5, 8	8000
F	Non-SG		2	GF: 64, GM: 66		10000
J	Non-SG		1	GF: 56, GM: 55	1, 3	6000
M	Non-SG		1	GF: 57, GM: 58	1, 2, 7	8000
G	Non-SG			GF: 56, GM: 55		2000
H	Non-SG			GF: 64, GM: 60	2, 4	1000
N	Non-SG			GF: 64, GM: 66		2000

Note

SG: Skipped-generation household, Non-SG: non-skipped-generation household  
GF: Grandfather, GM: Grandmother

Data were mainly collected through interviews with grandparents in the skipped-generation households. A total of eight such households and six normal households (contains 3 households that experienced skipped-generation arrangements) were chosen on the basis of snowball sampling. Descriptions of the interviewees are presented in Table 1.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Is grandparenting a new norm?**

It was found that regardless of the kind of household, the grandparents in Hecun showed a positive attitude toward the idea of providing child care for their grandchildren. Household F (which had grown-up grandchildren) and Households G and N (which had no grandchildren) did not show a positive attitude, but Households J, M, and H did. In the case of Household H, the grandmother was not healthy enough to provide full-time child care for her grandchildren. Because of this, her daughter-in-law worked near the village. However, the grandmother did take care of the grandchildren during the day and sometimes at night.

On the basis of the following statements from various grandparents, it can be confirmed that in Hecun at least, grandparenting is considered a norm. Two grandparents expressed similar ideas in this regard: "It's my child. If I don't take care of him/her, then who will? As a grandparent, this is my obligation" (Grandfather J, Grandmother F). In the grandparents' own words, grandparenting is considered a norm in Hecun. Therefore, for grandparents, this norm is part of their traditional consciousness, but is it really a traditional norm from the past?

It is not easy to confirm this point. People, particularly grandparents, from that era are no longer living. Even if some great-grandparents from the era were to be located, interviewing whether there was a grandparenting norm or not would not necessarily guarantee accurate results because of people's tendency to live according to norms without being conscious of the norms' existence. Therefore, in this study, whether a

certain practice, that is, grandparents' provision of child care for grandchildren, was customary was investigated. Through the investigation, we inferred whether the grandparenting norm existed in the past and was a traditional norm. In particular, we focused on two questions: (1) whether grandparents themselves had been raised by their grandparents and (2) whether grandparents' parents had provided child care or, in other words, whether the grandparents' own children had been raised by the grandparents' parents. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Child care history of grandparents

Grand parent	Age	Whether raised by grandparents				History of child care
		Grandparents		Grandparents' children		
		Yes or no	Reason	Yes or no	Reason	
GM-A	48	No	Death	No	Too many brothers and sisters	Child→grandchild
GM-B	61	No	GF was dead; GM was not willing to provide child care	No	Too many brothers and sisters, and they had to take care of their parents	Brothers→child→grandchildren
GM-C	59	No	Had to work	No	Had to work	Brothers→child→grandchildren
GM-D	66	Yes	Sometimes	Yes	-	Child→grandchildren
GM-F	66	No	Had to work	No	They had to take care of their parents	Child→grandchildren
GM-I	65	Yes	-	Yes	-	Brothers→child→grandchildren
GM-H	60	No	Too many brothers and sisters	No	-	Child→grandchildren
GF-B	63	Yes	Too many brothers and sisters	-	-	Grandchild

In only three cases were grandparents themselves raised by their grandparents: those of Grandmother D, Grandmother I, and Grandfather B. With the exception of Grandmother A, the grandparents' ages ranged from 59 to 66, so we can infer that grandparenting was not a customary practice in this area in 1940s to 1950s.

In only two cases were the grandparents' children raised by their grandparents: those of Grandmothers D and I. The age range of the grandparents' children was 20 to 40, so we can infer that grandparenting was not a customary practice in this area in 1960s to 1990s.

As the table shows, the most common reasons for grandparents not providing child care for their grandchildren were "too many brothers and sisters" (four cases) and grandparents "had to work themselves" (three cases). Other reasons were "death" (two cases), "had to take care of their parents" (two cases), "were still caring for their children" (one case). The 1940s and 1950s witnessed the end of the Chinese Civil War,

and from the 1960s to the 1990s, the era was that of people's communes. Both periods were tumultuous, and family life was greatly affected. Therefore, the continuity of social norms may have been impaired, and it cannot be conjectured whether grandparenting was a norm before 1940s

The sample used for analysis in this study is small, but by limiting itself to this area, this study is able to counter the hypothesis that grandparenting is a traditional norm. It shows that the norm of grandparenting does exist, but it is not a traditional one, or at least not one that can be confirmed as traditional "from the 1940s to the 1990s. Therefore, a new hypothesis can be put forward that the grandparenting norm was re-formed in the later 1990s In accordance with this norm, not only do grandparents provide child care for their grandchildren but parents also provide support for grandparents; this is a kind of intergenerational exchange. The following statement from a grandmother is indicative of this:

Grandmother B: If you don't babysit the child, they (the parents) won't care for you when you get old. Not only my son but also my grandson think of me all the time, and it is the same with my daughter-in-law. I take care of her child and treat her [my daughter-in-law] well, and she treats me well in turn.

#### 4.2 Division of roles in a family strategy

It appears that grandparents do not passively agree to provide child care for their grandchildren in accordance with a social norm. Rather, they consider it as a kind of division of roles in a family strategy that pursues the maximization the economic benefits for the family:

Grandmother J: There is so little farmland that regardless of whether I till it or my son does, the harvest and income remain the same. If he goes out to earn, our earnings will increase and our economic condition will improve.

Grandmother B: I want them to go where they can earn more money. They can earn a lot outside the village. At home, they must support their families and raise their children. So, it is all right that we endure hardships at home; they make

money outside.

In Hecun, everyone receives 0.9 mu (about 600 m<sup>2</sup>) farmland per capita, so the area allotted to individual households is limited. With mechanization, the elderly can work on farms without assistance from their children. Therefore, regardless of whether grandparents or parents work on the farm, the income remains the same. Under these conditions, seeking employment in cities is an appealing option for families. Therefore, to maximize the family income, parents choose to work in cities. According to Grandmother B, parents should go where they can earn more money, and it appears that in several households (A, B, C, D), father and mother work separately.

As the following statements show, the purpose of the aforementioned family strategy is not only to improve families' economic status and standard of living but also to enhance their economic strength, increase their educational capital, and raise their social status.

Grandmother C: The purpose of earning money is to let children go to school. Too many things require money. We bear hardships in order to provide our family's children with a good education and thus enable them to lead better lives.

Grandmother D: My family is poor, so to let the family's children go to school, we grandparents bear hardships. Our daughter-in-law went to the city too... The oldest grandchild is in his fourth year in university. He can earn 3600 yuan in one month from internships. All we did was for the children; [we wanted] to enable them go to university.

The prospect of receiving compensation for enduring hardships, such as support from the grandchildren's parents and the success of grandchildren, can make grandparents' attitudes toward the family strategy more positive, and they can become more willing to provide child care.

#### 4.3 Formation of a child care lifestyle

In focusing on grandparents' experience of child care, we found that some of them began to take part in child care during their own childhood. They began by taking care of their younger brothers or sisters, and after that, they raised their own children.

When their children began to start families of their own, the grandparents began to take care of their grandchildren.

Grandmother B started to participate in child care at the age of seven. She married at 20 and had four children. The eldest son was 14 years older than the youngest son. She had her first grandchild when her youngest son was four, and she started to raise the son and grandchild at the same time. After that, she started raising her second son's three grandchildren. In sum, Grandmother B was continuously involved in child care throughout her life.

Grandmother A also had some experience with child care in her childhood. After her last daughter left the village, she “did nothing but [play] mah-jongg all day long” for half a year. When her granddaughter was about a year old, she asked her daughter-in-law to go to work and began to raise the granddaughter. At the time of conducting this study, although Grandmother A had been raising the granddaughter for half a year, she and Grandfather A still sometimes erroneously called the child by their last daughter's name. During the fieldwork, Mother and Father A came back home for a week and took the child to see other relatives for some time. Grandmother A reported that without the granddaughter, she had “no idea what to do.”

Grandparents in Hecun tend to lead a very lonely life after their children leave the village. However, this can change with the arrival of grandchildren; in Grandmother F's words, “the house becomes full of joy,” and grandparents' lives become fulfilled. Thus, at least in rural China, caring for grandchildren brings grandparents' fulfillment and happiness, provides emotional support, and alleviates loneliness. As a result, those without grandchildren are “envious” of those who raise grandchildren.

In rural areas, where facilities for leisure are few, child care essentially becomes a kind of lifestyle for those who have cared for children for a long time. This lifestyle can also be seen as the result of the grandparenting norm and of the family strategy discussed in 4.2. If this lifestyle were to be promoted as the ideal one for the elderly, it would strengthen the norm and make more families choose this strategy.

## **5. Discussion**

Three reasons were found for why grandparents became amenable to providing full-time child care for grandchildren. The first is that a new grandparenting norm has been formed. The second is that grandparenting is part of a family strategy. The third is that some grandmothers have developed a child care lifestyle. The grandparenting norm is a social factor; the family strategy, a family factor; and the child care lifestyle, a personal factor.

For the reasons, grandparents show a positive attitude toward the notion of grandparenting. Grandmother A, for instance, was so enthusiastic that she persuaded her daughter-in-law to go to work and began to raise her grandchild on her own initiative. This positive attitude toward grandparenting is a prominent influence in parents' decision to leave their children at home to go to work in cities. Among the three factors, the child care lifestyle factor was confirmed by only some of the grandparents. Additionally, while not every grandparent was conscious of the family strategy factor, the common factor we found was the grandparenting norm factor.

If our hypothesis that the grandparenting norm existed in the period from the 1940s to the 1980s and was re-formed in the 1990s is correct, then this norm was internalized during the grandparents' middle age and old age. The interviewees were not raised by their grandparents; yet, they internalized the grandparenting norm without question in such a short time. Why? Because grandparenting is considered a traditional norm, it is possible that this norm is an extension of some older, related norm.

A traditional norm called "raising a child for old age (养儿防老)" exists. This refers to the so-called "feedback model" of intergenerational relationships, according to which the parent generation raises children, and the child generation takes care of the parent generation when the members of the former becomes old. Some scholars call this a "rear-care" relationship (Wang, 2008). Grandparenting is combined with the provision of elder care by the parent generation, so we can infer that the grandparenting norm is an extension of this rear-care relationship. Specifically, the responsibilities of the parent generation extend from rearing children to rearing grandchildren as well.

This unilateral extension of obligation means that traditional intergenerational relationships collapse. In traditional society, the parent generation owned land and

livestock, so parents had much power in intergenerational relationships. However, in the people's commune era, private ownership of land was abolished and parents lost their upper hand. Nevertheless, intergenerational relationships still remain balanced, because the rights of elders who are unable to work are protected by China's collectivist system. They could fulfill their material needs, and collectivism promoted filial piety (He, 2008).

With the advent of reform and liberalization in the 1990s, the collectivist system was abolished. Because of the progress of industrialization, for farmers, employment opportunities outside of agriculture increased, and non-agricultural income became greater than agricultural income. Members of the parent generation worked in cities as migrant laborers, and they earned more money than members of the grandparent generation, who remained in villages. The change in economic status changed the power structure of intergenerational relationships. In addition, the grandparent generation was no longer protected by the government, so the future lives of its members became mired in uncertainty. Intergenerational relationships needed to be strengthened, and the existing rear-care relationship was no longer enough for this. As a result, the obligation of the grandparent generation extended to include the provision of child care for grandchildren. The new grandparenting norm is a manifestation of the change in intergenerational relationships. In this sense, the increase in skipped-generation households is due to the change in intergenerational relationships.

We have indicated that the grandparenting norm existed from the 1940s to the 1980s and was re-formed in the 1990s, as a manifestation of the changes in intergeneration relationships. However, we have not yet discussed the mechanism of this re-formation. I propose only a hypothesis because of the limitations of my data. The parent generation's crisis of being unable to raise children was caused by industrialization, urbanization, and the urban-rural dual social structure. To respond to this crisis, families implemented a strategy in which parents became responsible for production and grandparents, for reproduction. Currently, as this family strategy adopted by more and more families, grandparenting has become conventional. People, at least in the community studied in this research, believe that everyone participates

in this convention and so choose to practice it as well. Refusal to babysit grandchildren without valid reasons such as poor health is seen as a deviation from the norm and unworthy of respect; consequently, this increases future risks for the elderly.

Finally, I would like to discuss the limitations of this study. Changes in intergenerational relationships have been investigated by other studies, including studies in 11 provinces of China, covering the southern, central, and northern areas (He, 2008). Therefore, the findings of this study are confirmed by those of studies of inland rural areas. However, further investigation is required in coastal rural areas. In Hecun, grandparents raise their sons' children, but in coastal rural areas, grandparents tend to raise their daughters' children (Ochiai et al., 2004). Therefore, in future studies, factors such as regional culture and the degree of economic development in the community being studied should be analyzed.

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