

“Invisible” grandparents of transnational families

Experiences of Chinese elderly caregivers in Canada and policy considerations

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Outline

- Introduction
 - Research context and focus
- Methods
 - Research participants, data collection, etc.
- Results
 - **Invisibility** on transnational, familial and social levels
- Discussion



Background

- China has become the **premier source country** of Canadian immigration since the 1990s (Statistics Canada, 2008);
 - During the period 2001-2006, 155,105 immigrants from China (excluding HK and Macau) landed in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006)
- They are often referred to as “**highly-educated** immigrants” or “**skilled** workers”;
- The recent influx of mainland-Chinese **seniors** as a byproduct of skilled immigration
 - Most have worked as housework helpers or, even, as primary caregivers

Research context

- Transnational families;
 - Technological advances and transnational family tie;
 - (Exchange of) care and transnational families
- The relationship between Chinese immigration and transnational caregiving
 - The geographic distance did not prevent Australian immigrants of diverse cultural backgrounds (including Chinese) from fulfilling their **care-giving responsibilities for their aged parents** in the homeland (Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding, 2007);
 - A lack of **childcare** resources within Chinese immigrant families led to two types of transnational care-giving relationships there: sending young children back to grandparents in China, and inviting grandparents to Australia (Da, 2003)

Research focus

- Knowledge gaps;
 - Invisibility of Chinese seniors (vs. their skilled immigrant children);
 - Relationship between skilled immigration and transnational caregiving
- The larger research project;
 - Care, aging and globalization: Transnational caregiving experiences of Chinese seniors in Canada (funded by SSHRC)
- The focus of this paper:
 - How their daily struggles and contributions relating to childcare have become invisible in the larger society?
 - The role of care in transforming the family in the context of the neoliberal globalization that has shaped the dynamics of both human migration and the state's care provision

Methods

- Eligibility of research participants:
 - Grandparents who had come from **mainland China** and who had experience of working as caregivers for their grandchildren in Canada
- Data collection (2007-2010):
 - Individual, face-to-face, semi-structured, and in-depth interviews;
 - Interviewed in Mandarin, 1.5-2 hrs/interview;
 - Recruited from three cities (Toronto, Hamilton, Windsor) in Ontario
- Data analysis:
 - The audiotaped interviews were transcribed verbatim in Chinese;
 - Using NVivo, a software program for qualitative study;
 - Pseudonyms are used

36 grandparents: Who are they?

■ Gender:

- 31 were women and five were men

■ Age:

- ranged from 54 to 77, with an average of 64 yrs (excluding one unknown)

■ Immigration status:

- 7 “permanent residents (PR)”
- 2 gained Canadian citizenship
- 27 came with a visitor visa
 - 12 had already applied for PR

■ Current household size:

- 2-6 persons, with an average of 4.5 persons per household

■ Housing:

- 5 (including 2 Canadian citizens) were living in publicly-funded senior homes;
- 12 shared rental apartments with their children and grandchildren ;
- 19 were living in their children’s self-owned houses or apartments

■ Travel between China and Canada:

- 26 had traveled more than once for caregiving by the time of interview

Results: “invisible” grandparents

- Grandparents as “foreign visitors” in Canada;
- Grandparents as unpaid caregivers;
- Grandparents as “outsiders” in their children’s homes and in Canadian society



Transnational mobility of grandparents

- **Need for transnational childcare;**
 - Skilled immigrants' extra efforts to secure their current jobs or to prepare for their future professional career;
 - The selection of "suitable" caregivers from extended families
- **Visa;**
 - Application process was stressful and full of uncertainties;
 - The time limit & multiple travels;
 - Visa renewal rejection?
 - a) inviting the parents of the other spouse to come; b) finding paid childcare that is affordable, of good quality and with flexible hours; or, c) sending the child back to China
- **Long international travel:**
 - Travels within China, unfamiliarity with international circumstances, and language barriers

Narratives

“People in the line-up [for visa application] also chatted about this. ...We all wondered why it is that difficult to get a visa. We’ve spent so much time, energy and money, but we could still get rejected in the end, and then we cannot see our child and grandchild [in Canada]. ...Our children are Canadian citizens now, and our grandchildren are Canadian-born. **We are their families, but we may not be allowed to go to see them and to care for them when they need us.** ... [The visa office] asked us for things like a bank statement and home ownership certificate; are they worried that we will stay in Canada [illegally] because China is relatively poor and we are poor? **But they don’t understand our love for our children; what we care about is not living in Canada, but our children.**”

(Interview with Mrs. Yan)

Narratives

"I felt like Canada does not welcome us as grandparents. First, we can only get a six-month visa at best; after that, it all depends on renewal. Second, it seemed that we couldn't even say that we were coming to look after our grandchild [for fear of visa rejection]. ...**When I passed through customs in Vancouver, the officer asked me about the purpose of my visit. I said I came for sight-seeing. I didn't dare to say I came to care for my grandchild. In China, caring for a grandchild is a glorious thing, but I had to hide my pride and happiness there. I don't understand it, and I felt hurt.**"

(Interview with Mrs. He)

Chinese seniors' unpaid care work

- Care works;
 - Post-natal care: *zuo yuezi* (“sitting out a month”);
 - Childcare and various kinds of house work;
 - Feeling concerned about sending grandchildren to day care
 - Contribution to their children’s finance;
 - E.g., fly back to China right away if they got a major illness
- Understanding their own contribution:
 - “Family obligation” – learned from their own parents;
 - Importance of grandparenting: holistic attention & cultural continuum
 - “Physically tiresome but spiritually rewarded”;
 - Save time for their children to catch up

Narratives

“Why do we have to work so hard here? ... **My understanding is that my daughter could work less if I worked more. ...** I want her to live a better life, right? So if I take good care of these two grandchildren, then my daughter will have peace of mind and can concentrate on her work. **And then they will have a better life in the future.** What do we live for? Don't we live for our families and our own future generations? There is nothing we can bring with us when we die, right? But if I know my children are living a good life, I will die with **happiness.**”

(Interview with Mrs. Zhao)

Narratives

“Caring for our children and grandchildren is a non-waivable duty for parents. If one does not do this, it’s like a regret in one’s life. ... In China, we have a word called *gedaiqing* (**intergenerational love**): that is, parents pass their love on to their grandchildren as a way to love their own children. ... This is a Chinese tradition. I also learned this from my parents; they helped me care for my two children; and I was brought up by my grandmother. ...**I would like to contribute to our children’s and grandchildren’s life, and this makes me very happy.** It's like I feel very proud, satisfied and happy. ...I guess this is what a family means.”

(Interview with Mr. Lu)

Isolation outside and in their children's families

- Challenges in their daily lives:
 - The language barrier and reduced confidence;
 - Being alienated from the social networks back home;
 - Challenges to interact with the mainstream society and other Chinese seniors;
 - Other challenges: e.g., crowded living conditions, in-law conflicts, and lack of communication with children
- Changing relationship with children:
 - “Three nots”: **not a master** (because they cannot make decisions for families here), **not a guest** (because they have to do housework and childcare), and **not a servant** (because they are not paid)
 - Perceived impossibility to carry on the Chinese traditional norm of “family obligations” that emphasizes **reciprocal** responsibilities

Narratives

“I feel like I became nobody when I came here. I cook and care for the child every day... I feel greatly lost: in China I at least felt like an intellectual, an educated woman. But here I am just a complete housewife. Now I am an illiterate, deaf and blind; I cannot do anything here! I cannot do things without the help of my daughter or son-in-law. ...So now I have this low self-esteem. ...I accept that now I am old and out of date. I accept that this is who I am now. ”

(Interview with Mrs. Zhang)

Narratives

“Caring for grandchildren is very tiring, from morning to night. But they [the immigrant couple] always come home very late, and carry on with their work, like reading and studying, after that. I really wish they could be off work at 7pm, but this is just wishful thinking. ... So perhaps they are too tired to talk with us. Sometimes they talk to each other about things, and I find it difficult to join in. ... **It’s like they are talking about their own world, and I am just a stranger.**”

(Interview with Mrs. Han)

Discussion

- Despite being key members of their transnational families, Chinese seniors' official status is that of "visitor to Canada";
 - ...motivated by both their traditional obligations and by their children's need for childcare
- Grandparents' transnational caregiving had both cultural and pragmatic meanings;
 - ...vs. commodified care and "global care chain" (Yeates, 2009)
- Transnational caregiving created multiple levels of isolation for grandparents who crossed the border
 - e.g., separation, loss due to the fragmentation of family life, alienation, and naturalization

Conclusive remarks

- ... transnational care as a **family-based strategy** to respond to inadequate public care provision has played **an increasing role** in providing them with various supports that they would otherwise be unable to access;
- ... the **conflicts** between Chinese grandparents' increasing transnational mobility in this globalized era and their invisibility at familial, social and institutional levels;
 - the inequality and self-exploitation experienced by these grandparents and families
- ... transnational caregiving can also be complicated by **the host country's public policy** that has shaped immigrant families' need for child care, the mobility of caregivers and care-receivers, and the sustainability of such practices
 - The intersection of policy sectors and transnational effects of national policy

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 - <http://www.jupiterimages.com/Image/royaltyFree/71418192>
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