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Grandparents or free nannies? Grandparenting and intergenerational dynamics in rural-to-urban migrant families in China

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This briefing focuses on childcare practices in three-generation rural-to-urban migrant families in China, where grandparents play pivotal roles. It highlights migrant grandparents' significant yet often overlooked contribution to childcare and the compounding challenges they face as they provide childcare while adapting to urban life. The analysis shows the complex intergenerational dynamics that emerge when two generations are involved in arranging and negotiating childcare, and how intergenerational cooperation is strained by families' limited access to urban public services and social welfare.



Centre for Research on Families and Relationships

Research Briefing Number 102

Key Points

- In rural-to-urban migrant families (RUM families) in China, grandparents' support often extends from hands-on childcare to financial support. This is particularly important for parents from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.
- Intergenerational cooperation in childcare is a family strategy to cope with the high costs of raising children, underlining the central role of intergenerational relations in RUM families.
- On the one hand, grandparents and parents form strong connections and cooperate closely to fulfil childcare needs; on the other hand, intergenerational care can lead to tensions in family relationships.
- Gender dynamics in grandparenting in RUM families are significantly shaped by the urban labour market; compared to grandmothers, grandfathers encounter more challenges in the urban labour market, which leads some grandfathers either to share more childcare responsibilities or to remain in their rural hometowns.
- Family members' limited access to education, healthcare, and pension security creates significant challenges for childcare provision in RUM families.

Background

China is one of the most expensive places in the world to raise a child, according to the think tank Yuwa Institute (Liang et al., 2024). Public childcare services are both limited and underdeveloped. The high cost of childrearing and a lack of affordable and reliable childcare services have made childcare very challenging for many Chinese parents. As a result, grandparents' financial and practical help has become an indispensable source of support in many families, especially for rural-to-urban migrant families. This shift in childcare practices has been especially profound for the rising number of rural families moving to urban areas without a local urban hukou (household registration). The hukou system is a household registration mechanism that regulates internal migration and links a person's social welfare entitlements to their registered place of residence (Chan, 2019). The system affects more than 29 million rural-to-urban migrants (RUMs) each year (NHFPC, 2018) because of the significant rural-urban divide in access to public resources and social welfare. Consequently, RUMs without a local urban hukou have limited access to urban public services and welfare benefits, including educational opportunities, creating significant barriers to raising children in cities. For decades, millions of rural migrants have had little choice but to leave their children in their rural hometowns to be cared for by grandparents, contributing to the widely discussed phenomenon of 'left-behind children'.

Yet, the past two decades have seen a rapidly growing number of children from rural areas migrating with their parents to cities (NBSC et al., 2021). There were 64 million rural-to-urban migrant children in 2020 (NBSC et al., 2021), suggesting significant changes in childcare practices in RUM families. Consequently, in many families, there is evidence of grandparents migrating to cities to fill gaps in childcare provision (NHFPC, 2018; Qi, 2018). This has remained overlooked and underexamined. Very few studies on

grandparenting in China take an intergenerational perspective, and much less attention has been paid to RUM families compared to urban middle-class families.

The Study

This research looks at migrant grandparents' childcare experiences and how childcare responsibilities are arranged and negotiated when three generations are involved in RUM families. It also examines how social policies regarding rural migrants' social welfare affect intergenerational cooperation in childcare.

To gain perspectives from grandparents and parents in RUM families, the study used separate semi-structured interviews with each generation. Additionally, interviews were conducted with social workers from two Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) who had been involved in providing education and childcare support for RUM families.

The fieldwork was conducted in Guangzhou and Dongguan, Guangdong province, from February to June 2023. Both cities are popular migration destinations with many job opportunities in the manufacturing industry.

Participants were recruited through personal networks and in partnership with an NGO that provides childcare and education support for RUM families. The final sample included 21 grandparents, 27 parents, and 4 social workers. The average ages of grandparents and parents were 61 and 34.5 years old, respectively. Twenty-four of the 32 families in the study had more than one child. All grandparents and 22 parents belonged to socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Five parents transferred their rural hukou to urban ones and were in middle-income occupations.

Findings

Grandparents' support in childcare giving

Grandparents' migration histories and labour market participation significantly affect their capacity to provide childcare. Based on the intensity of grandparents' childcare provision and their participation in the labour market, the research identified three roles that migrant grandparents can play in childcare provision:

1. full-time care providers
2. migrant workers and part-time caregivers
3. substitute breadwinners.

Eleven out of 21 grandparents looked after pre-school children without undertaking paid work outside the home. The intense childcare labour was often accompanied by housework for their three-generation households, which had a negative influence on grandparents' wellbeing. Very limited social networks in cities and unfamiliarity with the urban environment made it especially stressful for newly migrated grandparents.

Eight grandparents were migrant workers and childcare providers, whose support extended beyond hands-on childcare to financial contributions. Many also undertook paid work in addition to caregiving due to the higher costs of living in cities and the financial pressure associated with childcare. To reconcile these dual responsibilities, grandparents usually chose jobs that allowed greater time flexibility, such as street cleaning and part-time domestic work, even if the pay was lower. Providing childcare support reduced some grandparents' income.

In two families, the mother assumed primary responsibility for caring for young children at home, while grandparents devoted their time and energy to increasing family income to compensate for the loss of the mother's earnings. The grandmothers in both families were skilled tailors in factories with long migration histories and earned more than the mothers. Although less common, this suggests that grandparents' income in cities is an important factor affecting parents' decisions about childcare and labour market participation.

Gender dynamics in grandparenting

Gendered ideologies about childcare remain prevalent among grandparents in the study. However, migration and the urban labour market add new complexities and reshape traditional divisions of care and work among grandparents.

Many grandparents assume that women are naturally better childcare providers. As a result, grandmothers are often the primary caregivers, while many grandfathers contribute mainly through financial support, such as paying rent and covering other living expenses, rather than providing hands-on childcare.

However, in some families, the gendered division of childcare has undergone changes in response to the urban labour market and migration costs. Many grandfathers with low education levels or limited occupational skills face considerable disadvantages in the urban labour market. By contrast, grandmothers often have more opportunities in sectors such as clothing manufacturing and domestic services.

Consequently, when the grandmother earns a higher income, the grandfather becomes the primary caregiver, challenging dominant gendered divisions of childcare and work. This suggests that employment opportunities for grandmothers and grandfathers intersect with gender in shaping grandparenting practices and create new gender dynamics in care-work arrangements.

Furthermore, the higher costs of living in cities also lead to the separation of grandparents, with some grandfathers remaining in rural hometowns to reduce spending while grandmothers migrate to cities to provide childcare. This gendered care-labour migration pattern shows that childcare provision also creates new dynamics in grandparents' migration trajectories.

Intergenerational cooperation and tensions

Grandparents and parents cooperate closely and contribute differently to children's physical needs, emotional needs, and education. Many parents in this study believe

that grandparents sometimes spoil children and lack the knowledge needed to guide their education appropriately. As a result, parents often exercise more authority in childcare and take charge of children's education and overall development.

Grandparents' roles are therefore largely confined to physical care, such as feeding and dressing children. This arrangement illustrates intergenerational power imbalances in childcare provision.

Although connections between grandparents and parents are strengthened through childcare cooperation, disagreements and tensions often arise due to differences in childcare styles, financial pressure, and reduced personal freedom resulting from cohabitation.

To reduce conflict and sustain cooperation in childcare, both generations use a range of strategies. Positive strategies include actions that improve intergenerational intimacy, such as buying gifts or showing empathy for each other's pressures. Negative strategies include living separately or establishing stronger boundaries, such as reducing conversations.

These dynamics show that intergenerational cooperation in childcare is an ambivalent process, characterised by both solidarity and tension.

Both generations acknowledge that grandparents' childcare provision creates expectations of future reciprocal eldercare. However, practical concerns remain, especially when grandparents return to rural hometowns while parents continue living in cities.

Statement

This briefing draws on the findings from Yingzi Shen's PhD thesis: Shen, Y. (2025) Caring through intergenerational support: Childcare practices in rural-to-urban migrant families in China. PhD thesis, University of Sheffield. [oai:theses.whiterose.ac.uk:37624](https://oai.theses.whiterose.ac.uk:37624).

Policy Implications

- Childcare support is most needed in RUM families before children reach school age. Thus, more affordable childcare services, such as public nurseries, could significantly reduce the pressure from both migrant grandparents and parents.
- The threshold of school enrolment for migrant children is the biggest concern for many RUM families. Therefore, reducing barriers of school admission and providing migrant children more places at public schools are pivotal for childcare in RUM families.
- Grandparents' health and pension lay the foundation of their capacity to provide childcare. The government should increase rural people's basic pension and reduce the costs of healthcare outside of their hukou administrative region.
- Migrant grandparents face considerable disadvantages in the urban labour

market due to discrimination based on their age and hukou status. The local authority should introduce policies to reduce discrimination against older RUMs and improve their employability in the urban labour market.

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