

**Between State, Market and Family: Changing childcare policies in urban
China and the implications for working mothers.**

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Abstract

The participation of women in Chinese society over past decades has been shaped by the shifting relationships between state, market and society as these have impacted on public and private spheres of life. The paper looks at these relations from the point of view of the development of childcare policies for pre-school children by considering three main phases in the development of childcare policies in China. It then turns in more detail to the coping strategies available to working parents in contemporary times. It considers this in relation to new intersectionalities of gender, generation and income. Finally the paper looks forward to new policies to better enable the balance of work and care in the future.

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Introduction

The reconciliation of paid work and child care is an issue that confronts parents in all modern industrialized societies. However, the choices they make and

the strategies they adopt are shaped by cultural expectations of gender, childhood and family life. They are also shaped by the social policies which determine the provision of childcare facilities. In China, the move from a collectivized planned economy towards a market economic system has reconfigured the management of childcare. Family and gendered cultural values pervade these changes and the example of pre-school childcare enables us to see the interrelation of public policy and private lives, of cultural and structural interactions and helps to explain limitations of the liberation of women in contemporary China. China is a particularly relevant country in which to consider these changes because there has been a bold and systematic attempt to shape gender equality at a public level. Great transformations in family relationships in the private sphere have also taken place, but traditional attitudes about women's responsibility for childcare continue to inhibit women's equal participation in society and new intersections of gender, generation and income have emerged. This paper aims to make a contribution to the understanding of women's position in Chinese society through the analysis of changes in pre-school childcare provision and situating this within the wider perspective of gender relations. Managing work and care for mothers in urban China represents a critical pressure point in gender and generational relations.

The paper considers first of all how debates about gender and social policy apply to a Chinese context. It then considers the development of public childcare policies in terms of three stages – the planned economy period, the shift to marketization through to the increasing intervention of social policies in the present period. Urban women with children below the age of seven (before entry into full time elementary school) are the focus of this paper because these are the people affected most acutely by such changes. We then turn to the parallel changes in gendered and family relations. Finally, we address the strategies used by urban women to manage these pressures before looking at future considerations.

Shifting relations between state, market and family

Despite the vast literature on stratification and marketization in China and the fact that many have noted the negative impact on women's position, a critical assessment of the role of gender and family in these developments is still needed (Ji et al., 2017). Gendered values are important for shaping society as they are embodied in the public sphere in terms of state policies and the labour market on the one hand but also in the private cultures of family life, on the other. The Chinese government has tried to shape these relationships in various ways over time and yet the aim of creating a "harmonious family and

harmonious society” cannot be realised without also addressing gender issues (He and Jiang 2008: 4). In order to understand these developments we need to look at childcare practices as well as childcare policies. As Nee and Opper (2012) argue, it is through the activities and initiatives of daily life that institutional changes take place rather than just by grand designs of the state. It is therefore necessary to take account of not only policies by the Chinese government but also the everyday practices of parents managing work and care because it is at this level that gender relations are shaped (Abbott, Nativel and Wallace 2013).

The structure of social welfare has been envisaged as an equilateral triangle with three dimensions: state, market and family (Evers 1988). The relative importance of each of these dimensions have shifted over time and as one or the other becomes more important the relative roles of the others might change. For this reason, the triangle is never really equilateral as originally envisaged, especially in China. As we shall show, the family as the “residual” dimension comes more or less into prominence over time in China too. We mean residual here to refer to the fact that the family tends to compensate for changes introduced in the state sectors and private markets that may have inadvertent consequences for society.

In using feminist critiques of gender relations developed in the West, we need to bear in mind the wider historical and social developments in Chinese society that make it different from a Western context. Not only are there different cultural traditions with respect to childhood and gender but also because gender relations have been explicitly included as an element of social and industrial policies to enact transformative change (Ji et al., 2017). However, this is what makes the persistence of gender inequalities especially interesting and in need of explanation.

In this paper we take forward an understanding of the relationship between public policies and private familial relations by showing how they interrelate and change over time in China. Building on debates about gender and social policy, we see structural aspects of gender relations as embodied in social and labour market policies (Lewis 1992), whilst the cultural norms and assumptions held by people regarding gender, shape the gender arrangements in the family (Pfau-Effinger 2004). However, these gender dimensions may not necessarily comfortably fit with one another. Norms and values often change faster than public policies (Inglehart, Norris 2003) or vice versa, so that there can be clash or accommodation between the two. At times the public policies included gendered ideologies explicitly laying down the conditions for women's liberation through paid employment and at other times by default, for example

when they assume that the market will provide for childcare and the family (with its gendered and generational division of labour) will compensate.

These assumptions can have inadvertent consequences for the practices of private life.

These intersections apply to China in particular ways. The border between public and private sphere is described as “thin” in Chinese society because of the history of the attempt to collectivise both of them (Ji et al., 2017). Chinese feminists have reacted in online articles to these changes: “To some extent, over the last thirty years, China has undergone an incomplete reversal from the public gender system to the private gender system. As a result, women have been attacked by patriarchy both in the public and the private sphere” (see website: Pengpai, 2016). Chinese feminists have also engaged with Western feminist debates by arguing that in China public and private patriarchy are not shaped by capitalism, as Walby (1989) suggested in her theorisation of patriarchy as a universal institution, but rather by the patriarchal power of state-led institutional forces. These institutional forces nevertheless embody gendered norms about women’s position.

The developments in child care policy can be mapped roughly into three phases based upon a reading of Chinese policy documents cited in this article.

Private cultures of the family follow a different, yet parallel path of

development that we shall address later. The first phase takes us from the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 through to the late 1970s. The main characteristic of this phase is that the state dominated both public and private spheres. The second phase covers the period from the 1980s until the early years of the twenty first century when marketization started to take off. During this period with economic reforms and changes in the role of enterprises and the organisation of employment, there was partial state withdrawal from both public and private spheres. The third phase stretches from roughly 2010 to the present and is characterised by the state using institutional arrangements to shape gender relations. Apart from the beginning of the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the periodisation is roughly - rather than precisely - characterised because changes were gradual rather than sharply defined and were regionally differentiated.

The focus is on urban childcare policies because rural areas in China reflect more traditional childcare arrangements built around the household and extended family (Honig, Hershatter 1988). It is in urban areas that the clash between tradition and modernisation and between public and private gendered relationship takes its most pronounced form.

The Public Sphere: The development of child care policies in China

The first phase of child care provision in China: 1949 to early 1980s

Since the establishment of the PRC in 1949, women's full time labour force participation was seen as critical to the building of a new society resulting in the highest numbers of working women in the world at that time (Croll 1983). One of the most radical aspects of the New China was the liberation of women through the transformation of gender roles (Stacey 1983, Honig, Hershtatter 1988). The old traditions of forced and arranged marriage within which women were subjugated was abolished in favour of the right to full and equal participation in the labour market and public life as well as women's own right to choose marriage partners and to divorce them (Stacey 1983). This radical revision of public and private patriarchy was embedded in the 1954 Constitution and the one that followed in 1982, giving women full and equal rights, including full rights in the labour market. Indeed, China was one of the first countries in 1980 to ratify the United Nations Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (Attané, 2012).

In order to compliment this project, state childcare was provided for children from earliest childhood until their entry into the full-time education system at age seven. This childcare system was decentralised with some services provided by the Ministry of Education, some by the places of employment (including productive enterprises, public institutions and government offices) and some by neighbourhood committees (Du, Dong 2010). One of the main

tools for reshaping public and private patriarchy in the early years of the PRC was through the *Dan Wei* system of work units that also provided childcare, housing and tried to socialise domestic work (Ji et al., 2017), even providing breast-feeding rooms in in the workplace (Liu, Zhang et al., 2010). As Du and Dong (2013) point out, the disadvantage of this system is that it was in practice uneven in its consequences and the extent of childcare provision depended upon in which region and in which kind of enterprise a person was situated. There were also important variations between urban and rural areas – in the latter the absence of large-scale facilities but the presence of extended family enabled children to be cared for more easily at home.

A series of reforms in the 1950s aimed to extend childcare provision. In 1952 the dual task of kindergartens were defined as: “(1) enhancing the sound development of physical and mental health of early childhood before entering elementary school; and (2) reducing the burden of working-mothers, so there is time to participate in activities of political life, productive labor, cultural and educational activities ” (Shi 1999) (1) (2) reflecting the traditional emphasis on the importance of education in Chinese society but also a non- traditional emphasis on liberating women for participation in the public sphere.

This was intended as a universal policy to maximize women’s participation in society through full time employment. Hence, the founding and provision of

public childcare was mainly focused on the work unit for the benefit of those who worked there as an element of industrial policy. This provision still involved some co-financing from parents - up to about 40 per cent (Zhou 2007) - but poorer families would pay no or reduced charges and there was encouragement to set up kindergartens in the workers residential units in order to complement the provision at the work unit (Shi 1999).

Hence during this period there was a bold attempt to forge new and more equal gender relationships for everyone. Whilst the employment of women was seen as enabling the maximum efficiency of the economy by expanding the workforce, it was also ideologically driven in line with Marxist ideas for the liberation of women through paid employment (Engels 1884, 1902). However, the relative lack of attention to the gendered division of labour in the private sphere with the tacit assumption that women would continue to bear the main share of reproductive and domestic labour, means that the transformation was only partial (Ji et al., 2017).

The second phase of childcare provision in China: from the mid-1980s

The reform of pre-school educational followed the opening of the economic system from 1978 onwards, but accelerating after 1985. During this period, we see a shift from state to market as the government began to reduce the direct investment in early childhood education. In order to reduce the financial burden on state-owned enterprises and public institutions, most kindergartens were leased or sold and provision of childhood education was no longer obligatory. Childcare and childhood education became more marketised and more diversified. Hence responsibility for childhood education was pushed towards the private sector for which the family was responsible. This was reflected in the announcement in 1985 of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China that *Decision on Reform of the Education System* should encourage not only enterprises but also social organizations and individuals to engage in running schools (3).

Since the 1990s, the role of the market in childhood education has gradually increased and private kindergartens have overtaken public ones in the provision of children's education. In 1992, The 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China declared that the target of China's economic restructuring was to establish a socialist market economic system (4) and reform of state-owned enterprises and public institutions followed. By this time only a few public

kindergartens were left and most workers could no longer expect privileges such as childcare to be provided by their work units. The goal of gradually promoting non-governmental kindergartens was suggested in Government documents from 1997 onwards (5) and in 2003 the State Council in the *Guidance on the Reform and Development of Early Childhood Education* (6) asserted that the whole pre-school education system should be undertaken outside the state system. In these documents the Government encouraged “social forces” to participate in providing childcare. Although the idea of “social forces” referred vaguely to wider society, it implicitly rested on the family as a residual element.

Consequently, it is possible to trace the steep rise of private kindergartens during this period. Whilst at the end of 1991 private kindergartens had represented 7.35 per cent of the total, this had increased to 39.84 percent in 2001 (Cai, 2003) and by 2010 they accounted for 68 per cent of all kindergartens (7).

At the same time, the introduction of the one-child policy in 1980 meant that the number of children per family dropped. This coincided with the increasing desirability for places in education as more children continued into higher

levels. Therefore, childcare became more demanding because parents were keen to optimally equip their offspring for entry into this intensely competitive system. Rapid modernization and urbanization occurred as young people moved to cities away from extended family resulting in a particularly stark set of requirements for parents in managing early childcare.

During this phase we can see that in supporting the private sector and the role of “social forces” a particular set of gendered relations were developed by default. The introduction of neo-liberal ideologies meant less willingness on the part of the government to reshape gender roles resulting in the growth of gender inequalities as women’s labour is taken for granted in the reproduction of the family. In the words of Ji et al. (2017) “Research has provided strong evidence of a revival of patriarchal tradition and its alliance with neo-liberal ideologies emphasizing personal choices and responsibilities.” (ibid:.)

The third phase of childcare provision in China: 2010 to the present

The third phase of development has seen new forms of public policy emerge. The implementation of China’s Twelfth Five Year Plan in 2011 recognized a stronger role for the state in managing pre-school childcare at the same time as increasing differentiation within market provision. In pursuit of this, the

Chinese state endeavored to establish a basic system of public services including the education of pre-school children (8) (9) (10) (11). A series of documents signaled the shift in responsibility for pre-school education from family and society back towards government, but mainly through outlining a general framework for policy rather than direct provision (Wang 2015). This kind of public policy however, did not attract sufficient funds for full universal provision and instead worked with the mixed economy of services through public and private sectors alongside informal and family care.

Pre-school childcare falls between several budgetary stools being covered by the education services, local government, health services and some provision directly through the Government Agency. The result that it is seen as a low priority in the different sectors and suffers from lack of public funding. For public kindergartens, like other basic education, local government is primarily responsible for funding, with money drawn from the education budget.

However, pre-school education is not seen as a required area of educational expenditure (Liu 2009). In fact, pre-school education accounted for only 1.2 to 1.3 percent of the total financial investment in education, which stands at only about one third of the level found in other industrialised countries (Chen,2013) (12). On the one hand, it has lost the sources of industrial

funding that it had enjoyed in the earlier days of the planned economy, but on the other hand it has not fully been recognised for investment as education in the present day (Liu 2009).

The very limited financing for public pre-school education has mostly been directed at cities. Private kindergartens, along with almost all nursery provision, are funded by fees from parents themselves. The high costs of private childcare facilities for parents puts them out of reach of many or represents a substantial part of the family budget (Zhang, Chen, 2011). These financial pressures affect the way in which families balance work and care in contemporary China.

Nevertheless, the Government intends to expand pre-school education in the future. According to *National Plan Outline for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010– 2020)* (13) the aim is to expand this "wide coverage" of public kindergartens and to extend basic pre-school education to all children below above age three by 2020. Gross enrolment of those in pre-school education should rise to 75 per cent for a three year period and 95 per cent for a one year period. During this phase the responsibility for

pre-school childcare has seen a move towards a more pedagogical approach to pre-school care. The importance of a mixed economy of preschool childcare provision is recognised by the Government requiring all provinces to make plans to expand existing provision in 2017 as part of the *Third Period of the Pre-School Education Plan* (14). The responsibility for doing this falls upon local government, but the uneven development across Chinese provinces means that some of them, especially those in the less developed west of the country, are very constrained in what they can offer. For example, an officer in Gansu Province Education Department claimed that the local government could not afford this provision and in some places kindergartens cannot open due to lack of funds and facilities (15).

Therefore, the shifts in the welfare mix from state-centred (mainly industrial) policy towards privatisation and then later a mixed economy which puts an onus on local authorities to provide pre-school childcare, still leaves many gaps in provision. These gaps particularly affect poorer families who cannot afford to pay privately for these services. It also affects the residual role of the family in filling these gaps with implications for gender cultures.

In 2016 the new “two-child” policy was introduced, allowing families to have up to two children. Thus, working women are now confronted even more critically with the issue of balancing their work and family care in the urban areas of China, which may lead to negative effects on women's employment and career development (Chen 2014). In order to understand why this is the case we need to understand the particular configurations of family cultures and the role of gender relations in China and it is to this that we now turn.

The private sphere: continuity and change in family cultures

Although we have called it a “residual category” since it has not, for the most part, been subject to legislation *per se* but rather left to fill the gaps in public policy, the family has been important for the continuity of everyday social life. Whilst new family values have arisen, they evolve from older ones that we also need to take into account. The attempts to eradicate patriarchal relations during the foundation of the “New China” after 1949, did not eradicate private patriarchy as it was still assumed that women would take primary responsibility for childcare and domestic tasks. In some ways the traditional family became cemented into the new social system and started to take on a new significance with the evolution of changes in the economic system

towards a market society (Honig, Hershatter 1988). Ji et al. (2017) call this the continuity of the “socialism-and-Confucian-patriarchy hybrid” gender model.

The traditional family in China was a multi-generational unit held together by a notion of “filial piety” (Chen Liu et al. 2011, Stacey 1983). This required younger generations to respect and care for older family members and to subordinate their needs to those of their elders. This was reinforced through patrilocal marriage arrangements which made the role of daughter-in-law moving to the husband’s family the most subordinated one. These traditions were continued to some extent even into the 1990s when modern urban living had started to change gender and generational relations in important ways (Stockman, 2000). Nevertheless, the resilience of the domestic family provided a basis of continuity and security during the many upheavals of the last 60 years.

However, the private patriarchy of the traditional family faced various challenges in the transformation of Chinese life since 1949 and this has meant that it too has evolved. The movement of young people to the towns, their rising educational levels and their growing economic autonomy served to

challenge traditional assumptions. These trends towards increasing cultural and social individualisation (Abbott, Wallace et al. 2016) were further exacerbated by the one-child policy – all attention was focused upon fewer children within the family.

With the growing older population in China, women might need to take care of not only their children, but also parents, and their burdens have increased in terms of time, energy, and financial needs. However, grandparents play a crucial role in childcare and domestic work. The limitations of pension provision indeed means that many grandparents live with their children and generational relations are still seen as a form of social security for both young and old. The preference for paternal grandparents to live with the young father's family reflects traditional values of patrilocality but adds to tensions with daughters-in-law; educated and working women are no longer quite so prepared to accept their subordination (Logan, Bian 1999, Stockman 2000). Furthermore, both sets of grand-parents are involved in providing for and helping the young couple, although young mothers might feel closer to their own mothers than to those of their husband's.

The Chinese transition to a planned economy and the rapid social change that accompanied it after 1949 has resulted in stark generational differences.

Whilst grandparents are less likely to be educated, more likely to have spent their lives in rural areas and hold “traditional” views of childrearing, a very different younger generation has emerged with the rise of a new middle class (Nee 1996). The younger generation of parents often challenge these assumptions, leading to disputes about childcare. These tensions are greater between mothers-in-law and their daughters-in-law than between mothers and daughters because fathers’ parents traditionally saw themselves in a privileged position, especially if there is a son. However, nowadays the relative position of the new mother in the family depends upon other wider family circumstances – such as whether the paternal or maternal grandparents donated the house in which they live and whether she earns sufficient income to make her own decisions. Hence, value change brought on by modernisation more generally is reshaping attitudes to gender (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). However, these impacts are generationally specific. Shu and Zhu’s (2012) analysis of waves of the World Values Survey suggest that whilst some views about gender equality, including the expectation that women should work in the labour market were shared by all generations of Chinese,

others saw younger cohorts being more liberal in their attitudes (Shu, Zhu 2012).

The shrinking number of children per family combined with the importance of familial continuity mean that both sets of grandparents are focused on children. Whilst in the past there was a special focus on male children, these traditional views are changing and daughters now too enjoy a privileged position that they did not hold previously. Hence, one (perhaps inadvertent) effect of demographic policy is to elevate the position of young women in the family.

Nevertheless, the pressures of private patriarchy undermine some of the progress made in public policy and the liberation of women in the New China. Women are under intense pressure to marry and have children before they become “left over” (Hong Fincher, 2016). Women continue to be seen as the primary carers even at the same time as being full time workers. However, their position in the labour market is lower than that of men, there is a large gender wage gap and women face prejudice as inferior workers (Attane 2012). Although able to participate in public life, they are also less likely to be found in significant political offices. With labour market restructuring over the last

three decades, women are more likely to become unemployed and their labour force participation has dropped from 84.3 per cent in 1990 to 60.8 per cent in 2010 (compared with 95.7 per cent and 81.1 percent for men respectively) (*ibid*). Under these pressures it is no surprise that women drop out of the labour force to care for children full time and one in five women are dependent on another family member compared with just one in twenty men, implying that gendered familial relations still determine the situation of women (*ibid*).

Yet there is evidence that egalitarian values have penetrated the Chinese family pervasively. A study carried out in the 1990s suggested that the division of domestic labour in Chinese families was far more equal (between men and women) than it was in Japan, UK or the USA, although women were still mainly responsible for domestic chores (Stockman, Bonney et al. 1995). This was reflected also in attitudes towards gender and work. The study also found that the burden of domestic work for younger women is mitigated by grandparents, many of whom were co-resident. Therefore, private cultures of the family had been to some extent transformed alongside public policies at least by this period. This suggests that theories of patriarchy developed in the West fail to take sufficient account of generational relations when considering

China and elsewhere. However, Ji et al. (2017) suggest that gender relations are becoming more unequal in the recent period due to a resurgence of traditional patriarchal attitudes as a result of neo-liberal ideology, which favours market forces over state intervention.

In order to understand the situation more clearly through the lens of pre-school childcare, we now turn in more detail to the provision of childcare resources in contemporary China and how parents' decisions and strategies are shaped by them.

How do parents manage work and care in contemporary China?

State policies tend to be set as high-level goals rather than concrete policies meaning that they are implemented in different ways in different regions and the different administrative bodies. Therefore, to understand their impact, we need to look at what is actually available to parents on the ground and how they manage their childcare strategies.

There are currently three types of childhood education in China: nurseries, kindergartens and pre-primary school following 98 days of paid maternity leave.

However, most parents are not willing to let children below the age of three attend nurseries and this is especially the case for those below the age of two. Therefore, the percentage of children who enrolled in regular education programs for children before the age of three in urban areas is usually less than 20 per cent (Zhou 2007).

What happens to the remainder? A high percentage of children stay at home until age three. This is where informal services become important as the majority of Chinese children are usually cared by grandparents, relatives or a hired nanny. However, grandparents are not always available for these roles if they are too old, too frail or if they live far away in the countryside. They may also have more than one grandchild claiming their attention. As already pointed out, the involvement of grandparents is important but comes at a cost in the form of the balance of power in the family. It can foster tensions between different generations within Chinese families who can hold very different views on child rearing.

Under these conditions, nanny care is another way to help young couples to relieve the childcare burden. However, there are a lot of problems with this as well (Xinran 2003). Nannies are often women with young children of their

own or women who are unemployed and seeking to earn some extra money. Some nannies are employed by an agency called *Jia Zheng Gong Si* but this does not necessarily mean that the nanny has formal training either and the quality of the nanny depends upon the fees parents are prepared to pay. Other nannies are hired in the informal economy so there is no standardized or regulated provision of care. Even this is a cost that some families cannot afford.

Many middle class urban families do not trust the nannies to provide high enough quality care. These women are usually less educated and come from the countryside where more “traditional” child care practices are prevalent. Online forums report various alarming scandals associated with these practices including kidnapping, administration of sedatives and so on (Xinran 2003). As a result, working mothers are always under stress during this period, which detracts from their work commitment. Hence, mothers are tempted to quit their job for few years to take care of their children as is shown in the falling labor force participation rates of women.

Since childcare has to be purchased from market by the family themselves, the inevitable result is that only high earners can afford high quality services.

Therefore, family care is a common choice, with women - including the older

generation of family members – taking on most of it (Liu, B., Zhang et al. 2010).

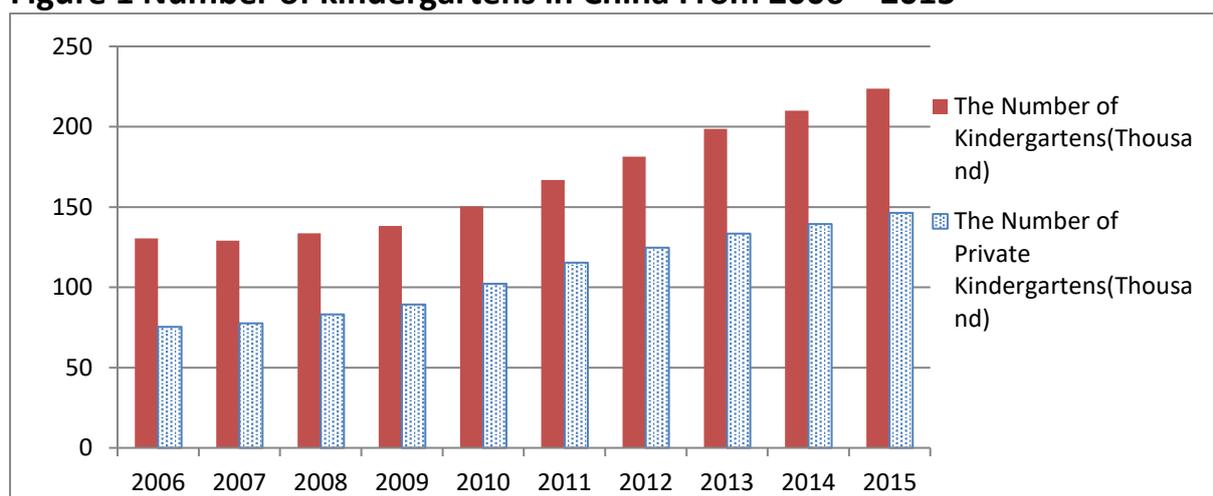
The family tensions that might arise from this include conflicts over the best ways to raise children. Older people might favour more traditional methods which prefer children to be quiet, obedient and rule-bound – indeed this is even seen as a complimentary way of describing children in China. By contrast, more modern methods of child-rearing allow more freedom, expressiveness and autonomy to children. Furthermore, the intense pressure on children to perform well educationally alongside the long hours worked by their parents, means that they spend long days locked into supplementary educational and other provision.

Although many nurseries and kindergartens have been leased or sold, there are still some kindergartens run by Government Agencies. These receive financial support from the government and are regarded as having high teaching quality. Most importantly, they have a good reputation for providing security in terms of food and other aspects of the environment. Therefore, they are very attractive for young parents. However, they can only enrol a small number of children and are seldom open to those who do not belong to respective work unit or school district.

Since public kindergartens can only provide limited space for children, they have developed a system of drawing lots to decide who can attend. This has led to the phenomenon of queuing known as *Yao Hao*. However, in order to qualify for *Yao Hao* in the first place, parents may need to buy a house in the relevant district, where prices reflect the desirability of different kindergartens.

The limited availability of places in public kindergartens has led to the development of private kindergartens to fill the gap. This is illustrated in Figure 1 which shows the steady increase in the number of kindergartens and the steady increase of private kindergartens at the same time.

Figure 1 Number of kindergartens in China From 2006 – 2015



Source: "National Education Development Statistical Bulletin "(2006-2010)
 "National Education Development Statistical Bulletin "(2011-2015)

In urban areas, with more than 90 percent of children are enrolled in pre-school programs (Zhou 2007), most were found in private kindergartens (16) (17)– However, this rapid and often unregulated expansion came at a price. Lack of supervision and security issues have become a topic of concern in recent years, especially for the cheaper establishments. The ratio of supervisors to children can be up to one to thirty and food provided can be poor or inadequate in some places. Since the quality of care depends upon how much parents can pay, there is increasing variability in provision with those on low incomes having to resort to no or poor quality services whilst those who can afford it get better services (Zhang, Chen 2011). In this way the stratification system is reflected in child care provision and in the long run reproduces inequalities.

Furthermore, for parents whose children are in any kind of non-family care, there are problems with getting them there and back. The opening times of public kindergarten is usually from 08:00 am to 16:50 pm and children should

be collected by 17:30 pm in most cases. However, the work units in some cities might start at 08:30 am and end at 17.30 or even later as overtime is common. Very long hours of work and overtime are normal in contemporary urban China and parents do not necessarily work in locations close to the kindergartens. Therefore, parents also have to pay for someone to bring their child to the kindergarten and collect them again. These kind of services can be provided by informal nannies or by grandparents or other relatives. Especially in the holiday periods, parents have to turn to these additional sources of help.

Recent government circulars from 2019 have attempted to redress some of these problems with plans to incorporate the support of kindergartens into public services along with their regulation as part of the urban redevelopment of shanty towns and renovation of older urban areas. In terms of labour market policy they have proclaimed

“ We think that family is the warmest environment for the growth of infants and young children...Our government encourages employers to flexibly arrange working hours, support the return of parents to employment and provide employment advice and training.” (18)

This set of assumptions in public policy aiming to support work-life balance addresses some of the problems of urban childcare but leaves patriarchal assumptions about gender roles unchallenged.

To sum up: the withdrawal of public collectivised childcare has been replaced by a combination of family care, private provision (at a high price) and various informal arrangements including the use of nannies or unregistered childminders. These vary between children aged 0-3 where informal arrangements are more common and those aged 3-6 when more formal public and private facilities become available. As elsewhere, families find strategies to manage these different resources depending upon their income, their location and their residential circumstances (Abbott, Nativel et al. 2013). Hence the shift from public to private provision and then towards a mixed economy of welfare is reflected in the realignment of gender roles in public and private spheres. However, it leaves childcare as a mainly family responsibility with the unchallenged assumption that women will have the main responsibility (maybe with help from the older generation if they are fortunate), thus detracting from their roles in public life.

Conclusions

The paper has described the changes in childcare policy and how it has affected women in urban China in the shifts between state, market and family. The early stages of egalitarian liberation under the planned economy system was replaced by gradual marketisation and the partial withdrawal of the state through to the more recent expanded role of the state in childcare policy. Finally, we have a mixed provision of childcare split between formal (public and private) and informal systems of nannies, relatives and family care. These transformations over time have resulted in new intersectionalities of gender, generation and income. Whilst the early policies aimed to universally liberate women from domestic exploitation, they failed to entirely challenge the culture that women were mainly responsible for domestic and reproductive work. Generational relations need to be built into this picture as the relationship between parents, children and grandparents form a critical part of the childcare strategies and represent the reinforcement of traditional cultures of the family. The period of marketisation helped to reinforce the role of family as well as bringing inequalities based on income leading to a much more stratified system of childcare and social reproduction.

In this complex picture, what are the future directions for Chinese childcare policies? A number of possibilities can be identified.

First, the provision of public, high quality childcare available for all children would help to alleviate the pressures on women's labour market participation and family budgets as well as ensuring the best possible start in life for children. This kind of service is provided by Government Agency kindergartens, but they are few and far between. The Government aims to provide preschool education for all children for at least one year by 2020. In order to do this the government will need to increase investment and to define a reasonable proportion of educational funding for pre-school education, since at the moment the demand is substantially higher than the supply of places (Zeng 2006) . More basic kindergartens are needed and these should be of a standard to satisfy the requirements of parents and provide basic services to the public. This will not only help reduce the pressure on families, especially women in families, but also help to avoid the problem of unequal opportunities.

Second, the Government is starting to recognise the role of fathers, which might be a way of addressing the issues of private patriarchy. According to

Population and Family Planning Regulations issued by local governments (18)

statutory paternity leave is already being provided in 29 provinces and cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Henan, and Guizhou Provinces among others) for a period of between 7 days and one month, with 15 days being standard.

There is substantial evidence to support the involvement of fathers for family relationships and benefitting the cognitive development of children (Hobson 2002). However, it is not clear how much take up there is of these schemes given the work pressures Chinese families find themselves under.

Third, the Chinese Government recognises that it needs to strengthen the role of local communities in providing childcare for the under threes by providing diverse services at the residential level. Although in recent years there have been some official calls to address this (see *Outline of Child Development 2001-2010* (20) and *Outline of Child Development 2011-2020*) (21) calling for more and more comprehensive development of early childhood education, specific policy measures have not been proposed. As one author stated “from the perspective of helping women to balance work and childcare better and improving the development of women, the government cannot ignore the demand for public pre-school for parents where both are working and cannot find suitable ways of looking after children” (He and Jiang 2008:6). Therefore

there is an urgent need to work out a combination of policies to improve the care system for children under three.

Fourth, it is necessary to better regulate the private kindergartens and nurseries. Private kindergartens are still the important supplement of childcare but they are profit-oriented and it is difficult for local governments to monitor their quality. Therefore the Government needs to strengthen the standardization and supervision of the existing early childhood education market. In this way they can more effectively protect the health and safety of children. In addition, there is discussion about more direct Government procurement of pre-school education services as well as encouraging more successful work units to establish kindergartens once again (Wang, Wang 2011). This regulation should be extended to the regulation of informal care providers such as “nannies”.

These reforms suggest that at least some of the problems of childcare are recognised by the Chinese Government. By taking such measures into account, the promise of women’s emancipation suggested in the establishment of and early years of the PRC could be realised in such a way

that the position of women in public and private life is addressed without compromising the welfare of young children.

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