

Gender and intergenerational support in East Asian families

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Abstract

This review essay summarizes recent research on the topics of gender inequalities, family obligations, and intergenerational support in East Asian societies. In particular, we introduce four papers featured in a special published in 2021 and 2022 in this journal. We conclude by highlighting the continual importance of intergenerational support and family obligations in East Asian societies. We foresee that families and gender relations in East Asian societies will continue to evolve with characteristics of both modern gender egalitarian values and traditional family responsibilities. We call for more research on the topics and recommend that future research should investigate the intersection of gender and other other dimensions of social inequality, employ advanced research methods, and examine the impacts of recent policies on gender and family life.

Introduction

In East Asian societies such as China, Japan, and South Korea, gender relations and families have been undergoing transformations following rapid economic development over the last three decades. Nowadays more women than men receive higher education (OECD 2021). Public attitudes and norms generally support that woman should and can participate in labor market work (Lee 2017). These factors should have contributed to the development of a modern form of gender egalitarian families. Based on recent research, however, gender and family scholars have suggested that traditional family obligations and gender expectations such as intergenerational ties and support and differential responsibilities of women and men in the family, continue

to prevail (Raymo et al. 2015, Ji and Wu 2018, Xu, Li, and Yu 2014).

The continuation of traditional family obligations and gender expectations in East Asian societies is consistent with the Confucian ideology which emphasizes patriarchal structures as well as gender and generation based hierarchical orders in the family (Sung and Pascall 2014). It is also due to the relatively low public spending on family benefits (Gauthier 2016), and hence East Asian societies rely on women to provide free care and domestic labor to family members. For example, the gross domestic product percentage contributed to family benefits was only 1.103 in South Korea and 1.585 in Japan, compared with 3.242 in Norway, 2.880 in France, and 3.233 in the UK in 2017 (OECD 2022a).

Furthermore, a rapidly aging population poses policy challenges in East Asia. In China, people aged 65 and over grew from 5.6% to 12.0% of the population from 1990 to 2020 and the old age dependency ratio (the number of people older than 65 years per 100 people of working-age (20-64)) grew from 10.2 to 18.5 from 1990 to 2020. The figure is estimated to reach 58.8 in 2075 (OECD 2022c). In Japan, the old age dependency ratio surged from 19.3 to 52.0 from 1990 to 2020. The corresponding figures for South Korea were 8.9 and 23.6 (OECD 2022c). It is a common practice for married children to coreside with their elderly parents in East Asian societies. Even when adult children live separately from their parents, they often maintain close ties with their parents. As women are considered as the primary care givers of the family, all the aforementioned factors may affect fertility outcomes and create barriers to women's participation and achievements in the labor market (Tan 2022, Zhou and Kan 2019).

The female labor force participation has been rising in East Asian countries

except China. For example, the labor force participation rate for women aged 15 to 64 rose from 54% in 1985 to 71% in 2018 in Japan. The figures were 45% and 59% respectively in South Korea (OECD 2022b). China has a distinctive socialist historical background among the East Asian countries. The transformations in gender relations and families in China have followed some distinctive paths. Since the economic reform in the 1980s in China, the state has retracted its role in enforcing equal gender roles and hence there has been a resurgence of gender essentialist ideologies and practices in the family and at the workplace (Ji and Wu 2018). Unlike other East Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea, the labor force participation rate of women has been declining from 72% in the 1990s to 62% in the 2020 (Ji and Wu 2018). The relatively high level of women's labor force participation in the 1990s was mainly due to the state political propaganda on equal gender roles and the extensive institutional child care offered to the general public in urban areas (Ji and Wu 2018). The marketization of many public services since the economic reform is an important factor for many women, especially those who have a young child to care for, to withdraw from the labor market (Ji and Wu 2018). In the post economic reform period in the 2010s, families in China are characterized by a mixture of modernity and traditions (Xu, Li, and Yu 2014).

Time use research has shown that the closing of gender gaps in paid work and unpaid domestic work has been extremely slow or even stalled in East Asian societies (He 2018, Kan and He 2018, Kan et al. 2022). The persistence in gender inequalities in the division of labor can exacerbate the already ageing population and a low fertility rate in East Asian societies (Kan, Hertog, and Kolpashnikova 2019, Kan and Hertog 2017). As the family is a primary unit of socialization, the gendered housework pattern of the parents will pass onto their young children (Hu 2018). Gendered values and behaviors cultivated at a young age may partly account for gender segregation in school

subjects and in occupations, which is a key factor for the persistence in the gender pay gap (He and Zhou 2018). Furthermore, the gendered division of labor has implications for health and well-being. Using data of a Korean survey, Hyun and Kan (2022) illustrate that women's labor market participation has positive impacts on their self-reported health. Studies based on data of China also find that labor market earnings are positively associated with women's level of happiness and family satisfaction (Chen 2018, Kan and He 2018, Kan 2021). Nevertheless, women's happiness will decrease when they earn more than their husbands, indicating that traditional gender expectations are still commonly held (Chen 2018). Incidentally, people with traditional gender attitudes report a lower level of well-being than those with gender egalitarian ones (Zhang and Liu 2022).

Against the social backgrounds discussed above, we have proposed a special issue of papers focusing on multigenerational families and gender inequalities in East Asian families. Multigenerational families play an important role in supporting and caring for family members in East Asia (Kan and Kolpashnikova 2021a). In China, Japan, and South Korea, adult children are the first source of help when their elderly parents need care (Ren and Treiman 2015). In recent years, a higher proportion of grandchildren are cared for by grandparents because the parents of those grandchildren are most likely the grandparents' only child, given the generation was born under the Chinese "one-child" policy. As the title of the article on *Atlantic* states, "*In China, it's the grandparents who 'Lean in'*" (Young 2013). As a result, young couples, especially mothers, can pursue their careers (Chang 2015). Recent research in Japan has also suggested that married working age women's domestic work and paid work time, but not married men's, depend on whether they reside with older parents and whether old relatives have caring needs (Hertog and Kan 2021).

The current issue

The current special issue contains four papers which address timely issues of gender and families in China, Hong Kong, and Japan.

The first two papers aim to investigate how coresidence with older parents may affect the time use of married couples in China and Hong Kong respectively. In the first paper, Zhou, Kan, and He (2021) analyze data from the 2008 Chinese Time Use Survey to examine how housework time and paid work time of married couples vary when they do not live with their elderly parents, live with relatively young parents (under age 75), and live with relatively old parents (age 75 and over). The classification of living arrangements aims to reflect those who receive caring support from their parents and those who provide caring support to their parents. They find that compared to married children who do not live with their parents, those who live with relatively young parents spend less time on housework, while those who live with relatively old parents spend more time on housework and less time on paid work. As expected, women's time use is more strongly and significantly associated with the intergenerational coresidence arrangements compared to men's time use. While previous work on intergenerational families has largely focused on childcare provided by grandparents, this paper highlights the importance of differentiating between intergenerational families that provide downloads or upward support between generations. Furthermore, it reveals the usefulness of time use data in documenting the time cost of childcare and adult care.

Apart from seeking support from elderly parents, many families in urban China and Hong Kong hire migrant workers to help with domestic work and care. In mainland China, for example, it is common for rural migrant women to work as nannies for urban middle class couples (Su, Ni, and Ji 2018). In Hong Kong, women domestic helpers

from Southeast Asian countries including those from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand play a key role in providing outsourcing domestic work to families. In 1995, 13% of households with married couples and children hired a domestic helper; the figure rose to 30% in 2016 (Legislative Council 2017). In the second paper, Chen and Zhou (2022) seek to answer the questions: If the burden of housework is outsourced, will grandparents and household helpers provide a similar type of assistance? Will the patterns of changes in the adult children's time use be similar? Using data from the 2011 Hong Kong Panel Study of Social Dynamics, Chen and Zhou (2022) found that having living-in grandparents and hiring a household domestic helper are associated with a similar level of reduction in time spent on domestic work for married women and married men. Nevertheless, the gender difference in time spent on paid work and domestic work is smaller for couples who hired a household helper than for those who live with their elderly parents. Their research reveals the interesting interactions between outsourcing domestic work, gendered expectations, and the domestic division of labor.

In Japan, many families enlist the help of grandparents to care for young children (Tsuya and Bumpass 2004). In 2017, about half of new parents received grandparental assistance with (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2017). Japan is also one of the societies suffering from the persistently low birth rate. The highest total fertility rate since 2000 has been 1.45. Against this background, in the third paper of this special issue, Yoda (2021) investigates if living with elderly parents has a positive effect on the number of children born to a married couple. Previous research found that living with older parents would ease domestic burdens from married couples in Japan (Hertog and Kan 2021). Furthermore, a more equal domestic division of labor between husband and wife is associated with women's

stronger fertility intention in Japan, China, Korea and Taiwan (Kan and Hertog 2017, Kan, Hertog, and Kolpashnikova 2019). However, earlier research were often based on cross-sectional data and suffered from sample selection biases and endogeneity of variables in the analysis. Yoda (2021) overcomes these problems by employing propensity score matching analysis on the 2010 and the 2015 waves of data from the Japanese National Fertility Surveys. By matching couples who coreside with elderly parents with those who do not, Yoda (2021) finds no clear evidence of a positive relationship between living with the husband's parents and the number of children born to a couple. However, coresidence with elderly parents will accelerate the timing of the first births, but not the subsequent births. Yoda further argues that family programs designed to stimulate fertility by promoting multigenerational households may not be as effective as planned.

The final paper of this special issue addresses an important gender equality issue concerning marriage in urban China: Who owns the house within the marriage? Changes in the economic structure will inevitably lead to changes in gender relations within the family. With the commercialization of the housing market in urban China since 1988, home ownership is an important source of wealth. Home ownership has become a major asset within the marriage that husbands and wives may bargain for their share. Meanwhile, the patrilineal and patriarchal traditions in China emphasize that marital housing should be provided by the husband's natal family. The traditional cultural thoughts property provision and the opportunities opened up in the modern housing market create conflicting desires for house ownership for men and women. Therefore, home ownership has become a new avenue for gender display (Zheng 2020). In the fourth paper, Jia and Cheng (2021) examine whether the ownership of the family home, as measured by the name in the deed, is divided equally between the wife and

the husband. They found that women with greater economic power tend to hold the home jointly with their husbands. However, for those who have less economic power, the home is more likely to be solely owned by the husband. Women are also more likely to have their share of home ownership if the property was purchased or built after the marriage. Interesting regional differences are found: women's home ownership is more common in economically more developed areas, suggesting that gender-based norms and practices vary with the economic environment of a society.

Conclusion and recommendations for future research

The papers in this special issue have reiterated the continual importance of intergenerational support and family obligations in East Asian families. The first two papers have demonstrated that living with relatively young and healthy elderly parents can relieve the domestic burdens and increase the gender equality level in terms of time use of married couples in China and Hong Kong. The third paper has shown that in Japan living with elderly parents will shorten the time between marriage and the birth of the first child of a couple, although it will not alter the numbers of children the couple will eventually have. We should note that, however, traditional gendered expectations and family responsibilities still underpin the intergenerational exchange in support and care. For example, women's time spent on paid work and unpaid domestic work varies to a greater extent with the elderly parents' residential arrangement than men's, indicating that women are still the primary care providers in the family.

With more women gaining decision making power in the family through education and labor market income (Xu, Li, and Yu 2014), we foresee that families and gender relations in East Asian societies will continue to evolve, with characteristics of modern gender egalitarian values and practices as well as traditional extended family

ties, responsibilities, and intergenerational support. The lack of public services in care provision such as childcare, elderly care, and health care implies that extended family members, especially adult children and their parents, will continue to be the main source of mutual help. Gender norms and domestic division of labor will continue to change and may settle at different levels of egalitarianism (Kan and Kolpashnikova 2021b). Amid rapid social change and economic transformation, the young generations may hold diverse gender ideologies. In a recent study, Koo, Hui and Ngai (2020) have found that about half young people in the post economic reform period in China hold gender essentialist but conflicting gender values: they believe that women should undertake labor market work but should also be the primary care provider of the family; some hold gender egalitarian values and the rest hold a neutral stance about gender roles.

Future research should investigate how gender values and family practices continue to evolve in East Asian societies. Gender and family practices may vary across social identities and cultural and economic contexts, such as class, education, migration status, economic development of a region, and urban and rural environments (Zhou, Wu, and He 2017, Ji and Wu 2018, Zhao and Hannum 2019). More research is needed to understand the intersection of gender and other dimensions of social inequality. With more high-quality survey data made available for researchers, future research should employ advanced research methods to unpack the family dynamics in everyday life and over the life course. Last but not least, we call for more research to assess the impacts of latest policies on family life and gender relations, such as the relaxation of the one-child policy, the introduction of an extended maternity leave policy, and the government propaganda on the Chinese traditional family values and culture in China.

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