

Esther Goh. *China's One-Child Policy and Multiple Caregiving: Raising Little Suns in Xiamen*. New York: Routledge. 2011.

The idea that “family members across the generations all have resources to influence each other from a culturally embedded, relational context” (p. 73) undergirds the bidirectional reframing of childrearing in contemporary China, developed by *China's One-Child Policy and Multiple Caregiving*. Bookended by a carefully developed introduction and focused conclusion, the five intermediary chapters provide a well-organized analysis of China's “4-2-1” (four grandparents, two parents, and one only child) formulation of parenting that will be of interest to scholars and practitioners in the fields of sociology, anthropology, psychology, and cross-cultural studies. The multiple methods employed—an extensive background survey, in-depth ethnographic interviews, and participant observation—are a tribute to the thoroughness of the study, particularly as noted in the foreword and endorsement sections. Central to this volume is the innovative notion, appearing in both China and Western research, of the parent-single child bond as a mutually influencing one of asymmetrical power in which children are neither passive recipients nor spoiled “little emperors” but agentic, “lone tacticians,” holding varying, contextually dependent degrees of negotiating ability with their caregivers (parents and grandparents). A key contribution of the work is its development of a bidirectional framework for critically evaluating childrearing which is nuanced to the cultural context of contemporary China.

In addition to outlining all of the chapters briefly, the introduction discusses how macro-changes in China have directly and indirectly impacted micro-settings like the family. Utilization of ethnography in Xiamen, a southern Fujian city at the cross-roads of rapid economic shifts, contributes a greater understanding of the ways in which the dynamics of the traditional family and childrearing practices have been transformed by developments like the one-child policy. The chapter lays out three aspects of the reframing on childrearing: treating adult caregivers and children as active agents with mutual influence, including grandparents as an integral component of coalitional parenting, and re-evaluating the stereotype of only children as spoiled and self-centered. While the introduction lays out the intergenerational parenting coalition that contextualizes the bidirectional model of childrearing in China, the concluding chapter summarizes the study's findings, justifies use of a bidirectional, rather than unidirectional, framework of analysis for childrearing, and suggests applications of this analytical model beyond the Chinese context in future research.

Drawing on recent research directions in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and behavioral genetics, chapter two demonstrates the dynamic characteristics of the bidirectional framework for analysis, rather than a static unidirectional model, because this framework reflects the interdependence of the actors (the grandparents, parents, and only children) in childrearing. By looking at the different discourses of power balancing that change both with one's developmental stages and with one's sociopolitical and cultural contexts, the chapter's findings move China studies beyond the indiscriminate use of Western concepts to more effective application of contingent, dynamic models that better fit Chinese childrearing cases. Utilizing multiple methods to access the different facets of family life, the study focuses on urban Xiamen for investigating the micro-dynamics of single children's relationships with their caregivers. The characteristics of agency, here, include autonomy, cognition, and action. Power is both interdependent and asymmetrical between the participants in the dialectical process of childrearing. Within this process, human agents construct meaning out of each other's behavior

such that qualitative change emerges.

Chapter three discusses the contextual elements of urban Xiamen, the dynamics of the “4-2-1” childrearing there, the details of the pre-ethnographic survey, and the demographics of the five families upon which the book’s ethnography is based. With a good response rate, the survey was used to determine the extent of intergenerational parenting in Xiamen. In addition to showing the expectations over parenting between the middle and senior generations, the survey revealed the benefits and challenges for both generations as well. Despite rapid transformations of family in China, many seniors (grandparents) still feel the obligation to care for their grandkids. Parents, though, are not as reciprocal in gratitude to the senior generation. This uneven dynamic suggests grandparents are more dependent than in Western families. However, both parents and grandparents saw childrearing as a joint enterprise in which they all had vested interests, a factor that fits the bidirectional model on parenting advocated by the book.

Grandparents and parents as actors and agents in China’s “4-2-1” childrearing is the focus of the ethnography, elaborated by chapter four. As hinted at in the previous chapter, ambivalence—holding two contradictory emotions at once—is a significant part of the feelings held by the grandparents in all five families interviewed and observed. Despite such similarity, there were differences in both the degree of conflict and in the types of agency experienced at the junior level relationship (between parents and single children). Documentation of these differences is detailed, and the differences depend on a multitude of factors ranging from who the primary parents are (grandparents or parents—or a single parent), to gender and style of parenting, to the level of disagreement among and degree of intervention demonstrated by the generations of caregivers (parents and grandparents). One of the five cases is deliberately set out as an outlier to test the validity of conclusions drawn from data generated by the other families. A migrant family with a lower socioeconomic situation, different social mobility, and constrained opportunities relative to the other four families serves as this corrective outlier. Readers might have appreciated both more direct comparisons and more explicit applications of the aspects of agency (autonomy, cognition, and action) across family sections as a way to further strengthen an already excellent study.

Turning from the behavior and attitudes of the upper generations, the next two chapters concern the only child as active social participants. Chapter five details the role of only children as agents differentially conceptualized, instead of as passive recipients of objective parenting. Making adequate but insufficient comparisons across families, the analysis demonstrates how a child’s strong emotional bond with either parents or grandparents becomes a resource for agency. For several of the children in the study, authority figures (teachers outside the family or fathers inside the family) served as leverage to negotiate with their caregivers, but this resource was only effective as agency when respect or affection was given to these figures by the child or society. Chapter six describes the ways in which the asymmetries in the grandparent-parent-child relationship still provided the children with the power to influence caregivers. However, children, as “lone tacticians,” had the extent of their power and agency constrained by both the cultural context of their relationship with their caregivers and the degree of influence afforded them in their parents’ lives. In short, children acted strategically to get their needs fulfilled by parents and grandparents, but their level of success was contingent on idiosyncratic family dynamics and Chinese cultural context. “Lone tacticians” encapsulates the “position and actions of the child in the intergenerational family system” (p. 99). Only children in China have both a “pleasure” and a “plight” in acting as agents by themselves (without siblings) to negotiate their multigenerational family dynamics. These two sides of the only child’s lives are under-

researched aspects of the existing literature on childrearing and so provide a sound basis for the directions taken in this well-constructed, carefully-designed study. In these final chapters, as well, explicitly distinguishing between and more comprehensively applying the dimensions of agency would have enriched and further nuanced the volume's analysis of ways children utilize resources for agency and become innovative strategists in their journeys to grow and develop. Nevertheless, this suggestion should not detract from the book's overall multiple strengths, the richness of its findings, and the beauty of its comprehensiveness.

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