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'JIYANG': LONG-TERM NONPARENTAL CHILD REARING IN CHINA

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INTRODUCTION

The cultural contexts of childrearing has received great attention in recent years. Many researchers have made efforts in finding out and in verifying the existence of cultural differences in child-care and their consequences (e.g. Barratt *et al.*, 1993; Martini, 1996; Bradley *et al.*, 1996; Franco *et al.*, 1996). However, most research has focused on comparing mother's child-care styles in different cultures, while in many cultures the task of child-care is not expected to be fulfilled by mothers only (Houndoumadi, 1996; Super & Harkness, 1986). For example, in present day China, a large percentage of children under 6 are being farmed out to live under the care of their grandparents or other relatives for an extended period of time. The task of childrearing in present day China is widely considered the responsibility, indeed the privilege, of the extended family, rather than that of the nuclear family, as in Japan or most western industrialized societies. Many Chinese young children spend an extended period of time away from their own parents. This practice, known as 'jiyang' or 'farming out', has been in existence for quite a long time. It seems that the new social conditions in recent decades have resulted in its more frequent presence. From the point of view of current attachment theory, which emphasizes the importance of a child' focused attachment relation with the mother, this practice would seem to cause undesirable effects on children's later development as a consequence of long term separation from their own mothers. At the moment, we are not sure if 'jiyang' has caused any significant problem in child development in the population. Nor do we have any systematic information concerning other aspects of this practice. The inquiry into this phenomenon will deepen our understanding of not only the role of the cultural context in child-care, but also the role of social unit larger than the nuclear family has on child development.

METHOD

71 mothers in their twenties (mean age=27.7 years) from Linze county, Gansu province in northeast China were asked to fill out a Questionnaire designed by the authors, in August, 1997. The mothers' averaged age of marriage was 22.8 years and they had an average of 1.1 children (with a total of 46 boys and 28 girls, the rate of single child family was 95.8%). Most of them are living in nuclear families (67.6%) and have works outside. The Questionnaire included items for demographic data, the

average amount of time each of the child's caretaker spent with the child at daytime before the child was 6 years old, the sleep arrangement of the child at night, and some detailed conditions concerning 'jiyang', including emotional response, length of separation from own parents.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Present situation of child being farmed out

The phenomenon of 'jiyang' is very extensive in northeast China. Our result shows that 43 out of 71 of the mothers (60.6%) had the experience of farming out their children for more than 10 days. The children' s average age when taken to their surrogate caretakers' home was 16.5 months (ranging from 3 to 61 months) while their average age of return to their own parents' home was 33.2 months (ranging from 8 to 72 months), with an average of 16.8 months of separation from own parents. Most of the children were sent to their grandfathers and grandmothers (57.9%) or maternal grandparents (34.2%). Some other children were sent to their maternal aunts (5.3%) or nonrelative dry nurses (2.6%).

The main reason reported for sending their children away was that the parents were 'busy over their work' (67.5%). All kinds of other reasons were also reported, such as 'in order to wean the child' (10%), other reasons such as 'can not find baby sitter', 'father and mother worked and lived at different areas', 'mother's illness', 'had no time' accounted for 12.5% of all reasons.

Before being sent out, the percentage of children who had already been cared by their future surrogate caretakers (at their parents' home) and were familiar with each other was 70.7%, those who had met the future surrogate caretakers for a few times but had not became familiar with each other occupied 24.4%, while those who didn't know their future surrogate caretakers until they were sent out with them accounted for 4.9%.

When the children were to be sent out, 34.1% of them were reported to have shown negative response (cry or show unwillingness), the rest (65.9%) were reported to show no special response.

The parents would take an average of 4 hours (one way) if they went to see their farmed out children, in which 55% of them only took less than 1 hour, 22% of them 1.5-2 hours and 23% of them 3 hours. Most of them (89.5%) lived nearby that they went to see their children by bike or bus, but 10.5% of them had to go by train traveling several hours.

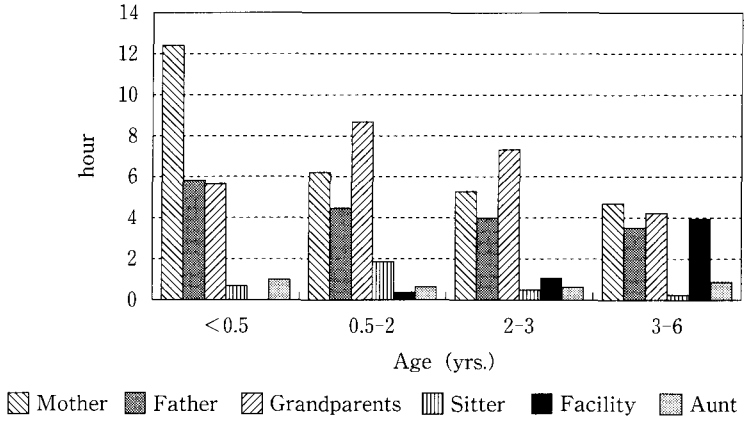
During the time their children were farmed out, 78.9% of the parents kept on contacting with them by going to see them at least once a week. 10.5% of them visited their child once half a month, and 10.5% of them once more than one month.

When the children were brought home from their surrogate caretaker's home, 51.2% of them were reported to appear as 'happy' or 'excited' (44.4%), 27.8% as 'miss grandma and grandpa', 11.1% as 'out of place, inhibited' or 'behaving like a stranger', 5.6% as 'curious to everything in the room' and 5.6% as 'irritable'. The average period of reported reaction lasted 9.3 days (ranging from 1 to 30 days). While 48.8% of the children were reported to show no special response.

The historical and cultural context of farming out children

About the arising of the phenomenon of farming out children in China, we can find the source from it's history and social background. Due to hard economic conditions of China, all the family member had to share work as fully as possible, so it was a traditional social division of labor in Chinese family for the young father and mother to work outside and the aged grandmother and grandfather to take care of children and do housework. This kind of tradition is still prevalent in China, especially in rural area. As figure 1 shows (from this investigation), the average time of the grandparents spent with their grandchildren at daytime was more than 4 hours before children were 6 years old. Especially when children were from 6 months to 3 years old, they spent 7-8 hours at daytime every day with them. Quite a lot of grandparents even slept with the children at night (see figure 2).

Fig. 1 Average time of each caretaker spent with the child at daytime

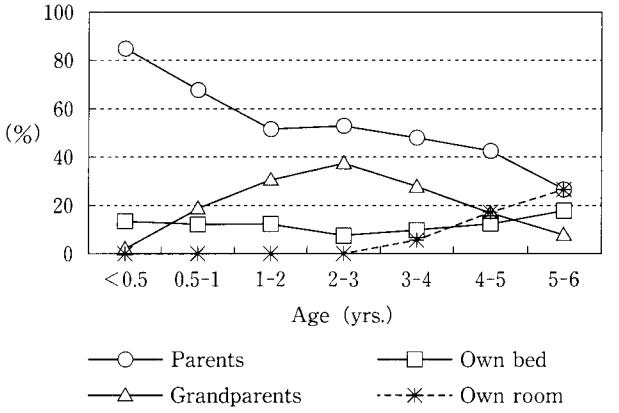


With the development of industry, more and more young men leave the countryside and come to the town or city to set up their families. When their children are born, they still expect their children to be taken care of by their aged grandparents as in previous time.

Based on our investigation, the present average family size is 3.6 person, while it rose to 4.5 when the children were under 1 years old. Even though most of the mothers reported that they were living in nuclear families, with the birth of children, the grandparents (in many cases either the grandmother or grandmother-in-law) would come to live with their children's families to take care of the lying-in woman and the newborn baby for one month or longer (in some cases the pregnant women would go to their parents', the future grandparents' home to deliver). This is a traditional custom of Chinese child-rearing called 'zuoyuezi', which arose from the belief that the lying-in woman was so vulnerable that she was not supposed to take care of the baby and do the housework by herself, on the contrary, she need special care from others.

In fact, after one month of 'zuoyuezi', quite a lot of grandparents remain with their children's families to help with the young mothers caring the babies, especially after the child is half a year old for the mother has to return to work according to the current practice stipulated by the government.

Fig. 2 Percentage of each caretaker spent sleeping with the children



It maybe the best choice for grandparents to come to live and share child-care with the parents. But as a result of all kinds of difficulties, such as lack of space, difficulty of the grandparents' adapting to city life style etc., the two families can not be put together for a long time, which led to children being farmed out and be cared separately by their grandparents or other surrogate caretakers.

It should be noted that the people in the rural area in China have to and can be expected to depend on their children or grandchildren when they become old. This may be one of the most important reasons why they are willing to bear the hardship work of child-care. The strong Chinese sense of family also cause the aged to devote much attention to their own offsprings.

The influence of farming out to children : cultural beliefs about child care

'Do you think there is any influence of farming out on your child?' To this question, 31% of the mothers who had farmed out their children gave positive answers, including 'enrich child's experience' or 'develop child's skills for supporting himself/herself' (5) and 'deepen child's love to grandparents' (3), *etc.* There was also 31% of the mothers who gave negative answers. Most of them pointed out that their children were 'spoiled by their grandparents' and became 'selfish' or 'lacking vigor and drive' (7). Only one mother reported that 'the child suffered bad health resulted from crying too much over being separated from parents'.

Even though the mothers' reports were not totally reliable, it is quite evident that their attitudes and beliefs about mother-child separation are quite different from that of mothers in America, Japan and some other countries, where mother-child bonding is believed to be so exclusively important that efforts were made to verify the effect of even short period of separation, with the belief that even a short separation would somehow exert a negative influence on the child by bringing about all kinds of problems, from psychiatric depression, low performance at school, to unsatisfactory marriage later (Bookcock, 1997, Butterworth & Harris, 1994). It seems that Chinese mothers tend to believe that children have high plasticity and resilience. In their view, the child's response of crying for being separated from the mother is just a transient

phenomenon, he (she) will forget it quickly and establish a new attachment relation with the new caretaker. Moreover, as mentioned above, some of them even believe that it is a good experience for the child to be trained to adapt to other social environment early in life. Owing to this belief, mother-child separation is regarded as an unavoidable and common event in China. In our study we found that 40.8% (29 out of 57) of the mothers simply used the method of 'separating child from mother' to wean, including sending their child to grandmother or mother leaving the child (in the case of extended family) and go back to her own mother's home for 3 to 5 days. As the period of separation for weaning was almost shorter than one week, most of the cases were not included in this analysis.

In fact, some of the mothers (11%) themselves also had the experiences of being farmed out when they were very young. Their recall revealed that the average age of being farmed out was 26.1 months and the age of being taken back was 56.8 months (average farmed out period=30.7 months). Most mothers (85.7%) reported that their experience of being farmed out had no influence on them either physically or psychologically. Others (14.3%) reported in a positive way saying that the opportunity 'strengthened their sense of love to grandparents'. It was possible that the mothers' own early experiences affected their own beliefs and their choice in farming out their children.

Just as it is unimaginable for a Japanese mother to send her child away for a long period of time, one can not easily cast off the cultural bias of the culture one lives. So do the developmental researchers. We have to widen our outlook in order to avoid the limitation of individual culture and to reach a truer conclusion.

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