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“Good Mothers Work”: How Maternal Employment Shapes Women’s Expectation of Work and Family in Contemporary Urban China

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Drawing on 70 in-depth interviews, I investigated how maternal employment shapes urban young Chinese women’s work–family expectation in a context of rapid social change. These interviews indicated that respondents attached strong moral meaning to mothers’ wage work, regarding it as integral to a “good” mother and an “ideal” woman. This moralization of maternal employment, in turn, led contemporary young Chinese women to view wage work as a taken-for-granted choice. Yet different from their own mothers, these young women were confronted with profound transformation across various domains of the postreform Chinese society. The normative expectation of women’s wage work, coupled with slow-to-change expectations about women’s roles at home and in a changing labor market, intensified young women’s burden of “doing it all.” This research highlights the importance of bringing the macro-level context back into the mother–daughter dyad to understand the intergenerational transmission of gender beliefs and behavior.

The nexus between women’s paid work and motherhood has long enthralled gender and family scholars. Extensive research has examined how women navigate the competing demands of work and family (e.g., Blair-Loy, 2003; Gerson, 1986; Hays, 1996; Hochschild, 1989; Stone, 2007). Scholars are interested in how motherhood affects women’s earnings and continued employment (e.g., Benard & Correll, 2010; Budig & England, 2001; Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007; Shen &

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Jiang, 2020), and how maternal employment, in turn, impacts young and adolescent children's wellbeing (e.g., Bianchi, 2000; Desai & Jain, 1994; Dustmann & Schönberg, 2012; Goldberg, Prause, Lucas-Thompson, & Himsel, 2008; Lucas-Thompson, Goldberg, & Prause, 2010; McGinn, Ruiz Castro, & Lingo, 2019; Parcel & Menaghan, 1994; Short, Chen, Entwisle, & Zhai, 2002).

But beyond childhood and adolescence, does maternal employment, that is, women's paid work during children's childhood years, still matter for individuals' adulthood lives? A growing body of literature now turns to the link between maternal employment and children's adulthood outcomes (see McGinn et al., 2019). Finding a generally positive association between maternal employment and adult children's employment probability, income, and equitable division of housework (e.g., Cunningham, 2001; Fernández, Fogli, & Olivetti, 2004; Gupta, 2006; McGinn et al., 2019; Stinson & Gottschalk, 2016), researchers draw on two intrafamily mechanisms as possible explanations: Maternal employment affects children's adulthood behavior and outcomes by shaping children's gender-related attitudes (Moen, Erickson, & Dempster-McClain, 1997) and by providing behavioral examples (Bandura, 1977; McGinn et al., 2019).

Despite the growing scholarly interest, some gaps remain in this burgeoning literature.

First, current studies on the effects of maternal employment have largely relied on quantitative analysis of survey data, operationalizing children's adulthood outcomes as a limited set of quantifiable measures. As women's choices surrounding paid work face frequent scrutiny and are fraught with moral connotations (Damaske, 2011; McGinn et al., 2019; Scott & Clery, 2013; Williams, 1991), it is important to gather richer narratives that will allow women to explain, in their own words, how having employed mothers may shape children's work-family belief, ideation, and decision-making process in adulthoods.

Second, existing research has mostly focused on intrafamily mechanisms when examining the long-lasting effects of maternal employment. Although family is a key site in the process of gender socialization, solely focusing on intrafamily mechanisms has its limitations: From one generation to another, the transmission and reproduction of gender-related beliefs and behavior do not operate in a vacuum insulated from societal level institutional context. As such, intrafamily mechanisms need to be considered in relation to the macro-level conditions that different generations face.

To fill these gaps, I turn to contemporary urban China.¹ I ask: How do young Chinese women view their own mothers' wage work during childhood?

¹Promulgated in the 1950s as a population control measure that restricts internal migration, China's household registration system (*hukou*) that classifies citizens as agricultural (rural) and non-agricultural (urban) has been one of the major sources of inequality and stratification in contemporary China (Whyte, 2010). Over the years, rural and urban residents are entitled to different social welfare, housing, education, and employment opportunities. *Hukou* is a significant predictor in determining

Specifically, I highlight how maternal employment shapes young Chinese women’s expectation of women’s wage work and work–family decision-making. In so doing, I depart from previous studies on the long-term effects of maternal employment in two meaningful ways.

First, I adopt a qualitative approach and draw on 70 in-depth interviews with women born after China’s marketization in 1978. A qualitative approach is well-equipped to uncover individuals’ ideations and deeply held beliefs. As such, this article moves beyond the quantitative associations among variables and trace the effects of maternal employment in young women’s *narratives* of their work–family belief and experience.

Second, I situate these young women’s views on maternal employment against the backdrop of China’s rapid social transformation over the past several decades, thereby drawing the link between intrafamily mechanisms and macro-level structural and institutional conditions. China is particularly well-suited for this empirical endeavor: From the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949 to this day, state socialism and market transition have both left enduring legacies across various domains of the Chinese society. The young women of this study are daughters of women who grew up during the late 1950s and 1960s, when the socialist party-state exhorted Chinese women to enter the workforce (Robinson, 1985; Short, Chen, Entwisle, & Zhai, 2002). Yet, compared to their mothers, these young women now encounter educational, labor market, cultural, and demographic conditions that have been drastically altered by China’s social and economic transformations.

Taken together, by examining how contemporary urban young Chinese women view maternal employment, this research sheds light on how women make sense of and navigate the gendered nexus of work–family—learning and deciding to work and to mother—amidst profound social transformation.

Connecting Intrafamily Mechanisms to the Macro-Level Context

For daughters, mothers and the experience of being mothered exert powerful influence on the making of a gendered self (Chodorow, 1978; Evans, 2007). Maternal employment matters for daughters’ adulthood work–family lives. Studies across societies have consistently demonstrated the predictive power of mothers’ occupational status on daughters’ occupational attainment (e.g., DiPietro & Urwin, 2006; Emran & Shilpi, 2011; McGinn et al., 2019). Scholars mostly draw on intrafamily mechanisms as explanations: Family—a crucial site of socialization—plays an important role in the intergenerational transmission and reproduction of

individuals’ life chances. Given these entrenched rural–urban differences, in this article, I focus on urban China alone.

gender-related beliefs and behavior (McGinn et al., 2019). Research has pointed to a positive correlation between mothers' and children's gender role attitudes (Johnston, Schurer, & Shields, 2014). Parents often act as key behavioral models for children, providing resources, knowledge, and skills. Parental behavior serves as templates that children could draw upon later in life (Bandura, 1977; McGinn et al., 2019).

Yet, intrafamily mechanisms are embedded within a broader set of social relations. As such, macro-level context frames individuals' lived experience and moderates the transmission and reproduction of gender-related belief and behavior. A society's institutional configurations, as well as women's locations within the social structure, jointly shape their available resources and options as they navigate their work–family lives (Collins, 2019). For example, differential interactions with labor market institutions impact women's expectations and decision-making surrounding paid work (Damaske, 2011; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Risman, Atkinson, & Blackwelder, 1999). School experience shapes adolescents' aspirations about future employment (Damaske, 2011). In turn, girls espousing more egalitarian gender-related beliefs have greater likelihood of aspiring to higher levels of educational attainment and paid work (Davis & Pearce, 2007). While mothers working outside the home may serve as similar behavioral examples, the amount of other resources that mothers of different educational levels and occupational status are able to provide nonetheless varies significantly (Coley & Lombardi, 2013; Hsin & Felfe, 2014; Lombardi & Coley, 2017; McGinn et al., 2019). As such, factors such as social class may moderate the association between maternal employment and children's outcomes in adolescence and adulthood (Coley & Lombardi, 2013; Hsin & Felfe, 2014; Lombardi & Coley, 2017).

Thus, when examining the “long shadow” of maternal employment in daughters' adulthood work–family lives, it is critical to not only look within, but also beyond the family. Intrafamily mechanisms need to be considered alongside the macro-level structural and institutional context that different generations of women find themselves in. On this note, I turn to the Chinese context: The following section describes in greater details both the change and the continuity with respect to gender, work, and family in post-1949 China. I set the stage for elucidating how contemporary urban young women view and understand their mothers' wage work as they make decisions about their own work–family lives.

Gender, Work, and Family in China: Change and Continuity

An Unfinished Revolution: Implications of State Socialism and Market Reform

What women face in the urban labor market and at home has changed significantly over the past several decades as China transitioned from state socialism to a market economy. After the establishment of the People's Republic in

1949, in the spirit of Engels, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership posited a link between women’s “emancipation” and joining the socialist production (Short, Chen, Entwisle, & Zhai, 2002). The late 1950s and 1960s saw active incorporation of Chinese women into the workforce. The party-state’s gender messaging during this period was permeated with sentiments like “women holding up half of the sky” and images of “iron girls” and “heroine workers” (Honig, 2000; Short, Chen, Entwisle, & Zhai, 2002). Social welfare and benefits were also organized around full time wage work (Davis, 1991; Gal & Kligman, 2012). As a result, China’s female labor force participation rate under state socialism was high, and dual-earner families became the prevalent family form (Robinson, 1985; Short, Chen, Entwisle, & Zhai, 2002; Whyte & Parish, 1984; Wolf, 1985).

Yet at the same time, the socialist state has wanted women to be mothers as well as workers (Gal & Kligman, 2012). Similar to the notion of an “unfinished revolution” (England, 2010; Gerson, 2009; Hochschild, 1989), the active incorporation of women into the labor force was not matched by equal emphasis of men’s role at home as cocaregivers (Evans, 2007; Ji, Wu, Sun, & He, 2017).

The market reform beginning in 1978 further complicated the conditions women face at home and in the urban labor market. First, under state socialism, state- and collectively owned work units (*danwei*) provided a wide range of public goods and provisions—such as dining services, low-cost childcare, and kindergartens—that, to various extent, fulfilled the needs of domestic life (Ji et al., 2017; Lv & Perry, 1997; Walder, 1986). Marketization significantly weakened the role work units played in providing public goods and services. As such, the burden of household labor and care work was largely shifted back to women (Ji et al., 2017).

Second, with marketization, autonomous employers began to replace the party-state in allocating employment opportunities and determining wage structure. As such, while women’s labor force participation rate has remained high after the market reform, women are now more subject to discriminations from employers (Cao & Hu, 2007; Cook & Dong, 2011; Davis, 1995). Research has shown gender inequality to be pervasive postreform across occupations (Davis, 1995): The gender wage gap among urban workers has widened (Xie, 2013). Women are more likely to experience downward occupational mobility and occupy jobs and positions of less prestige and authority (Robinson, 1985; Song & Dong, 2009; Xie, 2013).

Third, with China’s market reform came significant normative changes. Whereas previously the party-state’s gender messaging had called on women to join the socialist production, analysis of China’s postreform mainstream gender messaging revealed a resurgence of traditional notions of femininity and a renewed emphasis on women’s role in the private sphere (Sun & Chen, 2015).

Reproductive and Educational Policy Changes

Beyond changes in the labor market landscape that occurred as China transitioned from state socialism to a market economy, for urban young Chinese women today, two impactful reform-era policies—the one-child policy and the educational expansion program—hold additional significant implications for their work–family lives.

One-child policy. Since the 1970s, the CCP has kept a tight rein on population planning. These efforts culminated in the nationwide institution of the one-child policy in 1980 (Greenhalgh, 2008). Since its inception, the one-child policy has been criticized by both social scientists and human rights advocates for its draconian and often abusive enforcement that particularly harms women: Women are vulnerable to forced abortion and sterilization (Greenhalgh, 1994; Whyte, Wang, & Cai, 2015), while female fetuses and female children are vulnerable to sex-selective abortion, abandonment, neglect or even infanticide by parents hoping to bear a son (Cai & Lavelly, 2003; Chu, 2001; Johnson, 2016).

These gendered adverse effects notwithstanding, scholars have also highlighted the policy's nuanced implications for urban singleton daughters. No longer facing competition from male siblings, to some extent, urban only daughters are empowered as they now benefit from more concentrated parental investment (Fong, 2002, 2011). Parental expectation for daughters has also shifted (Shi, 2017); research has shown that parents of only sons and only daughters hold comparable educational aspiration for their offspring (Tsui & Rich, 2002).

Educational expansion. For urban young Chinese women today, such changes in family structure, number of siblings, and parental aspiration and investment have arrived at a time of significant educational expansion. As China underwent drastic educational expansion since the mid-1990s, obtaining some form of tertiary education has become increasingly common. Conditional upon entry into high schools, transition rate into college and universities has risen sharply, from 27.3% in 1990 to 76.3% in 2005 and 83.3% in 2010 (see Zhou, 2019). Along the same line, the gender gap in educational attainment has been steadily narrowing (World Bank, 2006), and women are now outperforming men in tertiary education (Zhong & Guo, 2017).

Yet, these gains in women's education are not mirrored by their labor market outcomes. Despite closing and reversed gender gaps in educational attainment, studies continue to find a gender gap in employability after college graduation (e.g., Zhong & Guo, 2017). Highly educated women continue to face more adverse labor market conditions than their male counterparts (e.g., Zhou, 2019).

Between Mothers and Daughters

Taken together, contemporary urban China offers an ideal setting to examine the “long shadow” of maternal employment in daughters’ adulthood work–family lives. As Evans (2007) perceptively noted, the mother–daughter dyad makes a fruitful unit of analysis for understanding how women learn—in the currents of social changes—to negotiate the gendered boundary between the public and the private sphere.

For the urban young Chinese women of this study, compared to their mothers, tertiary education has become much more attainable and parental aspiration has shifted. At the same time, the division of unpaid household labor has remained gendered over the years, with women expected to perform the majority of domestic work (Ji et al., 2017). These young women today further face a postreform landscape of increasingly intensified labor market discrimination and reoriented gender messaging from the state that emphasizes women’s roles at home (Sun & Chen, 2015; Zhou, 2019).

Against this backdrop, how do these urban young Chinese women view their own mothers’ wage work? Moreover, how do their attitudes toward maternal employment fit into the narratives they construct to articulate their own work–family lives and decision-making? In examining these two questions, this research makes the connection between intrafamily mechanisms and the macro-level social forces to understand the intergenerational transmission of gender beliefs and behavior. I examined these questions using qualitative in-depth interviews. Narratives are a powerful tool for understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences and the world around them (see also Evans, 2007).

Method

Participants

I used snowball sampling to reach potential participants. After each interview, I asked my interviewee to pass along the recruitment flyer and invite additional participants from her own networks. To allay concerns of network clustering, I interviewed a maximum of three referrals from the same “seed.” Participants were recruited to balance two considerations in a small-*N* nonrandom design: (1) ensure adequate data variability and (2) avoid overfragmentation. That is, in a small-*N* sample, if participants differ on too many sociodemographic attributes, each “cell” becomes too small to reliably discern meaningful patterns and themes. I stopped recruiting additional participants after data saturation was reached, that is, when no new salient theme emerged with each additional interview (see Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Participants were 70 young, heterosexual women in two Chinese metropolitan areas (i.e., Nanjing and Beijing).² Table 1 summarizes their sociodemographic characteristics. Participants were between 22 and 38 years old at the time of the interview ($M = 28.47$, $SD = 3.61$). All born after China's 1978 market reform, they were daughters to women who grew up under China's state socialism in the 1950s and 1960s. Consistent with China's high female labor force participation rate, all but three participants had a mother who worked full time during their childhood.

Marriage and childbirth are critical life course events with gendered implications, and may impact how women view maternal employment. As such, I purposefully recruited participants who were (1) never married ($n = 37$), (2) in their first marriage without children ($n = 21$), or (3) in their first marriage with one child ($n = 12$). Doing so enabled me to capture women's views toward maternal employment across a spectrum of life course experiences.

All participants had completed some form of tertiary education. They ranged from having attended associate-degree-granting colleges and lower-tier nonselective 4-year universities to having graduated from more selective or elite schools. Aside from two doctoral students, all participants came from a range of professional jobs in both public and private sectors, for example, elementary and middle school teacher, content editor, office worker, and market analyst.

Procedure

In-depth interviews were conducted between January 2016 and July 2017. The interview protocol followed a semi-structured format with open-ended questions. I directly asked each participant about her experience growing up with (or without) a working mother. We talked about the mother–daughter relation at home when the participant was growing up. I probed into each participant's attitudes toward maternal employment and women's wage work. I also asked all participants to describe an ideal mother and an ideal woman.

The interviews were part of a larger project on gender, work, and family in contemporary urban China. The interview protocol thus further covered a wide range of questions on women's day-to-day experience at home and in the urban workplace. For example, we talked about the participant's (anticipated) transitions into marriage and/or parenthood, division and outsourcing of household labor, job search experiences, and workplace routines. As part of the larger project, the interview protocol also incorporated a set of items adapted from the gender module

²I interviewed 19 women in Nanjing and 51 in Beijing. Subsequent data analysis has revealed no meaningful differences by locales; I thus merged interviews from both sites without making further geographical comparisons or generalization.

Table 1. Qualitative Sample Demographic Characteristics

	Female
Mean age at interview	28.47 (3.61)
Median monthly income	8,000 yuan (approx. 1,100 USD)
Median child’s age at interview	5 <i>N</i>
Life course stage	
Never married	37
First marriage, no children	21
First marriage, one child	12
Urban hukou at birth	64
Urban hukou at interview	67
Only child	49
Employment	
Full time	66
Part time	2
Doctoral student	2
Employment by sectors	
Public sector	27
Private sector	33
Self-employed	8
Maternal education	
Primary schooling and below	7
Junior high school	8
Technical secondary school	8
High school	14
Associate degree	12
BA and above	18
Data missing	3
Maternal occupation	
Homemaker and unemployed	3
Agricultural and farm work	4
Routine nonmanual worker	19
Self-employed without employees	4
Self-employed with employees	3
Lower-grade professional and managerial	25
Higher-grade professional and managerial	9
Data missing	3

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued

	Female
Total <i>N</i>	70

Note. Demographic information was collected at the end of the interview. In compliance with the study's IRB protocol, respondents were given the option to skip questions. As a result, three respondents declined to provide information on their own income, and the exact educational level and occupation of their mothers (although all three mothers were employed during the respondents' childhood). All other information presented in Table 1 is based on complete data. Public sector includes government agencies, public schools, and state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Private sector includes private- and foreign-owned businesses and NGOs. The classification of maternal employment draws on the EGP class schema that classifies occupations (Erikson & Goldthorpe 1992; Erikson, Goldthorpe, & Portocarero 1979). Higher-grade professional and managerial jobs include physicians, university professors, high-level managers in SOEs and government agencies; lower-grade professional and managerial jobs include secondary school teachers, nurses, and regular civil servants; routine nonmanual workers include bookkeepers, cashiers, and clerks in SOEs.

of the World Values Surveys (WVS).³ After emphasizing that there were no correct answers and that participants should feel free to say anything, I asked each participant whether she agreed or disagreed with a given WVS statement and recorded the answer using a five-point Likert scale. I then probed into the reasoning behind her response (i.e., *why* she agreed or disagreed with the statement) with open-ended follow-up questions. I mostly focus here on findings from the following WVS statement to further triangulate participants' views toward maternal employment and women's wage work:

A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.

To ensure consistency, I interviewed all participants myself in Mandarin Chinese. The interviews, on average, lasted for 1.5–2 hours. With consent, I digitally recorded all interviews. In compliance with the study's IRB protocol on data privacy, I handled all data transcription, cleaning, and analysis myself. All recordings and transcriptions were anonymized.

³These questions include items on the breadwinner–caregiver role division; whether working mothers can establish an equally warm and secure relationship with her child as nonworking mothers; whether women should stay at home full time when the child is under three; whether men should have more right to a job than women do when jobs are scarce; whether college education is more important for boys than for girls; whether men make better political leaders and (in a separate question) business executives; whether women or (in a separate question) men need marriage and (separately) childbearing to be fulfilled; whether housewives can have an equally fulfilling life as working women; whether the husband and the wife should both contribute to the household income. I also asked all participants about their attitudes toward unions where the wife earns more, and (separately) the husband stays at home full time.

Data Analysis

Immediately after each interview, I first wrote a short memo summarizing my impressions of the rapport, flow, and notable topics of discussion during the conversation. Over the course of data analysis, I then returned to the data multiple times—repeatedly listening to the recordings, transcribing, taking detailed notes, writing analytical memos, and coding the transcriptions.

Repeatedly listening to the recordings allowed me to fully capture the emotional cues in the conversations. The analytical memos facilitated cross-interview comparisons by inductively identifying key themes emerging from the data. Based on these emergent themes, I developed a series of theoretical codes and coded the transcriptions using Dedoose. All data analysis (e.g., memo-writing and coding) was done in Chinese. All English excerpts presented in the results section are literal translations of verbatim quotes. To ensure accuracy, I translated all quotes myself.

Results

The results are organized into two parts. I start with participants’ views toward their mothers’ wage work during childhood. Specifically, I illustrate that participants imbued a mother’s decision to work with moral meaning, viewing wage work as integral to a “good” mother and an “ideal” woman. Next, I show how such moralization of maternal employment—along with mechanisms produced by the institutional context of urban China—shaped these young women’s decisions about wage work, and the new challenges they face.

The Moralization of Maternal Employment

When asked whether she agreed with the WVS statement “a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work,” 65 out of the 70 participants quickly answered in the affirmative. Open-ended follow-up questions about the reasoning further revealed that participants—across life course stages—believed having a working mother to be *more* beneficial. Drawing on their own experiences, participants regarded an employed mother to be better at (1) providing valuable knowledge and (2) modeling self-reliance. As such, participants consistently treated a mother’s wage work as a moral choice: That is, for the good of a child, a *responsible* mother *should* work.

Maternal employment as a source of knowledge. At the time of the interview, Yansheng was 24 years old, never married, and just graduated from one of China’s top theatre arts academies. Yansheng was determined to “make it” as an actress, filling her days with casting calls. When asked about her career choice,

Yansheng spoke fondly of her mother, who worked for a local government agency during Yansheng's childhood:

It's so good that my mom had her job. Her agency used to organize public speaking contests around the city. So when I was little, my mom signed me up for public speaking classes, and we would participate in those contests together on weekends. And after we got home, we would also compete between the two of us, to see if she won a prize, or if I won a prize.

Yansheng attributed her interest in acting and her successful entry into the prestigious theatre arts academy to those childhood public speaking contests and classes, where she learned to command the stage in front of an audience. She spoke of the confidence she felt during the improvisation portion of her school's admissions audition, remarking that "it felt so easy. It's what I grew up doing." According to Yansheng, these early opportunities to develop critical skills, which laid the ground work for her current career trajectory, were made possible because of her mother's job.

Of course, not all participants narrated such a straightforward and close link between their mothers' wage work and their own career trajectories and aspirations. Yet similar to Yansheng, across interviews, participants of different social class origins viewed maternal employment as benefitting the children by providing knowledge and information about "how the world works." For example, Yinuo (26 years old, never married) taught in a private education agency. When Yinuo was young, her mother worked as a contractual staff in one of the local universities. Despite seemingly little connections between her own job and her mother's, Yinuo believed that having an employed mother was critical for her upbringing:

A child's knowledge about the society mostly comes from the mother—the knowledge about work, about different career paths. Working women can bring a lot of new and fresh things to her child.

In other words, having grown up watching their own mothers work, participants regarded maternal employment as crucial for the transmission of knowledge, information, and cultural capital to children. They therefore attached a moral meaning to women's work: They saw working mothers as the kind of "good" mothers who are capable of "better" childrearing, as compared to mothers who stayed at home full time. Meile (28 years old, married, and without children) exemplified this view. Meile's mother worked continuously when she was young, but a few of her friends' mothers did not. When Meile discussed their respective upbringings, she stated:

My mom has always worked, and she got to know different kinds of people because of her job...She is able to keep up—improving her thinking alongside the progress of the society. So I also don't feel like there are barriers or gaps between us. We are closer. Some moms I know who gave up working, in my view, they also lost the ability to learn and to keep up. I think there are greater gaps and more barriers between them and their children.

Similarly, consider Jingrui (27 years old, never married). During Jingrui’s childhood, her mother, after being laid off from a factory job, opened a flower shop. Jingrui spoke proudly of her mother’s choice to keep working outside of the home:

When I was not in school, I would go to her shop, and there I’d get to know stuff that I would not have encountered in a kid’s world. Full-time housewives wouldn’t have this kind of experience...A working mother connects with the society and improves. So she could give her child more help and guidance. Sure, a full-time stay-at-home mother may have more time, but it’s not like if you put in the time, you’d necessarily raise the child better.

Taken together, rather than treating paid work as disruptive and pulling a mother away from her child, participants consistently saw maternal employment as beneficial and central to “good” mothering—enabling the mother to share information and knowledge with her child. Such reasoning became especially salient among participants who already had a child. For this group, they further expressed a desire to replicate this mode of mothering. As an illustrative example, consider Xiaoting, who had a 7-year-old daughter. Xiaoting explained her expectation of continued employment through a series of rhetorical questions:

Wouldn’t I want my daughter to work in the future as well? Then by working myself, wouldn’t I have more things to share with my kid, more things [for us] to talk about, and more similar life experiences?

Maternal employment as behavioral model. When asked to describe an ideal woman, 57 of the 70 participants immediately invoked notions such as “independence” and “self-sufficiency”—and wage work was treated as the means to realize this ideal. As such, beyond transmitting knowledge, participants attached a second moral meaning to their mothers’ work: Maternal employment was regarded as central to “good” mothering because they believed that working mothers were uniquely able to serve as behavioral models and demonstrate how to be self-reliant. As Yunfan (24 years old, never married, and whose mother owned a small business since Yunfan’s childhood) put it:

When she [my mother] worked, she was in a mode of striving, in a mode of making efforts. This is teaching by example.

Participants across life course stages expressed similar views. At the time of the interview, Qianwen was 28 years old, married, and had not yet had children. Qianwen intended to have one child in the near future, but was strongly against the prospect of becoming a stay-at-home mother. For Qianwen, a good mother needed to be her child’s “role model,” which according to her, meant engaging in paid work:

A mother needs to have her own thing, her own job. Only when she is doing well herself, can she raise good children, be a good role model, and give her child a good environment.

Along this line, perhaps unsurprisingly, nonworking mothers were scrutinized through a moral lens as well. Manyu (26 years old, never married) grew up with a mother who worked in a local government agency. In describing her view toward maternal employment, Manyu made the following comparison:

My mom worked full time, but a few of my high school classmates' mothers did not. Her working definitely influenced me. Like me and my friends, we understand marriage differently. Like they believe a man should work and a woman should focus more on caring for the family. They prefer wives who are a lot 'weaker.' I'm not like that, I don't like to rely on a 'stronger' man.

Similarly, when asked whether she envisioned any changes to her employment status after having children, Jiaqi (31 years old, married without children, and daughter to a middle school teacher) answered without hesitation:

Absolutely not [to staying at home full time]. Many full-time mothers are also failing mothers.

This ideal of good mothering—being a role model through engaging in paid work—was especially salient among participants who already had one child. For example, consider Hejia, a lecturer in an adult learning college and mother to a 6-year-old son. To Hejia, being a “good” mother meant having a fulfilling career that promised independence and self-fulfillment. As she stated:

An ideal mother should have her own career, so that she can be fulfilled. Especially if you have a daughter, because what kind of woman you are, that hugely shapes what kind of woman she will become.

Wage Work as a Taken-for-Granted Choice

The above section indicated that based on their own experience of growing up with a working mother, urban young Chinese women consistently viewed maternal employment through a moral lens: Participants of all three life course stages regarded wage work as central to good mothering. Working mothers were believed to be better suited to provide valuable information and model desirable behavior.

This moralization of mothers' wage work further shaped these young women's own expectation of labor force participation. Importantly, it was not only participants who already had one child that intended to work and replicate this mode of mothering. In fact, across the board, wage work was viewed as a taken-for-granted choice. Nearly all participants rejected outright the prospect of staying at home full time after marriage or childbearing. What is more, the decision to stay at home was frequently scrutinized, through a moral lens, as “relaxing the standards for oneself” and “getting left behind.”

Two additional factors—as produced by the macro-level structural and institutional conditions of urban China—further enhanced such normative expectation

of women’s wage work. The ubiquity of maternal employment and the changing parental expectation for daughters additionally contributed to the conception of wage work as a taken-for-granted choice for young women. At the same time, such normative expectation of women’s wage work, when placed in the macro-level context of postreform urban China, led to new challenges for the young women today. In this section, I explicate such dynamics.

Ubiquity of maternal employment. Ample studies have demonstrated that dual-earner families became and have remained the prevailing family form in contemporary urban China, in part due to the socialist incorporation of women into the labor force (Short, Chen, Entwisle, & Zhai, 2002). The legacy of such early state efforts was visible on the micro-level.

As shown in Table 1, nearly all participants’ mothers worked full time during their childhood. Moreover, participants also noted that in those years, what they came to know was that their peers’ mothers mostly worked as well. Thus, for these young women, growing up with an employed mother was nothing out of the ordinary. As Wenqi (27 years old, never married, and whose mother worked in a state-owned enterprise) put it:

When I was growing up, there were almost no stay-at-home mothers around me, so I think mom working...it’s a normal, regular thing.

The ubiquity of maternal employment normalized women’s wage work and further reinforced young women’s expectation about their own employment. Having watched their own mothers and the mothers around them engage in paid work, young women viewed female employment as the norm, rather than the exception. As such, they fully expected to work as well. As an illustrative example, consider Yingshu: Throughout Yingshu’s childhood, her mother, who did not attend college, worked as a clerk in a private company, earning a modest income. When I asked Yingshu if she ever thought about staying at home full time after having a child, Yingshu—26 years old, married, and without children—was adamant that she would remain employed in the future:

Why wouldn’t you work full time? My mom did it. All my classmates’ moms did the same thing.

Changing parental expectation. Beyond the ubiquity of maternal employment, for some women, parental views further reinforced this normative expectation of female wage work. Such parental expectation was in part shaped by the demographic and social transformations that had swept over contemporary urban China. Studies have shown that under China’s one-child policy, urban parents of singleton sons and daughters hold similar educational aspiration for their offspring (Tsui & Rich, 2002). Urban only daughters have also benefitted from concentrated parental investment (Fong, 2002). Consistent with findings from this

line of research, some participants reported similar parental expectation regarding their employment.

After 6 years of dating, Meile married her husband in 2013 at age 25. At the time, Meile had been working in a well-regarded state-owned enterprise for one year, after obtaining her master's degree. When asked about the timing of her marriage, Meile emphasized the importance of her parents' expectation regarding her own work:

My parents thought my work should come first, that it'd be bad-form if I immediately got married right after starting this job. They thought it would leave a bad impression on my boss and my colleagues, like I was not taking this job seriously, but preoccupied with dating and boys. Because when we got married, we have already been together for so long, really the only thing that kept us from getting married earlier was that my parents thought I need to focus on my job first—they were adamant that I should wait at least one year [after starting the job] before getting married.

Author: "How do you think they'd feel if you were still unmarried?"

Meile: They would be fine with it! My parents are actually against me marrying this early. My dad always says I should do better with my work—don't get distracted and devote everything to the family, and lose my drive and my focus [with my work].

Meile's parents expected that their only daughter would not only work, but also *excel*. Like Meile, across interviews, participation in wage work was sometimes regarded as an important precondition for marriage and childbearing—not only by participants, but by their parents as well. For example, Xiaoting similarly described that when she first got married, the consensus among herself, her husband, and her own parents was that the couple should only begin actively trying for a child, after Xiaoting was settled in her job and had brought her career "on track."

"Not my mom's days": Social transformation and women's new challenges. However, the seemingly prevalent support for mothers' wage work and the normative expectation of female employment should not be taken at face value as uncomplicated signs of greater gender equality. Rather, placed within the macro-context of postreform urban China, such moralization of maternal employment led young women to face intensified burden of "doing it all."

At the time of the interview, Hualing had been married for 2 years. Hualing intended to have a child in the near future, yet was conflicted about the actual timing. As the only daughter of a doctor and a nurse who both worked in the same public hospital, Hualing stated:

What we have now is not my mom's days. Their *danwei* took care of a lot of things. When I was little, we all lived in *danwei*-provided housing. When school let out, all the kids would walk together to their parents' *danwei*, wait in the canteen or something, and that was safe. Nowadays, when school lets out at three and you have to go pick up your kid, but who on earth gets out of work at three?

As previously discussed, ample research has shown that with China’s marketization, employers’ (*danwei*) roles in providing public goods and services have significantly weakened. The burden of unpaid household labor has thus largely been shifted back to individual families, particularly to women (Ji et al., 2017). Despite strong expectation of wage work, these young women often also agreed with the primacy placed on their roles in the family. When describing an ideal woman, more than one-third of the respondents highlighted the ability of “being good at both.”

The gendered division of unpaid household labor and professional women’s “second shift” at home (Hochschild, 1989) have been extensively documented in studies across time and societies. Yet the Chinese context is striking in its own way: Mothers’ wage work is imbued with moral meaning and viewed as central to “good” mothering by young women who have grown up with working mothers. Such moralization contributes to the strong normative expectation that regards employment as something a woman *should* do. The ubiquity of maternal employment and changing parental expectation for daughters—as produced by the macro-level structural and institutional context of postreform urban China—further strengthen this expectation. Thus, when work conflicts with family, choosing family *over* work has also become an infeasible option. Instead, contemporary young Chinese women view themselves as being caught between two realms with competing demands, and having to excel at both. As Liran (37 years old, married with one daughter, and taught in a public middle school) put it:

To be a woman in China, there is just so much stress. To be able to strike a balance between work and family, you’d have to be the best of the best.

Discussion

These qualitative data pointed to remarkably consistent views toward maternal employment among young women in contemporary urban China. While previous quantitative research has uncovered associations between maternal employment and children’s various adulthood outcomes, much remains to be known about *why* and *how* maternal employment casts a long shadow into children’s adulthood.

The findings from this research illustrate one important mechanism in this process, that is, the moralization of mothers’ wage work. In other words, as urban young Chinese women navigate the gendered nexus of work–family, maternal employment held lasting sway because these daughters viewed their mothers’ wage work through a moral lens: Wage work was regarded as inextricably linked to the notions of a “good” mother and an “ideal” woman. Having grown up watching their mothers work, these daughters viewed employment as how a woman *should be*.

This research further highlights the importance of bringing the macro-level context back into the mother–daughter dyad (Evans, 2007). The structural and institutional context of contemporary urban China is marked by profound social transformation across various domains. On the one hand, China’s socialist legacy and market reform have produced factors that reinforce the normative expectation of women’s wage work (i.e., the ubiquity of maternal employment and changing parental aspiration for daughters). On the other hand, changing labor market conditions under marketization, coupled with slow-to-change expectation about women’s roles at home, intensifies young women’s burden of “doing it all.” As such, the findings here further complicate recent research on the advantages of “flexible gender identities” experienced by urban young Chinese women in work and education (Kim, Brown, & Fong, 2018). Instead, I show that employment remains central to the articulation of a gendered self among urban young Chinese women. Moreover, under the macrocontext of postreform China, such normative expectation of wage work leads them to experience persistent challenges of navigating the dual demands of work and family.

Women’s increased participation in education and in the labor market is a phenomenon that extends beyond the Chinese case. Yet, scholars across contexts have repeatedly demonstrated that despite women’s advancement, the gender revolution remains incomplete and stalled (England, 2010). On this note, I highlight the policy implications of my findings: Policy design that solely focuses on promoting women’s participation in the public sphere (i.e., education and labor market) is not enough. Rather, social policies are needed to “finish the revolution.” That is, women’s entry into the public sphere as cobreadwinners needs to be matched by men’s entry into the private sphere as cocaregivers. As a starting point, one possible area of policy intervention is parental leave, which has been generous yet gendered in contemporary China (Zhou, 2019). Equalizing parental leave for mothers and fathers reduces the adverse labor market effects for women (e.g., employer discrimination and lengthy career disruption), while pushing men back into care work.

Limitations and Future Directions

I have highlighted the importance of connecting intrafamily mechanisms and macro-level context to understand the intergenerational transmission of gender-related beliefs and behavior: On the one hand, for contemporary urban young Chinese women, the ubiquity of maternal employment has provided a positive behavioral model and normalized women’s participation in wage work. Yet at the same time, within an institutional setting of persistent gender inequality in the private sphere and weakening provisions of public goods and services, these young women faced an intensified burden of *balancing* work and family.

I have limited the scope of this study to professional women in urban China. I now address some limitations that warrant future research. First, for women with greater access to economic resources and social ties, individualized strategies—such as relying on intergenerational support or outsourcing—could potentially be a way to ease some of the competing demands of work and family. Yet these individualized strategies inevitably would privilege those with access to such resources over those without. As such, one limitation of this study is its sole focus on urban professional women with some tertiary education. Future research is needed to further investigate how maternal employment may differentially shape young women’s expectation of work, family, and motherhood in a changing society, across educational strata, class lines, and the rural–urban divide. In addition, this study’s focal participants were young women. This approach only allowed me to explore parental expectation and aspiration through daughters’ narratives. Future work could incorporate parents into the analysis. Additional research could further interrogate how shifting parental aspiration and intergenerational support may shape young women’s views of their mothers’ wage work through a dyadic perspective.

Conclusion

China has undergone significant and profound social transformation over the past several decades. State socialism and the market reform have created distinct labor market conditions and hold different implications on wage work for women of different generations. Furthermore, demographic and educational policy changes have contributed to the changing expectation and aspiration—within the family—about women’s place in the society. As such, China offers a fruitful case to examine the long-term effects of maternal employment on contemporary young women’s work–family expectation, in a context of rapid social change.

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