

Care-Providing Older Adults: An Exploratory Study of Quality of Life through Grandchild Care in East Asia

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Abstract

This study examines grandparenting as a care-providing role in later life and explores how it affects grandparents' quality of life. Grandchild care has often been understood as a positive experience that gives older adults a sense of purpose, family connection, and emotional fulfilment. However, this study focuses on less visible aspects, including long hours of care, the concentration of responsibility on grandmothers, conflicts with the parent generation, difficulties in supporting children's education, and isolation. Based on semi-structured interviews with grandparents in China and Japan who live or previously lived in three-generation or skipped-generation households, the study compares how grandchild care is organised and experienced in different family contexts. The findings show that grandchild care is shaped by gendered care burdens, relationships with the parent generation, living environments, and emotional exchange. In both China and Japan, care responsibilities tended to be concentrated on grandmothers, although the kinship context differed: paternal grandmothers were more visible under patrilineal norms in China, whereas maternal grandmothers played a central role in Japan. The study argues that grandparenting is not simply social participation or family contribution by older adults, but a gendered care practice embedded in kinship relations and family welfare.

1. Aim of Research

The aim of this study is to reconsider grandparenting as a care-providing role in later life and to examine how it affects grandparents' quality of life. Grandparenting has often been understood as a positive experience that gives grandparents a sense of purpose, family connection, and emotional fulfilment. However, within such narratives, aspects such as long hours of care, the concentration of responsibility on grandmothers, conflicts with the parent generation, difficulties in supporting children's education, and feelings of isolation tend to become less visible.

This study compares cases of three-generation co-residence and skipped-generation co-residence in China and Japan, and examines the conditions under which grandparenting is experienced as fulfilment, as well as the conditions under which it is experienced as burden, conflict, or isolation. The analysis draws on role accumulation theory, role strain theory, social exchange theory, and socioemotional selectivity theory, and positions grandparenting as a social, emotional, and gendered care practice that is closely related to older adults' quality of life.

2. Method of Research & Progression

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with grandparents in China and Japan who were living, or had previously lived, in three-generation or

skipped-generation households. The participants were grandparents aged 60 or older whose grandchildren were minors at the time of the interview.

The fieldwork in China was conducted in 2024, mainly in Hubei and Shaanxi provinces, and included both urban and rural areas. The Chinese data consisted of interviews with 38 grandparents: 23 grandmothers and 15 grandfathers. In terms of living arrangements, eight participants lived with a daughter's family and 30 lived with a son's family; among them, 14 were caring for left-behind children. In Japan, interviews with 21 grandparents were conducted in Fukuoka Prefecture in 2024. Approximately 70 per cent of the Japanese participants were grandmothers, and the cases were almost evenly divided between co-residence with a son's family and co-residence with a daughter's family.

The interviews asked about how participants became involved in grandchild care, the kinds of everyday care they provided, their relationships with the parent generation and with their grandchildren, changes in their daily lives, and their experiences of burden and fulfilment. The collected data were analysed with attention to how grandparents narrated grandchild care as a role, a burden, an exchange relationship, and an emotional experience.

3. Results of Research

3-1. Chinese cases

The Chinese data showed that grandchild care by grandparents was not simply a form of support within the family, but a practice deeply connected to gendered care burdens, intergenerational relationships, living environments, and emotional relationships with the parent generation.

First, the burden of grandchild care tended to be concentrated on grandmothers. Grandmothers were responsible for meals, helping grandchildren dress, putting them to bed, and other forms of everyday care, while grandfathers often remained only peripherally involved even when they lived in the same household. This tendency was especially visible in co-residence with a son's family, where grandmothers tended to take on grandchild care as an expected role under patrilineal kinship norms. The interviews confirmed many cases in which grandmothers took on almost all of the care of grandchildren and housework, while grandfathers remained in the position of observers. This finding shows that grandparenting may provide older adults with a new social role and a sense of usefulness, but that when this role is gendered and unequally allocated to grandmothers, it can generate role strain and excessive burden. It is therefore necessary to examine not only grandparenting as social participation or family contribution by older adults, but also who actually performs the care work.

Second, intergenerational gaps were observed between grandparents and grandchildren, based on differences in educational experience and living environments. Some grandparents had not had sufficient educational opportunities and had difficulties with reading and writing. As a result, when they were expected to help grandchildren with homework or learning, they experienced a strong sense of helplessness and frustration. In the interviews, some grandparents described being unable to understand what their grandchildren were studying and even being mocked by grandchildren, which became a source of psychological burden. This finding shows that grandchild care is not merely everyday care, but has become a complex care practice that includes modern educational support. For grandparents, grandchild care was both a continuation of traditional family roles and a new burden that required them to adapt to education, digital devices, and urban ways of life.

Third, what shaped grandparents' quality of life was not simply traditional ideas of filial piety or family

support, but the actual conditions of everyday life. Grandparents who moved to urban areas, or who migrated across provinces to live with the child generation, faced differences in daily rhythms, inconveniences in the living environment, isolation from local communities, and problems related to language and literacy. The interviews showed that adapting to a new environment and urban life was difficult, and that, especially in cases of cross-provincial migration, issues related to Mandarin and written language became a source of stress. This suggests that even when grandparents provide care for their children and grandchildren, this does not necessarily improve their own life satisfaction. Rather, leaving familiar hometowns and adjusting to the different daily rhythms of younger generations intensified feelings of isolation and a desire to return home.

Fourth, whether grandparents could experience grandchild care positively was strongly shaped by their emotional relationships with the parent generation. In particular, grandparents living with a daughter's family often had emotional exchanges such as everyday conversation, consultation, and watching television together. By contrast, in cases of co-residence with a son's family, everyday conversation and expressions of gratitude were more likely to be lacking, and dissatisfaction accumulated when the burden of grandchild care was treated as something taken for granted. This contrast shows that grandparents' quality of life in grandchild care is shaped not only by the amount of care or the presence of economic support, but also by emotional exchange such as gratitude, conversation, and respect. From the perspective of social exchange theory, grandparents provide care for the parent generation through grandchild care, but they can interpret this burden as meaningful when they also receive emotional support and recognition from the parent generation. When this exchange is unequal, however, grandchild care is more likely to lead to stress and loneliness rather than satisfaction.

Overall, the findings from the Chinese cases show that grandchild care can provide grandparents with a new role and family connection, but that this experience is not uniform. Its impact on quality of life varies substantially according to the distribution of care burdens, differences between grandmothers' and grandfathers' roles, relationships with sons and daughters, living environments, and the presence or absence of emotional support. Grandchild care by

grandparents therefore needs to be understood not only as social participation or family support by older adults, but also as a care practice embedded in gender, intergenerational relationships, and living arrangements.

3-2. Japanese cases

In the Japanese cases, grandchild care was often observed as a supplementary and adjustment-oriented form of support for the employment and everyday lives of the parent generation. However, this involvement was not limited to temporary help. It functioned as important support within the family for the parent generation's daily life, including taking grandchildren to and from nursery school, after-school care, and extracurricular activities, preparing meals, responding when children were ill, supervising homework, helping with bathing, and assisting with other everyday routines.

First, support in which daughters relied on their own mothers was especially noticeable. In particular, in cases of co-residence with a daughter's family, grandmothers often took on everyday care so that daughters could continue working. For example, in one case, a grandmother retired from her own job when her grandchild was born so that her daughter could continue working, and took on care such as picking the child up from nursery school, responding when the child was ill, preparing meals, and taking the child to cram school and other extracurricular activities. In relationships with daughters' families, daughters could more easily ask their own mothers for support, and grandmothers could also become involved relatively openly. Grandchild care therefore functioned as a substantial care base that supported the parent generation's continued employment.

Second, in cases of co-residence with a son's family, grandmothers were involved in grandchild care while adjusting the distance between themselves and the parent generation. They were conscious of the need to be considerate towards daughters-in-law and to respect the parenting practices of the parent generation, and therefore tried not to intervene too directly in discipline or education. At the same time, they provided everyday support when needed. Some families also avoided excessive interference or burden by separating living spaces between the first and second floors or by eating separately. In other cases, families shifted from co-residence to living on the same property but in separate households, making support possible while maintaining

independence in daily life.

Third, grandchild care was described not only as a burden, but also as an experience that brought motivation, enjoyment, and emotional fulfilment. Caring for grandchildren involved concrete labour, such as transportation, preparing meals, bathing, and supervising homework, but this was not always described negatively. One grandmother said that washing her grandchild's hair and spending time together did not feel burdensome, but enjoyable. Another grandmother described how her grandchildren coming to her room, and the voices and sounds of children in the house, made her feel less lonely than living alone. This shows that the presence of grandchildren could become a source of motivation in everyday life.

Fourth, emotional exchange through grandchild care was closely related to grandparents' satisfaction. In cases of co-residence with a daughter's family, daughters' reliance on their own mothers increased grandmothers' care burden, but everyday conversation, expressions of gratitude, and support with living expenses also made it easier for grandmothers to interpret this role as meaningful. In one case, an instrumental and emotional exchange relationship was established in which the daughter and her husband covered living expenses and utility costs, while the grandmother took on meals and care for the grandchildren. By contrast, in cases of co-residence with a son's family, grandmothers tended to suppress direct dissatisfaction or intervention, while providing support and taking into account their relationships with daughters-in-law and generational differences in childrearing views.

Overall, the findings from the Japanese cases show that grandchild care appeared as an adjustment-oriented care practice that complemented the employment and everyday lives of the parent generation. However, it was not merely an auxiliary role. It was also an important experience that created motivation in grandparents' own lives, shaped relationships with the parent generation, and formed emotional connections with grandchildren. In particular, the findings showed three patterns: daughters relying on their own mothers, mothers-in-law supporting sons' families while being considerate towards daughters-in-law, and arrangements in which living spaces and roles were separated even within co-residence. These findings suggest that grandchild care in Japan was adjusted through distance and consideration within the

family. The Japanese cases therefore show that, in considering the impact of grandchild care on older adults' quality of life, it is necessary to examine not only the amount of care, but also who relies on whom, what kind of distance is maintained in co-residence or nearby residence, and how gratitude and consideration from the parent generation are expressed. The quality of grandchild care experiences in Japan was shaped by relationships with daughters or sons, consideration towards daughters-in-law, the separation of living spaces, and the balance between care responsibilities and grandparents' own freedom and health.

3-3. Comparative Implications

A comparison of the Chinese and Japanese cases shows that grandchild care by grandparents tended to be concentrated on grandmothers in both societies, although the kinship relations through which this burden emerged differed. In China, under patrilineal kinship norms, paternal grandmothers living with a son's family often took on grandchild care. In Japan, by contrast, many cases involved daughters relying on their own mothers in order to continue working, and maternal grandmothers functioned as a substantial care base supporting the everyday lives of daughters' families.

This difference is important in relation to the theoretical framework of this study. It shows that grandchild care cannot be explained only as the accumulation of an additional role in later life, nor only as the strain produced by care work. Rather, the same care role takes on different meanings depending on the kinship relations through which it is organised. When grandchild care is assigned to paternal grandmothers as an expected obligation, role accumulation may easily turn into role strain. By contrast, when grandmothers support daughters' families within relationships marked by everyday conversation, consultation, and recognition, the same care work may be more easily experienced as meaningful and emotionally rewarding. In this sense, the findings suggest that role accumulation theory and role strain theory need to be connected with social exchange theory and socioemotional selectivity theory in order to explain how grandchild care affects older adults' quality of life.

Overall, the impact of grandchild care on grandparents' quality of life cannot be explained simply by whether grandparents are involved in grandchild care. The comparison between China, where grandchild care is more likely to appear as an

obligation of paternal grandmothers, and Japan, where it is more likely to appear as support for daughters' families centred on maternal grandmothers, shows that role, burden, exchange, and emotional fulfilment need to be understood together. This also highlights the importance of examining East Asian grandchild care through kinship relations and gendered care arrangements rather than treating it as a uniform family practice.

4. Future Area to Take Note of, and Going Forward

The next task is to examine the Chinese and Japanese data in greater detail and to clarify how grandchild care is organised through paternal and maternal kin relations. In China, paternal grandmothers tend to be positioned as expected caregivers under patrilineal norms, while maternal kin become less visible. In Japan, by contrast, daughters frequently rely on their own mothers, and care tends to be centred on maternal grandmothers, while paternal kin recede into the background. Future analysis will examine how these different patterns of visibility and invisibility are connected to the gendered concentration of care work on grandmothers.

In addition, future work will develop the analysis beyond an understanding of grandchild care merely as a source of purpose in later life or as a form of family contribution. It will focus on grandmothers' care work, relationships with the parent generation, the distance involved in co-residence and nearby residence, and the presence or absence of emotional exchange. In doing so, it will seek to clarify the realities of grandparental care in East Asia and the structure of invisible care work that supports family welfare.

5. Means of Official Announcement of Research Results

Part of this research was presented at the 34th Annual Conference of the Japan Society of Family Sociology on 7 September 2024. Future work will prepare a paper focusing on maternal kin relations that become invisible under patrilineal kinship norms in China and on the care burden concentrated on grandmothers, with the aim of submitting it to an international academic journal. In addition, another paper will be prepared as a comparative study of China and Japan, incorporating the Japanese interview data.