



Get Yourself an Insurance! Negotiating Family and Intergenerational Care in Post-Mao Urban China

Roberta Zavoretti

To cite this article: Roberta Zavoretti (2017) Get Yourself an Insurance! Negotiating Family and Intergenerational Care in Post-Mao Urban China, *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 11:3, 248-260, DOI: [10.1080/17496535.2017.1300306](https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2017.1300306)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2017.1300306>



© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 11 Aug 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 47



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

Get Yourself an Insurance! Negotiating Family and Intergenerational Care in Post-Mao Urban China

Roberta Zavoretti

Department Resilience and Transformation in Eurasia, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle Saale, Germany

ABSTRACT

In urban China, the demise of the employment-based welfare system dovetails with the commoditization of service provision and the state-led promotion of ‘family values’. Disadvantaged labourers invest most of their resources in their children, who are expected to become their future ‘insurance’. Notwithstanding their emotional and material investment in the upbringing of daughters, informants recast the birth of sons as a sign of success and continuity within wider care relationships. As these ambiguous relationships develop in the context of pervading insecurity, the birth of a son constitutes a definitive sign of a well-managed destiny. While this repertoire evokes the narrative of traditional familism, it feeds into state and market-sponsored policies that foster self-reliance, reinstating the family as the primary site of care provision.

KEYWORDS

Care; urban China; intergenerational relations; gender; family politics; destiny; class

Introduction

This paper explores how practices of intergenerational care are articulated by a family of Sichuan-born street sellers who had settled in the city of Nanjing over 12 years before our first meeting in 2007. While the building of a solid and happy family is considered by all family members as a fundamental premise of success, the ultimate signifier of this success is the birth of a male heir. Mr Zhang and his wife Ma Ying, who are already investing important sums of money in the education of their 11-year-old daughter Hong, specifically refer to their own baby son Doudou as a form of ‘insurance’ (*baoxian*).

This reference to the idea of ‘insurance’ is confusing, as the Zhangs grew up in the absence of state welfare provision. Ma Ying’s use of the word ‘insurance’ echoes the Maoist state’s provision of social welfare in urban work-units (*danwei*), as well as its decline following the dismantlement of the *danwei* system. In present-day China, entering urban employment does not necessarily correspond to a horizon of life-long security. While those employed in the public administration and in large firms are endowed with medical cover and pension schemes, many manual and unskilled labourers are supposed to purchase services at market prices or buy insurance. The Zhangs cannot afford privately mediated welfare, and they are excluded from the provision of minimum livelihood

CONTACT Roberta Zavoretti  Zavoretti@eth.mpg.de  Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, 36 Advokatenweg, 06114 Halle Saale, Germany

© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

guarantee (*dibao*) (Cho 2013, 127), precisely as they had been excluded from the Maoist system of state provision. In this context, they carefully manage their fertility and invest in their children in the hope they will reward them with old-age care.

Casting a son as the main recipient and future provider of care can be easily interpreted as the reproduction of 'Chinese' patrilineal tradition.¹ Yet this is not a simple story about the persistence, or even revival, of patrilinearity in the context of the privatisation of service provision. The Zhangs' eagerness to cast their baby son Doudou as a form of 'insurance' does not prevent them from investing in the education of their daughter Hong, who is expected to perform at school and to become a future provider of care as well.

The importance of a son's birth is certainly motivated by the need to find strategies to cope with an uncertain future in full accordance with a widely shared cultural repertoire. In addition, the arrival of a male child is also a sign of luck, a reward for the careful and entrepreneurial choices made by the couple during many years of uncertainty and hardship. This indicator of a good destiny is readable by everyone, in particular by the parents' kin and community both in the village and in the city.

The most important of these concerned people is probably Lao Zhang, Mr Zhang's elder brother, who had once been proud and petty towards his younger brother in need. Nowadays, a freshly arrived migrant in an unknown city, he cannot but rely on Mr Zhang to find accommodation, work and build contacts for his family. In his eyes, the birth of his younger brother's son is the trademark of success for a man who pursued his own life path as a migrant entrepreneur. In comparison, Lao Zhang's early choice to stick in the village appears as defeated by times, a defeat that is definitely sanctioned by the birth of Mr Zhang's baby son.

The relationship between Mr Zhang and his own family of origin is haunted by divergent claims on duty of care, all of which eventually revolve around the very idea of the patrilineal family as the primary site for this kind of provision. These differences are evened out by events that do not put in question the validity of this idea, but rather reproduce it and reinforce it even while social actors appear ready to adopt heterodox strategies towards economic and social security. This story highlights how practices of care in today's urban China cannot only be explained as an expression of the 'new prudentialism' underpinning agency in neo-liberal society (Rose 1999); nor can they be reduced to the expression of an immutable culture of patriarchy and patrilinearity that is often ascribed to Chinese society.

Meet the Zhangs

A few days after my arrival in Nanjing in August 2007 I met Mr Zhang, a Sichuan-born fruit seller who was living with his family in my same residential compound (Zavoretti 2016). Our acquaintance marked for me the beginning of an increasingly close relationship with his enlarged family, which at that time included his own household as well as his older brother's. Mr Zhang and his wife Ma Ying had two children: a girl of 11, Hong, and a baby boy called Doudou. Mr Zhang's brother, whom I will call Lao Zhang (old Zhang), was also married and had three children, two of which were living with him. While Mr Zhang had spent many years in Nanjing and raised his children there, Lao Zhang's household had only recently joined him in town. At my arrival, I was impressed by the level of interaction and cooperation between the two households, which were

sharing very limited living space, preparing and eating all their meals together. The wives of the two brothers, in particular, joined forces in order to clean and wash for everyone, prepare meals and take care of the baby boy.

With time I realised that Ma Ying and her sister-in-law were very different by experience and temperament; yet both women were aware of the need put aside their differences and cooperate in order to cope with the care needs of the enlarged family. The relationship between the two brothers, on the other hand, seemed from the onset far more complex. The extroverted Mr Zhang clearly performed as the family head, running his business, entertaining relationships with friends and neighbours, hosting dinner parties whenever the occasion required it, dispensing advice to young people and talking about his plans for the future. Lao Zhang, who was 8 years older than Mr Zhang, seemed instead happy to keep a low profile, doing the odd jobs he could get on building sites and keeping an eye on his youngest daughter.

Having just arrived in town from the village, Lao Zhang and his family depended on his brother's hospitality and assistance under almost any respect. Lao Zhang's status of elder was obviously at odds with the fact that his own household was dependent on his younger brother, who was behaving as if he had been the 'old' Zhang. These relations were reproduced during ritual celebrations, which invariably saw Mr Zhang hosting dinner parties, while his older brother and his family acted as guests. For example, when in the autumn of 2007 Lao Zhang turned 47, his younger brother hosted a dinner at a nearby Sichuan-style restaurant to celebrate the festivity; Lao Zhang, who was struggling to make a living, was not in a position to reciprocate; when Mr Zhang's birthday arrived, more than half a year later, the whole family celebrated it at home, with a banquet prepared by Ma Ying and hosted by Mr Zhang himself.

A daughter's birthday: get yourself an insurance!

After just over a month from Lao Zhang's birthday party, in December 2007, Mr Zhang and Ma Ying organised another dinner in a Sichuan-style restaurant not far from their store in order to celebrate Hong's 12th birthday. The party of family members and close friends counted around 15 people, and included the Yuans, a couple who came from Northern Jiangsu (*Subei*). The Yuans, who run their own small transport business, had a lively 6-year-old daughter, Little Yuan, who enjoyed playing and running around the table with Mr Zhang's nephew, while Hong, who was the oldest child, was keeping a composed attitude. During the dinner, a conversation started on whether the Yuans were planning to have a second child. This was a commonly debated topic for those whose first child had born female.²

The Zhangs did not hide their surprise when Mr Yuan replied that they were not planning to have a second child. Mr Zhang politely pointed out that it would have been advisable for them to have a boy, because their daughter would one day 'marry out' and they would be left 'alone'. Mr Yuan got impatient and replied that in this they had different points of view:

You are from Sichuan and you have your own ideas. We are from Subei and we have ours. I have a daughter and that's enough for the moment. We do not plan to have another child. Our situation does not allow us to do it. For me my daughter is as good as a son and I do not think she will let me down.

At this point, the discussion acquired a different tone. The Zhangs insisted that they did not intend to say that the girl would let her parents down. Ma Ying said:

We did not mean that. We do not tell you to have a son because we do not respect your daughter. We are telling you to have a son as a form of insurance!

I was intrigued by the use of this word from the part of Ma Ying. Because of their rural origin, nor Ma Ying or her husband had ever been covered by the comprehensive package of social security that used to be provided by the urban *danwei* system in the Maoist years (Croll 1999). The implementation of Maoist policies did benefit remote countryside areas by providing some healthcare coverage through the 'barefoot doctors' system (Gao 1999); while this had marked a noticeable improvement on pre-Liberation conditions, however, general care provision in the countryside was not comparable with the 'iron rice bowl' that the state provided to employed urban citizens. This was particularly relevant for the sustenance and care of the elderly, which for a large part of the rural population continued to be the responsibility of the elderly's offspring. Nowadays, as household-based entrepreneurs, Mr Zhang and Ma Ying were also excluded from the welfare packages enjoyed by people employed by the state or by large companies. The purchase of insurance at market price was out of their reach, too, as they prioritised other expenses: increasingly costly urban-based education for their daughter, medical bills for their little one and, last but not least, the purchase of an apartment within the Nanjing urban administrative area.

For Mr Zhang and Ma Ying, the word 'insurance' was the synonym of a privilege that they had long been excluded from. In the past, the Zhangs had never been able embody the privileged socialist subject that dominated the trope of urban-based life until the Open Door Reform. The end of Maoism and the liberalisation of urban-based welfare provision, however, had not brought about more security for these household entrepreneurs. Nowadays, privileged people could access insurance schemes through their employment institutions or could afford to buy insurance at market price. The Zhangs, however, could not embody the ideal of middle-class consumer supported by the neo-liberalised welfare state institutions of present-day China: a choice-making, self-regulating subject who exercises his/her right to consume as a 'social virtue' (Makovicky 2014, 8).

This impossibility to embody either an imaginary socialist subject, on the one hand, or the present-day ideal of the middle-class consumer, on the other, did not imply that the Zhangs were not touched by the disciplining efforts of both state and market institutions. The Zhangs articulated their idea of insurance through that of the future they imagined for their son. Accordingly, the Zhangs had carefully controlled their fertility in the years following the birth of their daughter. Both Mr Zhang and Ma Ying were keenly aware of the cost that supporting children implied in Reform-era urban China. Besides, their view of security could not be reduced to the low-end economic support that the state reserved for *dibao* recipients, but it revolved instead around aspirations for secure white-collar employment and home ownership. The Zhangs were therefore committed to make every possible effort to equip their son (and daughter) with the means to compete on the post-Mao job market, secure a comfortable lifestyle and eventually repay them with long-term intergenerational support. The Zhangs therefore performed parenthood as a careful venture plan, which involved a watchful regulation of economic *as well as* emotional investment.

Sons and daughters

The Zhangs trusted that their son would one day feel compelled to reciprocate the care they were now providing for him. While for privileged city dwellers, the need to 'take care of themselves' in terms of securing jobs, housing and welfare service provision constituted a hallmark of the post-Mao, and especially post-Deng era, Mr Zhang and Ma Ying's families re-articulated the idea of 'insurance' according to a long-standing repertoire of family-based self-reliance that revolved around the figure of the son as ideal provider.

The Yuans, in the meanwhile, were becoming increasingly nervous about all the unsolicited advice provided by the Zhangs. Mr Yuan's wife was visibly furious and accused Mr Zhang of diminishing her daughter. She said that Mr Zhang was too conservative, and this was proven by the fact that he left all the burden of housework on his wife's shoulders. Mr Zhang look mortified, and struggling to keep calm declared that he preferred to leave things like those to his wife because she was far more capable than him, and he was sure she could sort things out better than him. For a short while everyone was keen on making his or her point, but after a few minutes the atmosphere cooled down. After all, the Yuans were still invited guests at the Zhangs' table, and the Zhangs were also keen on maintaining a good relationship with their guests. Mr Yuan acquired a more benevolent attitude and concluded that it was fine to have different opinions, in the end they were coming from different places and for this reason they were bound to have different points of view. Mr Zhang apologised to the rest of us for the unpleasant episode.

For the Yuans, wanting a son at any price implied the idea that their daughter would not be, in herself, good enough. They vocally rejected this idea, even at the cost of offending their host by calling him misogynist and of spoiling their relationship with him. Mr Zhang and Ma Ying felt they had been misunderstood, since they had not intended to diminish Little Yuan. What they were speaking out was a 'common sense'³ idea according to which a daughter would not necessarily feel obliged to take care of her elderly parents.

The clash was finally sorted out thanks to a 'diplomatic' negotiation of local identities, which allowed Mr Yuan to 'other' his host and automatically re-state his position. The other participants to the dinner did not have a place within this discussion, possibly also because they were childless. Xiao Ma, an Anhui-born unmarried guest in her mid-twenties, did not seem keen on speaking up, even if she was supporting her elderly father herself. Hong kept silent during the discussion. Already too grown-up to play with the other children, but too young to be considered as 'adult', she sat silently and seemed to listen with keen attention.

Certainly the Zhangs' advice to their friends as well as their eagerness to have a male child were motivated by anxieties around what would happen during their old age (Stafford 2007). Notably, the argument between the Zhangs and the Yuans was not based on a disagreement on the importance of intergenerational support. Both couples shared a vision of future security that revolved around their children as care providers, and on the need to invest in them any possible resource. The Zhangs and the Yuans did differ however in terms of strategies, in so far the second couple considered one child only as a sufficient guarantee of care provision, even in the case in which the child had born female.

A close look at patterns of kinship-based support in urban China indicates that many couples share the Yuans' reproductive choices and strategies to secure old-age support

(Fong 2004; Milwertz 1996; Whyte 2003). Whyte's (2003) comprehensive study on intergenerational relations in urban China illustrates how co-residence of elderly parents with one of their children does not represent an essential pre-requisite for the maintenance of strong intergenerational ties. Parents may feel that daughters, 'traditionally' socialised as carers, may represent a more secure source of assistance than sons (Fong 2004; Milwertz 1996). Several informants of mine, apart from Mr Yuan and his wife, stressed that 'nowadays' daughters could be seen as better carers for their parents (Greenhalgh 1988, 664–665; Milwertz 1996), because they 'were more considered (*titie*)'. Daughters would also 'cost less' to parents, since they were not supposed to buy a house before marrying. Family members often drew on the vocabulary of choice and investment while negotiating family planning, reminding observers that in present-day urban China low fertility is not simply dictated by violently repressive measures, but produced through state and market institutions that govern desires, aspirations and visions of success (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005).

Mr Zhang often spoke in aspirational terms and used to joke about when his son would become Prime Minister and live in Beijing's Imperial Palace, but in more serious occasions he would state that university education would allow his son to become a Nanjing-er (*Nanjingren*). One day I asked him whether that would be the case for his daughter as well. 'Even easier', he replied, 'she marries here and she'll be a *Nanjingren*.'⁴ Mr Zhang's reply clearly reproduced the patrilineal paradigm according to which a woman was supposed to belong to her husband's family. I waited a few days for another favourable occasion and one evening, while we were having dinner, Hong excused herself to go to their tiny bedroom and finish her homework. Her parents ceremoniously apologised on her behalf: it was obvious to everybody that school homework was a priority for a girl of her age. I suggested that it was good that Hong took her studies so seriously, even at a young age. Would Mr Zhang hope for her to go to university one day? 'She will certainly go to university', he replied with a nervous grin and a determined look in his eyes.

Hong's parents were proud of her achievements at school and were keen on supporting her studies in the interest of the whole family. For someone like Mr Zhang and Ma Ying, higher education had always been a no-go area, a privilege of those with a 'luckier destiny' or supposedly higher abilities. If the official education system had once sidelined them as failures, the fact that their daughter was achieving good results in a Nanjing-based school could not only facilitate upward mobility for the whole family, but also redeem them from the stigma of ineptitude, backwardness and 'low quality' commonly associated with the countryside and with rural dwellers (Yan 2003, 2008).

Mr Zhang and Ma Ying, then, did not correspond to a stereotypical model of 'traditional parents' who would refuse to invest in a girl's education just because she was supposed to 'marry out' one day. Every day talk about Hong's future was not revolving around marriage, but around school routine, mathematics homework or what her teacher had told her on a particular day. Mr Zhang and his wife expected their daughter to perform well at school and thought that this would have eventually benefited the whole family.

A son's birthday: the rise of a family man

Just a few weeks after Hong's birthday, in early January 2008, the Zhangs organised a large dinner party in a fancy dining hall to celebrate their son's first birthday. It was on the

occasion of this grand celebration that I could fully appreciate the value that the Zhangs attached to the birth of their son. If their marriage and the birth of their first child could be read as a rite of passage into fully fledged adulthood, the birth of their baby boy had been the coronation of years of efforts and sacrifice, and had marked their passage into a more secure horizon (Croll 2000).

The Zhangs notified me well in advance of what was obviously going to be an once-in-a-lifetime event for the whole family. Around 50 people attended the dinner during which many Sichuan-style dishes of fish and meat were served, together with different kinds of drinks, including Great Wall wine and top-brand Chinese spirits. For the occasion, everyone was wearing their best clothes and Ma Ying had put on make-up and shimmering sparkler pins to hold her long, shiny hair. The atmosphere was very excited; the hall was filled with chattering and laughter and the kids were running around the sumptuously dressed tables, while young waitresses were bringing in the dishes from the kitchen. Mr Zhang's older brother Lao Zhang, who was sitting at a nearby table, came around to say hello. He sat next to me and before I could utter a word he declared:

My younger brother is really exceptional (*hen liaobuqi*). He 'got out' by himself when he was very young to work (*dagong*) and 'ate lots of bitterness' (*chi henduo ku*).

Mr Zhang had in fact left his village at the age of 14 in order to work on construction sites in the north of China. Lao Zhang, the oldest son of the family, had stayed behind in the village to farm. The fact that Lao Zhang addressed me to praise his younger brother's entrepreneurialism precisely during the celebration of the baby's first birthday was significant. Mr Zhang had been brave and hardworking, and, after many years of sacrifice, he had been rewarded with the birth of a healthy son, the quintessential marker of a good life, which in Chinese also indicates a good 'destiny' (*ming*).⁵ In this context, destiny does not necessarily denote a fatalistic superstition in a fixed, unchangeable fate, but is part and parcel of a hegemonic ideology of hard work and entrepreneurialism (Harrell 1987). Casting the birth of a son as a reward for long-lasting sacrifice was a popular leitmotif in the media and among my other informants as well. While I was doing participant observation in a Nanjing-based cake bakery, for example, one of the bread bakers told me that the low turn-over of the company personnel was motivated by the competence shown by his foreign employer (*laoban*), and in order to praise him he elaborated a narrative that struck me as very similar to Lao Zhang's:

We all really respect our *laoban*. He arrived in China when he was still young, but he was resolute in his will to succeed. He worked very hard and studied diligently to learn Chinese. He studied Chinese characters even by night! He was tired, but he went on studying. He ate a lot of bitterness (*ta chile hen duo ku*) in order to succeed. Here in China he met his wife; they got married. Now he is the *laoban* of this company, and he has a son.

Both stories highlight that the necessary precondition for succeeding in business and life is to 'eat bitterness' and to persevere in moments of loneliness and hardship. As destiny can change and bring surprises, it will be fully known only by the end of a person's life (Harrell 1987, 100). For a grown up man as Mr Zhang, the arrival of a son 11 years after the birth of a daughter, and over 20 years after he had left the village as a teenager signified the materialisation of his hope for old age security. It also boosted Mr Zhang's reputation within his closest circle, as most of his relatives and friends

recognised this happy event as a just retribution for his entrepreneurial spirit, his perseverance and his behaviour as a caring husband and family father. For Doudou's parents, the coming of a son implied the achievement of a main life objective and had obviously brought to a dramatic change in their status within their circle of friends and relatives (Croll 2000, 82).

Accordingly, the birth of a baby son required the organisation of a sumptuous feast for 50 people. It was precisely through major investments like this one banquet that Mr Zhang and Ma Ying were reproducing all-important care and support networks for themselves and their children. While, sitting at my place, I was trying to keep a rough count of the dishes and bottles that kept being served at our table, and pondering the financial implication of those numbers, Mr Zhang walked to the centre of the hall and, holding a microphone, he cheerfully welcomed us and thanked everyone for being present. Then he said that we were all together to celebrate Doudou's first birthday, and that he hoped that in the future we would be close to them and the little one, helping them in case of need.

Two brothers in changing times

As suggested by Lao Zhang's praising of his brother's enterprise, having a baby son was more than deserved after the heroic sacrifices he had to endure after leaving the village. By 'going out on his own', Mr Zhang had given proof of exceptional courage, decision-making and endurance. This emphasis on the sacrifices that Mr Zhang had to endure in order to survive and one day eventually prosper (and have a male son) suggested that Lao Zhang, who had instead stayed in the village to farm, had not been equally ready to eat bitterness in order to succeed. The experience Mr Zhang had gained during those years as a migrant had made him 'superior' to his older brother, who could not draw on his own skills as a farmer in order to face daily problems in Nanjing. At the age of 47, Lao Zhang was a late newcomer in the big city and was obviously struggling in his attempt to catch up with the 'journey' that his younger brother had embarked on over 20 years earlier.

Lao Zhang's opinion of his younger brother, however, had not always been so high. In the past, he had looked upon Mr Zhang's choice to leave the village as selfish and uncaring towards their enlarged family. Once Mr Zhang had come back to the village with his pregnant wife in order to have his first baby in his natal home, Lao Zhang had refused to host the couple and to provide Ma Ying with the post-natal care that most Chinese women feel entitled to. After this episode, the relationship between the two brothers had become sour and Mr Zhang had decided to go back to the city with his young family in order to start afresh as a trader.

With the growth of rural to urban migration in the 1980s and 1990s, people who, like Lao Zhang, had remained in the countryside have often felt 'left behind' in villages now inhabited only by the elderly and young children. Lao Zhang's decision to move to Nanjing at this stage of his life was also connected to his wish to increase the employment prospects of his own children, and in particular of his own 21-year-old son Zhang Wei. Moving to the town did not guarantee that Zhang Wei would eventually prosper, but at least allowed Lao Zhang to ensure that his son had the same opportunities of any other boy of his age. As a caring father he could not but allow him to go, possibly drawing on the support of his own younger brother.

Zhang Wei seemed to be the only member of Lao Zhang's family who truly enjoyed having moved to Nanjing. Differently from his parents and his younger sister, he seemed completely at ease in his new environment and had quickly found a job for himself. The young man also enjoyed the company of his uncle, whom he visibly treated with respect and admiration. According to Zhang Wei, there was nothing to do for him in the village, nor there were young people like him left there: 'they have all gone out to find jobs (*dagong*)'.⁶

The different paths and personalities of the Zhang brothers suggest an ironic inversion of stereotypically 'traditional' power relations within the family, with a younger brother mentoring his older brother. As for the apparent inconsistency between the Zhangs' son preference, and their investment in their daughter's education, the two brothers' relationship highlights the need to analyse family and gender relations as intimately linked with the dynamics of class formation in post-Mao China. Because gender roles are inevitably class coded (Xiao 2011; Yang 2010), family histories like the Zhangs' also illuminate class formation at a time in which the family is re-proposed by state and market as the primary site for social reproduction and, often, income generation and capital accumulation (Palmer 1995, 2007).

In this context, Mr Zhang's flamboyant deportment as family head was in line with the entrepreneurial spirit that had allowed him to travel around the country and become a businessman. Mr Zhang was keen on being perceived as an experienced 'man of the world' and good family father, and the birth of a male son further confirmed him as fit and deserving to lead his enlarged family. Lao Zhang's statement of admiration for his younger brother, on the other hand, suggested he had not been equally able to lead his family. His own determination to stay in the village despite the generalised movement towards the industrial east coast appeared as hopelessly contrary to the changing of times and inevitably bound to the Maoist past (Yang 2010). In this respect, the failing of Maoist rural-based ideas of development also corresponded to Lao Zhang's loss of manly pride within his own family, which nowadays had to face a difficult and tardy move to the city, and to be patronised by his younger brother.

Lao Zhang was well aware that his own son Zhang Wei constituted his own 'insurance' for the future, and for this reason the now ageing farmer was keen on providing his son with the employment opportunities offered by the big city, but also on staying as close to him as possible. For Mr Zhang, on the other hand, the status he had gradually gained by being a veteran migrant in the city also implied an implicit obligation to help those relatives who wanted to follow (Gao 1999, 216). Mr Zhang was visibly keen on regaining his family's independence as quickly as possible. Although he projected the image of a street-wise urban-based entrepreneur, he was not in the condition to fully support his brother's family. His priority was to sustain his wife and his children: these relationships had given him status within his own circle of relations (including his patrilineal ones) and allowed him to articulate his own identity as that of a self-reliant entrepreneur and solid family father.

Conclusion

Following the dismantlement of the *danwei* system and the privatisation of service provision, in present-day urban China, the state requires Chinese people to be no more

recipients of state welfare, but self-reliant and enterprising individuals. Citizens of different background are expected to behave according to a 'new prudentialism' (Rose 1999) that re-casts family-based strategies of support at the centre of survival and social mobility. Post-Mao privatisation of service provision dovetails with a pre-existent ideology that posits the family as the primary site for the provision of care, notably through the enactment of age- and gender-specific familial roles. These roles, at the same time, are also expression of class and status in the context of the dramatic realignment of class and gender taking place in post-Mao China (Xiao 2011). The configuration of the Zhang family raises interesting questions about how paradigms like son preference and age-based hierarchy keep their rhetoric power in everyday language, and yet are continuously challenged through social practice.

For rural-born manual labourers and entrepreneurs like the Zhangs, the birth of a baby son constitutes an 'insurance' for the future, as Ma Ying mentions. Her words highlight the Zhangs' hope to guarantee their children what they had been denied in virtue of their rural origin: continued access to urban-based services. The Zhang's insurance scheme, however, requires much emotional and economic investment, and as such it implies the need to carefully plan their own fertility and economic behaviour. The Zhangs invest their savings in buying an apartment in the city and in securing their children's education, in order to provide them with the best possible conditions to compete on post-Mao China's aggressive job market.

In other words, the Zhangs consume themselves in order to equip their children to become competitive job seekers, competent consumers and, accordingly, reliable care providers. These hopes may of course fail to materialise. The social inequalities that divide Hong and Doudou from middle-class children are likely to prevent them from accessing privileged positions in their adult lives. Despite the dramatic retrench of the state from service provision in the post-Mao era, however, the trope of urban-based security is still very much alive in the desires of people like Mr Zhang and Ma Ying.

The Zhangs' long-term planning highlights that 'in China the governance of the population increasingly works through the autonomy and agency – and ultimately through the desires, needs, rights, interests and choices of individuals', while powerful state and market institutions are at work to shape those same desires and needs (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005, 362). The importance of self-management and planning becomes all the more evident during the Zhang's argument with the Yuans, who are ready to forfeit the chance of having a son. While, as the Zhangs, they articulate their visions of security in terms of intergenerational support, the Yuans differ from them as they consider one daughter as a sufficient guarantee of care provision.

Despite their eagerness to have a son, the Zhangs devote many resources to their daughter's education, hoping that she (before her brother) will one day succeed as a university graduate and find secure employment. In this view, despite a rhetoric focus on the son as the primary care provider, the young girl, too, is bound to her parents by the duty of intergenerational care. This primacy of the son, therefore, cannot be understood as the simple expression of a rigid and immutable tradition that proscribes any investment on daughters. The Zhangs' keenness to have a son needs to be understood in the context of a widespread common sense that casts entrepreneurialism and hard work as the key to success and prosperity not for one person only, but for people *as specific members* of their families, and eventually of wider circles of social relations.

Part and parcel of this ideology is the notion that the birth of a son constitutes a sign of success and good destiny (*mingyun*). The birth of Mr Zhang's son is the ultimate proof that he had made the most of his *ming* by 'moving' (*yun*) in the right direction: that of market reform. Twelve years later, Lao Zhang moved in the city, under increasing pressure from the part of his own 21-year-old son, Zhang Wei. He now appears as a rapidly ageing man who must adapt to changing times for the sake of his own children who are, inevitably, his own insurance for the future. Mr Zhang, on the contrary, emerges as the man who succeeded thanks to his entrepreneurship and his endurance against all adversities.

Lao Zhang's words define Mr Zhang's life experience as inherently superior to his own one, as he is nowadays compelled to seek the support of his younger brother in the city. Mr Zhang's status as dominant working-class man and head of the family is the product of long-term negotiations that involve not only family members, but also larger institutions like the state and the market. The most trying of these negotiations involve competing claims on care, putting once again in question class and gender-specific familial roles: the older brother, the younger sister-in-law, the father and so on.

The renewed centrality of the family in people's expectations for care provision highlights the importance that care maintains not only for their physical sustenance, but also in the emergence of class-based difference and of the ideologies that justify it. In her work on inequality among brothers in Hong Kong, Rubie Watson (1985) argued that family and lineage dynamics could only be understood as the expressions of class-based social order:

If we remember that Chinese lineage existed in a class-based society with a complex state and religious system, we begin to see that lineage did not dominate but was dominated by these wider social forms. (173).

Accordingly, family histories like that of the Zhangs highlight that these gendered and class-coded relationships, which most often revolve around expectations and claims of care, are at the core of social order in market-oriented Chinese society; in other words, these family-based relationships are not ancillary but central to the production of class.

Notes

1. Scholars of Chinese society have devoted particularly intense attention to the phenomenon of son preference, especially in connection with the one child policy. A comparative case has been made by Amartya Sen, who looked at the phenomenon of 'missing women' in China and India (1990). Elisabeth Croll, among others, has further developed this comparison (2001).
2. At the time of this fieldwork, having a second child in Nanjing implied the obligation of paying a fine. The system of fines for the birth of more than one child is complex: rates vary according to different factors (residence status, 'ethnic' group, number of siblings in the former generation, etc.) and have been changing over time. In cities like Nanjing, the reproductive behaviour of rural-born citizens is policed by the state and constructed as undisciplined and backward; on the other hand, official policies are gradually allowing wealthier citizens a wider range of choice in terms of family size.
3. According to Gramsci, 'common sense' may be defined as a belief that cannot be easily refuted, because it rests on assumptions that coincide with the basic principles of moral economy and social order. The editors of the *Selection from the Prison Notebooks* define 'common sense' as 'the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and

- understanding the world that has become “common” at any given epoch’ (1971, 322). Notably, Gramscian ‘common sense’ differs from the current meaning of ‘common sense’ in English.
4. For a long time, marriage with an urban residence holder did not entitle the ‘rural’ spouse to automatically transfer his or her residence. The couple’s children would automatically inherit the mother’s residence status. According to Fei-Ling Wang, the reform process in this field started in 1998 (2004, 123).
 5. In Chinese, the word destiny (*mingyun*) includes both pre-ordered elements (*ming* means ‘destiny’, ‘life’ but also ‘order’), and aspects that can be modified by human action (*yun* means both ‘movement’ and ‘luck’). I translate *mingyun* as ‘destiny’ since I see the latter as the English word that gets closest to its meaning. The Chinese word, however, also refers to cyclical reincarnation.
 6. Zhang Wei’s enthusiasm about being in Nanjing echoes Gao Mobo’s description of his natal village in Jiangxi. According to this description, the Maoist horizon of rural-based development has given way to official discourses that rendered life in rural villages as a second-class existence that was barely worth living (Yan 2003): ... a young villager is considered odd if he or she stays in the village. In fact, virtually all the young people in Gao village have gone. The very few who remain are considered to be incompetent (Gao 1999, 16).

Acknowledgements

Fieldwork for this article was partly supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Cho, Mun Young. 2013. *The Specter of ‘the People’: Urban Poverty in North East China*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Croll, Elisabeth. 1999. “Social Welfare Reform: Trends and Tensions.” *The China Quarterly* 159: 684–699.
- Croll, Elisabeth. 2000. *Endangered Daughters: Discrimination and Development in Asia*. London: Routledge.
- Croll, Elisabeth. 2001. “Amartya Sen’s 100 Million Missing Women.” *Oxford Development Studies* 29 (3): 225–244.
- Fong, Vanessa. 2004. *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China’s One-Child Policy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gao, Mobo. 1999. *Gao Village: Rural Life in Modern China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Greenhalgh, Susan. 1988. “Fertility as Mobility: Sinic Transitions.” *Population and Development Review* 14 (4): 629–674.
- Greenhalgh, Susan, and Edwin A. Winckler. 2005. *Governing China’s Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Harrell, Stevan. 1987. “The Concept of Fate in Chinese Folk Ideology.” *Modern China* 13 (1): 90–109.
- Makovicky, Nicolette. 2014. “Me, Inc.? Untangling Neoliberalism, Personhood, and Postsocialism.” In *Neoliberalism, Personhood, and Postsocialism: Enterprising Selves in Changing Economies*, edited by N. Makovicky, 1–16. London: Ashgate.
- Milwertz, Cecilia. 1996. *Accepting Population Control: The Perspective of Urban Chinese Women on the One-Child Family Policy*. Richmond: Curzon Press.

- Palmer, Michael. 1995. "The Re-emergence of Family Law in Post-Mao China: Marriage, Divorce and Reproduction' in Lubman, Stanley (guest ed.) 'Law in China under reform.'" *The China Quarterly* 141: 110–134.
- Palmer, Michael. 2007. "Transforming Family Law in Post-Deng China: Marriage, Divorce and Reproduction." *The China Quarterly* 191: 675–695.
- Rose, Nicholas. 1999. *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sen, Amartya. 1990. "More Than 100 Million Women Are Missing." *New York Review of Books* 37 (20). <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1990/12/20/more-than-100-million-women-are-missing/?printpage=true>.
- Stafford, Charles. 2007. "What is Going to Happen Next?" In *Questions of Anthropology*, edited by R. Astuti, J. Parry, and C. Stafford, 55–75. Oxford: Berg.
- Wang, Fei-Ling. 2004. "Reformed Migration Control and New Targeted People: China's Hukou System in the 2000s" *The China Quarterly* 177: 115–132.
- Watson, Rubie. 1985. *Inequality Among Brothers. Class and Kinship in South China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Whyte, Martin K., ed. 2003. *China's Revolutions and Intergenerational Relations*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.
- Xiao, Suwei. 2011. "The 'Second-Wife' Phenomenon and the Relational Construction of Class-Coded Masculinities in Contemporary China." *Men and Masculinities* 14: 607–627.
- Yan, Hairong. 2003. "Spectralization of the Rural: Reinterpreting the Labor Mobility of Rural Young Women in post-Mao China." *American Ethnologist* 30 (4): 578–596.
- Yan, Hairong. 2008. *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Yang, Jie. 2010. "The Crisis of Masculinity: Class, Gender, and Kindly Power in Post-Mao China." *American Ethnologist* 37 (3): 550–562.
- Zavoretti, Roberta. 2016. *Rural Origins, City Lives. Class and Place in Contemporary China*. Seattle: Washington University Press.