

# Traditional Values in the Upbringing of Chinese Children: Challenges and Adaptations in Contemporary Chinese Society

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**Abstract.** This paper examines the traditional values in the upbringing of Chinese children, focusing on the influence of Confucian philosophy, the shift towards individualism, and the evolving role of equality of men and women in modern Chinese society. Historically, Chinese parenting emphasized collectivism, filial piety, and academic success. In recent years, changes in society, like increased individualism, globalization, and progress in equality, have led to a shift in how children are raised. While women have made strides in education and career opportunities, old social roles persist, especially regarding household responsibilities. Women continue to face societal pressures to balance professional success with domestic duties, showing that old cultural values remain strong. This paper explores these tensions and the ongoing adaptation of parenting practices in the context of an evolving society.

**Keywords:** Chinese upbringing, traditional values, Confucianism, social roles, women, education, individualism, family dynamics, child-rearing, modernization, Tao Xingzhi.

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# Традиционные ценности в воспитании китайских детей: вызовы и адаптация в современном китайском обществе

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**Аннотация.** В статье рассматриваются традиционные ценности в контексте воспитания китайских детей с акцентом на влиянии конфуцианской философии, сдвиге в сторону индивидуализма и эволюционирующей роли равенства между мужчинами и женщинами в современном китайском обществе. Исторически сложилось так, что китайские родители делали упор на коллективизм, сыновнюю почтительность и успехи в учебе. В последние годы такие изменения в обществе, как рост индивидуализма, глобализация и прогресс в области равенства привели к изменению подходов к воспитанию детей. Хотя женщины добились успехов в образовании и карьере, старые социальные роли сохраняются — особенно в том, что касается домашних обязанностей. Женщины продолжают сталкиваться с общественными нормами, пытаясь совместить профессиональный успех с домашними обязанностями, что свидетельствует о сохранении старых культурных ценностей. В данной статье рассматриваются эти противоречия и продолжающаяся адаптация родительских практик в контексте развивающегося общества.

**Ключевые слова:** китайское воспитание, традиционные ценности, конфуцианство, социальные роли, женщины, образование, индивидуализм, семейная динамика, воспитание детей, модернизация, Тао Синчжи.

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## Introduction

Raising children in Chinese society is closely linked to traditional values, especially those from Confucian philosophy and culture (Gu & Zhang, 2024). Key aspects include respect for authority, family hierarchy, filial piety, and a strong focus on education. These values shape family relationships and social interactions. However, modern society presents challenges to these values. Globalization, technology, and changing cultural norms are prompting families to rethink these beliefs. As they adapt to modern life, they are trying to blend old values with new ideas about individualism and equality, aiming to raise children who respect their heritage while thriving in today's world.

### Confucian Influence vs. Individualism

Chinese society has long placed great emphasis on collectivism, prioritizing the needs of the family, community, and society over individual desires (Wood, 2023). Children were traditionally raised with a strong sense of duty toward their family and a deep feeling of respect for elders. Central to this upbringing was the concept of filial piety (孝, xiào), which encouraged children to honor not only their parents but also their ancestors and elder people as well. In essence, the core idea of parenting in traditional Chinese society involved guiding children to uphold family values and maintain the continuity of cultural heritage through reverence for their forebears.

However, modern society forces Chinese families to rethink their beliefs about the traditional way of raising children due to challenges that are emerging. It's fair to say that to adapt to modern life, they have to cope with the new values brought about by globalization, technology, and changing cultural norms.

### The Philosophical Foundations of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism

Confucianism, as highlighted earlier, emphasizes the welfare of society over individualistic pursuits (Chou, Tu, & Huang, 2013). Moral development, which is diligently nurtured and actively encouraged by Confucian parents who play a key role in their children's upbringing, occupies a central position in shaping and influencing the overall trajectory of a human being's existence and personal growth. As a result of the process of bringing such philosophical principles to life, the aim of traditional Chinese society's parents is still to cultivate harmonious family relationships and a sense of duty towards the nation and the world, ultimately promoting a cohesive social structure based on family, nation, and global unity (Gu, 2012). Thus, the idea of social

harmony, which is also one of the main objectives of the Confucian doctrine, begins at the family level and extends to the community level (Joseph, 2023).

Daoism also emphasizes the importance of moral development; however, in contrast to Confucian practice, it promotes the concept of *ziran* (自然), or spontaneity in its natural way, which encourages individuals to act in accordance with their true nature and the universe's inherent laws (Xu, 2009). The moral system of Daoism focuses on collective harmony as well, but to achieve it, the individual must first attain personal harmony, as part of a collective balance (Culham & Lin, 2020: 25). Moreover, Daoist philosophy tends to minimize hierarchical structures in parenting (Low, 2012). When comparing the philosophical ideas of Daoism and Confucianism, it should be noted that Daoism, unlike Confucianism, does not directly impact child-rearing practices; however, the core ideas of Daoism promote flexibility and adaptability, which are qualities that are becoming increasingly important in today's modern parenting in China.

Buddhism, as a philosophical doctrine, also cannot be ignored in this comparison, as it promotes values such as selflessness, loving-kindness, and social responsibility, which shape the harmonious coexistence of individuals and society. By highlighting the importance of mindfulness and the impermanence of life, it adds a spiritual dimension to the process of child-rearing (Thathong, 2012).

These three philosophical systems still influence the process of raising children in Chinese society, shaping its framework. However, all of them face challenges from modern societal norms and are being absorbed and mixed with them.

### **The Rise of Individualism**

As Chinese society has evolved and modernized, certain foundational principles of Confucianism have gradually adapted to cope with the demands and values of contemporary life (Huang, 2016). The shift is not a complete departure from Confucian ideals but rather a transformation that combines the enduring spirit of Confucianism, which was forming for ages, with the needs of modern life. This evolution reflects a broader trend towards individualism in Chinese society, particularly in urban areas. Modern Chinese families are increasingly balancing old values — such as obedience and family loyalty — with Western ideals of personal freedom and self-expression.

This shift can be attributed to changes in the socio-economic landscape, particularly in the job market. As China has become more economically dynamic and consumer-driven, the focus has moved from collective well-being to personal achievement (Yan, 2020). With the rise of consumerism and the emergence of youth culture, individual aspirations have come to the forefront. Personal success is increasingly seen as a measure of one's value and fulfillment, which becomes a stark contrast to the earlier emphasis on collective goals. According to various studies, Chinese citizens now place greater importance on individualistic factors, such as personal accomplishment and self-realization, in their pursuit of happiness. This shift

in priorities underscores the changing dynamics of family life and child-rearing in modern China (Steele & Lynch, 2013).

To sum up, Chinese society is changing as old values mix with more modern, individualistic ideas. Parenting is evolving to balance respect for family with a growing emphasis on personal success and self-expression.

### **Educational Expectations vs. Child-Centered Approaches**

In traditional Chinese society, education always played a central role in life, as it was seen as a pathway to social mobility and success. The educational process was largely controlled by parents, who focused more on memorization and discipline rather than creativity or critical thinking. Parents' primary concern was not necessarily the quality of knowledge but ensuring that their children followed rigid academic standards. Chinese parenting, historically, has followed a collective desirable path (CDP), emphasizing academic excellence and societal success (Qi & Du, 2020). CDP has been shaped by the one-child policy and intensified parents' expectations for academic success, contributing to the creation of a highly competitive society. According to some researchers, while this approach helped improve social mobility and family prosperity, it may have limited children's individual development. That is because children were often forced to compete with their peers, prioritizing external expectations over pursuing their own interests and passions. As a result, the process of achieving personal goals and exploring individual talents was often overlooked.

One well-known example of strict parental control is the “tiger mom” phenomenon, popularized by Amy Chua in her book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (Chua, 2011). This concept stresses the importance of strict parental supervision in educational success. According to this approach, the control exerted by parents is seen as a key factor in ensuring their children meet high academic standards (Kuefer, 2016).

### **Influence of Tao Xingzhi's Educational Philosophy**

Modern educational psychology advocates for a more child-centered approach, focusing on emotional intelligence, creativity, and holistic development (Liu, 2024). Mostly the concept of education in China is rooted in the educational philosophy of Tao Xingzhi (陶行知, 1891–1946). This philosophy integrates Western principles of education as well. Tao Xingzhi promoted the idea of «life education» (生活教育, *shēnghuó jiàoyù*) and “learning by doing”, encouraging hands-on, experiential learning that connects education to real-life experiences (Tao, 2016).

In recent years, China's educational landscape has been shaped by Western philosophies. Their influence has led to a growing emphasis on student well-being, critical thinking, and personal choice, shifting down parents' expectations for children's success. It's also fostering a more flexible and individualized approach to the process of education itself and tempering parents' expectations for their children's success.

## **The Interplay of Political Aspects, Family Policies, and Urbanization in Child Upbringing in Modern China**

Traditional Chinese upbringing has typically adhered to strict social roles, with boys and girls facing distinct expectations. Boys were often seen as the bearers of the family name, expected to be strong, confident, and accomplished. In contrast, girls were traditionally raised to be obedient, focusing on household tasks and preparing for marriage (Attané, 2013).

### **Political Aspects and Family Policies**

The political landscape of China has shaped family structures and parenting styles, particularly through the introduction and long-term enforcement of the one-child policy. The one-child policy, which was instituted in 1979 and lasted until 2015, was designed to curb rapid population growth and align with the nation's economic and social development goals. While the policy achieved its demographic goals, it also brought about significant and often unintended implications for Chinese families. It also had an impact on the process of reshaping societal norms, dynamics in social roles of men and women, and parenting practices.

### **Effects on Family Structures and Parenting Styles**

The policy's impact extended far beyond population control. The old family unit was fundamentally transformed with the appearance of the one-child policy and one-child households. These kinds of families, often referred to as «4-2-1» families (four grandparents, two parents, and one child), placed a certain focus on the only child. Families with one child, often called "little emperors" in academic discussions, made him the main focus of their active investments. Families were also heavily aimed at making sure their only child excelled in school and achieved success in their careers, no matter the child's gender or background (Fong, 2004).

It's obvious that while that kind of policy was achieving its goals, it also placed pressure on the only child, such as increased stress and competition among the other children. The new environment was created: the emphasis on individual achievement created the sphere where children were expected to succeed in order to get personal fulfillment as well as secure their parents' future well-being (Zeng, Li, & Ding, 2020). The high-pressure environment not only limited opportunities for creative or non-academic pursuits but also confined children to a rigid academic framework, leaving little time or encouragement for self-expression or exploration of interests outside the structured educational system.

### **Impact on Dynamics in Social Roles of Men and Women**

The implementation of the one-child policy in the late 20th century also had a profound effect on dynamics in social roles of men and women. Historically, sons were more favored in Chinese families due to old values that bring up the importance of male heirs for carrying on the family lineage

and providing economic support. However, the one-child policy disrupted these long-standing preferences and principles. With only one child allowed, families mostly began to place a higher value on the educational and career potential, regardless of sex. The value placed on daughters increased. They started to receive the same level of parental investments as sons (Chow & Zhao, 1996). This shift was evident especially in urban areas, where the level of spiritual and material investments from parents to their daughters was growing significantly, and as a result, their daughters were also able to get a better education as well (Luo & Chui, 2019). So, on the one hand, it's clear that modern Chinese society has witnessed a great shift toward equality of men and women, especially with women gaining better access to education and career opportunities.

However, on the other hand, this shift has not been without its challenges, as old social expectations still persist in many areas, creating a tension between progressive values of equality and entrenched cultural norms. The persistence of patriarchal norms often places a dual burden on women, as they are expected to juggle professional careers while fulfilling old domestic roles. This ongoing struggle underscores the complexity of achieving true equality in contemporary Chinese society, where progress in one area can be undermined by deeply ingrained cultural traditions (Berna, 2013).

### **Reversal of the One-Child Policy and New Challenges**

To solve the problem of an aging population and declining fertility rates, the Chinese government decided to cancel the one-child policy. The government replaced it with a two-child policy and later a three-child policy, which were aimed at encouraging larger families and solving the problem of demographic imbalance. However, it led to new issues.

The realities of modern urban life, which include high living costs, housing shortages, and the financial burden of childcare, make the process of raising multiple children an almost impossible prospect for many families (Yu, 2024).

The Chinese government now stresses the significance of family values and traditional roles, especially due to an aging population and falling fertility rates. However, these efforts to encourage larger families often conflict with the realities of modern urban life, where financial strain and dual-income households make it difficult to raise several children (Shao, 2024). Women have to face the pressure of fulfilling the old roles of caregivers and mothers, even though they have achieved professional success and have built up a career.

### **Family Policies and Their Role in Shaping Upbringing**

The continued tension between old roles and modern aspirations highlights the challenges in achieving full equality in Chinese society. And it's obvious that the following tension between progress and traditions is especially seen in the sphere of education and career choices for women (Ming, 2023). While educational attainment among women has greatly improved, with statistics showing a marked increase in women's postsecondary education rates since

the early years of the People's Republic of China (Xie, 2013), many women still face pressures from society to prioritize family over their personal or professional ambitions.

Faced with societal expectations to prioritize family responsibilities, women often find themselves forced to take on the role of primary caregivers (Jiang, 2019). This dynamic influences parenting practices, as mothers shoulder the burden of the majority of child-rearing responsibilities, while fathers continue to play a secondary role in many families.

The struggle between building a career and meeting family responsibilities is made worse by social expectations to maintain family values. This expectation is based on Confucian beliefs as well (Li, 2024).

Government campaigns that actively advocate for the idea of “family harmony” often rely heavily on the foundational principles and teachings of Confucianism (Lee, 2024), which in turn serve to reinforce and perpetuate long-standing old social roles and societal expectations surrounding the behavior and responsibilities of individuals within the family unit (Rothmann, 2023). For instance, many initiatives aimed at supporting the concept of bigger families often highlight the crucial role of a mother's constant responsibility in running the household well. This point also resents the vital function of mother-caregiver as essential for the overall safety and health of society. Although this cultural narrative acknowledges and values the importance of householding as a vital aspect of family life, it simultaneously creates significant barriers that make the achievement of true equality in the distribution of parenting responsibilities and duties more difficult and challenging to realize.

By encouraging the belief that women must put family first instead of their own goals or careers, these social and cultural expectations block progress towards a more equal distribution of caregiving responsibilities (Cui, 2022). Achieving true equality in parenting requires not only a cultural shift but also systemic support for shared responsibilities, such as policies that promote paternal involvement and work-life balance for both parents.

### **Cultural Influence of Urbanization on Parenting**

Urbanization has become a powerful change in modern China, greatly impacting family dynamics and different methods of raising children (Jacka, Kipnis, & Sargeson, 2013). As families relocate to urban centers in search of better job opportunities and enhanced living conditions, they face many cultural practices and financial situations that are different from the lifestyles they were used to before. The quick-moving and complex nature of urban life, characterized by its fast tempo and diverse social influences, puts significant pressure on old parenting techniques and ways of raising children (Lee, 2024).

One notable consequence of the ongoing urbanization process is the clear shift towards nuclear families, which now dominate in urban Chinese cities (Wang, 2018). In contrast to the extended family systems that are prevalent in rural communities, urban families often lack the help that grandparents and other relatives can offer, which increases the pressure on parents as

they try to balance working and caring processes for their children. This evolving landscape has led to a heightened reliance on daycare services and extracurricular programs, which also raise significant concerns regarding the emotional well-being and psychological health of children growing up in such environments.

Urbanization has also brought up Western ideals of individualism and self-expression. They have contrasted with Chinese values of collectivism and filial piety, which are mostly brought by Confucian philosophy practice (Bian, Chen, Greenfield, & Yuan, 2022). In urban areas, parents now are more likely to encourage their children to aim for their personal interests and develop critical thinking skills, which reflect the influence of global educational philosophies and principles. Many Chinese parents in central areas are now looking for alternative ways of learning, which children could pay more attention to in accordance with traditional methods. Increasingly, parents are choosing schools that offer education in English rather than solely in Chinese. Moreover, if the family's budget allows, parents often opt to provide their children with the opportunity to study abroad. This allows children to improve their English proficiency and develop a more open-minded perspective compared to their peers.

The reasons for the latter are quite logical: not every child at such a young age has the chance to leave the area where they have grown up and gain the significant new experience of living in another country. This exposure not only broadens the child's interests but also gives them a head start in various areas, such as understanding other cultures and ways of life, compared to students who have not had the opportunity to study outside of China.

However, this process of changing the social norms often logically leads to conflicts between generations, as older family members struggle to reconcile these changes with their own upbringing experiences, which are already becoming outdated for modernized society. Many students, after graduating from Western universities and returning to China, experience a strong sense of adaptation to Western societal and educational norms. This adaptation often leads to conflicts not only at the family level, where generational differences arise, but also in their professional lives. In Chinese corporate culture, employees are expected to show the same level of respect for directors and higher-ranking officials as demanded by family hierarchies, rooted in Confucian principles. This emphasis on hierarchical respect and behavioral conformity contrasts sharply with the corporate culture of young Western companies and startups, where the focus is primarily on an employee's qualifications, skills, and contributions, rather than their deference to authority. These cultural differences create a challenging dynamic for returnees. On one hand, they may feel pressured to conform to the hierarchical expectations of Chinese corporations, leading to psychological stress and a sense of compromise. On the other hand, if they attempt to assert their Western-influenced values — such as prioritizing merit over hierarchy — they risk being perceived negatively by their employers. This tension between Confucian values and modern, merit-based workplace ideals highlights the broader struggle of integrating global perspectives into local cultural frameworks.



Thus, returning to the question of Chinese parents' attempts to provide their children with what they consider the best education by combining the ideals and principles of Western and Eastern education systems, their children inevitably face a clash between these two systems. To navigate this conflict, they must learn to carefully maneuver between the opposing values and expectations of each system. This hybrid approach to education offers significant advantages for those children who manage to familiarize themselves with both Western and Eastern principles and cultural values during their educational journey. However, at the same time, it complicates their subsequent career paths, forcing them to make compromises on many fundamental issues that are important to them.

### **Intersection of Urbanization and Dynamics in Social Roles of Men and Women**

The last point to discuss is the influence of urbanization on social dynamics. The interplay between urbanization and social roles further complicates parenting in modern Chinese society. Childcare responsibilities are shaped by socioeconomic factors such as education, occupation, and urban residency. Women in urban areas are increasingly joining the workforce and delaying marriage and childbirth, which challenges old family roles.

Parenting styles in urban areas generally fall into three categories: "mother-oriented", "father-oriented" and "parental collaboration". However, research shows that the "mother-oriented" style remains the most common (Yang, 2023). While urban women are more willing to share parenting responsibilities with their partners, this shift toward collaborative parenting is still not widespread. The gradual nature of this change reflects a slow transition toward more egalitarian family structures. However, the question of evenly dividing roles between the two parents remains unique to each family, making it difficult to generalize the trend or emphasize that it is characteristic of life in many modern Chinese megacities.

The impact of urbanization on social dynamics is not uniform across China. Rural-to-urban migrants often bring old social norms with them, creating a cultural dichotomy within cities. Migrant families frequently struggle to adapt to the demands of urban life, leading to disparities in parenting practices and access to resources.

There are also known cases where migrants from rural areas bring with them their child-rearing habits and traditions, which, in turn, set a trend for preserving traditions within modern families. This phenomenon has spurred the development of specific services designed to uphold these traditions while adapting them to contemporary conditions. One such example is the Chinese tradition of "doing the month" (坐月子, zuò yuèzi), a postpartum practice that involves a period of complete rest and recovery for women after childbirth. Traditionally, a woman who had given birth to a child was not allowed to leave the room for a month, spending most of her time in bed and eating warm food. Such traditional health beliefs are now often viewed as relics of the past by educated and modern women (Zhang, 2023). However, today, this tradition is being reimagined in more comfortable and modern settings: many maternity

hospitals now offer comprehensive postpartum recovery programs, providing new mothers with a month-long rest period while specialized nannies take care of the newborn.

These modern maternity and postpartum facilities enable many women to recover effectively while also offering the option of returning to work quickly. By adhering to this traditional practice, women can seek assistance from nannies, caregivers, massage therapists, and doctors from the very first months of their child's life. They can also delegate childcare responsibilities to their own parents or their husband's parents. Thus, the tradition of "doing the month", which predates urbanization, now combines the benefits of rapid physical recovery and an early return to work without sacrificing career progress. This is made possible by the fact that childcare duties are often taken on by retired grandparents, allowing both parents to focus on their careers.

In summary, urbanization in China has transformed family structures and parenting, challenging social norms while creating new opportunities for growth and adaptation. Families now balance the influences of globalization and individualism with traditional values like collectivism and filial piety, which are often leading to generational conflicts and a shift in cultural priorities.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the traditional values that have shaped Chinese child-rearing practices, particularly those influenced by Confucianism, are increasingly being challenged and adapted in modern Chinese society. As China continues to modernize, a blend of old values such as respect for family and authority, and more contemporary ideals like individualism and equality, are influencing how children are raised and educated nowadays. While there are clear shifts toward individualism and greater equality of men and women, particularly in education and professional opportunities, old social roles, especially those related to women's responsibilities in household duties, are deeply ingrained. Despite women making significant strides in education and the workforce, they continue to face societal pressure to balance career success with fulfilling old domestic roles. This double challenge shows how difficult it is to reach real equality in today's Chinese society.

The deep-rooted cultural ideas about social roles have mostly stayed the same, making it hard to fully accept modern views. This changing scenario shows the challenge of keeping cultural traditions alive while welcoming fresh viewpoints in a quickly globalizing world. Furthermore, the intersection of urbanization and globalization has introduced new complexities to parenting and social dynamics. Urban families, influenced by Western ideals of individualism and self-expression, are increasingly encouraging their children to pursue personal interests and critical thinking. However, this shift often clashes with the expectations of older generations, who were raised under more collectivist values. As a result, many families are navigating a delicate balance between preserving cultural heritage and embracing modern,

progressive values. This tension is particularly evident in the evolving roles of women, who are now expected to excel both professionally and domestically, often without adequate systemic support. To achieve true equality and holistic child development, Chinese society must continue to address these challenges by fostering policies that promote shared parenting responsibilities, work-life balance, and equal opportunities for all.

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