

Raising yet another generation

Questions arise about the health needs of older people who help to bring up their grandchildren

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The World of Chinese

The *Wuhan Morning Post* reported recently that a 63-year-old woman was diagnosed with depression from the stress of caring for her grandchildren. This triggered debate on social media over the ethics of young people foisting their child-raising responsibilities on their aging parents.

According to the report, the woman, surnamed Li, moved to the central city of Wuhan three years ago from her hometown in East China's Shandong province to help raise her grandson, and then her new granddaughter.

Li also did all the housework while her daughter was at work, and slept with the grandson at night, when she would be frequently awakened by the child.

After her diagnosis, Li told doctors that she "lived in constant fear of accidents" or illnesses that the child could suffer under her watch, for which she could be blamed by her daughter or son-in-law.

In 2013, researchers from Case Western Reserve University, in the United States, who conducted long-term studies on grandmothers in various family situations, from full-time caregivers to those not involved in parenting their grandchildren at all, concluded that grandmothers who are grandchildren's primary caregivers need help in dealing with depression and family strain.

Still, the Wuhan report claims that 60 to 70 percent of children under

2.5 years in China are cared for by their grandparents, as well as 40 percent of children older than 3 years.

Given the lackluster support for mental illness in China, these figures are indeed alarming. However, netizens — who, it must be noted, tend to be young — found the matter far from clear-cut, with many reluctant to criticize the parents for their entitlement (though there was still plenty of that):

One of the comments online was:

老人带孩子只是分担一些, 很多成年人都把这个当成了老年人的责任. 凭什么带大了你, 还要带大你的孩子?

Lǎorén dài hái zǐ zhǐ shì fēndān yīxiē, hěnduō chéngnián rén dōu bǎ zhègè dāngchéng le lǎonián rén de zérén. Píng shénme dài dà le nǐ, hái yào dài dà nǐ de hái zǐ?

Elderly people raise children to share the burden, but many adults regard it as the elders' duty. Why should your parents be obliged to raise your children after having raising you?

However, many empathize with young couples who have no choice because they have to work full-time:

自己的孩子自己带, 根本就不现实. 现在的年轻人, 工作压力很大, 不上班, 一个人养家又不行. 买房, 养娃, 连最基本的衣食都保证不了!

Zì jǐ de hái zǐ zì jǐ dài, gēnběn jiù bù xiànshí, xiànzài de niánqīng rén, gōngzuò yā lì hěn dà, bù shàngbān, yìgè rén yǎngjiā yòu bùxíng. Mǎifáng, yìgè rén yǎngjiā yòu bùxíng. Mǎifáng,

yǎng wá, lián zuì jīběn de yīshí dōu bǎozhèng bùliǎo!

It's no longer realistic to raise one's children oneself. Young people today have tremendous pressure at work and can't afford to live on a single income — it's not enough to buy a house, raise a child, or even to buy food or clothing.

年轻人不是不想带, 是要上班. 一个人的工资不够开支. 不过老年人带确实累, 都不容易.

Niánqīng rén bùshì bùxiǎng dài, shì yào shàngbān. Yìgè rén de gōngzī bùgòu kāizhī. Bùguò lǎonián rén dài quèshí lěi, dōu bù róngyì.

It's not that young people don't want to raise children, they have to work ... though it's true that this is exhausting for the elderly, nobody has it easy.

Some have pointed out that the entitlement goes both ways. There are young adults who were pressured by parents to have children:

父母催生的时候就是你生了我帮你带. 真的生了各种矛盾各种埋怨. 人老了根本就没精力. 生出来还是自己的责任. 所以别因为父母一句话不想生都生了. 还是自己有足够的的能力再说.

Fùmǔ cuīshēng de shíhòu jiùshì nǐ shēngle wǒ bāng nǐ dài. Zhēn de shēngle gè zhǒng máodùn gè zhǒng mányuàn. Rén lǎo le gēnběn jiù méi jīnglì. Shēng chū lái hái shì zì jǐ de zérén. Suǒyǐ bié yīnwèi fùmǔ yìjù huà bùxiǎng shēng dōu shēngle. Háishì zì jǐ yǒu zúgòu de nénglì zài shuō.

When parents pressure you to have children, they promise to help you raise them; then afterwards they complain. It's true that the older they get the less energy they have to raise

children ... So don't have children unless you're able to raise them, no matter what parents say.

Finally, some point out that without a total overhaul of society's attitudes on child-rearing, all that this debate accomplishes is to put more pressure on women:

你不生孩子人家骂你自私. 你生了孩子在家照顾说你吃白饭不赚钱. 你生了孩子给父母带说你不孝顺. 所以, 以后不要有女性这种生物了, 给你们添堵了.

Nǐ bù shēng hái zǐ rén jiā mǎ nǐ zì sī. Nǐ shēngle hái zǐ zài jiā zhàogù shuō nǐ chī bái fàn bù zhuàn qián. Nǐ shēngle hái zǐ gěi fù mǔ dài shuō nǐ bù xiǎo shùn. Suǒ yǐ, yǐ hòu bù yào yǒu nǚ xìng zhè zhǒng shēng wù le, gěi nǐ men tiān dǔ le.

You're selfish if you don't have a child; you're lazy if you stay at home to raise your children; if you ask your parents to raise them, you're unfilial. Why does this organism known as "woman" exist, except to be criticized?

又是自己的孩子自己带, 又要女人独立, 请问女人是超人吗? 全职在家要面临被丈夫抛弃, 被社会抛弃的结局, 出去工作又要被说对孩子不负责. 那哪家公司允许女人带着娃上班?

Yòu shì zì jǐ de hái zǐ zì jǐ dài, yòu yào nǚ rén dú lì, qǐng wèn nǚ rén shì chāo rén ma? Quán zhí zài jiā yào miàn lín bèi zhàng fū pāo qì, bèi shè huì pāo qì de jié jú, chū qù gōng zuò yòu yào bèi shuō duì hái zǐ bù fù zé. Nà nǎ jiā gōng sī yǔn xǔ nǚ rén dài zhe wá shàng bān?

Women are supposed to raise their own children and also be independent. Are they superwomen? Full-time housewives who get cheated on by their husbands get looked down on by society. Work, and people say that's irresponsible to their children. What company allows women to bring their kids to work?

看了一圈评论, 都在说女人带孩子还是外婆带孩子还是奶奶带, 都是丧偶式家庭吗? 爸爸死了吗?

Kàn le yì quān píng lùn, dōu zài shuō nǚ rén dài hái zǐ hái shì wài pó dài hái zǐ hái shì nǎi nai dài, dōu shì sàng' ǒu shì jiā tīng ma? Bà ba sǐ le ma?

I have looked through the comments, which are all debating whether the children should be raised by the mother or grandmother. Are they all from widowed families? Is the father dead?

These generational and gendered attitude divides are unlikely to find easy bridges.

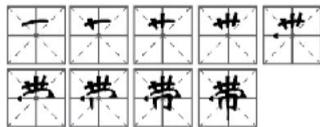
More applicable in this situation, but less discussed, may be the cost and other stresses of living in China's cities, the lack of affordable child-care options, the pressure on the current generation of young adults to succeed, and the lack of mental health services for the elderly (or anybody).

Meanwhile, Li in Wuhan recently got some help — of a sort: Now that the grandson has started kindergarten, she's only responsible for the new baby. The boy is going to live with his other grandparents.

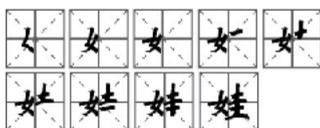
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dài wá, babysitting