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**Two-sided Marriage: Intergenerational Bilateralism
and Egalitarian Family Practices in China**

By

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Introduction

In 1979, the Chinese government implemented the One-Child Policy (OCP) to accelerate modernization through birth control, resulting in the world's largest population of only children. It is estimated that there were more than 220 million only children in mainland China at the end of 2015 (Li et al., 2018). Among these, one-daughter families are facing more complex problems: the patrilocality and patrilineality of kinship, which implies that families reproduce along the male side of the family, does not protect these family's interests well. As the old Chinese saying goes: "married daughter, splashed water". In traditional Chinese family, daughters are destined to marry out, and they lost their belongings to their natal families upon marriage. Daughters are usually not considered heirs to property, family name or lineage, nor are they the primary and indispensable care provider for their parents (although in reality many married daughters continued to visit and support their parents). If only-daughter families continue to follow the old way, the parents would be left without a successor, who keeps the resources and property of the family within the lineage and bears the obligation of providing for the parents' old age.

To cope with this situation, a new marriage pattern, known as the Two-Sided Marriage (两头婚, hereafter in this article, the term will be abbreviated as TSM), has been practiced in recent years among one-child families. TSM is essentially a contract, usually an unwritten one, between two families whose only children are getting married. It abolishes the exchange of bride price and dowry, and instead emphasizes equal importance and contribution of both families. While specific arrangements vary significantly by class and region, TSM typically includes the following common aspects: the bride's family is expected to invest as much into the newlyweds

as the groom's family, including splitting the costs of housing, cars, the wedding ceremony, and/or providing equal support in childcare. In return, each set of parents receives a grandchild who carries their family name (a possibility enabled by the universal two-child policy, which officially legalized the right to have two children), and both sets of parents are assured care and support in old age. Thus, an ideal TSM family follows a "4-2-2" structure: four grandparents, two parents, and two children.

The core feature of TSM is a shift away from the traditional conception of *jiaqu* (嫁娶, "marrying out" or "marrying in", see Figure 1) toward a model that emphasizes neither side "giving away" nor "taking in" a spouse. This represents a transformation from a unilineal, one-sided model of marriage to a two-sided configuration marked by equal involvement of both families (see Figure 2). Also, in each Two-Sided Marriage (TSM) household, two sets of parents and two parallel lines of family names and property inheritance are brought together within a single conjugal unit. These dual kinship and resource structures connect three generations simultaneously, forming a complex web of intergenerational ties and obligations that are negotiated across both maternal and paternal lines.

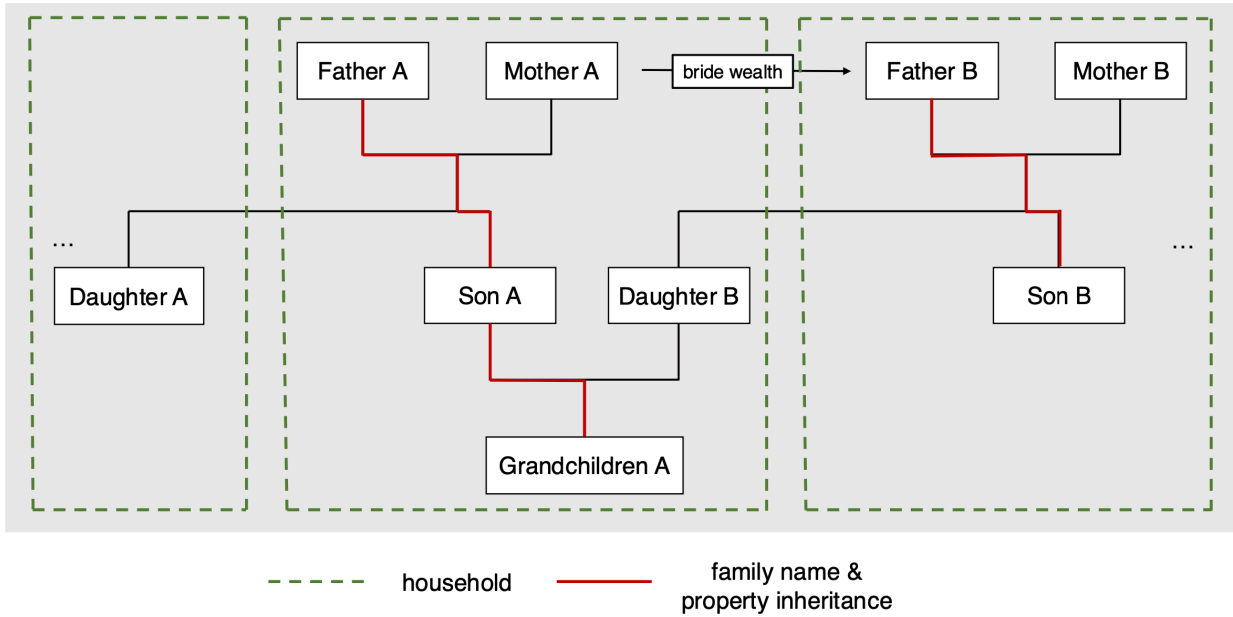


Figure 1

The patrilineal jiaqu kinship model

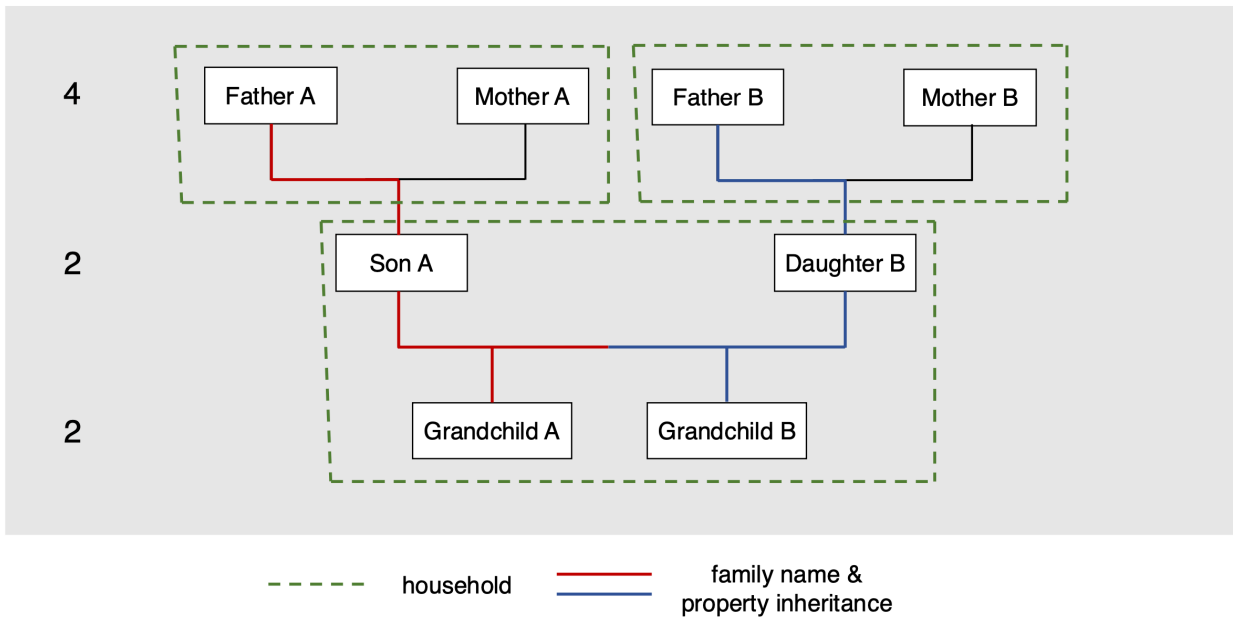


Figure 2

The TSM kinship model

In the old order of Chinese family life, age and gender have been the basis for family hierarchies, where older are superior to younger, and men are superior to women. This is what Santos and Harrell (2017) refer to as the gender axis and the generational axis, which constitute Chinese patriarchy. They also observed “the genderedness of the generational axis”, which refers to the structurally gendered nature of intergenerational relations—specifically, how responsibilities for caregiving, inheritance, and filial duties are distributed according to gender. Traditionally, this axis has been both patrilineal and gender-specific, but it is now being “twisted”: patrilineal centrality is beginning to weaken, gendered divisions of labor are becoming more blurred, and daughters are gradually gaining a more prominent role in intergenerational support.

This study’s analysis follows this relational structure. Conceptually, the structure of TSM can be understood as consisting of two interwoven sub-contracts: an intergenerational contract and an affinal contract between the two families. Following a brief discussion of the sociohistorical emergence of TSM, Chapters One and Two explore these two sub-contracts respectively by focusing on the vertical and horizontal axes that organize TSM households. The vertical axis addresses the flow of intergenerational support and obligations, while the horizontal axis—a bit different from what Santos and Harrell (2017) describe as “the genderedness of the generational axis”—focuses on the bilateral configuration of family structure, where both patriline and matriline hold parallel weight and legitimacy. In Chapter Three, I shift to examine a second horizontal dimension within TSM households: the gender axis. Here, the analysis moves beyond structural symmetry to reveal the persistent gendered dynamics that shape reproductive labor, domestic responsibilities, and symbolic value.

As in any social system, structure is only a starting point. Kinship is not a fixed framework or static entity, but an ongoing relational practice. Beyond the balanced and symmetrical structure lay questions about how such arrangements are lived, experienced, and made to work in practice—particularly under conditions of asymmetry, uncertainty, and unequal expectations. This leads to the central inquiry of the thesis: What brings families to embrace this arrangement? How do families negotiate the allocation of resources, labor, power and value while fostering intimacy during the constant practice of TSM? And how does such practice reshape the intergenerational, affinal and gender relationships?

By situating these inquiries within broader theoretical conversations on feminist critique, kinship practices, and neo-familism values, this study seeks to illuminate how Chinese families creatively adapt to ongoing demographic and sociocultural transformations. In doing so, it reveals how families negotiate emergent tensions between the pursuit of intergenerational support and the aspiration for gender equality—highlighting both the possibilities and contradictions embedded in contemporary familial arrangements.

Methodologically, this research draws on a combination of interactive interviews, digital ethnography, and autoethnographic reflection. As a newly married participant in a TSM myself, I approach the field as an insider, occupying what Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy (1997) describe as an interactive stance grounded in emotional reciprocity and relational closeness. My interlocutors are not distant informants, but peers with whom I share generational location, cultural expectations, and everyday experiences.

Interviews were conducted online with 18 interlocutors located in various regions in China¹, primarily come from the Jiang-Zhejiang-Hu region²—the birthplace and heartland of TSM—but several came from other provinces such as Liaoning and Anhui. The majority were only children born between the 1980s and 2000s, a demographic shaped by the OCP and central to the rise of TSM. They occupied different points along the marital life course: some were preparing for marriage, some married but childless, others had children, and two had already divorced. I also spoke with three individuals who, despite both partners being only children, chose not to pursue TSM—offering important comparative insights. Two participants, a bride’s mother and a groom’s father, represented the parent generation and provided cross-generational insights. One particularly insightful interview was with a divorce lawyer practicing in the Jiang-Zhe-Hu region, who, without breaching client confidentiality, reflected on patterns she observed in TSM-related divorces.

The digital ethnographic component centers on Rednote, a popular Chinese lifestyle and social media platform used by urban youth. From March to June 2025, I systematically observed public posts, comment threads, and tagged content under keywords such as “two-sided marriage” and “Jiang-Zhe-Hu only daughter”. Initially adopting a non-interactive stance, I documented publicly visible material without direct engagement. Later, I contacted several users whose posts aligned with my research interests. With their informed consent, I conducted follow-up interviews and incorporated their original content into this study.

¹ All interviews were conducted with informed consent and, unless otherwise noted, pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity. Transcribed quotations from interviews are marked accordingly (e.g., “Interview with Moli, recorded 2025”).

² Culturally speaking, although the term “Jiang-Zhe-Hu region” is named after the abbreviations of three provincial-level units—Jiangsu (Jiang), Zhejiang (Zhe), and Shanghai (Hu)—it typically refers to the core area of the Yangtze River Delta, namely southern Jiangsu, northern Zhejiang, and the municipality of Shanghai, which together form the heartland of the historically affluent Jiangnan region.

Finally, I draw on autoethnographic reflection, integrating remembered observations, informal conversations, and written reflections on my own TSM experience. This material is interpreted through a self-reflexive lens that recognizes my dual position as both researcher and participant embedded in the very kinship arrangements I study. This positionality allows for a more grounded, situated understanding of how broader structural dynamics—such as gendered expectations, intergenerational negotiations, and shifting kinship norms—are lived, embodied, and sometimes contested in everyday life.

The Generational Axis and A Brief Background of TSM

The emergence and popularity of TSM are rooted in a unique historical context and cultural landscape at the local level. This chapter traces how demographic, economic, and cultural shifts in Jiang-Zhe-Hu have fostered the re-emergence of TSM as a solution to the challenges posed by singleton daughterhood. In the TSM, there are renewed negotiations over intergenerational responsibilities—such as housing, elder care, and child-rearing—in both sides of the family. The generational asymmetries are no longer based on coercive institutional forces, but they are still vital to the family and evolves through an intergenerational contract. Through empirical materials, this chapter answers this key question: what is exchanged between parents and their adult children (as well as grandchildren) in TSM, or in other words, what different generations seek to gain from this arrangement?

“Jiang-Zhe-Hu Only Daughter” and The Emergence of TSM

In recent years, the term “Jiang-Zhe-Hu Only Daughters” has gained popularity on the Chinese internet. It refers to cherished only daughters from economically prosperous families in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shanghai—long renowned for its economic prosperity and a refined cultural heritage. These daughters are widely seen as growing up at the center of parental attention, and as continuing to receive sustained support—financial, emotional, and symbolic—well into adulthood. While daughters across China increasingly benefit from stronger parental backing, Jiang-Zhe-Hu only daughters are often regarded as uniquely privileged, not only receiving large material transfers such as apartments or cars by the time they graduate college, but also being treated as central to their natal families’ long-term plans for care and continuity. Such portrayals reflect broader shifts in the gendered dynamics of parental support, while also pointing to regional patterns shaped by class, urbanization, and local cultural values.

Though the figure of the “Jiang-Zhe-Hu only daughter” has, like many internet phenomena, taken on an exaggerated, almost urban-legend quality on social media, observable family practices among my interlocutors suggest a material basis for this image. Of the nine Jiang-Zhe-Hu only daughters I spoke with, six had apartments purchased by their parents before marriage, and one had a newly rebuilt rural house. One interlocutor, Jianjun, the father of a groom in a TSM, also noted that his daughter-in-law had her own apartment bought by her parents.

What makes “Jiang-Zhe-Hu only daughters” particularly noteworthy is not simply that they are daughters, but that they are the only child in their family, a demographic configuration shaped by the OCP and modern reproductive planning. While it was not unheard of in imperial or early modern China for daughters to be sole children—often due to high infant mortality or

lack of male offspring—such cases were largely circumstantial and relatively rare. Under traditional patrilineal norms, family property was legally and customarily passed down through the male line, and daughters typically received little to no inheritance beyond a dowry or wedding gift (Goody, 1990; Harrell & Dickey, 1985). The large-scale emergence of only daughters as a social category, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon. It stems primarily from the implementation of the OCP started from the late 1970s and 1980s, especially in urban areas, where compliance with state family planning was more strictly enforced (Guo et al., 2003). Although the policy was officially lifted in 2016, many urban couples continue to opt for a single child. The policy's primary goal was to accelerate China's socioeconomic modernization through population control (Greenhalgh, 2008), but one of its unintended consequences has been the emergence—and, in some cases, the empowerment—of only daughters, who increasingly occupy central roles as emotional anchors and primary heirs within their natal families.

In the absence of sons, families redirected their aspirations and investments toward daughters, treating them more like sons in terms of expectations and resources (Wang & Zhang, 2021). This shift is especially evident in urban areas, where strict policy enforcement led to increased investment in daughters' education and careers (Fong, 2007; Huang, 2015; Huang et al., 2019). These daughters, in turn, are able to strategically navigate and challenge gender norms in education, work, and marriage, leading to greater opportunities and a more egalitarian future for them (Fong, 2002).

Lee, an only daughter from Ningbo, Zhejiang, described how the support from her parents influenced her sense of security:

I've always been very confident. When I was looking for a job, I felt that it wouldn't be a big deal if I didn't find one—my parents are fully capable of supporting me and wouldn't blame me.

(Interview with Lee, recorded 2025)

However, the one-child policy was implemented nationwide—why “Jiang-Zhe-Hu” in particular? Although similar dynamics exist in other wealthy urban areas, the Jiang-Zhe-Hu region is emblematic due to its historical prosperity, cultural specificity, and institutional legacy. And this very context has also enabled the rise and widespread of TSM in the region.

When people refer to “Jiang-Zhe-Hu,” they are essentially referring to a place associated with wealth. According to Skinner (1995), Jiangnan's long-standing wealth stemmed from population density, water transport, developed markets, and trade integration. Gates (1996) describes Jiangnan as the heartland of petty capitalism—characterized by contract-based exchange, a formally egalitarian structure, and an emphasis on the family unit over extended patrilineal lineage. This legacy of household-based entrepreneurship and flexible labor patterns has fostered a distinctive commercial ethos that remains influential today. Building on this long-standing economic culture, post-1980s market reforms further transformed the Yangtze River Delta into a hub of private enterprise. A 2024 Hurun Wealth Report found that roughly 29 out of every 100 wealthy households in China are located in the Jiang-Zhe-Hu region (Hurun Research Institute, 2024).

Culturally, while residence and inheritance in Jiang-Zhe-Hu have historically favored males and patrilineal norms, the strength and visibility of lineage institutions in the region appear relatively attenuated compared to other parts of China. Atsutoshi Hamashima (2011) famously

claimed that there is “no *zongzu* in Jiangnan” (江南无宗族)³, using *zongzu* to refer to a patrilineal kinship collective that ensures both biological and social reproduction. His claim has sparked debate and is challenged by historical and ethnographic evidence of active patrilineal lineages in the region. Nonetheless, Hamashima’s observation draws attention to the comparatively weaker presence of material and symbolic markers of lineage authority in Jiangnan—such as ancestral halls, lineage estates, and strict seniority hierarchies. Other scholars have similarly noted that while patrilineal clans certainly exist in Jiangnan, they tend to be less dominant and exert more limited influence than those in southern Zhejiang, Anhui, Fujian, and Guangdong (Xu, 2013).

Patrilineal *zongzu* organizations are centered on male descent, recognizing only men as legitimate bearers of the family line. In regions where such lineage structures are weaker, cultural preference for sons has also tended to be less pronounced. Take my hometown—Jiaxing, located in northern Zhejiang—as an example. According to the Gazetteer of Jiaxing Prefecture compiled during the Guangxu reign of the Qing dynasty (光绪嘉兴府志), the customary practices of the region did not include female infanticide (Xu & Wu, 1879, Vol. 34). This stood in contrast to broader patterns across China, where female infanticide was a relatively common phenomenon (Baker, 1979).

This tradition of valuing daughters, when coupled with strong state control (Gates, 1996)—which more effectively dismantled traditional clan structures during collectivization and enabled stricter enforcement of the OCP—helped produce the exceptionally high rates of only children in the Jiang-Zhe-Hu region. According to data from China’s Seventh National

³ Hamashima delineates a narrower definition of “Jiangnan,” referring specifically to the Taihu Lake region encompassing the five historical prefectures of Suzhou, Songjiang, Changzhou, Jiaxing, and Huzhou.

Population Census, Shanghai had the highest proportion of only children nationwide at 64.4%, followed by Jiangsu (47.2%) and Zhejiang (37.4%), both ranking among the top ten provinces (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). When only the culturally defined Jiang-Zhe-Hu region discussed in this article is considered—excluding northern Jiangsu and southern Zhejiang—the proportion is even higher.

Indeed, looking back on my childhood in Jiaying, it was rare to meet local classmates who weren't only children. Even in my rural elementary school—where families with rural household registration could legally have a second child if the first was a girl—few chose to do so. According to the Zhejiang Provincial Gazetteer of Family Planning, several counties in Jiaying were designated as “National Advanced Collectives in Family Planning” during the policy era. By 1999, the city's birth rate had dropped to 8.14 per thousand, the total fertility rate had fallen below replacement level, over 70% of families had only one child, and the sex ratio at birth was below 103⁴ (Zhejiang Provincial Committee for the Compilation of the History of Family Planning, 2004). In other words, different from the skewed sex ratios observed in many other parts of China due to gender-selective practices (Li, Yi, & Zhang, 2011), families in Jiaying, and likely the broader Jiang-Zhe-Hu region, largely refrained from using such technologies to ensure the birth of a son.

The high rate of only children has created challenges now that this generation has reached marriageable age. In the past, wealthy only-daughter families would recruit men to marry into and reside with a the family, known as *ruzhui* (入赘). However, when the prospective son-in-law is also an only child, his family is far less willing to forgo their sole male descendant.

⁴ The sex ratio at birth (SRB) refers to the number of male live births per 100 female live births. A global average is around 105.

Additionally, there exists another underlying concern in *ruzhui* arrangements involving wealthy only daughters: the potential accusation of *chijuehu* (吃绝户, literally “eating the extinct household”), a term referring to taking advantage of a family line that has no male heirs, thereby “claiming” the inheritance of a now-extinct patriline. As a result, TSM has emerged—or more precisely, re-emerged—as a popular arrangement among only-child families to cope with this situation.

TSM is not a recent invention. In *Peasant Life in China*, Fei Xiaotong (1938, p.71) recorded an early form of TSM in Wujiang, Jiangsu nearly a century ago. He described a local custom known as “*lendiugoxofen*” (Wu dialect of 两头挂花幡), or “hanging flowery flags at both households,” which occurred when a bride came from a family without sons. In such cases, the bride’s family could request that the groom agree to let their daughter carry on the family line. In other words, the bride’s natal family claimed the right to designate one of her male children as their own patrilineal descendant. During the wedding ceremony, symbolic flowery flags were placed on the ancestral shrines of both families, marking that both lineages had descendants.

Kang, a young man from Zhenjiang, Jiangsu, shared that this arrangement was practiced in his parents’ generation. Because his mother had no brothers, his parents also opted for a two-sided arrangement. Growing up, Kang lived alternately between both households, took his mother’s surname, while his brother bore the father’s. In Kang’s generation, even though neither he nor his fiancée is an only child, they have chosen to continue the TSM.

Before the universal two-child policy was enacted in 2016, the TSM was preceded by the double surname system (复姓制) in some region, combining the surnames of father and mother

as the child's surname (Qi, 2018). The early cohort of urban only children were still restricted by the OCP by the time they had children, and the double surname system can be seen as an attempt to combine matrilineal and patrilineal inheritance in a single child. For others, TSM had already become a viable option prior to the universal two-child policy. In addition to the existing allowance for rural couples to have a second child if their firstborn was a girl, further policy relaxations were introduced: in 2011, couples where both partners were only children were permitted to have a second child, and in 2013, this was extended to couples where only one partner was an only child. Against such backdrop of evolving family planning policies in China, three of my interlocutors were only children born in the 1980s who entered into TSM and went on to have two children in the 2010s.

While some only children born in the 1980s had already begun experimenting TSM it was the 1990s-born generation that helped bring TSM into broader recognition and made it a legitimate and increasingly mainstream marital arrangement among only-child families. According to discussions on Rednote and my interlocutors, TSM is now also practiced in other provinces such as Fujian, Liaoning, Anhui, Hunan, Guangdong, and Guangxi, but mostly in urban areas. Sometimes it goes by different names and takes slightly different forms depending on the local context, with varying degrees of institutionalization. TSM is referred to as *bingjia* or *liangtou zou/zhu* (并家, joining families; 两头走/住, two-sided living/residence) in southern Jiangsu, *pinghun* (平婚, equal marriage) in parts of the Jiangnan Plain, and *liangtougou* (两头顾, two-sided care) in Fujian and Anhui. Interestingly, *bingjia* and *pinghun* highlight the structural characteristics of TSM, in which two families are merged on equal terms into a single unit. While *liangtouzou/zhu* and *liangtougou* derive their names from the everyday practices of TSM,

emphasizing the couple's obligation to care for both sides of the family and alternate their residence between parental households.

TSM is more prevalent and institutionalized in the Jiang-Zhe-Hu region, where it is widely practiced across both rural and urban contexts—a difference also reflected in terminology. Fang, a woman from Anhui, described her own experience of a locally termed *liangtougou* (两头顾, “two-sided care”). Unlike the Jiang-Zhe-Hu model, marriages in her hometown still distinguish between marrying out and marrying in. Although no bride price or dowry was exchanged, Fang—classified as having married out—had a son who took the father's surname and relied on her husband's family for the wedding, housing, and childcare. Yet as an only daughter, she is still responsible for supporting her own parents—hence the emphasis on “care.” After her son took her husband's surname by default, she decided not to have a second child, and her parents are fine with not having a grandchild with their surname. Had the baby been a girl, she noted, the surname might have been open to negotiation, and that would also mean she'd need to have another child—preferably a son—to carry on her husband's family line.

Fang's case illustrates that in regions like Anhui, where patrilineal norms remain strong, TSM is less a product of active negotiation or egalitarian arrangement by only-daughter families than a pragmatic response to the inescapable realities of inheritance and elder care placed on daughters after marriage. By contrast, in the Jiang-Zhe-Hu region, the bride's parents are positioned as equals to the groom's from the outset. It is widely accepted that they should contribute financial resources comparable to those of the in-laws and are entitled to have one grandchild bear their surname. One of my interlocutors, Yiting, an only daughter from Jiaying, said that she opted for a traditional marriage simply because she did not want to have two children. This choice indirectly illustrates the extent to which TSM has become formalized in the

Jiang-Zhe-Hu region—so much so that having two children is often seen as a default expectation (although it is not always fulfilled). This highly institutionalized intergenerational contract also gives rise to more complex dynamics of power and reciprocity between generations, which I explore in the following sections.

“Everything We Own Will Eventually Be Yours”: The Downward Flow

In the western world, Van de Kaa’s (1987) Second Demographic Transition thesis emphasized a shift toward individualization, prioritizing personal autonomy and self-realization. This trend was expected to weaken traditional familial bonds and diminish intergenerational support. However, scholars have challenged this view, noting that despite demographic shifts like lower fertility and increased mobility, families continue to adapt and serve as crucial sources of support (Coleman, 2004; Bengtson, 2001).

Chinese families mirror this trend, albeit with unique complexity and nuances. Yan Yunxiang’s work illustrates how individualization unfolds alongside enduring family commitments. Yan’s early account of post-Mao China noted the rise of the individual—greater personal choice, pursuit of happiness, and “pragmatic individualism” (Yan, 2003). Yet Chinese individualization has been a state-managed process that never fully severed the individual from the family. Institutional reforms in the 1990s (privatization of housing, education, health care) forced individuals to assume new responsibilities, but reliance on family networks remained strong. China’s modernization produced only “halfway” individualism: individuals gained autonomy in certain domains but continued to prioritize family obligations, effectively embedding individualization within familism (Yan, 2010). He later proposed the concept of neo-familism (Yan, 2018), whereby familial obligations are reshaped but persist, particularly through

“descending familism,” a system where care and resources flow primarily downward to children and grandchildren, creating a familial safety net amid institutional deficiencies.

TSM exemplifies this downward flow, wherein both sets of parents direct substantial resources to the conjugal unit and the grandchildren. Moli, an only daughter from Dalian, recalled that during marriage negotiations, each set of parents contributed 380,000 yuan. Her parents purchased a home and car, while her in-laws provided a 500,000-yuan fixed deposit. The process, she noted, was “many-to-one”: both families aligned their efforts to support the couple rather than acting as competing sides.

For families where both spouses are only children, economic exchanges between the two sides lose their significance—there is no need for the bride’s family to redirect the bride wealth to support a son, and the assets from both families are ultimately consolidated into the household of the young couple. Economic resources flow vertically in these families, and almost exclusively in a downward, one-way direction. As with many parents of only children, they would often say to their child: “Everything we own will eventually be yours.”

For many young people in China today, financial support from parents has become an indispensable foundation for establishing adult life. As personal effort and a couple’s combined income often fall short of covering major expenses—particularly home ownership—the natal family is increasingly seen not as a source of interference but as a bedrock of economic security. Among my interlocutors, nearly all of whom are only children, especially those from the Jiang-Zhe-Hu region, few anticipate matching their parents’ level of income or wealth accumulation, even with degrees from elite universities and careers in white-collar sectors. In contrast, many of their parents, born in the 1960s and 1970s, came of age during a period of extraordinary economic transformation. Despite often lacking higher education, they were able to secure stable

and well-compensated positions in the state sector—civil service, education, healthcare, and state-owned enterprises—or to accumulate assets through early private enterprise during the first waves of market reform.

This generational cohort benefited from widespread upward mobility and asset appreciation, particularly in real estate, as well as from generous pension schemes and job security that are increasingly out of reach for their children. In this context, the emergence of TSM can be understood not only as an innovation shaped by the only-child structure, but also as a pragmatic response to intergenerational economic asymmetry: a way to preserve access to both sets of parental resources in a context where young couples face rising costs, precarious employment, and a plateauing of social mobility.

As job stability remains a paramount value among Chinese (a tendency that has become increasingly pronounced in recent years), entrepreneurial parents in Jiang-Zhe-Hu rarely expect their children to repeat their path; they understand that in today's economic climate, doing business has become increasingly difficult, risky and far less lucrative. Accordingly, children from affluent families tend to choose so-called “iron rice bowl” (铁饭碗) careers—civil servants, bank clerks, employees in state-owned enterprises, or schoolteachers. These secure, decent jobs are highly competitive and moderately paid, but as long as the salary can cover the daily living expenses, that is deemed sufficient; larger expenditures—such as housing, vehicles, and weddings—are typically provided by parents:

As only children, we get a lot of support from both sides of the family. Our parents don't expect us to take care of things for them. At the age of twenty-seven, we're still too

young to take on full responsibility for the whole family—right now, we just need to take care of ourselves.

(Interview with Moli, recorded 2025)

Confronted with increasing socioeconomic uncertainty, urban kinship has been re-verticalized around the parent-child axis (Davis, 2021). And for TSM families, the intergenerational support is doubled, from each set of parents to the conjugal unit. By pooling the material resources of two parental families, TSM families significantly reduce the economic burden on the younger generation, and maximize their capacity to protect the next generation from economic decline and downward social mobility.

In terms of the downward direction of generational flow, there is little difference between families of only daughters who opt for TSM and those whose daughters marry out. My father once said to me, “You might as well just marry out—then your mother and I would have much less financial burden!” But I knew he was just joking, and later he shared with me what he really thought:

Of course we’re happy to go with a two-sided marriage. Suppose that a man comes to propose marriage, bringing a bride wealth of 288,000 yuan. What would I want that money for? I wouldn’t spend it. I’d probably add more—maybe make it half a million—and give it to you to keep for yourself. Either way, everything we own will be yours sooner or later, but if you marry off, you end up belonging to someone else’s family. It’s just not worth it!

(Recalled conversation, 2024)

In marriages where the only daughter is formally married out, the parents typically do not retain the bride wealth and instead contribute a considerable dowry, combining both as initial

capital for the newly established conjugal household. Although the family's assets will be inherited by the daughter as well, compared to TSM, marrying out a daughter doesn't change the patrilineal nature of the intergenerational relations. It involves less normative pressure for parental contribution from the bride's side, and the expectation is less immediate or pressing—after all, supporting the young couple is mainly the responsibility of the groom's family. Giving money to a daughter is more an expression of emotional investment than a material obligation shared between affinal families. While in TSM, the flow of resources is no longer dominated by the patriline; daughters are regarded as equally important carriers of family legacy, and their parents are expected to contribute resources on par with the groom's side.

Also, what my father said reflects the sentiments of many only daughter parents in TSM. For them, acquiring money is not the ultimate goal. Moreover, marrying off an only daughter in exchange for bride wealth can evoke a sense of moral discomfort—an uneasy feeling that they are, in effect, “selling” their daughter. While the institutionalized allocation of material responsibilities in TSM has led only-daughter families to take on a greater share of the financial burden, they are nonetheless able to retain what is most valuable: their daughter, and the future she carries for the family. Money in these intimate arrangements is socially mediated and symbolically loaded. The downward flow of family assets from the older to the younger generations both heightens financial and emotional interdependence. These exchanges constitute what Zelizer (2005) calls a “disciplined economy of intimacy,” where money is not only a medium of exchange but also a vehicle for expressing and negotiating moral obligations and affective ties. And financial transactions among kin are deeply embedded in social norms, emotional expectations, and relational meanings.

Meanwhile, parental financial contributions to their children's marriages are increasingly recognized and endorsed by law. The Interpretation (II) of the Supreme People's Court on the Application of the Marriage and Family Section of the Civil Code of the People's Republic of China, implemented in 2025, addresses this issue. If a residential property is purchased during marriage using funds fully provided by one party's parents, and the gift agreement clearly specifies the gift is for their child only, the court will follow the agreement. If the agreement is unclear or absent, the court may award the property to the child of the contributing party and determine appropriate compensation for the other spouse based on factors such as cohabitation, child-rearing, marital fault, and the property's market value. For partial contributions or joint contributions from both sets of parents, the same rule applies: the court will honor clear gift agreements. If unclear, it will base its decision on the proportion of contributions and other relevant circumstances (Supreme People's Court of China, 2025).

This provision is particularly relevant to TSM households, where both sets of parents frequently co-finance the purchase of marital property, but without written contracts. It not only formalizes intergenerational financial flows but also introduces legal standards into what were often informal or morally driven arrangements between affinal families. By reinforcing the principle of "who pays, owns", ownership is determined largely by the source and proportion of funds if there's no explicit agreements. This legal clarification solidifies the economic boundaries between the two families, making it difficult for one side to claim the other's parental assets during divorce. As a result, support from both sides of the family flows in parallel toward the conjugal unit, yet remains segmented—each side's contribution is directed to their own offspring.

Beyond material contributions, parents in TSM also provide significant labor and caregiving support to their adult children, particularly in domestic chores and childcare. Nowadays, dual-income couples often struggle to reconcile the demands of paid work with the responsibilities of childrearing, making grandparental involvement a common practice and a normative expectation in Chinese families (Chen, 2013). In only-daughter families that prioritize education and professional advancement, it is especially unthinkable to expect the daughter to forgo her career in order to take on full-time childcare responsibilities. Thus, unlike the patrilineal bias in grandparental caregiving observed by earlier scholars (Santos, 2017), TSM arrangements involve labor and care contributions from both sets of grandparents. This significantly reduces the childcare burden on the young couple, providing them with more resources and, in many cases, increasing their willingness to have a second child.

Lee's household became unusually crowded after the birth of her first child, as both sets of parents moved in to live with the couple and offer support. The sheer number of people and constant activity made her feel both cared for and overwhelmed. On the one hand, she urgently needed their help; on the other, the presence of four grandparents under one roof created chaos—even feeding the baby turned into a competitive scene, with all four grandparents rushing to take over. Eventually, Lee imposed a rule: the two sets of parents would alternate weekly in providing support, a system that lasted until the child started kindergarten.

But in most TSM households, grandparental caregiving is often organized around a principle of “whoever the child takes the surname from, that side of the family takes primary caregiving responsibilities.” Tai, a woman from Suzhou, Jiangsu, told me that her first child took her husband's surname, so the child was mainly cared for by the paternal grandparents, and she stayed at her in-laws' home during postpartum recovery, with her mother-in-law providing care.

When she had her second child—who took her own surname—she returned to her natal home for postpartum care, where her father looked after both her and the baby. This arrangement is often accompanied by financial support directed toward the grandchild who shares their surname, primarily in the form of ritual or major expenditures such as birthday banquets, new year gift money, education funds, or contributions toward school-district housing.

“People Matter More Than Anything”: The Upward Flow

Despite the weakening of traditional patrilineal obligations, filial piety remains a core cultural value in contemporary China. Its expression, however, is increasingly shaped by new social realities—emphasizing intergenerational autonomy and a more balanced, reciprocal relationship between parents and adult children (Zhang, 2017). This is particularly evident among only children, many of whom have received substantial investments from their parents and feel a strong sense of indebtedness in return. Existing research suggests that individuals with higher levels of education tend to hold stronger conceptions of filial responsibility (Hu & Scott, 2016), a pattern that is even more pronounced among singleton children (Deutsch, 2006; Zhan, 2004).

For TSM families, although most parents are still relatively young and have yet to face immediate issues of aging and care, it has always been part of the implicit contract that their children will be there for them as they grow older. This helps explain why parents in TSM arrangements often place high value on residential proximity to their adult children. Proximity is a precondition for the provision of care and other forms of time-intensive support between generations, and an important element in intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). Reflecting this expectation, TSM couples tend to marry within relatively short geographic

distances. With the exception of Moli, a woman from Liaoning who married a man from Fujian, all other interlocutors in my study married partners from the same region—often both from northern Zhejiang or both from southern Jiangsu, and in some cases, even from the same county. In this sense, the demands of maintaining close ties with both sets of parents effectively constrain marriage mobility. Geographical proximity and shared cultural norms facilitate ongoing contact and reciprocity between both families.

From the time I was in school through to when I started working, my parents were always subtly hinting—or trying to influence me—not to move too far away. Sometimes the message came through relatives; other times it was just them casually asking where I planned to work. But I could clearly sense that what they really wanted was for me to stay close—somewhere nearby. When I was getting married, my mom told me, ‘You can try a two-sided arrangement. We’ll buy you your own place.’ What they really hoped was that this kind of arrangement would make it easier for me to stay connected and come home often. If I had married out, I probably wouldn’t have been able to come back every week the way I do now.

(Interview with Lee, recorded 2025)

Alongside the substantial financial contributions and residential proximity maintained by parents in TSM comes a deepening involvement in their children’s conjugal lives. Lee shared with me a telling detail: whenever she and her husband had a disagreement, her mother could often sense the tension during weekend visits and would try to mediate or offer advice. Even when no conflict had occurred, if Lee returned home alone, her mother would immediately ask why her husband wasn’t with her—had something happened between them? This heightened attentiveness, while rooted in care, also brought Lee a sense of constraint.

Such parental involvement reflects how TSM not only redistributes economic and caregiving responsibilities across two lineages, but also reconfigures boundaries of intimacy and power. With both sets of parents heavily invested—financially, emotionally, and spatially—into the lives of the couple and their children, the small nuclear household is often not fully autonomous. Instead, it becomes embedded in a broader web of intergenerational presence, where even minor fluctuations in marital dynamics are monitored and interpreted by parents who feel entitled, or even obligated, to intervene.

More significantly, TSM channel economic resources through the grandparents directly to the grandchildren, formalizing a line of support that bypasses the conjugal unit as an autonomous entity. In doing so, they give the older generation power over their adult children via their grandchildren. While such dynamics are not unique to TSM and may reflect broader socioeconomic shifts—particularly the concentration of capital and caregiving capacity in the grandparent generation—TSM give this intergenerational power a more formalized and institutional character. By directly linking resource provision and caregiving labor to lineage-based claims through the grandchild, TSM renders parental influence less negotiable and more structural.

Contrary to earlier assumptions that modernization and individualization would erode parental authority, TSM illustrates how parental power not only persists but is being rearticulated through new intergenerational arrangements. Adult children are expected to align their life choices—such as residential patterns, parenting decisions, or marital conduct—with the expectations of their parents. In this context, TSM provides a framework in which the older generation's financial and caregiving contributions become institutionalized mechanisms of

influence, in which in which parents and grandparents wield substantial decision-making power—not only as kin but as economic stakeholders in the reproductive future of the family.

Another dimension institutionalized through TSM is the practice of daughters providing elder care to their natal parents—a pattern that aligns not only with demographic necessity, but also with the long-standing legal framework established by the Chinese state. Since the 1950 Marriage Law, Chinese family law has rejected the patriarchal assumption that a married woman's primary obligations shift to her husband's family. Instead, it has upheld a gender-neutral conception of filial duty, wherein sons and daughters bear equal legal responsibility for supporting their own parents, while no parallel legal obligation exists toward in-laws.

Historically, this legal ideal was often overridden by patrilineal family practices, as daughters-in-law were expected to care for their husband's parents while daughters were largely released from such duties due to the presence of sons in their natal families. Because daughters were not considered descendants within the family, they held neither the right to inherit family property nor the obligation to care for their parents (Baker, 1979). Yet in practice, sons can be unreliable, and daughters are filial, even after marriage, particularly when it comes to providing care (Shi, 2009; Zhan & Montgomery, 2003; Obendiek, 2017). Many married daughters still cared for their natal parents out of emotional attachment and a sense of voluntary responsibility. And they have proved to be taking on a greater proportion of the changing roles in the filial relationship than sons and have been valued for their potential role in supporting their parents in old age (Shi, 2017). I remember that when my maternal grandmother was on her deathbed, my mother and aunt—her daughters—took turns staying with her in the hospital to provide care, while my uncle—her only son—was recognized within the family as the primary decision-maker regarding her medical treatment and the one responsible for covering the medical expenses.

In such circumstances, women in traditional marriages often find themselves bearing a dual burden of elder care. On one hand, they are legally and morally obligated—under state law and the enduring cultural norm of filial piety—to support their own natal parents. On the other hand, entrenched patrilineal and patrilocal customs continue to expect them to assume caregiving responsibilities for their husband’s parents as daughters-in-law. This dual expectation creates a structural contradiction: while legal frameworks uphold gender-neutral obligations of filial support, the everyday practices of patrilocality place an additional, asymmetrical demand on women. However, with the rise of only-daughter households and the emergence of TSM, legal norms have begun to manifest more fully in lived arrangements.

What makes TSM distinctive, then, is that it formalizes care duties of married daughters at the level of custom and practice, thereby offering a framework through which daughters may be partially released from the double burden of caregiving that traditional patrilocal marriage often imposes. This has led to a bilateral division of eldercare responsibilities between the young couple, with each spouse primarily responsible for their own parents, like what Fang said: “I’m not going to count on my husband to look after my parents, just as I wouldn’t stop him from being a dutiful son to his own parents.”

Notably, the obligations of elder care in TSM are rarely centered on financial support, as the parental generation—often part of the economically secure boomer cohort—tends to possess sufficient material resources. Instead, what matters more is the provision of care labor and the cultivation of consistent emotional presence. These include accompanying parents to medical appointments, sharing meals, and maintaining regular contact—forms of relational labor that may seem mundane but carry profound symbolic weight. In this context, reciprocity is expressed less through monetary transfers and more through time, presence, and attentiveness.

I didn't fully grasp how much this meant to parents until one day, my mother helped me see it differently. I shared with her an observation I had made about TSM families: more and more young couples prefer to live with or closer to the wife's parents, relying on them for help with household chores and childcare. Women also tend to prefer having their own mothers care for them during postpartum recovery, in part to avoid tensions with their mothers-in-law. I said, "Doesn't that seem unfair to the wife's parents? They end up contributing more labor!" My mother replied, "I actually think the wife's parents have the better end of the deal. They get to see their daughter often!"

Another mother, Mao, shared a similar perspective:

At first we thought, if we marry off our daughter, the burden on us would be a bit lighter. But later, I realized that was not wise. What troubled me was the idea that, once she marries out, she would no longer truly belong to our family—when she comes back, she'd just be a guest. She definitely wouldn't be able to visit this often.

(Interview with Mao, recorded 2025)

The remarks of these two mothers reflect a broader transformation in the meaning of filial piety. Rather than demanding obedience, they explicitly articulate emotional needs and emphasize the affective bond between parents and children. In contemporary China, elders have limited institutional authority over the lives of their adult children. However grateful the younger generation may be for their birth and upbringing, elders can no longer compel compliance. Filial piety has thus evolved into a relationship in which elders must, in a sense, *earn* the support of their children by cultivating emotional closeness (Fong, 2004; Ikels, 2004). And Parents now seem to place less emphasis on material support from children and more on emotional bonding

(Ji et al. 2023; Zhong & Ho, 2014). Yan (2023) describes this as an “intimate turn” under China’s neo-familism: elders have effectively “marginalized the principle of filial piety as the moral foundation of eldercare” and instead constructed a “psychological-emotional-ethical complex of *qinqing* (亲情)” as an alternative moral framework. In other words, familial affection itself has become the guiding virtue of eldercare.

As only children become the sole recipients of their parents’ love and expectations, they tend to develop stronger emotional bonds with their parents (Liu & Jiang, 2021). Emotional support from the only child has been shown to be a strong predictor of an elder’s well-being (Xu, Hu, & Wang, 2024). The mothers’ appeals for intimacy exemplify this shift: in TSM families, love and emotional closeness have come to define filial virtue, with companionship and presence emerging as the new currency of intergenerational care.

This kind of emotional connection is not confined to parent–child relationships; but also manifest strongly in grandparent–grandchild relationships. In TSM families, the most significant filial return adult children can offer is precisely this: a grandchild—or more precisely, a grandchild who carries the family’s name.

Chinese grandparents have traditionally regarded the arrival of grandchildren as central to both emotional fulfillment and the perpetuation of the patrilineal family line. More accurately, this expectation is gender-specific—only male grandchildren qualify as “continuum of descent”, the embodiment of past ancestors and future descendants (Baker, 1979), and carry religious and symbolic functions associated with ancestor worship (Croll, 2000; Yan, 2003).

However, as family priorities have largely shifted from ancestor veneration to child/grandchild-centeredness, notions of ancestor worship alone fall short of accounting for the strong desire for grandchildren often expressed by parents in TSM. Aside from a small number of paternal-side parents who still hope for a grandson to carry on the ancestral line, most parents in TSM families are less concerned with this and more focused on whose surname the child carries. In this context, the surname functions as a symbolic marker of familial affiliation and intergenerational continuity—signifying not just descent, but also the direction of emotional and caregiving ties.

My mother once told me that if I had a child with the surname Jin, she would use her entire retirement pension to cover the child's expenses. I teased her: "But you're not even a Jin—why do you care whether the Jin family has a descendant?" She replied:

I don't care about that. Taking the surname Jin means the child is part of our family—it's my daughter's child. It means our family has a great future that carries energy and hope. Maybe it also holds a bit of personal meaning—a feeling that some part of who I am is being carried forward.

Ultimately, people matter more than anything.

(Recalled conversation, 2025)

Unfortunately, I have no intention of having children—a decision that occasionally fills me with guilt toward my parents. Yet I am far from alone. An increasing number of young people in China are making similar choices, as reflected in the country's persistently falling fertility rate.

In this sense, the intergenerational support seen in TSM can be interpreted as an attempt to “entice” or even “bribe” the younger generation into having children of their own.

Doudou, an only daughter who was adopted as an infant by her parents in Jiaying, Zhejiang, confided to me that although she doesn’t like children, she still plans to have two. Her parents, she explained, have given her so much, raising and educating her, and later buying her a car and an apartment. Lacking a biological tie, she never felt fully entitled to these forms of support in the same way other Jiang-Zhe-Hu only daughters might. Instead, she carries a deep sense of indebtedness.

This emotional debt, though never formally articulated, functions as a powerful form of moral pressure. It is through such deeply felt, affective commitments that the intergenerational “contract” of TSM operates. So when she realized that her parents hoped she would have two children—one of whom could symbolically “belong” to their side—she made up her mind to do so. In her case, reproduction became not only a matter of personal choice or family planning, but also a form of repayment—a way to honor a non-biological bond by fulfilling a tacit familial promise.

However, the contract itself is inherently fragile. Reproductive decisions involve personal bodily autonomy, and any such agreement holds no legal weight and cannot be recognized or enforced by the law. As a result, TSM arrangements are typically based on informal, intra-family verbal commitments rather than written contracts or notarized agreements. And unlike Doudou, many adult children do not fulfill this tacit intergenerational contract, either by choosing to remain childless or by limiting reproduction to a single child. Such decisions can provoke disappointment or conflict within the parent–child relationship.

In sum, the generational exchanges in TSM are interwoven with money, care and intimacy, producing flexible and resilient kinship strategies in the face of contemporary uncertainty. Situated at different life stages and having come of age in different eras, the two generations seek different things from the family. While the younger generation looks to their parents for financial assistance and childcare support in order to establish themselves in society, the older generation desires emotional connection with their children and grandchildren as a source of meaning and comfort. Thus, materially, both parental households contribute substantial resources to support the conjugal unit; emotionally, the value of proximity, companionship, and surname continuity carries significant symbolic weight.

Crucially, this dynamic is underpinned by deepening intergenerational economic inequality. As wealth and property tend to concentrate in the hands of the older generation—many of whom benefitted from earlier waves of housing privatization, stable employment, and rising asset values—adult children often find themselves reliant on parental support to meet key life milestones such as marriage, homeownership, and childrearing. This economic asymmetry grants parents not only the capacity to provide, but also the leverage to intervene. In effect, the flow of resources from the older to the younger generation strengthens intergenerational bonds, but it also reshapes power relations within the family.

TSM also challenges the traditional son-centered intergenerational contract by enabling both sets of parents to retain meaningful ties with their married children, while ensuring mutual eldercare and emotional closeness. Its success hinges not only on negotiation but also on affective labor and mutual recognition. It also provides a striking case of how families creatively adapt to demographic and societal change by strategic kinship reconfigurations.

In an era marked by persistently low fertility both in China and globally, the intergenerational reciprocity embedded in TSM represents not just a marital strategy, but a mode of familial reproduction. As my mother put it, “Ultimately, people matter more than anything.” This echoes David Graeber’s insight in his essay *Turning Modes of Production Inside Out*, where he writes:

while any society has to produce food, clothing, shelter, and so forth, in most societies, the production of such things as houses, manioc, and canoes is very much seen as a subordinate moment in the larger productive processes aimed at the fashioning of humans (p. 96-97)

It is sometimes said that the central notion of modernism is that human beings are projects of self-creation. What I am arguing here is that we are indeed processes of creation, but that most of the creation is normally carried out by others. I am also arguing that almost all the most intense desires, passions, commitments, and experiences in most people’s lives – family dramas, sexual intrigue, educational accomplishments, honor and public recognition, one’s hopes for one’s children and grandchildren, one’s dreams of posterity after one is dead – have revolved precisely around these processes of the mutual creation of human beings. (p. 100-101).

The Bilateral Configuration of TSM

Below is an image that offers a vivid entry point into the core dynamics of (see Figure 3). On the wedding stage, the newlyweds stand hand in hand, and each set of parents stands beside their own child. At this moment, the groom’s father is speaking, offering congratulations on the

formation of a new family. In contrast to the now-common urban wedding ritual in China—where the bride is walked down the aisle by her father and symbolically “given away” to the groom, a practice popularized through Western films and imported into China following the Reform and Opening era—this scene affirms the two-sided structure of TSM. Here, neither family relinquishes their child. Instead, both maintain a visible and continuing presence in the conjugal unit, marked by mutual recognition, equal standing, and a symbolic balance between natal families.



Figure 3

Parental speech in a TSM wedding ceremony

Note. Photo provided by Xiyu, used with interlocutor’s consent and faces are blurred to minimize risks of re-identification.

In his work, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss (1971) argued that women have essentially formed a modicum of exchange in marriage practices, and this exchange

is a universal mechanism for establishing social cohesion. Lévi-Strauss's analysis of kinship was developed by Gayle Rubin (1975), who examined the gendered power dynamics it entails. In what Rubin famously referred to as "traffic in women", the kinship systems institutionalize the subordination of women and enforce rigid gender roles. Likewise, the Chinese kinship system also relies heavily on the exchange of women, except for some ethnic minorities such as the Mosuo who follow the matrilineal pattern (Mattison, 2010). In most cases, it is women who circulate from family to family, joining and living with their husbands' families after marriage.

Whether it's the prevailing model of a woman marrying into a man's family, or the other way around (*ruzhui*), there's always a primary family line to which the young couple belong. In this primary family line, inheritance rights and care obligations are exchanged, and parents on this line have a higher status and a greater voice. But TSM puts both the man's and woman's parents and families on an equal footing instead of having one party as the primary. Rather than being circulated or "exchanged" between two households, women in TSM remain closely connected to their natal families while also becoming part of a newly formed nuclear unit.

In *The Institutions of Reproduction* (1948/1998). Fei Xiaotong argued that while human reproduction is biologically bilateral and caregiving in early life is typically matrilineal, most societies adopt unilineal succession systems because property, status, and identity are difficult to divide and recombine across multiple lines. Particularly in agrarian contexts, bilateral inheritance of immovable property such as land or housing leads to fragmentation that undermines productive use. Thus, unilineal succession—whether patrilineal or matrilineal—emerges as a practical solution to ensure coherent and sustainable intergenerational transmission.

However, Fei also recognized that this structural bias toward unilineality generates contradictions with the bilateral realities of caregiving and familial attachment. He observed that

traditional Chinese society developed various strategies to mitigate this tension—such as dowries, matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, and even the institution of child brides—as ways of redistributing resources, realigning descent with caregiving labor, and reducing the psychological and practical disjunctures between where women come from and where they are expected to give.

TSM, in this light, can be understood as a contemporary response to the same structural contradiction Fei described: the tension between bilateral caregiving and unilineal inheritance. Its appeal lies in its capacity to create a new form of intergenerational arrangement—one that symbolically acknowledges both sides of the family, and pragmatically enables both to participate in the care and support of the conjugal unit and its offspring. Yet its effectiveness as a bilateral kinship form depends not simply on formal symmetry in marriage negotiations or the number of children, but on how families organize the flow of property, responsibility, and emotional investment across generations.

While TSM appears structurally bilateral—recognizing and incorporating both maternal and paternal families—it does not fully correspond to what anthropologists define as true bilateral or bilineal kinship systems. In classical bilateral systems, descent, inheritance, obligations, and emotional affiliation flow through both parental lines simultaneously, producing broad, flexible kin networks (kindreds) rather than unified corporate lineages, and often resulting in greater gender equality and flexibility in social organization (McConvell et al., 2013). Scholars have pointed to the trend of women’s intergenerational caregiving collaborations along both family lines as evidence of a structural shift in Chinese kinship, from patrilineality to a more bilateral orientation (Ji, 2024, 2025).

However, TSM practices encompass a range of kinship configurations that vary according to reproductive outcomes (e.g., number of children), intergenerational resource strategies, and culturally embedded symbolic conventions, such as surname assignment. It is within this shifting terrain that I propose the concept of intergenerational bilateralism—a form of bilateralism not based on symmetrical descent reckoning, but on the negotiated integration of two unilineal lines through the conjugal unit. Unlike classical bilateral kinship systems, in which each individual simultaneously belongs to and inherits from both family lines, intergenerational bilateralism in TSM often operates through a different logic. It binds together two single-line kinship systems, each retaining its own logic of inheritance, naming, and obligation, but coexisting within a shared marriage framework.

Central to this configuration is the emergent relationship between the two families, whose ongoing interactions and mutual adjustments constitute a distinct form of affinal solidarity. “Equality” is a key term in the discourse and negotiation of this relationship—not only referring to the egalitarian partnership between the young couple, but also to the symmetrical standing of both sets of parents. Yet this ideal is neither fixed nor automatic. Rather, it is continually bargained over, enacted, and reaffirmed through what I call balance work: the everyday practices through which families manage and maintain interfamily relationships, mediate expectations, and preserve symbolic and material symmetry.

Balancing the interests of both families is a nuanced and often fragile task—one that, in some cases, fosters sustained cooperation and shared investment, but in others, reveals latent hierarchies, unmet expectations, and eventual estrangement. TSM thus represents not the resolution of intergenerational tension, but a dynamic field in which competing principles—of descent, care, obligation, and equality—are negotiated and lived.

“Matching Doors and Households”: Establishing Equality

“Matching doors and households” (*mendang hudui*) is a traditional Chinese concept that underscores the importance of social parity in marriage arrangements. It reflects the belief that two families should be of roughly equal status—economically, socially, and culturally—for a marriage to be appropriate and stable. Rooted in Confucian ideals of hierarchical harmony and familial responsibility, this principle views marriage not merely as a personal union but as an alliance between families.

In TSM, the principle of *mendang hudui* is not only preserved but intensified, serving as a prerequisite of equality from which the marriage contract begins. Families who opt for TSM arrangements are typically matched in terms of economic resources and social status. On one hand, this parity ensures that both sides can provide comparable levels of contribution and support to the next generation. On the other hand, it reduces the risk of power imbalance or perceived exploitation between families, creating a more stable foundation for long-term cooperation and mutual respect.

A story shared by Mao about one of her neighbors offers a telling counterexample. In this case, the groom’s family was significantly wealthier than the bride’s. Although the couple had two children—each bearing the surname of one side and primarily raised by that respective family—the disparity in economic capacity led to stark differences in the children’s upbringing. One child was fed more expensive formula and provided with high-end toys, while the other was raised in a household that simply could not afford the same level of consumption. This imbalance created deep resentment and ultimately led to serious conflict between the two families.

Therefore, when there is a significant disparity in the families' economic standing, even only-child families may revert to the traditional *jiaqu* model of marriage. The visibility of family arrangements—whether TSM or traditional—becomes a proxy for class positioning and parental capability. As a result, one can often infer the relative standing of two families simply by observing the form of marriage they adopt. This has given rise to alternative systems of judgment, in which TSM symbolizes equality and prestige, while marrying out may be interpreted as a sign of inferiority or powerlessness.

Chenchen experienced this evaluative pressure firsthand. She's originally from Henan and moved to Zhejiang with her parents during childhood. Since the practice of TSM was not customary in her hometown, she followed the more traditional *jiaqu* model and married into her husband's Zhejiang family. At a high school reunion shortly after her wedding, a classmate was shocked that, as an only daughter, she had not opted for TSM. The classmate remarked, "Any capable parents wouldn't let their only daughter marry out and lower herself." Chenchen was angered by the comment: "So if we choose to marry out, we're somehow inferior?"

This dynamic highlights how the symbolic economy of *mendang hudui* is not fixed but negotiated. Some families, recognizing the discursive power of "equality," strategically manipulate surface-level signs to gain symbolic advantage—or to save face. Youmei's case is illustrative. She happened to share the same surname as her husband, which allowed them to fulfill the bilateral logic of TSM with only one child. Her father-in-law, a businessman sensitive to symbolic capital, used this coincidence to his advantage. "At our wedding," Youmei recalled, "he told his friends that their family had 'taken in' a daughter-in-law, without mentioning the two-sided arrangement. I guess it made him look more powerful and gave him more face. And since we only plan to have one child, no one will really be able to tell it was a TSM!"

Such symbolic boundary work is not always verbal. My uncle's case offers a more subtle example. When his son—my cousin—held a TSM wedding, they hosted two ceremonies: one at the bride's home and one at the groom's. I attended both as a bridesmaid. In our hometown, there is a pre-wedding ritual known as *shangtou* (上头), derived from ancient adulthood rites. On the night before the wedding, the couple sits in chairs while their parents dress them and perform ancestral offerings. At the bride's *shangtou* ceremony, my uncle noticed that the chairs were positioned facing the front door. Later, at the groom's ceremony, he quietly turned the chairs to face inward. He later explained to my mother with a note of pride, "Chairs facing out means sending the bride away; chairs facing in means bringing her in. So we got the upper hand!"—to which my mother responded with a well-deserved eye roll.

These interesting cases demonstrate that *mendang hudui* is not merely about material parity—it is enacted, symbolized, and sometimes subverted through performative acts. In TSM, the unique intergenerational bilateralism makes the perceived equilibrium between families a moral and social imperative, generating both symbolic creativity and subtle competition over how this equality is publicly represented.

“Balancing a Bowl of Water”: Balance Work between Two Sides

“Balancing a bowl of water” is an old Chinese idiom that means maintaining impartiality—ensuring fairness without letting anything spill. This phrase came up repeatedly in my interviews with Vivi and Sun, a recently married couple who adopted a TSM model. For them, this expression captured the core philosophy of dealing with both sets of parents in the wedding planning process. As Sun put it:

Ever since the decision was made by the parents to opt for a two-sided marriage, we've been trying to keep the equal footing for two families. Because instead of hosting two separate weddings, we held one joint ceremony. All the wedding arrangements must be the same on both sides. "Balancing a bowl of water" is the prior principle of handling family issues. TSM gives us a guideline to follow, with no one side of the family trying to overpower the other.

(Interview with Vivi & Sun, recorded 2025)

The most illustrative example from their story involved the guest seating arrangements. At the wedding venue, guests from both families were seated on opposite sides of a central T-stage. The challenge was the main table, which could not be split in two—it had to be placed on one side. Each family wanted it on their side but hesitated to appear too aggressive. Unlike in traditional weddings—where the groom's family typically hosts and the bride's kin occupy a single table—TSM forced symmetrical representation. The couple acted as intermediaries, collecting expectations from both sides and negotiating a solution. In the end, the main table went to the groom's side, while the bride's next-of-kin table was upgraded to mirror the décor and status of the main table and designated "Table 1" to signal parity.

This story captures what I call "balance work"—the ongoing relational labor through which members of TSM families maintain equilibrium between two sets of kin. Balance work is especially salient in TSM contexts because there is no default hierarchical structure like patriliney to govern decision-making. Without a dominant lineage, families must actively produce balance, rendering familial unity not as a given but as an outcome of continual negotiation.

The process begins early. Many TSM families hold a formal meal where both sets of parents meet to discuss marriage terms: the model, financial contributions, childbearing plans, and surnames. This sets the tone for a marriage premised on negotiated equality. From this point forward, interfamily life becomes structured by a constant, informal “balance sheet” of financial and emotional reciprocity—caregiving, gifts, housing, and even holiday visits.

In the dialect of my hometown, when a family chooses a TSM arrangement, people describe it as “doing a two-sided household” (*zuo liangtou renjia*, 做两头人家). The use of the verb *zuo* (“to do” or “to make”) is not incidental—it underscores the idea that kinship is not a fixed structure, but an ongoing process of negotiation, coordination, and maintenance. This resonates with Carsten’s (2004) argument that kinship should be understood not as a static set of biological or legal ties, but as something continually made and remade through everyday practices, affective labor, and shared life. In this context, “doing a two-sided household” becomes a locally grounded expression of balance work—the active labor of crafting equality, managing symbolic and material reciprocity, and sustaining affinal harmony.

The notion of balance work not only captures the material and affective labor involved in sustaining interfamily equilibrium within TSM arrangements, but also resonates with Erving Goffman’s (1967) concept of face-work—the strategic actions individuals perform to maintain face, avoid embarrassment, and uphold social harmony in interactions. Just as face-work is a ritualized process through which individuals negotiate their standing within social encounters, balance work operates as a ritualized intergenerational and affinal practice, in which families actively manage perceptions of fairness, reciprocity, and respect across family lines.

In this sense, balance work can be seen as a kinship-level extension of face-work, where the “face” at stake is not merely personal identity, but the symbolic standing and moral worth of the entire family. Acts such as matching financial contributions, taking turns in caregiving, or maintaining symmetrical holiday visits become forms of face-maintenance, ensuring that no side appears inferior, overbearing, or neglectful.

Sometimes, balance is easy. When I got engaged, my parents gave my husband 30,000 yuan as a betrothal gift, and his parents returned exactly the same amount to me. For Feifei and Mao’s daughters, rotating between two homes allows equal proximity to both sets of parents. In most TSM households, kinship terms also shift to reflect this symmetry—maternal and paternal grandparents are all called *yeye* and *nainai*, erasing the traditional prefix *wai* (外, “outside”) that marked maternal kin.

Other times, balance takes creativity. Some families alternate Spring Festival visits each year; others split the day—lunch with one family, dinner with the other; still others host both sets of parents together. Spatial arrangements reflect the same logic. Like Lee and her husband, who chose to settle in a city equidistant from both natal homes, many TSM couples aim for geographic symmetry in addition to neolocal residence.

In traditional Chinese kinship systems, patrilocality—residing with or near the husband’s family—has long reinforced the dominance of male-centered ties and sustained gendered asymmetries in intergenerational relations (Greenhalgh, 1985; Whyte, 2003). Even in contemporary contexts, empirical research shows that Chinese couples’ residential choices continue to exhibit a strong bias toward the husband’s parents (Grujters & Ermisch, 2019).

Moli and her husband defied this pattern. Coming from opposite ends of China—Dalian in the northeast and Fuzhou in the southeast—they ultimately settled in Shenyang, a city located closer to Moli’s natal family but framed as geographically "neutral." As Moli explained, although Shenyang is technically nearer to her parents, the travel time to both families is comparable (a three- to four-hour flight to Fuzhou, and a two- to three-hour train ride to Dalian). This framing transforms physical geography into a metric of fairness and affective reciprocity.

Their decision reflects an effortful spatial calculation aimed at maintaining perceived symmetry between both parental families. In this way, space becomes a terrain of kinship negotiation—no longer a default extension of patriarchal authority, but a resource to be equitably distributed. Such neolocal strategies resonate with the broader logic of balance work, extending its scope beyond economic and ritual domains to include the affective geographies of intergenerational care.

As vividly illustrated in Vivi and Sun’s wedding seating arrangement, not everything in TSM families can be perfectly divided down the middle. Some matters—especially those involving symbolic value or emotional significance—resist simple arithmetic division. Instead, they require active participation, negotiation, and mutual trade-offs from both families. What each side contributes, and what counts as “equal,” depends not on a fixed standard but on the families’ respective ideologies, expectations, and socioeconomic conditions.

Feifei’s account illustrates how surname assignment—perhaps the most symbolically charged element in TSM—can be governed by tacit cultural scripts rather than explicit negotiation. In her case, the naming of the first child was indirectly determined through the wedding ritual known as *baitang* (拜堂), a traditional ceremony of bowing and ancestral rites

that symbolizes incorporation into a lineage. Feifei notes that in her hometown, the side of the family not hosting the *baitang* ceremony receives the symbolic “compensation” of surname transmission. As her husband’s family did not observe this custom and the ceremony was conducted at her side, the child defaulted to taking the father’s name.

In this process, equality is not merely a goal but a dynamic practice. Families often engage in a form of tacit accounting, informally keeping a “balance sheet” of resources, care, and emotional support exchanged over time. This ongoing ledger reflects a deep concern with distributive justice—not strict equality, but a sense of fairness grounded in reciprocal effort and recognition. Over time, each family’s contributions and sacrifices are weighed, adjusted, and renegotiated, producing a fluctuating yet collectively maintained equilibrium.

In effect, familial contributions are set into a quasi-market logic, where love, labor, time, and money are assigned symbolic or practical exchange value. This doesn’t mean families become transactional in a cold economic sense, but rather that they creatively and strategically frame their actions within a shared moral economy—seeking fairness through equivalence. Just like balancing a bowl of water, the task is delicate, unstable, and constantly in need of adjustments.

Still, balance work is not always successful or harmonious. In one extreme case I heard from my aunt, four grandparents quarreled over their first grandson’s surname. The wife’s parents believed they had contributed more and thus deserved naming rights, while the husband’s parents invoked male privilege. The argument escalated until both grandfathers slammed their asset certificates on the table like Cold War powers showing off missiles—ultimately leading to divorce.

While such cases are rare, they highlight how TSM arrangements, though premised on equality, can intensify underlying tensions. Families constantly compare inputs and emotional returns. When discrepancies—real or perceived—accumulate, balance work can shift from a tool of cohesion to a site of surveillance and strain.

In short, TSM families are not simply practicing equality—they are doing it. And like all performances, balance work is shaped by cultural values, social scripts, emotional labor, and material stakes. It is an evolving process in which love and intimacy are exchanged and calculated alongside property and responsibility, producing a uniquely modern moral economy of kinship in contemporary China.

“AA-style Marriage”: The Problem of Family Belonging

In traditional *jiaqu*, women were considered “outsiders” in their natal families and secondary in marital homes (Baker, 1979). But in TSM, a woman’s entry into marriage does not entail a transfer of identity, property rights, or kinship networks. She retains her full subjectivity and remains a permanent member of her natal family. This challenges the patrilineal kinship logic wherein marriage traditionally marked the erasure or displacement of a woman’s natal affiliation. TSM thus represents a reconfiguration of kinship positionality, where women are not re-situated solely through affinal ties, but continue to be embedded in a dense web of affective and material ties with her natal family.

For many women in TSM (two-sided marriage) arrangements, the notion of a natal home—*niangjia* (娘家)—disappeared:

After I got married, I still go back to my parents' place every couple of days. Getting married didn't mean I became disconnected from my natal family. I never referred to it as *niangjia*; to me, it was simply "home".

(Interview with Xiyu, recorded 2025)

Vivi shared another wedding story that illustrates the subtle symbolic shifts brought by TSM. When the bridal car arrived at her home to pick her up, her mother instinctively stepped forward to send her off—a gesture deeply embedded in the emotional ritual of a traditional wedding. But she was stopped. "There's no need to send her off," someone said. "That's only for daughters who are marrying out. In a two-sided marriage, she's not leaving."

The moment reminded me of an old wedding video from over twenty years ago, showing my aunt's marriage. In that scene, her mother clung to the car window, tears streaming down her face, as mother and daughter exchanged a long, tearful farewell. It was a public performance of a woman's departure from her natal home, into a new life and a new family. But such scenes are conspicuously absent from TSM weddings. No departure, no sorrow. In a two-sided arrangement, the daughter is never truly leaving. The emotional rupture that traditionally accompanied marriage is softened—if not entirely erased.

However, retaining one's affiliation with the natal family also weakens the sense of belonging to the conjugal unit. The bilateral structure of TSM places two familial lines side by side within a single nuclear household, but the interests of these two families can rarely be fully aligned. This often leads to conflicts over family belonging and blurred responsibilities between spouses. The couple may find themselves navigating divided loyalties—pulled between

competing expectations from both sides, without a clearly defined center of gravity in their own small family.

Fang, visibly indignant, recounted the story of a close female friend whose husband held a stable position within the state system. Despite this, it was the wife—and her relatively affluent parents—who shouldered nearly all of the household expenses, including those related to their two children, who carried different surnames. The wife had no idea how much her husband actually earned.

One day, while sitting in the passenger seat of his car, she casually mentioned her wish to have a car of her own, so she wouldn't have to brave the wind and rain while transporting the children on an electric scooter. Her husband snapped back without hesitation: "Why don't you ask your parents to buy it for you? Why are you asking me?"

Evidently, the husband in this story did not see his wife as sharing a unified household with him, but rather as belonging to her natal family. The story shows a fundamental misalignment in perceptions of family belonging and responsibility. While TSM aim to equalize contributions and recognition across both families, they can also blur the boundaries of conjugal solidarity. When financial and emotional obligations remain strongly tethered to natal families, the married couple's nuclear family may struggle to establish its own autonomy. This underscores a central tension in TSM arrangements: while bilateral intergenerational support aims to foster equality, it can also intrude the marital unity when each spouse's primary belonging remains with their family of origin.

The problem of family belonging becomes even more pronounced when it comes to the third generation. In many TSM families, two children bear different surnames—one taking the

father's and the other the mother's—symbolically anchoring each child in a different familial line. This naming practice is not merely nominal; it often translates into distinct emotional attachments, caregiving expectations, and patterns of material investment from the two sets of grandparents. Rather than representing an integrative kinship model in which both family lines converge in the next generation, such arrangements often signal an ongoing negotiation—or even competition—between two lineages.

The grandchild who shares the family name may be viewed—however implicitly—as the true bearer of lineage and thus receives more emotional attention, symbolic recognition, or practical resources. The other grandchild, bearing the “in-law” family's name, might be unintentionally treated as somewhat external—less of an heir and more of a guest. Even when both sets of grandparents consciously strive for equal treatment, subtle discrepancies can emerge in daily interactions, which is picked up by Lee:

There are subtle differences in how each set of grandparents treats the two children. Our older child, a daughter, takes her father's surname, while our younger child, a son, takes mine. For example, when my mom is looking after our son, she tends to be a bit more engaged—just slightly more affectionate. If she takes him out and buys some cultural souvenirs, she'll carefully choose his favorite color. But when buying something for our daughter, she tends to pick a color more casually. If you pay attention, it's clear that she's more attuned to our son. Ask her what he likes, and she'll probably answer without hesitation; but if you ask about our daughter, she might pause to think. My in-laws show similar patterns. When they call our son—the one who doesn't share their family name—they'll often say his full name, including the surname. But when addressing our daughter, who shares their surname, they usually just call her by her given name.

(Interview with Lee, recorded 2025)

Family belonging, in this context, is symbolically encoded and emotionally enacted, revealing the limits of balance work. According to Lisa, the lawyer, disputes over children's surnames account for nearly half of the divorces she has seen in TSM families. One particularly telling case involved a couple who had initially agreed that their first child would take the father's surname and the second the mother's—a common compromise in TSM arrangements. However, their first child turned out to be a girl and the second a boy. After the son was born, the husband's family—especially his parents, who held deeply patriarchal beliefs—began to renege on the original agreement. They exerted daily pressure on the wife to change the boy's surname to reflect the paternal line, arguing that as the male heir, he should carry the family name.

This seemingly minor disagreement quickly escalated into a broader conflict over gendered belonging and intergenerational control. Ultimately, the couple divorced. In a bitter twist of irony, the custody arrangement split the children: the daughter remained with the mother, while the son was placed in the custody of the father—an outcome that directly contradicted the symbolic significance embedded in their surnames. Although the mother was heartbroken to part with her son, she conceded that in a family so clearly biased toward male children, the boy was at least likely to be treated well. The daughter, on the other hand, might not have fared as well in a household where her worth was already in question.

This case underscores how children in TSM families can become sites of symbolic and material struggle, particularly when traditional gender norms collide with more egalitarian expectations. The child's surname, far from being a neutral label, becomes a highly charged signifier of lineage, inheritance, and family belonging.

One day, aware of my ongoing research on TSM, my mother-in-law forwarded me a viral opinion piece circulating on Chinese social media. The article, provocatively titled “Grandparents Tearing Families Apart!—The Bizarre Trend of Only-Child TSM in Northern Zhejiang,” offered a scathing critique of the rising phenomenon. It lamented that in such arrangements, “biological siblings end up with different surnames,” and that “grandparents engage in bitter fights over whose surname a grandchild should bear—sometimes even pushing their children toward divorce.” The article highlighted extreme examples such as families of boy-girl twins resolving surname disputes by drawing lots, portraying these scenes as signs of moral decay.

According to the author, the older generation’s persistent attachment to feudalistic lineage ideology—combined with their overwhelming material influence—has transformed familial love and biological ties into commodities governed by a logic of capital. This article, in fact, reflects a broader pattern of public discourse surrounding TSM—the negative stereotype of “calculative Jiangnan merchant”. TSM is frequently depicted as an emotionally cold and overly transactional arrangement, where kinship is reduced to numbers, contracts, and bargaining tables.

To mock such dynamics, many users on Rednote refer to TSM as an “AA-style marriage” (AA 制婚姻). In Chinese usage, “AA-style” means splitting bills, a culturally specific expression used to describe a system of strict financial parity and cost-sharing. Calling TSM an AA-style marriage suggests that, rather than forming a unified household, the couple and their respective families are merely “cohabiting under a temporary contract”—keeping ledgers of who gave what and refusing to blend into a shared moral and affective unit. This indeed resonates with the Judicial Interpretation II mentioned earlier: even after marriage, the resources of the two families

do not truly merge but remain clearly delineated according to the proportion of contribution, with ownership boundaries distinctly drawn.

Xiaohai, an only son from Zhejiang who opted for a traditional marriage, expressed his discomfort with what he saw as the “calculative” nature of TSM. He found the constant balancing of contributions between two families to be emotionally exhausting, remarking that “doesn’t feel like a marriage anymore.”

Jianjun, a primary school Chinese teacher and the father of a groom in a TSM arrangement, offered a different perspective. When I asked how he felt about families fighting over surnames, he dismissed these problems outright: “Those are things rural folks with feudal-minded views would do.” And he defined himself as an enlightened and progressive parent—someone who would not interfere in his son and daughter-in-law’s life.

This, in fact, creates a weird paradox of TSM. On one hand, the negotiation of contributions and entitlements between both families is often framed as a rational and progressive effort toward equality. It reflects the aspirations of modern, urban, only-child families to build horizontal affinal ties that balance rights and responsibilities, seeking for a win-win that optimizes the interests and wellbeing of the whole family. It represents a conscious departure from hierarchical, patrilineal structures and reimagines family as a negotiated partnership between equals.

Yet on the other hand, these very negotiations—especially when they involve disputes over children’s surnames and financial accounting—are easily interpreted as narrow-minded, calculating, or even backward and feudalistic. The insistence on one’s share of ownership, control, or symbolic recognition is accused of letting “capitalist logic” corrode the warmth of

kinship. It implies a lack of emotional intimacy and familial fusion—suggesting that instead of forming a unified household, TSM tears a family apart.

Returning to the question of kinship structure, the bilateral configuration of TSM is considerably more complex. For families with two children, this creates a structure that appears bilineal on the surface but in practice represents two parallel unilineal lines housed within a single conjugal unit. Each child is embedded within a single line of succession, and the family's internal equilibrium depends on the successful co-presence—rather than integration—of two distinct unilineal pathways.

By contrast, a more functionally bilateral kinship structure may emerge in two distinct kinds of families. First, in some one-child TSM families, where both sets of grandparents continue to provide substantial support—financial, emotional, or caregiving—toward the conjugal unit and the grandchild, the single child effectively becomes the shared focus of both descent lines. Although the child typically bears only one surname (usually the father's), property, care, and recognition may flow symmetrically from both families, and inheritance may reflect both lines.

Second, in families where assets from both sets of grandparents are first passed to their own adult child (the TSM couple), who then jointly redistributes those resources to their child or children, a bilateral logic emerges not through direct grandparent-grandchild transfer, but through the couple's mediation. In these cases—regardless of how many children are born—the middle generation becomes a bilateral channel, absorbing assets and obligations from both lineages and redistributing them downward. This is especially true when grandparents do not insist on directly designating their resources to grandchildren by surname or patrilineal descent, but instead trust their own child to manage the transmission of wealth and care equitably.

These complications are structurally embedded in the intergenerational and bilateral configuration of TSM. While some TSM families reproduce traditional patterns of unilineal descent under the guise of balance, others begin to realize a more integrated bilateral logic in practice. Thus, rather than labeling TSM as either bilateral or unilineal, it is more accurate to view it as a flexible kinship form that allows for both symbolic symmetry and diverse material outcomes—sometimes converging toward bilineality, and other times reinforcing parallel unilineal lines within a nominally egalitarian structure.

This gives rise to a bilateral form that is not genealogically bilateral in the classical sense, but relationally bilateral—emerging through the ongoing coordination, reciprocity, and symbolic balancing between two families. TSM continuously requires what Carsten (2004) calls the performative labor of kinship-making. Families must enact relatedness through balancing acts that are emotionally dense yet economically explicit. In this context, what Zelizer (2005) describes as the “economy of intimacy” becomes especially visible and fraught: every gesture of care is also a signal of entitlement, and every financial contribution doubles as a moral claim. Balance work between the two families—managing equivalence in financial contributions, caregiving efforts, and symbolic recognition—plays a crucial role in sustaining this relational bilateralism. It is through this continuous calibration that both families remain socially present in the conjugal unit without collapsing into a singular unilineal framework.

The Gender Axis of TSM

This chapter continues to focus on the horizontal axis of TSM, but shifts from analyzing its bilateral structure to examining its gendered dimension. Specifically, it examines how men

and women across generations experience TSM differently, asking: when intergenerational support is doubled and parallelized—flowing in from both sets of parents and coexisting within the same household—does it affect women and men equally?

Through close attention to the lived experiences of wives, husbands, and parents, this chapter explores gender dynamics and practices of equality in TSM by analyzing the division of labor, power, and prestige. Feminist scholars have long critiqued the gendered division of labor by foregrounding the concept of social reproduction—the often invisible, undervalued labor that sustains daily life and future generations. This includes not only biological reproduction but also the care, emotional labor, and everyday housework that are essential to human survival (Laslett & Brenner, 1989). These tasks, often performed by women, are vital yet undervalued, forming the invisible foundation of both family life and the broader economy (Federici, 1975).

Drawing on Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of "patriarchal bargains," gender scholars have also shown that women are not merely passive subjects of male domination, but active agents navigating systems of power and prestige that are structured against them. In classic patriarchal systems, women may gain prestige—such as respect as mothers-in-law—by complying with gendered expectations, even as they remain structurally disempowered. This perspective, echoed by Wolf's (1972) work on Chinese patriliney, highlights how power (capacity to act) and prestige (symbolic status) operate differently across gender lines, enabling women to negotiate limited agency within broader patriarchal constraints.

Taken together, these dimensions provide a lens to examine how equality is enacted, negotiated, or challenged in the everyday life of TSM households.

“Having It All or Losing It All?”: The Empowerment of Women and the Gendered Division of Labor

TSM is widely regarded as a progressive step toward gender equality, as it significantly elevates the status of young women—not only as daughters, but also as brides and daughters-in-law. The empowerment that only daughters receive in their natal families often carries over into their married lives, enhancing both their personal bargaining power and their sense of security.

As divorce lawyer Lisa observed:

Women in two-sided marriages tend to be more decisive when it comes to divorce compared to those in more traditional marriage arrangements. They often have more courage and capacity to make that choice, because they know their parents are there to back them up. With that kind of support behind them, they feel less constrained and freer to leave if they need to.

(Interview with Lisa, recorded 2025)

In this way, TSM arrangements not only redefine intergenerational support but also provide women with a reliable safety net—emotionally, materially, and symbolically—that allows them to exercise greater autonomy in potential exits.

Moreover, strong maternal ties after marriage further reinforces women’s empowerment and simultaneously elevates women’s status in TSM, allowing women to exercise partial surname-naming rights and have full access to their parents’ resources. This boosts married women’s status in decision-making (Ji et al., 2024), especially regarding the child’s educational investment (Wang & Feng, 2021; Lowes, 2022), and mitigates the risk of land dispossession in rural areas (Guo, 2021). Childcare from maternal grandparents is preferred (Wang 2020; Zhang

et al. 2019) and other forms of maternal support contribute to married women's overall wellbeing and success, for instance: to alleviate their work-family conflicts (Wang 2020; Zhang et al. 2023) and "motherhood penalty" (Yu & Xie, 2018), benefit their labor force participation (Du et al., 2019) and family wealth accumulation (Cheng and Xie 2023; Cheng and Zhou 2022).

However, on Rednote, many users—particularly unmarried young women—express deep skepticism toward this marriage arrangement. They often view TSM not as a pathway to empowerment, but as a trap subtly designed for women. The heart of the debate lies in the gendered and embodied nature of reproductive labor, which renders childbirth an inherently unequal contribution—one that can only be physically borne by women. In online critiques, women in TSM are often mocked for being "unpaid surrogates": they give birth to children for someone else's family without receiving any compensation. This stands in contrast to traditional *jiaqu* marriages, which would correspondingly be "paid surrogacy," where although the child similarly does not "belong" to the woman, at least the bride price serves as a form of payment or symbolic "wage" for her reproductive labor. This controversy closely echoes the earlier movements of Chinese digital feminism (Wang & Chang, 2024).

Critics on Rednote declare: "True equality means men growing wombs and each spouse bearing one child!" This biting remark captures the core of gender inequality in TSM: the deeply embodied and gendered division of reproductive labor.

Ask any TSM member how their marriage was arranged, and they will likely recount in detail the financial contributions from both families—housing, vehicles, cash gifts—how many children to have, and whose surname each child will carry. These negotiations form the core of TSM's contractual logic. Yet, once the marriage life begins, many women come to realize that

the daily functioning of the arrangement rests on their tremendous labor: pregnancy and childbirth—expected twice—along with the ongoing responsibilities of childcare and household work (which often includes the less visible, cognitive labor of balance work discussed earlier). These contributions are rarely part of the original discussion and undervalued, yet they become essential to sustaining the very equilibrium the TSM aspires to achieve.

When I asked Jianjun what he thought about this issue, he paused, visibly caught off guard. As a father from the groom's side, the question of reproductive labor had clearly never crossed his mind. After a moment of reflection, he said, “well, there's no such thing as absolute fairness in this world, right? If you're too fixated on keeping score, life just gets exhausting.”

But this issue is not entirely without solutions. Lawyer Lisa noted that some wealthy families in Shanghai opt for overseas surrogacy as a way to equalize the cost of childbirth—transforming the burden into a financial one, which both families can split. However, surrogacy is never a viable option for the vast majority of ordinary Chinese families. Not only is it illegal in China, but it is also prohibitively expensive, often costing millions.

With childbirth comes the long-term labor of childrearing—a burden that, despite variations across individual couples, falls disproportionately on women in China. While fathers today are generally more emotionally engaged and involved than previous generations, their actual participation in daily childcare remains significantly lower than that of mothers (Li, 2020). Guo (2019) observed the “widowed childrearing”, where mothers shoulder the bulk of parenting responsibilities alone, despite the father's physical presence in the household. This reinforces a gendered parenting pattern in which fathers are positioned as breadwinners, while mothers are expected to devote themselves personally to their children.

Despite the fact that couples in TSM benefit from the labor support of both sets of parents, it is often the wife's parents—especially the mother—who take on a larger share of responsibilities across domains such as postpartum recovery, childcare, and housework. When considered alongside the gendered burden of reproductive labor previously discussed, this pattern reveals an unequal division of labor in which women and their families bear a heavier load.

I first came across Shengnan through a divorce diary she posted on Rednote about her TSM. That was what prompted me to reach out and interview her. Her name, Shengnan⁵, literally means “better than a man”—a special name for only daughters born during the one-child era, reflecting the high hopes their parents placed in them. She is twelve years older than me and grew up in a town called Wangzhen. Located near the provincial capital, the town is economically prosperous due to its thriving private enterprise sector.

Recalling the beginning of her marriage, she said, “My family ran a business and was relatively well-off, so my father hoped for a marriage arrangement that preserved our family line (*ruzhu*). But my husband, also an only child, had studied in Australia and came from a respectable government-employed family. Eventually, my father compromised, and since two-sided marriage was already common in our area, both sides agreed smoothly.”

Based on Shengnan's account, her natal family and her ex-husband's family were relatively comparable in overall standing. While her own family may have had a slight financial

⁵ All interlocutors in this article are referred to by pseudonyms, except for Shengnan. With her informed consent, I use her real given name, as it carries symbolic significance closely tied to the themes of analysis. Her surname has been omitted, and a pseudonym has been used for her hometown to protect her anonymity. Given that Shengnan is a relatively common name among only daughters born during China's one-child era, the use of her real name poses minimal risk of identifying her.

edge, the difference was not substantial. Her former parents-in-law, however, enjoyed higher social status due to their positions as civil servants. Before they married, Shengnan's parents purchased an apartment in Wangzhen for her future household. Her in-laws had also prepared two smaller units in downtown of the provincial capital, chosen with school districts in mind. The families had discussed giving their two children different surnames—one from each parent—but hadn't settled on the order. When Shengnan became pregnant, her father respectfully suggested that the first child take the husband's surname, since his parents were older. Shengnan appreciated her father's tact.

Early in the marriage, the couple lived in the Wangzhen apartment, which was closer to Shengnan's parents. Her parents often stayed over to help with childcare while her husband started a business nearby. Later, Shengnan moved with the children to Hangzhou for their schooling, while her husband stayed at Wangzhen—and continued living with her parents. “He relied on them for everything—meals, laundry, daily needs—but gave little in return. My parents treated him incredibly well, but he gradually became withdrawn and disrespectful toward them.”

Despite their children having different surnames, Shengnan was determined they be raised together. “I made it clear to both families that no one was to mention the surname difference—not even as a joke.” When her mother-in-law once hinted she might take one child to raise, “One glare from me and she went silent.”

Shengnan left her bank job after her second daughter was born and co-invested in a maternity and baby supply store. She breastfed both daughters, then switched to formula from her own shop. “The cost of raising our children was almost entirely borne by me and my family.” Aside from a brief stint when her mother-in-law helped with the older child, her in-laws

contributed little, financially or otherwise. Shengnan's parents covered most daily expenses and bought clothes for the children.

While her husband and his parents believed he was “working hard” to support the family, Shengnan noted that her own labor—childbearing, childcare, running the household—was often invisible and undervalued. “He once said, ‘Didn’t your family raise you like a boy?’ Meaning I should earn as much as him. In his eyes, childbirth and caregiving didn’t count as real contributions.” Ultimately, the tensions became irreconcilable, and in 2024, Shengnan ended her 15-year marriage.

Although Shengnan emphasized her own subjectivity in the matter of childbirth—saying, “I never had children for my ex-husband. No matter whose surname they bear, they are my daughters. I feel lucky to have them; there’s no question of gain or loss”—she could not deny that her parents had sacrificed heavily in the marriage, while her ex-husband reaped many of the practical benefits.

In response to the unequal burden of reproductive labor, some women in TSM have begun to demand material compensation from their husband's families for childbirth. This is the crux of the feminist paradox: when women refuse to monetize their reproductive capacity—as in rejecting bride wealth or refusing to view childbirth as a transaction—they often forgo the only form of formal recognition available within a patriarchal system. But when they do seek acknowledgment—whether through legal rights, financial contracts, or symbolic compensation—it risks reducing their bodily and emotional labor to economic terms, reproducing the logic they hoped to resist.

Tai, another divorced woman from TSM, thinks it's a “losing deal” for women:

Nowadays, women are pretty independent—I can handle everything on my own, I can support myself financially and take care of the kids by myself. Then what’s the point of having a husband? What is he even bringing to the table? Marriage really is a gamble—you’re betting on a man’s earning potential and moral character. Now I can really understand why some people demand a high bride price—it’s not just about tradition; it serves as a form of financial security for the woman in case the marriage goes wrong.

(Interview with Tai, recorded 2025)

Shengnan’s experience also shows the dilemma faced by many only daughters in China who are trying to “have it all.” As the convergence of daughters’ and sons’ roles within Chinese families (Gan, 2022), an intensified dual burden was placed on only daughters. Shengnan grew up empowered—with confidence, resources, and a strong safety net. Yet this very empowerment came with layered expectations: to be a successful professional, a good daughter/ family heir, a devoted mother, and a fair wife—all at once. This double bind was also reinforced by Shengnan’s ex-husband. When she left her banking job to focus on raising their two daughters, he remarked, “Didn’t your family raise you like a boy?”—a comment that blamed her for not fulfilling the role of a breadwinner like himself.

The lifestyle of Jiang-Zhe-Hu only daughters is often portrayed online as enviable examples of “having it all,” with successful careers, egalitarian marriages, and strong natal family support. But in practice, “having it all” often means “doing it all”: demanding that they be ideal daughters, ideal wives, ideal mothers, and ideal workers all at once.

This gendered imbalance resonates with Hochschild’s (1989) concept of the “second shift,” where working women, especially mothers, shoulder an additional round of unpaid labor after paid employment. Similarly, Douglas and Michaels (2004) argued that modern media

celebrates the myth of the “supermom,” urging women to excel in all domains while masking the structural inequalities that make such expectations oppressive. McRobbie (2009) contends that the postfeminist ideal of the empowered, choice-making woman ironically reinforces neoliberal forms of gendered responsibility.

Unlike the dilemmas highlighted in Western feminist scholarship, the “having it all” conundrum faced by women in TSM in China is compounded by strong intergenerational expectations. For most Chinese parents, marriage and motherhood is still a social imperative. I still remember a few years ago, during a heated argument with my father over the division of housework, he shouted at me: “Jin Tian! Don’t forget—you’re going to be a wife and a mother one day!”

This outburst wasn’t just about chores. It was a moment when his deep-rooted expectations for my future came to the surface—expectations shaped by gendered norms that continue to weigh heavily on many daughters in China, even those raised to be independent and ambitious.

Feifei faced similar pressures, as she shared with me:

At family meals, my parents would often bring up the fact that I wasn’t getting any younger—and that if I didn’t get married soon, I’d end up as a so-called ‘leftover woman.’ Our family had already decided on a two-sided marriage, so the search for a suitable partner through matchmaking was based on that condition. My mom was worried that if I married out and lived with my husband’s family, I might not be treated well. My dad, on the other hand, hoped for a child who would carry our family’s surname. But to be honest, if I hadn’t ended up with my current husband through that matchmaking

process, I think as I got older, my parents would have loosened the conditions. At some point, *ruzhu* or marrying out might have become acceptable.

(Interview with Feifei, recorded 2025)

Many parents are able to empathize with their daughter and actively share the burden, even choosing to forgo certain entitlements—such as giving up the right to have the second child bear their family’s surname. Feifei shared that her cousin endured an extremely long and painful childbirth that left her with lasting damage, and afterward, her parents couldn’t bear to ask her to go through it again for the sake of “balance.” Just like Mao said:

If they end up having two children, then the second one must carry our family name—there’s no room for compromise on that. But if my daughter feels it’s too exhausting and decides to have just one, we’d be totally okay with that child taking the husband’s surname.

(Interview with Mao, recorded 2025)

“Because He’s a Man”: Relative Prestige and Challenged Masculinity

The empowerment indeed grants women greater prestige. As Moli remarked: “I think in TSM, man shows greater respect for the woman and her family.” Yet, men still tend to retain a slightly higher degree of prestige—a subtle but persistent gender hierarchy remains embedded in daily life and social expectations.

The most telling example is the surname of the first child—it almost always defaults to the father’s surname. One day my mother and I were having a hypothetical discussion about

what things would happen after I got married, and the topic of the children's last name came up. She considered the age difference first: "Your father and I are a few years older than Yilin's (my husband, then still my fiancé) mom and dad, so do you think the first child should take our last name?"

"The child I gave birth to, of course, has to take my name." I said.

My mom frowned with a hesitant look, "But," she said, "But Yilin's a man, would it be wrong if the child doesn't take his last name?"

"What's wrong about that?"

"I don't know, I don't think Yilin's parents would like that."

Although Mao's daughter hasn't had children yet, she believes that the first child must take the father's surname, because "A man needs to feel he has some standing—if the first child takes the mother's surname, it looks like he's lost his status at home."

The persistent norm that the first child takes the father's surname reflects a symbolic asymmetry in prestige. While women and their natal families may contribute equally—or more—in terms of labor, caregiving, and material support, the father's family retains higher symbolic capital through naming rights. Male prestige remains culturally privileged in defining lineage legitimacy and intergenerational continuity, even in such egalitarian arrangements. This symbolic asymmetry can translate into concrete inequality when couples have only one child—a common outcome due to economic, health, or personal reasons. In such cases, the agreed-upon balance is effectively disrupted: the sole child inherits the father's surname, and the mother's family loses their expected share of recognition and continuity, despite their equal or greater investment in the marriage and childrearing.

According to my interlocutors' gossip and observations of other TSM cases around them, unless the bride's family contributes significantly more resources than the groom's, any strong insistence from the bride's side on having the first child take their surname is often judged by others as being "too aggressive" or "overbearing." In contrast, the groom's family's assumption of surname rights is rarely questioned—it is taken for granted as a cultural default.

Fearing they might appear too aggressive and disrupt their daughter's marriage, many maternal families choose to compromise. For them, maintaining family harmony is just as important as pursuing equality, and they constantly try to strike a balance between the two. Yet many of these acts of compromise are still grounded in deeply gendered expectations. Women are expected to value and maintain family harmony. Meanwhile, men and their families are rarely expected to make comparable sacrifices.

Phrases like "Regardless of the surname, the child carries on our family's bloodline" or "They're still our grandchild" are often spoken by the maternal side—but rarely, if ever, by the paternal side. This detail reveals a deeper anxiety for men. As Luce Irigaray (1985) suggests, men's insistence on passing down their surname stems from an insecurity about their biological role in reproduction. Without a womb, their contribution to childbirth remains uncertain and unprovable, and thus naming becomes a symbolic act to assert paternity and ease this fundamental doubt.

As seen in the earlier examples—the man who refused to buy a car for his wife, or Shengnan's ex-husband who remarked, "Didn't your family raise you like a boy?"—some husbands in TSM often show a subtle, lingering resentment toward their wives and their wives' families. And notably, the wealthier the wife's family, the stronger this resentment tends to be.

Lawyer Lisa also observed this pattern. In her view, husbands in TSM arrangements tend to exhibit a weaker sense of familial responsibility compared to those in more traditional marriages.

Although men are undeniably beneficiaries in TSM arrangements—financial burdens and domestic labor are largely absorbed by four eager grandparents, and childbirth falls entirely on the wife—the more egalitarian gender dynamics and bilateral family affiliations can feel threatening to traditional masculinity. Put plainly, the wife did not "marry into" his family, and therefore no longer "belongs" to him. For some men, this shift represents a perceived decline in their gendered status and authority within the household.

At the same time, when men reside with the wife's family, the patrilocal disenfranchisement can trigger a "gender crisis." (Friedman, 2017) as their masculinity is challenged not only by the wife's enhanced status but also by their own perceived lack of control and recognition within the household. This may help explain why Shengnan's ex-husband, the longer he lived with her parents, grew increasingly distant and disrespectful toward them. What began as an arrangement of mutual support gradually became, for him, a source of discomfort—perhaps even resentment—as he occupied a space where his masculine authority felt challenged.

While the redefinition marriage of TSM responded to and contained women's aspirations for equality, it costs women and their parents more than men. This chapter reveals how gendered hierarchies persist beneath its seemingly symmetrical structure. Through an analysis of labor, power, and prestige, we see that women—especially only daughters—may gain empowerment and symbolic prestige, but they also shoulder disproportionate reproductive and care responsibilities, both personally and through their natal families. This unequal division of labor

often goes unrecognized, while men retain subtle advantages in symbolic capital, such as naming rights and household authority. Ultimately, the gender axis of TSM exposes a deeper paradox: even within more egalitarian kinship arrangements, women's empowerment is often contingent, negotiated, and vulnerable to retraditionalization—especially when reproductive labor remains biologically and socially gendered.

Conclusion

Two-sided marriage (TSM) in contemporary China emerges as a compelling embodiment of intergenerational bilateralism and a reconfiguration of egalitarian family practices. Structurally, TSM departs from the patrilineal and patrilocal norms that have long organized Chinese kinship by institutionalizing a dual lineage model: both maternal and paternal families maintain parallel roles in providing financial support, caregiving labor, and symbolic recognition across generations.

Intergenerational bilateralism in TSM is expressed through the symmetrical flow of resources from both sets of parents toward the conjugal unit, effectively decentering the traditional prioritization of the paternal line. This symmetry manifests not only in co-residence and shared property investments but also in decisions about childrearing, surnaming, and educational investment. It fosters a household model where support and obligation circulate along two lines, reshaping family solidarity in ways that are more inclusive and balanced, though sometimes creating family belonging confusion and competitions.

This bilateral configuration, however, is far from self-sustaining; it demands continuous negotiation and coordination. At the heart of this process lies a distinctive form of relational

labor—what I call balance work—through which families actively calibrate fairness, reciprocity, and emotional harmony between the two kin lines. Balance work operates across multiple domains: aligning financial contributions, alternating caregiving responsibilities, negotiating surname assignments, and managing symbolic gestures of respect and recognition. It functions as a kind of everyday diplomacy—subtle, affective, and ongoing—through which equilibrium is not presumed but constantly performed and reinforced.

In this sense, TSM does not guarantee egalitarianism; rather, it opens up a space for a more participatory and negotiated form of kinship, where equality is not a fixed principle but a dynamic process. Balance work is what sustains intergenerational bilateralism in practice: it is the mechanism through which both families remain socially and materially present in the conjugal unit, despite the structural pull of unilineal inheritance norms. Thus, balance work is not merely a coping strategy but the constitutive practice that enables intergenerational bilateralism to exist as a lived and viable kinship form.

It is fair to say that TSM enables egalitarian family practices by enhancing women's status within both natal and marital contexts. Empowered by strong natal family support, only daughters in TSM arrangements often enjoy increased autonomy in marital negotiations, decision-making, and childrearing. This model offers the potential for greater gender equality in practice—women retain ties to their birth families, access resources, and exercise agency in household arrangements.

While TSM significantly alters the traditional foundations of patrilineality and patrilocality, it does not dismantle the deeper structures of patriarchy and male dominance that continue to shape everyday family life. While the structure of TSM provides a more balanced framework, the practice of equality is still mediated by deeply gendered assumptions about

reproductive labor, caregiving, and prestige. Thus, TSM serves both as a site of transformation and a lens for analyzing how Chinese families creatively respond to demographic, economic, and cultural shifts while navigating persistent inequalities.

The long-term trajectory of TSM remains open-ended. While it currently signals an important shift in the gendered logic of kinship—granting daughters an unprecedented role in carrying forward family lines, it remains to be seen whether this shift will endure. Much of TSM’s current form appears to be shaped by the demographic legacy of the one-child policy and the unique historical convergence of concentrated parental wealth. As this gap narrows with time, the structural basis that has enabled bilateral cooperation between families may become less sustainable.

At the same time, TSM remains deeply entangled in a succession-driven worldview, in which children are often positioned as vehicles for realizing familial aspirations, symbolic continuity, and future security. In families with only one child—a common variation despite the normative model of “one child per line”—the system’s internal balance becomes more difficult to maintain. As the third generation grows up, their number, naming, and role within extended family structures may profoundly shape how—or whether—TSM persists.

Rather than a stable institutional shift, then, TSM may be better understood as a transitional kinship strategy—one born of a specific historical configuration and sustained through ongoing negotiation. Its future will depend not only on fertility rates or inheritance practices, but on how families continue to reimagine intergenerational reciprocity and the moral value of kinship in a rapidly changing social landscape.

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