

Rethinking Motherhood in the Context of Intergenerational Caregiving



What this research is about

Studies examining motherhood have often focused on “intensive mothering”— the idea that a mother primarily assumes care for her child. Intersectional studies, however, have shown that intergenerational caregiving is an important facet that shapes mothering, especially in Black and immigrant families. In Chinese culture, new mothers are expected to hand over childcare and household responsibilities to their mother or mother-in-law while they recover their health in the first month postpartum. This is called *zuo yuezi* or “sitting the month.” In modern times, hired help (*yuesao*) is sometimes engaged instead. For immigrant Chinese mothers in Canada, this tradition and cultural expectation can present tensions and challenges to their identity and autonomy as a mother.

This study examined the intergenerational caregiving and early experiences of motherhood of Chinese immigrant mothers in Vancouver, BC. The study specifically focused on the relations between mothers and grandmothers who traditionally provide care during *zuo yuezi*.

What the researchers did

Thirty-four participants were recruited using mixed methods, including advertising on Chinese social media, at community organizations, and through snowball sampling. All participants immigrated as adults and had at least one child in Canada within the five years prior to the study. Most women had support from their mother or mother-in-law when they had their first child, while a few had additional support from a *yuesao* and/or their husband.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out in Chinese with the mothers. The interview questions

What you need to know

While there have been many studies examining motherhood, there is a gap when it comes to how intergenerational caregiving shapes the motherhood experience. In Chinese culture, new mothers are expected to rest in bed and follow traditional customs in the first month postpartum, known as *zuo yuezi*, leaving chores and childcare to their mother or mother-in-law. During this time, differences of opinions regarding childcare can give rise to challenges and tensions.

This study examined the impact intergenerational caregiving had on Canadian Chinese immigrant mothers’ early experiences of motherhood during their *zuo yuezi* period. The findings revealed that while the grandmothers’ support was valued and expected, their childcare practices and opinions might clash with those of the mothers. This could lead to tensions and power struggles as the new mother tried to assert her autonomy, as well as feelings of guilt and ambivalence about the situation.

included the mother’s preparation for the birth and recovery afterwards; family support and challenges faced during the postpartum period; and support from local healthcare services. Thematic coding was used to analyze the data, focusing on intergenerational caregiving during the *zuo yuezi* period.

What the researchers found

Over 80% of the women in the study expected that they would receive parental support, especially for the first birth. Often, support came from the grandmothers. For women without parental support, half hired help in the form of a *yuesao* or a *zuo yuezi*

meal service; however, such services are expensive in Canada. Mothers who were unable to have parental support saw themselves as deprived, despite support from their husband or the *yuesao*. Many grandmothers travelled from China to Canada to provide care during the *zuo yuezi* period and lacked local knowledge and language, limiting their capabilities. However, their support was still seen as valuable and integral to the process.

Although support during *zuo yuezi* was expected and missed when unavailable, the mothers recognized the pressure grandmothers took on during this period. Some thought that it might be unfulfilling for their parents, or saw it as a burden on ageing parents, disrupting routines and forcing them to travel internationally. Many of the mothers felt ambivalent and even guilty about the care demands placed on their parents.

The participants, especially first-time mothers, felt the need to be grateful and obedient and not be a burden to their parents. Placing themselves in this state of indebtedness to their mother or mother-in-law sometimes led to conflicts of authority. First-time mothers wishing to exert their new role as a mother sometimes clashed with the childcare expertise and experience of the grandmothers. Some women doubted their competence as a mother when facing the grandmothers' opinions and arguments.

A few participants gave in completely to traditional *zuo yuezi* customs and yielded to their mothers' or in-laws' decisions. However, most seemed to have a *zuo yuezi* period with at least some negotiations of authority on either side. One mother chose to have only her husband present for her *zuo yuezi* and make her own mothering decisions. A few others hired professional *yuesao*, hoping to avoid any conflict with the grandmothers. But an assertive *yuesao* might act as another older, experienced woman attempting to intervene in the new mother's autonomy.

This intergenerational childrearing conflict was found to recede, but not disappear, after the *zuo yuezi* period, as many mothers continued to receive support from their parents until their child was old enough for daycare.

How you can use this research

Understanding how grandmothers influence women's transition into motherhood fills an important gap in our knowledge about motherhood and mothering. Grandmothers not only provide care labour but are also figures of authority and expertise. More research into the concept of intergenerational caregiving is needed.

About the researchers

Amy Hanser and **Yijia Zhang** are affiliated with the Department of Sociology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver. Questions about this study can be sent to Amy Hanser at hanser@mail.ubc.ca.

Citation

Hanser, A., & Zhang, Y. (2025, January 16). Mothers and grandmothers: Rethinking motherhood in the context of intergenerational caregiving. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.13070>

Study funding

This research was funded by the by the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada.

Research Snapshot by Erika Cao

About the Vanier Institute of the Family

The Vanier Institute of the Family has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots.

The Vanier Institute is a national, independent, think tank committed to enhancing family wellbeing by making information about families accessible and actionable. The Institute offers access to a range of publications, research initiatives, presentations, and social media content to enhance the national understanding of how families interact with, have an impact on, and are affected by social, economic, environmental, and cultural forces.

Learn more about the Vanier Institute by visiting vanierinstitute.ca or emailing info@vanierinstitute.ca.

