

An Analysis of the Types and Characteristics of Parent-Child Relationships in Rural Sichuan under the Background of Social Changes

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Abstract

This study, with social changes as its macro background, focuses on rural areas in Sichuan Province, exploring the structural impact and adaptive reshaping of large-scale population migration on parent-child relationships. Based on theories of intergenerational solidarity, social exchange, and modernization, the paper builds an analytical framework centered on living patterns and emotional connections, dividing it into skip-generation raising, semi-working and semi-farming, etc. The research finds that social changes has driven profound changes in the power structure, economic support model, and emotional connection mode of parent-child relationships. Intergenerational power has shifted from the traditional "paternal authority" to "economic dominance of the younger generation", the economic model has tended towards "cash dependence" and "utilitarianism", and long-term separation has led to a widespread "emotional deficit". This study aims to enrich the localized theory of rural family sociology in Sichuan Province and provide empirical support for making family-centered policies for rural revitalization and care for left-behind populations.

Keywords

Social changes; Rural Sichuan; Parent-child relationships; Intergenerational solidarity; Left-behind families; Migrant workers.

1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening up, China's social changes has triggered the largest-scale migrant worker movement in human history [1], especially in Sichuan, a major labor-exporting province, where the rural parent-child relationship structure has been severely impacted and profoundly reshaped. Young and middle-aged parents, in pursuit of livelihood and higher economic income, have to be separated from their children for long periods, leading to a family ecosystem dominated by "skip-generation raising". This enforced spatiotemporal separation has restructured the intergenerational power and economic mutual assistance model within families and poses a severe challenge to the mental health of children. This study will apply theories such as intergenerational solidarity and social exchange in a localized context, aiming to classify the major types of rural parent-child relationships in Sichuan and explore their characteristics. Existing literature has pointed out that population mobility leads to family structure separation, intergenerational support tends towards "emotional investment" and "utilitarianism", and long-term separation causes widespread "emotional deficit". This study will make up for the lack of existing research focusing on a single model to answer the types, characteristics and mechanisms of parent-child relationship affected by social changes in rural Sichuan.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Analytical Framework

2.1. Core Concepts

Social Changes: In this paper, it is the profound and continuous changes in social structure, economic model, and cultural concept driven by urbanization, industrialization, and marketization since China's reform and opening up. In the context of rural Sichuan, its most direct macro manifestation is the large-scale, long-term, and cross-regional migration of young and middle-aged labor forces to cities.

Rural Parent-Child Relationship: it is the interaction pattern between parents and adult or minor children in rural families. This study focuses on its four core dimensions: emotional connection, intergenerational power, economic support, and filial obligations [2].

2.2. Theoretical Foundation

2.2.1. Intergenerational Solidarity Theory

Intergenerational solidarity theory is a core framework for analyzing the changes in family intergenerational relationships, dividing intergenerational relationships into six dimensions, providing a multi-dimensional perspective for examining the complexity of parent-child relationships in rural Sichuan:

Structural Solidarity: It is the living distance and interaction frequency between intergenerational members. The large-scale population outflow in rural Sichuan has directly led to the structural separation of parent-child relationships, forming a norm of "long-distance separation" and "low-frequency interaction".

Affective Solidarity: It is the emotional closeness, recognition, and satisfaction between parents and children. Structural separation is a prerequisite for weakening affective solidarity, generally leading to "emotional deficit" among left-behind children.

Functional Solidarity: It is the degree of mutual assistance and support among intergenerational members. Under market pressure, families adopt functional adaptation: parents provide economic support through working outside, and grandparents provide non-economic "care labor", which reflects the integration and mutual assistance of intergenerational resources, but this assistance is asymmetrical.

Normative Solidarity: It is the recognition and expectations of family roles and intergenerational obligations among intergenerational members. The decline of traditional filial piety norms and the enhancement of children's rights awareness have shifted intergenerational relationships from being driven by ethics to being driven by economics.

Consensual Solidarity: It is the consistency in values and attitudes among intergenerational members. The infiltration of urban and rural cultures has aggravated the generation gap between parents and children in lifestyle, marriage views, and career outlooks.

Associational Solidarity: It is the frequency of contact and participation in activities among intergenerational members. The intervention of new media has become an alternative way for long-distance parents and children to maintain associational solidarity.

In rural Sichuan, the core logic of intergenerational solidarity's changes is: the disintegration of structural solidarity has led to the weakening of emotional solidarity, but families cope with survival pressure by strengthening functional solidarity [3].

2.2.2. Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory is used to analyze the reciprocal and utilitarian tendencies in parent-child relationships. In the context of market economy, the gratuitous support under traditional blood ties is increasingly permeated by rational considerations of "cost-benefit". The one-way support from parents to children in resources (such as purchasing house and education), it is actually a form of "intergenerational investment" based on instrumental rationality, the

expected return is that children achieve a higher social status, thereby indirectly improving the quality of life and family honor for parents in their old age. This utilitarian exchange logic is an important perspective for understanding the flow of economic support and the distribution of intergenerational power in parent-child relationships.

2.2.3. Modernization Theory and Family Changes

Modernization theory holds that as society develops, the economic production, educational, and medical functions of the family are gradually stripped away by social institutions, and the family tends to retain only the functions of emotional maintenance and child-rearing. In rural Sichuan, the outflow of population has deprived families of their main labor force and production functions, and traditional agricultural economies have been replaced by income from working outside. This functional stripping forces families to reposition their value and function, leading to greater emphasis on emotional maintenance and material support in parent-child relationships [4].

2.3. Analytical Framework

Based on the above theories, this study builds a two-dimensional analytical framework centered on the living pattern and emotional connection of parent-child relationships, dividing the parent-child relationships in rural Sichuan into four types, and analyzing the characteristics of each type from four dimensions:

Table 1. four types of parent-child relationships in rural Sichuan

Type of Parent-Child Relationship	Living Pattern	Emotional Connection	Core Conflict/Characteristic
Skip-generation Raising	Long-term separation	Severe alienation	Remote control of power, absolute economic support, lack of care
Semi-Working/Semi-Farming	Intermittent cohabitation/separation	Relatively stable, but pressured	Power dominated by the left-behind party, mixed economic support
Living the Nearby Town	Nearby cohabitation or semi-cohabitation	Emotional connection restored, but with adaptation conflicts	Direct parental control, increased economic pressure
Immediate Family Living Together	Long-term cohabitation	Coexisting reciprocal support and habit conflicts	Offspring economic dominance, parental provision of care services

Dimensions of Feature Analysis:

Living Structure: The distance between parents and children, frequency of co-residence, and care model.

Intergenerational Power: The attribution of major family decision-making power (such as children's education and major consumption).

Economic Model: The flow of economic support between generations, main sources of income, and economic burden.

Emotional Communication: The emotional closeness frequency and quality of communication, and degree of generation gap between parents and children.

3. Main Types of Parent-Child Relationships in Rural Sichuan

Based on the aforementioned analytical framework, this section will elaborate on the typical types of parent-child relationships that have emerged in rural Sichuan under the backdrop of social changes.

3.1. Skip-generation Raising

Living Pattern (structural solidarity)

Characteristics: Long-term separation. Parents live apart from their children for long periods due to work outside their hometowns, and children are mainly cared for by their grandparents.

Analysis: This is a typical pattern of left-behind children's families, parents and children are physically isolated for long periods, resulting in the lowest level of structural solidarity.

Emotional Connection (emotional solidarity)

Characteristics: Severe alienation (emotional deficit). Due to the lack of daily intimate interaction and companionship, the emotional bond between parents and children is very fragile, there is significant "emotional deficit".

Analysis: Both parents and children have little understanding of each other's daily lives and psychological states, and emotional support is severely lacking.

Core Conflicts/Characteristics: Power Remote Control: Although parents are far away, they still attempt to exert power over their children remotely (such as through phone calls or video chats), especially in matters of study and major decisions.

Absolute Economic Support: Parents usually provide all living expenses and educational costs for their children, and it manifests absolute economic support.

Lack of Direct Care: Although grandparents provide daily care, the direct, daily, and companionate care from parents is absent, which has a long-term impact on children's growth, especially in emotions.

3.2. Semi-working and Semi-farming

Living Pattern (structural solidarity)

Characteristics: Intermittent cohabitation/separation. Family members (usually one parent) return to the countryside during the busy farming season or specific periods to cohabit briefly with those left at home (the other parent and children), while remaining separated at other times [5].

Analysis: Structural solidarity shows fluctuation, it is between long-term separation and long-term cohabitation, representing a flexible living pattern.

Emotional Connection (emotional solidarity)

Characteristics: Relatively stable but with pressure. Compared to the severe estrangement in the grandparental care type, this type maintains regular (or at least intermittent) reunions, sustaining a relatively stable emotional bond, but separation and economic pressure still burden the parent-child relationship.

Analysis: Parents and children can maintain a certain degree of interaction and emotional connection, but the longing caused by separation and the hardships of working are potential sources of stress.

Core Conflicts/Characteristics: Due to one parent (either the father or the mother) staying at home for a long time, they often become the dominant power in daily family affairs and children's education.

Mixed Economic Support: Family income is no longer solely dependent on working outside but is composed of both working income and agricultural income, providing a mixed support for the family economy.

3.3. Living the Nearby Town

Living Pattern (structural solidarity)

Characteristics: Close or semi-cohabitation. Families move to county towns or town centers, maintaining a short geographical distance from their rural hometowns, or one parent works and lives in the town while the other stays in the countryside to manage agricultural work, and children attend school in the town.

Analysis: Structural solidarity is significantly restored, achieving close or quasi-cohabitation, but the differences in urban and rural lifestyles and the need to travel between the two places may lead to a "semi-cohabitation" state.

Emotional Connection (emotional solidarity)

Characteristics: Emotional connection is restored, but there are adaptation conflicts. Daily interaction between parents and children is resumed, improving the emotional deficit, but the new living environment and close contact also bring conflicts in living habits and urban adaptation.

Analysis: The emotional distance between parents and children is shortened, but they need to adjust their living rhythms and expectations in the new urban environment.

Core Conflict/Characteristics: Direct parental control, due to the restoration of cohabitation, parents can directly and closely control their children's studies and lives.

Increased economic pressure: Urban living (rent, higher consumption levels) and children's education expenses have significantly increased, leading to greater economic pressure on the family and becoming a new core conflict.

3.4. Immediate Family Living Together

Living Pattern (structural solidarity)

Characteristics: Long-term cohabitation (in urban areas or returning to the countryside). Family members achieve long-term and stable cohabitation, either by settling in urban areas or by the entire family returning to the countryside after the parents' retirement.

Analysis: The structural solidarity between parents and children reaches the peak, and the family structure tends to be a traditional nuclear family, but its core has adapted to modern society.

Emotional Connection (emotional solidarity)

Characteristics: Mutual support and coexistence of habitual conflicts. The parent-child relationships are characterized by mutual support emotionally, the younger generation provides economic or information support and the older generation offers care services, however, long-term cohabitation inevitably leads to conflicts in living habits and parenting concepts.

Analysis: The emotional connection is strong, based on mutual resource provision and support, but generational differences are the source of daily conflicts.

Core Conflicts/Characteristics: At this stage, the younger generation (working in urban areas or starting businesses in the countryside) usually provides the main economic source and becomes the economic leader of the family.

The Older Generation Provides Care Services: Parents usually take on the responsibility of looking after grandchildren and handling household chores as a form of repayment or support for the economic contributions of the younger generation.

These four types clearly demonstrate the changes in the parent-child relationship in rural Sichuan in living patterns, emotional bonds, economic support, and intergenerational power during social changes, especially in the context of rural labor migration and urbanization.

4. Analysis of the Mechanism of Social Changes on the Characteristics of Parent-Child Relationships in Rural Sichuan

Social changes in not only give rise to different types of parent-child relationships in Rural Sichuan but also profoundly reshape the intrinsic characteristics of parent-child relationships through three core dimensions: economy, culture, and structure.

4.1. Changes of Intergenerational Power Structure in Parent-Child Relationships: From Normative Authority to Economic Dominance

4.1.1. The Decline of Traditional "Filial Piety" Norms and the Weakening of Paternal Authority

In traditional rural society, the core of the power structure in parent-child relationships was the "filial piety" and "paternal authority" norms under Confucian culture. The older generation's absolute control over land, labor, and family resources granted them undisputed authority (normative solidarity). However, large-scale population outflow has disrupted this foundation:

The release from land dependence: The market economy has shifted the main income source of young and middle-aged people to urban employment, the economic value and control of land decline, thus disintegrating the older generation's economic constraints on the younger generation.

The "functional vacancy" of authority: Parents' migration for work and structural separation prevent them from fulfilling their daily care and discipline responsibilities. This "functional absence" has greatly weakened their authority in the eyes of their children (weakening of emotional solidarity).

The rise of the younger generation's economic status: Young and middle-aged people who succeed in urban employment or return to start businesses have gained economic dominance and ultimate decision-making power in the family through higher market income and new ideas. Power has gradually shifted from traditional authority (the older generation) to modern resource controllers (the younger generation).

4.1.2. The Changes of the Older Generation's "Emotional Investment" to the Younger Generation

In the new power structure, the maintenance of the older generation's authority no longer relies on normative constraints but has transformed into unlimited resource investment in the younger generation. This investment is the older generation's "emotional investment" or "instrumental investment" in the younger generation's future. Parents spare no expense to support their children's education, home purchase, and marriage, the aim is to consolidate functional solidarity between generations and ensure the younger generation's higher social status, thereby indirectly guaranteeing the older generation's livelihood in their old age. This "investment" logic has replaced the traditional "raising children to provide against old age" norm, the older generation in a disadvantaged "giver" position in intergenerational power competition.

4.2. Reconstruction of the Economic Model in Parent-Child Relationships: Utilitarianism and Unidirectional Support

4.2.1. The "Utilitarianism" of Traditional Support: From Labor Dependency to Cash Dependency

In traditional agrarian societies, the elderly's reliance on their children was mainly based on labor (requiring labor for farming and care) [6]. Social changes have shifted the basis of traditional support from labor dependency to cash dependency. The elderly's dependence on

their children has transformed into cash dependency, especially in the absence of a well-developed rural social security system, the quality of life in old age directly depends on the cash transfer payments from children's earnings. This utilitarian trend in economic dependency has further linked the emotional and responsibility ties between parents and children more directly to material rewards.

4.2.2. The Controversy over "Intergenerational Exploitation" and One-way Payments

In rural Sichuan, the core feature of intergenerational economic flows is "children's extraction" or "one-way giving". New-generation migrant workers need their parents to provide a large amount of initial capital for them to establish themselves in cities or improve their rural lives, such as huge dowries and down payments for houses. This phenomenon is called "intergenerational exploitation" or "reverse support pressure".

Exhaustion of parental resources: Parents often sacrifice their own retirement reserves to provide economic resources to support their children, increasing the risk of old age for the elderly.

Alienation of functional solidarity: The intergenerational care provided by grandparents, although it is a manifestation of functional solidarity, is often undervalued or seen as a "duty" of parents, further exacerbating the unequal status of parents in intergenerational exchanges.

Deep integration of economy and emotion: The scale of economic support has become the sole or primary indicator for measuring the closeness of parent-child relationships and the depth of emotions, further accelerating the utilitarian process of parent-child relationships.

4.3. The Alienation and Remodeling of Emotional Bonds in Parent-Child Relationships: The Impact of "Emotional Deficit"

4.3.1. The "Emotional Deficit" Caused by Spatial and Temporal Separation and Its Long-Term Effects

The "emotional deficit" is the most profound negative impact of social changes on parent-child relationships. The long-term spatial and temporal separation in intergenerational care and semi-working, semi-farming parent-child relationships has severely weakened the emotional solidarity between parents and children. This "emotional deficit" is not only manifested in low communication frequency and weak intimacy but also has a psychological impact on left-behind children:

Damaged attachment relationships: The absence of the critical attachment period in childhood may lead to insecure attachment patterns, lack of self-confidence, and interpersonal trust in children.

Mental health problems: The incidence of anxiety, depression, and loneliness among left-behind children is higher than that of non-left-behind children.

Obstacles to intergenerational emotional conveying: This emotional trauma can continue adulthood, affecting their intimate relationship patterns with future partners and their own children, creating intergenerational barriers to emotional conveying.

4.3.2. New Media and Remote Communication: Compensation or Futility?

The popularity of new media and remote communication (mobile phones, video calls) provides technical support for maintaining long-distance parent-child relationships (associative solidarity). However, its effect is controversial:

Positive effects: It maintains a "minimum" connection between parents and children, making parents understand their children's general situation.

Negative impacts: This remote communication is often fragmented and instrumental. Parents find it difficult to deeply understand their children's true psychological state and daily difficulties through screens. The "symbolic compensation" of video calls cannot replace real,

continuous physical companionship and emotional interaction, and the "emotional deficit" cannot be substantially remedied.

4.4. Conflicts in Educational Concepts and Cultural Values

4.4.1. The Manifestation of "Educational Inflation" in Rural Areas

In the context of fierce social competition, parents generally view their children's education as the only path for family social mobility, leading to the phenomenon of "educational involution" in rural areas: the contradiction between high expectations and scarce resources: parents have extremely high expectations for their children to be admitted to prestigious schools. However, due to their own limited educational attainment and the lack of educational resources (teachers and tutoring) in rural areas, there is a huge gap between expectations and reality, which increases educational anxiety and conflicts between parents and children. The absence of family education: In the absence of parents, the responsibility of family education is transferred to grandparents or schools, and parents are unable to provide effective guidance and supervision.

4.4.2. Intergenerational Differences and Conflicts in Urban and Rural Values

Under the influence of urban education and information media, the younger generation has been exposed to and absorbed a large amount of urban culture and modern values, this has led to a significant generation gap and weakened consensus with their parents' traditional concepts in marriage, career choices, consumption habits, and lifestyle. The inconsistency in values between parents and children makes daily communication and major decisions more prone to conflicts [7].

5. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

This study focuses on rural areas in Sichuan Province, analyzes the structural shocks and adaptive reshaping of parent-child relationships under the background of social change, and classifies them into four major types: skip-generation raising, semi-working/semi-farming, living the nearby town, and immediate family living together. The research finds that large-scale population outflow has driven a profound transformation of parent-child relationships: in power structure, the core power has shifted from the traditional "normative authority" to the economic dominance of the younger generation based on market income, and the older generation has to maintain the relationship by making large-scale "emotional investments" to the younger generation. In economic model, the traditional support base has been weakened, and family functional solidarity is manifested in the older generation providing care services and one-way cash support, this economic support model is increasingly showing a "utilitarian" tendency. The most significant negative impact is that structural separation has caused an irreparable "emotional deficit" in parent-child relationships, which has long effects and it is a major hidden danger affecting the mental health and relationship patterns of the next generation.

Given the above challenges, policies centered on the family should be made. First, for the mainstream left-behind model, it is recommended to build the child psychological support system and strengthen the parenting skills training of grandparents to make up for the lack of emotional and care support. Second, industries should be guided to transfer to counties and rural areas, and returning entrepreneurship should be encouraged, while promoting the integration of urban and rural social security systems to facilitate local employment and the overall mobility of families. In addition, rural home care services for the elderly should be improved to reduce the excessive dependence of the elderly on cash transfers from their children, and bring the parent-child relationships back to track mainly based on emotional maintenance. Finally, scientific family education guidance should be promoted, and make

parents recognize that high-quality emotional companionship is more important than frequent material giving, in order to improve the quality of parent-child relationships.

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