

Renegotiating Patriarchy: Lineage Succession, Intergenerational Support, and Gender Inequality in Contemporary China

Submission for the session on “Logic of Female Succession and Inheritance” or similar topics

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1. Introduction

Across much of human history, women were rarely recognized as heirs within their natal families. Formal institutions and informal norms often marginalized women in kinship systems, constrained their access to family resources, and weakened ties to natal kin. Over the last century, legal reform has advanced worldwide, but informal practice has changed more slowly. This paper adopts a historical perspective to examine the evolution of one understudied informal institution, surname transmission norms, and its implications for gender inequality in intergenerational support.

Specifically, I focus on how surname transmission and lineage succession shape family resource allocation and intergenerational ties in China. Contemporary China offers a compelling setting because rapid economic and demographic change coexists with persistent patriarchal norms. Despite radical revolutions and dramatic structural economic changes undermining the traditional patriarchal kinship system, patrilocal marriage and patrilineal inheritance continue to shape expectations about who belongs to a lineage and who should receive sustained parental support. Sons are conventionally expected to continue the family line and inherit more family resources, while daughters are often viewed as marrying out (Wen and Cheng 2026).

This context motivates two core research questions. First, under what circumstances can women be treated as heirs within families? Second, when women can pass their surnames to children, do they receive greater parental support and maintain closer ties to their natal families? Because surname is a symbolic and institutional marker of lineage membership, surname transmission may influence whether parents perceive daughters as continuing the family line. If so, maternal surname adoption may be associated with a reallocation of support and stronger intergenerational bonds between married daughters and their natal kin.

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The broader theoretical argument is that lineage succession norms mediate gender inequality in families. Where daughters can credibly transmit lineage identity through surname, parents may update expectations about reciprocity, care, and old-age security. This can reshape bargaining dynamics across generations and reduce gendered asymmetries in support. By connecting symbolic lineage practices to material transfers and living arrangements, this study contributes to the debates on how social stratification is reproduced and renegotiated through family systems.

2. Data and Methods

Because existing public datasets rarely include detailed information on surname transmission, this project combines original data collection with national survey infrastructure. First, I submitted a survey module to the 2024 wave of the *China Family Panel Studies* (CFPS) to collect information on maternal surname adoption, related attitudes, inheritance expectations, and family dynamics. This nationally representative design provides strong external validity.

Second, during the same period as the CFPS 2024 fieldwork, I commissioned a professional survey firm to collect a quota sample using matched wording for key items from the CFPS questionnaire and an embedded survey experiment. The quota sample is balanced on gender, age, rural-urban origin, and education, and is weighted to align with the demographic profile of the CFPS. The experimental component strengthens internal validity.

Third, I conducted extensive fieldwork in areas where maternal surname adoption is comparatively prevalent to gather illustrative qualitative cases and contextual detail on kinship negotiation. These cases are used to interpret mechanisms with nuance.

Together, I employ both multivariate regressions and content analysis to analyze the data. Because CFPS 2024 is not yet publicly released, this abstract presents selected findings from the quota sample while preserving full comparability with the CFPS module design.

3. Empirical Findings

3.1 Trends and Patterns of Maternal Surname Transmission

Figure 1 shows a clear upward cohort trend in the share of respondents reporting a child with a maternal surname. It suggests that, although still a minority practice, this non-patrilineal naming practice is expanding among Chinese households, challenging social norms that have persisted for thousands of years.

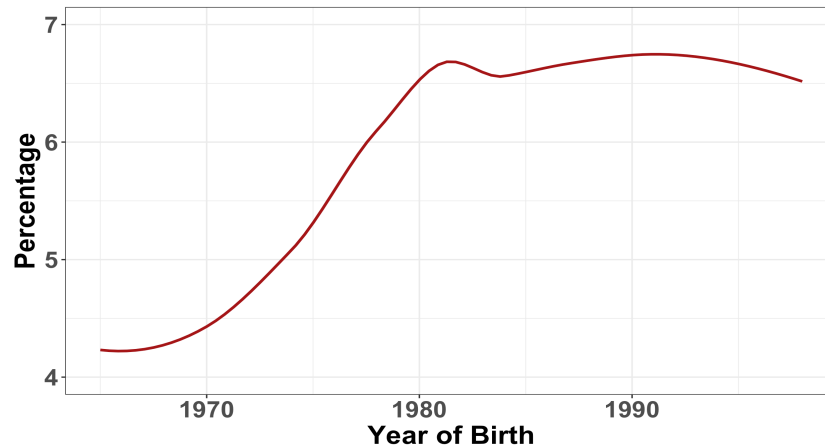


Figure 1. *The Rise of Respondents with a Child Adopting the Maternal Surname*

Figure 2 reports the correlates of maternal surname transmission. The strongest predictors are consistent with a lineage-renegotiation account: women without brothers, from only-child families, and of rural origin are more likely to pass their surnames to children. These patterns suggest that maternal surname transmission is not random but instead linked to family-level incentives for lineage continuation through daughters under patriarchy.

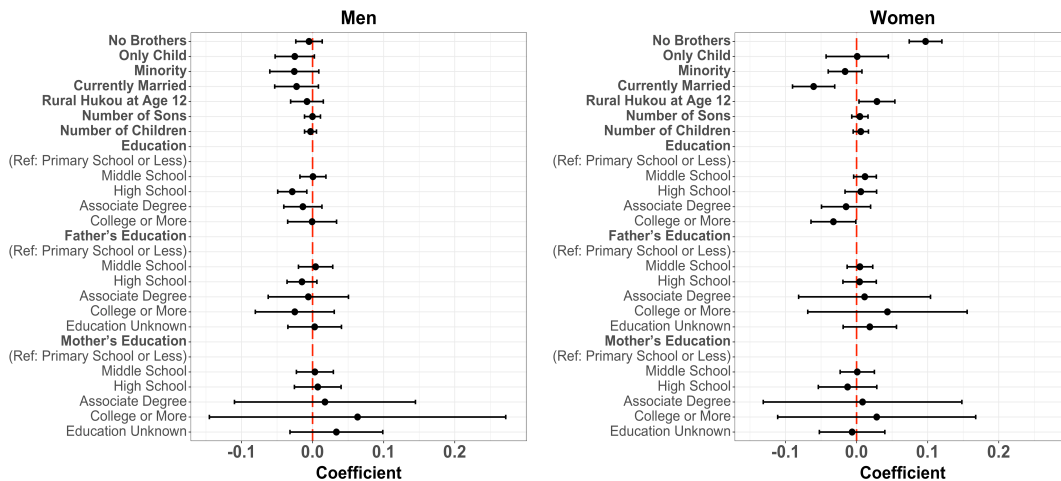


Figure 2. *Associations Between Personal Characteristics and Having a Child Adopting the Maternal Surname*

3.2 Maternal Surname Transmission and Reduced Gender Inequality

Figure 3 presents predicted economic and housework/childcare support from parents while controlling for covariates. The interaction pattern indicates that maternal surname transmission is associated with stronger parental support for women, effectively eliminating the gender gaps. Relative to otherwise similar women without a child adopting the maternal surname, women with such a child receive greater parental support in the forms of money, housework, and childcare.

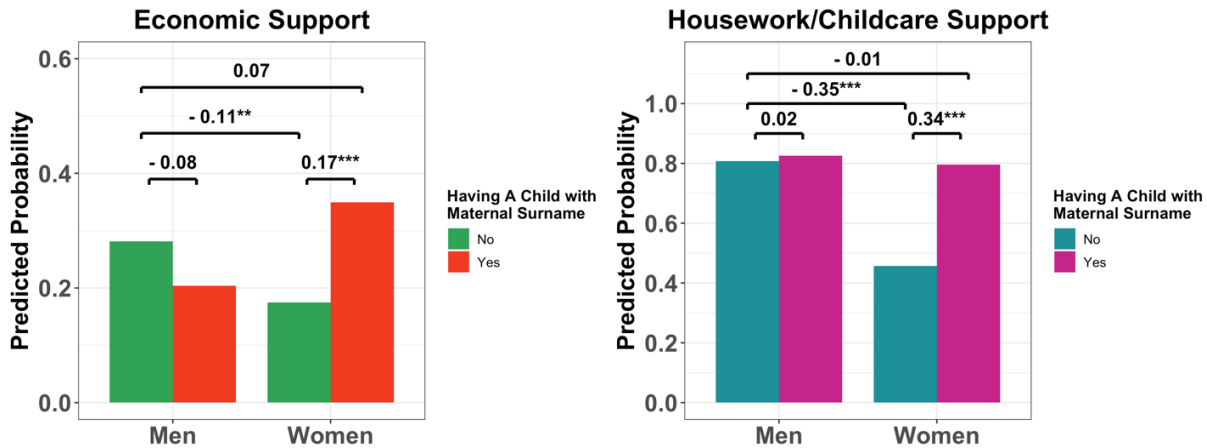


Figure 3. Effects of Having a Child with a Maternal Surname on Economic and Housework/Childcare Support from Parents in the Past Six Months

In parallel, Figure 4 presents predicted outcomes for living arrangement. Maternal surname transmission is associated with a higher probability of coresidence with a woman's own parents and with a man's in-laws. These results suggest that lineage redesignation through surname undermines traditional patrilocal residence patterns among married couples.

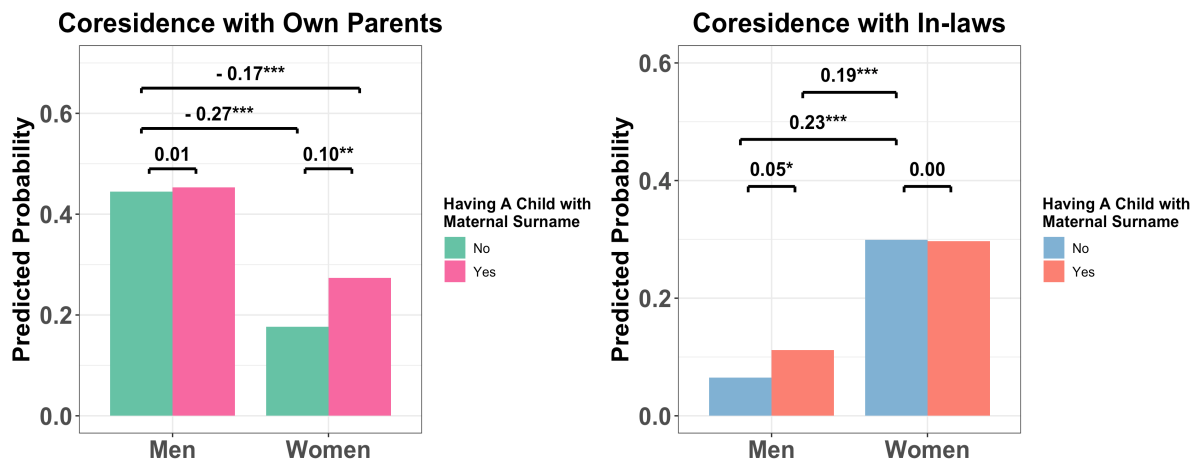


Figure 4. Effects of Having a Child with a Maternal Surname on Coresidence with Own and Spouse's Parents

To summarize, the evidence leads to three conclusions. First, surname transmission is a consequential informal institution, not merely a symbolic preference. Second, maternal surname adoption is associated with measurable shifts in intergenerational support toward women's natal families. Third, these shifts suggest one pathway through which gender inequality in family resource allocation may be substantially reduced, even under enduring patriarchal norms.