

## Neo-traditional Child Surnaming in Contemporary China

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**Neo-traditional Child Surnaming in Contemporary China:  
Women's Rights as Veiled Patriarchy**

**Abstract**

A sparse sociological literature on surnaming reports predominantly Western cases. This paper examines surnaming practices in present-day China, where married women universally retain their surname as part of a national political project. The one-child policy disrupts the practice of providing to a child his/her father's surname. Wives from daughter-only families increasingly provide their surname to their child(ren). Various social forms of mother-surname-to-child practices are discussed, including those involving *zhao-xu* (uxorilocal marriage) and *liang-tou-dun* ('two places to stay'). The paper reports a gender strategy of mother-to-child surnaming that paradoxically enforces patriarchal inheritance and obligation. A concept, 'veiled patriarchy', is developed and applied to surnaming practices in contemporary China.

**Key words:** surnaming, gender, veiled patriarchy, power, obligation, inheritance

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## **Introduction**

The Anglo-Saxon convention of patronymic surnaming continues today throughout Europe and the US (Almack, 2005; Boxer and Gritsenko, 2005; Goldin and Shim, 2004; Hoffnung, 2006; Johnson and Scheuble, 1995, 2002; Lebell, 1988; Lockwood et al., 2011; Nugent, 2010). It entails ‘a form of naming in which only males are assured permanent surnames they can pass on to their children’ (Kramarae and Treichler, 1985: 324–25). Indeed, the children of Western women who do not take their husband’s surname tend nevertheless to bear their father’s surname (Almack, 2005; Finch 2008; Lockwood et al., 2011; Nugent, 2010; Pilcher, 2016).

In spite of its significance surnaming has attracted little sociological attention. While focusing on personal naming Finch (2008: 712) mentions surnaming practices, reporting that patriarchal preference is reflected through patronymic child-naming where a woman conventionally takes her husband’s surname on marriage, thus displaying links to her husband’s kin network. Such patronymic dominance persists through cultural norms which lag behind gender shifts. Related expectations reiterate what women, wives, and mothers ‘should’ do to be appropriately gendered and intelligible social beings (Nugent, 2010; Thwaites, 2017).

The present paper contributes to surnaming research by drawing on Chinese cases. Two emergent practices in urban China are examined, namely *zhao-xu* and *liang-tou-dun*. The first, *zhao-xu*, refers to a man marrying into his wife’s family; the other, *liang-tou-dun*, is the provision of a marriage dwelling by both the bride’s family and the groom’s so that the couple has two places in which to live. In both of these cases it is socially acceptable for a child to take his/her mother’s surname. The background and social implications of these practices are explored.

Naming practices are typically related to family processes. But surnaming has relevance beyond the family and is connected with political and broader social arenas within which families operate. Surnaming practices may reflect state policy and social actors’ responses to state initiative; indeed, it will be shown that surnaming practices are family strategies of social and economic significance. Investigation of surnaming can thus contribute to understanding kinship, patriarchy and family obligations. The present paper will address each of these themes. A concept of ‘veiled patriarchy’ is developed in explaining surnaming practices as gendered strategies. Patriarchy is ‘veiled’ in this case as the provision of the mother’s surname to her child may be seen as a challenge to patriarchal norms but in fact preserves her father’s patrilineal lineage aspirations.

## **Individualisation or family connections**

In late modernity, through ensuing social, economic and legal change, it is theorised that individuals have greater freedom to make unconventional choices than in earlier generations (Almack, 2005; Lieberman, 2000). An enhanced sense of personal identity, liberalised values, feminist viewpoints, educational achievement, pre-marriage professional identity, and low religiosity are all identified as factors leading women to retain birth-surnames and provide them to their children (Goldin and Shim, 2004; Hoffnung, 2006; Johnson and Scheuble, 1995, 2002; Kupper, 1990; Lockwood et al., 2011; Noack and Wiik, 2008; Twenge, 1997). Change in family structure, increased rates of divorce and remarriage, single and GLBT parenting are also indicated as responsible for a greater number of households with members having different surnames and who make non-traditional choices in their own and their

children's surname (Almack, 2005; Johnson and Scheuble, 2002; Kopelman et al., 2009).

Unconventional surnaming practices tend to be associated with increasing individualisation. Under conditions of late modernity, it is held, families undergo significant structural change; individuals become less constrained by traditional social forms, 'disembedded' from established structures and compelled to make individual choices unencumbered by familial obligation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002). Family ties and community norms exert less pressure than previously and individuals have more independence and freedom to exercise personal judgment (Lieberson, 2000). In these circumstances 'family name' may 'no longer denote a family' (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 4–6) so that surname ceases to be a reliable identifier of family connections.

The individualisation thesis predicts, then, that kinship-connoted surnaming practices will weaken through the trajectory of modernisation. Research continues to show, however, that in both children's and women's post-marriage surnaming there is a continued prioritisation of men's over women's surnames (Davies, 2011; Finch, 2008; Lockwood et al., 2011; Pilcher, 2016). An overall rise since the 1970s of women's use of surnames other than their husbands' (Goldin and Shim, 2004; Kopelman et al., 2009) has provided expectation of corresponding changes in child surnaming (MacDougall, 1985; Nugent, 2010: 501). Research reveals, however, that even among women making unconventional marital name choices only a minority provide their birth surname to their children (Johnson and Scheuble, 2002: 426; Nugent, 2010).

The continuing predominance of the patronym in child surnaming suggests the enduring importance of kinship and family connections in this domain (Finch, 2008). Evidence suggests that men are more likely than women to favour conventional patronymic and patrilineal surnaming practices, in both the US (Intons-Peterson and Crawford, 1985; Scheuble and Johnson, 1993) and the UK (Pilcher 2016; Thwaites 2013, 2017; Wilson, 2009). While the norm for women to change their name on marriage is less rigidly applied there remains strong pressure on women to conform to established practice (Picher 2016; Thwaites, 2017). These findings support the idea that a shared surname between spouses reflects concerns regarding family unity (Boxer and Gritsenko, 2005; Hoffnung, 2006; Lockwood et al., 2011; Nugent, 2010). A common surname plays a significant role in a personal sense of belonging to a kin group and heritage (Almack, 2005; Bond, 1998; Edwards and Caballero, 2008). Connectedly the surnaming of children allows parents and children to display their belonging not only to a conjugal family but to a kin, race, ethnic or faith group (Davies, 2011). Almack's (2005) study of surnaming of children within non-conventional lesbian-parent families reveals continuation of family lineage and conventional expectations.

The continuing significance of family connections even under conditions of rapid social change both supports and partly results from conventional surnaming practices in Europe and America. The Chinese case shows even more clearly, though counter-intuitively, the importance of surname practices in a society of rapidly changing family structure and state policy.

### **Surnaming and women's rights in China**

A study of surnaming practices in present-day China permits identification of factors otherwise overlooked in research. Current understanding, summarised above, holds that retention of her birth surname after marriage contravenes patriarchal norms by a woman encouraged by individualisation, liberal ideology and feminist theory. The provision of a

married woman's pre-marriage surname to her child is an even greater challenge to patriarchy, according to this perspective. Consideration of women's and children's surnaming practices in mainland China, on the other hand, provides a quite different perspective. Chinese women today universally retain their birth surname after marriage. This is not a consequence of individual volition by select women but part of a larger political project in which marriage does not require women to relinquish their surname and adopt their husband's. This practice results entirely from state policy and the Chinese case provides one example of how politics can influence social processes and shape culture (Kaufman, 2004).

Naming practices provide insight into the way gender is historically constructed in China (Watson, 1986: 619). In both imperial (up to 1912) and Republican (1912-49) China women existed in a near 'nameless' state through patriarchal practices: temporary members of their birth family and incorporated into their husband's family only after the birth of a healthy male heir (Barbalet, 2014; Kuo, 2011; Watson, 1986). A married woman at this time would be called *nei-ren* (inner person), and, for example, *Chen-sao* (Chen's wife), *Dongdong-niang* (Dongdong's mother) or *Wang-nainai* (Wang's grandmother). Since the Communist Party's ascendance to national power in 1949 Chinese women transitioned from nameless subordination to possessing a full name of their own and surname autonomy. The 1950 Marriage Law upholds the principle that married women have the right to maintain their own surnames after marriage. This principle is today universally implemented so that women in China uniformly retain their birth surnames after marriage rather than adopt their husband's.

These changes in surnaming were made in tandem with an ideological assertion of women's equality with men. From the late-1950s women were encouraged to participate in public life; urban women working full-time in state or collective work-units and rural women in the labour force of collective farms. In this context surname practice became a political instrument demonstrating both nationally and internationally that Chinese women 'hold up half the sky', in the words of a slogan of the day. This political project thus functions as a 'distinctive sign' and constituted a 'significant distinction', to borrow Bourdieu's (1985: 730) terms. While Bourdieu's account of the official monopoly of naming titles does not relate to personal naming or surnaming his notion highlights how the Chinese party-state transformed the social world through its categories of perception (Bourdieu, 1985: 730), in this case the retention of Chinese women's surname after marriage.

Women's rights were thus enhanced in China through political campaigns, and by state-led social and economic change. The 'rights' involved, however, are not individual rights. The distinction between private and public spheres, the province of family and state competence respectively, as well as the idea of the individual independent of family obligation or direction, commonplace in liberal thought are absent from Chinese history (Wong, 1997: 514). The 'liberated woman' of recent Chinese history is not an individualised person with a sense of her own destiny apart from that of others but the 'daughter of the party', an image that has continuously functioned to indicate the party's transcendental authority over family, love, and the entire personal sphere (Yue, 1993: 124). Rather than separating itself from the family, the Chinese party-state directs a familial order that claims people's compliance and sacrifice (Wong, 1997: 515). In China, then, the liberated woman is thus linked to the prosperity of the nation.

It was noted above that women's use of surnames other than their husbands' since the 1970s in Europe and America introduces the possibility of corresponding changes in child surnaming, of non-patrilineal child surnames, that is a child having his/her mother's surname

rather than his/her father's (MacDougall, 1985). An examination of child surnaming practices in urban China, on the other hand, indicates that such outcomes cannot be inferred simply from the fact that women universally retain their own birth surnames. It will be reported below that giving a child his/her mother's surname may be a strategy to ensure the continuation of the mother's paternal lineage. It will thus be shown how in post-1978 reform China women's rights may implicitly reinforce a patriarchal order. The concept of 'veiled patriarchy' is developed in explanation of child surnaming practices which serve to continue a married woman's father's lineage, preserving patrilineal property and associated rights.

## **Method**

Research underlying this paper draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews. Qualitative methods are particularly useful in identifying the complexities of emergent surnaming practices and the dynamic contexts in which they are located, including the life-situations and experiences of individuals and their families, thus leading to refinement of existing theoretical perspectives (Layder, 2005: 20; Merton, 1968: 156–71; Ragin, 1994: 55–102). In this way the ground is prepared for an empirically-based and theoretically-informed examination of surnaming practices in mainland China during the current period of market reform. The present paper derives from a larger study of changing family relations in mainland China, for which 133 interviews were conducted. Within some of these, concerns regarding surnaming practices arose and through snowballing and other contacts additional interviewees were identified.

For the present study 63 semi-structured interviews concerning surnaming were conducted in Chinese cities of diverse size and location, namely Beijing (8 interviews), Changshu (16), Guangzhou (14), Hefei (23) and Shenzhen (2). The numbers of interviews should not be taken as a representation of the incidence of surnaming practices. It can be reported, though, that in all five research sites interviewees as well as additional informants from a broad and diverse range of backgrounds indicate an increased incidence of a child being given its mother's surname. This is especially so in Changshu, a small city with a large population of newly rich entrepreneurs in textiles and clothing. It will be shown below why new wealth is a common background-factor of the surnaming practices described here. Direct experience with a child being given his/her mother's surname was reported in 45 of these interviews (6 in Beijing, 16 in Changshu, 10 in Guangzhou, 12 in Hefei and 1 in Shenzhen). These respondents were drawn from 23 different families. A summary profile of these interviewees, indicating both their gender and employment status, is in Table 1. The remaining 18 interviews were conducted with respondents with a close relative whose child has his/her mother's surname.

### **[Table 1 about here]**

The study is designed to explore how and why a child is given his/her mother's surname, considering the perspectives of both parents and grandparents. Findings show not only that parents and grandparents view issues differently but also that these differences are interactively negotiated in the respondent's conceptualisation of the concerns and prospects of family life. Because men and women are represented in the interview samples consideration of a variety of gender-related issues is possible.

The data was sorted and coded according to thematic constructions. Multiple readings of transcripts were initially engaged to derive general themes. Each transcript was then read and

coded for indicators of themes. These themes were labeled and organized in terms of the connections between them. Clusters of themes were then organized to create higher-order concepts. Data is coded in terms of name, age, sex, employment, number and sex of adult children in a family, number and sex and also order of birth of dependent children in a family, reason for surnaming, negotiating practices, conflict patterns, family property and inheritance, felt obligation to others and other thematic influences. The final stage of coding focused on hypothesizing for theoretical development. The respondents' accounts presented in the paper are selected from those with direct experience of a child being given his/her mother's surname and represented across the data set. A summary of the surnaming of children in the study is presented in Table 2. The findings are drawn from interviews with respondents who have direct contact with such surnaming and are also reflected in interviews conducted with respondents who report the experience of close relatives. The names of respondents reported below are pseudonyms and the titles 'Mrs' and 'Mr' are used for gender identification only as such terms are not used in China. The factors underlying emergent surnaming practices are indicated in discussion below.

**[Table 2 about here]**

### **Veiled patriarchy: preserving patriarchy through women's rights**

While Chinese women retain their birth surnames after marriage an entrenched norm is that children take their fathers' surname. Field work revealed, however, an emergent contrary surnaming practice. A couple's only child may be given his/her mother's surname in certain circumstances. If a couple has two children one may be given the father's surname and the other the mother's. These surnaming practices are not associated with the mother's personal persuasion, nor her self-concept or self-defined gender role. Whereas in the West a child's taking his/her mother's surname is treated as a manifestation of non-patrilineal practice, in China it is not.

The emergent practice in China briefly described above is closely linked with the one-child policy begun in 1979 as a means of national population control. This policy was from 2002 embodied in the Population and Family Planning Law. One consequence of this policy in urban areas is the possibility of families comprising a couple and an only daughter. The policy permits rural families two children if the first is a girl, provided that the mother is 28 years or older and that there is a four-year gap between births (Dodge and Suter, 2008). Because the one-child policy is enforced by local authorities distinctive practices emerge; a family may have more than two 'legal' children through payment of a fine (Dodge and Suter, 2008: 15). From 2013, the Chinese central government relaxed the one-child policy, legally permitting couples two children if one parent is an only child.

A consequence of the one-child policy, through which arise a number of urban daughter-only families, is disruption of family lineage. Traditionally the Chinese family is inter-generational and same-generation conjugal spouses simply replenish what is known as the 'continuum of descent' through which a man 'exists by virtue of his ancestors, and his descendants exist only through him' (Baker, 1979: 26-7). Every Chinese male, according to this tradition, honours and supports his parents by fathering sons through whom the family line and therefore the family name will continue to the next generation. In contemporary China boys are preferred over girls 'because males can give birth to future generations in name, while females cannot' (Lebell, 1988: 21). Daughter-only families thus deflect lineage ideals and the continuum of descent.

No doubt aware of this implication of the one-child policy the Chinese government conducts campaigns promoting the value of girl babies. A billboard in Hebei Province, typical of many throughout China, proclaims: 'There is no difference between having a boy and a girl – girls can also continue the family line' (Dodge and Suter, 2008: 19). It is left to affected families to fashion and implement practices through which 'girls can also continue the family line'. Research reported here indicates how daughters may 'continue the family line' of their fathers through surnaming practices in which 'veiled patriarchy' is implicated.

On the surface a child's provision of his/her mother's rather than his/her father's surname could not be less patriarchal. Such surnaming practices, though, may preserve the 'family line' of an adult daughter's father. Such a case is an instance of what is called here 'veiled patriarchy'. The term 'patriarchy', as Kandiyoti (1988: 274-275) notes, 'evokes an overly monolithic conception of male dominance, which is treated at a level of abstraction that obfuscates rather than reveals the intimate inner workings of culturally and historically distinct arrangements between the genders'. This is particularly true in contemporary China, where apparently patriarchy-challenging surnaming practices serve the purpose of maintaining, paradoxically, a woman's patrilineal line and the property and authority prerogatives of her father rather than her husband. In this case patriarchy is hidden or 'veiled' in the sense that behind a mother's surname given to her child is an adult daughter's provision of her father's (rather than her husband's) surname to the young couple's child. On the horizontal plane, then, in the relation between spouses, a mother's rather than a father's surname given to the child is non-patriarchal. When the vertical dimension of inter-generational relations is considered, however, a mother's surnaming is patriarchal in so far as the child's maternal grandfather's lineage is preserved. In this case the patriarchal dimension is 'masked' by the mother-rather-than-father surnaming of the child. As shown below the inter-generational dimension predominates in terms of obligation, transfer of wealth and other forms of capital.

A social function of the 'continuum of descent' in Chinese families is an adult son's provision of care to his aged parents. A traditional solution for a family without a male heir and therefore without any prospect of parental aged-care is *zhao-xu* (uxorilocal marriage; namely, the practice in which a married couple resides with or in close proximity to the wife's parents). This is a marriage form in which a man marries into his wife's family, as opposed to the more usual situation in which a wife enters her husband's family. Uxorilocal marriage not only requires cohabiting after marriage with his wife's parents but also that their children take the mother's surname, ensuring continuance of the mother's family's line. Uxorilocal sons-in-law usually come from families with more than one son, so the husband's family's line is not threatened. This traditional form readily adapts to the needs of daughter-only families resulting from the one-child policy. In these circumstances the wife's family provides a wedding apartment, furniture, household equipment, dowry and wedding banquet.

Like other grandparent respondents with an only daughter Mrs Bai and her husband Mr Li decided that their daughter should not marry out. Their son-in-law agreed to marry into their family and he and his wife live with her parents. Mr Li and his son-in-law's father are both businessmen, although Mr Li is the more successful. The first grandson was given his mother's surname. Mrs Bai reported: 'The elder grandson is named after our family surname'. 'Your family surname?' I asked. 'Yes, our family, my husband's surname Li'. Other interviewees gave similar accounts, that the grandchild having his/her mother's surname is explicitly the provision of his/her maternal grandfather's surname, ensuring continuity of the male lineage one generation removed, thus realizing an instance of 'veiled



patriarchy’.

While the majority of young female respondents present views different from their parents’ their actions facilitate ‘veiled patriarchy’. When I first met Mrs Liang (aged 38), I learned that her 12 year-old daughter has her surname. Responding to my inquiry she said her husband had proposed this surnaming. In a follow-up interview she reported that her parents wanted her child to take her (Mrs Liang’s) family name. Mrs Liang’s husband is married into her family, a situation his parents objected to but came to accept through their son’s insistence. Her husband has siblings, including a brother. She said:

As an only daughter if I marry out my parents will not have any heirs. My parents’ generation has that sort of traditional view, which is that every family should have a *zhong* [seed], have posterity. My husband’s family has more than one son so they can have grandchildren who can take their surname. My family needs a child to carry on the family line.

In this and similar cases reported by my respondents the provision of his/her mother’s surname to a child represents no departure from but rather ‘veiled’ patriarchy, continuing the male lineage of the child’s maternal grandparents. The patriarchal order of the mother’s father, ironically, is reproduced through the women’s rights of his daughter to retain her surname after marriage. Indeed, this generational disjuncture explains both the apparent lack of concern with family lineage revealed by many of my young female interviewees and also their strategic interest in their children’s surname on their aged father’s behalf.

The situation described above seems to be foreshadowed by Finch (2008: 720) when she writes: ‘Parents who choose a name with links to another family member are making a positive choice to shape the child’s connection with their developing kin network, and are doing so in a way which focuses on particular relationships’. Indeed, much of the work on children’s naming similarly assumes that it is a matter decided by the child’s parents (Edwards and Caballero, 2008). My interviews, on the other hand, indicate that grandparents are not only involved in their grandchildren’s surnaming but are the principal decision-makers. Grandparents may devote considerable resources to influencing the surname of their only daughter’s children.

Fathers of a child who has the mother’s surname report concerns that they may ‘lose face’ (Qi, 2011) because men are expected to be master of their household. A man whose baby son has his wife’s rather than his surname is likely to be seen by others as having no authority at home and thus devoid of what Connell (2005) calls hegemonic masculinity. This indicates an association ‘between patronymic, patrilineal surnaming practices and the constitution and display of masculine heterosexual embodied identity’ (Pilcher, 2016: 770). Mrs Bai was asked how her son-in-law responded to his elder son’s being given his mother’s surname:

He was a bit unhappy about it. My son-in-law is very handsome and has a good job in a factory. My daughter is ordinary-looking. He is concerned that people may laugh at him. Most men have children who carry their surname.

Naming decisions are routinely viewed as private matters, but they are in fact social acts. A surname, as Elias (1991: 184) notes, ‘formulates the “We” identities of the individual and is a “visiting card” which indicates who one is in the eyes of others’. Most young male respondents indicated concern that choices which do not conform to the established convention are likely to be judged negatively, potentially undermining the image of their masculinity. Patronymic surnaming practices, as Pilcher (2016: 770) reports, can be ‘recognised as crucial to the constitution and display of embodied gender identities and relationships, as well as to family and kinship relationships’.

### Gendered negotiations and responsibilities

A child being given the mother's surname may lead to contention between parents-in-law and their son-in-law. The issues are frequently negotiated by women, as reported by both grandmother and young mother respondents. Mrs Bai's answers are typical of those provided by grandmothers. She has two grandchildren, both boys. The first boy has his mother's surname. In order to appease her son-in-law Mrs Bai ingeniously devised a given name for the first boy:

The first boy's full name is constituted from *women jia de xing* (our family's surname) Li, followed by *tamen jia de xing* (the son-in-law's family's surname) Meng, and then a character *yao* which derives from part of my son-in-law's given name. My son-in-law's given name is *Xiao*.

The first boy's full name includes his father's surname and also part of his given name. *Yao* was a legendary emperor who had all the virtues of a sage. That the boy's name *Yao* derives from his father's name implies that his future glory is linked with his father's qualities. This is all designed to give much face to Mrs Bai's son-in-law.

Another 'compromise', according to Mrs Bai, was that the second son took his father's surname:

Though it was decided when our son-in-law married into our family that all grandchildren should be named after our family surname we were more open-minded and allowed the second grandchild to take *tamen jia de xing* (the son-in-law's family's surname). The younger boy takes *tamen jia de xing* (the son-in-law's family's surname), followed by *women jia de xing* (our family's surname).

Mrs Bai's daughter talked her husband out of his initial dissatisfaction, pointing out that *tamenjia* (his family) actually fared quite well in the surnaming. Although the surnaming was well planned unforeseen factors intervened. Mrs Bai reports:

The most important thing, actually, is that my husband is not happy now. Why? Our elder grandson has health problems which will have future consequences. Our younger grandson is perfectly well, but he takes *tamen jia de xing* (their family's surname). *Tamen jia de xing* (their family's surname) is placed before *women jia de xing* (our family's surname). I'm OK about it.

Mrs Bai's elder grandson has a mild intellectual disability. Mr Li's idea of the importance of the first son suggests traditional views regarding primogeniture.

The terms used to describe whether a child's surname corresponds with his father's or mother's, not only by Mrs Bai but by respondents generally, namely *women jia de xing* and *tamen jia de xing*, reflect the fact that surnaming is not simply a matter of interest for a conjugal couple but for two consanguine families and the relations between them. Against the expectations of individualisation (Hansen and Svarverud, 2010; Yan, 2009), family ties remain determinative in marketised China (Barbalet, 2016), including for surnaming practices.

One possible purpose of a child being given the mother's surname is preservation of inheritance continuous with the maternal grandfather's (male) line, thus excluding the child's father and his family from access to his wife's family's wealth. Patrilineal surnaming is always understood to function as a means of indicating a biological paternal connection for the purpose of inheritance (Reaney, 1967; Scott et al., 2002: 13). Indeed, the adoption of patronyms was historically part of a general trend of consolidation for hereditary property owners (Scott et al., 2002: 13). With the 1949 Communist accession to power in China

private property and inheritance were abolished. After 1978, however, the Chinese government initiated economic reforms, transitioning from a planned to a market economy. Since the 1978 reforms many Chinese families have accumulated significant wealth. Daughter-only families increasingly adopt *zhao-xu* (uxorilocal marriage) to prevent the loss of property from their family line through inheritance, as evidenced in many respondents' accounts, so that their wealth and family name remain connected in the next generation.

Mrs Jiang's parents have two daughters, she is the elder sister. Mrs Jiang's parents arranged for her husband, who is one of four sons, to marry into her family. Mrs Jiang's baby son was given his mother's surname, guaranteeing the family's 'continuum of descent' through him as well as his inheritance of his mother's family wealth. An important element in this situation is Mrs Jiang's responsibility to support and care for her aging parents, a responsibility that traditionally would fall on the eldest son. Mrs Jiang's 'empowerment' implicates her essential role in the continuation of her father's lineage and in carrying out obligations of brother-in-absence, which is an additional element of the 'veiled patriarchy' that indicates the coherence of less-than-explicit but nevertheless efficacious patriarchy of contemporary China today. As an effective heir, Mrs Jiang has responsibility for the care of her elderly parents, a responsibility she both accepts and discharges. Whereas the individualisation thesis suggests the erosion of family ties and obligation (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) family obligations continue to play a significant role in post-reform China, even though conventions associated with the expectations, attitudes and emotions involved undergo change (Qi, 2015, 2016).

The practice of giving a child the mother's surname can serve as a mechanism to ensure an adult daughter's responsibility for elderly care of her parents, traditionally assigned to a son. This surnaming practice therefore not only preserves the 'continuum of descent' for the next generation but realigns relations between the present and preceding generations. In general terms, the bi-directional and lateral realignments affected through provision of mother's surname to her child is an informal institution of 'veiled patriarchy' through which are perpetuated bonds, power relations, resource distribution and management as well as the discharge of obligations.

### **'Two places to stay'**

It was indicated above that the practice of *zhao-xu*, uxorilocal marriage, draws on a traditional form. Field work revealed an entirely new practice, *liang-tou-dun* or *liang-bian-dun*. *Liang-tou* and *liang-bian* literally mean 'two places' while *dun* means 'stay'. A man and woman, each the only child of their respective family, have no need to marry into the other's family and therefore require no dowry. Nevertheless, the two sets of parents, of bride and groom, each prepare a wedding apartment so that the young couple has two marriage apartments which they will occupy at different times, periodically moving between them. As husband and wife are each an only child the young couple is legally entitled and expected to have two children, in which case one will have the father's surname and the other the mother's. Both families will thus continue their family lines, the paternal grandfather's and maternal grandfather's surname, to the next generation, which is a continuation of 'veiled patriarchy' through the means of a new marriage form. While this may seem like a perfect solution a number of issues arise.

Difficulties emerge because the logically possible permutations of surnaming are over-determined by cultural factors and power relations. A simple application of convention might be that the first child takes the father's surname and the second takes the mother's. First-born children, especially sons, have a special role in the continuity of a family line. Interviews

revealed that if the young wife's family has higher social or economic standing than her husband's then it is likely that they shall propose that the first child take the mother's surname. If the first child is a boy, because of patrilineal views regarding the superiority of boys over girls, it is likely that there will be forceful insistence that the mother's surname be given to that child. The only child of Mrs Dai (aged 63) is a son; his wife is similarly the only child of her family. The two families engaged *liang-tou-dun* with the young couple. Both families are financially comfortable although Mrs Dai's daughter-in-law's family is financially better off. Mrs Dai reported: 'When our son was married, my husband was still alive. He requested that the first grandchild should take *women jia de xing* (our family's surname)'.

Mrs Dai's son worked in a hospital and had privileged access to ultrasound services which revealed that his wife was pregnant with a boy. The wife's mother, speaking for her husband, proposed that the child should take their family's surname and that the second child would then take the father's surname. Mrs Dai, her husband and her son refused to accept this proposal. After difficult and lengthy negotiations it was agreed that the little boy should have his mother's surname added after his father's surname. Mrs Dai revealed some bitterness about this arrangement:

It was too good a bargain for them. We added *tamen jia de xing* (their family's surname) after *women jia de xing* (our family's surname) for the boy. Our granddaughter, the younger child, takes *tamen jia de xing* (their family's surname) not followed by *women jia de xing* (our family's surname). Where is the fairness in this! I asked why a surname is so important to them. Mrs Dai replied: 'We have old feudal ideas, our surname should be carried on one generation after another. We need to have a *gen* (posterity)'. After seeming so adamant Mrs Dai added: 'A surname is just a sign, it doesn't mean much'. Her behaviour, however, similar to many of my other informants, indicates a contrary assessment. It can be seen that the practice of '*liang-tou-dun*' with one child taking the father's surname and the other the mother's surname, an apparent liberal and democratic arrangement, may nevertheless operate as a mechanism of 'veiled patriarchy' in which paternal and maternal grandfather's lineage is sought to be preserved and birth-order priority possibly contested.

The importance of and therefore possible contention in surnaming is indicated in the case of Mrs Chong and her husband Mr Qian, both in their thirties, who practiced *liang-tou-dun*. The first child, a daughter, has her father's surname, Qian. This is the result of an agreement that was reached by both families prior to the birth. According to their agreement the next child would take the mother's surname, Chong. That child turned out to be a boy. The young couple was at first quite happy to apply the surnaming agreement in the case of the second child but Mr Qian's parents demanded a surname swap as they insisted that the baby boy should take their family's surname. Mrs Chong's parents refused to accept this new proposal. The conflict between the two families over the second child's surname escalated to such a degree that the young couple divorced and the established surnaming scheme prevailed. That the fate of a young couple's marriage can be so closely linked to a power struggle concerning the priority of one grandfather's family line over another's in child's surnaming indicates in a negative way how such practices are integral forms of 'veiled patriarchy'.

The over-riding significance of power differences in the senior generation in determination of a grandchild's surname is reflected in my interview with Mr Dong, the CEO of a major company who has an only daughter. He reported that when his daughter married he insisted that the first child take *tamen jia de xing* (their family's surname) and the second child take

the father's surname. When the first child, a daughter, was born Mr Dong demanded that she take her father's surname and the next child take the mother's (i.e. his) surname, on the expectation that the next child would be a boy. He proudly reported that his in-laws responded accommodatingly, holding that a surname-change for the first child was unnecessary and that the second child could also take *tamen jia de xing* (their family's surname, i.e. Mr Dong's). Mr Dong's power in surnaming his daughter's children was thus extensive. He was able to act on behalf of both families in deciding the surnaming sequence of his grandchildren; second, he set the agenda for a surnaming 'swap'; and finally his in-laws conceded that his contrasting proposals were both agreeable. In this way families with social and economic standing may exercise all three dimensions of power (Lukes, 2005).

Surnaming not only reflects power inequalities between families, it may generate inequalities within families. Grandparents tend to provide resources (health-care, education, recreation) to the grandchild who shares their surname. This generates a situation in which a family's children have access to different resources. Mr Mai and Mrs Niu, a couple in their late twenties, have two children, an elder boy and a younger girl. As reported to me by Mrs Niu, the boy has his father's surname and the girl her mother's. The couple is employed by a foreign investment company, and they often work on weekends. Mr Mai's parents look after their grandson, who has their family's surname, for extensive periods, and Mrs Niu's parents look after their granddaughter who has their family's surname. The respective grandparents live in different cities and the children do not see each other for extended periods. This is indeed 'a new way of doing family' (Almack, 2005; Weeks et al., 2001) as surnaming produces a situation of 'negotiated and creative affinities' (Davies 2011: 566). Because of the differences in resources devoted to the children the relationship between the siblings is underdeveloped and their future education and career prospects will reflect not their immediate family background but the different endowments of their respective grandparents.

## **Conclusion**

Sociological research on surnaming is under-developed and what there is predominantly reflects American and European experiences. These latter suggest that a married woman's retention of her birth surname expresses patriarchy-challenging choice supported by individualised orientation and gender-identity. Rejection of patronymic expectation by providing her child with her own (pre-marriage) surname is seen as an even stronger assertion of challenge to patriarchal norms. Examination of surnaming in contemporary China has identified otherwise neglected aspects of surnaming, thus challenging received theoretical expectations and providing opportunities for refinement of existing theory, enhancing its explanatory and analytical strength. The universal practice in China of married women retaining their birth surname reflects not personal choice but state-sponsored collective rights. The provision to a child of the mother's rather than the father's surname, it has been shown, reasserts patriarchal prerogative one generation removed. Because it does this through the medium of a woman's right to retain and also pass-on her surname to her children the term 'veiled patriarchy' is employed in explanation of the marriage forms of *zhao-xu* and *liang-bian-dun* emergent in urban China.

The present paper therefore contributes to the literature a clear direction in conceiving surnaming practices in terms of not only internal family decisions and processes but as one aspect of the interaction between family practices on the one hand and changes in the wider politico-legal and social context in which they operate on the other. In the Chinese case examined here the conjunction of market reform and the one-child policy underlie the child-surnaming forms discussed above. Secondly, through examination of child-surnaming in

China it has been shown that the relationship between advancement of women's rights and patriarchal dominance is complex and that the later may utilise the former. The role of grandparents and not only parents in the practices of surnaming children cannot be ignored. This is not only the case in contemporary China, where intergenerational family obligation remains significant (Qi, 2015, 2016), but worthy of exploration elsewhere as the wide-spread reliance of newly married couples on their parents' resources is intensified in neo-liberal economies. In particular, development here of the concept 'veiled patriarchy' advances our understanding of the possible obscuration of continuing patriarchal control under conditions of growing women's rights.

Given its social and economic significance surnaming unavoidably involves numerous emotions, including joy, excitement and elation linked to the birth of a new family member and thus the generation of multiple familial links and connections, as well as anxiety, bitterness, disappointment and even resentment arising from disagreement between two families concerning surnaming. The emotional aspect of surnaming is the least researched in this sparsely examined sociological topic and deserves future attention. More generally, in demonstrating that surnaming is connected with issues of family, gender and power in various ways, the present paper realigns surnaming theory and the theory of gender through empirical investigation and conceptual innovation.

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**Table 1**  
**Summary profile of interviewees with direct experience of a child being given his/her mother's surname.**

	<b>Employment Status</b>				<b>Total</b>
	business	retired employee	employee	farmer	
<b>Gender</b>					
male					19
female					26
<b>Generation</b>					
grandfather	7	1		1	9
grandmother	7	3		1	11
husband	1		8	1	10
wife	4		7	1	12
children					3

**Table 2**  
**Summary of child surnaming.**

	<b>Child (in order of birth)</b>	<b>Taking parents' surname</b>	<b>Total</b>
Singletons	boy	mother	3
	girl	mother	7
Two children	boy boy	mother father	2
	boy boy	father mother	1
	boy girl	father mother	4
	boy girl	mother mother	1
	girl boy	father mother	3
	girl boy	mother mother	1
	girl girl	mother mother	1