

China's Grandmothers

Over the past century and a half, China has experienced foreign invasion, warfare, political turmoil and revolution, along with massive economic and technological change. Through all this change there is one stable element: grandmothers, as child-carers, household managers, religious devotees, transmitters of culture and, above all, sources of love, warmth and affection. In this interdisciplinary and longitudinal study, *China's Grandmothers* sheds light on the status and lives of grandmothers in China over the years from the late Qing Dynasty to the twenty-first century. Combining a wide range of historical and biographical materials, Diana Lary explores the changes and continuities in the lives of grandmothers through revolution, wars and radical upheaval to the present phase of economic growth. Informed by her own experience as a grandchild and grandmother, Lary offers a fresh and compelling way of looking at gender, family and ageing in modern Chinese society.

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*Gender, Family and Ageing from Late Qing
to Twenty-First Century*

Diana Lary

The University of British Columbia



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This book is dedicated with love and gratitude to

My Three Treasures

三寶

Mabel Milsted

美寶

Jack Carney

英寶

Misha Carney

加寶

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Preface

In Praise of Grandmothers

Chinese grandmothers are integral parts of their grandchildren's lives, a major source of care, love and security. They love their grandchildren and are loved in return. They give unstintingly of their time and energy to their 'treasures'. They have done this for a long time.

The practice of grandmothers raising small children is embedded. Some parents have always gone away, to work or study, and been separated from their children, for weeks, months or years. The anguish for parents at leaving beloved children is immense, made easier by implicit trust that they will be well cared for. Today the separations are concentrated in the children of rural migrants. Grandmothers are in charge of the children for fifty weeks of the year, the parents home for only two weeks' annual holiday. Without the legion of grandmothers China's sustained economic boom would have been impossible.

In the past, grandmothers dominated their family. They were simultaneously loving grandmothers and harsh mothers-in-law, i.e. they mistreated their grandchildren's mother. The old system, so hard on young women, had to change, and it did. Old women have lost much of their power, but while the family remains the cornerstone of society, parts of the old internal dynamics survive. China is now a wealthy nation, but one that provides only limited social welfare benefits – healthcare, pensions, unemployment insurance, education. In the name of Confucian values, China makes younger generations of families responsible for the care of their seniors. In return the elders take a major role in the care of their grandchildren.

The book covers a long time span. Change has been constant. There are major variations by period, region, class, good luck, bad luck and personality in all these issues, but one constant: grandmothers are hugely important to their families.

This book covers the period from the mid-Qing Dynasty to the present. The way Chinese is written on the Mainland has changed; characters have been simplified since 1956. Here is an example: dragon (*long*) is now written 龙, replacing 龍. Simplified characters are easier to learn and to read but they lack

the beauty and the historical connection of traditional ones. They cannot be used for one of the greatest art forms in Chinese culture, calligraphy. Outside the Mainland (Taiwan, Hong Kong, Overseas Chinese communities) traditional characters are still used. I found it hard to abandon the traditional characters for traditional sayings and for poetry; for them and for names and terms used before 1956 I use traditional characters.

This is a personal book. As a granddaughter and a grandmother I could not help inserting myself into it. There are many shared experiences of old women, whether in China or elsewhere. The universal joy of being the grandmother of the most delightful of human beings, babies and small children, makes us members of an elderly sisterhood.