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Marital power, spousal relationship, and intergenerational support

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Abstract

This paper explores the effect of marital power distribution and the spousal relationship on family intergenerational support to older parents using CGSS2006 data. The findings include the following: (1) the more power the wife has, the less economic support the family probably gives to the paternal parents; (2) the spousal relationship contributes to both paternal and maternal intergenerational economic support to older parents; and (3) the spousal relationship can mediate the effect of marital power distribution on paternal economic support. The better relationship the couple has, the less marital power affects economic support to the paternal parents. The mechanism of maternal support requires further exploration.

Keywords: Marital power, Spousal relationship, Intergenerational support

“Putting the wife before the mother”: a question worth asking

The saying “Affectionate father and filial son,” symbolized a kind of moral principle, supporting parenting in the traditional Chinese family and shaping adult offspring’s support of their parents. However, in recent decades, problems have arisen in this model of elderly care. First, some aging parents receive little respect and care from their adult children, even though these children provide economic support. Second, aging parents obtain supporting resources from their adult children but only at the cost of “making contributions to their adult children”, such as taking care of a grandchild or doing chores. If these contributions are not made adult children can justify reducing their support of aging parents (Chen 1998; Guo 2001; Li 2010).

Some scholars claim that these challenges to traditional family support are symbols of the distortion and decay of traditional filial piety (Yan 2006; Shen 2007a, 2007b). At the macrostructural level, the modernization theory of family can theoretically explain these challenges. With the modernization of society, extended kinship gradually weakens and the structure of the traditional family breaks up, resulting in the erosion of intergenerational cohesion, especially between parents and children (Goode 1963). At the microdynamic level, many researchers attribute these challenges to the rise of the younger generation within the family. Under these conditions, the spousal relationship replaces the intergenerational relationship as the new axis of the family; in other words, “putting the wife before the mother.” In these microdynamic analyses, the fact that the “daughter-in-law rules the roost” is the key factor. In general, people believe that in ruling the roost, the

daughter-in-law will prioritize the interests of her “little family” rather than considering the needs of the “mother.” Sometimes, the needs of the husband’s aging parents are neglected. Although empirical evidence often confirms the above explanation of priority (He 1995; Yan 2006; Gui and Jia 2010; Zhang and Cao 2016), the mechanism behind it is worth analyzing. When researchers attribute the lack of support for aging parents to sons’ marriages, they imply that in this situation daughters-in-law are morally reprehensible. Explicitly or implicitly, they morally object to the rise of women’s position within the Chinese family. However, moral condemnation cannot replace academic analysis. It is still unclear whether the rise of the daughter-in-law within the family affects intergenerational support, or how it impacts familial support to aging parents. This paper addresses these questions.

Ethics and rationalism: two approaches to studying intergenerational interaction in the Chinese family

Except for certain periods in history, the family is always the most fundamental life unit for human beings. Academia has constantly debated and discussed why people form families and how they interact within families, but rarely reach universal answers. At one pole of these academic discussions, some scholars consider the family to be a moral community in which people interact with each other according to ethics. At the other pole, some researchers believe that the family is an organization formed by the rational calculation of every individual in which people rationally examine their status and interests and form strategies to maximize self-interest. These two different analytical approaches in family studies can be summarized as the paradigm of ethics and the paradigm of rationalism, and have vital influence on studies of intergenerational interaction in the Chinese family.

Studies on intergenerational interaction in the paradigm of ethics

The paradigm of ethics derives from discussions of traditional Chinese society (Zheng 1992; Weber 2008) as a “family-state isomorphism.” Thus ethics become the critical factor for researchers to comprehend and analyze the traditional family relationship, especially the intergenerational relationship, in China. Researchers who adopt the paradigm of ethics believe that the Chinese family is a moral community in which altruism and ethics powerfully shape and regulate individual behavior (Liang 2005; Tan 2010). In the paradigm of ethics, scholars further develop two analytical approaches based on different research purport and logic—institutionalism and socioculturalism.

The analytical approach of institutionalism emphasizes that institutions provide structural support to ethics, and how institutions are dependent on ethics. Its focal issue is how ethics are implemented in rural society and the traditional family under the “strong restriction” of institutional structures. This approach argues that patrilineality, male-centered familial rights and duties, and patriarchy are the cores of traditional Chinese kinship and family relationships (Li 2010). Researchers either utilize the ethics of Confucianism (e.g., filial piety, chastity, ancestor worship) to examine the scope, hierarchy, and principles of family relationships, or consider the group based on patrilineality as a kind of social organization. In this sense, the patriarchal family is extended

to the patriarchal clan, whose organizational principles and forms further serve as the structural bases of Chinese society (Yan 2012).

Different from the institutionalism approach, socioculturalism argues that individuals gradually acquire social ethics in their process of socialization, and finally internalize these social ethics as personal codes of conduct. With the help of the internalization of ethics, the interactions among family members are selfless and altruistic. On the one hand, family members feel obligated to support other family members who cannot work or take care of themselves, even though this support cannot be directly rewarded. These supporters consider themselves to be beneficiaries as well, since the existence and well-being of other family members are vital for the family's well-being as a whole (Zimmer and Dayton 2005). On the other hand, family members are always inclined to decrease consumption in order to benefit others, especially when the family has few resources.¹

The paradigm of ethics is also applicable in explaining family intergenerational interaction in contemporary China. According to the paradigm of ethics, social structural transformation in China has already changed paternity-centered family culture and the ethics system, which are embodied in the reciprocal model and the intergenerational relationship of "affectionate father and filial son" (Tang et al. 2009). Social structural transformation has thus influenced intergenerational interaction and resource allocation within the family. Two different theoretical explanations have been developed to explain the root cause of these phenomena and interpret the ethical implications of these transformations—"ethical lapse" (Yan 2006) and "ethical change" (Di and Zheng 2016). The ethical lapse explanation is based on the modernization theory of the family, emphasizing that industrialization and modernization engender nuclearization of family relationships. Occupational mobility enlarges the geographical distance and social gap among relatives. Social welfare and insurance decrease individual dependency on kinship networks. Meanwhile, economic development and modernization undermine traditional moral codes such as filial piety, reducing adult children's willingness to take care of aging parents (Chen and Korinek 2010). Yet those using the approach of ethical change are not convinced to accept the claim of ethical lapse based on the phenomenon described above, though the intergenerational interaction pattern in contemporary Chinese families is distinct from and sometimes opposed to traditional Confucian ethics, especially the ethical principles repeated in Confucian classics. The recent approach of "favor flows downstream" (恩往下流) in Chinese families and the inadequate supporting resources given to the older generation are simply consequences of the ethical change from "senior priority" to "junior priority" (Di and Zheng 2016). Although the explanations of ethical lapse and ethical change are different in their estimation and analysis of empirical phenomenon, both theories are derived from the paradigm of ethics. What differentiates ethical lapse is that in its explanation of Chinese family's status quo, previous ethical codes disintegrate and lapse in the process of family modernization.

Studies on intergenerational interaction in the paradigm of rationalism

In contrast to the paradigm of ethics defining family members as altruists and moral models, studies in the paradigm of rationalism focus on the rationality embedded in

intergenerational relationships. The most influential theory in the paradigm of rationalism about Chinese familial intergenerational relationship is the corporate model. In the corporate model, Chinese families are economic units composed of completely rational and self-interested members. Shared property in the family is the primary leverage to supervise and regulate each member. As a sort of operational unit with inherence and flexibility, the Chinese family can mobilize human power and material resources to the utmost extent and make the best use of external opportunities. In the corporate model, different forms and constant changes of family structure are the consequences of familial cooperation that is economically oriented (Yan 2006), targeting the maximization of family interests. The corporate model was originally applied to understand patrimonial system and household production. Its influence later spread to discussions of uxori-local marriage (招赘婚), homogeneous marriage, residence, and house division (Luo 2004; Li et al. 2002).

Developed from the corporate model that emphasizes the rationalization of family members, Wolf (1972) proposes the concept of the “uterine family” based on her observation of family relationships in Taiwan. Wolf suggests that the daughter-in-law, who is originally the alien in her husband’s family, does not always passively accept her fate in the traditional family. She deliberately forms a clique with her sons, cultivating a close relationship between her sons and herself so as to acquire family power and ensure life quality when she is old. In Wolf’s analysis, the uterine family is the product of rational behavior chosen by female family members.

Under the paradigm of rationalism, scholars often regard intergenerational interaction as a kind of exchange relationship. Essentially, intergenerational relationships in the Chinese family are an exchange in the form of parenting and reciprocation. Intergenerational interactions and parent-child dynamics contain not only the tangible exchange of materials and economic resources but also the intangible exchange of affection and symbols (Guo 2001). In this sense, intergenerational interaction is utilitarian in that the quantity and quality of exchangeable resources possessed by parent and children directly define their status in the family. In the case of familial support in contemporary China, this paradigm is actually evidenced by a large amount of data. Direct causality is found between parental investment in children and children’s reciprocal support to aging parents (Chen 1998). The greater the contribution that parents make to their adult child’s new family, the more easily they receive support from their offspring (Di et al. 2013).

Although the paradigms of ethics and rationalism are distinct from each other in terms of analytical perspective, they share an assumption regarding the homogeneity of behavior choice among family members. To be specific, the paradigm of ethics considers family members as an integral unit and focuses on its structure, including institutional structure and sociocultural structure. It highlights how structures shape and regulate family members, every family member is disciplined by moral codes, and their chosen behavior is coincident with acquired moral codes. The paradigm of rationalism assumes a single route of a family member’s behavior choice in its implicit belief in rational calculation. This paradigm, which focuses on behavioral strategies, considers family members to be single and rational individuals, and emphasizes their strategic behavior choice in the process of intergenerational interaction. Either the paradigm of ethics or the paradigm of rationalism implies the homogeneity of family members’

behavior choice—in the paradigm of ethics, family members are all moral code followers, and in the paradigm of rationalism, they are all calculative people. The diversity of individual behavior, especially the perspective and agency of women, is neglected in the existing literature.

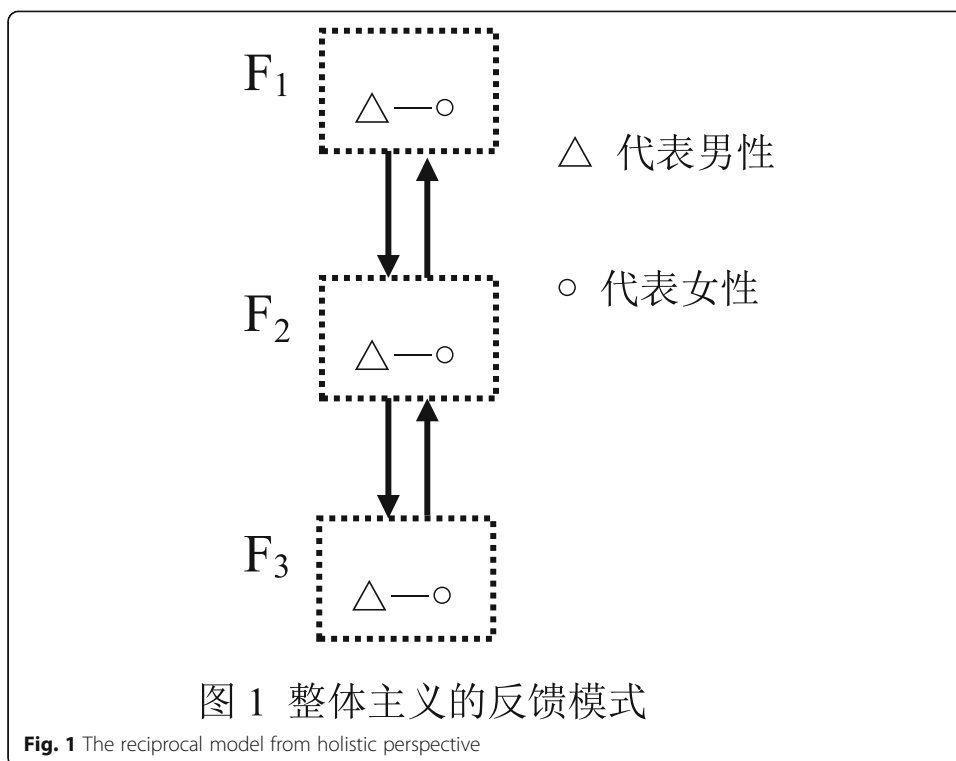
A comparison of the paradigm of ethics and rationalism in the intergenerational interaction of the Chinese family reveals that the two paradigms have different explanatory power to analyze families of different eras due to their distinct focuses. For instance, ethics have a strong impact on individual life in traditional China when the paradigm of rationalism can hardly demonstrate its explanatory power. With the social transformation and challenges of consumerism, however, the instrumental rationality of every single person gradually dominates the intergenerational interaction in the family, strengthening the explanatory power of the paradigm of rationalism. In this sense, this paper adopts the paradigm of rationalism to develop the academic exploration of intergenerational interaction in the Chinese family.

It is worth noting that the study of the uterine family is an exception in the existing literature since it brings the perspective of gender into the paradigm of rationalism and points out that female family members may have different behavior logic and interest appeal from male family members or the whole family. Therefore, the gender perspective is vital to comprehending resource allocation in the Chinese family. However, the study of the uterine family does not provide thorough reflection on how young women impact resource allocation in the family. This gap is amplified in the contemporary structure transformation of the Chinese family. As early as the late nineteenth century, “family revolution” (freedom of marriage and family nuclearization) emerged in China. The victory of Communism in China became the dividing point in the revolution of the Chinese family revolution (Levy 1968; Yang 1959), in which the success of the socialist government and its socialist transformation challenged or overthrew the patriarchy and “senior authority” (Whyte and Parish 1984). With the increase of the female employment participation rate in nonagricultural industries (Jin 1998; Xiao 2002) and women’s advanced capacity for negotiation in the marriage market (Yan 2006), women’s roles in the family increased, and more and more studies have paid attention to women’s influence within the family (Yang and Shen 2000). As family members became aware of individual subjectivity and rationalization, it is necessary and pressing to combine the gender perspective and the paradigm of rationalism to further existing discussion of intergenerational interaction in the Chinese family. This paper develops the discussion in this combined direction.

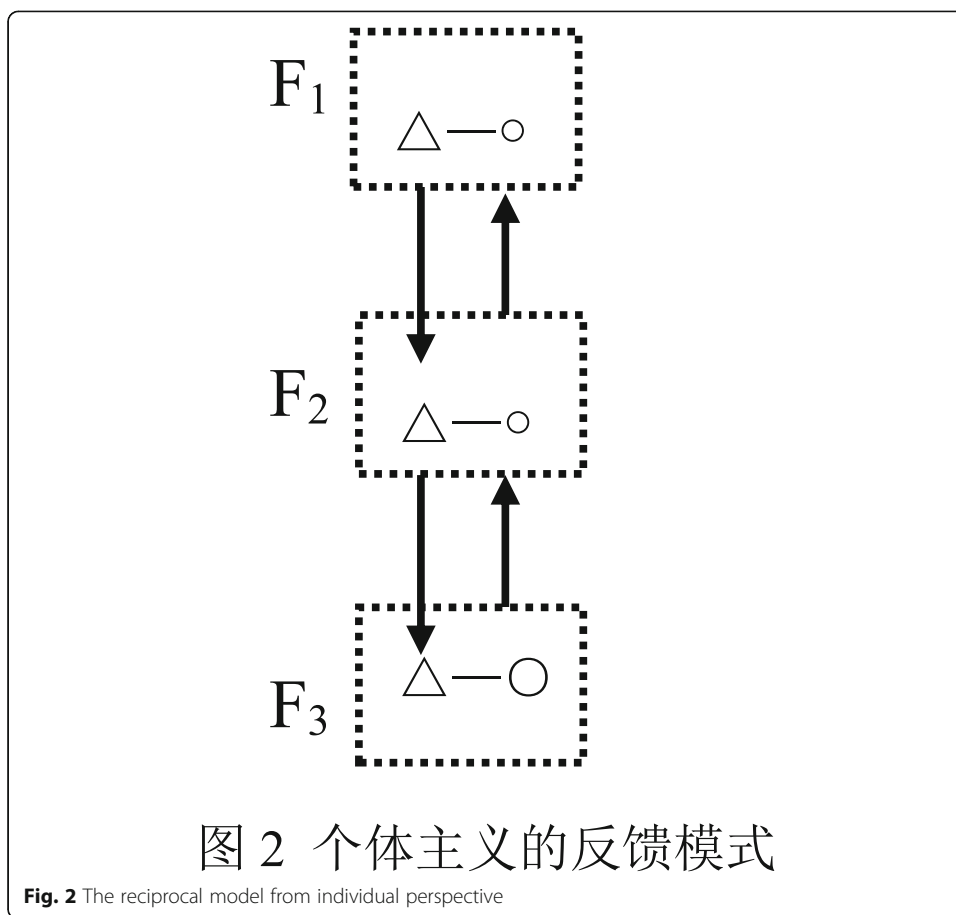
Theoretical framework and research hypothesis

The reciprocal model: the holistic perspective vs. the individual perspective

In Chinese families, the most fundamental pattern of the manifestation of intergenerational interaction is parenting and support. Fei (1983) conceptualizes the “parenting--supporting” relation in Chinese family as the “reciprocal model” in which parents take care of their underage children, then later receive support when they are getting old and their children are adults (see Fig. 1). It is worth noting that the reciprocal model implies a precondition that is normally overlooked. The husband and wife are regarded as a whole family—family F2 receives parenting from family F1 as a whole family, and



thus family F2 needs to reciprocally support family F1 as an integral unit as well. This paper calls this model the reciprocal model from the holistic perspective. Fei’s discussion of intergenerational interaction and exchange is embedded in the relationship between two successive generations (F1–F2).² The study of the uterine family challenges and develops the reciprocal model from the holistic perspective in that the family is far from an absolute community of interest; it may thus be biased to use the holistic perspective to understand resource allocation within the family. Moreover, it is critical to go beyond the scope of the relationship between two successive generations and discuss family resource allocation in a three-generation linkage.³ The concept of the uterine family and the individual perspective constitute a gendered approach to examine family support. This gendered approach discloses the actual reciprocal model (see Fig. 2). The couple in family F1 cooperates with each other to rear their son (the man in family F2). When the son grows up and forms his own family (family F2), he and his wife rear their son (the man in family F3) as a unit,⁴ then reciprocally take care of the aging family F1 to fulfill their support obligation. This paper names this model the reciprocal model from the individual perspective. In this reciprocal model, family F2 is required to not only support family F1 but also parent the son of family F3. In other words, family F2 has to “parent their parents along with their children” (上有老下有幼). Family resources are allocated among three generations. The wife in family F2 has never been taken care of by family F1 directly, but is still required to fulfill the obligation to support family F1 along with her husband. As a completely rational individual, the wife in family F2 will be willing to invest limited family resources (or the majority of family resources) in her own children because she can depend on her children in the future. She may also be inclined to distribute resources to her own parents if possible, instead of



her parents-in-law who are not blood relations nor took care of her. Therefore in the family interaction or intergenerational resource allocation, the thoughts and behavior choice of the wife in family F2 are vital. In the traditional Chinese family, the patriarchal culture concealed women’s roles to the utmost extent. The “senior priority” principle of resource allocation thus prevailed, and maternal intergenerational support was generally restrained. When the patriarchal culture was significantly challenged and women’s status greatly improved in contemporary China, the principles and practice of intergenerational resource allocation underwent transformation, an issue that is worth exploring.

With the above review, this paper addresses the marital power of the wife in family F2 as an important variable, affecting the decisions of resource allocation. This paper examines whether and how the wife’s marital power affects the allocation of family resources, and how other factors specifically restrict or shape this influence.

The identification of “our family” and family resource allocation

Adopting the reciprocal model from the individual perspective, this paper emphasizes that the spousal power structure has an influence on resource allocation. In contrast to existing literature that neglects women’s role and influence in family resource allocation, one of this paper’s contributions is to “bring women back in”, revealing the

mechanism of marital power in family resource allocation. The identification of “our family” is a core factor in the analysis. Generally speaking, subjective perception often shapes individual behavior choice. As Wolf points out in her study of the uterine family, women’s identification of “our family” is the basis of their decisions in family resource allocation.

Essentially, the identification of “our family” is a projection of Schütz’s sense of self in the field of family. Schütz points out that, “the wide-awake man within the natural attitude is primarily interested in that sector of the world of his everyday life which is within his scope and which is centered in space and time around himself” (Schütz, 2001:222). It seems that within the natural attitude, everyone lives in his/her environment based on his/her sensation. It is almost human nature for people to concern himself/herself with their spouse, child, parents, and relatives with whom they have a long-term relationship and who form the basic part of his/her world. Therefore, as the motivation for family members to allocate resources, “our family” is not a completely objective factor. Instead, it is subjectively constructed, being shaped and regulated by institutional culture and social structure outside the family. For instance, in traditional China, a woman often constructed her life world around her husband’s natal family rather than around herself after marriage. In this perception, “our family” was an extended family formed by parents-in-law (sometimes even including the husband’s brothers) and the wife’s children.⁵ The argument of this paper, and also the significance of this paper, is derived from Wolf’s study of the uterine family.⁶ Daughters-in-law are motivated to construct “our family.” This kind of motivation does not necessarily induce practice, which is restrained by a series of condition and structure. The following section discusses some restraining factors.

Power mechanism: marital power vs. family resource allocation

As discussed above, young daughters-in-law are always willing to construct “our family,” but the traditional patriarchal family generally suppresses her willingness. One major reason for this suppression is that women have limited rights to controlling family resources. The mismatch of the strong willingness and limited power hinders women’s efforts in constructing “our family,” and determines their dependency on husbands and their obligation to support their parents-in-law. With the transformation of the social structure and increase in women’s participation in paid employment, women’s position in the family has been improved. This has transformed the previous restrained conditions of family resource allocation and thus based women’s willingness to construct “our family” on a more-substantial foundation. This paper thus suggests the following research hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The marital power of women impacts the allocation of family support resources

Women’s participation in social life, their improved status in the family, and their advanced autonomy make women more and more powerful in family decision making. The wife may consider her husband, child, and parents as members of “our family” but exclude her parents-in-law. Under this circumstance, the advancement of women’s family power may lead to the decrease of support resources from “our family” to her husband’s family. This paper thus suggests Hypothesis 1a.

Hypothesis 1a: *Ceteris paribus*, the more powerful wives are in family decision-making, the less support resources are allocated to her parents-in-law

In the traditional patriarchal family, sons rather than daughters are responsible for taking care of aging parents. The responsibility and obligation of intergenerational support are more closely related to generational inheritance in the patriarchal family than the return of love or affection (Shiga 2003; Cheng 2006; Tang et al. 2009). Under this institutional restriction, male family members (sons) are responsible for supporting his parents. This is both an economic responsibility and a moral obligation. In contrast, female family members (daughters) are not required to care for her aging parents in the patriarchal family. As dependent actors on their husbands, they are assigned the responsibility of taking care of her parents-in-law (Di et al. 2013). After the collapse of the traditional patriarchal family, a woman is more likely to identify her parents (maternal parents) as members of “our family” and is strongly motivated to repay her parents’ care and “be filial.” Meanwhile, her power has been strengthened in the nuclear family, which ensures the achievability of her motivation to repay and be filial. This paper therefore suggests Hypothesis 1b:

Hypothesis 1b: *Ceteris paribus*, the more powerful wives are in family decision making, the more support resources are allocated to her (maternal) parents

The empathy mechanism: the spousal relationship vs. family resource allocation

With the advancement of power in the family, women will allocate family resources to paternal parents and maternal parents according to the same key mechanism, which is distributing family resources to members of “our family.” Whether a woman identifies paternal parents or maternal parents as members of “our family” determines her resource provision/allocation decisions. In this sense, the quality of the spousal relationship determines whether the couple can empathize with each other to consider parents-in-law as members of “our family” and make family decisions from the spouse’s point of view. Hence this paper suggests Hypothesis 2:

Hypothesis 2: The spousal relationship impacts the allocation of family resources

Whether the couple considers parents-in-law as members of “our family” directly determines their provision and allocation of family support resources. A critical factor of their perception is the quality of the spousal relationship. In other words, the quality of the spousal relationship influences empathy and identification of “our family” determines whether the couple considers parents-in-law as members of “our family” and consequently how they allocate family resources. This paper thus suggests hypotheses 2a and 2b:

Hypothesis 2a: *Ceteris paribus*, the better the spousal relationship is, the more support resources are allocated to paternal parents

Hypothesis 2b: *Ceteris paribus*, the better the spousal relationship is, the more support resources are allocated to maternal parents

The emotional adjustment mechanism: marital power and the spousal relationship vs. family resource allocation

According to Weber, power is the possibility of putting the will of the individual into the actions of others (Weber 2004). Even though a woman possesses considerable

capacity to allocate family resource and her husband cannot institutionally restrain her power, this does not mean that wives in the Chinese family would definitely manage family resource allocation in opposition to her husband's wishes. The spousal relationship is the primary reason. In other words, a couple in a good spousal relationship will negotiate on the issue of family resource allocation. Although a wife may possess greater power in decision making than her husband, she often does not risk hurting her husband's feelings by using her power directly to reduce economic support to her husband's parents. In contrast, a couple in a poor spousal relationship may be inclined to deal with family affairs rationally. The marital power of the wife thus has significant influence on the allocation of family support resources. This paper therefore suggests Hypothesis 3:

Hypothesis 3: The spousal relationship serves as the moderator in the power mechanism of family resource allocation

To be specific, Hypothesis 3 can be presented as:

Hypothesis 3a: *Ceteris paribus*, the better the spousal relationship is, the less influential wives' marital power is in the allocation of family support resources to paternal parents

Hypothesis 3b: *Ceteris paribus*, the better the spousal relationship is, the less influential wives' marital power is in the allocation of family support resources to maternal parents

Data, variables, and analytic strategy

Data

The analytical data of this paper comes from the family section of the China General Social Survey of 2006 (CGSS 2006). The survey used the fifth census data as the sampling frame. Using the stratified four-stage unequal probability method, the survey recruited 10,151 respondents between 18 and 69 years old from 28 provinces (except Tibet, Qinghai, Ningxia, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan). A total of 3208 respondents were asked to fill out an extra family questionnaire. Among them, 1531 households with at least one living paternal or maternal grandparent were the analytic objects of this paper. The reason to choose the family section of CGSS 2006 as the database is that the survey offers sufficient data to test the research hypotheses of this paper. This paper explores the relationship of women's family status, spousal relationship, and the allocation of support resources, which requires data that measures marital power, the quality of the spousal relationship, and intergenerational resource allocation. Commonly used datasets contain more-recent data on intergenerational resource allocation, such as the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) and China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study (CHARLS). The third Survey on Social Status of Women (2010) contains the latest data on marital power and spousal relationships. CGSS 2006 is the only data set that includes data on these three topics. However, the choice of dataset is far from frustrating because the primary focus of this paper is to develop and verify a new explanatory framework of intergenerational allocation of family resources rather than to describe the latest status of women in the family, the spousal relationship, or intergenerational allocation of family resources. The collected time of the data is not that vital for the analysis in this paper. Given the large amount of literature focusing on the

fact that many daughters are taking care of aging parents and revealing the latest development of family support, if the data collected around 2006 can generally demonstrate the hypotheses suggested in this paper, it would be reasonable to believe that the statements in this paper could be verified by updated data if available.

Variables

Dependent variables

Intergenerational support in the family often includes three aspects of work: economic support, labor service, and emotional care, which are generally covered by CGSS 2006.⁷ In order to explore the research question of whether the rise of the daughter-in-law within the family affects intergenerational support, and how this could impact familial support to aging parents, this paper anchors dependent variables on economic support. First, for the majority of Chinese families, economic support is the most fundamental part of intergenerational support. The family can offer labor service and emotional care to aging people after sufficient economic support has been provided. Second, what is more important is that this paper clarifies the theoretical question with empirical data, so a concise research design is desirable so as to address the hypotheses in a straightforward manner.

To be specific, the dependent variables of this paper are respective economic support to paternal parents and maternal parents, measured by the amount of money given to paternal parents and maternal parents by the respondent household in the past year. The value ranges from one to five. Greater value indicates more money offered by the respondent household.

Independent variables

One of the independent variables of this paper is women's marital power in the family, demonstrated by their power in decision making. This paper measures and compares husbands' and wives' power by asking about the decision-making process of four family issues: parenting children, supporting parents, household expenditure distribution, and purchase of expensive household goods. The alpha value of these four variables is 0.71. This paper conducted factor analysis of these four variables,⁸ and generated a common factor to indicate wives' marital power in the family. The common factor is calculated as a continuous variable ranging from 1 to 100. Greater value indicates greater marital power of wives in the family.

The other independent variable (also the moderator variable) is the quality of the spousal relationship in the respondent household. This paper chose four questions from the survey to operationalize the quality of the spousal relationship. The statements "The spouse listens to me when I am complaining" and "The spouse tells me about his/her problems" address spousal communication in everyday life. The questions "In general, are you satisfied about your marital life?" and "If you were given a chance to choose your spouse again, would you choose the same person?" reflect the degree of satisfaction in the marriage. The alpha value of these four variables is 0.70. This paper conducted factor analysis of these four variables,⁹ and generated a common factor to indicate the quality of the spousal relationship. The common factor was calculated as a continuous variable ranging from 1 to 100. Greater value indicates greater quality of the spousal relationship.

Control variables

There are three groups of control variables in this paper. First, since this paper compares the power of husband and wife and explores how the spousal relationship affects the allocation of family support resources, the characteristics of the wife and some comparable characteristics of the husband and wife may have influence on the analytic model. This paper therefore controls certain variables about the wife and the family, such as wife's age, wife's education level, the education gap between husband and wife,¹⁰ and family income.¹¹ Second, this paper controls variables that may influence intergenerational support, including economic support from paternal parents and maternal parents in the past,¹² family residence pattern, and husband and wife's number of siblings. Many studies have pointed out that these variables may affect intergenerational support. Thus the model in this paper needs to reveal the sole effect of women's marital power and the spousal relationship on intergenerational support by keeping these variables fixed. Lastly, this paper controls the type of *hukou* (registered residence) and living region, which have an important impact in contemporary Chinese society. By doing so, this paper controls the effect of socioculture on individual behavior.

Analytic strategy

The data analysis of this paper is composed of three parts. The first part is a descriptive statistical analysis, and the remaining two parts are multiple regression analyses. The second part focuses on the influence of women's marital power and the spousal relationship on family intergenerational support, and the third part analyzes the interaction effect of women's marital power and the spousal relationship on family intergenerational support. Since the dependent variable is an ordinal variable ranging from one to five, this paper uses the ologit model for the analysis.

Findings

Descriptive statistics

This paper discusses intergenerational support in the family; the independent variables are the wife's marital power and the spousal relationship. Dropping missing values, the analytic samples of this paper total 1139 households. Table 1 shows the basic information of the variables and descriptive analysis statistics. Urban families compose the majority of the research sample, constituting 57.7% of all sampled families. Families in the eastern region and central region respectively made up around one-third of all sampled families. Most families economically support parents, both paternal parents and maternal parents. The percentage of supported paternal parents is slightly higher than that of maternal parents, which demonstrates that Chinese families tend to support maternal parents and this support is not significantly less than the support of paternal parents. Parental support to a child's family is typical; around half of respondent households formed of adult children had received economic support from their parents after marriage, such as support to purchase or rent a house or investment to start a business. Parental support from paternal parents was slightly higher than that from maternal parents. These results show that the intergenerational relationship in contemporary Chinese society underwent significant transformation, and the flow of family resources is no longer confined to the paternal line.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics on variables $N = 1139$

Variable	Values	Percentage	Mean	Standard deviation
Economic support to paternal parents	Never	12.4		
	Seldom	22.5		
	Sometimes	41.4		
	Frequently	20.5		
	Very often	3.2		
Economic support to maternal parents	Never	14.4		
	Seldom	26.2		
	Sometimes	40.9		
	Frequently	16.0		
	Very often	2.5		
Parental support from husband's parents in the past	None	49.2		
	A little	45.5		
	Quite a lot	5.3		
Parental support from wife's parents in the past	None	53.4		
	A little	43.6		
	Quite a lot	3.0		
Hukou	Urban	57.7		
	Rural	42.3		
Region	East	38.7		
	Central	37.1		
	West	24.2		
Wife's power in decision making (1–100)			51.4	14.5
Spousal relationship (1–100)			72.9	14.3
Wife's age (20–69 years old)			38.2	8.7
Wife's education level (1–9)			3.2	1.2
Education gap between husband and wife (–5.5)			–0.3	1.1
Household income (0–600,000 per year)			2.4	3.6
Husband's siblings (0–8)			2.7	1.7
Wife's siblings (0–9)			2.8	1.7

The average age of the wife in 1139 respondent households was 38 years old. The average level of the wife's education was junior high school. The average value of wife's marital power was 51 in a range of 1 to 100, which means that most couples make decisions on family affairs together. Compared with traditional society, wives have possessed considerable power in decision making in the family, which is also the social background of this paper. The quality of spousal relationship in respondent families was generally good, with the average value of 73 in a range of 1 to 100. Husbands had a higher education level than their wives. Both husbands and wives had around three siblings.

The influence of marital power on the intergenerational allocation of family resources

As mentioned earlier, this paper uses ologit model to do analysis since the dependent variable "family intergenerational economic support" is an ordinal variable ranging

from one to five. Model 1 is built to examine Hypothesis 1a, which addresses how the wife's marital power impacts economic support to paternal parents. Model 2 is built to examine Hypothesis 1b, which focuses on how the wife's marital power impacts economic support to maternal parents (see Table 2).

The results in Table 2 demonstrate that after holding other variables of family and wife fixed, the wife's marital power has significant negative impact on economic support to paternal parents. In other words, the greater the wife's marital power, the more probable it is that the family will reduce economic support to paternal parents (model 1). This result confirms Hypothesis 1a, and also echoes people's sense experience in studies that the rise of the wife's status in the family erodes traditional ethics of the patriarchal family. Many sons put their wives before their mothers after marriage.

However, it is worth noting that there are two "mothers" in the newly formed family—the husband's mother (paternal parent) and the wife's mother (maternal parent). Although the influence of the wife's marital power on economic support to maternal parents is not significant and Hypothesis 2a is not verified after controlling other variables of family and wife, in model 2 there is a tendency revealed that the influence of the wife's marital power on economic support to maternal parents is in an opposite direction to the influence on economic support to paternal parents. In other words, the greater the wife's marital power, the more probable it is that the family will increase economic support to maternal parents.

Table 2 The influence of women's marital power on intergenerational resource allocation in the family $N = 1139$

Variable	Model 1 Economic support to paternal parents		Model 2 Economic support to maternal parents	
Wife's marital power	-.10+	(.05)	.01	(.06)
Wife's age	.02*	(.01)	-.01	(.01)
Wife's education level	.21*	(.09)	.10	(.10)
Education gap between husband and wife	-.23**	(.07)	-.10	(.07)
Household income (10,000 RMB)	.03**	(.01)	.08*	(.04)
Economic support to paternal parents (compared to "a little")				
Some	.12	(.16)		
Quite a lot	.43	(.38)		
Economic support to maternal parents (compared to "a little")				
Some			.06	(.14)
Quite a lot			.38	(.37)
Coresidence with parents	.21	(.21)	-.30	(.19)
Husband's siblings	.05	(.04)		
Wife's siblings			.06	(.05)
Hukou	.15	(.19)	-.09	(.19)
Region (compared to "central")				
East	.32+	(.16)	.42*	(.17)
West	.18	(.20)	-.06	(.19)
Pseudo R^2	.02		.02	

Marital power and spousal relationship are divided by 10 to simplify explanations. + $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Values in brackets are standard errors

In sum, hypotheses on the influence of marital power on intergenerational support are partially verified by the data analysis. This paper argues that although support to the maternal line has been a common phenomenon, it is still an emerging social fact whose influence factors and mechanism need further analysis.

The influence of the spousal relationship on the intergenerational allocation of family resources

In the allocation of family resources, whether or not the family increases or reduces economic resources allocated to paternal parents or maternal parents with the increase of the wife's power in the family is largely determined by the identification of "our family" by the couple in the new family. In a satisfactory spousal relationship, the couple empathizes with each other to consider the spouse's parents as members of "our family," which influences resource allocation. This paper therefore shows the influence of the spousal relationship on intergenerational resource allocation by testing Hypothesis 2 in this section.

To be specific, model 3 is built to examine Hypothesis 2a, which focuses on how the spousal relationship in the new family impacts economic support to paternal parents. Model 4 is built to examine Hypothesis 2b, which focuses on how the spousal relationship in the new family impacts economic support to maternal parents. In order to reveal the real causality between variables, the variable of women's marital power is added into model 3 and model 4 as a control variable. Models 5 and 6 are thus generated (see Table 3).

The results of models 3 and 4 demonstrate that the spousal relationship has significant positive effect on economic support to both paternal and maternal parents. In other words, the better the spousal relationship is in the new family, the more probable it is that the couple will empathize with each other and increase economic support to both paternal and maternal parents. Research Hypothesis 2 is thus verified. The results of models 5 and 6 show that after controlling the marital power of the daughter-in-law, the spousal relationship maintains its significant influence on economic support to paternal and maternal parents. Therefore, the empathy mechanism does have explanatory power in comprehending the process of intergenerational allocation of family resources.

The interaction effect of women's marital power and the spousal relationship on intergenerational support in the family

This paper argues that with the improvement of women's family status and advancement of autonomy, the increase in women's marital power may lead to the decrease of support resources to paternal parents (husbands' parents) and increase support resources to maternal parents (wife's parents). However, the rise in women's family status only advances their capacity to allocate family resources. The spousal relationship has a moderator effect on how women's capacity actually determines the allocation of family resources. This paper suggests that the couple is inclined to negotiate family issues if they have good relationship. Even though the wife possesses greater power in decision making, she often does not exercise the power directly when she thinks it will hurt her husband's feelings. Hence, it is

Table 3 The influence of spousal relationship on intergenerational resource allocation in the family $N = 1139$

Variable	Model 3 Economic support to paternal parents	Model 4 Economic support to maternal parents	Model 5 Economic support to paternal parents	Model 6 Economic support to maternal parents
Wife's marital power			-.09+ (.05)	.02 (.06)
Spousal relationship	.17** (.06)	.16** (.06)	.17** (.06)	.16** (.06)
Wife's age	.02* (.01)	-.01 (.01)	.02* (.01)	-.01 (.01)
Wife's education level	.17* (.09)	.10 (.10)	.18* (.09)	.07 (.10)
Education gap between husband and wife	-.23** (.07)	-.10 (.07)	-.23** (.07)	-.09 (.07)
Household income (10,000 RMB)	.03** (.01)	.08* (.04)	.03* (.01)	.08+ (.04)
Parental support from husband's parents in the past (compared to "a little")				
Some	.08 (.15)		.09 (.15)	
Quite a lot	.43 (.40)		.43 (.40)	
Parental support from wife's parents in the past (compared to "a little")				
Some		.06 (.14)		.03 (.14)
Quite a lot		.38 (.37)		.28 (.38)
Coresidence with parents	.24 (.21)	-.30 (.19)	.20 (.21)	-.30 (.20)
Husband's siblings	.03 (.04)		.04 (.04)	
Wife's siblings		.06 (.05)		.06 (.05)
Hukou	.21 (.19)	-.09 (.19)	.19 (.19)	-.07 (.19)
Region (compared to "central")				
East	.28+ (.16)	.42* (.17)	.28+ (.16)	.37* (.17)
West	.20 (.20)	-.06 (.19)	.18 (.20)	-.07 (.19)
Pseudo R ²	.02	.03	.02	.03

+ $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Values in brackets are standard errors

less likely for the family with a good spousal relationship to reduce economic support to the husband's parents. In contrast, in a family with a poor spousal relationship, the couple tends to deal with family affairs with a rational approach, and the wife's marital power thus has a significant and direct influence on the allocation of family support resources.

This paper tests Hypothesis 3 to verify the moderator effect of the spousal relationship on the power mechanism of intergenerational resource allocation. Model 7 is built to examine Hypothesis 3a and the interaction of the spousal relationship and women's marital power on economic support to paternal parents. Model 8 is built to test the interaction of the spousal relationship and women's marital power on economic support to maternal parents (see Table 4).

The results in Table 4 demonstrate that the spousal relationship is a moderator of the influence of women's marital power on economic support to paternal parents. In the family with a good spousal relationship, women's marital power has limited negative effect on intergenerational support to paternal parents, which verifies research Hypothesis 3a. However, the spousal relationship is not a significant moderator between women's marital power and economic support to maternal parents. Hypothesis 3b is not verified by the data.

Table 4 The interaction of women's marital power and the spousal relationship on intergenerational support in the family $N = 1139$

Variable	Model 7 Economic support to paternal parents		Model 8 Economic support to paternal parents	
Wife's marital power	.61**	(.23)	.53+	(.32)
Spousal relationship	.67**	(.19)	.52*	(.25)
Wife's marital power (spousal relationship)	-.10**	(.03)	-.07	(.04)
Wife's age	.02*	(.01)	-.01	(.01)
Wife's education level	.18*	(.09)	.07	(.10)
Education gap between husband and wife	-.23**	(.07)	-.09	(.07)
Household income (10,000 RMB)	.03*	(.01)	.08+	(.05)
Parental support from husband's parents in the past (compared to "a little")				
Some	.09	(.15)		
Quite a lot	.41	(.40)		
Parental support from wife's parents in the past (compared to "a little")				
Some			.04	(.14)
Quite a lot			.29	(.38)
Coresidence with parents	.16	(.21)	-.32+	(.20)
Husband's siblings	.04	(.04)		
Wife's siblings			.06	(.05)
Hukou	.15	(.19)	-.06	(.19)
Region (compared to "central")				
East	.27+	(.16)	.38*	(.17)
West	.18	(.20)	-.07	(.19)
Pseudo R^2	.03		.03	

+ $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Values in brackets are standard errors

Conclusion and discussion

Analyzing the data from the family section of CGSS 2006, this paper explores the effects of marital power and the spousal relationship on the intergenerational allocation of family resources and their mechanisms. Statistics show that the power mechanism of intergenerational allocation of family resources partially exists: the greater the marital power of the daughter-in-law, the less economic support is given to paternal parents. Meanwhile, the empathy mechanism has an influence on the intergenerational allocation of family resources: the better the spousal relationship is in the new family, the more economic support is provided to both paternal and maternal parents. Furthermore, the spousal relationship can mediate the effect of marital power distribution on paternal economic support. The better relationship the couple has, the less marital power can affect economic support to the paternal parents.

In summary, the theoretical framework proposed by this paper is verified in paternal support. In maternal support, only the empathy mechanism is verified. Given the traditional domination of paternal support, the findings of this paper are of academic significance and empirical reference. As a newly emerging tendency, the mechanism of maternal support should be assumed to be more complex and require further exploration. This paper generates an important response to the topic of intergenerational relationships and aging care in the academic field. The following sections further discuss relevant issues.

A reflection on the relationship of the daughter-in-law and the mother

This paper starts with a discussion of people's sense experience in everyday life that sons may be putting his wife before his mother after marriage. The discussion is developed by revealing the cause of mother-wife conflicts—since the daughter-in-law has never been parented or cared for by her parents-in-law, at least before marriage, she probably refuses to accept the traditional responsibility of taking care of her aging parents-in-law when she becomes aware of her rights and possesses considerable power in the family decision-making process. She begins to exchange the allocation of support resources to parents for parental contributions to her own family, such as doing chores and taking care of grandchildren for her newly formed family. At first glance, the relationship of mother and wife is embedded in a zero sum game. That is, as for sons, the increase of the wife's power stands for a necessary decrease of the mother's rights and interests; otherwise, he has to limit his wife's power so as to protect his mother's rights and interests.

Bringing the variable of spousal relationship into the discussion, this paper discovers that a good spousal relationship encourages the new family to economically support both paternal and maternal parents. Moreover, a good spousal relationship can counterbalance the negative effect of the wife's marital power on intergenerational support to paternal parents. In other words, husbands can act as the lubricant to the relationship between mother and wife. It is not inevitable that his mother and his wife are in conflict. In this sense, it is due to either a biased moral assumption or lack of effort for researchers to accuse daughters-in-law of ruling the roost in the family and causing the aging-care predicament in contemporary China, or attributing the challenges in aging care, at least partially, to the improvement in women's status. The complex mechanisms behind this phenomenon are thus eclipsed by rough moral judgments. There may be multiple practical ways to overcome the aging-care predicament. One is to coordinate family relationships and promote family harmony, which has significant positive effect on the challenges of familial aging care.

Daughters in support (女儿养老) and the dual-track system (双系并重)

The topic of daughters in support has recently drawn much academic attention when discussing family aging care. The emergence of the topic is closely related to the one-child policy and consequent increase of all-female households. People have observed that more and more married daughters are economically supporting maternal parents. This paper finds that the majority of families economically support both paternal and maternal parents to some degree. The percentage of families supporting maternal parents is only slightly less than that of families supporting paternal parents, demonstrating that it is an emerging trend in contemporary society. Under the background of the general improvement of women's family status, "daughters in support" has partially become a social fact. This change may alter parents' sex preference, especially parents in rural areas. It may now be a practical family strategy to rear daughters for their reciprocal support and care to aging parents (Gao 2014).

Taking phenomenology as the basis of epistemology and bringing the concept of the uterine family in, this paper suggests that with autonomy in decision making, it is almost human nature for women to take care of maternal parents who parented and

cared for her when she was young, and reduce support to paternal parents with whom she is not as close. Yet family has never been a place in which pure rational calculation is the primary force. Emotion has a critical influence in the field of family. The spousal relationship can substantially modify and integrate the husband's and wife's expectations of older care to parents. A good spousal relationship encourages the couple to empathize with each other, putting oneself in the other person's shoes. Under this circumstance, it is easier for the couple to come to an agreement about family issues, resulting in a more sufficient and stable supply of economic support to both paternal and maternal parents. China has implemented the one-child policy for decades, and thus a low fertility rate cannot be reversed in a short time. Under this demographic background, the dual-track system of family older care is of considerable social importance.

It is worth noting that this paper does not verify whether or not women's marital power positively influences economic support to maternal parents. This is because on the one hand, the only available data set offers a small sample and rough measurement of the concepts; on the other hand, "daughters-in-support" is such a new phenomenon that its mechanism is far from being mastered yet. The phenomenon of daughters in support requires further exploration.

Endnotes

¹The extreme case of this is the suicide of the aged with cancer or other serious diseases. These aged patients choose to kill themselves in order to release the burden for their families.

²Although Fei discusses intergenerational relationships among F1, F2, and F3 in his reciprocal model, the primary analytical focuses are two generations in which F1 rears F2 and F2 supports F1 as a kind of repayment. The relationship between F2 and F3 is just a copy of the relationship between F1 and F2.

³The logic of resource allocation among three generations is different from that of two generations; see Di and Zheng 2016.

⁴The description of parenting in this paper does not mean that the family would only rear sons and ignore daughters. The discussion on rearing sons helps highlight the paternal inheritance of family resources and clarify the analytical framework of this paper.

⁵In the traditional era, the identification of "our family" of married women was preserved and continued by powerful conditions outside the family, including the exclusion of women in mainstream production, patrilocality in which a woman mainly lived separately from her natal family, and the ethical codes of "three obediences and four virtues" (三从四德).

⁶The theory of the uterine family suggests an obviously gendered implication. The existence of the uterine family is an active reaction against the patriarchal family. It is an invisible form of family parallel to the patriarchal family in everyday life. The existence of the uterine family demonstrates that it is human nature to construct life around oneself. This tendency is too strong to be eliminated by the patriarchal culture.

⁷Questions in the questionnaire asked about economic support and labor service in intergenerational support. The questionnaire does not cover emotional care.

⁸The KMO value of factor analysis is 0.69. The explained variance ratio of generated factor is 37%. The process of factor analysis is omitted.

⁹The KMO value of factor analysis is 0.57. The explained variance ratio of generated factor is 39%. The process of factor analysis is omitted.

¹⁰The education gap is the value of the wife's education level minus the husband's education level. Greater value indicates the higher education level of the wife compared with her husband.

¹¹Since there are many missing values in income, this paper does not control wife's income and the income gap between husband and wife in the model. After controlling wife's income and the income gap between husband and wife, the model generates the same results as in the next section.

¹²Since there is no data on the income of paternal parents and maternal parents, the economic support they offered in the past to their child's family may reflect their economic status.

Abbreviations

CFPS: China Family Panel Studies; CGSS: Chinese General Social Survey; CHARLS: China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study

Availability of data and materials

Data used in the paper is freely available for academic purpose.

Authors' contributions

The paper contributes to the analysis on intergenerational support. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Publisher's Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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Received: 31 July 2018 Accepted: 13 September 2018

Published online: 08 October 2018

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