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Meaningfulness experienced in performing domestic labor in Chinese families: a qualitative study from caregivers' perspectives

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Abstract

The intricately connected interactions among personal choices, traditional cultural ideologies, and modern societal backgrounds have provoked dynamic interpretations and practices in performing domestic labor. The value of domestic labor in terms of macro considerations, such as reproductive value, economic value, and caring value, has been established in scholarly discussions. In China, the emphasis is on the meaningfulness of domestic care for the whole society. However, it remains unclear how family members in contemporary Chinese society understand the meaningfulness of performing domestic labor. This study aims to investigate what kinds of meaning that individuals derive from their day-to-day domestic labor and how the different types of meaningfulness affect their future behaviors in sharing domestic responsibilities. Meaningfulness is a complex notion, but Baumeister's theory of meaning provides a theoretical framework to understand why humans need meaningfulness in life, the forms that meaningfulness takes, where meaningfulness resides, and how perceptions of meaningfulness are shaped. In total, 48 respondents participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews concerning their attitudes toward the value of domestic labor. Findings based on in-depth interview data show that the meaningfulness of domestic labor consists of participants realizing their need for belonging, self-efficacy, and a sense of living a good life. These results also suggest that the values of domestic labor illustrated in previous studies, in which domestic labor was conceptualized as reproductive labor, economic activity, and care labor, have little effect on individuals' lives. Nevertheless, the meaningfulness that individuals experience in daily life continues to motivate their devotion to domestic labor. Finally, the discursive mechanism shaping the meaningfulness of domestic labor is also discussed.

Keywords: Meaningfulness, Domestic labor, Caregivers, Chinese families

Background

According to the International Labor Organization Report (2015), there is a global care crisis. This care crisis is a severe imbalance between the supply and demand of care labor, which has led to an uneven distribution and insufficient supply of care resources and services across regions and populations (Ma 2020). In China, the lack of care has quickly become a visible problem over the past two decades, as the phenomena of an

aging population, a rising birthrate, and an increasing demand for childcare have aggravated this problem.¹ There are often heated debates about care-related issues in contemporary Chinese society. Interpretations of meaningfulness in certain activities motivate individuals to devote themselves to such activities. Understanding the meaningfulness of caregivers' experiences in performing domestic labor provides insights into how long-term, high-quality care can be sustained. Such understanding is needed as China aims to address the growing care shortage.

The current study explores the kinds of meaningfulness that Chinese women and men experience in their day-to-day performance of domestic labor and how their understanding of meaningfulness may be related to their continued involvement in domestic labor. The remainder of this study is organized into sections concerning the conceptual framework, methodology, and results, which are followed by a concluding discussion. The next section reviews the literature on the value of domestic labor and constructs a conceptual framework to inform the study's research methods. It also serves as a guide to analyze data on domestic labor collected through in-depth interviews. Baumeister's theoretical and conceptual framework provides a lens through which to analyze where the meaning of life resides and how meaningfulness influences people's perceptions and behaviors. After the section on the conceptual framework, there is a section dedicated to outlining the methodology with reference to the study site, participants' sociological and demographic characteristics, and how the data were collected and analyzed. The section presenting the results will show that the respondents identified three forms of meaningfulness in performing domestic labor. Through a discussion of the results, we summarize the findings and reflections on discourses involved in constructing meaning from domestic labor. We will also comment on the limitations of this study.

Defining domestic labor

Although domestic labor is a recurrent theme of discussion, debate, and research, attempts to provide a general definition of domestic labor have always met challenges (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010). Empirical studies have concretized domestic labor into a list of household tasks, but the components of the list vary according to the criteria used for classification. For example, domestic labor could include both unpaid domestic labor (provided by family members) and outsourced housework; it may also include tangible household tasks (such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare) and intangible housework, such as emotional labor and sex work. Based on existing definitions of housework and the empirical findings from our research data, this study attempts to conceptualize domestic labor as a set of unpaid tasks performed to meet the needs of family members or to maintain the home and the family's possessions (Lachance and Bouchard 2010), which are constituted in three forms. The first form is daily, routine household chores. These chores include cleaning, meal planning, cooking, cleaning up after meals, washing, ironing, and mending clothes, grocery shopping, paying bills,

¹ This is easily understood as a matter of Chinese policy. China implemented a one-child policy (Chinese: 一孩政策; pinyin: *Yī Hái Zhèngcè*) in 1980 to control the country's total fertility rate. This population planning initiative continued until 2015, curbing the country's population growth by prohibiting many families from raising more than one child. In 2016, this policy was revised to a universal two-child policy, and more recently, a three-child policy was launched in 2021. The recent policy revisions were designed to combat issues such as persistent low fertility, a rapidly aging population, rising demand for pensions, a shrinking labor pool, and a diminishing demographic dividend (State Council of PRC 2021).

disposing household waste, repairing household appliances, maintaining motor vehicles, and transporting family members.

The second form is household tasks, which rural families usually do. Such tasks include fetching water, collecting firewood, doing yardwork such as growing vegetables and raising poultry for household consumption, trimming trees, and maintaining and repairing agricultural machinery. Studies focused on urban households have largely ignored these labor-intensive and time-consuming tasks, although they are essential for sustaining the livelihoods of rural families (Zhu and Ying 2005; Midgette 2019).

The third form of domestic labor concerns whether caring for family members (e.g., older adults, children) should be regarded as domestic labor (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010). China differs from countries with well-developed public health care systems because, in the Chinese context, the responsibility of caring for older adults and children rests primarily on individual families (Song 2022).

Accordingly, in this study, domestic labor encompasses caring for family members, including children, older parents, and sick family members. This definition also encompasses managing neighborhood relations.

Existing theories of value in domestic labor

From the 1960s onward, feminist scholars have conceptualized domestic labor in different ways and debated its value with reference to measures illustrated by three predominant theoretical approaches. These approaches may be found in Marxist (and socialist) feminism, feminist economics, and the ethics of care.

The Marxist and socialist feminist literature has identified family households as sites of production. The productive nature of women's unpaid domestic labor is reflected not only in specific household tasks (such as cooking and cleaning) for the daily maintenance of family life but also in the reproduction of the human being (Vogel 2000). Socialist feminists have compared "value points" based on the knowledge, skills, and responsibilities required of various occupations. The study showed that domestic laborers with high-value points were paid the least, indicating that "social gender" may explain the differences in earnings between feminine and masculine jobs (Tong 2009).

Feminist economists have revealed that the most significant products of domestic labor are intangible human capabilities, which are essential resources for social survival and economic growth. The amount of monetary output contributed by domestic labor has been calculated for some countries and regions. The monetary value of domestic labor as a share of GDP was compared with that of other macroeconomic indicators on an annual basis. According to An and Dong (2012), unpaid care labor accounted for more than 25% of China's GDP in 2008. Many economists have proposed compensating for domestic labor in various ways, including through tax preferences and child allowances (Collas-Monsod 2010; Folbre and Song 2020).

Viewing domestic labor through the framework of care labor, care ethicists have examined the complexity of processes and skills involved in care labor to sustain life. Ethicists who support this framework, such as Tronto (1993) and Kittay (1999), have uncovered a vicious cycle of caring. In this vicious cycle, domestic labor is undervalued, putting caregivers in a disadvantageous position (Sevenhuijsen 1998; Herd and Meyer 2002; Engster 2005).

Despite previous research articulating the value of domestic labor from a macro perspective, little research has investigated whether these theoretically established values have permeated through caregivers' day-to-day perceptions and practices concerning domestic labor. Few studies have explored whether caregivers benefit from these argued values (Koo 2018). The manner in which caregivers extract meaningfulness from their daily engagement in domestic labor, viewed from an individual perspective, still lacks clarity.

Conceptual framework: exploring meaningfulness

The first step toward clarifying the key concept of this study is to differentiate two terms: *meaning* and *meaningfulness*. When they appear in the literature, these related terms are used in overlapping ways. Meaning is defined as shared mental representations of possible relationships among things, events, and relationships; these representations form the basis for a collective, organized network of concepts (Baumeister 1991). Meaning can be interpreted either by recognizing and decoding the meanings already attached to the things or by creatively conferring meanings on things. Thus, meaning is both individually and socially constructed. On the other hand, meaningfulness refers to the amount of significance held by individuals, and this could vary greatly from one individual to another. Moreover, things that have meaning are not necessarily meaningful to all individuals. In the literature, meaningfulness has a positive valence because individuals expect to experience it in their lives (Rosso et al. 2010).

Viktor Frankl is widely regarded as a pioneer in the study of meaning, and later thinkers acknowledged individuals' need to find meaningfulness in life. The general need for meaningfulness can be divided into four basic needs: (1) purpose, (2) values, (3) efficacy, and (4) self-worth (Mackenzie and Baumeister 2014). Experiences related to this need may vary, but they may also overlap, in terms of their content and sources of satisfaction. Individuals are motivated to adapt their behavior to fulfill this need and thus bring meaningfulness into their lives. Meaningfulness can be found in many ways, such as from paid work, religious beliefs, family attachments, and agency or selfhood (Baumeister 1991).

How does Baumeister's theory of meaning serve as a theoretical framework for this study? First, the abstract sense of meaningfulness is concretized in Baumeister's theory: the needs for purpose, values, efficacy, and self-worth shed light on the meaningfulness that may be experienced in domestic labor. Second, Baumeister's specific elaboration of the family as a source of meaningfulness and fulfillment in life provides an analytical framework for understanding household meaningfulness. Furthermore, Baumeister remains sensitive and reflective of the impact of changing social contexts on interpretations of meaningfulness.

According to Baumeister, the meaning of things is historically and socially contextualized. It has been shown that religion can improve one's sense of belonging and satisfaction. Work performance is also an important indicator of life achievements in a society dominated by work ethics. Moreover, in the modern world view, intensified individualism expands the concept of self, a concept that has become established as a new basis for individuals' understanding of personal relationships, work, and other activities. This concept of self may permit assignments of meaningfulness based on

individualist understandings without resorting to other, higher sources of meaningfulness (Baumeister 1991). These systematic analyses of socialized constructions of meaning inspired us to take a historical perspective on the interactions and changes in discourse that inform meaning in domestic labor in China.

While we draw on Baumeister's meaning theory as a framework for analysis, we maintain an open-minded approach to our data rather than a fixed position. In this study, we considered the specific characteristics of the Chinese social context when evaluating the respondents' voices and reflections on their day-to-day domestic labor responsibilities.

Methods

Most studies on domestic labor in China have utilized quantitative research methods. Although statistical models can determine the correlation between factors, they cannot determine how causal mechanisms operate. Therefore, according to Fei (2008), a pioneer Chinese sociologist, qualitative research should be conducted to study Chinese families. We conducted in-depth interviews in this study to gain an empathic understanding of respondents' perspectives and be sensitive to the social context (Koo 2018). To recruit respondents, we adopted purposive and snowball sampling. An electronic recruitment letter was posted in several WeChat groups inviting potential respondents to contact us; those who replied constituted the first group of respondents. Some respondents were recruited through word-of-mouth referrals with the assistance of respondents from the first group. In addition, the authors' neighbors, colleagues, and relatives were invited to reach out to their acquaintances.

Forty-eight respondents, comprising 36 women and 12 men, were interviewed. The sample was diversified by maximizing the range (Weiss 1994) in terms of age, education, work, status, occupation, income, housing, and residential location. The sample included men and women regardless of their marital status and the number of children that they had. This approach enables us to explore the feelings, assessments, and arrangements of married participants compared to younger or unmarried respondents' views of the domestic labor allocation in their present and childhood households. Additionally, we interviewed respondents in rural as well as urban areas. Since the launch of the reform and opening-up in 1978, the disparities between China's rural and urban areas have become increasingly evident (Knight and Gunatilaka 2010). Notably, exceptions to the one-child policy in rural areas impacted the distribution of housework. Furthermore, the respondents' educational backgrounds varied from finishing elementary school to earning PhD degrees, and their occupational status spanned multiple sectors. The respondents' demographic information is included in the "Appendix" to this article.

Finally, each respondent was fully informed about the project, the main topics of discussion, and their right to decline participation or interrupt the conversation at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured. Respondents also had the opportunity to ask clarifying questions and make additional remarks. The interviews were recorded, and notes were taken with the respondents' consent.

The interviews began with general questions about what chores were done every day and how they were divided among family members. Next, we asked open-ended questions about how respondents experienced and valued their domestic labor. Finally, respondents were invited to ask questions and provide comments; if necessary,

additional questions were asked based on the respondents' narratives. This interview modality not only allowed each respondent to become accustomed to the interview but also gave them the agency to lead the interview by sharing their life experiences, feelings, and evaluations in relation to performing domestic labor (Rosenthal 2004).

The data processing and analysis occurred in two phases. Analysis of the raw data began while the fieldwork was still being conducted to allow for initial findings to guide further exploration. In the second stage, each interview was transcribed and read carefully before open codes were generated in Nvivo 12 Plus. After scrutinizing the coded text fragments, the themes were then created by grouping open codes based on their potential interrelations. For example, themes revealed factors affecting divisions of labor, devalued and harmful experiences in performing domestic labor, types of meaningfulness experienced among caregivers, and relationships between evaluations and practices of domestic labor. The findings were compared with the conclusions of the extant literature on an ongoing basis.

Results

We identified three themes that suggest that the practice of domestic labor provides different types of meaningfulness that enrich and even sustain caregivers' lives. In addition, caregivers' experiences of meaningfulness should not be regarded as rigid categories without overlap. While the types of meaningfulness differ, they also overlap to some extent in content and sources of satisfaction. We defined categories of meaningfulness based on respondents' narratives.

Belongingness: the family as the root of life

When asked how they perceived the meaningfulness of the domestic labor they performed, most respondents associated the meaning of their devotion with the well-being of the whole family, especially the healthy growth and good academic performance of children. Even though domestic labor may, in some cases, be accompanied by negative physical and psychological experiences such as exertion and anxiety, respondents still appreciated the way they educated their children and rarely regretted their dedication. As Respondent 2.4 said, "Despite the fact that sometimes life can be a bit hard and tiring, I felt pretty happy when I kept my eyes on my children."

The satisfaction derived from children's growth was echoed in Respondent 3.5's remark: "When it comes to my child, the idea that I am done with housework never occurs to me. I just continue to devote myself."

The following question asked why it was meaningful for respondents to create a good home environment by maintaining intimacy with a partner and raising children well. Respondents explained that their devotion would provide them with a place where they could rely on others and belong.

A sense of belonging resides in the next generation or in the husband. If you have a good husband, you are lucky. You belong to your family. Oh, think about it: can you work your whole life? A job is something that pays you wages to survive in daily life, but the family is the place where you settle your emotions. It is your home. Tell me what a person is busy for if they cannot even organize their home in their lifetime... Or let's say you're devoted to your career, but when you're old, you can't work any-

more, and your career no longer needs you. Your career is then over, and you are abandoned, but your family will take care of you when you are old, especially when you can't move. Right? (Respondent 3.3)

According to the respondents' explanations, the significance of engaging in domestic labor is twofold. First, the family relationship is reciprocal and will provide them with tangible and material benefits: caregivers expect they will be supported one day by other family members. Second, the family provides individuals with emotional security and allows them to settle down. "Without a family," said Respondent 3.3, "People don't have a place to go for the rest of their lives. You'll suddenly realize how miserable your life is, for you don't even have roots."

Empirical research data suggest that interpersonal relationships are the most frequently reported source of meaning in life (MacKenzie and Baumeister 2014). Among various types of relationships, familial relations were the most frequently cited (68%) primary source of meaning in life (Lambert et al. 2010). Baumeister (1991) argues that family ties are the earliest, most widely recognized, and enduring social bonds. According to the respondents' experiences of shared identities, beliefs, or attributes, their attachment to family based on caring relationships fulfills their need for belonging; their family roles nourish their core sense of self even more than paid work could. The more worth and uniqueness that individuals attach to family, the more willing they are to devote themselves to domestic responsibilities. This enables the sense of belonging obtained through a supportive family network to grow even stronger (Rosso et al. 2010).

Self-efficacy: control over the environment and self

The second sense of meaningfulness that respondents experienced performing domestic labor was in realizing self-efficacy, i.e., believing that they have the power and ability to produce an intended effect and make a difference (Baumeister and Vohs 2002; Rosso et al. 2010). The self-efficacy that caregivers experienced in completing various household tasks varied. The respondents' personal characteristics also played a role in determining the intensity of meaningfulness in domestic labor. Three scenarios of domestic labor generated a sense of self-efficacy.

House cleaning: "it is actually a sense of control over my living environment"

One of the ways in which caregivers realized self-efficacy was through their capacity to make decisions and manage their own living environments (Rosso et al. 2010). Respondent 2.9 described her mother's (and her own) experiences of arranging her living environment in a way that she felt comfortable.

The desire for control! I think my mother is intensely controlling; she used to demand that things in our home be arranged according to her will rather than the way that other family members thought was good. Because of her intense desire for control, others could rarely interfere with her household arrangements. It was a sphere under her control... I may have also inherited this from her because I can only be calm and comfortable in a tidy living environment. I feel like I'm in control of every corner of my one-bedroom, and as you navigate through each item in your mind, nothing is messy. You know exactly where all these things are, and then you know how many days they haven't been wiped down and whether they are clean enough to be used.

Knowing these things makes me feel at ease. Especially now that I am living alone, this space totally belongs to me.

Domestic labor, such as cleaning and organizing one's living space, is one medium through which caregivers create a space that satisfies their needs and desires. In this cognition, of being able to create comfort and order in the home and for its other residents, individuals are reassured that they have control and agency in their surroundings.

Respondent 3.10, a Chinese woman living in a rural area, was confined to staying at home due to a stroke. She said that the “usefulness” that she experienced in completing domestic labor compensated for her health challenges.

At the beginning of my illness, I could not accept it. I cried every day, felt pain, had poor sleep, insomnia... However, sometimes, after I had finished hoeing the field in the garden, I felt quite happy. In spite of being exhausted, I felt that I still had some value when I looked at the vegetable garden, I had planted... For example, sitting here after wiping the windows and cleaning the house, I would realize, oh, my life is fine; at least I am still a useful person. Rather than living in vain, my life has some meaning. Ha-ha.

Experiences of effectively arranging their living circumstances and behaviors, even their destinies, despite health challenges, provided individuals with life meaningfulness. It was found that meaningfulness serves as a powerful motivator for further devotion to domestic labor (Rosso et al. 2010).

Filial responsibility: “being proud of having tried my best to support my parents”

Family structure significantly impacts how family members interact with one another. In China, families have become increasingly smaller over the past four decades. As youth autonomy and power increase, newlyweds seek to establish their own households to escape the confines of their extended families. As Yan (2016) found, individuals today pursue more private and intimate family lives as havens of personal happiness. The well-being of the core family—in particular, the children's development—is the primary concern of deriving meaningfulness in life from domestic work. A change in family structures and intimate relationships has led to a downward flow of family resources such as care, love, and financial resources. This downward flow has resulted in a perceived crisis of support for seniors and an erosion of filial piety (Yan 2016).

In the Chinese societal context, although filial responsibility remains a legal obligation as well as a moral duty, there is no guarantee of whether or to what extent elderly parents will be supported (Jin 2014; Liu 2014). Adult children's ability and willingness vary in regard to providing care for their parents. Financial means, intergenerational relationships, willingness to live with parents as they age, and especially the attitudes of sons- and daughters-in-law are important factors. All these conditions make fulfilling filial responsibility a challenging and uncertain task.² Thus, adult children who

² According to the sixth national census in China, the average number of people per household has decreased from 3.44 in 2000 to 3.10 in 2010, with the nuclear family becoming the most dominant family type. Moreover, there is a tendency for families to be more dispersed. According to statistics, 75.2% of married adult children in China do not live with their parents. The proportion of empty-nest households has risen to 13.2%, especially in rural areas where the number of elderly people left behind is rapidly increasing along with the number of empty-nest and older-adult households. By 2023, the number of empty nesters in China is expected to exceed 100 million (Jin 2014).

successfully manage these obstacles and fulfill their parental support duties demonstrate their capacity and responsibility. As reported by Respondent 3.2, taking good care of his parents gives him a sense of pride:

If you ask about my experience, I think I did a great job supporting my parents. I have four siblings. Compared to my siblings' families, my family was the poorest when my parents were alive. Despite this, I cared for my elderly parents until they died in my home, and I held their funerals. Well, I never actively asked my siblings to help. It's difficult to improve my family's financial conditions. Because they lived with us, my family was responsible for taking them to the hospital for medical attention. I have to admit that my wife made a greater contribution to this issue. In today's Chinese society, it is challenging to fulfill many filial responsibilities without the support and agreement of a partner. My partner is also a filial person... I did my best to fulfill my filial responsibilities. I regretted nothing after they passed away. Even now, looking back, I do feel quite proud of what I did. At least while my parents were alive, I tried my best to satisfy whatever they wanted to eat or asked for, even though my family wasn't rich at all.

This respondent's self-efficacy stemmed from taking good care of his elderly parents, which took on the meaningfulness of being a good son and sibling. He confirmed his self-efficacy by overcoming financial challenges and other practical difficulties to fulfill his duties and live up to social expectations. In addition, his experience with elder care shows that domestic labor requires communication skills as well as the ability to perceive others' needs. According to Masten and Reed (2002a, b), when an individual sees herself effectively responding to challenges, she is likely to feel more personally competent and efficacious. As a result, as noted by Masten and Reed and other scholars (Spreitzer et al. 2005; Rosso et al. 2010), more meaningfulness could be found in completing this task. Respondent 3.2's sense of self-sufficiency grew when he compared his commitment to filial duties to his financially better-off siblings.

Conversely, respondents experienced self-blame and anxiety when they failed to care for their parents. "My mom is over 70 years old," said Respondent 2.2.

I'm transferring her 1,000 yuan at the Spring Festival. I usually only transfer her 500 yuan each year... She doesn't blame me, but I can't bear it in my heart because she is 70 years old and I know she can't wait too long. I'm really anxious.

Having migrated to Beijing to work as a custodian at the airport, the respondent was unable to be present with her mother to care for her. Thus, Respondent 2.2 experienced negative feelings such as incompetence because of her absence, which prevented her from fulfilling her responsibility to support her mother.

In Chinese society, adult children's efforts to support their aging parents are valued. Thus, individuals feel satisfied with their own moral performance, as they feel that their contributions meet or exceed the expectations placed by social norms. Furthermore, effective care requires overcoming various practical obstacles in life, such as financial difficulties. In addition, care as a practice involves the integration of physical labor and emotional sensitivity (Tronto 1993; Folbre 2012). Facing multiple challenges

in undertaking domestic responsibilities, individuals achieve a greater sense of self-worth, pride, and self-affirmation.

Balancing family and work: “I am a versatile woman”

The criteria for assessing self-efficacy are multifaceted and changeable over time. More than half of the respondents, including younger and middle-aged adults, described the ability to balance family and work as important. One female respondent mentioned that in her three experiences of cohabitation, with a Chinese boyfriend, a Korean boyfriend, and a Chinese girlfriend, she was always responsible for most of the household chores. When asked about the aims of performing domestic labor, this respondent described her wish to be viewed as a successful woman:

It might be my own choice to do most of the housework, since I want to show my partners that I am not only adept in the kitchen but also in the guest room.³ I was able to build a career, study hard and do research, clean up my house, and also cook... The better you arm your mind, the more profound your thoughts are, and the more you will think about how to fight for your life goals instead of limiting yourself to being someone's wife, daughter, or a good citizen of the nation. Having a career is one aspect, but my self-worth should also include other aspects, such as having fun, traveling, learning to paint, and earning French. These pursuits integrate into my life, and having a family must be an essential part of it. Thus, a hallmark of a successful woman is her ability to balance work, self-improvement, and family. In my mind, I feel that such a woman is successful.

For the possible reasons why and how such a norm to be a successful woman had formed in her life, she said:

Shandong is a province that remains relatively traditional. Due to my family culture, there is the notion that as a woman, you should assist your husband and educate your children. You should behave in this way or that way because you are female. However, they also support you in deciding to study abroad, having your own career, and continuously improving yourself. It's just difficult to live up to the expectation that you can balance these tasks.

This respondent recognized that her need to become a successful woman was not an innate ability that she was born with. While standards inherited from traditional gender expectations may have been passed down to her through her upbringing, the criteria defining a successful woman have changed over time. The challenge of balancing a successful professional career and home life has been attached to a modern woman's image.

Whereas such factors contribute to a mixed social gender norm that may affect women's perceptions of a meaningful life, the meaningfulness of being competent at performing domestic labor resides in the pursuit and realization of being a successful woman.

³ The respondent cited a Chinese idiom to describe the ideal image of a woman in her mind: 上得厅堂, 下得厨房 (*Shangde TingTang, Xiade Chufang*—to be able to deal with household tasks in the kitchen but also household issues in the guest hall). This idiom takes on more meaning than its literal translation. The “kitchen” refers to all housework, and the “guest hall” refers to behaving appropriately at formal occasions, which imply a woman's interpersonal skills. This idiom is used to describe a woman who can handle both domestic responsibilities and a professional career.

Life unfolds: eating well and dressing warmly as essential life lessons

The meaningfulness that participants experienced in finding a sense of belonging or self-efficacy derives from the external performance of domestic labor, revealing how value lies in tangible outcomes. In other words, meaningfulness has to do with families' prosperity, and caregivers find self-efficacy in controlling their lives by overcoming challenges. Apart from domestic labor's external value, one caregiver's narrative revealed the internal significance of domestic labor. Respondent 4.1 said:

Let's say you make a dish that you think is delicious. You might make it for your boyfriend, not necessarily your husband. It could be for anyone, like a visiting friend or your parents, and you feel you are able to express filial piety or something else through that dish. It can also be meaningful simply because the dish was delicious or because you enjoyed the process of cooking it. People of all ages may realize that one day, "I'm probably not going to achieve anything big in my career throughout my lifetime, but at the end of the day, I need to go back home and cook a nice bowl of rice for myself."

This essential but often overlooked value of domestic labor emphasizes living well. The respondent stressed the importance of domestic tasks:

Doing housework occupies a large portion of ordinary people's lives and is a necessary chore. Take cleaning your room as an example. You can choose to do it weekly or monthly. It doesn't matter whether you live in a clean or dirty room if you don't care about cleanliness. However, if you don't eat for a few days, you'll die. It's still an urgent matter.

The value of domestic labor is also evident, as it contributes to creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships in daily life. By effectively managing domestic labor, one can live an aesthetically pleasing lifestyle with close family ties. Respondent 4.1 continued with this point:

*I think housework is valuable on its own. Doesn't the movie *Little Forest* show you how important it is? Clothing, food, and shelter are what keep people alive, right? Is there a more important lesson in life than eating well and dressing warmly every day? Cooking with care and sharing your food matters because you won't leave right away after you prepare it. Rather, your family and friends will sit around the table and enjoy the meal you prepared—together, right? The process of cooking and eating builds relationships, and those relationships will continue, won't they? I don't know if you've seen any of Ang Lee's films or those of Taiwanese directors, but human life is naturally based on sex, or sexuality, and eating. During a meal, people develop a stronger bond. If I cook, we do housework together, or if you and your loved one do housework together, your mutual affection is likely to increase. This is likely to be a very positive feeling. This feeling is similar to maintaining dental health by brushing your teeth, maintaining physical health by exercising, and eating healthily after preparing a tasty meal. What would be the point of living without a well-maintained home and good food every day?*

The participant noted, at the same time, that the significance of housework is somewhat independent of social norms and ideology:

I believe attitudes toward housework are quite malleable. Especially when one cannot discern what domestic labor is, one can become confused about how to evaluate it. When you are young or immature, living in a society that suggests men should work outside while women should look after the home, you may think, "Oh, this is okay." However, then feminism arises, and suddenly, society says, for example, that women should also work hard day and night, and you think, "Well, this claim is revolutionary." At the same time, you might hold a prejudiced view that it is problematic to have women living as homemakers. Right? However, I think that's because you haven't formed your own ideas yet. You just follow the views that are popular in society. From this perspective, I think the issue of housework that we're talking about now could be a personal issue once you make up your own mind. It concerns more of my individual life.

As this respondent observed, the meaningfulness of domestic labor depends not only on the experience of having a role or an impact. The performance alone, of eating well and dressing warmly, are individuals' efforts to live well and take good care of themselves. This performance shows the otherwise neglected urgency, necessity, and meaningfulness of domestic labor.

Conclusion

Individuals' interpretations of meanings regulate their behavior and impact (MacKenzie and Baumeister 2014). Our findings show three ways in which individuals experience meaningfulness in domestic labor. First, caregivers' labor provides a sense of belonging. The family is viewed as the center of life because it provides continuous emotional support and care as its members age. Second, performing domestic labor confirms a sense of self-efficacy that takes different forms depending on the task. Such self-efficacy includes a sense of control in organizing one's living environment, pride in oneself in overcoming difficulties in fulfilling filial duties, and a sense of accomplishment. Third, the meaningfulness of domestic labor resides in the performance itself: domestic labor deals with life necessities such as food and clothing. Additionally, healthy interpersonal relationships are fostered through domestic labor. Commitment to domestic labor reflects an individual's effort to take care of himself or herself and thereby contribute to the quality of life. We found that caregivers' experiences of meaningfulness were intrinsic motivators for their domestic labor practices.

What are the characteristics of domestic labor's meaningfulness experienced by respondents from various backgrounds? First, a gender difference was observed in the domain of meaningfulness. Female respondents reported richer meaningfulness in domestic labor. Our data analysis showed that although men generally recognize the necessity of domestic labor, only one identified supporting parents with a sense of personal efficacy. Conversely, women found more meaningfulness in caring for and educating their children as well as in daily routines such as cleaning and cooking.

Gender differences in the domain of meaningfulness align with traditional cultural gender norms concerning the division of domestic labor. In the case of male

respondents, caring for their parents is their responsibility, and the sense of efficacy and pride associated with providing care for their parents is derived from their fulfillment of the traditional male gender expectation of raising sons to provide financial support for elderly parents. On the other hand, female respondents, particularly middle-aged and older women, who were influenced by traditional gender norms of being a “good woman,” gained a sense of belonging and satisfaction in fulfilling their traditional roles as good wives and mothers. Traditions accrue moral prestige when they are successfully and repeatedly followed over time, and they serve as the basis for defining right and wrong—the essence of a value system. Gender-based concepts determine the norms and meanings of actions for men and women. Perceptions and practices following traditional gender norms to accomplish household tasks are justified as appropriate and even natural (Baumeister 1991: 100). As the basis for value judgments, gender-based traditional norms provide intrinsic motivation for individuals to perform certain household tasks, which partially explains the persistence of a gendered division of domestic labor.

Second, nuanced yet profound generational changes have taken place in understanding the meaningfulness of domestic labor. Our analysis of the age distribution of meaningfulness experienced in household chores reveals that the meaningfulness experienced by middle-aged and older caregivers is associated with the family’s overall well-being, including raising children, caring for elders, maintaining neighborly relationships, maintaining the functioning of the family, and providing food, clothing, and shelter to family members on a daily basis. In contrast, younger caregivers’ interpretation of the meaningfulness of domestic labor centered around the individual’s well-being, emphasizing maintaining comfort, the intimacy of non-blood relations, and representing their capacity to balance work and life as independent and competent individuals.

One of the potential drivers of this generational change is the expansion of “agency” among the younger generation, which manifests in an individualistic mindset. It has been established that high standards for a satisfactory lifestyle must be maintained, and taking good care of oneself is highly emphasized. Devotion to domestic labor is a strategy that allows them to realize their life plans and identities.

A meaningful experience in domestic labor does not ensure that younger generations will be willing to shoulder an unequal share of domestic labor. Several female respondents of younger generations mentioned the transition in contemporary China from a gendered division to equal sharing of household chores as a prerequisite for pursuing the meaningfulness associated with domestic labor. The equal sharing of household chores contributed to increasing intimacy between couples and reducing conflicts. Individualism, which has become more widespread among the younger generation, has provided new mechanisms for producing meaningfulness in household chores. The source of meaningfulness has been streamlined from the prosperity of intergenerational and extended families to the welfare of the individual (Yan 2016).

The generational transition of meaningfulness experienced from domestic labor mirrors the current trend in China of late marriage and late childbearing among the younger generation, as well as shrinking household sizes. (Yan 2016). The nuclear family structure has become the dominant family structure in China. Moreover, there are more than 125 million “one-person households,” which account for more than 25% of all households in China (China Statistical Yearbook 2021). As a result, the move away from

multigenerational family living has dissolved the traditional norms and responsibilities for daily care expected of younger family members. Consequently, the younger generation perceives household chores as more closely connected to maintaining the individual's well-being. In addition, we can observe that the younger generation's introspection and detachment from social traditions influenced the older generations. "Women should not be just anyone's wives or mothers" (Respondent 4.1). Completing household chores is one of many ways in which a capable woman can demonstrate her ability.

Comparing across generations, the source of meaningfulness of domestic labor shifted from "prosperity of the family" to "fulfillment of the self." In Chinese society, the idea of the booming "self" has never been accepted as an important source of value, as the "small self," which is focused on one's own interests, has been perceived as less ethically correct than the "big self," which represents devoting oneself to the advancement of the "big family." Nevertheless, due to the transformation of modern Chinese society, decisions in marriage and career are now largely made by the individual. At the same time, the market economy views individuals as independent, autonomous, and profit-seeking economic agents. Self-interest was a positive factor because of the status of power and duty. Traditional culture and state ideology used to have the authority to provide value guidance; nevertheless, these concepts now serve as mediators of self-expression in which one chooses what constitutes one's personal values. Younger generations are not easily convinced by external sources of value, such as those presented in state ideologies, marketing consumerist values, or the renaissance of traditional culture, unless these values are also perceived to be beneficial for their own self-development. Various mechanisms of meaningfulness collectively shape an individual's social identity and position within society.

The meaningfulness of activities is constructed throughout history and society, in which different mechanisms of meaning exert their power in the form of confrontation and cooperation. This rising self struggles to find a place for its own agency within the interactions among the mechanisms that construct meaningfulness. Completing household chores leads to the same outcome, such as an orderly room, a delicious meal, and well-cared-for family members. Nevertheless, domestic labor has different meanings to individuals from different classes, generations, and positions of power. To avoid existential risks and identity crises, the subject makes calculated choices between different orders of values, and some or all of life's values can be realized through domestic labor.

Additionally, since respondents experience multiple meanings in domestic labor, it is important to remain reflective and open-minded rather than draw premature conclusions. Given that the gendered division of domestic labor has become notorious for creating a "double shift" of domestic workers, negatively affecting the health and career development of individuals due to care penalties, is an individual's experience of domestic labor meaningful or an illusory triumph of the underprivileged? Tronto suggested that the pride in and importance of care labor that caregivers experience is neither a false consciousness nor a romanticized view. Caregivers are closer to the real world, in which everyone's existence inevitably requires care to survive. As the respondents of this study indicated, domestic labor is not a choice but a necessity. However, the meaningfulness of care labor experienced by caregivers does not ignore the fact that it is unpaid and undervalued. The undervaluing of domestic labor manifests itself in terms of the

distribution of social goods, such as salary and prestige, in which care workers and caregivers are often marginalized (Tronto 1993, 117).

In this qualitative study, we explored the diverse meanings that caregivers experience in performing domestic labor. These findings complement existing macroeconomic assessments of the value of domestic labor. Nevertheless, there are several idiosyncrasies and limitations to this research. First, the meaningfulness experienced by caregivers differs from the meaning of performing domestic labor. Both negative feelings and harmful experiences coexist with meaningfulness in the practice of domestic labor. For example, parents find pleasure and a sense of accomplishment as their children grow; however, they may feel disappointed and frustrated when their children do not meet their expectations. This study mainly examined the meaningfulness caregivers experienced, but a positive sense of meaningfulness does not negate the possibility of a lack of meaning. Moreover, the meaningfulness of domestic labor is not limited to this study's findings, and the criteria for classifying tasks may differ depending on the theoretical framework consulted. As a final note, there is a gendered division of domestic labor guised as traditional culture and the rhetoric of "personal choice." While caregivers' subjective perceptions of meaningfulness in domestic labor motivate their continuous devotion, the care crisis cannot be fundamentally alleviated by individual families' decisions alone; both the state and the market should help shoulder care responsibilities (Song 2011). We recommend that subsequent research consider how the perceived meaningfulness of domestic labor can be publicly recognized and practically compensated so that caregivers also receive adequate care. Greater value could be derived from compensated meaningfulness for domestic labor, thereby incentivizing more agents, including individuals, social organizations, and government institutions, to share the responsibility for domestic labor, thus alleviating the looming caregiving crisis in Chinese society.

Appendix: Sample characteristics

Respondent	Age group	Gender	Occupation	Marital status	Children	Region	Education background
1.1	Young adult	Male	PhD candidate	Single	0	Rural Chiina	University
1.2	Young adult	Female	PhD candidate	Single	0	Rural China	University
1.3	Young adult	Female	Undergraduate	Single	0	Urban China	University
1.4	Young adult	Female	Undergraduate	Single	0	Urban China	University
1.5	Young adult	Male	Graduate student	Single	0	Urban China	University
1.6	Young adult	Female	Graduate student	Married	0	Urban China	University
1.7	Young adult	Female	Graduate student	Single	0	Urban China	University
1.8	Young adult	Male	Undergraduate	Single	0	Urban China	University
1.9	Young adult	Female	Graduate student	Single	0	Urban China	University

Respondent	Age group	Gender	Occupation	Marital status	Children	Region	Education background
1.10	Young adult	Male	Undergraduate	Single	0	Rural China	University
1.11	Young adult	Male	Undergraduate	Single	0	Urban China	University
1.12	Young adult	Female	Undergraduate	Single	0	Urban China	University
1.15	Young adult	Male	Undergraduate	Single	0	Urban China	University
1.16	Young adult	Female	Graduate student	Single	0	Urban China	University
1.17	Young adult	Male	Undergraduate	Single	0	Urban China	University
1.18	Young adult	Male	Graduate student	Single	0	Rural China	University
1.19	Young adult	Female	Undergraduate	Single	0	Urban China	University
1.20	Young adult	Male	Undergraduate	Single	0	Urban China	University
1.21	Young adult	Female	Undergraduate	Single	0	Urban China	University
1.22	Young adult	Female	Graduate	Single	0	Rural China	University
1.23	Young adult	Female	Undergraduate	Single	0	Urban China	University
1.24	Young adult	Female	Undergraduate	Single	0	Urban China	University
1.25	Young adult	Female	Undergraduate	Single	0	Urban China	University
2.1	Elder adult	Female	Farmer	Married	2 sons & 1 daughter	Rural China	Primary school
2.2	Elder adult	Female	Nanny	Married	1 daughter & 1 son	Urban China (migrant worker)	Primary school
2.3	Elder adult	Female	Nanny	Married	1 son	Urban China (migrant worker)	Middle School
2.4	Elder adult	Female	Airplane cleaner	Married	1 daughter	Urban China (migrant worker)	Primary School
2.5	Middle age adult	Female	Airplane ground crew	Married	1 daughter	Urban China	University
2.6	Young adult	Female	waitress	Single	0	Rural China	High School
2.7	Young adult	Female	PhD candidate	Married	0	Urban China	University
2.8	Young adult	Male	PhD candidate	Married	0	Urban China	University
2.9	Young adult	Female	PhD candidate	Single	0	Rural China	University
2.10	Young adult	Female	Farmer; Nanny	Married	2 sons	Rural China	Middle School
3.1	Elder adult	Male	Teacher	Married	1 son	Rural China	College
3.2	Elder adult	Male	Teacher	Married	1 son	Rural China	College
3.3	Elder adult	Female	Teacher	Married	1 daughter	Rural China	College
3.4	Young Adult	Female	Teacher	Married	1 son	Urban China	College

Respondent	Age group	Gender	Occupation	Marital status	Children	Region	Education background
3.5	Middle age Adult	Female	Teacher	Married	1 son	Rural China	College
3.6	Middle age adult	Female	Housewife-Teacher	Married	2 daughters	Urban China	College
3.7	Middle age adult	Male	Teacher	Married	1 daughter	Rural China	College
3.8	Middle age adult	Female	Teacher	Married	1 son	Urban China	College
3.9	Elder adult	Female	Teacher	Married	0	Rural China	College
3.10	Elder adult	Female	Farmer	Married	1 son	Rural China	Middle school
3.11	Elder adult	Male	Farmer; migrant worker	Married	1 son	Rural China	Middle school
3.12	Elder adult	Male	Civil servant	Married	1 daughter	Rural China	College
3.13	Elder adult	Male	Farmer	Widower	2 sons & 1 daughter	Rural China	College
4.1	Young adult	Female	PhD candidate	Single& Lesbian	0	Urban China	University
4.2	Young adult	Female	PhD	Married	0	Urban China	University

Abbreviations

PRC People's Republic of China
GDP Gross Domestic Product

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Author contributions

ZB designed the study, conducted research, and drafting of the manuscript. GC provided critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content and study supervision.

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Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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