

Beyond Transplantation and Particularism: A Proposition-Level Framework for Integrating Family Systems, Ecological Systems, and Social Learning Theory in Chinese Intergenerational Co-Residence

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ABSTRACT:

Research on Chinese families leans heavily on three imported frameworks: family systems theory, ecological systems theory, and social learning theory. How they get used tends to follow one of two familiar patterns. The first is uncritical transplantation, which carries Western scope conditions over as though they were universal. The second is indigenous particularism, which asserts cultural difference without saying which part of the theory has gone wrong. This article tries a third route. Taking the cooperative-parenting temporary stem family as a strain case, a time-bounded three-generation co-residential arrangement that has become common in China's urban and peri-urban areas, it develops a diagnostic protocol for separating proposition-level mismatch from concept-level and phenomenon-level critique, then applies that protocol to each of the three theories. The resulting diagnosis is deliberately asymmetric. Family systems theory and social learning theory each carry load-bearing propositions whose scope conditions appear to fail in this setting, which argues for revision toward boundary elasticity and toward a priority ordering among

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multiple modeling sources. Ecological systems theory looks under-specified rather than mismatched, its difficulty being over-accommodation. The article then argues that citing all three frameworks in parallel produces redundant and largely unfalsifiable explanation, and proposes instead a four-tier architecture (scoping, structure, mechanism, specification) in which each theory answers a distinct class of question and hands a specified variable to the next tier. Indigenous Chinese scholarship enters this architecture as the mechanism specifier that supplies content to variables the imported theories leave open. Seven falsifiable propositions and their design implications close the article.

Keywords: boundary elasticity; ecological systems theory; family systems theory; indigenization; intergenerational co-residence; observational learning; theory integration.

1. Introduction

Three frameworks dominate the theoretical apparatus of contemporary Chinese family research. Family systems theory supplies the vocabulary of subsystems, boundaries, and triangulation (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974). Ecological systems theory supplies the nested image of development embedded in community, labor market, policy, and culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Social learning theory supplies an account of how family arrangements reach the child, by way of observation, vicarious reinforcement, and self-regulation (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Between them they cover the structural, contextual, and mechanistic dimensions of the field. It is hard to find an empirical study of Chinese intergenerational childrearing that invokes none of them.

1.1 Two Failure Modes

It is nearly as hard to find one that says what work each is doing. The characteristic move is to introduce all three in a framework section, note that Chinese families differ from Western ones, and then proceed to an analysis in which the theories decorate rather than constrain. Where they do bear weight, they usually bear it in one of two unsatisfying ways.

The first is **transplantation**. A proposition developed under one set of scope conditions

gets applied where those conditions do not hold, and the resulting anomaly is read as a property of the case instead of a limit of the theory. Minuchin's (1974) diagnostic framework treats sustained grandparental penetration of the parental subsystem as a cross-generational coalition, and therefore as a marker of dysfunction. Apply that without qualification to a society in which such penetration is normatively expected, and often functionally productive, and the framework stops describing Chinese families. It pathologizes them by construction.

The second is **particularism**. The transplantation problem is recognized, and the response is to insist that Chinese families are culturally distinct and require concepts of their own. The insistence is reasonable. As usually practiced, though, it does not amount to theory. It substitutes a label ("Chinese families are relational") for an argument, leaves the original proposition untouched instead of revised, and gives up the comparative traction that made the imported theory attractive to begin with. A framework that applies to one society alone cannot be falsified by evidence from another, and a framework that cannot be falsified from outside has stopped being in dialogue with anything.

1.2 The Argument in Outline

The route taken here is organized around a distinction the existing literature rarely draws: the difference between critiquing a **concept**, critiquing a **phenomenon description**, and critiquing a **proposition**. Only the last is theoretically consequential, since only a proposition makes a prediction capable of failing. The argument proceeds in four moves. Section 2 introduces the strain case, the cooperative-parenting temporary stem family, and explains why this particular configuration, rather than Chinese families in general, puts the three theories under diagnostic pressure. Section 3 sets out a five-step protocol for identifying proposition-level mismatch and telling it apart from weaker forms of critique. Sections 4 through 6 apply the protocol to each theory in turn, arriving at an asymmetric diagnosis: family systems theory and social learning theory call for proposition-level revision, whereas ecological systems theory calls for specification rather than revision, its problem being over-accommodation. Section 7 takes up the integration question that the literature has largely ignored, namely how three individually adjusted theories should be combined without producing redundant explanation, and proposes a four-tier architecture with explicit coupling rules. Section 8 positions indigenous Chinese scholarship within that architecture, and Section 9 derives a research agenda together with the limitations that bound it.

The contribution is meant to be portable. The strain case is Chinese; the diagnostic protocol and the integration architecture are not. They should apply wherever imported family theory meets a configuration its originating context did not contain.

2. The Strain Case: Cooperative-Parenting Temporary Stem Families

Chinese families are not a single object, and “Chinese families strain Western theory” is exactly the kind of unhelpfully broad claim this article hopes to replace. The argument rests on one specific and fairly recent configuration.

2.1 Defining the Form

In the **cooperative-parenting temporary stem family**, grandparents relocate into the household of an adult child for a bounded period, typically three to five years corresponding to the focal child’s preschool years, in order to share caregiving, and then withdraw when the child enters formal schooling (Yao, 2012; Wang, 2023). Several neighboring forms are often conflated with it. Unlike the classical permanent stem family, its temporal horizon is explicit and finite. Unlike skipped-generation households, where parents are absent through labor migration (Cong & Silverstein, 2012), both generations are co-present and both do caregiving work. Unlike proximate or “near” residence arrangements, co-residence here is full and continuous for as long as it lasts.

2.2 Conditions of Emergence

Several structural conditions appear to generate the form. Urbanization has drawn dual-earner couples into employment rhythms, manufacturing shift schedules and long metropolitan commutes among them, that fit poorly with the temporal demands of infant and toddler care. Public provision for children aged zero to three remains thin, particularly outside first-tier cities (Hong & Zhu, 2024). Market-purchased care costs a great deal relative to household income (Reuters, 2024). A demographic window has also opened. The first cohort of only children, born in the 1980s and 1990s, is simultaneously in the ascendant phase of career formation and in the childbearing phase, while their parents, born between the 1950s and 1970s, are in early retirement and physically capable of cross-city relocation and sustained daily care (Feng, 2010; Ma et al., 2011). Macro-level survey evidence documents the corresponding shift in urban living arrangements from permanent toward episodic co-residence (Logan et al., 1998; Ma et al., 2011; Feng & Wang, 2016).

2.3 Why the Form Strains Theory

What makes this configuration a strain case rather than merely a new case comes down to a handful of features.

It is simultaneously multi-generational and temporary. Family systems theory was developed on structures assumed to be stable enough that a boundary configuration could be diagnosed as a trait. Here the configuration has a scheduled beginning and a scheduled end. The appropriate degree of boundary openness at month three is unlikely to be the appropriate degree at month thirty.

It is negotiated rather than ascribed. The division of caregiving authority is not inherited from a fixed kinship script. It gets worked out, contested, and periodically revised between two adult generations with different educational backgrounds, different childrearing epistemologies, and different economic positions (Zhong & He, 2014; Xiao, 2014). That makes the arrangement an unusually legible site for watching structural conditions get converted into micro-level practice, and a correspondingly poor fit for theories that take family structure as given.

It exposes the child to a plural and shifting model environment on a known schedule. The child encounters two caregiving generations that differ systematically in emotional expression, conflict style, and rule enforcement, and then loses one of them at a predictable point. Social learning theory has a clear prediction about such environments. Whether

the prediction holds is an empirical question, and this configuration makes it unusually answerable.

3. What Counts as a Proposition-Level Mismatch

Critique of imported theory operates at three levels that are routinely run together. Keeping them apart is the precondition for saying anything falsifiable.

3.1 Three Levels of Critique

Concept-level critique argues that a term does not translate. “Boundary” carries connotations of individual autonomy that sit awkwardly in a relational moral order; “differentiation” implies a telos of separation that Chinese developmental ideals do not obviously share. Such critique is frequently correct and always insufficient. A concept that translates badly can be re-glossed, and nothing follows about whether the theory’s predictions hold.

Phenomenon-level critique argues that the empirical distribution differs. Chinese families co-reside across generations at higher rates; grandparents provide more hours of care. Correct again, and again insufficient. A theory can accommodate an unusual distribution of values on its variables with none of its propositions being wrong.

Proposition-level critique argues that a stated relation between variables does not hold in the target context, and says why. This is the level at which an imported theory is actually placed at risk, and it is correspondingly rare.

Table 1: Three Levels of Critique of Imported Family Theory

Level	Claim form	What it puts at risk	Falsifiable?	Typical outcome
Concept	“Term X does not translate”	Terminology	No	Re-glossing
Phenomenon	“The distribution of X differs”	Descriptive generalization	Partly	Sample qualification
Proposition	“The relation $X \rightarrow Y$ does not hold, because scope condition Z fails”	The theory’s predictions	Yes	Revised proposition with stated boundary conditions

3.2 A Five-Step Protocol

The five-step protocol below is proposed for conducting critique at that level.

Step 1: Identify the load-bearing proposition. Not every claim in a theory does work. The target has to be a proposition on which downstream inference depends, one whose failure would change what the theory predicts rather than how it phrases things.

Step 2: Surface its scope condition. Propositions hold under conditions their originators usually did not state, because those conditions were ambient where the theory was developed. The analytic task is reconstruction: what would have to be true of a family for this proposition to follow?

Step 3: Establish that the scope condition fails. This requires evidence about the target context, not assertion about it. Cultural difference is a hypothesis about scope conditions, not a demonstration that they have failed.

Step 4: Check whether the prediction actually fails. This step is the one most often skipped. A scope condition can fail while the prediction survives for other reasons, and a prediction can fail for reasons unrelated to the scope condition identified. Proposition-level revision is warranted only where the scope condition fails *and* the prediction fails.

Step 5: Restate as a revised proposition that preserves the original as a special case. The revised proposition should be falsifiable, should specify the conditions under which the original still holds, and should generate predictions that differ from the original's under storable circumstances. A revision that merely adds "except in China" is not a revision.

Step 5 embodies a commitment worth making explicit. The objective is to set boundary conditions on propositions that were stated without them, not to displace Minuchin or Bandura. Where the original scope conditions are met, which is to say low external legitimation of intergenerational involvement, thin social-capital support, and an individualist normative

frame, the original propositions should continue to hold. A revision that cannot accommodate that is overreaching. Delimiting scope, rather than rejecting wholesale, is also what keeps the resulting framework clear of the particularist failure mode described in Section 1.

4. Family Systems Theory: From Boundary Permeability to Boundary Elasticity

4.1 The Load-Bearing Propositions

Family systems theory treats the family as an open system of subsystems, marital, parent-child, and intergenerational, whose boundaries regulate flows of information, emotion, and authority (Bertalanffy, 1968; Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974). Two proposition clusters bear weight here.

Minuchin's (1974) structural proposition holds that subsystem functioning is impaired when the parental subsystem is excessively penetrated by the grandparental generation, the diagnostic signature being the cross-generational coalition in which a grandparent and a child align against a parent. Bowen's proposition (1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) holds that mature functioning requires self-differentiation, the capacity to maintain independent judgment under emotional pressure, and that triangulation, in which a third party is drawn into a dyadic tension to stabilize it, obstructs the underlying conflict rather than resolving it. Later textbook consolidation hardened both into a diagnostic heuristic of "clear boundaries equal healthy family" (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2017; Nichols & Davis, 2020). Walsh's (2016) resilience perspective and Olson's (2000) circumplex model do leave room for adaptive variation in boundary configuration under stress.

4.2 Scope Conditions and Their Failure

Scope condition 1: the nuclear subsystem is the appropriate unit of boundary autonomy. Minuchin's framework assumes by default that the parents-plus-children unit should be relatively closed to the extended family. Under Confucian ethical arrangements, parents, children, and grandparents constitute a continuous moral community in which cross-

generational sharing of resources, emotion, and decision-making is normatively prescribed rather than merely tolerated (Yeh & Yang, 2009; Bedford & Yeh, 2021). The unit whose boundary autonomy matters is not the same unit.

Scope condition 2: permeability indexes impairment. In Minuchin's diagnostic logic, grandparental involvement in parental decision-making is a pathology marker. Xiao's (2014) account of the "strict mother, kind grandparent" pattern documents intergenerational divisions of labor that look more like functional complementarity than boundary erosion, and Shen's (2019) analysis of the post-motherhood era suggests that grandparental assumption of daily care can protect the spousal subsystem by returning interactional time to it. Whether penetration impairs functioning seems to depend on the structure of the division of labor and on the presence of cultural legitimation. Neither variable appears in the original proposition.

Scope condition 3: differentiation is the developmental telos. Bowen treats high differentiation as maturity and emotional cutoff as its failed extreme. In a relational order organized by what Fei (2012) termed the differential mode of association, the self is constitutively embedded in kin networks. Yan's (2012a) diagnosis of "individualization without individualism" captures the resulting configuration: autonomy is pursued without the accompanying repudiation of familial obligation. The differentiation-fusion axis maps poorly onto this configuration, since both of its poles are defined against a normative individualism that is largely absent.

Scope condition 4: triangulation is pathological. The intergenerational triad carries institutionalized legitimacy within Confucian ethics (Yeh & Yang, 2009). Zhong and He's (2014) account of negotiated intimacy suggests a further point. Under conditions of visible, ritualized adult negotiation, the triad can work as an observational arena in which children acquire emotion regulation, perspective-taking, and

responsibility-sharing. None of this establishes that triangulation is benign in general. It establishes that its valence is conditional on the mode of negotiation, which the original proposition treats as invariant.

4.3 The Revised Proposition: Boundary Elasticity

These failures share a structure. Each arises because the original propositions treat boundary permeability as a scalar trait of a family, running from closed to diffuse, with the healthy value somewhere in the middle. The revision replaces the scalar with a regulation capacity.

Revised Proposition (Boundary Elasticity).

In intergenerational co-residential families, developmental outcomes are predicted not by the level of boundary permeability but by the family's capacity to vary permeability systematically across task domains, family-cycle phases, and relational dyads. High-functioning arrangements should exhibit patterned variation; low-functioning arrangements should exhibit either uniform closure or undifferentiated openness.

Four dimensions specify the construct.

Task elasticity refers to differentiated permeability by domain: deep grandparental involvement in daily care coexisting with parental primacy in major educational decisions. The prediction is that permeability high in one domain and low in another will prove more functional than permeability uniform across domains at any level.

Temporal elasticity refers to the alignment of permeability with family-cycle phase. The same degree of openness that serves the household well during the maintenance phase should become maladaptive during entry and exit, when boundaries have to be negotiated and then contracted.

Relational elasticity refers to graded permeability by dyad. Drawing on the differential mode of association, one would expect a concentric pattern, with grandparental penetration deepest in the child-care circle, restrained in the marital circle, and slight at the

household's external interface. Boundary then becomes a question of gradation rather than of presence or absence, which is the sharpest single departure from the structural tradition.

Non-permeability compensation refers to what a family does when permeability generates tension: whether it responds through emotional strategy, explicit negotiation mechanisms, and external mediation, or simply reinforces closure. Compensation rather than closure is what should distinguish resilient from deteriorating arrangements.

4.4 What the Revision Preserves

Several commitments of the original survive. Boundaries remain the analytic object. The concern with functional differentiation among subsystems is retained rather than abandoned (Minuchin, 1974; Bowen, 1978). The original proposition itself is preserved as the special case in which the regulation capacity is absent: where cross-generational involvement lacks cultural legitimation, where negotiation mechanisms are unavailable, and where external mediation resources are thin, elasticity cannot be exercised, permeability becomes uniform in practice, and Minuchin's prediction should hold. That is a testable implication of the revision rather than a concession appended to it.

5. Ecological Systems Theory: Under-Specification Rather Than Mismatch

Applying the protocol to Bronfenbrenner's framework produces a different result, and the difference is instructive.

5.1 The Absent Mismatch

Bronfenbrenner (1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) situates development within nested micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems, with proximal processes, meaning repeated and progressively complex caregiver-child interaction, as the proximate engine of development. Step 1 of the protocol asks for the load-bearing proposition whose scope conditions might fail. The framework does not readily supply one. Its central claims are architectural rather than predictive: development is multiply nested, layers interact,

the temporal dimension matters. Claims of that kind are close to unfalsifiable, which is largely why the framework accommodates the Chinese case without visible strain.

So the problem is the mirror image of the family systems problem. Family systems theory misfits because it predicts too specifically from scope conditions that do not obtain. Ecological systems theory fits because it predicts too little. Diagnosing it as culturally biased would be a category error; it is empty at the point where content is needed. The asymmetry matters for the integration argument in Section 7. A framework that accommodates everything cannot serve as the mechanism layer of an explanation, though it can serve as the scoping layer, and it should be assigned accordingly.

5.2 Two Sites Requiring Specification

Micro-meso coupling. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) hold that the efficacy of proximal processes depends on consistency and complementarity between micro-level interaction and meso-level linkage. In the temporary stem family, the operative meso-level variable is unusually concrete: how well external labor rhythm matches household care rhythm. Shift schedules and long commutes determine which generation is physically present at which hours, and thereby determine the task allocation and permeability structure analyzed in Section 4. Housing availability determines whether co-residence is spatially feasible at all. Community mediation resources determine whether the compensation mechanisms of Section 4.3 have anything external to draw on (Hu & Peng, 2014; Ko & Hank, 2014). None of these follow from the nested model, and all of them have to be added to it.

Micro-meso coupling is therefore operationalized here as **rhythm match**: the degree of correspondence between the temporal structure of household caregiving demand and the temporal structure of adult availability, as jointly determined by labor-market schedules, commuting distance, and grandparental residence. The construct is measurable and varies across cases. It generates the prediction

that low rhythm match compresses task elasticity by forcing whichever caregiver is present to cover all domains.

Chronosystem at family-cycle scale. The chronosystem is usually invoked at epochal scale, historical period or cohort. Here it has to operate at two scales at once. At the family scale, the arrangement traverses a formation phase, a maintenance phase of roughly three years, and a dissolution phase triggered by school entry, each with different boundary requirements. At the societal scale, the form occupies a demographic window: only-child parents in career ascent coupled with early-retired grandparents still capable of relocation and full-time care. That window has an expiry. Projected forward a decade, the grandparental cohort will have entered advanced old age, and the form should decline in prevalence independent of any change in cultural values.

This yields a reasonably clean falsifiable implication. If the temporary stem family is a chronosystem-conditioned adaptation rather than a cultural constant, its prevalence should track the demographic window and the childcare-provision gap instead of the strength of filial norms. Cross-regional variation in provision, and cross-cohort variation in grandparental age structure, should then predict prevalence better than measured filial-piety orientation does.

5.3 The Layer's Proper Function

Assigning ecological systems theory this scoping role has two further payoffs. It blocks the reductionist inference that intra-family factors determine outcomes, by holding open the structural conditions under which the family form exists at all. It also supplies a comparative skeleton. Japanese near-residence and Korean commuting-grandmother arrangements (Ochiai & Molony, 2008; Ko & Hank, 2014; Jeon & Walker, 2022; Cha & Eun, 2021) can then be analyzed as alternative coupling patterns among the same layers, differing in exosystem parameters such as housing cost and commuting geometry, rather than as expressions of different

cultural essences. Cross-national comparison becomes an exercise in parameter variation.

6. Social Learning Theory: From Single-Source to Multi-Source Priority Ordering

6.1 The Load-Bearing Proposition

Bandura (1977, 1986) recast behaviorist learning as social-cognitive, with observation, vicarious reinforcement, and self-regulation as central processes, moderated by model, observer, behavior, and contextual characteristics. The load-bearing proposition for present purposes is narrower: **uniformity of behavioral models enhances acquisition efficiency, and inconsistent multi-source models impede acquisition.** This does substantial work in applied and developmental literatures, and it has clear explanatory power under the conditions in which it was developed, which is to say a nuclear household where parents are the primary models and childrearing discourse is comparatively homogeneous.

6.2 Two Scope Conditions

The passive-observer assumption. Bandura's early formulation treats the child as a relatively passive recipient of environmental signal, from which the value of environmental consistency follows directly. Vygotsky (1978) had already characterized the child as an active constructor of meaning, using private speech and the zone of proximal development to organize heterogeneous cultural input. If the observer selects and organizes rather than absorbing, inconsistency stops being straightforwardly a cost. It may be informational.

The homogeneous-source assumption. The paradigmatic experimental designs, the Bobo doll studies among them, present one or two standardized models in a laboratory setting. Cole's (1996) cultural-psychological critique makes the point sharply: the experimental design already presupposes a nuclear-family, single-culture environment, so the finding that inconsistency impedes acquisition is at least partly an artifact of a design in which multiplicity was never the natural condition.

6.3 The Configuration in Which the Prediction Should Fail

Within cooperative-parenting temporary stem families, several features jointly constitute a hard test. Model inconsistency is the norm rather than the exception, since the two caregiving generations differ systematically in emotional expressiveness, in conflict style, and in strictness of rule enforcement. Cultural scripts and modern childrearing discourse pull against each other, with norms of deference to elders coexisting alongside a parental generation that emphasizes negotiation and scientific rationality, which leaves the child with a “whom to obey” problem that is as much about divided loyalty as about cognition. The temporal cycle then resets the model environment: a three- to five-year arrangement means the child forms and subsequently loses a stable reference model at a developmentally consequential point.

By the original proposition, an environment of this kind should impair social learning. Existing cross-cultural evidence points the other way. Studies of multiple attachment relationships under grandmother co-parenting suggest that plural caregiving environments shape distinctive rather than deficient socio-emotional regulation strategies (Xing et al., 2016), and research on multiple caregiving in Chinese urban households runs in the same direction (Goh & Kuczynski, 2010; Goh, 2011; Han et al., 2020). Work on multicultural cognition documents context-cued frame switching as a competence rather than a confusion (Hong et al., 2000). Comparative research on caregiver sensitivity finds that a single Western standard fails to characterize development in multi-source care contexts (Li et al., 2022; Köster et al., 2020), and attachment research has long recognized that children organize relationships with multiple caregivers instead of averaging across them (Howes & Spieker, 2008; Mesman et al., 2016). Tomasello’s (2019) account of shared intentionality supplies a plausible developmental capacity for such organization.

6.4 The Revised Proposition

Revised Proposition (Multi-Source Modeling Priority Ordering). Where a child is exposed to multiple caregiving models, acquisition efficiency is predicted not by the uniformity of models but by the predictability of the mapping between context and model. Children sort models by domain rather than aggregating them into a single credibility ranking. Multi-source environments impair acquisition where domain assignment is unstable or contested; they support acquisition, and may extend the repertoire beyond what single-source environments afford, where the assignment is stable and deep-level value consistency is maintained.

Three conditions specify when multiplicity is developmentally benign. **Domain predictability** means the child can reliably infer which model governs which situation. **Deep-level consistency** means models differ in surface practice while converging on underlying values, so that domain switching does not require alternating between incompatible moral frames. **Conflict isolation** means disagreement between models is conducted in ways that stop short of forcing the child into loyalty choices, whether through the norm of not disputing in the child’s presence or through the ritualized negotiation Zhong and He (2014) describe.

The revision keeps Bandura’s proposition as the case in which domain predictability is low. Where two caregivers contest the same domain instead of dividing domains, the child faces genuine inconsistency with no sorting rule available, and the original prediction of impaired acquisition should hold. The revision is also continuous with the broader social-cognitive literature on selective imitation and multi-model abstraction (Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 1978; Perry & Bussey, 1979; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Bandura, 2001), which had already qualified strict uniformity claims. What gets added is a culturally specified sorting rule and a set of conditions under which it operates.

The revised proposition articulates with several classic frameworks in ways that strengthen it. A

multi-source environment supplies several more-competent others at once, extending the zone of proximal development along multiple dimensions instead of one (Vygotsky, 1978). It furnishes richer material for assimilation and accommodation, since intergenerational difference is close to a paradigm case of the discrepancy that drives schema reorganization (Piaget, 1954). It should also be compatible with the successful accomplishment of stage-appropriate psychosocial tasks (Erikson, 1950), provided the deep-level consistency condition holds, a qualification that turns a general compatibility claim into a testable one.

7. Why Flat Stacking Fails: A Hierarchical Integration Architecture

7.1 The Problem of Parallel Citation

Having revised two of the three theories and specified the third, the remaining question is how they combine. Prevailing practice is to cite them in parallel: the study is “grounded in family systems theory, ecological systems theory, and social learning theory,” each summarized in turn, none assigned a distinct explanatory task. Several characteristic pathologies follow.

Redundant explanation. The same variance is claimed by more than one framework. A finding that intergenerational conflict is associated with poorer child emotional regulation can be narrated as boundary diffusion, as micro-meso decoupling, or as inconsistent modeling. All three narrations fit, and none is thereby

supported, because the finding cannot discriminate among them.

Over-determined unfalsifiability. With three frameworks available, almost any observed pattern can be accommodated post hoc. The apparatus becomes a vocabulary for redescription instead of a source of prediction, which is roughly how theory sections come to feel detachable from the analyses they precede.

Level confusion. Constructs from different levels of abstraction end up in the same causal statement, as when a macro-level structural condition and a dyadic interaction pattern are entered as parallel predictors of a child outcome, with no account of how the former reaches the latter.

7.2 A Four-Tier Architecture

The remedy proposed here is to assign each framework a distinct class of question and to require that each tier hand a specified variable to the next. Three coupling rules govern the architecture. *Rule 1 (single occupancy):* each tier answers one class of question, and no construct appears at two tiers. *Rule 2 (specified handoff):* each tier must deliver a named variable, with a measurable range, that the next tier takes as input; a tier that delivers only context has not done its work. *Rule 3 (anti-redundancy test):* for any finding, the analyst must state which tier’s proposition would have to be wrong if the finding were reversed. Where no tier is at risk, the finding is not being explained.

Table 2: Four-Tier Integration Architecture

Tier	Framework	Question answered	Variable handed downward
1. Scoping	Ecological systems theory (specified per Section 5)	Under what structural and temporal conditions does this family form exist and vary?	Rhythm match; cohort-window position; provision gap; mediation-resource availability
2. Structure	Family systems theory (revised per Section 4)	Given those conditions, how are authority and responsibility allocated, and how is the allocation renegotiated?	Boundary elasticity profile across task, temporal, and relational dimensions; compensation mode
3. Mechanism	Social learning theory (revised per Section 3)	Through what process does the allocation reach the child?	Domain predictability; deep-level consistency; conflict

Tier	Framework	Question answered	Variable handed downward
	Section 6)		isolation
4. Specification	Indigenous Chinese scholarship (per Section 8)	What supplies content to the variables the upper tiers leave open?	Legitimation type; gradation rule; negotiation logic; motivational account

Read downward, the architecture states a chain: structural conditions determine the space of feasible boundary configurations; the configuration adopted determines the model environment the child encounters; the properties of that environment determine developmental effect. Read upward, it states feedback: child outcomes alter caregiver motivation, which alters the configuration, which over time alters the household's demand on external resources.

No link in the chain is deterministic, which is the point of building it this way. Each link is a proposition that can fail, and the tier structure says where to look when it does. If a family with favorable structural conditions nonetheless exhibits uniform rather than elastic boundaries, the failure sits at Tier 2 and calls for examination of legitimation and negotiation capacity at Tier 4. If an elastic configuration nonetheless produces poor child outcomes, the failure sits at Tier 3 and calls for examination of domain predictability. Parallel citation offers no comparable way of locating the failure.

7.3 What the Architecture Rules Out

Two moves become illegitimate. The first is explaining a micro-level outcome directly from a macro-level condition without passing through the intervening tiers, which is the level-confusion pathology. The second is invoking a second framework to account for variance a first framework has already claimed, unless the two make divergent predictions the data can adjudicate. Under Rule 3, an analysis that cannot name the proposition its finding would falsify remains incomplete however many theories it cites.

8. Indigenous Scholarship as Mechanism Specifier

Tier 4 needs justification, since it is where the particularism risk identified in Section 1 concentrates. The claim is that indigenous Chinese scholarship works best in this architecture as the layer that supplies content to variables the imported theories leave open, rather than as an alternative paradigm competing with them. Four bodies of work illustrate the role.

8.1 Four Sites of Specification

Dual filial piety specifies the legitimation variable. Yeh and Bedford's (2003; Bedford & Yeh, 2021) distinction between authoritarian filial piety, organized around obedience and lineage obligation, and reciprocal filial piety, organized around affective exchange and egalitarian dialogue, does precise work at Tier 2. Section 4.2 concluded that whether boundary permeability impairs functioning depends on cultural legitimation, but left "legitimation" unspecified. The dual model specifies it. Permeability legitimated reciprocally should go with elastic configurations and with experienced intergenerational intimacy, whereas permeability legitimated authoritatively should go with rigid configurations and experienced constraint. Since modernization has weakened the authoritarian dimension and strengthened the reciprocal one (Yeh & Yang, 2009), the model also predicts historical drift in boundary configuration independent of structural change. The temporary stem family may extend the model in turn: fulfilling filial obligation through periodic rotation instead of permanent co-residence (Zhang et al., 2024) hints at an instrumental-affective composite rather than a strict binary.

The differential mode of association specifies the gradation rule. Fei's (2012) account of relations radiating outward in concentric rings has been applied extensively to social relations and comparatively little to boundaries within families (see Yan, 2006). It supplies the relational-elasticity dimension of Section 4.3 with a rule rather than a description: penetration depth declines from the child-care circle through the marital circle to the household's external interface. That is what converts "boundaries are graded" from an observation into a prediction about which gradient.

Individualization without individualism specifies the negotiation logic. Yan's (2012a, 2012b, 2021) diagnosis, together with the associated notion of pragmatic familism, characterizes the strategic style through which contemporary urban families reconcile obligation and autonomy, retaining obligations while flexibly adjusting how they are discharged. At Tier 2 this specifies the compensation mode, negotiation and strategic concession in place of boundary re-drawing. At Tier 3 it accounts for how domain assignment gets established in the first place.

The individual family and post-motherhood specify the motivational account. Shen's (2013, 2019) iFamily framework, in which the individual pursues autonomy within the family while the family supplies resources to the individual, explains why the arrangement is chosen rather than only how it operates. Her analysis of the double bind between intensive mothering and mothering outsourcing identifies intergenerational collaboration as an indigenous resolution of a contradiction the imported theories do not name (see also Shen, 2014; Wu, 2021a).

8.2 A Normative Constraint on Inference

A critical qualification belongs here rather than in a footnote. Wu (2018, 2021a, 2021b) argues that intergenerational collaboration, while it alleviates pressure on employed mothers, internalizes childrearing responsibility within the family's kin network, which allows the

obligations of state, market, and employer to be obscured by a familist logic. This is not an objection to the framework as description. It is a binding constraint on what may be inferred from it normatively. A framework that explains how families absorb a care deficit must not be read as showing that families should absorb it. Tier 1 is where the constraint operates: because the scoping tier holds the provision gap open as a variable, the framework retains the capacity to represent the counterfactual in which provision is adequate, a capacity a purely intra-family account would lack.

8.3 Regional Comparison

Ochiai and Molony's (2008; Ochiai & Kohama, 2022) work on East Asian mothering networks, together with comparative studies of grandparental care across China and Korea (Ko & Hank, 2014; Jeon & Walker, 2022) and of co-residence effects in Japan (Wang & Raymo, 2020; Furuya & Raymo, 2022), supports treating regional variants as different parameter settings within a shared architecture rather than as distinct cultural types. Recent syntheses documenting a shift from authority-dominated toward negotiated intergenerational sharing across the region (Raymo et al., 2015; Hayslip et al., 2019) suggest that the negotiation logic specified at Tier 4 is distributed regionally rather than nationally, which is itself a testable claim.

9. A Research Agenda

The framework's value depends on generating predictions that could fail. Seven are set out below, each with the observation that would falsify it.

9.1 Seven Propositions

P1. Within intergenerational co-residential households, variance in child social-developmental outcomes is better predicted by the patterning of boundary permeability across task domains than by its mean level. *Falsified if* mean permeability outperforms a differentiation index in predicting outcomes.

P2. The association between grandparental involvement and family functioning is moderated by legitimation type: reciprocal-filial

legitimation predicts elastic configurations, authoritarian legitimation predicts rigid ones. *Falsified if* the association is invariant across measured filial-piety orientation.

P3. Relational elasticity follows a concentric gradient, with penetration deepest in child care, restrained in the marital dyad, and slight at the external interface. *Falsified if* penetration depth is uncorrelated with circle position, or follows a different ordering.

P4. In multi-source caregiving environments, acquisition outcomes are predicted by domain predictability rather than by model similarity. *Falsified if* a measure of caregiver behavioral similarity outperforms a measure of domain-assignment stability.

P5. Multi-source environments impair acquisition specifically where caregivers contest the same domain, not where they divide domains. *Falsified if* impairment is equivalent under contested and divided allocation.

P6. Prevalence of the temporary stem family tracks the childcare-provision gap and the grandparental age structure more closely than it tracks measured filial-norm strength. *Falsified if* norm measures outperform structural measures across regions.

P7. Where legitimation, negotiation mechanisms, and external mediation are all absent, the original Minuchin and Bandura propositions hold without revision. *Falsified if* the revised propositions outperform the originals even under these conditions.

9.2 Design Implications

Some design implications follow. P1 and P3 require within-family measurement across domains and dyads rather than a single household-level boundary score, which most existing instruments do not provide; developing a domain-differentiated boundary measure is a prerequisite for testing the framework at all. P4 and P5 require observational data rather than self-report alone, since domain assignment is enacted more than it is reported. P6 requires cross-regional comparison with variation in provision, which single-site designs cannot

supply. Temporal elasticity requires longitudinal designs spanning formation, maintenance, and dissolution, and dissolution is the phase most under-observed, though it is where the framework predicts that prior elasticity should buffer separation effects. Qualitative designs suit the first two requirements well and the third poorly, so the agenda is deliberately mixed-method.

9.3 Limitations

Several limitations bound the argument. The framework is derived from a single family form in a single society, and whether the diagnostic protocol generalizes to other imported-theory contexts is asserted here rather than shown. The revised propositions are theoretical rather than tested; this article presents no empirical evidence, and the propositions in Section 9.1 are offered as an agenda instead of as findings. Boundary elasticity carries a familiar risk as a construct: unless the four dimensions are operationalized with measures capable of registering their absence, “elasticity” can absorb any observed pattern and reproduce the very unfalsifiability the article criticizes in flat stacking. The four-tier architecture, finally, is a proposal about how frameworks should be combined, not a demonstration that combining them this way yields better empirical purchase. That demonstration would require comparative model testing that does not yet exist.

10. Conclusion

Imported theory appears to fail in Chinese family research in two opposite ways, and the two failures call for opposite remedies. Family systems theory and social learning theory fail by predicting too specifically from scope conditions that do not hold, and the remedy is proposition-level revision that preserves the originals as special cases. Ecological systems theory fails by predicting too little, and the remedy is specification, supplying the variables the nested model holds open. Recognizing that these are different failures is the first step toward doing anything other than citing all three in parallel.

The second step is architectural. Three frameworks, each individually adjusted, do not

integrate by being placed side by side. They integrate by being assigned distinct classes of question and required to hand specified variables to one another. The four-tier structure proposed here, running from scoping through structure and mechanism to specification, is one such assignment, and its central discipline is the anti-redundancy requirement: for any finding, the analyst should be able to say which proposition would have to be wrong were the finding reversed.

The third step concerns the standing of indigenous scholarship. Positioning dual filial

piety, the differential mode of association, pragmatic familism, and the individual-family framework as mechanism specifiers rather than as an alternative paradigm is no demotion. It is what allows them to do precise work, supplying the content of variables that the imported theories left open because their originating contexts supplied that content tacitly. That position seems stronger than either transplantation or particularism affords, mainly because it keeps the framework in dialogue with evidence from outside the society that generated it, which is in the end the only condition under which a theory can be shown to be wrong.

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