

"Compromise" or "Escape"? Intergenerational Conflict, Husband Complicity, and the Coping Strategies of Rural-to-Urban Migrant Women in China

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GT 05 - Agricultura familiar, ruralidades e relações de gênero no meio rural

Abstract: This article draws on in-depth interviews with 12 married women of rural origin to examine the dual manifestations of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (hereafter MIL/DIL) conflict in the context of rural-to-urban migration, the mechanisms through which the husband's mediating role fails, and the coping strategies adopted by daughters-in-law. The study finds that MIL/DIL conflict exhibits a dual-dimensional character in which power asymmetry within affinal kin relations and everyday life practice conflicts coexist. The former encompasses contestation over reproductive decision-making authority, control of household resources, dominance in child-rearing, and the substitution of elder-care and child-rearing obligations; the latter covers divergences in daily habits, disagreements in child-rearing execution, conflicts over cultural taboos, and disputes over spatial and affective boundaries. When the husband's role as intermediary proves universally ineffective, daughters-in-law's coping strategies manifest a dual logic of "compromise" and "escape." Compromise takes the form of economic dependence, entrapment by caring obligations, and conflict avoidance, while escape encompasses economic independence, spatial separation, emotional distancing, and, at the extreme, relational disengagement (marital dissolution). Intergenerational comparison reveals that, as the individualisation process deepens, "escape" strategies become increasingly prevalent, with younger women more inclined to leverage career development as a means of reconstructing personal autonomy. The study argues that MIL/DIL conflict illuminates the tension between modern individualist aspirations and Confucian familism (jiāzúzhūyì), and calls for husbands to play a more constructive intermediary role in sustaining the family as an affective community rather than a terrain of power struggle.

Keywords: mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflict, rural women, compromise strategy, escape strategy, individualisation

1. Introduction

The mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (MIL/DIL) relationship, as one of the central intergenerational relationships in family life, has frequently been characterized as "the dominant relationship in the politics of family life" (Du, 2022). Against the backdrop of rapid social transformation, it constitutes not only a micro-level window through which to observe the modern transformation of the Chinese family, but also a vivid field for understanding how individuals navigate the tension between the traditional and the modern. With the deepening of large-scale rural-to-urban migration and the individualisation process—understood here in the Chinese context following Yan (2009, 2010), rather than Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's Western welfare-state model—large numbers of women of rural origin have entered cities or county towns by virtue of marriage or occupational choice. Such migration has not only altered their geographic space and field of practice but has also reconstituted the patterns of family reproduction. On the one hand, the diversification of co-residence arrangements has

multiplied the possibilities for child-rearing cooperation and rendered the boundaries of economic arrangements more complex. On the other hand, traditional family ethics and intergenerational obligations have not been wholly dissolved; the encounter between new situations and old structures frequently generates new forms of conflict.

Against this backdrop, the husband—who in theory connects the two generations of women and plays the role of communicator and coordinator, functioning as "intermediary"—occupies a particularly critical position. Yet preliminary fieldwork and prior scholarship suggest that when MIL/DIL conflict occurs, the husband's role is commonly characterized by "failure." This "failure" does not necessarily denote an absolute absence; rather, it may manifest as economic collusion with the mother, avoidance of communication, displacement of responsibility, or a partial defense of the traditional order, all of which leave the daughter-in-law caught in the middle, feeling isolated and powerless. This article designates "the universal failure of the husband's role" as the central analytical context and premise, with a view to exploring how women confronting conflict perceive, respond to, and construct their own repertoire of strategies when this critical buffering and mediating mechanism is absent.

On the basis of the critical review below, this study addresses the following questions: Under the dual contextual conditions of a migration context and the universal failure of the husband's mediating role, what intertwined characteristics do the MIL/DIL conflicts encountered by married women of rural origin display? How do these women perceive and respond to such conflicts? And what are the specific practical logics and individualist significance of their "compromise" and "escape" strategies?

2. Literature review

Perspectives on the MIL/DIL Relationship

In broad terms, existing scholarship on the MIL/DIL relationship and MIL/DIL conflict may be organized under two headings: the perspective of intergenerational power relations, and the perspective of everyday life research.

Under the perspective of intergenerational power relations, one strand focuses on the social foundations underpinning changes in power dynamics. Prior to the implementation of the Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China in 1950, the overwhelming majority of Chinese marriages were contracted according to the wishes of parents (Xu & Whyte, 1990). Accordingly, some scholars argue that in traditional society the mother-in-law held absolute authority by virtue of patriarchy and the culture of filial piety, and exercised "control" over the daughter-in-law through reproduction, economic resources, and household decision-

making power, thereby positioning the daughter-in-law in a subordinate relationship (Xiao, 2010). Other scholars have pointed out that the development of individual personality and subjectivity in the village context has been largely confined to the private sphere, thereby engendering the privatization of the family; individuals have ultimately come to assert only their own rights while disregarding obligations and responsibilities to others, thus becoming "uncivil individuals" (Yan, 2006, p. 169). In the "individuated family" (gètǐ jiāting)—characterized by diverse and fluid family structures, family life that valorizes both economic and affective dimensions, and the inversion of the parent-child axis as the primary intrafamilial relationship—women have attained a degree of power and interest through the individualisation process, and the status of young women within the family has accordingly risen (Shen, 2013); yet conflict between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law remains commonplace. In the domain of child-rearing, the daughter-in-law may hold the initiative and function as the "chief manager" of child-rearing while the mother-in-law occupies the role of "helper"; yet the daughter-in-law does not possess the institutionalized symbolic and moral resources to secure her dominant position, giving rise to considerable room for negotiation and contestation among family members (Xiao, 2014). Other scholars, drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, argue that the mother-in-law—though occupying the front region as "helper"—continues in the back region to represent a "latent" patriarchy, occupying a position of relative advantage (Liu, 2020).

Another strand focuses on the iterative evolution of intergenerational power, tracing phases and phase-specific characteristics of shifts in power through a diachronic account. He Xuefeng and colleagues, drawing on fieldwork, summarize that from the founding of the PRC to the early twenty-first century, the MIL/DIL relationship has passed through three broad phases: "relative equilibrium," "disequilibrium," and "a new equilibrium" (He, 2008; Sun et al., 2010). Ding (2022), drawing on empirical research into three generations of women's MIL/DIL relationships over the period 1956–2021, argues that the MIL/DIL relationship has evolved from an "authority–submission" type during the collectivization period, through a "conflict-independence" type during the early post-reform era, toward a "compromise-cooperation" type in the market economy period.

Under the perspective of everyday life research, one strand focuses on intergenerational differences in daily lifestyle—encompassing both mundane matters and normative questions such as "how to raise children" (Du, 2022). Mi (2021), for example, analyzes the new-generation MIL/DIL relationship as represented in TikTok short videos, arguing that educational level, income, and family background constitute important indicators

in new-generation MIL/DIL family power "bargaining." Another strand situates the MIL/DIL relationship within individuals' lifeworlds. Kong (1999) argues that MIL/DIL conflict only erupts when the mother-in-law insists on a subordinate-dominant relationship while the daughter-in-law possesses her own will. Zou et al. (2015), drawing on a mixed-methods approach, argue that in addition to the struggle over power and resources, differences in values and divergent understandings of "insider" versus "outsider" constitute the principal causes of MIL/DIL conflict. Tao (2019) further argues that the essential nature of MIL/DIL conflict is a misalignment of values between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law.

Daughters-in-Law's Coping Strategies

Within the conflict-resolution logic, research on MIL/DIL coping strategies can be divided into two dimensions: situation and person. With respect to situation, this refers principally to the residential context. Although neolocal residence has become increasingly prevalent worldwide—to the point of generating the "dual-centre marriage" (liǎngtóuhūn) model (Goode, 1988; Yang, 2024)—women nonetheless occupy a disadvantaged position within this ostensibly egalitarian residential arrangement. While physical-spatial separation may alleviate MIL/DIL conflict, under the overarching premise of maintaining the relationship, it fails to resolve it at its roots.

With respect to persons, this refers principally to the four distinct roles of mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, son/husband, and father-in-law. In everyday life, daughters-in-law employ such coping methods as "flattering to evade" and "agreeing first and then seeking to change" (Pan, 2016); they generally adhere to the principles of "filial but not submissive," giving rise to what Yan and Yang (2017) term "descending familism" (xiàxíng jiāzúzhǔyì), characterized by its "non-violent," "fragmented," and "individualised" qualities. Li et al. (2024) note that daughters-in-law of rural origin moderate the MIL/DIL relationship through such acts as gifting clothing to mothers-in-law.

The Husband's Intermediary Role

Beyond the roles of both parties, research on the MIL/DIL relationship typically emphasizes the critical role of the son/husband in resolving MIL/DIL conflict. When the son/husband occupies a relatively high status within the family or performs effectively as active mediator, he can more readily alleviate MIL/DIL conflict and thereby enhance marital satisfaction (Zuo, 2009; Li, 2012). Conversely, as the pivotal figure in the MIL/DIL relationship, should he fail to fulfill the mediating role effectively and fail to adjust in response to women's changing expectations, family harmony and stability will be significantly

affected (All-China Women's Federation, 2020; Hochschild, 1983, 1989). Cai and Ku (2019), drawing on surveys of male and female migrant workers, identify four modes of spousal power negotiation: entrustment, communication, nominal concession, and conflict. Cai (2018) summarizes that most sons/husbands in practice discover that, although they genuinely wish to defuse MIL/DIL conflict and fulfill their imagined ideal of the "modern husband," the outcomes are not always satisfactory; as conflict intensifies, sons/husbands acting as intermediaries are increasingly inclined to distance themselves from the "storm," precisely when wives feel most unsupported and misunderstood.

Gaps and Research Focus

Nevertheless, existing scholarship retains scope for further deepening, and it is upon four such gaps that this article attempts to engage. First, the analytical perspective calls for integration: most existing studies treat intergenerational power conflict and everyday life practice conflict as two relatively independent analytical paths, whereas in the actual situation of rural families in the era of migration, power contestation is invariably embedded in quotidian activities (Giddens, 1984). This article advances a "dual-dimensional coexistence" analytical perspective. Second, the mechanism of the husband's role "failure" requires deeper examination; the specific behavioral patterns through which this role fails have not received in-depth analysis grounded in empirical material. Third, the analysis of coping strategies awaits greater systematization; this article distills the "compromise-escape" dyad as a core strategic framework. Fourth, the specific contextual positioning of the research subjects—married women of rural origin with migration experience—awaits fuller articulation, as their MIL/DIL conflicts constitute a distinctive window through which to observe the transformation of family relations and the individualisation process under China's rapid social transition.

3. Method

This study adopts a multi-case in-depth interview qualitative research methodology. Its primary aim is not to draw statistically representative inferences about the phenomena under study, but rather to understand those phenomena, construct an analytical framework, and illuminate the internal logic and mechanisms of action.

Participants

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. The study draws on interview data collected from 12 married women of rural origin with migration

experience who self-identified as having experienced MIL/DIL conflict. Main interviews were concentrated in May–June 2025, with each lasting 1–3 hours; supplementary interviews of approximately 1 hour each were conducted with two participants based on transcription needs. In one instance, an interview with a woman born in the 1990s was conducted jointly with her unmarried younger sister born in the 2000s; some content relating to the former's MIL/DIL conflict was narrated by the sister. In the use of interview data, the sister's interview code is retained, but she is not counted among the 12 interviewees.

Participants' ages span from those born in the "post-1960s" to those born in the "post-2000s." In terms of educational attainment, nine hold junior college qualifications or below, and three hold undergraduate or higher degrees. Eight are currently based primarily in cities by virtue of marriage or work, while four reside or work in villages or county towns due to family care obligations. Two are currently separated from their husbands due to relational breakdown; the remaining participants maintain normal marital relationships. Participants' household registrations span ten provinces across the country. All participants have had protracted co-residence experience with their mothers-in-law or currently continue to live with them. Table 1 presents basic information for all participants.

Table 1 *Basic Information on Participants*

Interview Code	Pseudonym	Age	Co-residence Situation	Province of Origin	Interview Location	Education	Occupation
2024120902008AH-ZXJ	Xiao Zhou	40	Husband, children	Anhui	Suzhou	BA	Admin, private firm
2025031801014SX-ZAY	Aunt Zhao	57	Couple; two married daughters; "elderly drifter"	Shaanxi	Xi'an	High school	Cleaner
2025051201016AH-JNN	Xiao Nan	30	Father-in-law, mother-in-law, husband, daughter, son	Anhui	Beijing	Junior high	Delivery worker
2025061501020YN-ZL	Xiao Li	39	Mother-in-law, husband, daughter, son	Yunnan	Beijing	Master's	University lecturer
2025061901023HN-ZXJ	Xiao Hai	27	Father-in-law, mother-in-	Hainan	Haikou	BA	Accountant

XVI World Congress of Rural Sociology
64th Congress of the Brazilian Society of Rural
Economics, Management and Sociology

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Interview Code	Pseudonym	Age	Co-residence Situation	Province of Origin	Interview Location	Education	Occupation
			law, husband, daughter (same unit, different floors)				
2025062001024LN-WT	Xiao Tao	30	Mother-in-law, husband, daughter	Heilongjiang	Liaoning/country town	Junior college	Supermarket cashier
2025062002025HB-CXJ	Xiao Chen	25	Husband	Hubei	Wuhan	BA	Finance, private firm
2025062103028SD-QXJ	Xiao Qiu	31	Parents-in-law, husband, one son, one daughter, brother-in-law	Shandong	Shangqiu/country town	BA	Teacher, kindergarten
2025062201029GD-YXL	Xiao Lili	36	Parents-in-law, husband, one son, one daughter, brother-in-law	Guangdong	Shanwei/country town	Junior college	Community worker
2025062202030SD-ZFAY	Aunt Feng	47	Husband, daughter; mother-in-law in same village; rotation elder care	Shandong	Jining/country town	Junior high	Supermarket sales clerk
2025062203031HE-YXK	Xiao Ke	26	Husband, daughter (parents-in-law in same compound)	Hebei	Harbin	BA	Academic affairs, high school
2025062204032ZJ-LXJJ	Xiao Li	35	Parents-in-law, husband, one daughter, one son (currently residing at	Zhejiang	Shaoxing/country town	Vocational school	Individual business operator

Interview Code	Pseudonym	Age	Co-residence Situation	Province of Origin	Interview Location	Education	Occupation
			parental home)				

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person or via video call. Interview topics covered co-residence arrangements, the nature and frequency of MIL/DIL conflicts, the husband's behavioral responses to conflict, and the strategies adopted by participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Participants were assigned pseudonyms or titles (e.g., "Aunt Zhao") to protect confidentiality.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) combined with iterative case comparison. Initial open coding identified conflict types and coping behaviors; axial coding examined relational mechanisms among these categories; and selective coding developed the overarching "compromise-escape" analytical framework. Coding was conducted manually, with member checking achieved through follow-up contact with three participants. This article does not aim to make rigorous intergenerational statistical comparisons between birth cohorts or to advance such comparisons as a central thesis. Rather, the diversity of the sample is intended to provide rich empirical material for exploring the different practical forms, generative conditions, and possibilities of transition within the "compromise-escape" strategic spectrum from multiple perspectives.

4. Results

Dual Dimensions of MIL/DIL Conflict in the Era of Migration

The research findings reveal that contemporary society is one in which mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law holding divergent familist ideologies coexist across multiple age cohorts, and that MIL/DIL conflict takes rich and varied forms. Within MIL/DIL conflict, power asymmetry within affinal kin relations and everyday life practice conflict coexist simultaneously. On the one hand, power asymmetry within affinal kin relations encompasses four dimensions: (a) control over reproductive decision-making authority, (b) control over household resources, (c) dominance in child-rearing decision-making, and (d) the substitution of elder-care and child-rearing responsibilities and entitlements. On the other hand, everyday life practice conflicts encompass four dimensions: (a) conflicts over daily habits, (b) conflicts

over child-rearing execution, (c) conflicts over the transmission of traditional cultural taboos, and (d) conflicts over spatial and affective boundaries. Table 2 presents a classification of these conflict types with illustrative interview data.

Table 2 *Classification of MIL/DIL Conflict Types With Illustrative Interview Quotations*

Conflict Dimension	Sub-dimension	Specific Manifestation	Illustrative Quotation
Intergenerational power contestation	Control over reproductive decision-making authority	Daughter-in-law denigrated for bearing daughters; differentiated care for granddaughters vs. grandsons	"Buying a hen and it can still lay eggs—the hen their family raises lays no eggs." (2025062202030SD-ZFAY)
	Control of household financial resources	Husband's wages controlled by mother-in-law; daughter-in-law's income monitored; funds diverted to support mother-in-law's natal family	"Once I asked my mother-in-law for 300 yuan, saying I wanted to take the child on a day trip to our city, the child wanted to go, and there was a huge argument and she still didn't give it to me." (2025051201016AH-JNN)
	Dominance in child-rearing decision-making	Mother-in-law negates evidence-based parenting concepts; forcibly takes over care of infant; invokes "experience" to override daughter-in-law's decisions	"The older generation is more frugal—they have money but feel that money shouldn't be spent in this way, and are unwilling to invest in things like enrolling children in classes." (2025062204032ZJ-LXJJ)
	Substitution of elder-care and child-rearing obligations	Mother-in-law refuses to provide intergenerational child-rearing support but demands son provide elder care; daughter-in-law bears actual care burden	"I still had to look after her, and she still said those things—and behaved the same way as before." (2025062202030SD-ZFAY)
Everyday life practice conflicts	Conflicts over daily habits	Attitudes towards food; aesthetic differences; frugality disparities; hygiene disagreements	"My mother-in-law would say she wanted kung pao chicken, and I was too lazy to cook so I ordered one as takeaway, and then she would say the kung pao chicken was also terrible." (2025062001024LN-WT)
	Conflicts over child-rearing execution	Divergences over feeding practices; discipline (indulgence vs. rule-setting); investment in children's activities	"Sometimes we say don't let them watch phones all the time; but the child won't listen ... elderly people tend to spoil children a little." (2025062201029GD-YXL)
	Conflicts over traditional cultural taboos	"Husband is the sky"—prohibiting daughter-in-law from wearing husband's trousers; prohibition on babies looking in	"I was wearing my husband's trousers—she felt that, because the husband is like the sky, those trousers shouldn't be worn by a woman." (2025062001024LN-WT)

Conflict Dimension	Sub-dimension	Specific Manifestation	Illustrative Quotation
		mirrors	
	Conflicts over spatial and affective boundaries	Mother-in-law intrudes on private space and daily schedule; rejection of physical intimacy; material compensation substituted for affective communication	"When I'm out with my own parents, I naturally hold their arms ... With my mother-in-law I never do any of that." (2025061501020YN-ZL)

Intergenerational power contestation manifests primarily in four areas. (1) Control over reproductive decision-making authority: the mother-in-law may personally denigrate the daughter-in-law for bearing daughters, or differentiate in her childcare support, refusing to help with granddaughters while readily helping with grandsons. (2) Control of household financial resources: the husband's wages are handed over to the mother-in-law, and the daughter-in-law must apply to her for everyday expenses; the mother-in-law may divert household funds to support her own daughter while refusing to pay for her son's surgery; and the daughter-in-law's income channeled to her natal family may be jointly "monitored" by the mother-in-law and husband. (3) Dominance in child-rearing decision-making: the mother-in-law negates the daughter-in-law's evidence-based parenting philosophy, treating it as a waste of money; or forcibly takes over care of the infant; or deploys her own "experience" to override the daughter-in-law's decisions. (4) Substitution of elder-care and child-rearing obligations and entitlements: the mother-in-law refuses to help care for grandchildren while continuing to demand that her son fulfill elder-care obligations, with the actual caregiving burden falling to the daughter-in-law.

Everyday life practice conflicts likewise encompass four areas. (1) Conflicts over daily habits: involving attitudes towards food, aesthetics, frugality, and hygiene. (2) Conflicts over child-rearing execution: divergences over feeding practices, discipline, and investment. (3) Conflicts over traditional cultural taboos: including prohibitions rooted in folk beliefs. (4) Conflicts over spatial and affective boundaries: the mother-in-law's intrusion into the daughter-in-law's private space and daily schedule; the mutual tendency to resist physical intimacy; and the phenomenon of substituting material compensation for routine affective communication.

In general, MIL/DIL conflict does not exist in isolation. Where multiple types of conflict coexist simultaneously, the son/husband becomes the "pivotal figure," and his mode of handling these conflicts directly bears on the daughter-in-law's capacity for self-preservation within the family. Once a mother-son alliance generates a sense of isolation in the daughter-in-law, this dynamic is highly likely to precipitate the breakdown of both the conjugal relationship and the MIL/DIL relationship.

Role Dysfunction of the "Intermediary": The Critical Driver of MIL/DIL Conflict

In this study, all participants reported that the husband, as MIL/DIL "intermediary," exhibited some degree of role failure, with three principal manifestations emerging from the data.

First, the husband becomes an economic accomplice in the mother-in-law's maintenance of household resource control and a defender of the traditional order, leaving the daughter-in-law feeling isolated. In economic terms, he either directly hands over his wages to the paternal generation, ceding household resource control (e.g., Xiao Nan's husband handed over his full salary to his mother and tacitly permitted his mother to demand access to Xiao Nan's income), or he collaborates with the mother to "monitor" his wife's financial support to her natal family (e.g., Xiao Ke's husband, at his mother-in-law's behest, "kept an eye on" her remittances to her natal household). In relational terms, he reinforces the mother-son alliance at the expense of the conjugal bond.

Second, the husband fails in his role as mediator. When MIL/DIL conflict erupts, he evades it—choosing not to see, not to ask, to say nothing (e.g., Xiao Tao's husband, when MIL/DIL conflict broke out, more often than not chose silence—neither criticizing the mother-in-law nor defending his wife, leaving Xiao Tao feeling he was "just like a wooden figure"). He may alternatively adopt a strategy of procrastination, or, as putative mediator, transmit communications so inaccurately as to intensify the conflict (e.g., Xiao Ke's husband distorted her request into an accusation against the mother-in-law, causing resentment on both sides).

Third, under the exigencies of work, the husband not only competes with his wife for rest time in daily life—causing her to bear a greater share of domestic labor and a substantial gendered "second shift" burden (Hochschild, 1989) compounded by cross-regional caregiving obligations—but also displaces his own obligations as a bearer of elder-care or child-rearing responsibility, thereby increasing responsibilities incumbent on either his mother or his wife and indirectly increasing the probability of conflict. For example, Aunt Feng's husband left

home to drive trucks when the children were young, leaving Aunt Feng alone to care for them; yet when the time came for his mother to be cared for in old age, Aunt Feng—in order to "fulfill filial duty on her husband's behalf"—quit her job to bear the rotation-care obligation in her husband's stead, a situation that generated deep feelings of grievance.

In general terms, husbands in MIL/DIL conflicts resulting in relational breakdown primarily enact the role of defender of the traditional order, while in MIL/DIL conflicts characterized by a surface calm, husbands commonly enact the role of the mother-in-law's "invisible accomplice." The majority of participants' husbands exhibit a problem of filial-piety-first partiality or passive avoidance, functioning as "conflict escalators" by means of economic collusion, communication avoidance, and responsibility displacement.

Compromise and Escape: Daughters-in-Law's Coping Strategies

Analysis of participants' accounts reveals that, under conditions in which the husband's intermediary role is universally ineffective, participants—drawing on a composite assessment of the pressures of the household power structure and their own material and social resources—exhibit an overall "compromise–escape" coping strategy in dealing with MIL/DIL conflict. Daughters-in-law of rural origin display a "compromise" strategy oriented toward preserving the family and fulfilling maternal obligations, alongside an "escape" strategy predicated on economic independence and self-reconstruction (typically manifested through occupational legitimation). The following section presents a detailed discussion drawing on the case of participant Xiao Nan before developing a broader analytical framework.

Illustrative Case: Xiao Nan's MIL/DIL Conflict and Coping Strategies

Xiao Nan was born in 1995 in a rural area of Anhui Province. Her parents ran a shop away from home during her early childhood, and she grew up under the primary care of her grandmother and older sister. She left school after completing junior high school and worked without pay as a helper in her parents' restaurant. At the age of 19, "fantasizing about whether I could go to his family and live a somewhat better life," she entered into marriage. Shortly after the wedding she gave birth to a daughter; at 21, in keeping with the village ethos, family expectations, and her physical condition, she gave birth to a son, completing the task of bearing a male heir.

After marriage, the mother-in-law—supported by her son—took control of wedding gifts and her husband's wages under the pretext of "keeping them safe for you," refused to grant Xiao Nan household resource control, and even demanded that Xiao Nan hand over her own income. When Xiao Nan's husband required surgery, the mother-in-law refused to pay

for it, forcing Xiao Nan to seek support from her natal family—yet the mother-in-law promptly provided economic support to her own married daughter for home renovation. This constituted "economic control" over Xiao Nan, disregarding her economic expenditure needs as a mother engaged in child-rearing—forcing her to live on credit cards, take on casual work while raising her children at home, and run a small street stall.

In daily life, Xiao Nan experienced frequent friction: she was routinely required to wake early to clean and cook, responsible for washing the clothes of the entire family and even of a younger sister-in-law, and criticized when meals failed to meet the mother-in-law's taste. Confronting MIL/DIL conflict and her husband's lack of support—or even his violent treatment of her—early-period Xiao Nan was economically dependent on the patrilineal household and could only endure financial control. Although, following the first incident of husband-perpetrated intimate partner violence, she chose to seek divorce, she subsequently agreed to remarry out of unwillingness to give up her children, the verbal pressure of being "pleaded with," and her young age.

In 2023, Xiao Nan and her husband relocated together for labor migration to Beijing. Following persistent domestic violence and her own feasible plans for new employment, Xiao Nan left, achieved a de facto separation from her husband, and once again filed for divorce. Sustained by relatively stable employment that brought her a sense of personal satisfaction, Xiao Nan—despite self-evaluating her maternal identity as "selfish"—has, through spatial separation from and economic severance with the mother-in-law and husband, effected a transition from "forced compromise" to "active rupture," forming the cognitive framework that "work equals freedom" and thereby achieving a reconstruction of the self.

Compromise Strategies: The Pragmatic Choice of Preserving the Family

"Compromise" strategies encompass both passive adaptation and active adjustment, and can be differentiated into three specific types: economic dependence-type compromise, elder-care/child-rearing responsibility entrapment-type compromise, and conflict avoidance-type compromise.

Economic dependence-type compromise manifests as acceptance of the patrilineal household's economic control in exchange for survival and child-rearing support. Xiao Qiu, for example, accepted the family decision that her parents-in-law should accumulate marriage resources for the youngest son, receiving 1,000 yuan per month while she became a full-time mother; Xiao Nan, when lacking a stable income source in the village, endured the mother-in-law's control over the husband's wages. The coping logic lies in the participant's active or

passive economic dependence on the mother-in-law—being compelled, under conditions of economic dependence, to cede decision-making authority in order to secure child-rearing support and survival.

Elder-care/child-rearing responsibility entrapment-type compromise manifests as choosing to yield in MIL/DIL conflict—particularly everyday life practice conflicts—owing to intergenerational cooperative child-rearing. Xiao Zhou, for instance, who disagreed with her mother-in-law over water-saving, tolerated both the unpleasant odors and the mother-in-law's behavior because, since the mother-in-law had come to help look after the children, direct confrontation was impossible; one cannot sacrifice the greater good for a trivial matter.

Conflict avoidance-type compromise manifests as silence and retreat to prevent the escalation of MIL/DIL disputes—the most universally adopted compromise strategy among participants. Xiao Hai, for example, out of concern that "speaking up" might worsen the MIL/DIL relationship and affect her married life, chose to yield to the mother-in-law's consumption values. The coping logic lies in the daughter-in-law's assessment of her own disadvantaged position: in order to preserve family harmony, she chooses to internalize what are, within her own lifeworld, genuine contradictions, rendering conflict latent.

In general terms, the essence of "compromise" strategies is a passive defensive response on the part of participants operating under conditions of capital and power deficiency; they choose concession out of a desire to maintain family harmony and fulfill family obligations—above all the obligations of motherhood.

Escape Strategies: The Reconstruction of Individual Autonomy

"Escape" strategies encompass both physical-spatial separation and psychological independence, and can be differentiated into four specific types: economic escape, spatial escape, relational downgrading and affective escape, and spatial-economic-affective escape.

Economic escape-type strategies manifest as the daughter-in-law insisting on separate financial management—maintaining independent accounts with her husband—in order to break through the traditional integration of household finances, thereby securing a position of both advance and retreat in handling MIL/DIL conflict. Xiao Nan, for example, secured a stable income source through working outside the home, broke free of economic dependence, and shattered economic resource control.

Spatial escape-type strategies manifest as the daughter-in-law proactively separating from the parental generation through arrangements such as living on different floors or in different buildings within the same residential compound, or returning temporarily to her natal

home to escape the post-marital household. Xiao Ke and her husband live in a separate unit from her parents-in-law within the same compound; Xiao Hai lives in the same unit but on a different floor; Xiao Tao and Xiao Li, when conflicts generate feelings of grievance, choose to stay at the natal home for a few days.

Relational downgrading and affective escape-type strategies manifest as the establishment of affective boundaries through reduced communication and emotional distancing. Xiao Li, for example, considered that since the mother-in-law had not participated in her own upbringing, her primary obligation was financial support; following multiple failed attempts at communication, she refused to provide what Hochschild (1983) terms "emotional labor" to the mother-in-law and established clear affective boundaries. Xiao Ke, facing no outlet for grievances, entered online social spaces and rebuilt her behavioral repertoire, obtaining emotional support.

Spatial-economic-affective escape-type strategies manifest as separation or divorce, thereby dissolving the legal basis for the maintenance of the MIL/DIL relationship and thus avoiding MIL/DIL conflict altogether. Xiao Li (2025062204032ZJ-LXJJ), experiencing major conflicts with her mother-in-law and confronting her husband's inaction, has—with the acceptance and support of her natal family—separated from her husband and resides primarily at her natal home. (Note: "The reason I won't divorce is my child—in our area, if you're divorced, it's bad for the child's development and bad for your reputation.")

In general terms, the essence of "escape" strategies is that when conflict erodes the individual self of a participant to a degree that cannot be positively resolved through communication or strategic adjustment, the participant pursues a legitimate escape through occupational legitimation and a legitimate reconstruction of the self through self-reinvention. It must be noted that variations in the material and social resources held by the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law respectively, and in the role conduct of the son/husband, generate tensions in the exercise of strategies; any change in the strategy of any party is more likely to alter the strategic choices of the other parties, producing a new state of MIL/DIL relations and family relations more broadly.

The Evolution of Coping Strategies Across Generations

Generational Patterns in Coping Strategies

Through intergenerational comparison, the specific manifestations of daughters-in-law's coping strategies can be discerned across three broad phases.

During the phase in which the "post-1960s" and "post-1970s" participants were daughters-in-law, land and housing largely belonged to the extended family rather than the nuclear family. Patrilineal descent norms and family planning policies transformed reproductive decision-making into a locus of power; their MIL/DIL conflicts were accordingly concentrated primarily on the contestation over reproductive decision-making authority within intergenerational power conflict. Restrictions imposed by the rural household registration (*hukou*) system made it difficult for these women to migrate, binding them to the extended patrilineal household. The overall characteristic of "under someone else's roof, the mother-in-law is strong and the daughter-in-law weak" meant that "post-1960s" and "post-1970s" daughters-in-law relied primarily on "compromise" strategies; even when "escape" strategies were employed, they took the form of family-wide arrangements—such as household division (*fēnjiā*)-based escape—rather than the awakening of individual consciousness in resistance, with the mother-in-law emerging as the "victor" in MIL/DIL conflict.

During the phase in which the "post-1980s" generation were daughters-in-law, rural-to-urban migration had begun to emerge, but the extended family remained predominant. Influenced by urban migration experience and rising educational attainment, daughters-in-law developed lifestyle differences with their mothers-in-law; their MIL/DIL conflicts were concentrated primarily on child-rearing execution conflicts within everyday life conflicts. Since intergenerational mobility was only just beginning and the intergenerational accumulation of migration had not been completed, support from the parental generation in child-rearing remained necessary. Accordingly, coping strategies also centered on compromise, or mild escape—relational downgrading or affective escape. Xiao Zhou, for instance, actively yielded to her mother-in-law in everyday life conflicts because the mother-in-law had come to the city to help with childcare; Xiao Li drew on professional development fieldwork as a legitimate pretext for escaping MIL/DIL conflict, though this amounted merely to a temporary respite.

During the phase in which the "post-1990s" and "post-2000s" generations are daughters-in-law, society has entered a transitional period (Luo, 2021; Jiao, 2022); digital technology empowerment and individualisation trends are pronounced, and MIL/DIL conflict has exhibited diversification and dual-dimensionality—that is, power dynamics within affinal kin relations and everyday life conflicts coexist. In terms of strategies, "escape" strategies predicated on economic independence and self-reconstruction have increased markedly, and daughters-in-law are more likely to emerge as the "victors" in MIL/DIL conflict. Women such

as Xiao Ke, when grievances have no outlet, are increasingly entering online communities and forming new "online affinity networks" of shared experience. The "post-2000s" participant Xiao Chen, having experienced a miscarriage, has chosen to remain child-free in the future and has decided with her husband to conceal this from the mother-in-law, hoping that as time slowly passes, the parental generation will naturally discover and accept the situation.

Evolutionary Characteristics of Coping Strategies

Four evolutionary characteristics emerge from the intergenerational comparison. First, a breakthrough from the unidirectional downward-flowing pattern of intergenerational power relations. The essential nature of MIL/DIL conflict is not simply the alternation of intergenerational power—not merely a shift in the primary flow of family resources from the traditional "upward flow" (children supporting parents) to a "downward flow" (parents providing comprehensive support to adult children; see Yan & Yang, 2017)—but rather an evolution from competition over power within the traditional family power structure to a conflict between the power of the traditional family structure and modern individualist aspirations.

Second, "compromise" and "escape" strategies coexist. In a society undergoing compressed modernity (Chang, 1999), with rural society in a state of transition, MIL/DIL conflict constitutes one prism through which to observe the transformation of the Chinese family—that is, when the power shackles of Confucian familism (jiāzúzhǔyì) encounter the modern individual's longing for emancipation, "compromise" is the strategic choice of the relatively weaker party for survival, while "escape" becomes the pathway through which they reclaim subjective autonomy.

Third, occupational legitimation functions as a legitimizing instrument for resisting MIL/DIL and even family conflict. In other words, married women, by securing stable employment or engaging in self-improvement to sustain occupational stability, legitimate the act of physically escaping from the domestic sphere, thereby distancing themselves from MIL/DIL conflict—and even escaping from the burdens of maternal obligations—winning breathing space and room for self-reconstitution.

Fourth, as the MIL/DIL relationship's "intermediary," the son/husband in MIL/DIL conflict does not merely function in the traditional sense as a "mediator"; in families where MIL/DIL conflict exists, the husband also occupies a role sequence of "defender of the traditional order—invisible accomplice—conflict escalator." From this dimension, therefore, studying family relations through the lens of intrafamilial power politics, once the husband's

role is incorporated into the analysis, there is a necessity to shift from relationship mediation toward the deconstruction of traditional power structures.

5. Discussion

This study makes several contributions to the literature on intergenerational family relations, gender, and migration in China. By foregrounding the MIL/DIL relationship among rural-to-urban migrant women specifically, the study reveals how the intersection of migration, patrilineal norms, and inadequate husband mediation produces distinctive patterns of conflict and resistance. The "compromise-escape" framework developed here synthesizes previously dispersed findings and offers a theoretically grounded account of daughters-in-law's agency under structural constraint.

The findings extend and complicate the existing literature in several ways. First, by identifying the dual-dimensional character of MIL/DIL conflict—the coexistence of power asymmetry within affinal kin relations and everyday life practice conflicts—the study integrates two analytical paths that prior scholarship has treated separately (cf. Giddens, 1984). Second, by systematically analyzing the husband's role failure through three distinct mechanisms (economic collusion, communication avoidance, and responsibility displacement), the study moves beyond the observation that husbands "fail" to specify how and why this failure occurs and how it shapes daughters-in-law's strategic choices. Third, the intergenerational comparison reveals a clear historical trajectory in which "escape" strategies—particularly those predicated on occupational legitimation—have become increasingly prevalent as the individualisation process has deepened (cf. Yan, 2009, 2010). This finding is consistent with the broader literature on individualisation in China (Shen, 2013) while extending it to the specific context of MIL/DIL conflict management.

The study also speaks to the practical significance of economic independence for daughters-in-law's agency. Participants who achieved income autonomy were substantially better positioned to exercise "escape" strategies, including the most radical form of marital dissolution, than those who remained economically dependent on the patrilateral household. This finding aligns with Hochschild's (1989) analysis of the "second shift" and its relationship to women's negotiating power in the family, while situating it within the distinctive context of Chinese intergenerational family dynamics.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The qualitative sample of 12 women, while appropriate for the exploratory aims of this study, limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research using larger, more representative samples could test the typology

quantitatively. Additionally, the study relies exclusively on daughters-in-law's accounts; incorporating the perspectives of mothers-in-law and husbands would provide a more complete picture of the interactional dynamics. The recruitment strategy—targeting women who self-identified as having experienced MIL/DIL conflict—may also introduce selection bias, as women with more severe conflicts may be more likely to participate. Future research might also examine how structural factors—including changes in rural property rights, pension coverage, and labor market conditions—shape the relative prevalence of compromise versus escape strategies across different regional contexts.

6. Conclusão / Conclusion

As someone who has lived through these experiences, participant Aunt Feng answered the author's question about experiential wisdom by sharing her successful experience mediating the MIL/DIL conflict between her sister and the latter's mother-in-law:

"Where there's conflict, you have to tell them (the elderly) in advance not to be too rigid about their experience ... People say the family isn't a place for reason—it's a place for feeling ... First affirm her, don't negate her; then put forward different views; then ask for her opinion in a consulting tone ... whoever's mum it is, that person does the 'infiltration'" (2025062202030SD-ZFAY).

This observation encapsulates a broader theme: effective mediation in MIL/DIL conflict requires sophisticated interpersonal skills and an appreciation of affective dynamics, skills that the husbands in this study consistently failed to deploy. On this basis, beyond the need for both mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law to employ greater strategic wisdom to avoid MIL/DIL conflict, this article calls upon husbands to fulfill their role as intermediary well, and—amid the fissures in family ideologies held by individual family members and the tension generated by individuals' drive for self-emancipation—to sustain the possibility of the "family" as an affective *Gemeinschaft* rather than a battlefield of power.

This study has demonstrated that MIL/DIL conflict among rural-to-urban migrant women in China is dual-dimensional, encompassing both power asymmetry and everyday life practice conflicts, and that the husband's role failure is a critical driver of conflict escalation. The "compromise-escape" framework developed here provides an integrative analytical tool for understanding how daughters-in-law navigate this complex terrain, with important implications for social policy, family support services, and educational interventions aimed at promoting more equitable intergenerational family relations in contemporary China.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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