

Bridging Cultural Scripts and Psychological Mechanisms: A Review of Maternal Stress in Contemporary China

Yi-Ru Zhang*

Shenzhen Yi Miao Trading Co., Ltd., Shenzhen, Guangdong, 518000, China

*Correspondence to: Yi-Ru Zhang, Shenzhen Yi Miao Trading Co., Ltd., Shenzhen, Guangdong, 518000, China, E-mail: 872750854@qq.com

Abstract: Maternal stress is a growing mental health concern in China, yet existing frameworks remain fragmented. Western research has established clear cognitive–emotional mechanisms such as self-discrepancy, rumination, and shame, while Chinese studies have largely focused on sociocultural expectations surrounding motherhood. However, the pathway through which cultural pressures become internalised as psychological distress has been insufficiently explained. This review integrates evidence from Western psychological models, East Asian cultural norms, and empirical research on Chinese families to provide a more comprehensive understanding of maternal stress in contemporary China. The synthesis highlights that emotional challenges arise from the interaction between individual vulnerability and culturally embedded expectations shaped by familism, intergenerational caregiving, and performance-driven parenting. By situating psychological processes within their cultural and relational contexts, this review extends current maternal mental health theories and underscores the need for culturally informed assessment and intervention strategies. Future research should adopt longitudinal and family-level approaches and include more diverse maternal populations to strengthen the applicability of theoretical models.

Keywords: Maternal stress; Psychological mechanisms; Neoliberal parenting; Maternal mental health

1. Introduction

Mothership is widely recognised as one of the most demanding transitions in adult life, marked by heightened vulnerability to anxiety, depression, guilt, and self-doubt. Western psychological research has identified several robust mechanisms explaining these experiences, including self-discrepancy between actual and ideal mothering standards, self-critical rumination, and shame- and guilt-related emotional processes (Liss et al., 2013;

Sokol, 2014). These cognitive–emotional processes offer a coherent framework for understanding how internalised mothering ideals shape women’s well-being in predominantly North American and European contexts.

Growing cross-cultural evidence, however, indicates that maternal stress is not solely a psychological phenomenon but is profoundly shaped by cultural scripts and relational obligations. In East Asian societies—particularly contemporary urban China—



© The Author(s) 2025. **Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, for any purpose, even commercially, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

motherhood is constructed as a socially embedded and morally evaluated role rather than an individualistic pursuit. Expectations rooted in Confucian familism, intergenerational hierarchy, and gendered responsibility interact with modern discourses of “scientific,” high-investment parenting, creating a distinctive and often contradictory set of pressures (Chao & Tseng, 2002; Chen et al., 2023). Understanding these dynamics is not only regionally important but also central to expanding maternal stress theories beyond Western-centric assumptions.

Despite these insights, existing research remains fragmented. Western frameworks specify detailed cognitive mechanisms but often treat culture as a background moderator. Chinese studies richly describe sociocultural expectations yet rarely explicate how these norms translate into psychological processes that shape emotional outcomes. Consequently, we still lack an integrated, culturally grounded understanding of how cultural norms interact with cognitive–emotional mechanisms to influence maternal well-being in China. This review adopts a cultural-psychological perspective and focuses on contemporary Chinese mothers of young children—a group in which cultural and structural pressures are particularly salient.

To address this limitation, the present review synthesizes evidence from three bodies of literature: (1) Western theoretical models of maternal cognition and emotion, (2) East Asian cultural and gender role norms, and (3) empirical research on maternal mental health and family dynamics in China. By integrating these domains, the review aims to offer a culturally informed conceptual perspective that provides a more comprehensive understanding of how psychological stress emerges among Chinese mothers and contributes to the cross-cultural development of maternal mental health research.

2. Western Models of Maternal Stress

Within Western psychology, motherhood is conceptualised as a domain where personal identity, moral worth, and emotional regulation become tightly interconnected. Maternal stress is understood to arise when mothers perceive a misalignment between their actual selves and internalised ideals—an proposition grounded in cognitive–emotional models of the self. Three mechanisms dominate this literature: self-

discrepancy, rumination, and shame–guilt mechanisms, including the role of self-critical cognition.

Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) proposes that emotional distress results from gaps between the actual self and ideal or ought selves. Mothers in the United States often internalise aspirational and moralised expectations of being endlessly patient and fully responsible for child outcomes (“intensive mothering”; Walls et al., 2014). Empirical studies show that greater self-discrepancy predicts heightened guilt, shame, and depressive symptoms (Liss et al., 2013), especially among mothers sensitive to social evaluation. Early postpartum challenges are thus interpreted not merely as situational difficulties but as failures of the idealised maternal self (Jackson et al., 2024).

Rumination further exacerbates distress. Defined as repetitive focus on perceived failures, rumination is a transdiagnostic predictor of anxiety and depression. Postpartum mothers frequently ruminate on moralised tasks such as breastfeeding or soothing, interpreting minor lapses as moral failures (Nan et al., 2025).

Self-criticism transforms behavioural shortcomings into global negative self-judgments, reinforcing internalised shame and identity-based distress (Jackson et al., 2024). Western literature distinguishes **guilt** (“I did something wrong”) from **shame** (“I am a bad mother”). While guilt relates to behaviour and motivates correction, shame is linked to social withdrawal and depressive affect. Content analyses confirm that shame is more identity-oriented and socially evaluative (Jackson et al., 2024). Liss et al. (2013) demonstrate that although self-discrepancy predicts both emotions, shame more strongly mediates links between maternal ideals and mental health outcomes. Altogether, maternal distress is conceptualised as a cascading chain: *idealised standards* → *self-discrepancy* → *rumination/self-criticism* → *guilt/shame* → *anxiety/depression*.

Despite their strong explanatory value, Western maternal stress models exhibit notable limitations when applied across cultural contexts. These models prioritise intra-individual cognition—such as self-discrepancy, rumination, and self-criticism—while treating culture as a passive backdrop, overlooking how cultural scripts and structural inequalities actively shape the standards that mothers internalise (Chao & Tseng, 2002; Chen et al., 2023).

Furthermore, much of the empirical evidence is derived from relatively homogeneous samples, predominantly white, middle-class, married mothers in the United States, who typically parent within nuclear family structures with higher autonomy and stronger partner involvement. Such narrow sampling restricts the generalisability of Western frameworks to contexts where intergenerational co-parenting and gendered household power dynamics strongly influence maternal responsibility and emotional burden (Walls et al., 2014).

Additionally, Western models often assume that maternal ideals emerge internally, without fully recognising the role of partner expectations, institutional support, and sociocultural norms in defining and reinforcing what counts as “good motherhood.” When relational and structural determinants are downplayed, the ways in which cultural forces intensify shame, guilt, and self-critical rumination become obscured (Hartanto et al., 2024).

Taken together, these limitations underscore the need for culturally informed models that integrate cognitive–emotional mechanisms with cultural scripts, family structures, and social obligations—an aim pursued in the following chapters of this review.

3. The Cultural Construction of Motherhood in China

Chinese motherhood is often shaped by a culturally embedded system in which Confucian familism, intergenerational structures, and neoliberal educational competition jointly define what it means to be a “good mother.”

Within **Confucian familism**, motherhood is often conceptualised as a relational and moralised role embedded in collective family needs rather than an individual identity. Confucian values emphasise filial duty, sacrifice, and emotional discipline (Chao & Tseng, 2002), reflected in long-standing ideals such as *sancong side* and the “virtuous mother.” Feminist scholarship notes that these norms prescribe not only behaviour but also emotional expectations, shaping how women evaluate maternal challenges (Wu, 2021). Contemporary research shows these ideals still exert strong influence: mothers often prioritise harmony and lineage continuity over personal needs, and falling short of moralised standards elicits guilt, shame, and

self-reproach (Gao, 2009), amplifying the cognitive–emotional mechanisms described in Chapter 2.

A second defining feature is the **intergenerational**, relationally dense caregiving structure. Childrearing commonly involves grandparents and in-laws, creating a multi-actor system of decision-making (Cai, 2015). Although this provides practical support, it also produces heightened surveillance, as mothers’ daily caregiving is monitored and evaluated by elders, rendering maternal identity increasingly visible and subject to social evaluation (Hu, 2018). Within these hierarchical kinship systems, mothers bear primary labour but have limited authority, especially where paternal grandparents hold decision-making power (Gao, 2012). To maintain family harmony, mothers often defer to elders, producing frustration and emotional strain when traditional expectations conflict with contemporary “scientific” parenting practices (Chen & Xu, 2017). Because children are viewed as collective family projects, mothers are held accountable by multiple family members, intensifying shame and perceived inadequacy when problems arise.

Third, **neoliberal educational competition** has transformed motherhood into a performance-driven project. China’s high-investment parenting culture—expressed through *jīwá* and *nèijuǎn*—positions mothers as primary agents responsible for constructing children’s future competitiveness (Bian & Ju, 2021). Mothers must master scientific parenting knowledge, manage extracurricular schedules, and track developmental milestones, generating persistent educational anxiety. The booming parenting industry reinforces a narrative of self-responsibilisation in which children’s success or failure is attributed to mothers’ effort and optimisation. Working mothers face compounded pressures as neoliberal ideals intersect with work–family conflict, heightening guilt and emotional exhaustion (Feng, 2004). These market-driven expectations shift structural educational risk downward onto families, and disproportionately onto mothers.

These forces converge to create a hybrid model of motherhood in contemporary China: morally obligated, relationally constrained, and performance-based. Such cultural scripts heighten sensitivity to shortcomings, amplify scrutiny through intergenerational monitoring, and expand the standards by which maternal adequacy

is judged. Consequently, Chinese mothers experience intensified self-discrepancy, self-criticism, guilt, and shame. Maternal stress in China therefore cannot be understood through psychological mechanisms alone; it emerges from culturally embedded expectations that define—and continually elevate—the meaning of good motherhood.

4. Empirical research on maternal mental health and family dynamics in China

4.1 Perinatal Mental Health Risks: A High Prevalence–Low Help-Seeking Paradox

Growing epidemiological evidence highlights substantial mental health vulnerability among Chinese perinatal women. A systematic review reported an overall perinatal depression prevalence of 16.3% in mainland China, including 19.7% antenatal and 14.8% postnatal depression—with rates higher than those reported in some studies conducted in high-income contexts (Nisar et al., 2020). Urban samples present even more alarming patterns. A multi-center study in Shanghai found that 26.5% of pregnant women experienced depressive symptoms and 18.8% reported anxiety, indicating significant emotional burden during the transition to motherhood (Ho et al., 2024).

Despite high clinical need, professional help-seeking remains markedly low. Among 561 screen-positive perinatal women, 45.5% had never accessed any psychological support (Zhu et al., 2025; Schwank et al., 2020). Qualitative findings suggest that cultural narratives such as “strong motherhood,” self-blame attributions, and insufficient familial and institutional support contribute to delayed care and internalized distress (Nan et al., 2025). These findings reflect a critical mismatch between mental health risks and service utilization in China.

4.2 Cultural Mechanisms of Maternal Stress: Moralized Motherhood and Emotional Stigma

Extensive China-based research shows that Confucian familism frames motherhood as a central moral obligation sustaining family stability and lineage continuity, while maternal emotional needs are often devalued as immature or incompetent (Wu, 2021). Parenting difficulties are moralized as failures of character or ability, leading to heightened shame and guilt (Gao, 2009). Qualitative studies show that first-time mothers frequently attribute infant

crying or sleep disruptions to personal inadequacy, reinforcing cycles of rumination and self-negativity (Hu, 2018). Moreover, Confucian emotional restraint norms encourage concealment of distress, making psychological suffering hidden, prolonged, and less likely to reach professional attention (Chen & Xu, 2017).

These findings indicate that Confucian cultural scripts shape emotional experience through moralized responsibility and stigmatized vulnerability, acting as key cultural drivers of maternal stress.

4.3 Intergenerational Co-Parenting and Power Structures: Support Coupled with Surveillance

Intergenerational co-parenting is common in Chinese families and offers vital childcare support, yet empirical evidence identifies it as a major stress amplifier. Grandparents frequently dominate child-rearing decisions based on experiential authority, leaving mothers with high caregiving labor but limited autonomy—a role imbalance associated with feelings of powerlessness (Gao, 2012). Daily parenting actions are monitored and evaluated by elders, transforming caregiving into a public performance of family honor (Hu, 2018). This dynamic is intensified in patrilineal arrangements, where mothers experience greater conflict and emotional strain due to hierarchical control—especially from mothers-in-law (Cai, 2015). To maintain relational harmony, women often suppress emotional needs and avoid confrontation, leading to chronic internalized distress (Chen & Xu, 2017). Thus, intergenerational structures produce a paradox of centralized responsibility but constrained authority, reinforcing shame and role conflict for mothers.

4.4 Neoliberal Competition: Motherhood as Performance and Over-Responsibilisation

As educational competition accelerates, motherhood in China has become increasingly performance-oriented. Research shows that mothers are expected to continuously update parenting knowledge and invest in their children’s future competitiveness, generating persistent anxiety (Bian & Ju, 2021). Quantifiable developmental and academic benchmarks intensify social comparison and self-evaluation under external scrutiny (Feng, 2004). Meanwhile, commercialized parenting industries and digital parenting platforms escalate competitive pressures and amplify feelings of

inadequacy (Liu & Wang, 2024). Work-family conflicts further compound emotional exhaustion, guilt, and self-doubt among working mothers (Feng, 2004). Overall, neoliberal risk is individualized and privatized, with systemic pressures ultimately transferred to mothers.

4.5 Synthesis and Implications

Collectively, current empirical evidence reveals an integrated mechanism: Confucian moralized maternal standards → intergenerational surveillance and role asymmetry → neoliberal performance pressure → intensified self-discrepancy, guilt, shame, and chronic psychological distress, alongside persistently low help-seeking.

Maternal distress in China is therefore not a purely individual psychological issue, but a cultural–structural–psychological phenomenon. These findings underscore the urgent need for a culturally informed theoretical framework that integrates cognitive–emotional mechanisms with China’s distinctive sociocultural context to more accurately explain the formation of maternal stress and guide context-appropriate intervention strategies.

5. Discussion

This review advances current theoretical understanding by positioning culture as a primary force that actively shapes how maternal ideals are constructed, internalised, and emotionally evaluated in contemporary China. While Western models largely conceptualise maternal distress as the outcome of intra-individual psychological mechanisms—such as self-discrepancy, rumination, and shame—our synthesis shows that these mechanisms operate within sociocultural environments that define what counts as “good motherhood” and how perceived shortcomings should be interpreted. Moralised expectations derived from Confucian familism and relational accountability heighten the meaning mothers assign to routine parenting challenges, transforming situational stressors into indicators of personal or moral inadequacy. This culturally intensified interpretation pathway helps explain why identity-based shame, rather than behaviour-focused guilt, more strongly drives distress among Chinese mothers in comparison to Western contexts.

Despite substantial progress in both domains, Western and Chinese scholarship have developed with

different emphases that leave a critical theoretical gap: Western research offers clear psychological pathways but underexamines the cultural sources of internalised standards, whereas Chinese research richly documents cultural scripts but seldom explicates *how* these social forces become psychologically consequential. Without this missing bridge, Chinese mothers’ suffering remains difficult to articulate and insufficiently recognised. Many women face pressures that are widespread yet silenced—experiences that are normalised as what a responsible mother should endure. Naming the culturally specific mechanisms of distress is therefore essential not only for advancing theory but also for legitimising mothers’ emotional needs and enabling culturally informed pathways to care. This review contributes to filling that gap by synthesising evidence on how cultural obligations infiltrate daily family interactions and intensify self-evaluation processes, thereby linking cultural-structural demands to psychological vulnerability.

The findings also carry significant clinical and social implications. In China, maternal distress is often socially generated but individually borne. Intergenerational co-parenting structures provide practical support yet reinforce power asymmetries and continuous evaluation, leaving mothers with high responsibility but limited authority. Neoliberal parenting norms further shift educational risk to families and, disproportionately, to mothers. Together, these forces construct a “silent endurance” model of motherhood, in which acknowledging emotional struggles is interpreted as weakness, immaturity, or failure of maternal duty. Consequently, maternal mental health challenges often remain hidden until distress escalates to crisis levels. Addressing this silence requires interventions that involve not only mothers but also family members, workplace actors, and community systems, recognising that maternal wellbeing is relationally and institutionally produced.

In conclusion, the core of maternal distress in contemporary China lies not merely in individual psychological mechanisms, but is deeply rooted in the intersection of cultural expectations and structural conditions. Only by situating mothers’ emotional burdens within their specific sociocultural context can we fully grasp the complexity of motherhood and move toward a more inclusive and supportive society.

6. Conclusion

The present review synthesised Western psychological models and Chinese sociocultural research to provide a more integrated understanding of maternal stress in contemporary China. The evidence indicates that mothers' emotional challenges arise from the interaction between individual cognitive–emotional mechanisms and culturally embedded expectations that define the standards and meaning of motherhood. Cultural influences do not replace individual processes but shape the contexts within which self-discrepancy, rumination, and shame become psychologically consequential.

By clarifying this cultural–psychological interplay, the review extends existing frameworks that have predominantly focused on Western nuclear family contexts and contributes a more contextually informed perspective to maternal mental health research. Future studies should further examine the dynamic pathways through which cultural scripts and family structures influence emotional vulnerability, adopt longitudinal and family-level methodologies, and include more diverse maternal populations. Developing culturally sensitive assessment tools and support strategies will also be important for improving the identification and intervention of maternal distress.

Overall, this review highlights the importance of situating maternal mental health within the cultural and relational environments in which it is experienced, offering a foundation for ongoing theoretical refinement and context-appropriate support practices.

Reference

- [1] Bian, Y. F., & Ju, J. W. (2021). The more you nurture, the more anxious you get? Escaping the “maternal involution”. *Shaonian Ertong Yanjiu [Youth & Juvenile Research]*, 2021(12), 5–14.
- [2] Cai, L. (2015). Study of new mothers' learning process in motherhoods: Qualitative analysis basing on individual cases. *Zhonghua Nüzi Xueyuan Xuebao [Journal of China Women's University]*, 27(3), 51–58.
- [3] Chao, R., & Tseng, V. (2002). Parenting of Asians. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting: Vol. 4. Social conditions and applied parenting* (2nd ed., pp. 59–93). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- [4] Chen, X. L., & Xu, J. (2017). Status and influencing factors of psychological help-seeking intention among perinatal depressed women: A case study in a tertiary hospital in Wuhan. *Zhongguo Jiankang Jiaoyu [Chinese Health Education]*, 33(9), 820–823.
- [5] Chen, Y. (2023). *Family and work of middle-class women with two children under the universal two-child policy in urban China* (Master's thesis). The University of Hong Kong.
- [6] Feng, Y. (2004). Role orientation, work–family conflict, and quality of work life among employed women (Master's thesis, Zhejiang University).
- [7] Gao, L., & Zheng, Y. (2012). Sex roles and division of household labor in married couples. *Chinese Mental Health Journal*, 26(7), 543–546.
- [8] Gao, Q. (2009). On the living conditions of Chinese women in the Confucian cultural sphere: Taking foot-binding culture as an example. *Xibei Chengren Jiaoyu Xuebao [Journal of Northwest Adult Education]*, 2009(11), 362–364.
- [9] Hartanto, A., Sim, L., Lee, D., Majeed, N. M., & Yong, J. C. (2024). Cultural contexts differentially shape parents' loneliness and wellbeing during the empty nest period. *Communications Psychology*, 2(1), 105. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44271-024-00156-8>
- [10] Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review*, 94(3), 319–340. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.94.3.319>
- [11] Ho, P. J., Sim, T. M. Y., Loo, C. K. Y., & Li, J. (2024). Challenges, experiences, and potential supports for East and Southeast Asian mothers in the workforce: A systematic review. *BMC Women's Health*, 24, Article 3255. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-024-03255-0>
- [12] Hu, X. (2018). Constraint and breakthrough: A study on maternal experiences of first-time mothers. *Xibei Chengren Jiaoyu Xuebao [Journal of Northwest Adult Education]*, 2018(3), 115–119.
- [13] Jackson, L., O'Donoghue, E., Helm, J., Gentilcore, R., & Hussain, A. (2024). ‘Some days are not a good day to be a mum’: Exploring lived experiences of guilt and shame in the early postpartum period. *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and*

- Education*, 14(12), 3019–3038. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe14120198>
- [14] Liss, M., Schiffrin, H. H., & Rizzo, K. M. (2013). Maternal guilt and shame: The role of self-discrepancy and fear of negative evaluation. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 22(8), 1112–1119. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-012-9673-2>
- [15] Liu, S., & Wang, H. (2024). Chinese people's child-bearing and rearing beliefs: The interplay between Confucianism and neoliberalism. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 55(6), 638–658. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220221241248596>
- [16] Nan, Y., Yang, L., Nisar, A., Zhang, J., Gao, Y., Zhang, M., Liu, F., Li, X., & Zhang, Y. (2025). Psychological dilemmas and distress among Chinese primiparas during the postpartum transition underlying implicit cultural norms: A phenomenological inquiry. *BMC Psychology*, 13, Article 911. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-03264-0>
- [17] Nisar, A., Yin, J., Waqas, A., Bai, X., Wang, D., Rahman, A., & Li, X. (2020). Prevalence of perinatal depression and its determinants in Mainland China: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Affective Disorders*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2020.07.046>
- [18] Schwank, S., Lindgren, H., Wickberg, B., Fu, S.-C., Yan, D., & Andersson, E. (2020). When a new mother becomes mentally unhealthy, it is everyone's problem: Shanghai women's perceptions of perinatal mental health problems. *Women's Reproductive Health*, 7(3), 190–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23293691.2020.1780396>
- [19] Sockol, L. E., Epperson, C. N., & Barber, J. P. (2014). The relationship between maternal attitudes and symptoms of depression and anxiety among pregnant and postpartum first-time mothers. *Archives of Women's Mental Health*, 17(3), 199–212. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00737-013-0391-9>
- [20] Walls, J. K., Helms, H. M., & Grzywacz, J. G. (2014). Intensive mothering beliefs among full-time employed mothers of infants. *Journal of Family Issues*, 35(11), 1539–1557. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X13519254>
- [21] Wu, X. Y. (2021). The paradox of motherhood: From feminist critique to Chinese motherhood strategies. *Shehuixue Yanjiu [Sociological Studies]*, 2021(4), 1–17.
- [22] Zhu, Z., Wang, H., Zhu, T. *et al.* Mental health service utilization among pregnant and postpartum women: status, determinants, and insights from a mixed-methods study. *BMC Public Health* 25, 1942 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-23132-1>