

Comparing the Han Cultures to Mosuo Cultures: A Study Examining the Social Status of Housewives in China

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Abstract. To examine the social status of Han ethnicity housewives in China, it is necessary to look at family structure, economic rights, and personal welfare status to analyze and declare adverse outcomes brought about by culture and urbanization. While the Mosuo ethnicity also practices gender roles like the roles stated in Han beliefs from Confucianism, their family structure is relatively large, and domestic duties are equally distributed compared to those of Han ethnicity. The freedom to allocate economy and distribute inheritance within the household is also drastically different between the ethnicities, as women in Mosuo families are responsible for financial decisions while Han housewives are entirely passive and dependent on their husbands' decision of distributing allowances. Similarly, the personal welfare of Han housewives correlates with financial passivity, as women are highly inclined to be victimized by domestic abuse. In contrast, Mosuo women -especially mothers- are highly esteemed, and their welfare is highly protected. By comparing the Mosuo (a rural minority) to the Han, this research analyzes three dimensions consequential to understanding the low status of urban Han housewives, which deciphers the vagueness of Han housewives' negative situation and presents the areas needing future efforts.

Keywords: Ethnicity, social status, Han, Mosuo, housewives.

1. Introduction

From a sociological point of view, culture, which is accountable for shaping the social hierarchy, highly influences the construction of the current patriarchal society. As an obstacle to women's full participation in the workforce, culture propels gender stereotypes within a society implicitly, creating an unequal ratio of the number of women responsible for housework in comparison to men. Notably, in China, a study recorded a decreasing labor participation rate for women, reaching only 60.5 percent. It is then not surprising that Chinese women spend 2.6 times as much time on unpaid domestic care work compared to men as of 2024 [1].

Accounting for 91.11 percent of the total Chinese population, the Han ethnicity remains the biggest ethnic group in China, with a population of 1286 million (16.5 percent of the world population). Within Han ethnicity, there are two standard definitions for the concept of "housewives," one known as Jiatingzhufu, which means "Stay-at-home woman," and another known as Quanzhitaitai, meaning "Full-time wife." The Quanzhitaitai (full-time housewife) is considered affluent and possesses work skills. She could work if she chose to but has decided to return to the household and can enjoy a luxurious life without being too burdened by housework. On the other hand, the Jiatingzhufu (stay-at-home woman) conveys the image of a woman with a low education who cannot find work and, therefore, has no choice but to concentrate on her housework [2]. The presence of Jiatingzhufu is severely underappreciated in Han society, as their struggles are often underrepresented in gender and human studies. This research will focus on unraveling the situations faced by Han housewives categorized by society as a member of Jiatingzhufu (stay-at-home woman).

Not yet categorized as an official ethnic group by the Chinese government, the Mosuo ethnicity is also known as a branch of the Na-xi or Meng-gu minorities. The Mosuo people settle on the border of Yunnan and Sichuan provinces beneath the Himalayas, on the shores surrounding the lake of Lugu in southwest China, with an estimated population of only 56000. Living in an agrarian society, Mosuo families rely on farming, fishing, and herding domestic animals, though in recent decades,

commercialization and tourism have opened new job opportunities to many residents. Despite women being generally responsible for running the Mosuo household, one important circumstance to acknowledge for this paper is that -apart from the Han ethnicity and Western societies- the Mosuo ethnicity has no word or term for the concept of “housewives.” Each Mosuo family is a closely-knit group consisting of multiple generations of a common lineage descended from the oldest women in the family. Noted for being a matrilineal society by most scholars and tourists, the curator of Mosuo People Museum, Duoji, corrects this misconception and states that the Mosuo society is not in favor of either gender but fosters the view that both genders are equal contributors to the society. However, they emphasize the role of mothers, regarding them as the most influential figures in their social structure. Under this conception, the women of Mosuo hold great respect and authority while also managing domestic responsibilities, like the Han stay-at-home women.

In ethnic and gender studies, previous scholars have conducted a fundamental analysis of both the unique marriage patterns of Mosuo and the struggles of the Han stay-at-home women. Scholars believe that the status of stay-at-home women is primarily due to rapid urbanization. In agreement with this previous statement, there is a lack of direct analysis of the outcomes of different aspects in which the urbanization of Han negatively impacted the status of stay-at-home women. Using the Mosuo ethnicity (rural and relatively primitive minority) as a reference, this paper will focus on the factors that indicate the status of Han stay-at-home women that derived from urbanization, social development, and religion.

Through evaluating the work of previous scholars, this research aims to decipher the societal background that drove the disrespect and low status of stay-at-home women in Han culture by comparing it with the different social aspects of the Mosuo community, including family structures, economic power, and personal status.

2. Difference In Family Structures Between Han and Mosuo

2.1. Mosuo Family Structure

In the Dong-ba scripts (the language of Mosuo), all adult women are referred to by younger generations as “a-mi” or “mother” without considering their marital status; adult males are referred to “a-wu” or “uncle” as the Dong-ba script has no term for “father.” We can then infer that the Mosuo society places males as a less significant figure in parenting [3]. Ethnographically, Mosuo culture performs a unique marriage pattern called *sese* marriage, or “walking marriage,” where the lovers meet at a woman's house at night, and the man returns to his maternal family at dawn without any documents or obligations [4]. Scholar Cai Hua referred to the structure of Mosuo families as the *lignée*, a unit referring to a group of people descending from a common ancestor from different generations. Living under the same roof, each *lignée* generation raised sisters' children together. Traditionally, the family consists of two chiefs of opposite genders; however, family members pay utmost respect to the oldest woman for her contributions to running the household, as she is essential in maintaining peace within the *lignée*. The female members or “a-mi” (Meaning mother in the Dong-ba language of Na) are responsible for major decisions and domestic chores within the home, such as weaving scarves, distributing finances, and preparing meals. Male members or “uncles” oversaw the *lignée*'s duties outside the household, herding livestock, running small-range businesses, and managing relationships with other villagers. As we can see, the traditional gender expectations are present in the Mosuo society as the distribution between the gender roles is relatively clear: male chiefs acted as providers for the family, while female chiefs organized domestic chores and fieldwork [5]. The lovers of the *Sese* marriage will not create an individual family, nor will they share property. After giving birth to children, the woman will raise the children equally among her own family, and the man will continue to perform the role of a-wu (uncles or fathers) for his sisters' children, also known as a *duolocal* residence. Children live with their mothers, maternal uncles, grandmothers, and other maternal family members and do not interact much with their biological fathers [6]. As a result, the blood tie of each family is entirely maternal, encouraging a deep connection within the *matrilignée*,

especially between the a-mi (aunties), as they support each other through domestic work and child raising, distributing the housework equally.

2.2. Han Family Structure

According to Confucian beliefs that dominate societal values in China, gender differentiation embedded in both familial and social roles is marked by “inside” (Nei) and “outside” (Wai). When Nei is coupled with a woman, it resembles a restriction that a woman’s virtue is to remain within the boundary of a household and personally fulfill no more than the role of a wife [7]. Despite legislation of the New China enacting the Law of Equal Rights, implicit sexist views of women’s incapacities outside the household construct an obstacle against gender equality in workforce participation. Influencing both urban and rural family structures, underlying Confucianism norms place Han individuals as temporary carriers who perpetuate familial male lines – each passing generation of Han is carried by not only the male family name but entirely by the male branch of the family – as male is regarded solely as providers and commanders of the family, thus, the sons are also viewed as permanent and central members of the natal family [8]. Small and patriarchal family units place a single stay-at-home wife in a subservient position, and the value of housekeeping is considered significantly lower than that of the husband’s responsibilities outside the household. Instead of considering the contributions of both genders as equivalent, the woman’s devotion to the family is considered unimportant, or it is simply the act of reciprocating the contribution of the male, which, on the other hand, is esteemed and respected.

2.3. Comparing the Two Family Structures

Rapid urbanization since 2000 led to a significant decrease in nuclear families in Han condensed territories and an increase in smaller family units. Reaching an average household size of 2.62 persons, there was a decrease of 0.48 people compared to 3.10 in 2010 [9]. Small family units living on the same property fueled the alienation of both emotional and physical connection between woman members of each family was exacerbated (excluding mother-daughter relationships). This phenomenon is derived from the patrilocal residence. Although the current urban Han structure fosters the “core-family” unit, consisting of children and parents only, settling closer to the parents or siblings of the male side remains highly encouraged. As a result, whether a Han stay-at-home woman settles in a core family or patrilocal residence, both family structures can leave the stay-at-home woman completely isolated, not only from society but also from people akin to them.

Having a small family unit of one woman in the household meant individual Han housewives were wholly responsible for all domestic duties. The pressure of sustaining a home solely is not present on Mosuo women, though; Mosuo families consist of numerous women and men helpers, distributing housework proportional between the family’s a-mi (mothers) and a-wu (uncles). Overall, Mosuo women are decision makers, finance allocators, and chore distributors. Unquestionably, they possess much higher status than Han stay-at-home women. However, similarly, both societies have constructed gender roles- women are encouraged to take on domestic chores while men are communicators or traders with others outside the family.

There is a difference in the outcomes of two distinct family structures: each generation of Han is highly patrilineal, which led to an extreme gender imbalance and disrespect among stay-at-home women. Traditional Mosuo people expand their lignée completely maternally, as they foster a much more peaceful society that emphasizes mothers but considers both genders as equals.

3. Difference In Economic Rights Of Housewives Between Han and Mosuo

3.1. Division of Economic Rights in Han Families

Under the patriarchal and patrilineal family system, sons are expected to retain a lifetime financial relationship with their parents, as they are required to return money to secure their parents’ economic well-being regardless of whether they are married themselves. Thus, Han parents are inclined to

invest in sons disproportionately among children. Fostering the belief that daughters are only temporary members of their natal families and will transfer to the men's family after marriage, the parents often extract resources and money from their unmarried daughters to invest in sons [10]. Therefore, it is not uncommon for sons to be given the chance to build a life through higher financial freedom and subjectivity of choice. As some women marry and decide to become stay-at-home women, their power over the allocation of money plummets, and on occasion, they are wholly deprived as husbands are dictators of finance in Han families. Despite housewives serving as a key figure in maintaining the household, husbands are regarded as a superior figure and "mainstay" of the family.

As of 2024, the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests in China has not yet considered the economic rights of housewives based on their contributions to children raising. The lack of legislation allowed some men to limit a housewife's money to even less than what is needed to run the household, leaving these housewives, with no income of their own, trapped in desperation, often begging their husbands for money.

3.2. Division of Economic Rights in Mosuo Families

Unlike the tense economic relationship between husband and wife in Han culture, the Mosuo lovers practicing the sese marriage (obligation-free duolocal residence relationship) which have little or no financial connections. The distribution of allowances centers on the family members connected maternally.

Although Mosuo women are not traditionally supporters of most family income, as mentioned previously, women of Muoso hold entire authority over allocating money in the household. Thus, wealth and property inheritance are only passed on to women heirs. Notably, Mosuo women's brothers share common matrilineal blood ties with them, reducing the potential conflicts over the interest of obtaining the inheritance of property (since the wealth will eternally remain under the same lignée) [11].

3.3. Economic Struggles of Han Housewives and Case Study

In Han culture, housewives generally resemble a group with no income (neither from a primary job nor part-time). This entirely due to their overwhelming responsibilities for household tasks such as cooking, washing, cleaning, child care, etc. No salary leads to their lack of economic independence, and all expenses in life need to rely on the male role in the family, which will also lead to the mentality of domestic women to inferiority and put themselves at a low level. Therefore, along with losing social identity, they must rely on their husbands to obtain individual roles and identities [12].

According to an anecdote in the Chinese Journal of Cardiovascular Diseases [13], Hou Yue was a full-time housewife. After her son was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, she took him around to find medical treatment, and her husband was responsible for financial support. When her husband lost his job and could not continue supporting family expenses, Hou Yue started a business that grew her monthly income to 60,000 yuan. She became the economic pillar of the family, and her family status increased.

This example indicates that when a stay-at-home woman is re-introduced to the workforce, the welfare and overall family economic status improves correspondingly [13].

4. A Comparison of the Personal Status of Housewives in Two cultures

4.1. Domestic Violence Suffered by Housewives in Han Family

If you follow the "checklist" your paper will conform to the requirements of the publisher and facilitate a problem-free publication process. Domestic violence (whether the impact is physical or emotional, or both) constantly victimizes women in family life. However, many of these behaviors are not recognized as crimes due to a relatively low level of evidence. As a result, domestic violence has always been a thorny issue worldwide. According to data recorded by the China Women's

Federation and the National Bureau of Statistics, in 2011 and before, 24.7 percent of women in China had experienced domestic violence, including but not limited to beatings, insults, economic control, and forced sex [14]. However, there are still many cases of domestic violence still go uncounted in these statistics due to the deep-rooted belief in some people that they should not wash their dirty linen in public. The problem caused by domestic violence is severe. Not only the women who suffer from these will suffer different degrees of psychological and physical harm, but also the members of the family who have not suffered from domestic violence will be affected to a certain extent, especially the children, who accept the information of violence during the growth period will affect the character and behavior of the children to a certain extent. On March 1, 2016, China officially implemented the Anti-Domestic Violence Law, which marks a new stage in anti-domestic violence in China. By 2021, the survey data shows that the rate of domestic violence against women in marriage is 8.6 percent, which is nearly 16 percent lower than the previous figure in 2010 [15].

4.2. Protection of Personal Status of Mosuo Women

As early as in the period of group marriage families with low levels of social productivity, women formed a female-oriented inheritance system. They gained initial status and respect because of their fertility and material production capacity. In the matriarchal clan, women's status peaked, and women's absolute authority was established in the family and society. Unlike the evolving patrilineal social system, the Mosuo retain the matriarchal social structure, and in the Mosuo culture, women have a higher social and family status than Mosuo men.

The custom of walking marriage, which is unique to the Mosuo ethnic group, also leads to relatively little domestic violence, as men need to return to the place where their mother's family lives when night comes. Men's lower family and social status are also important factors. In Mosuo culture, women are responsible for internal family affairs and participation in social and economic activities, enjoying a high degree of autonomy and decision-making rights.

4.3. Impacts of Lack of Personal Status on the Overall Status of Housewives

The lack of individual status hurts the overall social status of housewives. In Han culture, housewives often lack the right to speak in the family and society due to the lack of economic independence and social support. Being in a neglected and disrespected status for a long time will severely exacerbate psychological pressure on housewives; this situation not only affects their mental health but also limits their opportunities to participate in social activities. Busy with housework the whole time, the housewives lose their chances to socialize and earn money. In addition, the role of housewife may reinforce the stereotypical effects of gender roles, such as doing housework is the responsibility of a woman, or the simple recognition like "the man in charge of the outside, the woman in charge of the inside." In addition to Han housewives, Mosuo housewives also face some difficulties. For example, when intermarrying with people in other ethnic groups, different family and societal concepts may lead to a cultural conflict. How to make a choice when their partners cannot accept Mosuo's traditional form of Sese marriage is a serious problem for Mosuo women. In response to the rapid urbanization of modern society, Mosuo people have made their culture accessible to outer societies while engaging with tourists from around the world. They feel conflicted between maintaining the traditional matriarchal society and accepting the external patrilineal society. This is the challenge faced by Mosuo housewives

5. Conclusion

This research analyzes the significant differences between the social status of Han and Mosuo housewives. At the same time, this paper probes the factors that determine the social status of Han stay-at-home women, including urbanization, social development, and religion. Mosuo women have relatively high social status and respect, but challenges exist as they engage in cultural integration.

Han stay-at-home women in the patrilineal social system face significantly more physical and economic challenges.

This study focuses on the dilemmas Han stay-at-home women face in different societal aspects, emphasizing the importance of social and families' perspectives on housewives. In addition to raising awareness of housewives' welfare, this paper aims to promote gender equality by providing a complete image of the housewives' struggles and rejecting common stereotypes that housewives' vulnerability is self-driven.

In conclusion, this study provides some valuable information, but limitations remain. For example, there is an absence of previous data on women homemakers in Mosuo as there is no clear concept for the term housewife among the Mosuo ethnic group. Future research can further discuss how housewives in different cultural backgrounds improve their social and family status through laws and support from the masses.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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