

# Gender Violence Suffered by the Daughter-In-Law in the Changing Chinese Family — A Case Study from the Perspective of Family Power Structure

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## Abstract

With the development of society, the structure and function of the Chinese family have undergone great changes but gender violence still exists. Through in-depth interviews with two in-laws families, the article describes the gender violence suffered by three daughters-in-law (DILs) within two generations from the 1970s to the 2000s, discovering that despite the nuanced differences in the forms and frequencies of gender violence, three DILs were all at the inferior status in the stem family and were victims of family power inequality. It was revealed that the family power inequality gave rise to gender violence toward the DIL, inducing severe physical or mental injury to the DIL. However, family power inequality was rooted in the traditional gender ideology. The traditional gender ideology originated from the feudal society of China and still pervaded modern society. Consequently, the traditional gender ideology was the rooted cause of the occurrence of gender violence. The article concludes with a reminder of reflecting upon the impacts of the traditional gender ideology on our lives and promoting a new gender consciousness.

**Keywords:** Gender Violence, Daughter in Law (DIL), Family Power Inequality, Traditional Gender Ideology

## 1. Introduction

As a pervasive phenomenon in human society, gender violence toward women has been rooted in various cultures and has taken multiple forms (Russo & Pirlott, 2006; Mitchell & Freitag, 2011; Fernandez, 2006; Merry, 2009; Vandello & Cohen, 2008). In many cultures like China, Japan, Latin America, Vietnam, Ghana, etc, women as the daughter-in-law (DIL), were in a submissive position relative to their husbands (Fernandez, 2006) and suffered domestic violence not only from their husbands but also from the parents-in-law (PIL). Though abundant literature explored a series of issues on gender violence, encompassing the causes that might lead to gender violence (Carlson, 1984; Farmer & Tiefenthaler, 1997; Aizer, 2010; Gracia & Herrero, 2006; Mshweshwe, 2020), the adverse health consequences (Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottmoeller, 2002; Chrisler & Ferguson, 2006), the gender violence prevention (Chrisler & Ferguson, 2006; Mitchell & Freitag, 2011), the mechanism for the transmission across generations (Pollak, 2002) and the interventions to breaking the cycle of gender violence (Livings, Hsiao, & Withers, 2022). However, the literature is absent of the perspective of the DIL, which has been an important role in the Chinese family.

Gender violence suffered by the DIL was embedded in the structure of power within a family shaped by the patriarchal culture (Merry, 2009). The physical violence and mental abuse subjected by the wives were thought to be normative and culturally sanctioned in a patriarchal society (Mitchell & Freitag, 2011). Moreover, gender violence toward the DIL emanated from the unequal cultural context, within which the older family member of the previous generation dominated the DIL in the private sphere and exerted control over the DIL by the form of role expectations (Katz, 2006; Merry, 2009), which was totally ignorant of the DIL's feelings and injured their dignity as a human. For example, the DIL had been treated as inferior and must be obedient to her husband and PIL in traditional Chinese culture (Gallin, 1994).

Some research focused on the gender violence suffered by the DIL within the scope of the family from the views of the relationship between the DIL and MIL, or the relationship triangle among the MIL, the husband, and the DIL, such as analyzing the causes and consequences of the conflicts between the MIL and DIL (Adhikari &

Bharati-Santiniketan, 2015), and exploring how to maintain a good relationship between the MIL and DIL within the relationship triangle with the son and husband (Woolley & Greif, 2018). Focusing on the changes in intergenerational relations between the MIL and DIL during the 1950s and the 1980s in rural Taiwan, the academics found out that in some families the balance of power between MIL and DIL was reversed to the opposite one, while others continuously sustained the previous authoritarian hierarchy in the 1980s (Gallin, 1994).

As far as the Chinese family was concerned, the status of the DIL in a modern nuclear family was higher than that of in the traditional stem family. However, gender violence still pervaded the modern family in various forms. It has been a neglected area to research what changes had happened in the gender violence suffered by DILs in different generations. The article attempts to examine the power inequality in the stem family through the lens of family power structure (Sprey, 1972; Safilios-Rothschild, 1970); the connection between the family power inequality and the gender violence toward the DIL; the rooted cause of the occurrence of gender violence.

## 2. Methodology

The data used in the study was collected through in-depth family interviews with the two in-law families. As a result of the fact that I was familiar with the two families, having known and lived near them in my hometown when I was a teenager, I had the strength to build good relationships with the DIL, the husband, and other family members, so I conducted the in-depth family interviews smoothly. The interview outline was composed of the rough questions as follows. First, for the two rural stem families in the 1970s, (1) Who was the head of the family? (2) How did the MIL and father-in-law (FIL) get along with the DIL? Who would quarrel with the DIL? (3) What did they quarrel about? Why did it happen? What did the DIL think about it? What did the PIL think about it? (4) What was the consequence of the quarrel? Who would be the injured? (5) What was the position of the son or husband? How did the son or husband look at his mother and his wife in the conflict? Whose side will the son or husband join in? Why? (6) What was the relationship between the husband and his wife? Second, for the nuclear family in the 2000s: (1) How often did the young couple meet the husband's parents? (2) Did the husband's parents make any demands on the DIL? What were those demands? What was the reaction of the DIL? (3) When the PIL and the DIL disagreed with each other, did the DIL insist on her own opinion, or give in? (4) What did the DIL do when she disagreed with the MIL? And what would the husband do? (5) How was the relationship between the husband and the wife?

Each family interview lasted from 120 to 240 minutes intermittently, mostly taking place at the home of each participant. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the family's agreement. And the transcription was sent to the individual participants to review and check for accuracy. To protect the privacy and show respect to the three families, I had promised that I will strictly adhere to confidentiality, so all the names used in the article were pseudonyms. Permission has been obtained from each family to quote their words.

## 3. Case Study

The case study was designed to discover the connection between family power inequality and the occurrence of gender violence from the angle of DIL. The case was the pair of in-laws families, consisting of two rural families, Mary and Jane's stem families, and one urban family, Lily's conjugal family. The two DILs in the older generation were Mary, who was born in 1949, and Jane, who was born in 1951; the DIL in the younger generation was Lily, who was born in 1974. They had become in-laws families since Mary's daughter Lily married Jane's son in 2000. There were different patterns of power inequality within the three families.

### 3.1 *The MIL-Dominated Stem Family in the 1970s: MIL-Husband Alliance*

Since Mary married Tom in 1969, Mary had become a housewife, and her husband Tom became the breadwinner, commuting from the village to the factory every day. Living together with Tom's parents and younger siblings, Mary was subordinated to Tom's family and burdened with most of the housework. But Mary occasionally had quarrels with her MIL over trivial matters in daily life. Each time after a conflict when Mary's husband Tom came home from work, the MIL would retaliate by instigating Tom to beat her. Thus, Mary was battered by her husband time and time again whenever she hadn't satisfied the MIL or didn't show obedience to the MIL.

The reason for the inferior status of Mary in the stem family can be presented clearly from the triangle relationship among Mary, MIL, and Tom in the genogram of figure 1. The closeness between Tom and his mother, and the alienation between Tom and his wife, were displayed clearly in the triangle. In this stem family, Mother had more control and dominance over the son. The MIL plotted to exert control over the DIL, which was explained by the academics as the result of the mother's limerent passion for the son (Adhikari & Bharati-Santiniketan, 2015). Furthermore, as the older son of the family, Tom knew well that he must show filial

piety to his mother through obedience. His mother took it for granted and expected it, thus resulting in more interference in the son's married life and more requirements for the son. To some extent, Tom and his mother formed a close alliance in the subjugation of Mary. As a result, Mary was placed in the inferior status within the stem family and subjected to gender violence physically and mentally from her husband incited by the MIL.

Another case also indicated that in the stem family, the husband's violence toward his wife was usually instigated by the older, authoritative member of the family. Tom's younger brother, the second son of the family, resisted obstinately his mother's meddling in his married life. Speaking concretely, instead of showing obedience to his mother, he often refused to obey his mother's orders. He tried all the ways to avoid beating his wife even though his mother tried to coerce him to act according to her order. It was clear to see that only the husband who dared to challenge the parents' authority, could he break the cycle of command-obey authority structure and protected his wife from violence.

The alliance between Mary's MIL and Mary's husband reinforced the dominance of the MIL, leaving Mary in a more fragile situation within the family. The pattern of power inequality within the family could be summarized as a MIL-husband alliance, which means the power to batter the wife was passed on to the husband from the older generation.

### *3.2 The FIL-Dominated Stem Family in the 1970s: Direct Control of FIL*

In 1972, Jane married a young man living near her village, and the young man was the only son of a prosperous peasant couple. Since married, Jane had given birth to four babies. The older one was a boy and the other three were girls. Longing for two grandsons, Jane's PIL were disappointed at having only one grandson because they desired more grandsons with the hope of more male offspring bringing more happiness. Despite that Jane was a gentle and diligent DIL, the FIL, the head of the family, usually scolded Jane strictly for some seemingly insignificant matters. He disliked Jane's style of speaking and acting and thought of Jane as an incompetent DIL. Then severe reprimand was inflicted upon Jane repeatedly. And Jane lived in a state of depression and anxiety, finally, she developed severe insomnia. Nonetheless, compared with Mary, Jane was a bit lucky for never being battered by her husband in the family.

The dominant FIL was observed to exert power over his son and his DIL separately and directly. That is to say, instead of being allied with the son, the authoritative FIL exerted the power over the son and the DIL respectively, so the pattern of power structure could be defined as direct control of the FIL.

Seen from the genograms, two DILs in the 1970s were both at the bottom of the family power hierarchy, being subjected to physical or psychological violence directly or indirectly from the older generation. Further, they sustained the gender violence and accepted it as a normal life at that time. In the 1970s, ordinary people considered it a personal affair for a husband to batter his wife, and they never took it as a serious matter, nor could they consider it as a human rights violation (Bunch & Carrillo, 1991).

### *3.3 The Nuclear Family in the 2000s: Limited Interference from MIL*

With the social and economic progress, an increasing number of women had attained high levels of education and participated in social life, then the traditional image of women as submissive and powerless changed to some extent in the 2000s. More couples chose to live apart from the older generations and enjoyed the intimate space for conjugal life. However, the rise of women's status in society in the social sphere neither led to significant changes in the role of a DIL within a family.

When Lily married Jane's son in 2000, the couple began their postgraduate education with the purpose of getting Master's and Doctorate degrees in the metropolis. During the long period of studying at university, whenever the couple went back to the husband's home on holidays, Jane would express a strong desire of hoping for them to bear a baby as early as possible. Sometimes Jane even threatened Lily to say, "if you refuse to bear a baby, we will go somewhere to buy a male baby", sometimes she deliberately satirized Lily, saying that "the tree is very big but bears no fruit". Jane was a straightforward MIL, whose insulting words manifested the so-called role expectations to the DIL in an agnation society, but she hurt Lily.

In essence, the value of a DIL in a rural family was nothing to do with higher education and living an independent life but intertwined firmly with reproducing offspring for the husband's family. Having been married by free choice and living apart from her husband's home, Lily was obviously enjoying more freedom and autonomy than her mother Mary, and her MIL Jane. But the role of DIL means it was her duty to meet the expectation and requirements of the PIL under the patriarchal culture. Therefore, despite that Lily had a high level of education, she remained to need to meet the requirement of her PIL as she was their DIL. Years later, Lily achieved a Doctorate degree and got a job, then she gave birth to a male baby in 2009, which undoubtedly

satisfied the husband’s family. In November 2015 when the government relaxed birth control and promulgated a new policy of “one couple, two children”, Jane could hardly wait to call Lily to prepare for having a second male baby.

Gender violence toward Lily seemed more limited than that of the previous generation. Lily escaped from being blamed for all aspects of life except for procreation, while Mary and Jane both lived together with their PIL and were blamed for various aspects. Although Lily only had limited occasions to meet up with her MIL, she remained to endure the harsh words and tough attitude from her MIL on the matter of bearing a baby whenever they met. We could conclude that Jane had power over her DIL at the point of reproduction. Thus, Lily had to endure limited interference from her MIL in the stem family.

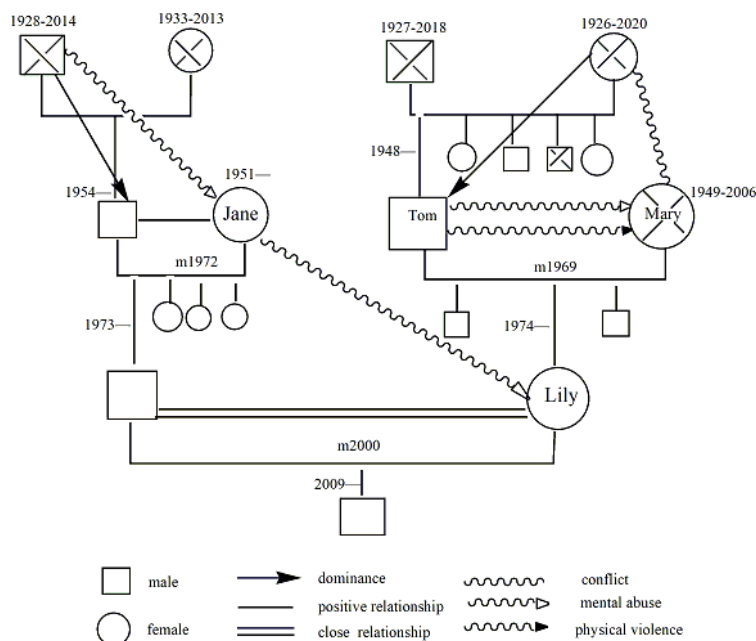


Figure1.Genogram

#### 4. Discussion

As seen from the genogram of figure1, the parents of the older generation had absolute power over the younger generation within the Chinese stem family in the patriarchal culture in the 1970s. Three DILs were subjected to different forms of gender violence within the unequal power structure of the stem family. Mary was subjected to severe physical and psychological violence from the alliance between her MIL and her husband. Jane sustained mental abuse from the direct control of her FIL. Lily was occasionally exposed to the mental abuse of her MIL. It could be found that the gender violence sustained by Lily in the 2000s was apparently reduced in scope and frequency, but it still existed. Looking back on the changes that Chinese families took place during the 30 years, we might find the rooted cause behind the family power inequality and the occurrence of gender violence.

##### 4.1 Chinese Families Had Undergone Great Changes in the Past Centuries

First, the size of the family had become smaller. A Chinese sociologist verified Parsons’s hypothesis that with the development of industrialization, the family of the young generation became smaller than that of the old generation through a case study on six generations of a traditional Chinese family in a suburb of Beijing (Li, 2003). With the development of society, more and more women participated in social affairs and attained higher social status than before. Hence, the DILs of the younger generation had more choices than the DILs of the older generation. The young couple had the freedom to live independently rather than living together with their older generation. Consequently, the stem family had been replaced mostly by the conjugal family or nuclear family in the developed society.

Second, the function of the family underwent important changes. In the agrarian society, the role of DIL was defined as a female giving birth to babies and caring for others. A married woman who was incapable of giving birth to a baby would face severe consequences. As the expectations to the role of DIL were constructed by the culture, we could find clues from the traditional ideology that originated from feudal societies thousands of years ago. The famous saying such as “no offspring is the worst one of the three ways unfilial to our parents” and “the

more sons, the more blessings” had dominated the Chinese agrarian society for a long time. Therefore, Procreation was the foremost function of a traditional Chinese family. However, in the modern nuclear family, more and more couples had the right to determine whether they had a baby or not, though their parents might sometimes try to persuade them to do so. Interestingly, the family was becoming a multi-functional space, not only for bearing offspring but also for the relaxation and intimacy of couples.

Third, the conjugal relationship was becoming more important in the modern family than in the traditional family which focused on the parents-children relationship. In a traditional Chinese stem family, the parents had authority over their sons including interference in the son’s personal affairs. Moreover, the son, especially the elder son, who was always obedient to his parent, would be regarded as having filial piety, a quality eulogized by the traditional filial piety culture. At the same time, the DIL was the person who behaved in a totally submissive manner. However, in a modern nuclear family, without the interference of the older generation, the couple were equal to face and tackle their problems together. Furthermore, they are more equal than ever and the conjugal relationship was becoming the dominant relationship in the nuclear family (Li, 2003).

4.2 The Traditional Gender Ideology in the Feudal Society of China Shaped the Social Expectations to the Role of DIL

The social expectations to the role of DIL remained unchangeable, though Chinese families had undergone great changes in the past centuries. It was noticed from the experiences of three DILs of two generations that gender violence is transmitted from generation to generation. In a traditional stem family, the DIL was treated as an inferior member and had responsibilities of producing offspring, taking care of other family members, etc. DILs mostly had neither significance nor position until she became a MIL. When Jane was young, she had to subordinate to the commands from her PIL and had to put offspring reproduction as her foremost task to fulfill for her husband’s family. In the end, she survived and completed the requirement from her PIL. Thus, it was her turn to exert the same authority over her DIL by demanding a male baby. That is to say, if she had given birth to and reared a son for her husband’s family, then she could get a higher status in the family power structure (Gallin, 1994).

The traditional gender ideology in the feudal society of China shaped the social expectations to the role of DIL. Characterized by “male superiority and female inferiority”, the traditional gender ideology originated from the feudal society in Chinese history. Having been prevalent in feudal societies for thousands of years, the gender ideology consisted of a series of traditional disciplines which was supposed to control the female’s behavior from all aspects of life. One of the disciplines was ‘three obediences and four virtues’. ‘Three obediences’ means that the female should be obedient to her father before she marries; the female should be obedient to her husband after she marries; the female should be obedient to her son after the death of her husband; and ‘four virtues’ means that the female should have high morality, speak properly, behave in a modest manner and work diligently (Hao, 2002). Having been confined by those disciplines, women were put in an inferior status, thus resulting in power inequality in the family, then women became the victims of gender violence.

As a result, as Figure 2 shows, the family power inequality induced gender violence toward the DIL, while the family power inequality was rooted in the traditional gender ideology. Therefore, the rooted cause of the occurrence of gender violence was the traditional gender ideology.

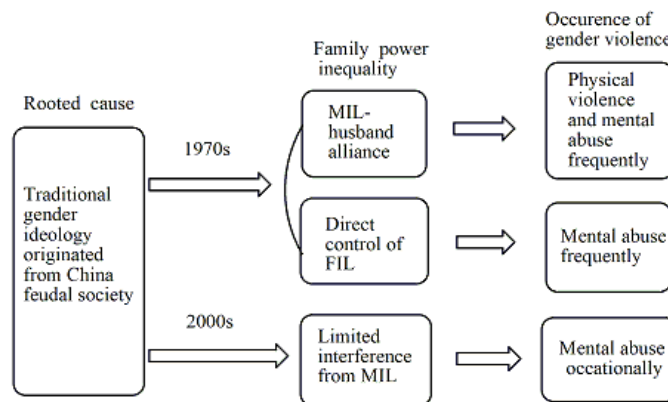


Figure 2. The rooted cause for the occurrence of gender violence

5. Conclusion

The gender violence suffered by the DIL was constructed by the traditional gender ideology and legitimized by

society. Apart from the nuanced difference in the forms and frequencies of gender violence sustained by three DILs of two generations, we were able to find that the rooted cause for DILs suffering unjust treatment was the traditional gender ideology. Originating from feudal societies thousands of years ago, the traditional gender ideology still pervaded modern society. From the sociological perspective, the traditional gender ideology is transmitted from generation to generation through the internalization of cultural values in the process of individual socialization.

The article discovers the significant role that the traditional gender ideology had played in resulting in the gender violence toward the DIL in the background of family changes. The gender roles and expectations based on the traditional gender ideology have legitimized, rendered, and helped to perpetuate the violence against the DIL from generation to generation (Russo & Pirlott, 2006). To break the cycle of intergenerational transmission of gender violence toward the DIL, we must spontaneously realize and reflect upon the impacts of the traditional gender ideology on our lives and substitute it consciously with a new gender consciousness characterized by respect and equality.

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