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# Family structures and women's status in rural areas of Xining, China: A family image study in the villages of Qinghai province

Ting ZHOU, Moe ONOJIMA, Kenji KAMEGUCHI and Chunli YI

## ABSTRACT

Although China's economy has experienced the dynamics of change in recent decades, gender inequality is still persistent, especially in rural areas. The present study aims to depict family structures in rural areas in Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province, and to investigate the status of women in these. Qualitative and semi-quantitative methods were used. Fifty-five married women from three villages of Xining participated in the investigation. A family image test (FIT) and semi-structured interviews were used to gather information on family structures and women's status in the household. Results indicated that typical patriarchal families were prevalent in rural areas of Xining. Women, especially the young married young ones, were marginalized and were at the bottom of the family hierarchy.

**KEYWORDS** Women's status; family structure; patriarchal family system

## Introduction

Family is the smallest unit of society. Its structure and organization reflect the fundamental ethics and values of the society. China is and has always been a patriarchal society through its long history. The patrilineal kinship system has deep and great impact on the family life of the Chinese, especially for people living in rural areas (Li, 2004; Liu & Chan, 1999).

In traditional Chinese families with their patrilineal and patrilocal features, the main productive assets are passed through the male line (Das Gupta, et al., 2003). Daughters' formal relations with their natal families ceased at the time of marriage and they are required to join the households of their husbands (Hare, 1999). The stem family consisting of a young couple and the husband's parents is typical and the most common family structure in traditional Chinese society and is still common, especially in rural areas. The hierarchy within the family is strict. The young are required to be subordinate to the old and the women are required to be subjugated to men, as the Confucian principle,

the Three Cardinal Guides says, "Rule guides subject, father guides son and husband guides wife" (Gallin, 1994).

Given this social and cultural context, women through history have had low status within their families during their entire lives. When girls are young and live in their natal families, their brothers are more favored by their parents and have more power and higher priority in resource allocation (Li, 2004; Li & Lavelly, 2003). This is the well-known son preference phenomenon which was common in the past and also prevails in the rural areas of contemporary China (Wang, 2005; Graham, Larsen, & Xu, 1998; Poston Jr, 2002). Sons are preferred because they are considered to represent continuity of their families and have the right to inherit family property. On the contrary, due to a definitive break at the time of marriage, daughters are often viewed as temporary and marginal members of their natal families (Das Gupta, et al., 2003), as an old saying describes: "a married daughter is like spilt water" (Zhang, 2009). The familial status of women does not improve after marriage as the position of a daughter-in-law in traditional Chinese families is one of subservience to her husband and his family. New brides are often viewed to pose a threat to family order both by senior males and females, especially mothers-in-law (Yan, 2006). So, they have to be subjugated by the latter to ensure stability in the family (Gallin, 1994).

There is no doubt that the status of women has been greatly improved, following the dramatic political and economic changes that took place in China during the last century. However, the phenomenon of gender inequality still exists. Especially, after the collective period of the 1950s, which was considered as a good time for Chinese women (Li, 2004; Li & Lavelly, 2003), subsequent economic reform policies of the 1980s seem to have exacerbated gender inequality. As the rural household became the basic unit of agricultural production and the locus of social and economic security after de-collectivization, the value of male labor has risen. As observed by some researchers, there is a revival of the Confucian gender ideology that emphasizes the subordinate roles of women as wives, mothers and caretakers of the family (Li & Lavelly, 2003). Although girls in the rural areas have opportunities to find jobs in cities, they usually get temporary jobs or those that offer no benefits (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003). And so they often quit their jobs and go back to their hometowns after getting married. Furthermore, the one-child policy begun in late 1970s, which may have been beneficial for girls in the urban areas (Lee, 2012), was a source of stress for women in rural contexts (Fong, 2002). Married women often struggled with the demands of their parents-in-law to have grandsons and the pressure of the one-child policy. The phenomenon of sex selection in China has been severe, which has led to a sex ratio that is most unfavorable to females in the world (Das Gupta, et al., 2003; Guilimoto, 2009).

Results of research on the mental health of women in rural China suggest that they report more mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and psychosomatic symptoms compared with their counterparts in urban regions (Gao, et al., 2006; He, Xu, & Xiao, 2004). The suicide data in China also reflects the poor mental health conditions of rural women. As indicated in earlier studies, China is the only country where the suicide rate is higher among women compared to men. The male to female suicide ratio is even lower in rural areas and among subgroups of young people. Young females in rural areas who commit suicide comprise a substantial proportion of the total number of suicides in China (Law & Liu, 2008; Yip, Callanan, & Yuen, 2000; Yip & Liu, 2006). Therefore, the living conditions of women in rural China are worthy of considerable research attention.

Although patriarchal family values have been considered to be one of the important factors that lead to the poor mental health and high suicide rate of rural women in China (Gao, et al., 2006; Yip, et al., 2000), little research has systemically described the structure of patriarchal families, women's status in these and how it impacts the mental health of women. The current study undertakes to fill in this gap, by focusing on family structure and women's status within the household in rural areas of Xining, Qinghai Province.

## **Overview of the present study**

The present study aims to depict family structures in rural areas of Xining, Qinghai; describe the status of women in families in the villages of Xining; and examine the change in women's status within families across generations. Data on family structures and dynamics were obtained using a projective family drawing method, using the Family image test (FIT), in which an individual is instructed to draw a picture of their entire family to depict its structure and psychological dynamics, which can thereafter be assessed. A short semi-structured interview was used to gather additional information regarding demographic data and the family status of women. Qualitative and quantitative analyses were conducted to analyze this data.

Qinghai is a big province located in Northwestern China and is economically weak, with low level of urbanization. According to the latest official data, the net per capita income of rural residents was 6196.4 yuan (approximately US\$1007). Therefore the region is ranked the second from the bottom among all the provinces of China (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2013). At the same time, the problem of gender inequality is significant in Qinghai as well. As indicated by the results of the latest nationwide survey on gender equality and women's status, the household status of women in Qinghai is also ranked at the bottom level (Jiang, et al., 2006).

## Research methods

Participants were recruited from three villages (Qianhu, Damo and Mao'erzha) of two counties (Huangzhong and Datong) in Xining, Qinghai. Fifty-five married women from 55 families that volunteered to participate in the interviews. The participants were between 20 to 53 years and on an average of 35.54 years ( $SD=7.16$ ). Fifty-three participants reported their educational attainments. Twenty-three (41.5 percent) had no education, 17 participants (32.1 percent) had completed primary school education, 12 participants (22.6 percent) had junior high school education and only 2 of them (3.8 percent) had senior high school education. All the families interviewed relied on agricultural work for a living and only 9 individuals reported that their husbands or adult children worked in local enterprises. The average family income varied from 1000 to 30,000 yuan per year, an average income of 7712.77 yuan ( $SD = 5845.61$ ) per year (approximately US\$1262.22).

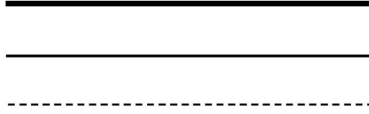
Of the participants, 25 lived in nuclear families consisting of a pair of adults and their children and 30 came from extended families in which parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and the children lived in the same household. All of them had children: 9 had only one child each, 28 had two children each, 17 had three children each and 1 had four children.

### *Family image test (FIT)*

Family Image Test (FIT) was developed by Kameguchi and colleagues in 1988 based on the Family Sculpture Technique (Kveback, 1980). This is a self-assessment method that requires participants to create a chart by placing circular stickers (representing individual family members) and line stickers (of 3 levels of thickness: thin lines indicating lower degree of bonding and thicker ones indicating greater bonding) to indicate bonds between different family members. We asked participants to nominate their family members and choose a sticker to represent each one. Thereby, they created an image on the chart for all their family members and their relationships. The circular sticker was 1.6 cms. in diameter with a triangle or arrow within it, pointing in the direction of a particular family member. Participants were instructed to place the arrow in the sticker pointing towards another one representing a family member for whom they cared the most. The color of stickers varied, representing five levels from white to black with the darker shades indicating greater power in the household (see Fig. 1a). Each participant was requested to place the line stickers connecting family members. The strength of bond was indicated by three thickness levels of the lines pasted (as seen in Fig. 1b). As for the analysis, a comprehensive assessment of family hierarchy and intimacy among family members was represented by differences in the color of the stickers, the order in which these were placed, the directions to



**Figure 1a.** Symbols to represent family members with color indicating power level and the direction of the small triangle indicating the family member of interest



**Figure 1b.** Symbols to represent strength of bonds between family members

which they pointed, the distance between stickers, and the thickness of lines (Kameguchi, 2004).

Earlier research has examined the reliability and validity of FIT among Japanese and Chinese participants. The results indicated that its test-retest reliability and validity were acceptable (Oshita & Kameguchi, 1999; Zhang, 2006). FIT has been used in clinical practice as well as qualitative and quantitative research (Kameguchi, 2004; Nakatsubo, Araya, Sakaguchi, Shiomi, & Kameguchi, 2006; Oshita & Kameguchi, 1999).

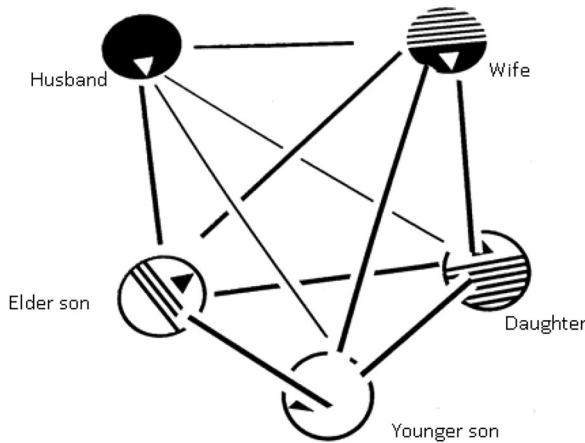
### ***Semi-structured interviews***

Apart from questions on age, educational attainment, labor force participation, family income and family type, the following questions were asked to obtain additional information on women's status within the family, as follows: 1) Who is the bread-winner in your family? 2) Who makes decisions in your family? 3) Do you often make contact with your own parents? 4) Do you get financial or psychological support from your natal family?

Data was collected in July, 2007. Face-to-face interviews were conducted by trained investigators at the participants' homes. Each interview comprised the semi-structured interviews and the FITs and lasted around one hour. Because of the relatively low educational level of the participants, the meanings of the FIT symbols were carefully explained. All the participants completed the FITs with the help of investigators.

### ***Family structures and dynamics***

Family hierarchies and intimacy among families members presented in the FIT were analyzed. The hierarchies were indicated by the color of stickers and the relative positions in which these were placed to represent family members. Intimacy was indexed by the distance between the two stickers as well as

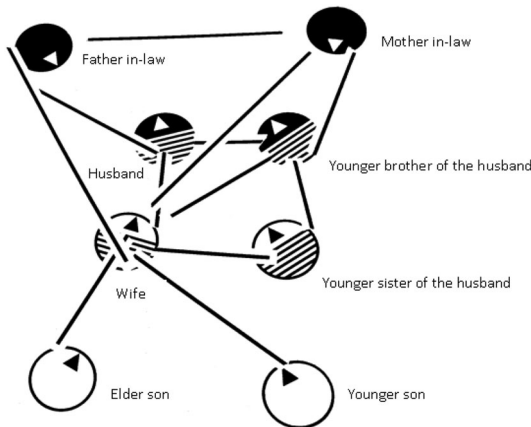


**Figure 2a.** A photo of the family image of a typical nuclear family

the thickness of the lines that represented the bonds between two family members. Typical family images of a nuclear family and an extended family were presented in Fig. 2a and Fig. 2b.

***Power and hierarchy between the couples***

Information on 85 husband-wife relationships was obtained from the family image tests from 25 nuclear families and 30 stem families. Data on 74 couples was complete and analyzed. Power in the household was defined as control over other family members and family affairs. As noted above, it was indicated by the darkness of circular stickers. As the results revealed, the power of husbands was negatively skewed in the distribution, with



**Figure 2b.** A photo of the family image of a typical extended family

Md=5.00, IQR=1.00. The distribution of the power of wives was also negatively skewed, with Md=4.00, IQR=2.00. A rank-order test (the Wilcoxon signed rank test) was run to examine difference in power among couples. Results indicated that husbands were more powerful than wives ( $p<.001$ ).

As previous research has indicated, authoritative persons are usually placed on the left or upper side, as per the FIT procedure (Oshita & Kameguchi, 1999). According to the coding manual of FIT, the hierarchical relationships between husbands and wives could be coded into five categories: husband-left, wife-left, husband-above, wife-above and diagonally placed husbands and wives (Kameguchi, 2004). The left and upper positions represented dominance. Our results indicated that in 47 (63.5 percent) relationships, the stickers of husbands were placed on the left side or above, while only 20 out of 74 relationships (27.0 percent) had the wife placed in the dominant position, that is, in the left or above positions (see Table 1).

### **Generational differences in position and power of couples**

In order to compare generational differences in the hierarchy, a cohort variable was created, first according to the ages of the women and the ages and marital status of their children. Information was available for 74 couples who could be classified into four cohorts. Cohort 1 consisted of women who had teenage grandchildren ( $n=3$ , aged 50+), Cohort 2 included women who had married children ( $n=22$ , aged around 45–50), Cohort 3 comprised women who had adolescent children above 14 years old ( $n=15$ , aged around 35–40) and Cohort 4 consisted of young women who had children below 14 or had no children ( $n=34$ , aged around 20–30). Data on Cohort 1 was excluded from the quantitative analysis because their numbers were very small.

As seen in Table 1, husbands were more likely to be placed in the more dominant position in all cohorts. For women in Cohort 2 to 4, generational differences in the positions of spouses were not significant,  $\chi^2(12) = 9.41$ ,  $p = .67$ . Regarding the generational differences in possession of power between husbands and wives, discrepancies were obtained for each couple by subtracting the power of the wife from that of the husband. Because this variable had a skewed distribution, a rank-order test (Kruskal-Wallis  $H$  test) was conducted to

**Table 1.** Hierarchical relationships of couples across generations

Cohort	N	Hierarchical relationship				
		Husband left	Wife left	Husband above	Wife above	Diagonal
1	3	1	1	0	0	1
2	22	10	4	6	2	0
3	15	7	2	3	2	1
4	34	13	9	8	0	4
Total	74	31	16	17	4	6



compare differences among cohorts in the discrepancies of power between husbands and wives in Cohort 2 to 4. Results suggested that the main effect of the cohort was not significant,  $\chi^2(2) = 0.03, p = .983$ . That is, the differences in power exercised by husbands and wives were similar across generations and the former were more powerful in all cohorts.

### ***Intimacy among couples***

The intimacy between spouses was measured by the thickness of the lines represented between each husband and wife, as well as the distance between them. The direction pointed to by the stickers also reflected degrees of intimacy among the couples. As presented in Table 2, the majority of the couples (63, 85.1 percent) reportedly had strong bonds, 10 (13.5 percent) couples had medium bonds, while only 1 (1.3 percent) couple had a weak bond.

As mentioned above, there was a triangle or arrow that pointed towards a family member on each circular sticker. For more than a half the couples (39, 52.7 percent) the spouses were represented as pointing in the same direction (parallel direction) and they both focused on their children. The direction indicated by spouses of 16 (21.6 percent) couples represented a right angle style, that is, one spouse pointed towards the other, while the latter pointed in other directions. The most common case was that of the husbands who pointed towards their wives and the latter towards their children. Among 15 (20.3 percent) couples, spouses pointed towards each other and four (5.4 percent) participants and their spouses faced away from each other in opposite directions (see Table 3).

With regard to the distance between spouses, the average distance ranged 1.50–14.50 cm, with an average distance of 4.56( $SD=2.56$ ) cm.

### ***Generational differences in intimacy***

Comparisons of the bonds, directions and distances between the respective spouses among couples of different cohorts were made in order to obtain variations in marital intimacy by generation. As displayed in Table 2, strong bonds between spouses were most common within each cohort. The

**Table 2.** Strength of bonds of couples across cohorts

Cohort	N	Bonds of couples		
		Weak	Medium	Strong
1	3	0	0	3
2	22	0	0	22
3	15	0	4	11
4	34	1	6	27
Total	74	1	10	63

**Table 3.** Directions pointed to by couples across cohorts

Cohort	Direction pointed by couples			
	Facing each other	Right angle	Parallel	Opposing each other
1	2	0	1	0
2	3	8	11	0
3	3	1	9	2
4	8	7	18	2
Total	15	16	39	4

feature of directions pointed towards also seemed to be similar across the age cohorts: the 'parallel style' was the most common, while the 'opposed to each other' style was the least common in Cohorts 2, 3 and 4. As the sample sizes of several cells were too small, chi-square tests of differences in bonds and directions of the couples of different cohorts were not conducted.

A one-way ANOVA test was conducted to compare the distance between spouses among couples across cohorts. Results suggested that the difference in distance between spouses among the couples of different cohorts was not significant,  $F(2, 68) = 0.99, p = .38$ .

### ***The parent-child subsystem***

Eighty-one parent-children units were obtained from the family image tests for the 55 participants. In order to describe and compare the power, bond, and distance between parents and children, only parent-children units with all the children on the FIT chart were included in the analyses.<sup>1</sup> Finally, 58 parents-children units were selected with 20 couples who had only sons, 18 couples who had only daughters and 20 couples who had both and all their children lived with them in their respective households.

The distribution of the power exercised by sons was negatively skewed, with a median of 4.00 ( $IQR = 2.63$ ), while that of daughters was positively skewed, with a median of 2.50 ( $IQR = 3.00$ ). Results of the Mann-Whitney U test suggested that sons were more powerful than daughters in general,  $p = .010$ . Cohorts of children were also classified. Cohort 1 had 16 adult children, 10 sons and 6 daughters; Cohort 2 consisted of 27 adolescent children, 12 sons and 15 daughters and Cohort 3 comprised 34 young children with 18 sons and 16 daughters. The medians and IQRs of the power of sons and daughters are displayed in Table 4. As the results of the Mann-Whitney U tests suggest, the difference in power of sons and daughters in each cohort were not significant, with  $p = .175$ ,  $p = .882$  and  $p = .304$ , respectively.

The differences in power of sons and daughters were also compared in the 20 families that had both. Results of Wilcoxon signed ranks test revealed that although the median power of sons ( $Md = 3.00, IQR = 2.50$ ) was more than the

**Table 4.** The medians and IQRs (Interquartile Range) of power of sons and daughters across cohorts

cohort	sons	daughters
1	4.50 (1.75)	4.00 (3.50)
2	2.00 (1.50)	2.00 (2.00)
3	1.00 (2.50)	3.00 (2.50)
Total	4.00 (2.63)	2.50 (3.00)

median power of daughters ( $Md = 2.50$ ,  $IQR=1.50$ ), the difference did not attain significance level,  $p=.688$ .

Power of parents and children: A rank-order test (Friedman test) was used to compare differences in the power of fathers, mothers and children. Results revealed a significant difference,  $p<.001$ . The median power of fathers was the greatest ( $Md=5.00$ ,  $IQR=1.00$ ), followed by that of mothers ( $Md=4.00$ ,  $IQR=2.00$ ), while the power of children ( $Md=3.50$ ,  $IQR=3.00$ ) was the lowest.

Bonds and distances between parents and children. As listed in Table 5, the bonds between parents and children were strong in most families. In all parent-child relationships, the distance between mothers and daughters was the least ( $4.56\pm 1.89$ ), followed by mothers and sons ( $5.17\pm 2.39$ ) and fathers and sons ( $5.25\pm 2.47$ ). The distance between fathers and the daughters seemed to be the largest ( $5.59\pm 2.26$ ) (as seen in Table 6).

For the 20 families that had both sons and daughters, the bonds in all parent-child relationships were compared. As the distribution of bonds was negatively skewed, a rank-order test (Friedman test) was conducted. Results suggested that the differences in the strength of all the parent-child bonds or relationships was not significant,  $p =.859$ . Regarding the distance between parents and children, results of a repeated ANOVA test revealed a significant main effect,  $F(3, 57) = 2.97$ ,  $p =.040$ . This significant effect was

**Table 5.** Bonds between parents and children

Relationship	N	Strength of Bond		
		Weak	Medium	Strong
Father-son	40	7(17.5%)	8(20.0%)	25(62.5%)
Mother-son	40	5(12.5%)	9(22.5%)	26(65.0%)
Father-daughter	38	7(18.4%)	9(23.6%)	22(58.0%)
Mother-daughter	38	4(10.5%)	10(26.3%)	24(63.2%)

**Table 6.** Mean distances between parents and children

	N	Mean	SD
Mother-son distance	40	5.17	1.89
Mother-daughter distance	38	4.56	2.39
Father-son distance	40	5.25	2.47
Father-daughter distance	38	5.59	2.26

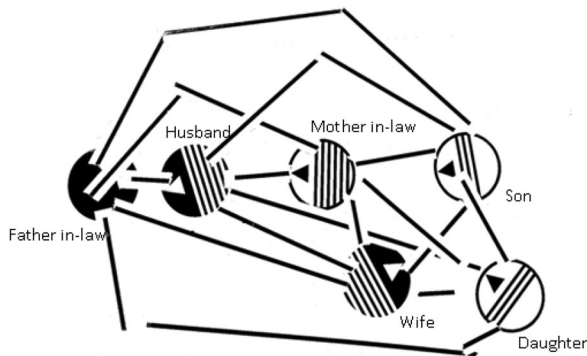
identified by the difference in the father-daughter bond that was distant and the mother-daughter relationship that was closer: the distance in father-daughter relationship was greater than that of the mother-daughter,  $p = .017$ .

### **Family boundaries**

Family boundaries were indicated by the ratio of the distance between spouses of each couple and that of parent-child. This ratio measured the distance for the couple and the parent-child. In the 71 parents-children units on whom data were available, the ratio was smaller than one in 35 units, that is, in these units, the distance between the husbands and wives was less than what was experienced by mothers and their children. While the ratio was greater than one in 36 units, that is, the distance between spouses for the couples was greater than between the mothers-children dyads (for example, seen in Figure 3).

### **The status of daughters-in-law/sons-in-law who lived with parents-in-law**

In 30 stem families involved in the interviews, 26 had young couples living with their husbands' parents, and four had young couples living with wives' parents. In the former eight mothers-in-law and 18 daughters-in-law completed the family image tests. Two of eight mothers-in-law did not even include their daughters-in-law in their family images, while all the daughters-in-law included their mothers-in-law in their family images. Regarding power distribution in these families, the results of the Friedman test revealed a significant difference among family members,  $p = .006$ . The power of daughters-in-law ( $Md = 4.00$ ,  $IQR = 2.00$ , mean rank = 2.03) was at the bottom rung of the respective families, lower than the power of the mothers-in-law ( $Md = 5.00$ ,



**Figure 3.** An example of the enmeshed generation boundary

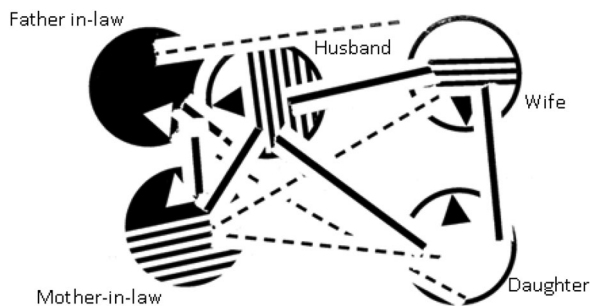
$IQR=0.50$ , mean rank =3.26), the fathers-in-law( $Md=4.00$ ,  $IQR=2.00$ , mean rank =2.50) and their husbands ( $Md=4.00$ ,  $IQR=1.00$ , mean rank =2.21).

For the position of the daughters-in-law, eight women were indicated below the parents-in-law, seven were parallel or at par with the parents-in-law and only two were above the parents-in-law. The distance between daughters-in-law and parents-in-law seemed larger than the distance between sons and their parents (as seen in Table 7), but differences in distance among family members were not significant,  $F(3.65, 62.07) = 2.20$ ,  $p=.086$ . It is interesting to note that, the distance between spouses for the young couples and that between mothers and sons were quite similar ( $4.45 \pm 2.71$  vs.  $4.46 \pm 2.68$ ). In 10 of 24 families, the distance for mothers and sons was less than what it was for the spouses for young couples, for example, as seen in Figure 4.

The strength of bonds between spouses for young couples and parents-in-law are displayed in Table 8. The results of the Friedman test indicate that the differences in bond strength were marginally significant,  $p=.077$ . The bond

**Table 7.** Distance among family members in stem families

	N	distance
For young couples living with the husbands' parents(n=26)		
Father-Mother	20	4.42±2.09
Young couple	24	4.45±2.71
Mother- Son	25	4.46±2.68
Father- Son	21	4.84±2.10
Mother in-law- Daughter in-law	23	4.89±2.29
Father in-law - Daughter in-law	19	6.27±3.02
For young couples living with the wives' parents(n=4)		
Father-Mother	3	5.34±4.20
Young couple	4	3.75±0.96
Mother- Daughter	3	6.83±2.14
Father- Daughter	4	6.50±3.34
Mother in-law- Son in-law	3	3.00±0.89
Father in-law - Son in-law	4	5.42±1.99



**Figure 4.** An example of strong connection between the husband and his natal family

**Table 8.** Bonds of young couples and parents in-laws in stem families

Relationship	n	Strength of Bond		
		Weak	Medium	Strong
For young couples living with husbands' parents(n=26)				
Father-son	21	3(14.3%)	3(14.3%)	15(71.4%)
Mother-son	25	2(8.0%)	4(16.0%)	19(76.0%)
Father-daughter in-law	19	4(21.1%)	3(15.8%)	12(63.2%)
Mother-daughter in-law	23	6(26.1%)	6(26.1%)	11(47.8%)
For young couples living with wives' parents(n=4)				
Father-daughter	4	0	0	4
Mother-daughter	3	0	0	3
Father-son in-law	4	1	0	3
Mother-son in-law	3	0	0	3

between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law seemed the weakest of all relationships within the families.

A common feature of the four families whose young couple lived with the wives' parents was that the old couples had no sons. The power of sons-in-law was relatively high ( $Md=5.00$ ), which was the same as the median power of parents-in-law ( $Md=5.00$  for the fathers;  $Md=5.00$  for the mothers), while the power of daughters was the lowest ( $Md=2.50$ ). In two families, sons-in-law were placed below the parents-in-law, while in the other two families sons-in-law were above the parents-in-law.

As seen in Table 8, the bonds between sons-in-law and their mothers-in-law were strong in all four families, but the bonds between fathers-in-law and sons-in-law seemed a little weaker. Regarding the distance of the young couples from their wives' parents, it is interesting to note that the distance between sons-in-law and their parents-in-law seemed to be less than that between daughters and their parents in all four families.

### ***Semi-structured interviews***

In addition to the FIT, a short semi-structured interview was conducted to investigate power distribution within families and married women's relations with their natal families. Results indicated that the males were very likely to be the main breadwinners in the families. As participants reported, most family income was contributed by husbands in 39 families and by fathers-in-law in 11 families. Only four participants reported that both husbands and wives were main breadwinners. One woman had to be the main earner of family income because there were no adult males in her family.

Consistent with the power distribution obtained from the FIT, the husband or the fathers-in-law made decisions in most of the families (41 out of 55). Two participants who lived with their natal families reported that their parents were the decision makers. Six participants reported that they had equal power for discussing with their husbands and made decisions together.

Women had the power to make decisions in four families. It was very interesting to note that although the household had been divided, the decision makers in two families were still an uncle and an older brother of the husband respectively.

Regarding women's connection with their natal families, only 10 participants reported that they visited their parents frequently and contributed their labor for their natal families, helping in agricultural work. Alternatively, they undertook the responsibility of caring for their old or sick parents. More than half the participants (30 out of 55) visited their parents once or twice a year during festivals, while 13 participants reportedly did so less than once a year. The large distance to their parents' homes, being trapped by household chores and responsibilities of taking care of children were among the most frequently mentioned reasons for limited contact with their natal families.

Infrequent contact with natal families may be a reason for have limited support for women from their natal families. Only 10 participants considered that they received such financial and psychological support, as and when needed. Twenty women said their parents may help them sometimes if they asked and 25 participants thought it was not realistic to seek support from their natal families.

## Discussion

The present study used the FIT and a semi-structured interview to investigate family structures and the household status of women in rural areas of Xining, a city in Northwest China. Results revealed that the structure of the family had typical features of a patriarchal family system; Women, especially the young women, stayed at the bottom of the family hierarchy.

### *Typical features of patriarchal family system*

As results indicated, most young women participants still lived with their parents-in-law even when their children had grown up. That is, traditional residence modes are customary in the rural areas of Xining. From the perspective of power distribution within the family, senior males were viewed as heads of families, followed by older women or adult sons. The well-known phenomenon of son preference was confirmed by the power differences between sons and daughters in general. As newcomers to the families, the daughters-in-law usually occupied inferior positions. This result was in line with a great number of earlier studies that described the difficult lives of daughters-in-law in traditional Chinese families (Li, 2004; Li & Lavelly, 2003; Tian, Li, Zhang, & Guest, 2007). Generally, the families studied here showed typical features of the patriarchal family system.

### ***Marriage and low status of women in the household***

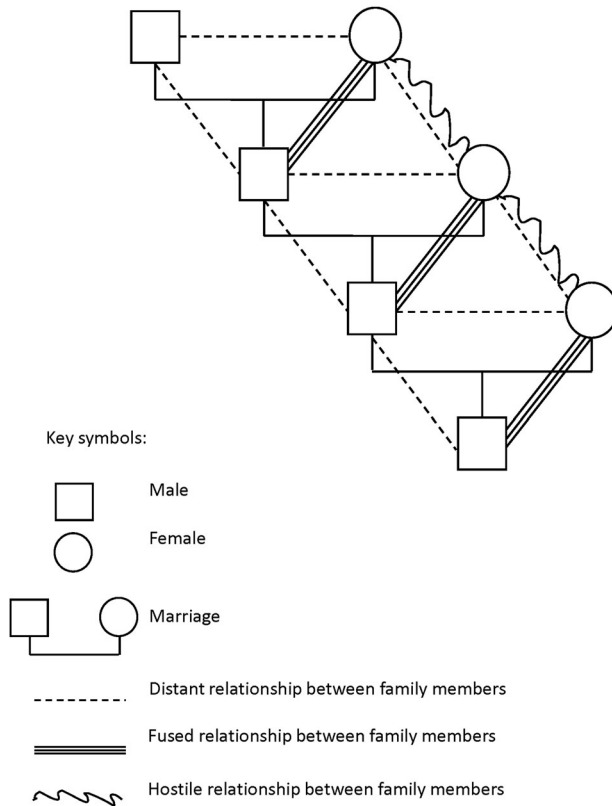
Marriage seems to be a critical challenge to the status of women. Apart from their powerless situation in their husbands' families, women lose their slots in their natal families once they get married. In the present study, these young participants usually did not include their own parents as members of their families and older participants did not include their married daughters as such. Most participants reportedly did not maintain frequent contact with their natal families and seldom received any support from them. These results are consistent with a previous study that indicated that being married in rural China is not a means to seek stronger support for women, but limits them. Married women have weaker social support available to them than unmarried ones (Zhang, 2010).

Taking the perspective of Bowen's family system theory, the dramatic reduction of emotional contact with their natal families for a daughter after her marriage is a manifestation of an emotional cut-off. This is almost a form of collective unconsciousness, which transmits across generations. It deprives women of the important social support of their natal families and pushes them into those of their husbands where they are isolated. Therefore, such emotional breaks from natal families may cause great psychological trauma to women (Bowen, 1976). This has been considered to be an important factor leading to the high suicide rate of young women in rural China (Jing, Wu, & Zhang, 2010; Zhang & Jing, 2011).

### ***Two forms of typical triangulation and family boundaries***

As an important finding of the present study, we obtained evidence for two forms of typical triangulation in traditional stem families, as displayed in [Figure 5](#). First, the mothers of the husbands seemed to be excessively involved in the relationships of the young couples. As the results of FIT indicated, the mother-son distance was almost identical to the distance between husband and wife among young couples. At the same time, the mothers-in-law and the daughters-in-law usually tended to be distant from each other, in order to avoid potential tension and conflict that is there in this relationship (Lee, Yip, Leung, & Chung, 2004; Gallin, 1994). The formation of this triangle (mother, son and daughter-in-law) may be understood within the context of the emotional loss the mothers-in-law suffered in their early years as a new bride. Given the typical experience of a young woman in traditional society, she would be likely to be devalued in her childhood, marginalized in her husband's family and had very limited support from her own parents and husband. Her value is established only when she gives birth to a boy and, therefore, has difficulty in differentiating herself from her son psychologically. Moreover, she needs to have strong





**Figure 5.** The typical triangulations in traditional Chinese families

ties with her grown son to maintain her power, autonomy and resources in the family. Due to such emotional fusion with her son, the mother of the husband has great motivation to marginalize the young bride to ensure her son's loyalty for herself (Das Gupta et al, 2003; Bowen, 1976; Hsiung, 1993).

The daughter-in-law has little standing to compete with the older woman. She may quickly realize the threat posed by her mother-in-law and alienate herself from her husband. As the results of the FITs indicated, in many families husbands pointed towards their wives, but the latter pointed towards their children, implying those over whom they exercised control. This was the second triangle in the traditional stem family, comprising the relatively distant relationship of husband-wife and father-child dyads and strong and even fused mother-child relationships. As our results revealed, in more than half of the parents-children units, the distance between spouses was larger than between parents and children. Instead of the dyad of the husband-wife, that of parent-child seemed to constitute the core in traditional

Chinese families, with the mother-son connection being the strongest bond (Hsiung, 1993). Although this triangulation occurs in western families as well, it is very common in China and relates to traditional familial values.

Impacted by the two triangles discussed above, the boundaries of relationships within the family are obscure. It seems that the husband belongs to his natal family and the young wife is left outside. She has to compromise to be accepted by the new family, for example, by completely submitting to her husband and mother-in-law and by giving birth to a son. The appropriate boundaries between family members are necessary to keep the family in good form (Minuchin, 1974). The obscure boundaries relating to the two typical triangles of traditional Chinese families may be considered to be important factors that lead to various mental health problems for women and their children (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998; Gao, et al., 2006; He, et al., 2004).

Furthermore, the second triangle is a continuation of the first one. These reflect the generational transmission of strong mother-son connections in the patrilineal kinship system. Such multi-generational transmission can also be seen in non-significant generational differences of power distribution and psychological distance among family members. These results imply that the patriarchal family with strong mother-son connections is a very rigid and stable family structure in Chinese society.

### ***Changing the patriarchal family structure and improving women's status***

Inspired by the results of the present study, we join the arguments of radical feminism and insist that the low status of women in the household is the result of the rigid patriarchal family system (Tong, 2013). In order to improve women's status in rural China, it is vital to challenge the patriarchal family system, in order to make clear the boundaries between the young spouses and the husbands' families and to strengthen the connection of women with their own families. The point of this is to change the patrilineal, patrilateral and patrilocal family system into a bilineal, bilateral and neolocal one (Fong, 2002).

Based on results of an earlier study, education, female employment and individualism associated with city life are likely to erode traditional patrilineal beliefs (Hu & Scott, 2014). Nowadays, girls living in rural areas receive more education, therefore, they have greater opportunities to leave their villages and find jobs in the cities. The young couples live at some distance from their parents' families and they, especially the young women, are less restricted by traditional norms and are more autonomous in their lives. They work and earn their own incomes and become more powerful in the familial context than they were earlier (Yan, 2006; Zhang, 2000, 2009).

Based on Jing, Wu, and Zhang's study (2010), the incidence of suicide by women in rural China has decreased dramatically. The rural-to-urban migration by women has been considered an important factor leading to this change.

Change in economic structure and rural-to-urban migration has had an impact on the stability of the traditional patriarchal family structure to some extent and provide great opportunities to rural women to improve their family status and mental health. Changes in family structure and the status of women have been underway in some parts of China. For example, there is evidence that in villages of Jiangsu Province that are partially urbanized, women's status is significantly higher than in the rural areas of Anhui and Yunnan (Hardee, Xie, & Gu, 2004).

## Conclusion

The present study has depicted family structures and examined women's status within the families in rural areas of Xining in Qinghai Province, using methodological tools of FIT and semi-structured interviews, which indicate that the typical patriarchal families with strong mother-son connections remain prevalent in rural Xining and women have low status within their natal and marital families.

Despite some interesting results drawn from this study, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. As our sample included only three villages, its size was fairly small, therefore, the generalizability of our study may be difficult. Further studies with larger samples and greater representativeness would be needed to be replicated in order to validate the results of the present study. Moreover, the phenomenon of gender inequality is unbalanced across different regions of China. As other studies have shown, the family structure has been changing and women's status has been rising in other parts of China (Hardee, Xie, & Gu, 2004; Yan, 2006). It would be interesting, therefore, to compare family structures and women's status in different areas in future studies and to explore how economic and social factors influence the structure of family and women's status in the household.

## Note

1. In some families, only those children who lived with the parents were included in the FIT while others were excluded. However, we included five families in which the married daughters were removed from the family images because all the other children were incorporated on the FIT charts.

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**ABSTRACT IN CHINESE**

近几十年来，尽管中国经济取得了重大发展，但性别不平等在农村地区仍很普遍。本研究以青海省会西宁市农村地区为例，采用定性和定量结合的研究方法，旨在描绘该地区的典型家庭结构，并探讨女性的家庭地位。来自西宁市三个自然村的55名已婚女性参与并完成了家庭印象测验和半结构化访谈。研究结果显示，典型父权家庭结构在西宁农村地区仍十分普遍。女性，尤其是已婚年轻女性往往被边缘化，处于家庭等级的最底层。

**KEYWORDS** 女性地位; 家庭结构; 父权家庭系统