Housework and Gender in Nuclear versus Extended Family Households: Experiences of Taiwanese Immigrants in Canada

Shirley Hsiao-Li Sun, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/shirleysun/1/
Housework and Gender in Nuclear Versus Extended Family Households: Experiences of Taiwanese Immigrants in Canada

Shirley Hsiao-Li Sun *

INTRODUCTION

One of the most dramatic socio-economic changes in the twentieth century was the increase in married women’s paid labor force participation; hence the contested debates on its impact on gender relations in the family, specifically, the division of household labor. On the one hand, data on enduring inequality in dual-earner families have created the perception of a “stalled revolution” (Hochschild and Machung, 1989). On the other hand, Gershuny (2000) contends that men’s and women’s unpaid work time is slowly converging, in part because of a cultural time lag in men’s housework and childcare time adjustments. Moreover, numerous studies have examined both individual-level and national-level factors that shape the gendered division of household labor. At the intermediate level of household processes, however, scholars tend to focus on the nuclear family, which has been the dominant household form in advanced industrialized nations (Coltrane 2000; Smith 1993). Given that only about five percent of the world’s societies practice neolocal residence (Nanda and Warms, 2002), intergenerational relations and cultural perceptions of various living arrangements are important. Indeed, in most societies, a newly married couple lives with or near the husband’s family (i.e., patrilocal residence) or the wife’s relatives (i.e., matrilocal residence). Indeed, life course theorists have called for a global perspective on intergenerational relations (Dannefer, 2003; Putney and Bengtson, 2003). Even in Europe and North America, understanding extended family household dynamics is becoming consequential, especially in light of the increasing number of immigrants arriving from Asia and Latin America where extended family structures remain social norms or cultural ideals (Bengtson, 2001; Glick, Bean and Van Hook, 1997).

In this paper, I investigate the interactions between intergenerational relations and gender relations by examining the division of household labor in nuclear and extended households—especially the three-generational family—in Taiwan, an example of “Confucian-influenced” East Asian societies. The central question is whether and how the presence of grandparents hinders or facilitates change in the gendered division of household labor between spouses. Drawing on thirty-seven, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with married couples and married individuals from Taiwan, this study makes two advances over previous research. First, I analyze interview data, which allows me to explore the subjective interpretations of social actors regarding their own situations and behaviors. Second, I examine gender

* Nanyang Technological University, Division of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, S3.2-B2-08, Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798.
dynamics in nuclear, patrilocal, and matrilocal households, which enables me to specify empirically the various consequences of the presence (or absence) of grandparents in different family settings.

**HOUSEHOLD DIVISION OF LABOR: A BRIEF REVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF FOUR THEORETICAL MODELS**

Existing empirical research on time allocation for housework and childcare has been predominantly guided by perspectives such as the “comparative advantage” or “relative resources” model, the “time availability” model, and the “gender role ideologies” model (Shelton and John, 1996). Each perspective, however, implicitly assumes the nuclear family as a household type. In what follows, I will briefly review each perspective and further hypothesize the consequences of having grandparents in the household.

According to Becker (1991), households allocate their resources of time and money between the spheres of market work, non-market work, and leisure. Husbands become more productive at market work because gender specialization leads them to invest in their capacity to earn through both educational attainment and on-the-job experience. Any allocation of “extra” time to housework would oblige men to forgo a greater amount of income. Meanwhile, the opportunity cost of a woman’s time spent in unpaid work at home is lower. In other words, men have a “comparative advantage” in paid work and women in unpaid work. The asymmetry in the allocation of time spent on housework in the family is seen as a rational response to both biological differences and inequalities in the labor market. Thus, the allocation of domestic tasks would become symmetrical if barriers to economic performance are removed for women and their labor market situation becomes similar to that of men.

In contrast, the relative resources or social exchange model, which builds on the work of Blood and Wolfe (1960) and Lundberg and Pollack (1996), does not assume that all family members seek to increase the household’s joint welfare. Whereas in Becker’s comparative advantage theory, each spouse chooses between market and household work in order to maximize contributions to the family, this model typically treats employment and earnings as exogenous, examining how they affect bargaining processes within the marital relationship. The fact that housework is mostly done by the wife follows from differences in resources such as education and income, rather than biological differences.

Hypothetically, however, household contexts affect gender specialization if the presence of grandparents in the households increases or decreases the economic benefits for mothers to stay at home. Moreover, the presence of the older generation may increase or decrease the effect of bargaining power between couples. Specifically, in the case of households in Taiwan, I offer two hypotheses. First, given the general assumption that younger women’s earning prospects are stronger than older women, the presence of grandparents in the households enables mothers to do less housework. Second, given the cultural norm of “respect for the elders” in a Chinese society, their presence is expected to decrease the bargaining power of mothers. In order to ascertain the actual effect of family structure on the division of household labor, I will look at household practices among working daughters-in-law in paternal stem families and working daughters in maternal stem families.
Instead of seeing housework time as a function of comparative advantages derived from the value of time, the “time availability” perspective sees housework time as a function of the differential amount of time available between spouses. For example, Coverman (1985: 81) found that “younger men who have children, employed wives, and jobs that do not require long work hours are most likely to be involved in household activities”. England and Farkas (1986) found that work hours for both men and women are negatively associated with time spent in domestic activities. Presser (1994) found that men who work different hours than their wives spend more time on housework than those who work the same hours. However, regardless of the amount of time a woman spends working outside of the home, she still tends to perform the majority of the housework (Bianchi, et al., 2000; Shelton and John, 1996). Moreover, time constraints do not affect men and women equally—women’s time is more responsive to the demands of children (Bianchi et al. 2000; Shelton 1992). One source of these “gendered time constraints” may be household contexts. Similar to the “comparative advantage/relative resources” perspective, it is reasonable to expect that the presence of grandparents may differentially increase or decrease availability of women and men.

The third perspective emphasizes “gender role ideologies” and suggests that husbands and wives perform household labor in different amounts depending upon what they have come to believe about appropriate behaviors for men and women. Several theoretical and empirical works have interpreted the division of household labor in this light (Brines, 1994; Connell, 1987; Fenstermaker, 1985; Hochschild and Machung, 1989; Shelton and John, 1993; Shelton and John, 1996; West and Zimmerman, 1987). In addition, the “doing gender” perspective conceptualizes household work as a site for women and men to display and reproduce gender; women do housework not only in exchange for men’s financial contribution, but also to display their femininity, and men express their masculinity by avoiding participation in domestic tasks (Fenstermaker, 1985; Hochschild and Machung, 1989; Shelton and John, 1993; South and Spitz, 1994; West and Zimmerman, 1987). The actual social setting influences whether attitudes will result in the expected behavior (Howard and Hollander, 1997). Given the cultural notion of “filial piety” in Taiwan, however, the presence of grandparents may make it harder to act in accordance with individual attitudes about sharing housework.

In summary, the common weakness of these models is the assumption that the household division of labor occurs mostly between husbands and wives or mothers and fathers and ignores the embeddedness of marital relations in the larger kinship system. A focus on household contexts suggests that individual-level theories of unpaid work behaviors are limited because family structures affect men and women’s time-allocation decisions, shaping the “opportunity costs” of specialization, the terms of bargaining, and the ease or difficulty of adhering to gender ideologies. Contextual factors can influence, directly or indirectly, the specific behavior of each spouse.

THE DIVISION OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR AND CHILDCARE IN TAIWAN

The family system in Taiwan can be described as ethnically Chinese, characterized by a strong patrilineal heritage and the veneration of age (Hsu, 1965; Wolf, 1972). Three sets of social relations are deemed critical in this Confucian-influenced family system: father and
son, husband and wife, and elder and younger brother. Moreover, each pair of roles has a corresponding governing ethic: “filial piety” (Xiao), governs the relationship between father and son; “differentiation” guides the relationship between husband and wife, and finally; “a sense of precedence” frames the relationship between elder and younger brother (Fei, 1992; Stacey, 1983). Extended families, rather than nuclear families, have been the dominant household form. Indeed, previous research from Taiwan shows that the ideal of multigenerational patrilocal households is actualized whenever the family situation permits. The official statistics and island-wide surveys also concur: since the 1970s, one third of households in Taiwan fall into the stem or extended family type, and the proportion has stabilized over time (Yi and Chang, 1996).

Previous studies on intergenerational relations in Taiwan have compared filial support patterns between sons and daughters, but few have looked at the ways in which Confucian ethics influence the division of household labor and childcare between husbands and wives. For example, Lee, Parish and Willis (1994) found that, contrary to popular belief, much of the upward flow of resources to parents continues during periods of rapid economic growth. Specifically, they found that that 79 percent of sons and 70 percent of daughters during the previous year gave cash and in-kind gifts, while only 14 percent of the sons and 21 percent of the daughters received gifts from their parents. Similarly, Agree, Biddlecom, and Chang (1998) compared intergenerational transfers in Taiwan and the Philippines and concluded that “the majority of transfers involving older-persons and their children are indeed unilateral flows upward from children to parents.” Lin et al., (2003) found that “sons generally carry the major responsibility for taking care of their older parents, and daughters fulfill the son’s roles when sons are not available.” Yi (1999) concluded that parental support by adult children in Taiwan is intact as a typical normative obligation with clear patrilineal advantage. Moreover, Yi and Chen (1998) and Hsieh (2000) found that adult children express views in accordance with the traditional expectation that they take care of their parents; more grandparents, compared with adult children, report favoring independent living.

Earlier anthropological field studies focused on exploring the social processes in patrilocal, but not matrilocal, households. Thus, Cohen (1976) highlighted the structural conditions underlying enmity between sisters-in-law, while Wolf (1972) was among the first to explicitly link women’s suicide rates to their family roles. These studies have made invaluable contributions to our understanding of the social conditions of conflictual relationships between women. Knowledge about family dynamics in matrilocal households, however, pales in comparison. This state of affairs has an empirical basis; the percentage of those living with the wife’s parents remained low at 3-4 percent in the period between 1965 and 1985 (Thornton, 1994; Lee and Sun 1995).

Similarly, studies in East Asia that have investigated the relationship between Confucian ethics and the distribution of housework tend to describe quantitative outcomes instead of qualitative processes. For example, Iwama (2005) examined husbands’ contribution to housework in dual-earner families in Japan, controlling for co-residence with parents. Chen (2004) conducted multivariate analysis of the 1993 wave of the China Health and Nutrition Survey and found that “the intergenerational division of labor between women responds to family needs, such as childcare demands, with the mother-in-law more likely to adjust her work activities than the daughter-in-law, and that the work arrangement tends to favor the
house work and gender in nuclear versus extended family

daughter-in-law the closer her natal kin lives." Tsuya and Bumpass (2004) established that "in Japan, co-residing parents are noted to reduce the housework time of all other members in a household; degree of reduction is more significant for husbands than it is for wives."

Other studies that have examined the cultural value of filial piety have not examined how it influences the subjective perceptions of married women and men regarding the division of household labor between spouses. For example, Sung (2003) delineates the ways in which the Korean government promotes the Confucian virtue of "filial piety." Whyte (1997) examined the fate of filial obligations in urban China and found that the younger generation in Baodong is as much or more supportive of traditional family loyalties and filial obligations than the older generation. A very high percentage of both parents and children (95 and 96%, respectively) say that grown children should always demonstrate filial piety towards their parents.

In summary, the existing research on Taiwanese-Chinese and Confucian-influenced families has yet to address systematically the question of whether and how different living arrangements mediate the perception and reality of the division of household labor between the husband and wife.

METHOD AND DATA

To understand familial experiences from the point of view of the participants, 37 in-depth personal interviews with Taiwanese immigrant families were conducted in Vancouver, Canada, in 2003. I recruited my informants through snowball sampling, beginning with four key informants, who were recent Taiwanese immigrants to Canada residing in Vancouver. All informants possess at least 30 years of working and living in Taiwan before their immigration in the 1990s and early 2000s. At the conclusion of each interview, I asked the participant or the couple to suggest another Taiwanese couple who might be willing to provide me with data on their work and family lives in Taiwan. Once a participant agreed to be interviewed, the interview usually took place at his or her residence. The interviews typically lasted one and half hours, but in some cases exceeded two hours. All interviews were audio-taped. The final sampling frame consists of sixteen married couples and five married individuals. A total of eleven individuals had lived in patrilocal households, eighteen in nuclear households, and eight in matrilocal residence in Taiwan; each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym.

As migration studies have shown, immigrants constitute a select group. Indeed, the interviewee group for this study is wealthier, better educated, and has a higher percentage of Mainlander-Taiwanese, as shown in Table 1. Nonetheless, the interview data reflects the view of a subgroup of Taiwanese origin and may help to shed light on various aspects of Taiwanese society.

FINDINGS ON HOUSEWORK

This study looks at core household tasks, including shopping for groceries and household goods, cooking and after-meal cleaning, home maintenance and repairs, and laundry and housecleaning. Questions for the respondents include "Who is responsible for doing the household tasks specified above?" and "On average, how much time does each participant
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Monthly Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharon Chao</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Family business worker</td>
<td>0 (unpaid)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Chao</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Family business owner</td>
<td>not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose Deng</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Senior high</td>
<td>Accounting firm owner</td>
<td>NT $130,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Deng</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Chinese Clinic Owner</td>
<td>NT $130,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma Liang</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy Liang</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Family business chain owner</td>
<td>NT $185,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret Chang</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Senior high</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victor Chang</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Senior high</td>
<td>Manager in private company</td>
<td>NT $12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Liu</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Private company accountant</td>
<td>not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen Chen</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Senior high</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>NT $31,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edison Chen</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Military personnel</td>
<td>NT $22,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara Cheng</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Senior High</td>
<td>Private company manager</td>
<td>NT $26,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Cheng</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Civil servant</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice Lee</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Senior high</td>
<td>Family business worker</td>
<td>0 (unpaid)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron Lee</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Senior high</td>
<td>Owner: Family business</td>
<td>NT $130,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Chu</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Music teacher</td>
<td>NT $300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Chu</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Senior high</td>
<td>Salaried employee</td>
<td>NT $30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marjorie He</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Senior high</td>
<td>Owner: accounting firm</td>
<td>NT $300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick He</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>NT $125,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Wang</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Military personnel</td>
<td>NT $10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Wang</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Private college faculty</td>
<td>NT $40,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

spend on this given task per week.” To start with, I find that married women spend significantly more time on housework than men do, regardless of the type of household structures. Women interviewees in nuclear households reported spending an average of 20.88 hours per week doing various types of housework compared to men’s 5.07 hours. In addition, women interviewees in patrilocal households spent 25.3 hours per week performing housework as opposed to men’s 0.75 hours. Comparing housework time both within the same gender category and across household structures, I find that while co-residing grandparents may contribute to household tasks by shouldering part of the housework, husbands benefit more from such contributions than their wives. More importantly, the gender gap of time spent on housework is wider in patrilocal households than in nuclear households.

Nuclear Households: Outsourcing versus Internal Redistribution

What happens to the division of household labor when wives earn more than their husbands? The wife may use her own income, if it is substantial, for paid help. Brian and Rose Deng provide a case in point. Brian was a doctor who ran a Traditional Chinese Medical clinic with an annual income between US $50,000 to US $125,000, and his wife Rose owned and operated a private notary and accounting office with an annual income between US $150,000 to US $180,000. The couple had been married for more than 25 years by 2003. In those
decades, Brian rarely participated in housework, even though his earnings were less than his wife's. To be sure, Brian remarked that housework was a “wife’s territory,” but what seemed critical in securing his lack of participation was that his income was above the average income of his male peers. In any event, I asked Rose how she managed to run a business in an extremely competitive environment and to maintain a home at the same time without Brian’s help. Her response was typical of married women in wealthier nuclear households: outsourcing housework and childcare.

Q: Who was responsible for doing laundry and cleaning and how much time per week did it take?
A: I hired a maid, and paid her monthly.
Q: When did you start hiring maids?
A: As soon as I started my own notary firm, because I was extremely busy.

The maid would come everyday to pick up the laundry and deliver the clean ones back. The maid would also do housekeeping twice a month.

Q: How much was the fee in comparison to your company’s profit?
A: Doing laundry at that time was NT $3200 (US $80) and housekeeping was NT $5000 (US $125) per month [in 1985]. My monthly income was between NT $500,000 (US $12,500) and NT $600,000 dollars (US $15,000). But I was paying for the nanny, too. I hired a nanny after my children were born…. For my two children, I spent about NT $9,000 dollars (US $225) per month, and I sent them to kindergartens once they were four, it was cheaper, about NT $2000 (US $50) less [in comparison with the private nanny].

Obtaining services through the market was also the strategy Anna Chu used to deal with the incompatibility of housework with her paid job. Anna was a piano teacher who gave private piano lessons and earned more than ten times her husband’s income. She explained how she managed the house:

Q: Who was responsible for cooking?
A: Cooking…I used to hire someone to cook for me, because my husband did not know how to cook at that time. Plus, I could earn more income by not cooking…. The hiring fee was negligible (xiaoerke)…. Less than one tenth of what I earned.
Q: So you never considered cooking dinner yourself?
A: I felt that it made more financial sense for me not to cook. I could give a piano lesson for one hour and my earning would be equal to hiring someone else for several hours.

Interviews with married couples in nuclear households also suggest that when the husbands’ income met current expectations, housework tended to be overwhelmingly the wives’ responsibility, regardless of whether the women were in the labor force or how much income they earned. Emma Liang’s husband, who ran a successful financial management company from 1989 to 1997 in Taiwan, earned sufficient income for Emma to stay at home to care for her two young children, and to hire maids to buy groceries, to clean and to do laundry.

Q: Who was responsible for laundry and cleaning?
A: When I was in Taiwan, I had someone coming once a week to clean the house, and it was 6 hours per week. Right now, I have someone coming twice or three times a week,
Q: What made you decide to hire someone?
A: My younger daughter was just born then, and housework and childcare were too much.
Q: Why did you stay home to care for your children?
A: I thought about hiring a Filipino maid [to care for the baby], but it was quite difficult at that time and I heard that others had experienced trouble. I was young and I thought I could handle myself, so I did it. At that time, many neighbors had live-in Filipino maids to help buy groceries, cooking, doing laundry...everything.
Q: What would be your ideal for sharing housework and childcare?
A: My ideal? I wish I had a butler (guanjia) at home who could arrange everything for me. I would only need to tell him what I want to do at certain times and he would get it done or make arrangements. Now it is difficult to find a butler like that. Now you can only hire someone and you tell them what to wash today, what to cook and to clean today....

It is essential to note that Emma did not consider her husband as part of the equation when I asked about her ideal for sharing housework and childcare. Instead, her desire was to have a “butler.” And, indeed, her husband’s six-digit annual income made it possible for her to hire and supervise a live-in help at home.

By contrast, couples with relatively modest household income tended to share housework. Margaret and Victor Chang earned a combined annual income of approximately US $50,000 when their children were young. Margaret earned slightly more than Victor. A comparison of their estimates of each other’s housework hours put the housework hours of the husband at roughly 24 hours per week and those of the wife at about 32 hours per week. While there was an eight-hour difference, this nonetheless represented a more gender-balanced distribution of work than in those cases where the husbands’ income met traditional earning expectations, with the husband contributing 43% of the total hours. Margaret provided details of how they shared the housework in the following exchange:

Q: Who was responsible for buying groceries and how much time did that person spend per week?
A: Groceries...sometimes my husband, and sometimes we went together. Probably three hours per week all together.
Q: Who was responsible for cooking and cleaning after meals?
A: I cooked, and sometimes I’d clean, and sometimes my husband and my kids did.... Every weekday I cooked dinner, and on Sundays occasionally. On Saturday evenings, we would go out or occasionally buy Kentucky Fried Chicken to eat at home. I’d say probably 10 hours for cooking [per week], and...probably 5 hours for cleaning.
Q: How about laundry and housekeeping?
A: My husband and I washed clothes once a week, and mopped the floors...altogether, probably 6 or 7 hours [per week]... He shared two thirds of the work.

In this instance, it would seem that for couples with less income, the work is shared more equally. In summary, instead of sharing the housework as would have been predicted by the relative resources theorists, wives who earn more than their husbands or whose husbands’
income was in the higher brackets bought themselves a solution to the “woman’s problem” of housework. This in effect allowed the couples to avoid a potentially emotional confrontation on the issue of gender equity. Traditional gender norms still prevail. However, for less well-to-do nuclear families, like their Western counterparts, shared housework between spouses is observed. In addition, couples in nuclear households utilize different types of commercial help with housework: live-in maids for the wealthier households and fast food restaurants for households with less income.

Intra-gender Conflict in Patrilocal Households

Market-based services exist and can be utilized, but couples in patrilocal households do not feel justified in turning to outsourcing housework. Married women in patrilocal households are in a unique position to learn first-hand what it means to be a daughter-in-law in the Chinese context, as the following remarks by Sarah Liu reveal:

Q: Why were you anxious to find work outside the home?
A: Because we were a big family. If I had stayed at home to care for my children, I would have to cook for everyone. In fact, in the first year of my marriage, I did not work outside of home, and I had to take care of my brother-in-law’s child. Both my brother-in-law and his wife were working. Daughters-in-law seemed to be supposed to do that...taking care of children in the family and cooking.

Of course, there were occasions when young couples disagreed with the elders. What did they do? One possibility, as Sarah Liu admitted, was to tell a white lie.

Q: How would you describe the experience of living with your parents-in-law?
A: I felt that I did not have much freedom. For example, my parents-in-law thought that eating at home was most healthy, and that it was what a wife and a mother should do. In other words, they could not accept that you dined out. From my perspective, I liked going out on the weekend, so of course my parents-in-law were unhappy about it.

Q: What did you do then?
A: I would not argue with her, and we would take them out with us to new restaurants. Sometimes, we would not tell them. If they happened to find out, we would say that friends invited us [when in fact there was no invitation]. In any case, we avoided saying that we were eating out.

As Fei (1992: 132) points out in his book *From the Soil: the Foundations of the Chinese Society*, “with paternalistic power, people are not allowed to oppose traditional forms.” Indeed, when there is a discrepancy between the elder’s habits and the young couple’s preferences in the daily matters of food preparation and consumption, telling a white lie seems not only unavoidable but also necessary.

In George Lakoff’s analysis of political rhetoric, a rescue scenario is characterized as a story in which “there is a Hero (The Reliever-of-pain), a Victim (the Afflicted), a Crime (the Affliction), a Villain (the Cause-of-affliction), and a Rescue (the Pain Relief). The Hero is inherently good, the Villain is evil, and the Victim after the Rescue owes gratitude to the Hero.” Studying the division of household labor in patrilocal households suggests, at
times, that social structures (in this particular case, family structures); can in effect turn the Villain into the Hero and the Victim into the Villain, as my analysis of the following statement of 52-year-old Helen Chen reveals:

Q. Could you elaborate on your experience as a daughter-in-law?
HC: [Taking care of my parents-in-law] involved mostly preparing meals, and also housekeeping. They were in a pretty good health condition, so there was not much they asked from me.

Q. Why was it your responsibility to cook, to wash clothes and to clean...?
HC: Because we didn't have any other young adults in our house! You know, my husband worked nine-to-five, my parents-in-law were old, and my two kids were young at that time. My younger brother-in-law also worked. Tell me, who else could do housework other than me?

Q: Did you think about talking to others about sharing [the housework]? Because I felt that they were old. How could you share with the elders? I would have been ashamed. After all, you could not say 'Mother-in-law, would you like to share with me,' right? I couldn't bring myself to say it. No daughter-in-law in our time would dare to say to a mother-in-law that "I would clean on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and you would clean on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday." We were taught to respect the elders.

This passage is particularly instructive about the relationship between the authority of elders (laoren jia), the salience of married women's identity as daughters-in-law, and male privilege. According to Helen's formulation, the reason for her doing more housework is not male privilege, but respect for elders. When I asked why she was the one who did all the housework, Helen's line of reasoning was not that "[her] husband did not want to do housework"; rather, it was that she felt unable to "share with the elders." Moreover, "the elders" really meant "the mother-in-law," as revealed by Helen's remark that "no daughters-in-law in our time would dare say to mothers-in-law that..." In other words, the empirical fact that both Helen's father-in-law and her husband were exempt from doing household chores was not perceived as the source of her extra work. Moreover, if Helen had resented doing housework, the resentment would have been directed toward the mother-in-law, because the latter was perceived by her as the only other person who could have pitched in. The unequal division of household labor between the husband and wife, which numerous studies have shown to be fundamentally a function and a form of gender inequality (Engels, 1972; Hartmann, 1981; Hochschild and Machung, 1989), is experienced and perceived by daughters-in-law as conflicts between women.

Indeed, husbands also perceived the unequal distribution of housework more as a function of intergenerational relations rather than of marital relations, as in the case of 52-year-old Edison Chen:

Q: How would you explain the division of housework?
EC: My wife runs a business at home, and my parents and my kids are at home so they can look after each other. I go to the office in early morning and come home late in the evening.

Thus, it is no surprise that when I asked Edison how he felt about such arrangement living
with his parents, he replied “it’s a very good thing; we can look after each other (huxiang zhaoying).” In contrast, when I asked his wife, Helen, what she thought would be an “ideal” relation between the married couple and the parents-in-law, she reported that it was best “live separately” for the reason that “the burden of housework is heavy,” and the feeling of some pressure that “one is unable to loaf on the job (xiang toulan mei banfa) with the older generation in the same household.”

Helen’s description of daughter-in-law’s feeling of inability to “loaf on the job” is shared by another interviewee, Marjorie He. 53-year-old Patrick He and 46-year-old Marjorie He have married for 25 years and in the first 3 years of their marriage, they lived with Patrick’s parents. When I asked Marjorie her feeling about having an older generation in the house, her statement echoed Edison Chen’s point about mutual caring at home.

However, when I asked further questions, she gave a clear example of the difference between living with her mother-in-law and her own mother:

Q: What is an ideal situation between parent-in-law and daughter-in-law?
MH: Keep the distance…. I feel that two women with different blood lineages cannot live under the same roof. If you were living with your own mother, whatever mistake you make she will accommodate you (rongren). But, it’s different with my mother-in-law. For example, after I had dinner with my husband’s family, his sister would volunteer to wash dishes, but my mother-in-law would say ‘don’t wash’. Of course, when I volunteered, my mother-in-law also said ‘don’t wash,’ while she put the apron on me! To be fair, when I am with my own mother, I’ve grown up by her side; she gave birth to me; no matter how lazy I am, she would not react. If it were my sister-in-law, she would be a little irritated. So, it is better that mother-in-law and daughter-in-law live separately, and gather together once in a while.

Patrick He shared Marjorie’s sentiment of separate housing. When I asked Patrick what he thought would be an “ideal” relation between the married couple and the older generation, he replied: We should be filial. But it is better to live with my wife’s parents, because my own mother has higher demands of daughter-in-law, and the husband is like the cream in the cookie, sandwiched in the middle (jiaxin binggan).

In other words, from Patrick’s perspective, it would not be ideal to live long-term with his own parents, because he felt being caught in-between mother and wife. Marjorie also stressed that it was not due to personal animosity and highlighted her importance in the paternal family:

MH: It is certainly not that I don’t get along with my mother-in-law…. Actually, my mother-in-law was constant in debt, and [my husband’s] brother was not of good bearing. I kept paying for them. Indeed, there was one Chinese New Year’s Eve, when my husband’s family came over to our house—since my father-in-law’s memorial tablet (paiwei) was with us. My mother-in-law couldn’t take it anymore, and felt like running away. I sat her down and asked her how much she owed and the remaining evening we spent on discussing how to share the debts. My brother-in-law suggested that I ask my husband whether he agreed [for us to shoulder the debts as a couple], and I said,
‘if I as the daughter-in-law agreed, on what basis should her son disagree?’ Even I agree to shoulder the debts, what can he say about not shouldering the debt accumulated by his own mother? I have done so three times.”

While both husbands and wives perceive that the distribution of housework was more a function of generational relations, some couples emphasized that there was a distinction between housework and childcare. While daughters-in-law may still be responsible for cooking, the older generation would help with taking care of the grandchildren. 53-year-old Daniel Chao and 50-year-old Sharon Chao have married for 24 years. Daniel owns a family business, and Sharon Chao was “the boss’s wife” helping manage the operation. In the first 17 years of their marriage, the couple lived with Daniel Chao’s parents. Daniel expressed that to live with the older generation (laorenjia) is “very good,” and is one’s “good fortune” (fuqi). Indeed, when Daniel’s father passed away, he felt a sudden loss of ground; all along, he “could focus on work because the older generation helped taking care of the grandchildren.” “Although the division of housework never changed,” Sharon Chao concurs, “parents-in-law did care for the children when they were small and even played with them when they were teenagers.” When I asked Daniel what he thought would be an “ideal” relation between the married couple and his parents, he replied: The older generation does not put on airs (laorenjia meiyou jiazi). My job is to serve as a bridge, so that my parents would be good to their daughter-in-law. The trouble emerges when they protect their son and the daughter-in-law gets jealous.

In sum, how is the cultural meaning of filial piety manifested in the patrilocal family? Both husbands and wives perceive that the distribution of housework was more a function of intergenerational, rather than marital, relations. Husbands do not partake in housework and, with the exception of grandparental childcare assistance; the older generation does not participate in other housework in patrilocal households.

Intra-gender Cooperation in Matrilocal Households

As the following testimony from Clara Cheng shows, in contrast to “daughters-in-law” in patrilocal households, she did not feel duty-bound to cook or do house-cleaning after coming home from work, because the primary social relationship in which she was embedded in was not “mother-in-law and daughter-in-law,” but “mother and daughter.”

Q: Who was responsible for grocery shopping?
CC: I was working, and had to leave early [in the morning]. There was a traditional public market near my home and my parents liked going there to pick up fresh groceries instead of going to the supermarket to buy frozen food. So my parents did grocery shopping most of the time.

Q: What about laundry and cleaning?
CC: Well, we used the washing-machine, and my parents would take care of it during the day.... During the workdays, my parents would clean the house. On the weekends, I would take over.

In other words, Clara’s parents “naturally” helped with housework, and she accepted their help without any hesitation. Furthermore, we can observe the gender asymmetry in the
family system: sons-in-law in matrilocal households reported no comparable experiences as those described by daughters-in-law in patrilocal residence.

For example, Aaron and Alice Lee, a couple who has married for 22 years. Aaron’s parents passed away soon after their marriage, and during the start-up years of their family business, the couple relied on the live-in assistance from Alice’s mother. Aaron Lee described the feeling of living with the older generation is that “an elder at home is a treasure \( (jia\ you\ yi\ lao\ ru\ you\ yi\ bao) \).” Moreover, Alice reported that the older generation is the most trustworthy and understanding when it comes to childcare:

Q: Who was responsible for housework and childcare when you had your family businesses?
A: My mother took care of my kids after they were born until they were almost 3 years-old.

Then, my mother still did not feel rest assured, so she moved in with us to care for both my children.

Q: How did you care for your parents?
A: Not really...I felt that it was always my parents taking care of me.
Q: But, somebody has to cook...
A: Yes, and it was my mother who cooked. I owed her too much.
Q: So you did not come home to cook after you worked in your factory?
A: No. It was always my mother who helped.
Q: Did the division of labor change after your parents passed away?
A: Yes. My share increased, because no one was there to help me. I remember that my mother would make breakfast, dress my kids up, and prepare them for school. She would then wake me up for breakfast. She would help me with the laundry. After she passed away, I had to do everything that she did for me.

Forty-nine-year-old Peter Wang and 46-year-old Elizabeth Wang lived with Elizabeth’s mother when they relocated from the central to the northern part of Taiwan, and they also enjoyed positive experiences with her:

Q: Has the division of housework and childcare changed since you were married?
EW: When I changed jobs to move to Taipei and my mother and sister moved in with us. My mom did a lot, washing clothes and cooking. Kids come home and saw waipo (maternal grandmother).
Q: You mentioned that your mother-in-law stayed with you for some time?
PW: Yes, that was 1988, after we moved to Taipei. Because my father-in-law passed away early and my mother-in-law was alone, so we bring her over to live with us so we can care for her.
Q: Did that change your time schedule or family life?
PW: Yes. Home organization became my mother-in-law’s responsibility.... Every day around 8am or so my mother-in-law would take my little one to take the school bus.

Elizabeth also elaborates the reasons why she did not live with the paternal parents; the concerns echo previous comments by daughters-in-law in patrilocal households:
Q. Why didn’t you live with your parents-in-law?
EW: My husband knows my temperament (piqi). I am a quite straightforward person. So he felt that if we had arguments, it would be difficult to maintain the emotional closeness. But if there were some distance, then everyone could be courteous. In fact, my mother-in-law was nice to me. But living together means that you are going to hear gossip—Mama Chang says this, Mama Li says that, and your mother-in-law says whatever. No matter whether it was right or wrong, true or false, when you hear all the gossip, you would be affected emotionally.

As indicated by this exchange, in contrast to the strict style of interaction between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, the older generation in matrilocal households is supportive of young married women, reflecting the underlying emotional connections between generations in matrilocal households, which contrasts with the structural and authoritative relations in patrilocal households.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary change (or lack thereof) in men’s unpaid work behavior presents an interesting puzzle. Is the revolution stalled or is there convergence? My findings suggest that the answer needs to be contextualized not only at the individual or national level, but also at the level of household structure. Western case studies have tended to focus on intact family versus single parent family. For Taiwan as an Asian case study, however, family structure is usually differentiated by nuclear versus three-generational families.

Using data based on in-depth interviews with spouses in new Taiwanese immigrant families, who reported on their family experiences during their earlier decades in Taiwan, the analysis highlights the following:

1. Typical daughters-in-law in paternal stem family do not expect their husbands’ participation in the division of housework, with the exception of childcare. Indeed, the typical first reaction of a wife in patrilocal households to my question of “sharing the household chores” was between her co-resident mother-in-law and herself, rather than between her husband and herself. Married women as young daughters-in-law in patrilocal residences do not even consider the possibility that men, including their husbands and fathers-in-law, should be involved in housework. None of the existing theories would predict this finding, although the outsourcing idea that those who can afford would purchase the labor of other women—but not men—has been well-documented.

2. Wives in matrilocal households receive help from their own mothers with respect to both housework and childcare. Moreover, unlike daughters-in-law in patrilocal households who report reservations towards living with the elderly, sons-in-law in matrilocal households, together with their wives express unequivocal gratitude towards such daily assistance from the older generation.

3. In addition, in nuclear family with fewer resources, like their Western counterparts, shared housework between couples is observed.
Thus, this study complements recent sociological literature of parental support in Taiwanese households. Existing research has shown that, in nuclear households, interaction patterns of married couple with their non-co-residing elders follow closely the extended family norms (Yi, 1999), and that, with regards to childcare, "to reside with elderly generation prohibits fathers to monitor children’s daily activity" (Yi, et al., 2004: 537). By examining the internal dynamics of the division of household labor in extended households, I show that generational relations take precedence over conjugal relations in the typical Chinese family. Moreover, the generational relation is maintained at the cost of gender equality—indicated by the findings that the housework is either performed by the older woman or the younger one in the extended family households, and rarely, if ever, by men. In addition, nuclear family living in some instances provides conditions for greater gender equity in sharing household labor.

REFERENCES


Journal of Comparative Family Studies


Shelton, B. A. (1992). Women, Men and Time: Gender Differences in Paid Work, Housework and
Leisure. Westport, CT: Greenwood.


Copyright of Journal of Comparative Family Studies is the property of Journal of Comparative Family Studies and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.