

Why Does Domestic Violence Against Women Still Happen in Rural Areas of China?

—A Systemic Review of Previous Studies on Cultural Factors

Yifei Tian^{1,a,*}

¹Shanghai University of Political Science and Law, Shanghai, 201701, China

a. yve555@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: A great deal of attention has long been paid to domestic violence against women owing to its long-lasting harm, whether physical or psychological, on the victim. The factors associated with domestic violence have been discussed by previous research. Among them, the impact of traditional culture is an indispensable part that can't be neglected. The pertinence has been proved by past studies, however, the comprehensive interpretation of the association between domestic violence and gender culture hasn't been stated. This study investigates the relationship between traditional gender culture and domestic violence against women in China. And the exact cultural influence on family violence is presented. The journal articles on intimate partner violence (IPV) and domestic violence over a period of 24 years covering 1998-2022 were systematically reviewed in this article. And the cultural factors mentioned in the previous articles were carefully analyzed. Our analysis shows a strong relationship between culture and family violence against women. We conclude that traditional culture has somehow promoted the occurrence of family violence against women in China. The patriarchal ideology and filial piety (important parts of Chinese culture) are related to the occurrence and durative of domestic violence.

Keywords: rural China, domestic violence, cultural effects

1. Introduction

Domestic violence against women has always been a critical social issue in China owing to its adverse effects on women's physical and mental well-being. Of all the victims of domestic violence, women in rural areas are exposed to a greater likelihood of suffering. To have a better knowledge of it, previous studies have been conducted to measure the related risk factors. Among them, the cultural factor has always been playing an indispensable role. Although most studies have considered cultural and societal factors [1], specific traditional gender cultural impacts on abusers and victims haven't been systematically reviewed to date. Moreover among all the research of the past decades, only a small part shed light on the family violence against women in rural areas of China. The analysis was based on 11 peer-reviewed journal articles on intimate partner violence (IPV) and domestic violence over a period of 24 years covering 1998-2022. By reviewing previous

journal articles on domestic violence against women, we will summarize the exact cultural impact on men and women resulting in unpleasant tragedy.

2. Domestic Violence

Domestic violence, identified as violent behavior that happened between family members[2], has been a pervasive issue receiving increasing attention from scholars in countries worldwide. Broadly speaking [3], domestic violence includes violent behavior that happened between couples or parents and offspring. While the narrow definition is violence that happened only between partners, especially against women. In this passage [2], we will especially shed light on domestic violence against women owing to the fact that married women reported having psychological problems resulting from IPV are at a greater risk of mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and other emotional problems [4-6].

Violence against women has long-term as well as immediate health effects. Women's physical health and mental health will suffer. Being aware of the harm of domestic violence, an increasing amount of attention is being paid to women suffering from it worldwide [7]. China is no exception to this case. An increasing number of studies were conducted by scholars from China mainland focusing on domestic violence or intimate partner violence(IPV). Owing to the traditional gender culture, the occurrence of domestic violence against women is more often in rural areas than in urban cities in China [8]. Results from previous studies found that women in rural areas of China were more likely to report violence victimization. Considering their low educational level and conservative mind, rural women are confronted with a more imperative and thorny situation. Women in rural areas almost have no access to and even don't have the awareness to attend to a psychologist, psychiatrist, or other mental health professionals for help. Therefore, it is the right time for us to take it seriously.

Efforts have been made to tackle the problem. In modern China(after 1949), a constitutional legal document was declared by the government of the People's Republic of China stating that women should be entitled to equal rights in every aspect of life, including politics, economics, culture, education, and so on[9]. To address the problem, the first Anti-Domestic Violence was enforced in December 2015 which defines family violence accurately --- domestic violence includes both physical abuse and psychological violence inflicted by family members including spouses, children, and elder family members. As a specialized law focusing on family violence, the enforcement of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law of 2015 makes considerable progress. However, the establishment of laws doesn't equal the end of the story. The gender-related cultural norms and values are still permeating communities and shaping people's attitudes and behaviors [1].

Previous studies have been discovering the determinants of family violence in rural areas of China on different levels. Researchers in Hong Kong examined the relationship between demographics, socioeconomic status [10], social support and substance abuse, and women's and husbands' in-law conflicts with family violence in the preceding year and the lifetime period. In 2020, Song et al. studied the contextual effects of domestic violence against women in rural China [1]. As far as we are concerned, the last systematic review discussing risk factors related to family violence against women in China mainland was published in 2022 [7]. Researchers assessed related risk factors at an individual(female victims/male perpetrators) level, relationship/family level, and society/cultural/attitude level. Although patriarchy-related factors(husband dominance, identification with traditional family culture/gender role, and IPV justification) were considered in previous research and its positive relationship with intimate partner violence victimization was tested, the exact cultural impact on IPV was not comprehensively stated, and summarized. In this review, we aim to find out the answer to this question: how does traditional culture influence family violence happening to rural women in China?

2.1. Rural Context in China

According to previous researchers [11], domestic violence happened in rural areas has specific features. Firstly, domestic violence happening in the courtyard can be noticed from around. As an association society, what happened in the village will quickly spread across the village. Secondly, domestic violence in rural areas has its complexity which is presented in many kinds of forms ranging from battering, and chastising to harming which can end up in disablement and even death. Despite physical violence, there's also visual violence, verbal violence, and sexual violence. Thirdly, domestic violence usually comes with grave consequences in that the physical and mental condition of the victim is badly hurt.

Using a survey of more than 3000 married, rural women in Anhui and Sichuan provinces and controlling for potential endogeneity of migration and return, researchers found that migration has some statistically lasting effects on a woman's position in the household [12], though the effects are not always positive, nor are they universal. It is discovered in numerous studies that migrant women have more autonomy in urban cities than they did in rural homes. In light of this, there is a great likelihood that rural areas have their particularity, unlike urban cities.

2.2. Female Victims

Conducted research on Muslim women in China who were living under oppression and suffering from domestic violence [13]. At the intersection of Chinese and Islamic cultural contexts, Muslim women have to obey both Chinese values and Islamic beliefs which both advocate a woman's subordinate positioning to her husband. The exact cultural influence is embodied in the following areas in their everyday lives. First, they will accept the violence they encountered and deem it as "fate", an unpleasant and important part of their culture as Chinese and as Muslims. The belief that they could not change their own lives and this is their unfortunate destiny prevents them from changing their lives. Second, the preservation of the family's reputation is put forward from their vulnerability. In the Chinese cultural context, "family face" is of great importance. If their unfortunate experience was known by the neighbors, they would feel shameful and could no longer live there. Therefore they dare not attend to neighbors for help and had to bare all the things themselves. Third, Hui Muslim women are influenced by the expectation of giving birth to a son. In their beliefs, a woman's worth to a family is to bare a male heir who is much more valued by a daughter. If a woman fails to do so, they may face serious negative, social consequences and endure beating from their husband. Fourth, the mother-in-law who holds the highest privilege in the family plays an indispensable role in facilitating and even worsening domestic violence against Hui wives. In a patriarchal area where family hierarchy is heightened, wives are at the disposal of their mothers-in-law and husbands, determining their unfortunate lives with no autonomy. Despite that the suffering of Hui women has its particularity (in the dual binary of Islamic and Confusion), some of the cultural influences can also be found in most rural areas in China [9][13].

Ko Ling Chan studied the aspects related to the likelihood of men committing violence that influence the vulnerability of women at three different levels — the ontogenic, the micro system, and the macro system [10]. The researcher discussed the factors relating to cultural values and attitudes on the macro system. Among the factors contributing to sexual violence, the author considered patriarchal authority structures and some cultural-specific risk factors. Within the patriarchal authority structures, male dominance and patriarchal norms have long been considered central family values and even treated as the motto of life [9]. Abusers are found to hold a more traditional gender role assumption that the man should be the provider and the woman the caregiver. And this has been widely reported to have resulted in the subordination of women and thus in the violence perpetrated against them. Despite that [9], problems in the family are not expected to

spread around according to the traditional culture which may make it difficult for victims to seek help. Family disgrace is heightened and thus intensifying the dangers of disclosure for the victim.

In a study on the meaning of suicide of women in rural China, researchers found that there's much more behind woman's acts of suicide in the context of a gender-unequal society [14]. Male superiority and female inferiority have been embedded in most aspects of social life. Also, hierarchical order is emphasized within the family [14], with the senior male at the top and juniors and females at the bottom. The patriarchal ideology regards women and children as the property of men. Thus, as dominant superiors, men are entitled to the social norms and culture to beat their wives and children. In this context, the researchers argued that "the suicide of women is one of the ways to rebel against their oppressive status in the society and a real denouncement of the unequal relationship between genders in China." (The suicide of women is linked with domestic violence)

If women can't stand domestic violence and unequal treatment, why don't they choose to divorce? Liu and Chan discovered the reason which is closely related to patriarchal culture [15]. They found that abused women usually accept the fact of being beaten. For almost all the women researchers interviewed, violence is normal and inevitable in a marriage. They thought that being beaten by a husband is a common event for any married couple. They even felt that their husband have the authority as the head of the family to discipline and beat them if they do something that displeases their husbands. Apart from the negative acceptance of violence, abused women don't have independent resources to make it possible to leave a marriage. In the patriarchal culture where man is dominant, women are not economically independent and don't have property.

Song et al. proved the association between cultural factors and family violence with appropriate measurement [1]. In this study, cultural causes were specified as gender norms formed in a community over a long time. Researchers used married woman's right of inheritance as one of the indicators of cultural impacts. Also, women's employment status and choice of the profession were taken into consideration and were classified into three types: (1) agricultural work (2) non-agricultural work as migrant workers, and (3) non-agricultural and other work inside the village. The results show that women who have the right to inheritance experience 31.7% less domestic violence than those who do not. And women engaging in non-agricultural work had a 31.6% lower risk of experiencing domestic violence compared with those whose earning was mainly from cropping and livestock farming.

Generally speaking, the unequal gender culture seems to be a cage where abused women have nowhere to go but to accept and suffer. Although many of the previous studies didn't especially focus on the violence that happened in rural China, they still have reference value for us.

2.3. Male Perpetrators

2.3.1. Masculine Gender Role Expectation and Face

Compared with the cultural victims, few studies paid attention to the cultural factors embedded in men's violence against their intimate partners. In the research conducted by Chan [16], the relationship between men's violent behavior against their wives and masculinity in Chinese culture was identified. Among the male respondents committing domestic violence, the research found that face orientation was particularly emphasized and valued. They were sensitive to the needs of face and their social presence and would get out of control in a face-losing situation. They had a strong intention to protect their faces and maintain their social standing in front of people.

2.3.2. Filial Piety

We can find out from above that traditional face culture has a significant impact on men's perpetration. Apart from that, men are also influenced by filial piety. Ko Ling Chan discovered that when in-law conflicts happen men are always put in a dilemma and feel frustrated handling these [16]. When in-law conflicts happen, the man chose to kneel and give in to his wife not bearing the guilt of disrespecting his mother. Men always feel frustrated and angry when their obedience to filial piety was challenged by their wives. Compared with beating his wife, a man was more afraid of failing to be filial to his mother and being negatively judged by others. According to the respondents of the research, the husband's facial needs should always be given priority. "Their wife is expected to play a complementary part in assisting them to achieve their gender expectations and present their capability to people outside the family in the name of their face." If their face and ideal image of masculinity is challenged, there's a greater likelihood of them using violence to show their gender dominance [16].

3. Discussion

The cultural facts mentioned in this article can't accurately reflect the status quo in today's society. The influence of the traditional gender culture today should still be identified in future studies. Owing to the cultural impact mentioned above, what measures can we take to improve the situation? There remains room for future study on the interrelationship between education, economy, legislation, and culture. It is worth discovering to what extent literacy rate relates to the cultural impacts on people. To what extent can the legislation change the traditional gender culture that is rooted deeply in people's minds? Will the situation get better if women are entitled to equal economic resources and income? With the development of society and the increase in women's literacy rate, can abused women throw off the shackles of traditional culture? What drastic measures should we take in the future can efficiently resolve the problem? The answer to these questions should be discovered in the foreseeable future.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, traditional culture has somehow prompted family violence against women in China. And traditional culture makes it relatively difficult to prevent domestic violence. In a patriarchal area where family hierarchy is heightened, wives are at the disposal of their husbands and mothers-in-law, determining their unfortunate lives with no autonomy. When in-law conflicts happen, the husband usually chooses to blame it on his wife fearing that he might disrespect his mother and be criticized by others for disobeying filial piety. In the patriarchal ideology, women are regarded as the property of men meaning that men are entitled by the culture to beat their wives. And women even deem it acceptable to be beaten by their husbands. Considering the preservation of the family's reputation, problems and conflicts that happened within the family are not expected to spread around to others. Therefore abused women dare not to attend to their neighbors or relatives for help. Moreover, influenced by a widely accepted traditional gender role assumption that the man should be the provider and the woman the caregiver, many women are not economically independent, which means that it is almost impossible for them to divorce after suffering from domestic violence.

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