Shining a new light on modern Chinese families and gender roles

Family and gender are often intrinsically linked to each other. Whilst the relations between the two have been heavily studied in western societies, one European Research Council-funded researcher is currently undertaking the first comprehensive study of family practices in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The work is leading to fascinating insights on gender, conjugal relations and intergenerational dynamics.

Confucian ideology was the guiding principle of Chinese family relations for over 2,000 years. But in the early 20th century this came under scrutiny as protocols of hierarchical family relations were considered to be holding society back. There followed a series of political and social campaigns to reform the structure of family life in China.

The Intimacy (Doing Intimacy: A Multi-sited Ethnography of Modern Chinese Family Life) project, led by Jieyu Liu, deputy director of the SOAS China Institute at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London approaches the subject of
Delving deeper into ‘doing intimacy’

Shifting gender relations in modern Chinese societies

modern Chinese family life from a new and unconventional angle. Intimacy considered the family as a process of practices and experiences, moving away from a rigid analysis of family structures to the quality of relationships. Lui focused on what she calls: ‘doing intimacy’.

“In short, this project takes a closer, fresher, critical look at Chinese family dynamics as they are lived,” Liu says. “And by doing so, it documented significant generational shifts in various aspects of Chinese family life covering child-parent relations, dating and courtship, gender relations, sexual relations, and ageing and later life.”

Delving deeper into ‘doing intimacy’

To shift the focus to the practices of intimacy, emotions and agency, Intimacy examined three generations of women’s experiences with their natal family, i.e. the family they were born into.

As Liu explains, married daughters often have intimate relationships with their parents, despite patrilineal and patrilocal cultural traditions. The former sees the organisation of family relationships by lines of decent from male ancestors: the latter, the settling of the family close to the husband’s relations or under their roof.

“Women have taken an active role in strengthening natal ties, which has gradually led to the modification of the cultural preference for sons, and patrilocal practice. Indeed, this may eventually challenge the patrilineal culture within Chinese society.”

Shifting gender relations in modern Chinese societies

On the surface, modern Chinese societies seem to have developed many of the same gender roles and activities as seen in Western societies. For example, many young Chinese experience dating culture and nuclear households that are similar in the West. “However, my research indicates that the interdependence between conjugal family and wider kin persists and such ties are strengthening in the face of economic and welfare uncertainties,” Liu adds.

There has also been a shift towards more affective and communicative conjugal relationships amongst younger generation Chinese couples. “This shift goes hand-in-hand with the older cultural ideal of the bridegroom bringing significant material goods to the marriage,” Liu continues.

“The traditional Chinese patrilocal family model has been reformatted for the present modern era – whilst in the past newly-weds lived at first with the husband’s parents, they are now more likely to live alone. But it remains the societal norm and expectation that the husband will be responsible for purchasing the marital home.”
An upcoming regional analysis

From January 2021, Liu will begin one of the key final stages of the project – an analysis of the regional differences between the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Two research monographs are also in the works.

And the wider legacy of the project? “Because matters relating to emotions, sex and intimacy are such private parts of human lives, there is a notable absence of studies of this kind. The findings of this project will be of great value to global family studies,” Liu concludes.

Keywords

Intimacy, gender, China, patrilineal, patrilocal, child-parent relations

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