

A Comparative Analysis of Gender Roles and Relations between China and America from the 1940s to Present

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Abstract

Gender roles and relations have undergone great changes in both China and America with the rapid development of the society. A comparative analysis of the gender roles and relations of the two nations is very helpful for the mutual understanding of the each nation. This paper studied the gender roles and relations of the two nations in the 1940s, which is my grandparents' generation and the 1980s, which is my parents' generation based on my family's true story and some personal interviews. It also made some predictions for the future gender roles and relations. Although my family's story and the American story based on my interview may not reflect the overall situation of each society, hopefully they can provide a mirror form which we can catch a glimpse of the gender relations of the two nations.

1. Gender Roles and Relations in China and America in 1940s: My Grandparents' and an American Couple's Story

My grandparents lived in a remote village in Inner Mongolia, which is located in northwest China. Their pathetic story, which is not exceptional but quite common among their peers, epitomizes the gender relations in feudalistic China. Let me begin my story with my grandmother. Born in a farmer's family in 1925, my grandmother was adopted to her father's elder brother because his wife was infertile. They also adopted a son younger than my grandmother. My grandmother never had the chance to go to school or receive any formal education. The only chance for her to learn something was that when she went out to collect something for burning, she overheard a little of teachers' teaching. So she could do some basic arithmetic and knew several simple Chinese characters.¹ Before she got married, her daily life was just concentrated on domestic chores. As young as 8 years old, she started cooking for the family. Domestic chores, such as cleaning, stitching, cooking, feeding animals, taking care of her younger brother occupied all her time.² I remember my grandmother told me that she used to do all kinds of chores with her younger brother carried on his back. Her bound feet made her even harder to deal with heavy family burden.³ Before she got married, she had never seen my grandfather before. Her marriage was totally arranged by her parents, who showed more affection to land and property than to my grandfather. They married off my grandmother for 30 mu land, which they thought was a good deal at that time.⁴ My grandmother, who got married at the age of 17, told me that even 17 was not an early marriageable age among her peers. The common age used to be as early as 15.⁵ My grandfather, who was two years older than my grandmother, was also born of a farmer's family. Because his family couldn't afford all their six children to go to school, my grandfather, who was the elder brother of other 4 children, was forced to toil on the land to support his family according to his father's will. His family and my grandmother's family lived in two separate villages not very far away from each other. And through some acquaintances, their parents arranged Grandparents' marriage.⁶

¹ See appendix 1, A8

² See appendix 1.A4

³ See appendix 1, A7

⁴ See appendix 1, A1

⁵ See appendix 1, A2

⁶ See appendix 1, A3

After marriage, my grandmother was more burdened. She not only had to work at home but also work on the soil.⁷ Life was hard for my grandparents. Although it was not easy to feed their children, they still believed that the more children they had the more fortunate they were. All together they had nine children, among whom five were sons. During that time, the dominant “rule” was that it was the duty of the bridegroom’s family to provide housing and betrothal to bring a daughter-in-law into their home. My grandparents, fearing they may not afford to get their sons married, gave two sons to some remote relative or acquaintance. Luckily, one of them remained living in the same village of my grandparent. And after been told his story, he still kept in touch with my grandparents. But the other son was separated to an unknown family and never reunited with my grandparents in their lifetime.⁸ Anyway seven children formed a big family and it was not easy to feed them, not to mention educate them at school. Meat and eggs were luxury for them. My grandmother seldom ate these luxuries herself. She always served them to my grandfather first and then left them for her children. Even when life was getting better in the 1980s, she still reserved them for my grandfather and her children and grandchildren. Her life was to toil, to serve her husband and children.

Mr. and Mrs. Arnow was an American couple married in 1940, almost the same year as my grandparents. Mrs. Harriet Arnow finished her high school at the age of 17. After graduation, she used to work in a local kindergarten.⁹ But faced with the uncertainties and difficulties of wartime, she thought it was better to get married rather than wait until war ended. “Get your man while you can” was a popular saying among her peers. So shortly after graduation at the age of 17, she got married.¹⁰ Mr. Harriet used to be an accountant in a company after graduation from a college.¹¹ They got acquainted in their friends’ party and both them had a good impression to each other. But without furthering contact, Arnow got married to Mr. Harriet who was 3 years older than her.¹² Their early years of their marriage seemed quite happy. Mr. Arnow went out to work every day while Mrs. Arnow just stayed at home to do domestic work and rear their two children. With the outbreak of war, which provided unprecedented job opportunities for women, more and more American women began to work outside home. Mrs. Arnow, who was encouraged by her friends and neighbors, also wanted to have a try. But her decision to take a job was rejected by her husband, who considered it would show his inability as a bread winner. He even threatened to leave home which led to Mrs. Arnow’s compromise.¹³ In 1942 when the battlefield was badly in need of soldier, Mr. Arnow decided to join the army, leaving his wife and two children at home. He stated that “he had more to defend than a single woman.”¹⁴ In the wartime, with the restriction on production of clothing, shoes, and household appliances, it was not easy for Mrs. Arnow to manage both household work and take care of her children. For alleviating labor shortage and for a sense of patriotism, Mrs. Arnow attended a day-care center in a nearby hospital. Mrs. Arnow worked outside for the first time after marriage although it was just volunteer work. She recalled proudly, “the kitchen and the sewing room are the housewife’s battleground.”¹⁵

My grandmother and Mrs. Arnow lived in different societies with different social contexts. Grandma, with feudalistic ideology deeply rooted in her mind, spent her lifelong time serving her husband and taking care of her children even grandchildren. Year after year, she was bound to domesticity. Her husband and children composed all her life. She had no sense of herself. She just thought she was doing what she should do. To challenge the traditional ideas was something that never occurred to her. She even considered her obedience as virtue. Although she also experienced the war, because she lived quite far away from central China, the war didn’t have any significant impact on her life. Unlike my grandmother, Mrs. Arnow, who lived in urban area in a much more developed society both in terms of economic achievement and people’s ideology and who received a certain degree of education, began to be aware of her status in family by demanding to work outside. Wartime offered her new opportunity for independence and freedom and challenged the conventional stereotype regarding women’s role in family and society.

⁷ See appendix 1.A4

⁸ See appendix 1.A5

⁹ See appendix 2, A4

¹⁰ See appendix 2, A2,6

¹¹ See appendix 2, A6

¹² See appendix 2, A1

¹³ See appendix 2, A7

¹⁴ See appendix 2, A4

¹⁵ See appendix 2, A7, 8

But at the same time, the war also intensified her commitment for the conventional family pattern. She still didn't get rid of the stereotyped family structure and family burden. Marriage remained the central focus in her life despite the occurring labor force changes.

2. Gender Roles and Relations of in China and America in 1980s: My parents' and an American Couple's Story

Significant changes have occurred concerning my parents' story. Unlike my grandmother who didn't receive any education, my mother got a degree from a junior high school. But she didn't finish her school years uninterruptedly. Her family was very poor and my grandfather thought girls didn't need any education. My mother was forced to quit school several times when there were too many family chores for my grandmother to manage. Luckily, under my mother's teacher's aid and encouragement, my mother finished her school. Because of her excellent performance in school, she was admitted to a primary school to teach Chinese in the village where she lived. With more and more her peers moving to urban area, she also wanted to have a try. Finally she succeeded in finding a job in a primary school in the city with the help of a relative. It was not until my mother settled down in the city did she get married when she was already 32 years old which actually is a quite late age at that period of time. ¹⁶My father, who also finished junior school education, is 3 years older than my mother. His first marriage ended in divorce because he found his ex-wife was not a good match. Then my aunt, who worked in the same factory as my father, introduced my mother to my father. After further contacts which actually just include two or three meetings, they decided to spend the rest of their life together. ¹⁷When they got married in 1980, the family planning policy had already been implemented in China. Partly in response to this policy and partly because they think one child is fine, I am the only child in my family.

Mr. Brown and Mrs. Brown married in 1983. They used to study in the same university in Detroit. Mrs. Brown studied in engineering and Mr. Brown was an economics major. They had known each other through their classmates and gradually fell in love. They kept their intimacy and didn't tell each other's parents until they were going steady. "My parents quite understand me and they think I've just found the right person who fits me." ¹⁸After graduation Mr. Brown worked in a bank as a clerk. And Mrs. Brown realized her dream as an engineer, although she was always in a disadvantaged position in her job hunting because women were considered secondary choice to fit the job. When their jobs were secure and their relationship was more stable, they got married when both of them were 28 years old. They both devoted much time and energy in their career. Working occupied their much time and family chores were usually shared by them. Three years after their marriage they had their first child and two years later they gave birth to another child. ¹⁹

Great changes have taken place in my parents' generation in terms of gender relations both in China and America. Since the founding of New China especially since the implementation of the reform and opening policy beginning from the late 1970s, Chinese women are enjoying more and more free choice for their marriage. Marriage is no longer something that is arranged by their parents but the couple's own choice to find an ideal mate according to their own will. Though my mother got married a bit later than her peers, marriageable age of women has been postponed significantly. Family size shrank considerably and many nuclear families appeared. Inside the family, men and women sharing equally in decisions, family expenditure and housework is the trend. ²⁰The same profound change has taken place in American society. With the progress of women's movement in 1960s and 1970s, some acts were passed and several organizations were set up to ask for equal rights of women. Women are more and more active in demanding full equality to men. Middle class women, who used to be confined at home by domesticity, can no longer tolerate "The problem that has no name" and began to demand working outside home. Many work, such as engineer, which was considered a rightful field just for men, begin to be taken up by women. In terms of childbearing, American has shifted from the Baby Boom of the 1950s and early 1960s to the Birth Dearth of the 1970s. Children are not considered as the aim of marriage and many women choose to have fewer children. With more and more women entered work force, gender roles in family are becoming more and more homogeneous.

¹⁶ See Appendix 3, A2,3

¹⁷ See Appendix 3, A1,2

¹⁸ See Appendix 3, A1, 3, 5

¹⁹ See Appendix 3, A2, 4, 6

²⁰ *New Trends in Chinese Marriage and the Family*. (Beijing: Women of China Press, 1987), 87

However, because China is still a developing country despite the economic reform along with great changes of ideology, Chinese women didn't receive as much education as their American counterparts on the whole. In addition, many Chinese women's work was still confined in traditional women's sphere.

3. My Prediction for Future Marriage in both China and America

In my generation, both men and women are having more and more freedom and choices concerning marriage and family life and this is sure to be the trend in the future both in China and America. Marriage is no longer as predominant in people's life as before. Women who prefer to remain single are increasing and society is more and more tolerant to them. People's gender identity will be more and more diverse and homosexual is gradually being accepted by the society. Because women as well as men put more and more emphasis on personal fulfillment, people's education period tend to be prolonged and marriageable age will be more and more delayed. With the burgeoning of information technology, various ways are used in finding one's mate, which provides people with more and more choices. The standard of one's mate is also undergoing great change. More and more people are trying to find out their "soul mate", to find someone who really matches. Family background and social status tend to retreat to a secondary importance. Marriage will be more and more taken as a person's own matter rather than something concerning their family clan. With more and more women participating in work, distinct mark of social division of work will be less and less visible. Women will enter more and more domains which are conventionally considered especially for men while men will also work in some fields which used to be considered as women's. People's expectation for marriage is rising. And although in the future divorce rate will not necessarily grow, divorce is considered a better option than just maintaining a dissatisfying marriage. In terms of childbearing, although children will still be considered an important part of marriage and family, desire for larger family will decline. Some couple even doesn't want to have any child. DINK (double income, no kids) family is appearing and will increase in the future.

4. Summary

In brief, tremendous changes have occurred in the past three generations in both China and America. From my grandmother to my mother and then to me, women's status is rising remarkably. In my grandmother's generation, women, living in feudalist China ruled by feudalist regulations and ideas, were always in a subordinate position in society and family. Instilled with feudalistic ideas and being illiterate, they even didn't realize their unequal status. In my mother's generation, women are making great progress in achieving equalitarian. The founding of new China and the rapid and drastic economic and social reform provide a favorable environment for women. Women are more and more awakening in pursuing equal rights. Many of them received a certain degree of education which enabled them to work outside to be economically independent. In America, gender roles and relation have also undergone great changes. In Mrs. Arnow's generation, wartime provided women with new opportunity to break the traditional restrictions on women and new working experience motivated them to reconsider their gender roles. But many women still were bound by stereotypes due to various reasons. As society progressed to Mrs. Brown's generation, higher education for women becomes prevalent and working women are common. They began to touch upon some men specialized sphere. Observing the great improvements of women's status, I think the future of women is rosy and full equalitarian is the tread both in China and America. People's conception on gender will continue to change and adjust. Conversely, changes in marriage and family structure are and will continue to transform society. Society had to make some adjustment to these changes. Through the reciprocal effect, old ideas are uprooted and new institution are established and become dominant in society.

Appendix 1

Q1: Was the marriage arranged? By whom?

A1: Yes, it was arranged by your great grandfather. Your grandparent hadn't seen each other before their marriage. Your great grandfather liked land very much and married your grandmother for 30 mu land. And he thought it was a good deal.

Q2: At what age were they married?

A2: When your grandma was 17 and your grandpa was 19. Your grandma said 17 is not an early age for marriage. The common age used to be as early as 15.

Q3: What social status were both families and what was the relationship between the two families?

A3: Both families were farmers. His family and your grandmother's family lived in two separate villages not very far away from each other. Through some acquaintance their families' parents got to know each other.

Q4: What work did each of them do?

A4: As young as 8 years old, your grandma started cooking for her family. Domestic chores, such as Cleaning, stitching, cooking, feeding animals, taking care of her younger brother occupied all her time. After marriage she not only had to work at home but also work on the soil. Your grandfather's work was mainly toil on the land and seldom did any housework.

Q5: How many children did they have?

A5: They had nine children. During that time, the convention was that it was the duty of the bridegroom's family to provide housing and betrothal to bring a daughter-in-law into their home. Your grandparents, fearing they may not afford to get their sons married, gave two sons to some remote relative or acquaintance. Luckily, one of them remained living in the same village of your grandparents. And after been told his story, he still kept in touch with my grandparent. But the other son was separated to an unknown family and never reunited with your grandparents in their lifetime.

Q6: What expectations would each of them have as to their gender roles?

A6: At that time they thought little about their gender roles. Your grandma considered obeying your grandfather and taking good care of children virtue. Your grandpa considered his duty to support the family.

Q7: Did my grandmother have bound feet?

A7: Yes, it made her even harder to manage the family chores. And that's quite common among her peers.

Q8: did they receive any education?

A8: No, neither of did. The only chance for your grandma to learn something was that when she went out to collect something for burning, she overheard a little of teachers' teaching. So she could do some basic arithmetic and knew several simple Chinese characters. And your grandpa's family couldn't afford all their six children to go to school. Your grandfather, who was the elder brother of other 4 children, was forced to toil on the land to support his family according to his father's will.

Appendix 2

Q1: Was the marriage arranged? By whom?

A1: No, we got acquainted in my friends' party and both of us had a good impression to each other. And without further contact we decided to get married because the war is coming. You know society is quite unstable.

Q2: At what age were they married?

A2: Faced with the uncertainties and difficulties of wartime, I thought it was better to get married rather than wait until war ended. "Get your man while you can" was a popular saying at that time. So shortly after graduation when I was 17 I got married with Mr. Arnow who is three years older than me.

Q3: What social status were both families and what was the relationship between the two families?

A3: We both are born of a middle class family and there's no relationship between our families.

Q4: What work did each of them do?

A4: After graduation, I used to do work in a local kindergarten. After marriage I just stayed at home to do domestic work and take care of my two children. Mr. Harriet used to be an accountant in a company. In 1942 when the battlefield was badly in need of soldier, Mr. Arnow joined the army. He said that "he had more to defend than a single woman."

Q5: What expectations would each of them have as to their gender roles?

A5: I thought domesticity is still women's sphere, like doing family chores and caring children. And my husband thought he should be the bread winner and I should depend on him.

Q6: What was each of your education level?

A6: I finished my high school and my husband went to college majored in economics.

Q7: Did the war have any impact on your life?

A7: Yeh, and quite significantly. The war provided unprecedented job opportunity for women, and more and more women began to take up to work outside. I was encouraged by her friends and neighbors, and also wanted to have a try. But my decision was rejected by my husband, who considered it would show his inability as a bread winner. He even threatened to leave home. At last I compromised. In the wartime it was not easy for me to manage both household work and take care of children. You know the production of clothing, shoes, and household appliances were all restricted. The kitchen and the sewing room are the housewife's battleground.

Q8: Did you work outside during the war?

A8: Yeh, there was labor shortage and also out of patriotism, I attended a day-care center in a nearby hospital. It's the first time after marriage I worked outside although it's just voluntary work. I'm proud of it.

Appendix 3

Q1: Was your marriage arranged? By whom?

A1: No, your aunt is the mediator of us. And after further understanding of each other, we decide it ourselves.

Q2: At what age were you married?

A2: I got married when I was 32, which is a delayed age among my peers. You know your father's first marriage ended in divorce because he thought they didn't fit each other. When we got married, he was 35.

Q3: Tell me more about your education and working experience.

A3: My school year was not finished uninterruptedly. You know your grandparents were very poor and your grandfather thought girls didn't need any education. I was forced to quit school several times when there were too many family chores for your grandmother to manage. Luckily, under the aid and encouragement of my Chinese teacher of my primary school, I finally finished my school. Because of my excellent performance in school, I was admitted to a primary school to teach Chinese in my village. With more and more my peers moving to urban area, I also wanted to have a try. Finally I succeeded in finding a job in a primary school in the city with the help of your grandpa's bother.

Appendix 4

Q1: Was the marriage arranged? By whom?

A1: No, we studied in the same university and got to know each other by our friends. I didn't even tell my father until we were going steady. My parents said they understood me and they thought I had just found the right person who fit me."

Q2: At what age were you married?

A2: At 28, we are of the same age.

Q3: What's your education level?

A3: We both got a bachelor's degree in a university in Detroit. Mr. Brown studied in economics and I was engineering major, which were not very popular among girls.

Q4: What work did each of you do?

A4: After graduation my husband worked in a bank as a clerk. And I become an engineer, which is my long cherished dream. But it was hard for me to get this job. You know during that time women were always in a disadvantaged position. They were always considered secondary choice to fit the job.

Q5: What expectation do you have as to your gender roles?

A5: I think marriage should be based on love. We didn't decide to get married until we thought we have fully known each other.

Q6: How many children do you have?

A6: We have two, a son and a daughter. Working occupies our much time. Three years after our marriage we had the first child and two years later they had another baby.

Q7: Then since you are all so busy, who do the family chores?

A7: We share it and I think domesticity shouldn't be just a wife's sphere. It's faire to do it together.

Note

Anderson, Karen. *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II*. London: Greenwood Press, 1981

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