

Views of Difference Between American Family Structure and Chinese Family Structure from the 17th Century to the Future Trend

Hanzhang Su

*Guangdong Experimental High School AP International Curriculum, Guangzhou, 510375, China
happysu0416@163.com*

Abstract: This paper focuses on the difference between the American family structure and the Chinese family structure from the 17th century to the current years. By reviewing the history background of America and China, this paper analyses and explains the possible causes of the difference appeared. Finally, considering the current affairs and the history's path, this paper predicts the possible future trends of both the country.

Keywords: family structure, American family, Chinese family

1. Introduction

The family has always been one of the most indispensable contents throughout human history. It is clear that the structural changes of families are much affected by the social context during different eras. These changes have so far not only influenced numbers of generations but also reflect back on the changes in the society as well. Naturally, countries with different histories and social backgrounds have their families involved in distinctive patterns. China and the US, the two superpowers in contemporary society, are good examples. Although all superpowers, the distinct history of the two countries that the US was first a colonial country and China involved originally a feudal society led the two countries on two separated paths of the family revolution.

Ever since the modern history of the US, the family structure that the two countries covered in varied eras contains various similarities as well as disparities. This paper will primarily focus on the comparison of urban family structure between America and China throughout US modern history (starting from the 16th century). During the three separated periods from the 16th century to the 20th century, the family structures of the two societies developed separately with many aspects of the society influenced and the generations grew from different family structures that contributed to the society in different ways. Until now, the two countries share a distinguished family structure, but the trend towards their future family structure is similar: there will be more nuclear families.

There is no such saying that one family structure is inferior to the other, for that all family structures are suitable for one period of time and unsuitable to another. This is why the structure always changes. The importance of understanding the two patterns is to use experience and facts to predict what family structure the society tends to have, how the generations that grow up in the following family structure will influence the society, and what adaptation can the society make to adjust to the changing family structure.

2. Literature Review

2.1. 17th century ~ 18th century

The modern history of the US began in the 17th century when it started becoming a European colony. Technically, the European colonization in the American Continent had started since Christopher Columbus's arrival in 1492. However, it was not until the mid-17th century that the colonizer completely governed America, and that is when the nuclear family became the major family structure in the US.

Before the colonizer arrived, the pre-contact Native Americans were organized in the tribal family structure. The complicated extended family, the tribe, includes not only the spouse and their children but also the spouse's blood and non-blood relatives. Inside the tribe members share daily activities and family responsibilities, as opposed to the nuclear family later brought by the colonizers. Beyond the extended families, many tribes, including the Navajo, Crow, Iroquois, and the Cherokee, were organized around clans, which refers to "a group of relatives who share an identity, hold property in common, and trace their descent from a common ancestor". Different tribes and clans formulated various family rules, resulting in some tribes were matrilineal or matrilocal, in which the mother was the center of the family, while some other tribes were patrilineal or patrilocal, in which the father was the center of the family; some tribes developed polygamy, while others prohibited.

As soon as the Europeans arrived, they brought the family structure in the European society to American, changing the major family structure into smaller family units as they defeated the Native Americans. The 17th century was when European started to abandon their original beliefs of the "family concept", which refers to "all of the people living in one house, under one head, including servants as well as parents, children, and other 'blood' relations", and came to value the family structure that center on the spouse and children only, which is now called the nuclear family [1]. The European generation that absorbed the changing concept of the family naturally brought the changed family structure to the New World. So far, American society has changed its major family structure from the tribal family structure to the nuclear family structure.

In contrast to the changing forms of family structure, although the society experienced dynasty changes during the 17th century, from Ming Dynasty to Qing Dynasty, the Chinese society remains a relatively stable form of family structure, but it is very different from the American family structure whether after or before the changes took place. The Chinese society adapted the extended family structure that is organized by clans that were the locus of cooperation in pre-modern China since the Song Dynasty (960-1279) [2]. The only changes on family structure caused by the alternation of the Dynasties were the slight increase in nomadic families, influenced by the Likely to the tribal family structure of the pre-modern American society, members in clans share public goods and safety nets including education, ancestor hall, bandits, over-taxations, etc [2]. In the patriarchal society, the men in the family were expected to pass through official tests and become country officials, while women were expected to help her husband to organize clan affairs and also assist in building social networks.

The reason for the difference involved in the family structure of the two societies can be credited to the divergence in the history of the Western culture and the Eastern culture. At the very beginning of human history, the purpose of the term "family" was to take care of the herd within a certain geographical area, but not a group of people with blood relationships [3]. It was later in history that the family became the concept of blood kinship. As it developed, larger families and more family structures appeared. The Clan's appearance influenced both the Western culture and the Eastern culture at the beginning. The intimacy-distance principle that governed the clans carried through Chinese history since the Western Zhou Dynasty, which can be proved through the Yandi system and the Quique system that have been implemented since the Spring and Autumn Period until the tail end of feudal society [3]. However, the clan system didn't continue in the Western Society as it did in

China. The development of the individual family added geographical factors' priority in clans, undermining the importance of blood relation in clans and eventually leading to the collapse of the clan family structure as well as the intimacy-distance principle [3]. Another major reason for the disruption of the clan structure was that the developing slavery: prisoners of war and debtors, the original members in various clans, were forced to become slaves. The priority-inferior principle of the slavery system finally damaged the intimacy-distance principle that governed the clans, and the clans themselves fainted as well [4]. This directly resulted in the former mentioned 16th and 17th-century British family structure—turning from all people living in the house (including the servants and slaves) to nuclear family structure.

2.2. 19th century ~ 20th century

During the 19th century and the 20th century, American society maintained the nuclear family as their major family structure. The abolition of slavery in the late 19th century undermined the priority-inferior principle in the family and thus promoted the spread of nuclear family structure. The changes that the American major families experienced were the change from the Victorian family to the “companionship blueprint” and then at last to another new blueprint that focused on independence and interdependence [5].

The term Victorian family was the product of the patriarchal society. In the Victorian family, love was the mother's responsibility. The ideal status of the Victorian family structure according to Cherlin was

a nuclear household consisting, a father who left home every day to make the money to support the family, a loving mother who was the center of the family life, and the children.

What's worse than living under this unfair distribution of family responsibility was that the women had no right to discuss the family decisions, because it is only men that in the Victorian family made decisions while others followed. Such an equitable family structure was then overthrown along with the arousing feminism. Meanwhile, the necessity of love in families was emphasized. The changing attitude towards the family brought a new form of family structure: the companionship blueprint. The companion blueprint fixed the family responsibility distribution based on the Victorian family structure: women's scheme shifted more to participation in the public sphere, while the men became more involved with their personal family lives and leisure. However, the simply much improved family structure was again questioned and adjusted. By the middle of the 1960s, the advanced image of family began to crystallize. This new image emphasized self-fulfillment, flexible roles, and intimacy and open communication [5]. Father no longer has to take charge of the family income, and mother is no longer bandaged by the family issue. The open communication allowed men and women to flexibly arrange the family responsibilities considering their own circumstances.

Compared to the maintenance of the basic family structure in the American society, the changes that happened to China during the 19th and 20th century have completely shifted the Chinese family structure. The alternation from feudal society to capitalist society and final stabled to the socialist society all had impacted on family structure. The clan structure vanished with the feudal society in 1840. What followed was the time period of the Republic of China. Influenced by the western colonizer and the capitalist culture, number of the smaller-unit family increased during the short period of the Republic of China [6]. However, the marriage laws at that time weren't completed, and thus arrange marriage, bigamy, prostitution and trafficking were widely practiced on women and children. What really put an end to the turbulence of marriage and intimate relationships were the establishment of the new China, which is now called the People's Republic of China instead of Republic of China, and the Marriage Code of 1950. The Marriage Code of 1950 required all Chinese citizens to follow Freedom of Marriage, Monogamy, Equal Rights of Men and Women, Birth Control,

etc [7]. After the marriage disciplines were set, the major family structure of China has become three generations living under the same roof, forming a family that usually range from 4 to 6 people[8]. The baby boom that took place right after World War II contributed to part of the family size, but it was then reduced with the birth control that was mentioned in the Marriage Code of 1950. As the year followed on, the average size of the Chinese family decreased: 4.33 in 1953,4.43 in 1964,4.41 in 1982,3.36 in 1990.

Comparing the Chinese and American family structure, it is clear that American has developed a more mature nuclear family system since Americans started this practice early up to the 19th century. It wasn't until the formation of the new China that the nuclear family became one kind of family structure. The difference in time line could be attributed to the difference in the country's revolutionary time period—America became an independent country after the Declaration of Independence in 1776, while the People's Republic of China became an official independent country in 1949. However, the barriers toward the nuclear family structure weren't the same between the American families and Chinese families. To the American society, the difficulties for families that didn't fit into the nuclear family mode was economic. Low wages during the early stages of Industrialization caused even the house cost to be hard for the nuclear family[9]. It was the later cheap land and high wages that helped the newly married couple become more certain in setting up an independent household, which also promoted the adjustment of the nuclear family[10]. Very different, what has blocked Chinese society to the nuclear family structure was muchly the traditions of the Chinese society itself. According to Chen [11], the traditional Chinese family mode was that “sons were permanent members of the family line, while daughters left their natal family behind at the time of marriage.” The Marriage Code of 1950 shifted the core dyad of the intimate relationship system from the “father-son relationship” to the “husband-wife relationship”. Together with the post-Mao economic reform that greatly promoted education and values of the Chinese families, the number of extended families became gradually smaller along with the nuclearization.

2.3. 21st Century and Future Trend

The 21st century is the time when the American family structure became the most similar to the Chinese family structure. For both societies, the most identical Character of the 21st century American family structure was diversity. In America, the nuclear family mode has stabled for a rather long time. The changes that arrived in the 21st century is the acceptance toward other new family structures such as one-parent family, the LGBT family, etc. Unlike in the past, when choosing divorce or declaring oneself as the LGBT group member were considered unethical, the more and more open attitude of the society towards the diversity of human identity. According to the LGBT research, about 90% of the parents show their supportive attitude towards their kids when they announced themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual [12]. The parents' support is one of the most important backups for these kids. The supporting attitude towards the LGBT groups explains the drop of heterosexual family percentage, from the 83 percent in the 1970 to the 69 percentage of today[13].

Slightly different from the American society, the yet illegalness of the same-sex couple causes the that the homosexual family hasn't been one of the promoted family structures. In addition, although an increasing number of people and most of the young ages are being supportive to the LGBTs, still there are a large group of people who have homophobia, which puts great barriers on the path of the legalization of the LGBT families. Despite the status of the LGBT groups, Chinese current family status is also in high diversity just as the American society is. Couple nuclear family, direct nuclear family, and single family are all the existing family structures in the current Chinese society [14].

Although the nuclear family has been the major family structure for decades, still, currently there are questions on whether the nuclear family is the most suitable family mode for today's society. There has been argued that the nuclear family, as a purpose of adult self-fulfillment, sometimes is not

that good for the family life, because fewer relatives are around to help and relieve their stress of family responsibility [15]. This is also one of the leading readings on why the Chinese society's nuclearization is so slow compared to the western society—the Chinese grandparents contribute much to the family responsibility especially on housework and children care, which allow both the parents to have full-time jobs to support the family financially.

3. Analysis

Just as the theory mentioned in the introduction, the difference and similarities between the American family structure and the Chinese family structure are all caused by society changes and society value changes. The difference between the 17th and 18th century was caused by the different society structure: the turning to capitalism influenced by the British colonizer and the feudal society that has carried on for over a thousand year. The tribal structure was formed based on the Native American's nomadic society as well. If the two-family structures were changed, the society couldn't work—the Ming Dynasty and the Qing dynasty relies heavily on the blood relationship net, which was even relative to the country's rise and fall; the clan family structure couldn't work in the early US society as well—rapid industrialization and the slavery system all blocked the clan structure from dominating the society system.

As for the 19th century and the 20th century, the revolution of the American family was majorly promoted by the women's revolution, which never really happened in the Chinese society. The Second World War was the most vital factor for women having full-time jobs as men instead of doing home-working. This working trend carried after the Second World War and formed the women's appeal to work and gain money as men. This status never happened in China, as the women generally gained equal rights as men as soon as the clan family structure ended at the beginning of the People's Republic of China as the Marriage Code of 1950 required. In fact, even before the Marriage Code of 1950, there has long been saying that “women can hold up half of the sky”, emphasizing the strength of women.

However, looking back to the past, none of the family structure that appeared in the family revolution of both the society is perfect: the clan structure would promote consanguinity, the Victorian and companionship family structure seriously compresses women's ability to work and create value for the society, the nuclear family involves high cost and put the parents into relative isolated stages that lacks help... All the phenomenon is normal, because the changes happened because of the imperfection of the last family structure image. Society is changing, so is the family itself.

It is very possible that in the future the LGBT family would be legal in the Chinese society, and it is possible that there will be a new form of family structure that takes up the dominant place of the nuclear family. The history has proved that the changes of the family structure never stop, and will never stop in the future as well. People would continually argue about the current family structure, and socialist would continue to invent new aspects in family lives. The only unchanging aspect of the family structure is that there will always be differences between the different societies, and the family structure would always be changing.

4. Conclusion

So far, this paper has ultimately listed the difference among the Chinese and American society's family structure from the 17th century to the 21st century and their future trend. History has revealed that the differences were always caused by the difference in society structure and the society's beliefs. The predictable future of both the American society and the Chinese society family structures are that

both of them will involve more diverse forms, but we are never able to predict whether the nuclear family or any kind of the other family forms will always dominate the society.

References

- [1] *Marriage and Family in Shakespeare's England*. Digital Collections for the Classroom. (2012, July 16). <https://dcc.newberry.org/?p=14411>.
- [2] Greif, A., & Tabellini, G. (2012). *The clan and the CITY: SUSTAINING cooperation in China and Europe*. SSRN Electronic Journal. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2101460>
- [3] Morgan, L. H. (1964). *Ancient society*. Belknap Pr.
- [4] Engels, F. (1918). *Der Ursprung Der familie, Des Privateigentums und Des Staats*. Dietz.
- [5] Cherlin, A. J. (2005). *Public and private families: An introduction*. McGraw Hill.
- [6] Yi, Z. (1986). *Changes in family structure in China: A simulation study*. *Population and Development Review*, 12(4), 675. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1973431>
- [7] CHENG, Y. A. N. G. (1987). *FAMILY law in china*. "International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family", 1(2), 248–258. <https://doi.org/10.1093/lawfam/1.2.248>
- [8] Xu, A., & Xia, Y. (2014). *The changes in mainland chinese families during the social transition: A critical analysis*. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 45(1), 31–53. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.45.1.31>
- [9] A.U.C., A. U. S. A. C. (n.d.). *The United states of America. Family life in the USA - TheUSAonline.com*. <https://www.theusaonline.com/people/family-life.htm>.
- [10] Smith, D. S. (1993). *The curious history of theorizing about the history of the western nuclear family*. *Social Science History*, 17(3), 325. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1171429>
- [11] Chen, F. (2009). *Family Division in CHINA'S transitional economy*. *Population Studies*, 63(1), 53–69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00324720802541658>
- [12] D'Angelo, A. R., Hershberger, S. L., & Pilkington, N. W. (1998). *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth and their Families: Disclosure of sexual orientation and its consequences*. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 68(3), 361–371. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0080345>
- [13] Jennifer Chrysler, L. D. (2012). *The changing reality of the American family* 201. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbtq-rights/reports/2012/01/27/11009/the-changing-reality-of-the-american-family/>.
- [14] Tong, J., & Huang, C. (2016). *The change of contemporary Chinese family structure and its social impact*. *China Social Science Net*. http://cssn.cn/ddzg/ddzg_ldjs/ddzg_sh/201608/t20160803_3147942.shtml.
- [15] Brooks, D. (2020, June 30). *The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake*. *The Atlantic Daily*.