

Research explores why daughters in Chinese families with a preference for sons fail to break from sustained exploitation

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Many Chinese families have a clear preference for sons over daughters. Credit: Lancaster University

New research from Lancaster University Management School (LUMS)

unveils the extent of sustained exploitation within many Chinese families that have a clear preference for sons over daughters—and why daughters can stay 'trapped' in this situation throughout their lives.

The new study explores Chinese families that have a strong preference for sons, where daughters are expected to make substantial financial or labor contributions to their parents before and after marriage—often to subsidize the schooling and living expenses of their brothers.

The paper by LUMS' Dr. ChihLing Liu, published in *Marketing Theory*, analyzes approximately 30,000 comments on online sites zhihu.com, a Q&A forum, and bilibili.com (equivalent to YouTube). Dr. Liu studied comments posted between 2016—when popular Chinese TV series, *Ode to Joy*, sparked renewed attention to [family](#) discrimination and abuse that many female children continue to endure—and 2022.

After scrutinizing the data, Dr. Liu reveals the shocking impact this family relationship can have on daughters, with many losing friendships and relationships while others are left feeling suicidal.

Dr. Chihling Liu said, "Whereas in cases of modern slavery, victims may be aware of the fact they are being exploited but lack the economic means or knowledge of the law to escape their situation, this is rarely the case in the family context I've studied. Yet, it is clear that sustained exploitation takes place today and is normalized in so many families."

"My research sheds some light on why women may seemingly allow this exploitation to continue throughout their lives. Evidence suggests that daughters are prepared for this exploitation from birth and grow up believing that their role is to 'give' to their family and shall not expect to receive anything from the family in return—all because of their gender."

"They grow up carrying a weight on their shoulders, believing they are

indebted to their family and must pay them back with total commitment for however little they have received. Their debt starts from the day they are born."

The paper identifies three ways parents 'mould' their daughters into this role:

By creating a 'destined giver'

Daughters are socialized from birth into believing that they are bound to shoulder the role of 'the giver' in the family system. This exploitation is clear in Wulan's testimony:

"I am in my 3rd year at university. My parents told me in Chinese New Year's Eve that they hope I will graduate soon and start working and that I should get myself married quickly and demand more money as a betrothal gift so that my brother who is 4 years older than me can then buy a house and get married. My mum said, 'Or why would I have brought you up?'"

This can have serious consequences and severely affect mental health, as is demonstrated in Zhaodi's case:

"I am only in my 2nd year senior high school. My mum has been very frank with me and keeps reminding me that, 'I bring you up for old age security, you should give me how much a month later and you should provide for your younger brother and help with his studies financially.' I have never felt loved, and I am always eager to be loved. I am insecure and I have very [low self-esteem](#)...I wanted to jump from stairs to commit suicide so that I could finally be happy."

By making them feel like an 'unworthy receiver'

Daughters are 'disqualified' from receiving anything from the family, not because of their actions but because of who they are or gender-based discriminations:

"My younger brother is only 12 years old, and he already knows that the family home will be his afterwards. Once we had a fight, he told me to get out of his house...my mum told me at the dining table that I need to be nicer to my brother because once I get married, I become a guest of this house. I am a guest. I should not be rude to the owner of the house."

By making them feel like a 'martyr giver'

The feeling of indebtedness transforms daughters into martyrs who must selflessly pay off their 'debts' from being given the 'gift of life,' education fees and living expense, as Quiannan's experience explains:

"When the pandemic started [in 2020], my mum started crying to me about not having any money. OK, I provide for their monthly living expenses. As the weather has gotten too hot, they want me to buy air conditioners for the three rooms in our family home. Fine. During the Chinese New Year, I gave the Hongbao (translation: 'red envelopes'—a monetary gift typically given during special occasions and important celebrations in East and Southeast Asian cultures) my boyfriend gave me to my mum too."

"But after all this, my mum always reminds me that anything they have has nothing to do with me, because I am a daughter; I am an outsider. She needs her son for old age security. So, all my giving is a total bullshit. The first few months when I had my first job, I was pestered by them so much for money, I almost lost my will to live. Even though I have a boyfriend now, I am prepared for a break-up at any time. I wanted to know why when they knew I was a girl, they didn't just strangle me to death."

The study also reveals that daughters born into Chinese families of son preference can lose their friendship circles or find significant relationships break down over time because they are made into a "Fu Di Mo," which translates as "monster of younger brother worshiping." This is a term coined to ridicule sisters who selflessly devote themselves to supporting their younger brothers at all costs.

"The 'Fu Di Mo' label is a way of warning people against women with the potential to drain others' resources to try and satisfy the endless demands and expenses of their brothers," Dr. Liu continues. "The breakdown of relationships can add to their vulnerability, making it even more difficult for them to break free of their exploitation.

"My evidence suggests this isn't limited to younger brothers either—this sense of duty put on [daughters](#) can extend to older brothers and even male cousins."

More information: Chihling Liu, The even darker side of gift-giving: Understanding sustained exploitation in family consumption system, *Marketing Theory* (2023). DOI: [10.1177/14705931231199386](https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931231199386)

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