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## **SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: A CASE STUDY OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF CHINA**

**Zhitong Liu**

*Anshan No.1 High School, Anshan, China*

[rkliuzt01@outlook.com](mailto:rkliuzt01@outlook.com)

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### **Abstract**

*Previous and current sociology scholars have come up with several theories to answer the question "why do men use violence?". Up to this day, it is believed that current sociological literatures are divided into three perspectives: family violence perspective, feminist perspective and integrative perspective. This paper upholds an integrated theory of resource theory, feminist perspective and socio-demographic perspective. In this paper, we situated the theory in Chinese society and selected five cases based on Oral Accounts of Battered Women in China to test the validity of the theory. The findings confirm the theory and further suggest that the domestic violence should be regarded as a problem from a societal level. In other words, tackling the problem individually would not be adequate and efficient.*

### **Keywords**

Domestic Violence, Feminist Perspective, Family Violence Perspective, Integrative Perspective, Case Study

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## **1. Introduction**

Intimate partner violence has always been a pervasive global problem. Worldwide, almost one third (30%) of women who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some forms of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner. Globally, as many as 38% of murders of women are committed by an intimate partner. The problem of intimate partner violence is also prevalent in China. According to the Executive Report of the 3rd Survey on the Status of Chinese Women, 24.7 percent of married women have experienced domestic violence. The percentage might be even higher since the traditional idea that people should not expose their families' scandals is still ingrained in people's mind.

Since the 1995 Beijing United Nation's World Conference on Women, there are a great number of burgeoning civil organizations that aim to defend female rights and people are paying more and more attention to the problem of domestic violence (Hester, 2000). Although tremendous efforts have been made, scholars are still debating what the crucial factors are. There are three major sociological perspectives that try to explain domestic violence: the family violence perspective, feminist perspective and integrative perspective (Kurz, 1989; Lawson, 2012). Based on extant literature, this paper upholds that socio-demographic factors, the husband's relative social status to his wife and the social construction of masculinity together influence men's behavior. Empirically, we test our theory by using both critical case study and small-N comparison. The findings confirm the theory.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first paper that studies domestic violence in China through an integrative framework. In addition, we incorporate different methods to perform empirical tests, which greatly enhances the internal validity of our paper.

## **2. Literature Review**

Demie Kurz and Jennifer Lawson had presented a well organized summary of the current sociological literature within the field (Kurz, 1989; Lawson, 2012). There are three major classifications of current sociological literature: family violence perspective, feminist perspective and integrative perspective. This section starts with a brief summary of theories proposed from family violence perspective.

The system theory, as Stratus (1973) put it, "views continuing violence as a systematic product rather than a product of individual behavior pathology." Specifically, the system theory proposes that the positive feedback encourages violent behavior while negative feedback restrains the use of violence.

Belsky's (1980) ecological model of human development was first applied to understanding of domestic violence by Carlosn (1984) and was later adopted by a variety of theorists including Dutton (2006). Specifically, as Dutton suggested, there are four spheres of milieus that are influential to an individual's behavior: The macrosystem is composed of "broad cultural values and belief systems"(p.19); the exosystem is composed of the groups and institutions (such as school, work, peers, and church) that connect the family to the larger environment; the microsystem is the family unit itself-the immediate context that surrounds the individual; and finally, ontogenetic factors refer to an individual's personal development, and they "define what a particular individual's unique developmental history brings into this three-level social context" (p.19).

The combination of exchange and social control theory proposes three points that would lead to domestic violence: (1) family violence will occur when rewards outweigh costs; (2) lack of effective social controls in the family decreases costs and therefore makes violence more likely; and (3) family and social structures, including inequality (e.g., in gender, status, economic resources, or physical strength), privacy norms of the family, and perceptions of masculinity reduce the costs and thereby increase the rewards of using violence (Gelles, 1983).

The resource theory suggests that people would use violence when they are depleted of other resources. Goode (1971) pointed out that family, like many other social units, is a power system (p. 624). Goode also suggested that "force is one the major four sets of resources by which people can move others to serve their ends"(p. 624). The other three include: economic variables, prestige or respect and likability, attractiveness, friendship or love. Thus, a man would be impelled to use force when there are no other resources available.

Although there are a variety of family violence theories, the feminist perspective theories share the common ground that gender should be viewed as the core and fundamental issue when examining the problem. (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Kurz, 1988; Anderson, 1997; Lawson, 2012).

As Dobash and Dobash suggests, the long history of gender inequality determines the foundation of a relationship that, as Lawson put it, sanctioned male subordination, abuse, and outright ownership of women in marriage.

The integrative perspective combines feminist perspective with other theories. Anderson (1997) believed that both men's socio-demographic status and husbands' comparative resource to their wives would influence men's use of violence. A more detailed explanation would be provided in the description of the theory down below.

Heise (1998) integrated the ecological theory with the feminist perspective. Heise adopted the ecological framework that encompasses the findings that could possibly result in domestic violence, but pointed out gender should be taken into account as well. She proposed that patriarchal society and social and individual factors together influence one's behavior. Unilateral explanation, especially viewing the use of violence solely from the feminist perspective, would not be adequate.

Michael Johnson (1995) believed that violence should be divided into two types: patriarchal violence and common couple violence. The patriarchal violence derives from the patriarchal society and often includes "violence, economic subordination, threats, isolation and other control tactics"(p. 284). In comparison, common couple violence is less gender-based and is believed to occur under situations where conflicts sometimes get out of hand. Common couple violence is considered to happen less frequently and "more rarely escalate into serious, sometimes even life threatening, forms of violence"(p. 285).

The theory of this paper is based on the findings presented by Anderson in her 1997 article. One of the improvements of this theory is that it points out that differences in status influence men and women differently. Previous family violence perspective studies have pointed out that status incompatibility results in higher rates of domestic violence. Yet they have failed to encompass how gender mattered when viewing the problem of domestic violence. As Hourhung, McCullough and Sugimoto pointed out, both status inconsistency and status incompatibility are associated with increased risk of psychological abuse, a greater risk of physical aggression, and even greater risk of life-threatening violence. Certain types of status inconsistency (i.e., under-achievement in occupation by the husband) and certain types of status incompatibility (i.e.,

when the woman is high in occupation relative to her husband) involve very high risks of spouse abuse, particularly life threatening violence. Other types of inconsistency (i.e., over achievement in occupation by the husband) seem to protect couples from abusive behavior. (Hourhung, McCullough and Sugimoto, 1981). However, they did not specify the gender of the victim and the perpetrator. By failing to do so, previous studies neglected the influence of gender in domestic violence (Anderson, 1997).

### **3. The Theory**

Our theory analyzes men's use of violence toward their wives in heterosexual marriages. The socio-demographic factor, husband's relative status and the social construction of masculinity together result in men's use of violence toward their wives. According to the theory, the socio-demographic factor itself can contribute to the use of domestic violence. The social construction of masculinity, from the feminist perspective, defines that men should be dominant. However, because the working class and the lower class lack power and authority in the working environment, they tend to seek masculinity at home (Gondolf, 1985; Messerschmidt, 1993). The method for the lower-class and the working class to demonstrate masculinity also differs from that for the middle class. Working class and lower class tend to use aggressiveness and violence to demonstrate masculinity while middle class tends to interpret masculinity as ambitions, responsibilities, and professional employment (Messerschmidt, 1993; Segal, 1990). Thus, for people with lower socio-demographic status, when they fail to receive power and authority outside their home, they become perpetrators of domestic violence to demonstrate masculinity.

We also argue that status incompatibility is also a factor that would contribute to domestic violence. Feminist perspective scholars propose that the patriarchal society expects men to be dominant in the family. In other words, a man is expected to have higher status and more resource in the family. However, when the expected gender role is inverted and a woman has higher status and more resource than her spouse, the resource theory predicts that a man would use violence as the ultimate resource to attain dominance.

We present a diagram below in order to illustrate our theory:

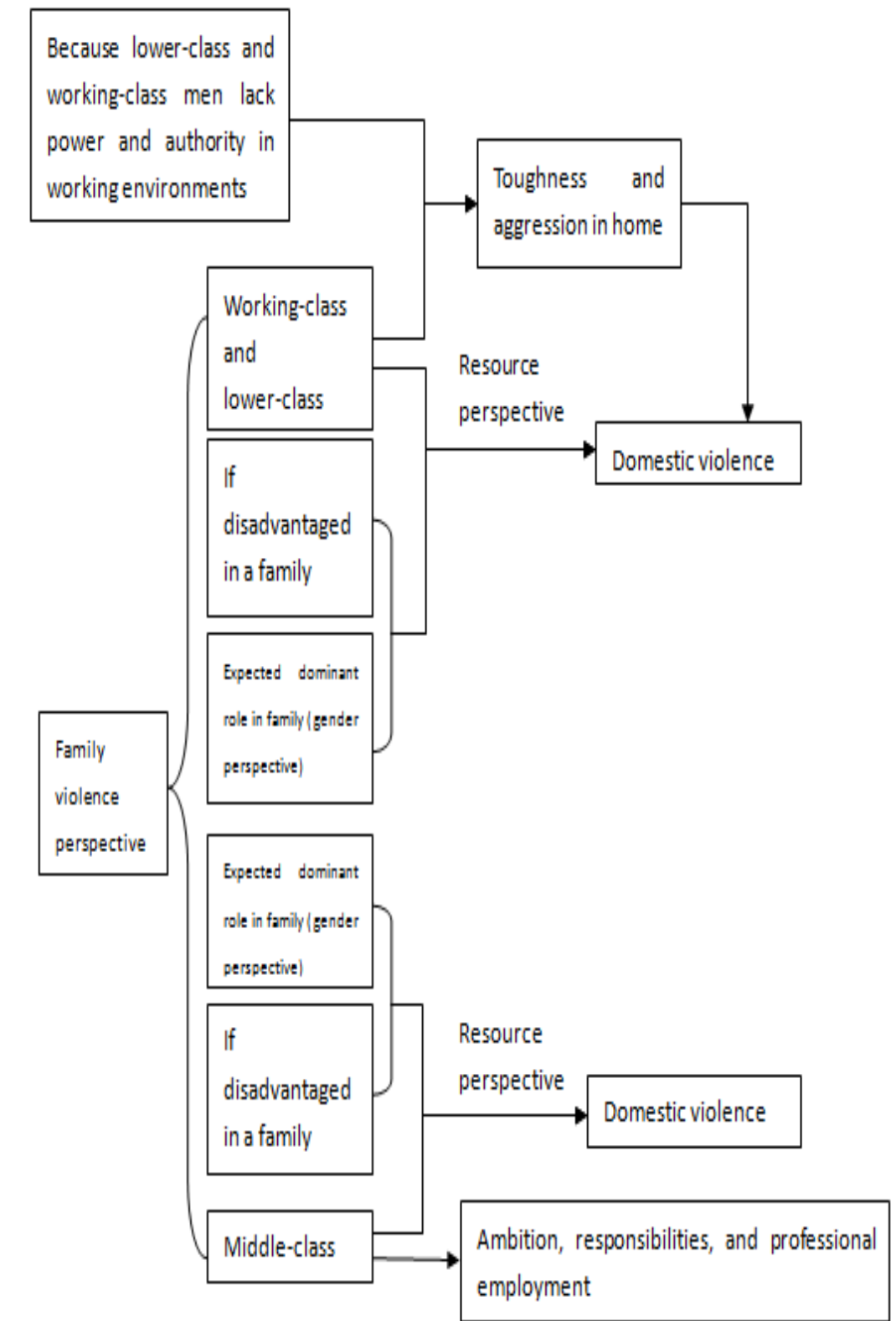


Figure 1: The Theory

#### 4. Hypotheses

Our theory suggests that socio-demographic, husband's relative status and the societal construction of masculinity together affect the husband's use of violence to his wife. Therefore, we derive the following hypotheses:

- 1) Men with low socioeconomic status are more likely to use violence in the home because they usually cannot seek power and authority in the workplace. Thus, they tend to use aggressiveness and toughness that are preferred among lower and working class in home to demonstrate masculinity.
- 2) A man would use violence as the ultimate method to exert control on his wife to demonstrate masculinity when he has lower status in home.

#### 5. Case Summary

The sources of my cases are based on the book *Oral Accounts of Battered Women* (Song and Xue, 2003). The book includes 28 cases in total. The occupations of the victims include workers, peasants, teachers, doctors, nurses, policewomen, editors, and office workers etc. The educational level also varies among the victims-4 of whom are illiterate, 6 of whom have received an elementary school education, 4 of whom have received an education up to ninth grade, 4 of whom have graduated from high school, 4 of whom have received junior college degree, and 3 of whom have received an university education, 1 of whom has received a graduate degree. The region where the cases took place includes 8 provinces in China.

The book is a collection of oral accounts of the victims of domestic violence. Specifically, we want to point out that the term "domestic violence" includes physical abuse, emotional abuse (i.e., cursing, scolding, humiliating, threatening and treating her like a servant etc.) and sexual abuse. The author transcribed and edited the recorded narration of the victims for better logical development. Thus, the book has an advantage of being authentic. In addition, the book provides detailed accounts of the family situation, including the husbands' and wives' occupations, social status, and relative family status. To protect the privacy of the victim and the people related, the author used pseudonyms instead of real names in the book.

For the selection process, we tend to select cases with detailed description of both the

husbands' and wives' socioeconomic statuses, including income, occupations, educational levels, etc. In addition, accounts that provide an explicit description or reflect a husband's internal feelings are preferred. We select and analyze the case of Li Yifan to test how status incompatibility and gender affect the use of domestic violence. We select four cases (Li Yanping, Sun Hongrong, Ren Yinghong and Xiang Minhua) to test how socio-demographic status and gender influence men's use of violence.

## **6. Analysis and Results**

### **6.1 Case No.1**

Description: Li Yifan was born in 1964 in Hunan province in Central China. She was a high school teacher with a junior college degree. Li had experienced an unhappy first marriage yet her second marriage was even worse. Li's second husband was also a teacher in the school she worked for. After marriage, Li and her husband decided to move to a coastal city for new job opportunities and one of the local schools accepted them. However, the school only approved of Li's teaching performance and the school accepted Li's husband only for her sake. Afterwards, she and her husband moved to another school located in another coastal city. Again, the head of the school was only satisfied with Li. In comparison, Li's husband's taciturn character and heavy accent were less impressive. However, the school, for the second time, accepted him because of Li. The second school immediately designated Li with teaching tasks, which was, according to another teacher, a rare situation at that time. Thus, Li told her husband to settle the issue with the education bureau in their hometown so that they could begin their new teaching career in another city. However, her husband lied to Li that the education bureau would not let them go while the truth was that the bureau actually agreed. But she still needed to at least finish the whole semester's teaching tasks. When her husband told the faculties in that school that Li cannot stay, teachers were extremely disappointed. "You might not be aware of this, but people in our school really like her!" Li detected that her husband was unhappy through his facial expression. "If someone praises my husband, I would definitely feel happy. But not for him, he won't." Li said. Li herself feel disappointed as well--the opportunity was precious and people in the school were very nice to her.

Li's husband beat her for the first time when they came back to their hometown. "He thinks



that I would go out of control. I can't be the bird of his cage anymore. That was the first time he slapped me in the face." said Li. Her husband's domestic abuse became more frequent after they came back from the South and usually it was usually out of no reason. One of the teachers in her school once said to her: "Now I know, the problem is not on you. It's on him." Apart from beating Li, her husband had even tried to stigmatize her of having affairs with other men. Li's husband once told Li to find someone for accompany to get an abortion of their baby. "Now I understand. He wants others to see me. People would think that the baby I'm secretly getting rid of must not be my husband's." He had also once sent a fake love letter to school vice president trying to libel her of dating someone else. On June 2nd, 1995, Li eventually killed her husband with a dumbbell and later turned herself in.

**Analysis:** We use this case to test our second hypothesis. Our theory predicts that men with relatively low status inside families are more likely to use domestic violence. Thus, we focus on analyzing the interaction and impact of social definitions of masculinity and relative status inside families.

As suggested by feminist scholars, the patriarchal society expects men to be dominant at home and they are supposed to have higher status in family. When a man loses his dominant role in his family, the resource theory suggests that men would turn to violence as the ultimate source for control. In Li's case, the expected gender role cannot be seen in her family. She outcompetes her husband in the workplace. The two schools valued Li more than her husband. The school immediately gave Li instead of her husband the teaching task. His wife's better job performance and the school's higher evaluation frustrated Li's husband since the patriarchal society expects men to be superior. His frustration can be seen through his actions. He first lied to his wife that they cannot leave their hometown to further their career in the school where Li was highly valued. His facial expression gave away his unhappy feelings when the teachers said that they all really like his wife instead of him. To reestablish his dominant role in family, according to resource theory, the male would use violence as the ultimate tool. Li's husband slapped her in the face for the first time after coming back from the south, or, in other words, when Li's husband felt that his dominance was in jeopardy. His physical violent behavior soon escalated and beating his wife became very common. Apart from physical abuse, Li's husband also engaged in emotional abuse

toward his wife. He stigmatized her as a cheater to make his wife suffer from other's judgment.

As a result, this case confirms our second hypothesis.

## **6.2 Case No.2, No.3, No.4 and No.5**

We will compare the following four cases to test whether men with low socio-demographic status would be more likely to use violence against their wives.

### **6.2.1 Case No.2**

Description: Li Yanping was born in 1961 in Liaoning province in Northeast of China. She had graduated with a secondary school degree and had been a steel factory worker before she went to prison. Li's husband, an illiterate man with both parents being passed away when he was very young, was a worker in the same factory. The first time he beat her was when Li came home after work. "We had a brawl that evening, although I can't recall the reason. I felt I had done nothing wrong, but he didn't think so. He then began to beat me and said: 'How dare you be defiant?' "Things as such occurred often. Li's husband beat her over trivial issues. "I was in charge of gas welding in the factory and my life is pretty hectic. I got lots of things to do at work and I also needed to do the housework and help my child with the homework. Although I'm not well-educated, I could at least assist my child with his (her) Chinese class. My husband, on the contrary, did nothing at home. I once told him that he should help me out. He replied: 'You're married to me. It is you who should do the chores.' I then questioned him: 'Am I the slave you bought?' We fought over this sentence as well, and he beat hard each time." Li had considered about filing a divorce, but her husband would always try to maintain the marriage so she never succeeded. "Every time I filed a divorce, I suffered both mentally and financially. The prosecution would charge me more than a hundred RMB and I was not in an optimistic financial condition. In the end, I gave up. Li eventually stabbed his husband and was sent to prison.

### **6.2.2 Case No.3**

Description: Sun Ronghong graduated from high school in 1976 in Liaoning province. After graduation, she became an elementary school teacher in her village. She then went to a teacher training school for three years and later became a professional teacher. She worked hard and the students she taught performed pretty well. In comparison, her husband was a peasant and his personal background was inferior. "Because of my hand (there are only two fingers on her left

hand), I wasn't expecting to find a good husband. He was really lazy and did nothing at all. He didn't care about his son a bit. It was my mom and my sister who were assisting me to take care of our child. My life at school was busy, yet I still needed to take care of his field. It was me who paid the money to buy seeds and fertilizer. He would beat you if you tell him to get some work done. He first beat me just three days after our wedding." During the marriage, Sun's husband constantly abused Sun. Sometimes with a knife, sometimes with an ax. There was a time when Sun couldn't get out of bed for a week."My father never took care of my mother. He never took her to the hospital, because he has no money" said her son Hou Chunshu. In January, 2001, Sun's son Hou grabbed the ax from his father's hand and killed him.

#### **6.2.3 Case No.4**

Description: Ren Yinghong was born in 1957 in Zhao Jia Ying village in Inner Mongolia in North China. She had attended primary school for two years. She met her husband in the same village and they got married in 1979. Ren was a peasant and her husband was a construction worker."He earned about 18 RMB each month but he never gave me any money. The crops I grew at home were enough for me to eat and I had never thought of asking him for money." The company later fired him due to his bad performance. "He lied to me at first, pretending to go to work every day, but he was actually fooling around. In 1983, he was forced to do labors as a punishment for stealing." Ren remembered the first time her husband began to beat her was when he got the job as a construction worker. "We just got married for a month. I came back from my mother's place and saw him lying in bed. I said: 'Oh, You're home. I'd better prepare for the meal.' Then he slapped me out of no reason. I laid on the bed crying with fury. Then I requested to leave, but he would not let me go and said all kinds of good words to me. I thought he might have encountered something unhappy during the day so I just let it go." This event triggered his beating habit. Ren's husband would pick on tiny issues and beat and curse Ren and their child each time he came home from work. "How did your family educate you? Don't you know you should not put the needle in such a place? Why is the television still on? Do you know what time is it?" Then her husband would try to throw the television into the ground. Sometimes Ren remained silent but he would still pull her hair and curse her and find something to beat her. "He beat me like a dead pig."Ren described. Her ears would be bleeding and he sometimes threatened her with a knife.

During the interview, Ren said: "I kept wondering what was wrong with him. Was he a human? Why would he do this to me? Villagers said that I was too submissive. But I still haven't figured what went wrong." Ren then got divorced, but her ex-husband kept harassing her. In June, 1996, Ren choked him dead with her belt.

#### **6.2.4 Case No.5**

Description: Xiang Minhua was born in 1963 in the countryside in Hunan province in Central China. Her father was once a railroad worker in Zhuzhou city. In 1962, her father moved to live in the countryside to comply with the country's new policy. He then did some temporary work in a sanitarium. Xiang's family could not afford her high school education because her father was then jobless and she had 4 siblings. In 1982, her father found her a job at a restaurant where she met her future husband Weng Xingping. Weng was born in 1957 in the Changshang city in Hunan province and both of his parents were workers. His father had pulmonary diseases in the early 1950s and was unable to work. Thus, his family was in a predicament and could hardly afford his elementary school education. Then the chaos brought by the Cultural Revolution forced him to drop out during his second grade. In 1971, Weng became a forestry worker and a construction worker two years later. However, he fell from the fourth floor and broke his hand while working on the construction site. Later, he was unable to do the same job after recovery and thus found another job as a cook in a factory. The factory then went bankrupt and he lost his job. He then decided to sell fish and fruit in a local market. In 1985, he met Xiang at the restaurant for which he served as a provider. They got married in 1988 and soon had a boy. After marriage, they made a living by doing some temporary work. Then they rented a house and opened a small restaurant in her hometown. However, they didn't have much luck and the business was bad. A year after, they returned to Changsha and began selling packed meals. Between 1990 to 1993, they opened a small restaurant at the Changsha railroad station and the family earned some rents when they closed the restaurant. Later, they returned to the packed meal business.

The first time when Weng beat her was in 1989. There was a blackout in one evening and the child began to cry because of the darkness. Weng blamed his wife for failing to take care of the child and kicked her off the bed. She fumbled in the darkness and accidentally touched his

face. Weng then got out bed and started to beat her. The second time he beat her was when Weng was repairing the bicycle. He hit her with a grinding wheel because she didn't fetch him the cloths he needed for his wound. The third time he beat her was also in 1989. Xiang was selling packed meals back then. She got up early at 5 in the morning and began to prepare for the food. However, Weng was still in bed at 10am so Xiang lifted his quilt telling him to get up. He then came downstairs with a kettle of water and put out the stove fire deliberately. There was smoke everywhere and the customers all ran away. Weng then grabbed her hair and hit her head against the wall. She then fled into the street, but he caught up and hit her from behind. Fainted, Xiang was carried home by her parents. From the year 1990 to 1993, Xiang opened a restaurant at the Changshang railway station while her husband did nothing at all. The burden of raising the family fell on Xiang's shoulder. The incident on March 11th, 2000 made Xiang disabled for the rest of her life. In that evening, Weng discovered that there were three aluminum container missing and was outraged. The kitchen helper suggested Xiang that she should just admit it was her fault and Xiang did so. Hearing her words, Weng smashed his bowl onto the ground and started to beat her callously. He then poured a kettle of boiling water on her. Xiang was severely injured and she later took Weng to the court. Weng was sentenced to five years' imprisonment and Xiang filed a divorce while he was in jail.

Analysis: We use these four cases to test the first hypothesis. The husband and wives' relative social status vary in the four cases. In the first case, Li and her husband were both steel factory workers. Thus, Li and her husband have almost the same resources and social status. In the second case, Sun was once a village elementary school teacher after she graduated from high school and then attended a teacher training college. After graduation, she was qualified to be a professional teacher. Although well-educated, her crippled hand discouraged her from marrying a husband with the same or even better background. Sun's husband was a peasant with little income. According to their son, he would not take her to the hospital after he beat her because he had no money. In comparison, Sun had more resource than her husband. In the third case, Ren was a peasant with no income and lived upon the food she grew in home. Her husband was once a construction worker who earned 18 RMB each month when he first started beating her. Thus, although both her husband and Ren belonged to lower and working class, her husband had more

resource than Ren as a construction worker with steady income. In the fourth case, although Xiang and her husband had done various jobs during their marriage, they worked through cooperation. Thus, there were few differences between their relative status since the earnings were communal.

Although different in the husbands and wives' relative resource, the four cases share a similarity that the husbands all belong to lower and working class. In Li's case, her husband was illiterate and made a living as a steel factory worker. In Sun's case, her husband was a poor peasant. In Ren's case, her husband was once a construction worker. However, he was fired because of his bad performance. He had even once been punished for stealing. In Xiang's case, her husband Weng had only been to an elementary school for a year. He had done a variety of jobs since then, all of which were inferior. He had been a forest worker, a construction worker, a cook for a factory and a vendor at a market. He had done some temporary jobs after marriage, had opened two small restaurants and had been selling packed meals with his wife.

Their low social status prevented the four husbands to gain masculinity in the workplace. Subsequently, the four husbands sought masculinity at home. However, as members of lower and working class, the four husbands deemed masculinity as violence instead of responsibility and ambitions. Li's husband refused to help his wife out with the chores at home or taking care of their child. Sun's husband, similarly, paid no attention to domestic affairs. His son had never had the fatherly love. He would refuse to do the chores at home as well. More importantly, as a peasant, he spared no time on taking care of his field. It was Sun who was in charge of supporting the whole family. Ren's husband had no ambition in his workplace. He was fired by the company he used to work for because he failed to fulfill his duty. Being jobless, instead of finding a new job to support the family, her husband spent time fooling around and was even caught stealing. Xiang's husband, similarly, didn't help Xiang out while they were running the restaurant at the Changshang railway station at all. Thus, the four husbands would use violence that they perceive as an expression of masculinity at home.

## **7. Conclusion**

The integrated theory tested in this paper combines socio-demographic factor, gender perspective and resource theory. In this paper, we select five different cases to test the validity of

the theory in the context of China. The integration of resource theory and feminist perspective states that a husband's relative social status to his wife would lead to the husband's use of violence. The feminist perspective points out that the husband is dominant in the family and should have more resources than his wife. However, when the husband fails to meet the expectation, according to resource theory, the husband will ultimately use violence to attain the dominant position. In this paper, we select the case of Li Yifan to test the theory by analyzing Li and her husband's relative resource and her husband's actions to reflect his mentality. The result confirms the theory. The integration of feminist perspective and socio-demographic factor proposes that a man's socio-demographic position may lead to men's use of domestic violence. The integrated theory suggests that men with low socio-demographic positions are more likely to use violence toward his wife. The logic is that lower and working class men usually fail to seek masculinity in his workplace. However, as feminist perspective suggests, the patriarchal tradition values masculinity in the society. Thus, a man with lower socio-demographic position would in turn seek masculinity at home. Their perception of masculinity, more often, is violence instead of responsibility, ambitions or career aspirations. All combined, these factors eventually lead to the use of violence at home. In this paper, we selected four cases to conduct comparisons and analysis. The husbands and wives in these four cases vary in their relative resources. However, they share the similarity that all of the four husbands belong to lower and working class and they have all committed the use of domestic violence against their wives. Moreover, as suggested in the theory, the four husbands all viewed masculinity as violence instead of ambitions and responsibilities. Thus, the findings also confirm the theory.

The western theory we tested in this paper also fits in the Chinese society. However, due to the limited number of available resources, we are not able to testify the theory to a larger quantity of victims. Thus, future researches may encompass a larger number of cases to further test the theory's validity.

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