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The Comparison of Power and Authority of Women in China and Minangkabau Societies

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Abstract:

The power and authority available for women are very important in measuring the cultural system in each society contains a gender bias or not. This study will examine whether the matrifocal and matrilineal society guarantees gender equality rather than the patriarchal and patrilineal society and to what extent these societies provide power and authority to women in both domestic and public spheres. To support analysis, this article will compare two Asian societies; those are China as a representative of the patriarchal and patrilineal society and Minangkabau as a representative of the matrifocal and matrilineal society. The analysis will be focused on their kinship systems, particularly in the differences in inheritance and descent which affects the role and status of women.

Keywords: Power, Authority, Culture, China, Minangkabau, Women, Gender

1. Introduction

The study of women and gender cannot be separated from the issue of power and authority of women in their families and communities. The power and authority available for women, furthermore, are very important in measuring the cultural system in each society contains a gender bias or not (Rosaldo, 1974; Merry, 2011). Therefore, to compare the power and authority from patrilineal and matrilineal societies requires understanding of respective kinship systems. This is because many people, today, assume that gender equality has adhered automatically in matrifocal and matrilineal societies, whilst the reverse can be found in the patriarchal and patrilineal societies.

This study will examine whether the matrifocal and matrilineal society guarantees gender equality rather than the patriarchal and patrilineal society and to what extent these societies provide power and authority to women in both domestic and public spheres. To support my analysis, I will compare two Asian societies; those are China as a representative of the patriarchal and patrilineal society and Minangkabau as a representative of the matrifocal and matrilineal society. The analysis will be focused on their kinship systems, particularly in the differences in inheritance and descent which affects the role and status of women.

2. Women's Authority and Power in China

To begin with, it needs to be understood that the status of women in China has mostly been affected by Confucianism. It is mentioned in Confucianism that woman's element (yin) and man's element (yang) are two different things. 'Yin' is often associated with something that is subordinated, such as dark, passivity, moon and earth, while 'Yang' refers to something that is dominant, such as light, activity, sun and heaven (Guisso, 1981; Valutano, 2012). Confucianism also contributed a stereotype of women as unclean and pollutant which could block people from communicating with the gods since they have menstruation as part of their reproduction (Ahern, 1982; Hedges, 2011). As a result the Chinese kinship system follows patrilineal descent in which descent and inheritance take place only through the male line. In this context, the social structure has successfully marginalised women's position as second class citizens. This explains why in the Chinese society, most people show more respect to a man than a woman in which a son is more important than a daughter, in order to continue the lineage of their family. History has noted that many infanticides have occurred in the past due to this belief (Holmgren, 1981; King, 2014). Having a daughter especially in traditional rural China has been judged as 'bad luck' due to the assumption that a daughter only knows how to eat, dress and be married (Freedman, 1961; Li and Wu, 2011). This was different for a son who received much respect from his parents as he could help them to earn a living in the future. The social structure about women in China can be characterised as a system oppressive to women rather than giving opportunities for women in decision making and participating in society outside domestic boundaries.

The oppression of women was reflected by the marriage system in China. In traditional China, marriages were arranged by parents, where people believed that a beautiful woman should get high 'bride price' from the groom (Knight, 2000; Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte, 2012). In that time, people allied beauty with small feet. As a result, to get a high bride price, many parents bound tightly their daughters' feet when they were seven years old (Jacka, 1997; Hong, 2013). This factor also contributed to the many trafficking of girls which occurred in China. This practice was oppressive and hurt women. Furthermore, with a 'high bride price', a woman found it difficult to divorce to her husband since her husband had paid a high price for her. Indeed, when divorce

happened women did not have opportunities to get an inheritance such as land, house or wet rice since these were claimed by men (Watson, 1984; Liaw, 2008). In such a case, a wife was made very vulnerable in proposing divorce since she was unlikely to obtain anything. This practice shows how from childhood to marriage a woman in China did not have authority and power to speak on behalf herself.

According to Cook and Dong (2011), they argue that for women withdraw from their work in the fields to undertake domestic work, it is likely that women's power in the family is relatively weak. After marriage, a woman became a wife and she had to stay in her husband's house as an outsider or a stranger (Croll, 1978; Croll, 2013). She could not go outside her house without the permission of her husband. She had to stay at home and do domestic work, such as feeding and caring for children, spouse and kin. The woman was expected to should wait on her husband on his return from work and this was repeated every day. In this context it seems that a woman was property of her husband (Jacka, 1997; Croll, 2013). She did not have authority in public affairs or domestic affairs. This is because all decisions were made by her husband or her mother-in-law who was often unfriendly to her. She was even more oppressed in the expectation that she would give birth to a son. Her failure to do so could lead her husband and her mother-in-law to anger and in some cases to torture. Following the communist revolution in 1949, the new marriage law of 1950 improved the lot women (Kane, 1987; Zuo, 2013). But despite this the one-child policy introduced in 1979 made women oppressed once more due to the cultural expectation that the one child would be a son (Hong, 1987; Ebenstein, 2010).

From this explanation, it can be clearly seen that women in China had no authority and power to participate in either public or domestic spheres. China seems more oppressive to women as a result of its culture and the social structure which is a 'classic patriarchy'. Women lived in an oppressive situation and often were subjected to violence from their husband, mother-in-law or her sister-in-law (Jacka, 1997; McLaren, 2001). That is why many suicides occurred. A wife could try to use a strategy of persuasion with her mother-in-law and try to improve relationships with her son, but it still did not make her position safe since her husband could chase her easily away from his house. The 1949 revolution led to a gender equality which opened the channel for women to propose divorce (Tsai, 1996; Wang and Purnell, 2008). This resulted in a dramatic number of divorces. This marked the beginning of the fight against the oppression of the past. They fought against a culture which did not recognise a wife as a real member of family and society, who could influence decisions in domestic and public affairs.

3. Women's Authority and Power in Minangkabau

Compared to China, Minangkabau has a matrilineal lineage system which is more respectful to women than to men. This is because adat (customary law and practice) gives more rights to women. Based on adat, a man has to respect a woman as is shown in the proverb 'Surga ada di telapak kaki ibu' (paradise lies at the feet of mothers) (Whalley, 1998; Sanday, 2002). The adat believes women have a higher status as noble human beings created by God. As a consequence, a man should respect a woman. This explains why Minangkabau uses matrilineal descent in its kinship system in which descent and inheritance are traced exclusively through the female line. So parents will be very happy if they have a daughter rather than a son. Women can own land, houses and wet rice which means that *harto pusako* (ancestral property) can be theirs (Kato, 1982; Wiryomartono, 2014). This property is transmitted from generation to generation exclusively through the female line. In this context women have a stronger authority and power than men.

In the marriage system, Minangkabau shows a unique custom. A bride decides a 'groom price' and the value of a groom. This depends on the status of the groom. It could result from his education or from adat. For example, a doctor could be paid \$ 6,000 whilst others obtain only \$ 1,000. After marriage, a husband will live in his wife's house, called *rumah gadang* (large house or matrilineal communal house) (Kato, 1978; Stark, 2014). At dusk, a husband goes back to his mother's house to work and later he will be return to his wife's house. This system which operates in Minangkabau is referred to as a *duolocal* system. Moreover, the woman has a strong authority in her house and domestic affairs. The woman is the head of household.

The kinship system also protects her from her husband due to her husband's position as a 'guest' in her family (Tanner and Thomas, 1985; Wiryomartono, 2014). In Minangkabau, a husband (*orang sumando*) will be stigmatised if he does not follow the adat, such as *orang sumando lapiak buruak* (a husband who is irresponsible and ignores his family), *orang sumando kacang miang* (a husband who is very lazy) and *orang sumando lango ijo* (a husband who practices polygamy and has many children in many places, like a bluebottle which has many larva). When a divorce happens a husband must go from his wife's house without taking anything, such as lands or houses (*laki-laki yang turun*). Under this system, divorces are rare in Minangkabau society.

Even though all lands are managed by *mamak* (the eldest male in the household or mother's brother), *mamak* has to obey what *bundo kanduang* (the eldest or senior woman) says. A Minangkabau woman also has a power in public affairs. Even in the *nagari* (a grouping of several villages with its own laws and government) which is lead by *penghulu* (lineage or kin headman), *bundo kanduang* influences who can become a *penghulu*. In this context, a woman in Minangkabau has a higher bargaining position to men and she has active roles both in domestic and public spheres. The authority and power of women in Minangkabau society in both domestic and public affairs can be shown in the tale of 'Kaba Rantjak di Labueh'. This story tells of the power of *bundo kanduang* in Minangkabau society since she could influence who became a *penghulu* (Schrijvers, 1977; Sanday, 2010). By her power and authority she can influence any *musyawarah* (discussion) and *mufakat* (consensus) since she has a veto right. This reflected the lack of class distinction within the society. So it is not a surprising that there were many heroines from Minangkabau during the war against the Dutch colonial government.

4. Some Changes in the Matriarchal Society: Lessons Learned from Minangkabau

Based on my explanation, Minangkabau society has given a higher status to women than in Chinese society. However, this system did not survive intact long. Because of Islam and the Dutch colonial government, the adat system has changed significantly (Sanday, 1990; Chadwick, 1991; von Benda-Beckmann and von Benda-Beckmann, 2014). This means that the oppressor from

outside (external factors) has contributed to the changing of this society. For example, the interpretation of Islam that a woman cannot be a leader of men has influenced much of the Minangkabau society. This interpretation affects the attitude of men and has challenged the adat system. Another interpretation allows men to practice polygamy. These interpretations legitimise the practice polygamy and encourage the dominance of men over women. Adat was defeated by Islam is summed up in a proverb that says, 'Sarak mandaki, adaik manurun' (Islam goes uphill and custom descends the hills) (Chadwick, 199; Uker and Fanany, 2011). According to Adamson (2007), she believes that 'Muslim doctrine and culture contributed to ideologies that threatened to oppress women.

This situation became worse with the Dutch colonial government in the nineteenth century. This government believed that a man is the head of household. From that time, men became more involved in public affairs. The offer from the government that Minangkabau men could become part in the Dutch colonial government introduced harta pencarian (earned property) in that society (Kahn, 1976; Iman and Mani, 2013). This allowed men in Minangkabau to gain authority and power in public affairs even though in domestic affairs a woman still had authority and power to make any decision. Many men (scholars) who came back from merantau (go to other places to get better lives) also challenged and contributed to the changes of kinship system in Minangkabau (Sanday, 1990; Wiryomartono, 2014). These people (orang merantau) claimed that the system was 'not modern' and oppressed men. This arose out of their experience of patriarchal culture when merantau in Java. As a consequence, women's position became marginalised as was shown by the increase in the divorce rate and in the practice of polygamy in 1930's (Tanner, 1974; Schrijvers, 1977; Kato, 1978; Rohman, 2013). These changes brought suffering to women in Minangkabau.

In their marriage system, women were also influenced by these changes. For example, in the marriage practice, men often set 'a high groom-price' and 'a high dowry' which was too expensive for women in Minangkabau. As a consequence, many women from Minangkabau today are doing merantau and marry men outside Minangkabau. The preference for a nuclear family rather than extended family structure means that the adat in this community is slowly becoming extinct (Kato, 1978; Parker and Nilan, 2013).

In Minangkabau societies nowadays, there are tigo tungku sajarangan (three parties which have same level) in decision making. These include ninik mamak, alim ulama and cadaiak pandai (adat expert, Islam expert and scholar). Based on this system, all positions are only for men. Ironically, the role of bundo kanduang was marginalised and she then just became a figure or symbol without authority and power in public affairs. This shows the ambiguity of women's role as represented by bundo kanduang today: In theory her status remains but not in reality (Sanday, 1990; Blackwood, 2001; Elvira, 2007; Nurwani, 2011). The policy of the Indonesian government under the 'New Order Regime' sought to impose Javanese culture universally. The change from nagari into desa (Javanese village) affected title to all lands in Indonesia including Minangkabau. Many certificates of title were issued to men, since the Indonesian government only recognised a man as a head of household. Even though the local government today supports the 'going back to adat' policy (mambangkik batang nan tarandam), this seems just a romantic idea of the past without any real changes for women.

5. Conclusion

This article has analysed the differences of authority and power available in both Chinese and Minangkabau societies. The differences mostly were due to the Confucianism and *adat* which have governed the position of women in these societies. As a result, Chinese society tends to use patrilineal descent while Minangkabau tend to use matrilineal. Based on my explanation, China could be categorised as a classical patriarchal society which oppresses women and did not give an opportunity for women to be involved in public or even in domestic spheres. However, since 1949 the women's movement has progressed under communist rule. The oppression history of woman has clearly opened women's eyes in China to struggle for gender equality, to obtain authority and power in their society. On the other hand, Minangkabau in the past, with its matrilineal system gave authority and power to women to make and to influence all decisions in both private and public affairs. However, the status of women has become a lower than men since the *adat* was influenced by from Islam, Dutch colonialism, *orang merantau* and Indonesian government policy under the 'New Order Regime'. Women in Minangkabau are now marginalised in domestic sphere. In conclusion, even though today it seems no longer to exist anymore in Minangkabau, it is true that the matrilineal system a reverse image of the patrilineal one. Furthermore, the greater separation between public and domestic spheres, the lower the status of women in their societies.

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