

# Household Dynamics and Inheritance Customs in Ming and Qing Dynasties: A Perspective on Traditional Chinese Society

Yiqi Wang

*School of History and Culture, School of Ethnology, Southwest University, Chongqing City, 400715, China*

**Abstract:** *This paper explores the family dynamics and inheritance practices in the Ming and Qing periods, providing insights into the family structures and inheritance systems of traditional Chinese society. The Ming and Qing periods were crucial eras of social, economic, and political transformation in Chinese history, with the family serving as the basic social unit reflecting the economic, cultural, and social aspects of the time. The paper first examines the family structures and internal power relations of the Ming and Qing dynasties, followed by an analysis of inheritance customs and property distribution, with a particular focus on the role of clans and the limitations on women's inheritance rights. Additionally, the study investigates the impact of political, economic, and social changes on family structures, highlighting the differences in inheritance practices among various social classes and between urban and rural families. Finally, the paper concludes with an evaluation of the far-reaching impact of family dynamics and inheritance customs during the Ming and Qing periods on Chinese social and cultural development, and reflects on their contemporary significance.*

**Keywords:** *Ming and Qing periods; Family dynamics; Inheritance practices; Clan system; Property distribution; Traditional Chinese society*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background and Significance

The Ming and Qing periods (1368-1912) were crucial eras of economic, cultural, and political transformation in Chinese history. During this span of over five centuries, Chinese society transitioned from the centralized system of the Ming dynasty to the more diversified political framework of the Qing dynasty, experiencing an evolution from an agricultural economy to the early signs of capitalism. The family, as the basic unit of traditional Chinese society, not only played a key role in maintaining social order and stability but also served as a central mechanism for the transmission of Chinese culture, ethics, and values. Therefore, studying the family dynamics and inheritance practices of the Ming and Qing periods can help us better understand the functioning of traditional Chinese society and provide historical and cultural insights relevant to modern society.[1]

During the Ming and Qing periods, family structures and inheritance systems exhibited complexity and unique characteristics. Chinese society at the time remained patriarchal and clan-centered, with hierarchical and gender-based differences prominent in family power relations and role assignments. Practices such as primogeniture, the transmission of clan property, and the limitations on women's inheritance rights reflected the ethical norms and legal provisions of the time. These customs influenced not only the distribution of wealth and the accumulation of economic resources within families but also reinforced the power of clans and familial authority on a broader social and cultural level. Moreover, the inheritance customs of the Ming and Qing periods continuously adapted to the political, economic, and social changes. For instance, the partial relaxation of women's inheritance rights in Qing law indicated subtle shifts in social attitudes. Thus, studying the family dynamics and inheritance practices of the Ming and Qing periods holds significant academic value and practical relevance.

In recent years, research on family and inheritance systems during the Ming and Qing periods has gained attention, with scholars interpreting family structures and inheritance customs through various lenses such as legal history, economic history, and cultural history. However, most studies focus on individual cases or specific social classes, lacking systematic and comprehensive analysis. Therefore,

this paper aims to reveal the overall picture of family dynamics and inheritance practices during the Ming and Qing periods through a multi-level and multi-perspective analysis, offering a better understanding of the operational logic and cultural transmission in traditional Chinese society.

### ***1.2 Research Objectives and Methods***

The primary aim of this study is to explore the characteristics of family dynamics and inheritance practices during the Ming and Qing periods, and their roles in society, economy, and culture through systematic and comprehensive analysis. Specifically, the paper will address the following core questions:

First, what were the characteristics of family structures during the Ming and Qing periods? How were power relations distributed within families, especially under the dominance of patriarchal and elder authority? How were interactions and role assignments among family members manifested under these power dynamics? And how did these power relations affect the harmony and conflicts within the family?

Second, how did inheritance customs function in Ming and Qing society? How did clan systems and legal regulations determine the distribution of inheritance rights, particularly regarding the prevalence of primogeniture and the limitations placed on women's inheritance rights? How did these systems influence the accumulation of family wealth and the flow of economic resources?

Third, how did family dynamics and inheritance practices adapt or respond to political, economic, and social changes? With the continuous development of the economy and society during the Ming and Qing periods, were there significant differences in inheritance practices among different social classes and between urban and rural families? How did these differences influence social integration and transformation?

By answering these questions, the paper aims to comprehensively reveal the mechanisms underlying family and inheritance systems during the Ming and Qing periods and to explore their specific impacts on society, economy, and culture. Ultimately, this study hopes not only to provide new perspectives for the academic community on family and inheritance practices during the Ming and Qing periods but also to offer historical insights for contemporary Chinese society regarding family ethics and inheritance law reform.[2]

## **2. Family Structure and Social Relations during the Ming and Qing Periods**

### ***2.1 Basic Composition of the Family: Nuclear and Extended Families***

During the Ming and Qing periods, Chinese families were primarily composed of two types: nuclear families and extended families. Nuclear families consisted mainly of parents and their unmarried children, typical of economically independent small farming households or urban artisanal families. In contrast, extended families included multiple generations living together, such as grandparents, parents, brothers, their spouses, and children, which was especially common in rural areas where clan influence was strong. The existence of extended families was not merely an economic consideration (e.g., joint farming and sharing production costs) but was also closely tied to cultural and ethical values. In traditional Chinese society, the extended family was seen as the foundation for maintaining family prosperity and clan interests, and it was an important link within clan relations.

### ***2.2 Patriarchal Society and the Clan System***

The Ming and Qing periods were characterized by a patriarchal society and a clan-based system that played significant roles in social organization and family structure. Patriarchy emphasized the authority of the male head of the family, with men being the central members and primary heirs, while women were subordinate and typically moved into their husband's family upon marriage. The clan system was particularly influential during these periods; clans not only wielded substantial power within families but also played important mediating and governing roles in villages and local communities. Clan interests took precedence in inheritance, marriage arrangements, and property distribution within families. Through the clan system, families could maintain power and wealth accumulation over extended periods, securing advantageous positions politically and economically.[3]

A key feature of the clan system was the presence of ancestral halls and genealogies. Ancestral halls were not only places for ancestor worship but also centers for important social and political activities within the family and village. Genealogies recorded the history of the clan and the lineage relationships

of family members, serving as crucial tools for maintaining clan identity and authority. These aspects demonstrate that clans in patriarchal society were not only economic and blood-based collectives but also organizations with immense social and cultural influence.[4]

### ***2.3 Family Roles and Gender Division of Labor***

Family roles and gender division of labor were prominent in the Ming and Qing periods, with men and women taking on different responsibilities within the family. Men typically managed external affairs, such as production, economic activities, and social interactions, serving as the main economic providers and decision-makers in the family. Women, on the other hand, were primarily responsible for domestic duties, such as household chores, child-rearing, and caring for the elderly. After marriage, women often bore heavy household labor responsibilities. In extended family structures, senior women (e.g., grandmothers or mothers) also held some authority in household management and child education.

Despite women's significant labor and managerial contributions within the family, their status was still subordinate compared to men. Inheritance rights and family decision-making power were strictly limited for women by law and traditional ethics. Furthermore, the practice of uxorilocal residence (women moving into their husband's family) was common in the marriage system of the Ming and Qing periods, causing women to lose the protection of their natal families, further reinforcing their dependent status in both family and society.

### ***2.4 Power Dynamics and Intergenerational Relations within the Family***

In Ming and Qing family structures, power dynamics were mainly reflected in intergenerational relationships, especially between elders and juniors, and between parents and children. Traditional ethics emphasized filial piety, requiring juniors to unconditionally obey the authority of their elders, which profoundly influenced the power structure within families. Parents, particularly male elders, held absolute power in the family; they not only made family decisions but also controlled their children's marriages and inheritance.

However, power dynamics within the family were not static. As sons matured and assumed more economic and social responsibilities, their status within the family gradually increased. The power relationship between parents and their adult children evolved over time, particularly as elders aged and lost economic and physical advantages. Additionally, elders within the clan would use clan rules and family traditions to maintain a balance of power, ensuring harmony within both the family and the clan.

By analyzing the family structure, clan system, gender division of labor, and power dynamics during the Ming and Qing periods, it is evident that the family, as the basic unit of society, was not only a space for economic cooperation and reproduction but also a critical domain for cultural transmission and power dynamics. These complex family relationships were both key to maintaining the stability of traditional society and a source of social change and conflict.

## **3. Inheritance Practices and Property Distribution**

### ***3.1 Inheritance Laws and Policies during the Ming and Qing Periods***

During the Ming and Qing periods, inheritance practices were largely governed by Confucian ethics and legal regulations, which were deeply rooted in the patriarchal and hierarchical nature of Chinese society. The central principle was to maintain family continuity and stability, which was essential for upholding the social order and clan structure. Both dynasties had legal codes that outlined the distribution of property within families, emphasizing the importance of preserving family lineage through male heirs.[5] In the Ming Dynasty, the *Da Ming Lü* (Great Ming Code) explicitly laid out guidelines for inheritance, favoring male descendants, especially the eldest son. This code ensured that inheritance practices aligned with Confucian values, which prioritized the continuation of the family line through patrilineal descent. In the Qing Dynasty, the *Da Qing Lü Li* (Great Qing Legal Code) continued this tradition but included some adjustments, particularly allowing for flexibility in cases of widowhood or childlessness. Despite these slight modifications, the overall emphasis remained on male-centered inheritance, with women having limited rights to property, often restricted to dowries or exceptional cases of inheritance when no male heirs were available.

These legal frameworks reinforced the idea that family wealth and property should remain within the

clan and be passed down through the male lineage. The laws were designed to minimize fragmentation of property, which was seen as a threat to the economic and social stability of the family unit and the broader clan system.

### ***3.2 Clan Inheritance and Property Transmission: Primogeniture and Equal Distribution***

Clan structures played a crucial role in property distribution during the Ming and Qing periods. The clan, as an extended network of related families, had a vested interest in ensuring that property and wealth were managed and transmitted in ways that strengthened the clan's collective power and unity. Two primary inheritance systems—primogeniture and equal distribution—were practiced, each with its own social and cultural implications.

Primogeniture, where the eldest son inherited the majority, if not all, of the family estate, was common among wealthier and more prominent families. This practice was intended to prevent the division of family property, which could weaken the family's economic base and diminish its influence within the clan and local community. By concentrating resources and power in the hands of the eldest son, the family could maintain its status and fulfill its responsibilities within the clan, such as organizing ancestral rites and providing support to extended family members. The eldest son, in return, was expected to take on the role of family head, managing the estate and ensuring the prosperity and continuity of the family line.

On the other hand, the practice of equal distribution, where property was divided among all sons, was more common among smaller or less wealthy families. This system aimed to provide each son with a share of the family resources, promoting economic independence. However, this practice often led to the gradual fragmentation of property, especially agricultural land, which could make it difficult for families to maintain their economic status over generations. Despite this drawback, equal distribution was seen as a fair and harmonious approach, ensuring that all sons, and by extension their descendants, could sustain themselves.

Both systems, while different in approach, had a common goal: to keep property within the clan and to prevent wealth from dispersing outside the family. Clans often played a supervisory role in these inheritance practices, enforcing rules through clan leaders and ancestral halls. These institutions ensured that the family's property distribution adhered to the principles of maintaining the clan's honor, unity, and continuity. In cases of disputes, the clan elders would mediate, ensuring that the resolution aligned with the clan's interests and local customs.

In summary, inheritance practices and property distribution during the Ming and Qing periods were closely tied to legal regulations, Confucian values, and the structure of the clan. These systems sought to maintain family stability, economic continuity, and social order, reflecting the deeply embedded patriarchal and hierarchical nature of traditional Chinese society.

## **4. Changes in Family Dynamics and Their Social Impact**

### ***4.1 Political and Economic Changes and Their Impact on the Family***

The Ming and Qing periods witnessed significant political and economic changes that directly impacted family dynamics. The rise of a more centralized government under the Ming dynasty, followed by the multi-faceted governance structure of the Qing dynasty, altered how families interacted with state institutions. Policies regarding land ownership, taxation, and household registration were increasingly controlled by the state, compelling families to adapt to new forms of state authority. Land tenure, in particular, influenced family wealth and stability, as land was the primary resource for sustaining large families and clans. As the state expanded its influence, families had to navigate the complexities of local governance, taxation policies, and even military conscription, which could alter family structures by removing male laborers.

Economic transformations, including the growth of commerce and the rise of urbanization, also reshaped family dynamics. As market economies developed, particularly in urban centers, many families shifted from purely agricultural production to commercial and artisanal work. This shift required greater mobility, leading to the migration of family members to cities in search of work opportunities. For some families, this meant a fragmentation of the traditional extended family structure, as younger members left rural homes to establish economic independence. In contrast, for merchant families, the accumulation of wealth through trade offered a chance to consolidate family power and establish new forms of extended

kinship networks in urban settings. Thus, economic changes created both fragmentation and opportunities for re-establishing family connections through wealth accumulation.

#### ***4.2 Evolution of Marriage and Family Relationships***

Marriage, as a crucial element in maintaining and expanding family networks, also evolved significantly during the Ming and Qing periods. Traditionally, marriages were arranged to align with family interests, often aimed at strengthening alliances between families of similar or higher social status. However, with the socio-economic changes of the period, marriage practices started to exhibit greater flexibility. In urban areas, for instance, where commerce and wealth played increasingly significant roles, marriage was not only a means of forming alliances but also of merging economic interests. Families with significant economic resources sought marriage alliances that would enhance their status or expand their commercial networks.

Additionally, the roles of women in marriage and family relationships experienced subtle shifts, especially during the Qing period. Although women's status remained largely subordinate to men due to Confucian norms, some gained more influence within the household, particularly in families that had achieved economic stability. In cases where men were frequently away for work or commercial activities, women took on greater responsibilities in managing household affairs and finances. Widowhood laws during the Qing dynasty also saw some reforms, granting limited rights for women to inherit property if no male heirs were present, reflecting a modest shift in traditional gender dynamics.

Despite these changes, the expectation that women marry into their husband's family and become integrated into their new household remained unchanged. However, with the expansion of market economies, opportunities for women to participate in small-scale business activities arose, providing some families with dual sources of income and altering traditional family roles to a degree. This evolution reflects how economic and social pressures influenced marriage practices and family relationships during this period.

#### ***4.3 Urban-Rural Differences and Changes in Family Structures***

The distinctions between urban and rural family structures became more pronounced during the Ming and Qing periods due to economic and demographic shifts. In rural areas, families largely retained traditional structures, with extended families living together to manage agricultural land. Rural families continued to rely heavily on the support of clans and extended kin networks for economic stability, social protection, and resource sharing. Clan halls and ancestral worship remained central to rural life, as they reinforced family unity and provided a means for social cohesion in times of hardship.

In contrast, urban families were influenced by the growing commerce and population density in cities. Urban families, particularly those involved in trade or skilled crafts, tended to be smaller and more nuclear in nature, as family members often lived closer to marketplaces or workshops for convenience. The demands of urban living, along with the pursuit of economic opportunities, led to a fragmentation of extended family networks, as younger members moved out to seek independent livelihoods or establish new households.

These urban-rural differences created a dynamic landscape for family structures. While rural areas remained more traditional and rooted in clan networks, urban families adapted to a more mobile and flexible structure to capitalize on economic opportunities. The shift in family structures between these settings reflects the broader changes in Chinese society, where economic forces and state policies continually reshaped how families organized and functioned.

#### ***4.4 The Role of Family Dynamics in Social Order and Cultural Continuity***

Family dynamics during the Ming and Qing periods were not just private matters but were central to maintaining social order and cultural continuity. The family was viewed as the foundation of society, a microcosm where Confucian values of hierarchy, filial piety, and loyalty were instilled. The adherence to these values within families reinforced broader societal norms, ensuring that social order was maintained across different regions and social classes. For example, the enforcement of filial piety within the family, where younger members respected and obeyed their elders, was mirrored in the larger societal expectation that subjects remain loyal to the state and its authorities.

Furthermore, family structures played a crucial role in preserving cultural and religious practices.

Ancestor worship, for example, was an integral aspect of family life, linking the living with their ancestors and reinforcing the sense of continuity and duty among family members. The maintenance of family temples and the practice of ancestral rites were not only spiritual acts but also served to solidify the social and economic cohesion of clans. These practices ensured that family members, even those who had migrated for work, remained connected to their ancestral roots and responsibilities.

In conclusion, the family dynamics of the Ming and Qing periods were shaped by the intersecting forces of political, economic, and social change. While traditional values continued to play a dominant role, economic shifts and urbanization introduced new dynamics that modified family structures and roles. Nevertheless, families remained fundamental to the social and cultural fabric of the period, adapting to changes while upholding the essential values that sustained Chinese society.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined the family dynamics and inheritance practices of the Ming and Qing periods, revealing how these structures influenced and mirrored traditional Chinese society. During these periods, families remained the fundamental units of social organization, playing a crucial role in upholding Confucian values, maintaining stability, and ensuring cultural continuity despite significant political, economic, and social changes.

Firstly, the study highlighted the prevalence of both nuclear and extended families. The patriarchal nature of these families was reinforced by Confucian ethics, which structured gender roles with men as the economic heads and women managing domestic affairs, but often in subordinate positions. Economic shifts, such as the rise of commerce, modified these dynamics, particularly in urban areas where smaller and more mobile family units emerged.

Secondly, the analysis of inheritance practices showed the dominance of primogeniture, emphasizing male inheritance to maintain family wealth and clan unity. Clan systems ensured that property remained within the male lineage, aligning with Confucian principles. Though this system stabilized families, it also limited women's rights and reinforced male dominance.

Political and economic changes, including urbanization and the development of market economies, also influenced family dynamics. Urban families adapted to new economic opportunities by transitioning to smaller, nuclear structures, while rural families maintained more traditional, extended forms supported by clans. These changes illustrate the flexibility of family structures in response to external pressures.

Marriage practices evolved as well, shifting from purely alliance-based arrangements to those influenced by economic factors, especially among merchant families. Economic independence allowed some women to take on greater household responsibilities, reflecting subtle changes in gender roles.

In conclusion, the family dynamics and inheritance practices of the Ming and Qing periods were deeply rooted in Confucian values, yet adapted to political and economic changes. Despite transformations in family structures, families remained central to Chinese society, maintaining social order and cultural continuity. This study provides insights into how traditional Chinese society functioned and lays a foundation for understanding its ongoing influence on modern Chinese family and social structures.

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