

Woman, House, Identity: The Study of the Role of House in Constructing the Contemporary Dong Minority Woman's Identity

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Abstract—Similar to most ethnic groups in China, men of the Dong minority hold the primary position in policymaking, moral authority, social values, and the control of the property. As the spatial embodiment of the patriarchal ideals, the house plays a significant role in producing and reproducing the distinctive gender status within the Dong society. Nevertheless, Dong women do not see their home as a cage of confinement, nor do they see themselves as a victim of oppression. For these women with reference to their productive identity, a house is a dwelling place with manifold meanings, including a proof of identity, an economic instrument, and a public resource operating on the community level. This paper examines the role of the house as a central site for identity construction and maintenance for the southern dialect Dong minority women in Hunan, China. Drawing on recent interviews with the Dong women, this study argues that women as productive individuals have a strong influence on the form of their house and the immediate environment, regardless of the male-dominated social construct of the Dong society. The aim of this study is not to produce a definitive relationship between women, house, and identity. Rather, it seeks to offer an alternative lens into the complexity and diversity of gender dynamics operating in and beyond the boundary of the house in the context of contemporary rural China.

Keywords—Conception of home, Dong minority, house, rural China, woman's identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE house is an important site for the construction of the productive identity for home-based female workers. Based on the interviews with the villagers in the southern dialect Dong minority region, of varying ages, household responsibilities, and production activities, this paper seeks to demonstrate the capacity, creativity, and freedom of the local women in making changes of the house for their productive and reproductive needs. In the hope of enriching the existing body of research in the intersecting fields of home, women, and identity, this study sheds light on how the house is transformed to respond to the women's conception of home, and how such process in turn reinforces women's productive identity.

The study of house as a site for productive identity construction is grounded in a fieldwork study conducted in Gaobu Village, Tongdao Dong Autonomous County, Hunan. In early 2021, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the local villagers, who made use of their home for various production purposes. The selection of villagers for this study is

based on their primary roles as the providers of the family, the type of production work, and the location in which the work is produced. Supplemented with survey study, the research aims to set up a scene for the production and economic phenomenon in the southern dialect Dong minority region today.

Primarily, the interview focuses on: the production and reproduction activities, the design and arrangement of the production space, its spatial relation with the living space, and the conception of home with reference to the productive identity. Most of the interviews were conducted either at homes or the production sites where the researcher could retrieve first-hand data based on personal observation. In some cases, the interviewees would invite the researcher to join their working process through which the working environment could be experienced through a holistic bodily engagement.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, there have been many studies in various disciplines examined the meaning of home. It is widely acknowledged that home is a multidimensional concept and is often associated with various ideas concerning house, family, haven, gender, ideal home, and making home [1]. In the discussion of women's identity and production at home, the following section reviews the intersecting studies of gender, work, and home framed by two spheres of literature. While the first sphere of literature concerns with the role of space in the construction of women's identity, the second sphere concerns with the different perceptions of home with reference to gender identity.

Throughout history and across cultures, geographical and architectural space has played a significant role in constructing and maintaining gender relation. Space as a socially constructed device segregates women from knowledge, power, and resource and thereby reinforces the status between men and women. Over the course of a life, humans perform institutional activities in ways that produce certain social outcomes, specifically gender stratification. The spaces in which these activities performed are 'spatial institutions' that fuel the segregated experience of different gendered bodies [2]. From school, workplace, to dwelling, spaces in various contexts are gendered as masculine and feminine to continue the production and reproduction of the hierarchical social relation.

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Of many institutional spaces, home is one of the loci in facilitating the gender interplay. In the late 1960s, feminist theorists pointed out the spatial separation in the Western industrial societies. Urban space is devised into two distinctive spheres of home and waged work, where the private arena is associated with women, and the public arena of men [3]. As men are expected to provide for the family, women are encouraged (or forced) to maintain the daily operation of the household. Women are consigned to domestic labor and remain socially isolated as they have limited opportunity in participating the wider economic and political sphere. For many feminist writers, the site of home is often associated with negative connotations – oppressive, tyranny, and patriarchal domination [4].

Considering the gendered perceptions of space, home becomes a site of femininity. While men see home as the representation of personal status and achievement, woman view home as a haven or a place of refuge [5]. This understanding of home is founded on the idea that home is a private arena differentiated from the public realm. It is free from public surveillance and is often perceived as a secure and safe space [6]. Contrary to the notion of home as a site for intimate and caring relations, the public sphere is associated with work, public engagement, and networks of nonfamilial contacts. Nonetheless, as the understanding of home is deeply rooted in historic and cultural context, many critics challenge the universal perception of home as a haven [7]. It is argued that home being a fluid concept must be studied beyond the binary oppositions (work/home, public/private, masculinity/femininity).

Home, as Pratt and Hanson attest, is never restricted to domestic life [8]. Research reveals that many women engage both paid and unpaid labor within the domestic sphere [9]-[12]. In her study of the female artistic identity in the home-based studio, Bain reveals the permeable nature of women's workspace as a result of the repeatedly interruption and demands of domesticity from other family members [13]. Today, along with the advent of technologies and the rise of remote work arrangement, work-from-home has become a dominant working culture for many men and women of the middle class and self-employed professionals. In negotiating the workspace/time in the domestic sphere, the impact on familial relationship, the workspace arrangement, and the working/living experience become the central discussions among scholars [14]-[16].

Other scholars reject the idealization of home as haven. As Valentine suggests, home with its dominance heterosexuality becomes a site for discrimination and asymmetrical sociosexual relations [17]. It restricts lesbians from defining their own identities, leading to the practice of self-censorship, and minimizing the time spent at home. In cases when abusive treatment and violence are performed to police heterosexual hegemony at home, home is only inclusive for those who are conform to conventional understanding of gender and sexuality [18]. Home is therefore never exclusively private, safe, feminine, or a site for domestic activities.

As Mallett concludes, home is “a repository for complex,

inter-related and at times contradictory socio-cultural ideas about people's relationship with one another” [1]. The meaning of home varies and depends upon the locus of study, the theoretical and methodological approach, and the broader historical and social context in which the study is conducted [19]. Owing to the different social facets of home, the following section examines the traditional Dong house, and the way women conceptualize it as a home in the contemporary context of southern dialect Dong minority.

III. TRADITIONAL DONG HOUSE AND PATRIARCHY

A traditional Dong house is a three-story timber building supported by pillars (see Fig. 1). Depending on the spatial arrangement with regard to the ground floor, it can be broadly categorized into two types, namely the *ganlan* and on-grade house. The *ganlan* house is an elevated structure where most of the dwelling activities take place on the first floor, leaving the ground floor partially or entirely emptied. Due to its adaptability in the natural environment, *ganlan* houses are often built on hilly terrains or by the water bodies. The on-grade house on the other hand is a structure that sits directly on the ground with the main living areas arranging on the ground and first floor.



Fig. 1 The exterior of a traditional Dong house

A traditional Dong house consists of four spatial components, namely ceremonial (the fireplace and the central hall), living (the veranda, the living room, and the bedroom), supplementary (the poultry barn, the toilet, and the storage), and transportation space (the staircase) [20]. Entering from the main entrance, the ground floor is a partition-less space that is dominantly used for raising domesticated animals, storage, and preparing food in special occasions. Leading up to the staircase, the first floor contains the living room and the semi-outdoor veranda where the family members entertain and do occasional manual labor. Decorative fence and windows are installed on the southern façade to create an enclosed yet public area for various activities. Perpendicular to the veranda, there is the central hall and fireplace for cooking and dining. The second and upper floors are the most private areas accommodating the bedroom and storage spaces.

For a long time, fire has been an essential element for the survival and spirituality of the Dong people. It provides fundamental functions of everyday living, including cooking, heating, and lighting. Spiritually, in most of the Dong minority settlement, a fireplace also represents an important cultural moral symbolizing a family unit (i.e., a nuclear family of the married spouses and their children). When the family extends and grows into several units along the patrilineal bloodline, the number of fireplaces within the same house also increases.

The central hall is a spatial element derived from the Han. In early China, etiquette in Confucianism was one of the key principles in organizing the society. It signifies the basic order that regulates human and their relationships with heaven, ancestor, others, and self. As centrality and symmetry are often conflated with the notion of etiquette, the central hall becomes the prominent axis through which the spatial sequence unfolds symmetrically.

Inside the central hall there is the altar at the center of the backwall (see Fig. 2). In traditional Chinese families, worshipping ancestors is a respectful social duty through which the living descendants are believed to be blessed with good fortune. As a ritual celebration of the patriarchal practice, a Chinese man is responsible for marrying and producing descendants to ensure the continuation of worshipers. A man without a child or a descendant of his own therefore breaches the filial duty to the household lineage [13]. By purposely placing the altar in the central hall, at the heart of the house, the family not only reveres the soul of their loved ones, but also honors the agnatic kinship and thereby forges the position of the male family member.

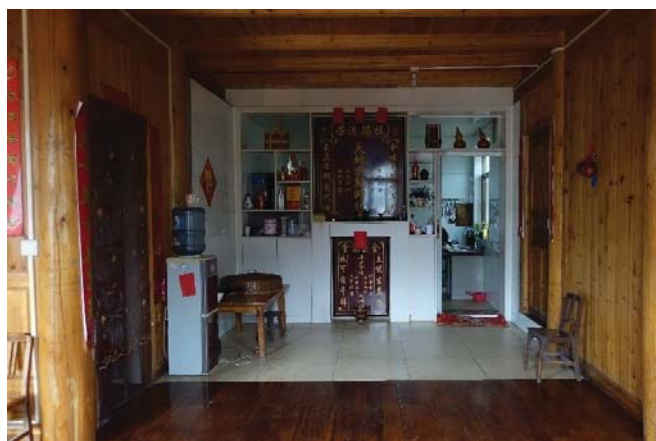


Fig. 2 The altar is placed at the center of the house.

Apart from the central hall, the inner division of the house also reveals the social dominance of man. In the traditional Dong society, or the Chinese society at large, married daughters are believed to be “spilt water” of no economic responsibility to her own natal family [21]. Once a girl is married to her husband, she is considered as a legitimate member of the husband’s family despite her kinship tie with her own. On the other hand, the son, who is believed to be the financial supporter and social authority within the family, becomes responsible for taking care of his birth parents and succeeding in the role of

expanding the family. Under the very same roof, the son and his spouse begin to take root and establish a family of their own. As a result, to cater for the future family, the bedroom of the male descendant is often much larger than that of the female descendant. Furthermore, in a household with more than one male descendant, the house is devised into portions where the families of each male descendant reside. While the portion of space might not be the evenly distributed, the additional family unit in most cases extends along the width of the house.

The male-dominated social practice does play a significant role in organizing the space and its use in a Dong minority house. Nonetheless, the purpose of this section does not attempt to identify specific rooms or spaces with the stereotypical gendered relationships. As a house/home involves processes and actions of dwelling, it is only through the activities at given times and relational context that the gender dynamics and the perception of home can be understood [22], [23]. In the following section, the paper examines how women construct a place called home, regardless the male-centric spatial arrangement of the house.

IV. CASE STUDY

Home as an Economic Tool

Home-based work entails an alternative means for stable income source. While agricultural production and other part-time employment may offer substantial salary, the unstable work schedule and sometimes questionable contracting terms make sustainable financial gain difficult. Long, for example, has been providing services and producing goods at home for many years. She is a mother of two children who both established a family of their own. Without the financial burden of child rearing, her homework activities are mainly to meet the daily expenses for her husband and herself. In addition to the seed distributor business cooperated with her husband, Long ventured a rice wine business at home two years ago to provide an alternative financial support for her family. As noted by Long,

No one would like to participate in agricultural work. It is too difficult and very tiring. When the weather rains or the temperature gets too hot or too cold, farmers like us cannot get any farm-based work done. Without work, we simply have no income for the day. (Individual interview, Hunan, 20 April 2021)

The site where the wine is produced is a temporary shed tucked at the back of the retail shop (see Fig. 3). On the southeast side of the shed, there is the main living compound of the family. The house, as with the other traditional Dong house, is a three-story structure shared by other related family members. The first and second floors cater most of the living functions, whereas the ground floor is dedicated to poultry farming, toiletry, and furthermore wine storage and rice fermentation. On the western end, a side entrance is connected to an empty lot which Long uses for the loading and unloading of the firewood and other large objects.

The winemaking shed is a 7 m x 4 m temporary timber frame structure containing a brick cooking stove, a firewood storage

space, and some shelving units (see Fig. 4). According to Long, the production of rice wine involves a number of procedures in which certain spatial condition is crucial in the process (i.e., a fermentation chamber with the optimum temperature for the development of rice; a flat, spacious area for the cooling of the cooked rice; a tap water piping system for the distillation of the wine). Since the house does not provide the convenience or condition for such production procedure, Long decides to construct a space to accommodate her productive needs.

Concerning how the winemaking shed is built and arranged, a key determining factor is the ownership of the land. Renting usually involves less responsibilities and financial obligations as associated with permanent ownership. Nonetheless with

short-term leases and impermanent legal ties, renting also entails little degree of control and certainty. The land where the shed stands is a property inherited from Long's family friend. It is not for sale, nor is it tied with any form of legal leasing terms. Without permanent ownership of the property, Long has minimal control over the tenancy period and the usage of the land. Yet her desire to initiate the winemaking business and provide for her family does not stop her from taking advantage of the property. By constructing a temporary structure, Long is able to minimize the investment risk while maintaining adequate liquidity for other business ventures. For other women who require the constant caring of their children, the boundary between work and living is less clearly defined.

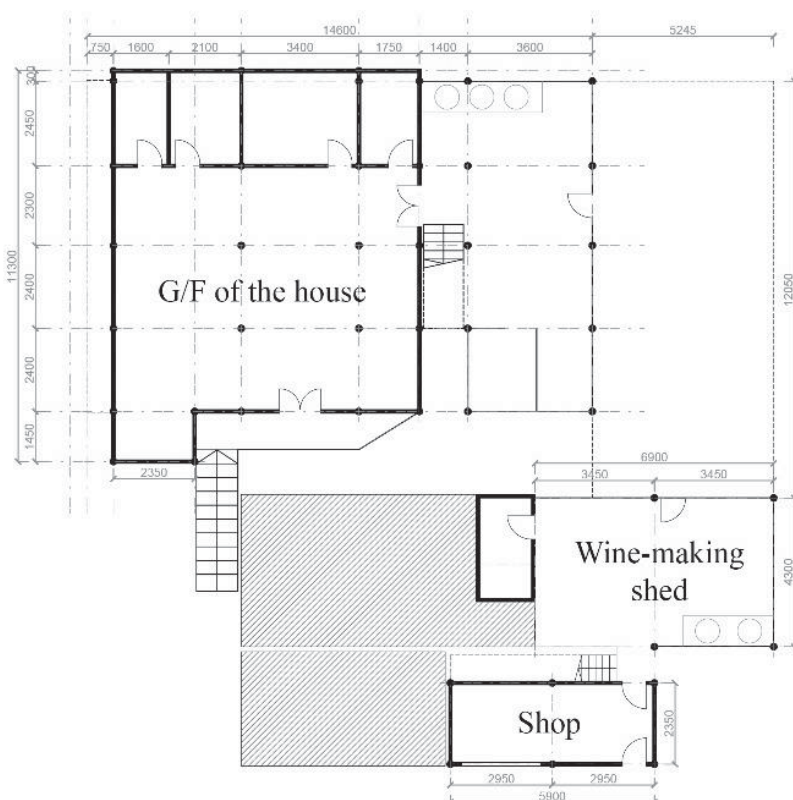


Fig. 3 The property of Long is structured in three parts: the shopfront, the wine making shed, and the main house. Between the shed and the house, there is an empty lot that is used for transporting the firewood and large objects



Fig. 4 The temporary wine making shed

Home as a Communal Resource

The implications of women's home-based production involve the constant demand and domesticity from other family members. While working at home does provide essential financial security for the family, women often 'work in pieces' to achieve both domestic and financial objectives. Like an artist, women must make conscious effort in collaging the time and resources as they juggle their various identities as a mother, wife, and the provider of the family. Home, for instance, has become an imperative means to negotiate different responsibilities. One homemaker, Luo, explained how home has been fundamental in incorporating her domestic responsibilities and income-generating activities:

Taking care of my grandson and making money at the

same time is no easy task. Because I am the sole caretaker, I decided to open a convenient store on the ground floor of my house, through which I am able to organize time and space for my grandson, my income, and myself simultaneously. When my grandson goes to school, I can work in the farmland. When he is back home, I can sell goods at the store and play with him at the same time.

Although women must adapt their work to accommodate various demands, working at home offers considerable flexibility which conventional employment often lacks. As with Luo, Xian deliberately integrates domestic and work spaces in ways to maximize productivity for different tasks. Xian is a home-based garment manufacturer and a mother of two children. As her husband is a long-term employee in another province, Xian is responsible for taking care of the children, household chores, and providing for the family.

I have no time to do any agricultural work. Between making clothes at home and working in the field, I can only pick one thing to do. Having to raise the child by myself, I choose to work at home so that I can have an eye on her while I am working.

The house where her family resides is a three-story brick building located by the side of a main driveway (see Fig. 5). Unlike other traditional Dong houses, the building is designed to facilitate clothes making processes and dwelling activities. Within the 10 m x 5 m rectangular floor plan, the house is devised into two portions: a public area for garment manufacture, and private living spaces encompassing kitchen, dining area, and bedrooms. In the basement, the indoor area is mainly dedicated to the clothing factory (see Fig. 6).



Fig. 5 Xian's house: Unlike other traditional Dong houses, it is a three-story brick building encompassing spaces for domestic and production activities

The integration of productive and reproductive activities creates a supportive environment and social network, through which Xian can perform multiple tasks simultaneously. At the garment factory, Xian employs a number of women from the nearby villages to produce clothing. These women, similar to Xian, also have to juggle work, childcare, and other household responsibilities on a daily basis. Occasionally, they bring their children along to work and provide supervision over Xian's and other women's children, while carrying out the assigned production tasks. Apart from creating economic value for

income generation, the house/garment factory is also an important support system that gathers collective resource among women. For Xian and her employees, a home is not a single entity operating exclusively in the private sphere, instead it belongs to the communal network that can be utilized for their shared goals and responsibilities.



Fig. 6 The garment factory located in the basement

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated how the house has transformed to negotiate the financial and domestic agenda of women, and how such process has reinforced women's productive identity. As illustrated in the case studies, women of different household background and responsibilities predicate their income generating activities on resources in the immediate vicinity. The house as a result performs a valuable economic and social instrument for women, regardless the hegemonic masculinity embedded in the spatial arrangement. For Dong women, the house is not a cage of confinement, nor it is an oppressive site of patriarchal domination. Rather, with reference to their productive identity, the house is a resource through which their productive and reproductive demands can be accommodated.

When the demands of childcare prevent women from working outside of home, they often create a supportive environment within home, where both the domestic and financial duties can be fulfilled. Even though women are constantly disrupted by the needs of other family members, home-based production offers the freedom and flexibility in which women can organize the time and space as needed. As women tend to prioritize the demands of domesticity, working with fragmented time, space, and material has been a key in succeeding their production practice. In times when the house can no longer benefit their working process, women would actively engage in the planning, construction, and maintenance of the home for social and economic purposes.

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