

Unraveling In-law Conflict & Its Association with Intimate Partner Violence in Chinese Culture: Narrative Accounts of Chinese Battered Women

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**KEYWORDS: IN-LAW CONFLICT, INTIMATE PARTNER
VIOLENCE, CHINESE CULTURE, FAMILY DYNAMICS**

This paper analyzes in-law conflict and disagreements experienced by Chinese battered women, and investigates their association with intimate partner violence (IPV). Conflict between a daughter- and mother-in-law seems to be a common phenomenon in Chinese families. Twenty-two Chinese women aged from 25 to 69 (M=41) who had experienced in-law conflict were interviewed in a refuge for battered women in Hong Kong. While most of the women experienced conflict with their mother-in-law, some interviewees were also abused by their sisters-in-law. Additionally, one case involved a daughter- and father-in-law conflict and another case encompassed a son- and mother-in-law conflict. From their experiences, some important aspects of conflict and disagreement between parents- and children-in-law were identified, including disputes over financial matters, conflicting lifestyles, battles over children, differences in gender role expectations and being a scapegoat of the husband. Using the analysis of narrative accounts of Chinese battered women, the effects of perceived Chinese culture and family dynamics on in-law conflict are studied. Implications of the study for prevention of, and intervention in, domestic violence, as well as future studies of IPV, are addressed.

Conflict in interpersonal relationships is something to be expected, because of the differing values, expectations, and interests of different individuals (Jameson, 1999). Harm arises, therefore, not from the conflict itself but from the tactics used for resolving it (Straus, 2007).

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In families, conflict between children and parents-in-law seems to be a normal phenomenon, arising from inheritance rules, marriage patterns, and gender relations (Clerkx, 1988). In addition, in-law conflict has been shown to be significantly associated with intimate partner violence (IPV) (Chan et al., 2008; 2009).

This paper explores in-law conflict experienced by Chinese women through the narrative accounts of twenty-two battered women living in Hong Kong, focusing particularly on identifying aspects of disagreement and conflict between parents and their children-in-law. While most of the sampled women had experienced conflict with their mothers-in-law, some interviewees were also abused by their sisters-in-law. Additionally, one case involved daughter and father-in-law conflict and another case encompassed son and mother-in-law conflict. These women's stories enable us to study the association of such conflict with IPV. The influences of Chinese culture and family dynamics on in-law conflict will also be discussed, to create a picture of the effect of in-law conflict in the subsystem of a couple within the family. Finally, the implications of the study for the prevention of, and interventions in, domestic violence, as well as future research on IPV, will be addressed.

Conceptualizing In-law Conflict

Conflict is caused by individuals and groups struggling to maximize their benefits and exercise influence and control over others in order to achieve their own goals as people with different interests and values (Wilmot, 2001). So *conflict* is defined as "a situation in which interdependent people express (manifest or latent) difference in satisfying their individual needs and interests, and they experience interference from each other in accomplishing these goals" (Donohue & Kolt, 1992, p. 4). The suffix in-law is added to denote the relatives a spouse acquires from the standpoint of marriage. In practice, the term is usually applied to the closest relatives of the spouse, such as the father, mother, brother(s), sister(s), and the husbands or wives of sisters or brothers-in-law (Apter, 1986). Accordingly, *in-law conflict* can be understood as a serious disagreement or argument, a state of opposition or hostilities, a fight or struggle, or an incompatibility between opinions, all occurring among relatives by marriage. The amount of time family members spend together, emotional/volatile interactions within the family, and power differences among family members all cultivate tensions in families. Additionally, family relationships are protected or restricted by law and cultural norms. Many interpersonal conflicts which can be resolved simply through the dissolution of relationships, however, family relationship cannot be easily terminated and so conflicts in the family cannot be easily resolved through dissolution. These unsolved conflicts cause tension in families and families sometimes

resolve these tensions in inappropriate ways, including through the use of family violence (Barnett, Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2005). The literature on in-law conflict is broad and shows both diverse causes and multiple ways in which abuse occurs.

In this paper, the study of in-law conflict is focused on the conflict arising between parents and spouses of their children. Such disagreements have different aspects based on the particular context and/or culture in which they occur. Parents-in-law with traditional values may prefer their daughters-in-law to stay at home as housewives, and to fulfill care-giving roles. However, daughters-in-law may prefer to work outside the home, especially when they are living with their parents-in-law, in part to reduce familial conflict and release the stress and tension it causes (Dallinger, 1998; Dautzenberg et al., 2000; Nakazawa, 1996; Stephens & Townsend, 1997). Cultural differences also impact in-law conflict. For example, for some Japanese families where the son married a foreign wife, the parents-in-law's control the family finances (Nakazawa, 1996) may lead to conflict. Moreover, in-law conflict is not a new phenomenon. For instance, in 18th and 19th century Germany, some mothers-in-law forced their sons' wives to give them their earnings (Volland & Beise, 2004). In both of the aforementioned examples, the parents' control over the personal finances of their daughters-in-law would be fertile ground for in-law conflict.

In-law stress can also be caused at specific times, such as during holidays and at family gatherings (Gomez, 1993). Because of their affinity with biological family rather than in-laws, people tend to visit their own family more often than their spouse's relatives. This is especially the case for daughters-in-law (Verweij & Kalmijn, 2004). Thus, visiting in-laws is often an unfavorable activity for couples, especially for women. Consequently, daughters-in-law may try to keep distant from their in-laws in order to avoid conflict with them. In addition, differences in goals and values have been identified as key sources of in-law conflict (Marotz-Baden & Cowan, 1987). A different lifestyle from parents-in-law may result in a great deal of stress being placed on daughters-in-law. From this, differences in feelings and/or opinions may arise between parents and spouses of their children (Soeda & Araki, 1999). For instance, some serious cases have been found in Tajikistan, where some mothers-in-law felt they had the right to abuse their daughters-in-law if they met their friends or contacted their own families (Haarr, 2007). In such situations, disagreements about social and daily living arrangements are a common occurrence.

In addition, some studies show that disagreement between parents and the spouses of their children, particularly daughters-in-law, can arise when it comes to children. For many older people, the role of wives is to produce children, and conflict may follow if this expectation

is not met (Hyder, Noor & Tsui, 2007). In caring for children, different views may arise between generations regarding the appropriate ways to care for a baby (Matthey, Panasetis & Barnett, 2002). When it comes to the gender of, and the care given to their grandchildren, mothers-in-law may make unkind comments and behave negatively (Chan et al., 2002). Disagreement over the disciplining of grandchildren has been identified as one of the most salient issues in in-law conflict (Kaneko & Yamada, 1990). Furthermore, sharing the same kitchen has been reported to be a common cause of conflict between women (Kaneko & Yamada, 1990). Wives are expected to carry out domestic work (Hyder et al., 2007), but disagreement may arise if the daughter and mother-in-law have different expectations about how housewives will go about their tasks. The relationships between daughters and mothers-in-law are often much worse than with fathers-in-law, since, in cases where the couple resides with the parents-in-law, there are two housewives in the same household. For example, in Japan the housewife traditionally has the authority to make decisions about housework, so conflict about housework management between daughters and mothers-in-law can be significant when these two housewives are living under the same roof (Soeda & Araki, 1999).

Association of In-law Conflict with IPV

According to the Declaration on Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 December, 1993, “[t]he term ‘violence against women’ means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (UN, 2000, p. 3). Based on a report produced by the World Health Organization (WHO), the worldwide prevalence rates of physical and/or sexual violence by intimate partners ranges from 15% to 71%, and for psychological abuse the prevalence rates range from 20% to 75% (WHO, 2005). Violence against women is a matter of widespread concern and is recognized as a serious abuse of human rights. In the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China (HKSAR), in which the current study was conducted, a recent household survey found that 13.9% of adult respondents (12% of male respondents; 15% of female respondents) had been battered by their partners at some point; 10.6% of HKSAR households were estimated to have a battered spouse (Chan, 2005). On this basis, it may be estimated that a total of 160,000 HKSAR couples have a problem with IPV.

Violence not only occurs between a couple, but also within a family context. According to the WHO, the extended family is both a risk and protective factor for IPV (WHO, 2005). Informal networks, such as

family, friends, and neighbors, are usually the first point of contact for abused women, rather than formal services such as health personnel, police, counselors, social workers and so on. Battered women are more likely to seek support from formal services when they receive encouragement from friends and family. However, in some situations, victims remain in the abusive relationship because of an overwhelming sense of fear and as a result of decreases in their personal resources, financial resources and contact with support networks. Victims may hesitate to contact their informal networks (family, friends and neighbors) if they perceive less support among these sources, especially in the situation that the violence against women is rooted in patriarchal ideas about gender and social acceptance (Leone et al., 2007). In other words, informal networks can be a protection for victims only if these resources can give support to victims and victims seek help from them. Moreover, victims identify intervention by extended family members as a potential cause of IPV when they find the interference to be harmful to their relationship (Clark et al., 1982). In the worst situation, the extended family is not only an obstacle to battered women in search of help, but also an abuser or at least a bystander in the violence. Recent studies conducted in the HKSAR have emphasized the correlation between in-law conflict and IPV. According to a report on the development of risk assessment tools for spousal battering and child abuse in HKSAR Chinese families, in-law conflict is one of the risk factors for battered spouses (Chan, 2006) and is significantly associated with IPV (Chan et al., 2008; 2009).

Although the association between in-law conflict and IPV has been confirmed in quantitative research, its mechanism and process has not yet been articulated. Knowing the concrete experiences of in-law conflict and how it is related to IPV would contribute to the prevention of both problems. This paper qualitatively analyzes in-law conflict and disagreements experienced by Chinese battered women, and investigates their association with intimate partner violence (IPV). The analysis will be based on the narrative accounts of Chinese battered women recruited in a refuge for battered women in Hong Kong.

METHODS

From June 2007 to January 2008, 22 battered women were interviewed.² The sampled women were aged 25 to 69 ($M=41$). A poster

² Examples from the **Interview guideline**/Background information/Family background

- How many people in your family? How many children you have? Their ages? Their genders?
- What kind of house do you live in? Public housing unit? Private flat?

describing the study was posted in a women's shelter and its staff introduced the research to the residents in order to recruit interviewees. The interviewees were recruited on a voluntary basis and offered a supermarket coupon to the value of HK \$50 (around CAD \$6.7) after the interview as a thanks for their contribution. A verbal explanation of the work was given by the interviewer, and written consent from interviewees obtained, before beginning. The interviewees understood they could stop the interview at any time if they wanted and they would still receive the coupon, without any penalty. The study was approved by the institutional review board of the Hospital Authority of Hong Kong. Participation in the study was voluntary, informed consent was provided, and confidentiality of information was guaranteed.

A total of 22 women admitted into a refuge for battered women participated in the study. An interview guideline was developed and it included: 1) Background information (e.g. family background, marital history), 2) Spousal violence incidents (e.g. the seriousness, first and most recent incidents), 3) In-law conflict (e.g. the relationship with in-laws, the seriousness, first and most recent incidents). Since they were still in a crisis situation in terms of their emotions and relationship with their family, the interviews were conducted in a private room by a female interviewer (the researcher) with over 10 years of experience in

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- What is your career? What is your husband's career? Did you receive government financial assistance?
 - How did you get engaged with your husband?
 - When and how did you get married with your husband?
 - How about your marital relationship in the first (few) year(s) of the marriage?
 - How about your marital relationship recently?
- II. Spousal violence incidents/seriousness of incident
- What was this incident? Where did this incident happen? When did this incident happen?
 - How did this incident happen/Who was involved? Was police called? If yes, who called the police?/Anyone suffer injury? Who? Did he /she consult doctor or make medical check. .
 - What was the response of your in-laws and your family?
- The first incident of spousal violence
- What was this incident? Where did this incident happen? When did this incident happen?
 - How did this incident happen? Who was involved? Was police called? If yes, who called the police?
 - Anyone suffer injury? Who? Did he / she consult doctor or make medical check.
 - What was the response of your in-laws and your family?
- Similar questions were also asked for the most current incident of spousal violence and in-law violence and husband's response to in-law violence.

family social work. Shelter workers also gave follow-up support after the interview. In addition, only handwritten notes were taken (by the interviewer) to record the interview, in order to relieve the participants' stress and anxiety caused by video or tape recording.

The age of respondents' spouses ranged from 25 to 75 years, with a mean of 53. The average age difference between respondents and spouses was 12 years and the average years of marriage was 15. All of the respondents had at least one child. About 23% of respondents were employed, 41% were homemakers, 27% were unemployed and 9% were retired. The respondents had experienced different levels and types of conflict with their in-laws, from keeping no contact or meeting occasionally on festive days and at family gatherings only, to having verbal or even physical fights.

Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the interviewer at the time of data collection. The first five accounts were used for coding development and their content analyzed using an open coding procedure to develop categories or themes. After a coding scheme had been constructed, each subsequent interview was coded on a present or absent basis for each category. This coding approach has been adopted previously to understand violence toward abused women and to understand abusers (Riessman, 1994; Chan, 2009).

Respondents' self-reported accounts of each conflict incident are the units of analysis. The interviewer was sufficiently sensitive to monitor her own emotional response to the accounts, to avoid obviously judgmental attitudes, and to facilitate a narrative whenever possible during the interview. The coding of the interview process was conducted by one social worker and one researcher working on domestic violence studies. To increase the credibility of data analysis, triangulation was employed. Triangulation is a means of supporting a finding by showing that independent measures agree with it, or at least do not contradict it (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This was achieved by comparing the coding scheme of two researchers. The inter-coder reliability reached at least 90% agreement.

Results

Disagreements between mothers & daughters-in-law: With reference to the reports of the interviewees who had experienced in-law conflict, some aspects of disagreement were commonly identified: disputes over financial matters, conflicting lifestyles, battles over children, differences in gender role expectations and being a scapegoat of the husband. These topics are each discussed in turn below.

Disputes Over Financial Matters: Negotiation for Power

In Chinese culture, as well as in many other cultures throughout the world, having control over financial matters in a family is a symbol of power and status. The traditional gender role expectation of women in a family is to take care of household chores. Women are supposed to be in-charge of a family and make it orderly. The family member who manages family expenses is the family member who has power. Below is an episode that typifies the sampled women's disputes over financial matters.

Ms. B lived with her mother-in-law in her husband's hometown in Mainland China for the first few years of her marriage. Her husband worked in Hong Kong and came home to visit them twice a month. Since her husband had a limited income, he gave only a little money to Ms. B to support his entire, and large (10+) family members. She needed to use her own savings to support them, so could not give any pocket money to her mother-in-law. The mother-in-law was angry with Ms. B as her son only gave money to his wife and not to her. Ms. B shared: "She (mother-in-law) never likes me. She always complained to her son about me for not giving her money."

Another episode that involved a struggle for power in a family was provided by Ms. J. As Ms. J described: "My husband gave all our money to my mother-in-law, she did not give me any money. She bought everything for me, including sanitary napkins. If I requested to buy something by myself, she would call me stubborn and disobedient." Ms. J had been married for 13 years and had a son aged 12. She lived with her mother-and sister-in-law. She was a housewife, stayed at home and cared of her son. Ms. J's mother-in-law managed the family finances and prepared everything in the family, including what the daughter-in-law required. As a result, she reasoned, there was no need to give Ms. J any money. Her mother-in-law controlled all daily expenditures of the family including those of Ms. J, and expected her to follow instructions and adhere to family norms. Ms. J's mother-in-law would be agitated and would blame her if she had a different opinion on any financial matter.

Other scenarios involving power struggles between daughters and mothers-in-law also emerged. For example, Ms. D was blamed by her mother-in-law for having a job while allocating insufficient time to take care of household chores. She complained: "my parents-in-law blamed me and called me greedy for money, giving me \$20 for the day was enough. She said I should not complain and should not work outside the home."

Ms. D was her husband's second wife and they had a son, aged four. She shared: "my husband is very lazy and does not want to go to

work. He preferred to apply for a government security allowance (because of his unemployment)." Her husband was always in debt and the government allowance alone could not support the family. Ms. D's husband only gave her HK \$20 (around CAD \$ 2.7) per day for the daily living expenses of her and her son, including three meals and the other necessities of life. She therefore found a part-time job to support the family only to, as shown above, be ridiculed and admonished for having done so.

Ms. I had a similar experience. She had migrated from Mainland China to the HKSAR after marriage and lived for the first year with her parents-in-law. She could not find a job of any description because she was under-qualified. During that time, the family was supported by her husband alone, and Ms. I stayed at home and did all the housework in order to receive recognition from her parents-in-law. However, they continued to blame her for not going out to work and called her a prostitute. Ms. I described: "My parents-in-law looked down on me and blamed me. They said [sarcastically] I should enjoy life (at home) and there was no need to work (outside)."

Conflicting Lifestyles

Mothers and daughters-in-law may have different lifestyle preferences. The experiences of Ms. E and Ms. K illustrate the situations of a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law respectively facing disagreements with their in-laws over their social and daily lives.

The case of Ms. E demonstrates religious disagreement between in-laws. Ms. E and her husband had a son, aged eight. She was a housewife and her husband was a construction worker. Given their limited family income, they lived in the two-person public housing unit of the husband's parents. Ms. E was a Christian but her in-law family members were not and they followed Chinese traditional customs of praying to ancestors and traditional Gods. Ms. E shared: "my parents-in-law did not like me being a Christian, and were against me going to church. They said the family would become unstable because I trusted God." They blamed Ms. E for going to church and said it would be bad for the family that she did not follow the traditional customs. Religious belief is more than just a choice of religion. It symbolizes the willingness of Ms. E, being married into her husband's family, to be socialized into her husband's family tradition. Keeping her own religious belief was perceived by her in-laws as rebellious. The religious differences between Ms. E and her parents-in-law thus created great conflict.

Ms. K shared the experience from the perspective of a mother-in-law. She was over 60 and lived with her daughter, son-in-law, and their two young daughters. Ms. K's daughter had invited her to live with the family after her husband passed away. However, her son-in-law did not accept this move and as a result, restricted Ms. K's behavior and

activities at home. He blamed her if she did not follow his instructions. As she portrayed: "my son-in-law always prohibited me from watching television, having a drink, or having a bath. I only sat on a corner of my bed in the sitting room, I was very afraid of him and I did not move." In summary, according to our respondents, sources of disagreement between parents and children-in-law regarding daily and social matters include important aspects of life such as daily routine activities, scheduling, social activities, behavior at home, and choice of religion. Conflicting lifestyles symbolizes the rigidity of either party to not give in and make compromises.

Battles Over Children

Sources of in-law disagreement where children are concerned focused on the couple's children or even grandchildren, in terms of their gender, how they are cared for, and who has custody. Ms. A recalled her memories of her mother-in-law's anger with her for not giving the family a boy, when she had given birth to two girls. At the time of the interview, Ms. A was over 60 years old, but she still remembered how her mother-in-law always twisted her face when she lived with her in her husband's hometown in Mainland China at the beginning of her marriage. In those years, her husband did not work because the family was supported by money from her father-in-law who worked in Hong Kong. He sent back money regularly, but seldom visited the family. However, the money was not enough to support the family after the birth of the children, so Ms. A went to work in order to buy food, while still doing all the housework. The mother-in-law not only did not give Ms. A any support but also blamed her for not giving the family a boy. She said: "my mother-in-law complained that I only have two girls, and I was a 'no-son woman'." Her mother-in-law was only concerned with the gender of her grandchildren and constantly asked her daughter-in-law to give her grandsons. Later, Ms. A did give birth to a son and her mother-in-law was willing to help care for him when she went to work. Childcare arrangements were another frequent basis for in-law conflict. The following were the two typical situations showing that child care was a source of disagreement.

Ms. H: My mother-in-law was very angry when she knew I had talked about my baby girl having a skin disease that might have been caused by my mother-in-law giving me fish to eat when I was pregnant.

Ms. I: When my son was a baby, my parents-in-law not only did not take care of him, but also always went to the bathroom to disturb me when I tried to bath the baby. In this time, I needed to take care of my son by myself and also do all the housework...

Child custody was another reason for intensive conflict. Ms. F had a daughter with her ex-boyfriend and two sons, aged six and three, with her husband. Her daughter was cared for by her parents and lived with them. Her husband also had a son aged 18 with his ex-wife. According to Ms. F, her husband had brought her eldest son to his hometown where he lived with his mother without Ms. F's consent. She recalled: "my husband brought our son to his hometown in mainland China to be cared for by his mother. When I came back to his hometown, his relatives hit me with iron sticks to prohibit me from seeing my son." Ms. F felt helpless and disappointed. The husband's family prohibited her from having any contact with her son as they saw him as their family's child.

Differences in Gender Role Expectations

In the experience of the women who were interviewed, disagreements with parents-in-law were often caused by different expectations about the roles of daughters-in-law and wives.

Ms. C: My father-in-law always blamed me for the bad taste of the meals I cooked, but I did not know what food he liked....

Ms. I: My parents-in-law criticized the meals I cooked. They said they were fit only for pigs to eat...

As the above statements show, housework, and especially cooking, was another source of in-law disagreement. Ms. C migrated from Mainland China and had lived with her father-in-law in Hong Kong for three years until he passed away. He always criticized her and her children, and called her names. He complained that her meals tasted bad. She also explained that her father-in-law did not care for her and her children even when they were punched by his son. Ms. I had similar experiences. She lived with her parents-in-law in the first year of her marriage. She was obliged to do all the housework and prepare the meals for her parents-in-law. Even when she was caring for her newborn baby, she was still expected to do all the housework. The parents-in-law not only complained about the taste of the meals she cooked, but were also dissatisfied with her management of the housework and child care. Ms. H: "I needed to do all the housework by myself, taking care of my parents-in-law, such as preparing meals for them and their friends at 2am when they were playing a game..." Ms. H lived with her parents-in-law for over 10 years after her marriage, until they passed away. Her father-in-law was a practitioner of Chinese medicine and worked from home. Her parents-in-law played mahjong (a traditional Chinese game) at home with their friends day and night. So Ms. H not only needed to care for her parents-in-law, but also their friends. She also entertained her father-in-law's patients. She said she needed to prepare a meal at

midnight if they were playing mahjong overnight. So, she always completed all her housework at midnight and got to sleep around 2am. Her parents-in-law expected all this work to be the duty of a daughter-in-law. Ms H could not refuse to follow their instructions even though she found it hard to do all the housework and also care for her baby son.

Ms. B: When I came back to my husband's hometown to visit my parents-in-law I would try my hardest to save money from the government security allowance to buy them some clothes, but they would complain that I was not fulfilling the filial duty as I did not give them money. My sister-in-law [my husband's sister] said someone opened her mouth to eat their dish [someone received their food but without making any contribution]...

Ms. B's mother-in-law complained that she had not fulfilled her filial duty as a daughter-in-law when she visited. She was expected to prepare appropriate gifts and give money to her in-laws in order to present her respect and filial piety to them.

Scapegoat of the Husband

Being a scapegoat of the husband means that in-law disagreement has resulted from tension or conflict between the husband and his parents. The negative feelings or attitudes of the parents-in-law toward their sons are transferred to their daughters-in-law who are expected to fully respect their in-laws and tolerate all manners of treatment by in-laws. The parents-in-law will not blame their sons because their sons are the leaders of the family and they rely on their sons' care and support under the value of filial piety and paternity. They avoid or are fearful of dissolving their relationship with their sons. Consequently, parents-in-law take out their frustration and anger on their daughters-in-law.

Among the respondents with distant or fair in-law relationships, some reported that husbands had tense or distant relationships with their parents and they seldom visited/contacted their parents/relatives. The following are two examples showing how daughters-in-law became scapegoats in such situations.

Ms. L: "my mother-in-law lived with my husband's young brother. I told her husband beat me, she said she could not control her son and he also stole her money. My husband unemployed and always made complaints, all relatives and friends were fear of him and avoided to contact him. And they, his mother and relatives, also seldom contact me.

Ms. L had a son and a daughter, aged three and five. She was always beaten and threatened by her husband, even in front of their children. She said her mother-in-law also knew of her situation but she did not provide any support to help stop the violence.

Ms. M: "My husband has poor sibling relationship and I did not meet them. I had told my mother-in-law my husband brought back a woman who lived at home for half year but she only suggested me going back Mainland China with my son." Ms. M had a son, aged three, with her husband. She and her parents-in-law lived in the same district and Ms. M visited them regularly. However, her husband seldom contacted his parents.

These women described their in-law relationships as 'fair', however they were not satisfied with this relationship; their in-laws' attitude toward their situations were lacking in concern. These women were disappointed that their in-laws did not meet their expectation of care and support, especially when in crisis in their marital relationship or with family problems. Some women who reported having in-law conflict also reported a similar situation of being a scapegoat of their husband. Ms. G shared: "when my son was a baby, my mother-in-law did not care about him." Because Ms. G's husband always scolded his mother, she transferred her anger towards Ms. G and the baby. At that time, Ms. G lived with her mother-in-law. Her husband was a single child and his father passed away when he was a child. Most of her mother-in-law's relatives had migrated to other countries. The relationship between her husband and her mother-in-law was close, but always in conflict. Her husband always blamed his mother for everything. Ms. G said she needed to care for the baby alone under the long face of her mother-in-law from day to night at home. However, her mother-in-law would not show anger to her son (husband).

Similarly, the husbands of Ms. L, M and G, all had poor relationships with relatives, included their parents (respondents' parents-in-law) and siblings. The in-law relationship was described as distant or tense. No matter what these women did for the family, even if they 'gave' the family a boy, they still could not build up a close and harmonious relationship with their in-laws. These women said their mothers-in-law disliked them because they were disappointed in, or angered by, their sons (respondents' husbands). Ms. L's mother-in-law felt sad about her son stealing her money, blaming relatives and gossiping about the family. Ms. M's mother-in-law was disappointed her son was always in debt and had poor sibling relationships. Ms. G's husband always scolded his mother which made G's mother-in-law angry. However, these mothers-in-law did not express their unhappiness to their sons. Their dissatisfaction at sons was transformed as rejection, avoidance, and anger attitudes or feelings toward their daughters-in-

law. In this family, the daughter-in-law becomes a scapegoat of the husband.

Association Between In-law Conflict & IPV

From the respondents' descriptions of their experiences with in-law conflict, we can see some patterns in parents-in-law's behavior around, or attitudes towards, spousal battering. When their son abused their daughter-in-law, their responses included agreeing with the abusive behavior, stopping the victim from seeking help, shifting the responsibility for abuse to the victim, and being abusers themselves.

Supporting the Abuse

Parents-in-law showed their support for their son's abusive behavior towards his wife in several ways. Ms. A described the first incident of abuse, which occurred when her husband became angry and beat her, because she had talked back to his mother (her mother-in-law). The mother-in-law was happy when Ms. A was beaten by her husband (her son). Ms. C and Ms. D shared similar experiences, where their in-laws would not stop their sons abusing them even when they witnessed the violence. Ms. C reported: "In 2003, mid-autumn festive, my husband punched my daughter, I stopped him, then he punch me and threw a small-chair towards me. My father-in-law was there, he knew what happened but he did not do anything. I run away to seek help from my neighbor." Ms. B also found that her marital relationship was affected by her mother-in-law, who always complained about her to her son (Ms. B's husband). Ms. F's situation is another example of in-laws supporting the abuse. Ms. F's mother-in-law arranged for her son to take care of her grandson and stopped Ms. F from visiting the child after her husband had abused her. In addition, among the distant or fair in-law relationship cases, the parents-in-law avoided becoming involved or intervening in the IPV, even when their daughters-in-law sought help from them. In such situations, the parents-in-law become passive bystanders, thereby promoting the occurrence of IPV, such was the experience of Ms. L and Ms. M as discussed above.

Preventing Help-seeking

Parents-in-law may not only support their sons passively but also stop daughters-in-law from getting help. Ms. A said her mother-in-law asked her to tolerate her son's (husband) abusive behavior because a married woman should accept what a man does, and avoid a family scandal. Ms. E's parents-in-law also stopped her from reporting her husband (their son) to the police when he beat her.

Shifting Blame

Parents-in-law may blame their daughters-in-law (the victims) for, as they see it, making their sons beat them. Ms. E lived with her parents-in-law. When her husband slapped her, they blamed her and

said she had provoked their son. The responsibility for the abuse was thus shifted from the abuser to the victim.

Abusive In-laws

Some women are not only abused by their partners, but also by their parents-in-law. Ms. I lived with her parents-in-law, who always criticized her for not going out to work and called her a prostitute. Her husband not only physically abused her, but also controlled her social life and stopped her from having any contact with her friends. Ms. I could not tolerate her husband's abuse. However, her father-in-law told her that women must follow men and have no right to request for a divorce (although men do). Ms. I's parents-in-law supported their son to control and restrict her behavior.

On the other hand, Ms. J had a different experience of marital and in-law relationships. She lived with her mother and sister-in-law. After she got married, she discovered her husband already had a wife and daughter in Mainland China. Her husband ran a small business and seldom came back home. The family was led by the mother-in-law. Ms. J was expected to follow all her mother-in-law's instructions and arrangements. If she did not, her mother-in-law blamed her and complained to her son. The sister-in-law disliked Ms. J. She stopped her from staying in the sitting room if she came back home, and also beat Ms. J. The husband not only did not stop his mother's and sister's abusive behavior, but also delegated the management of this 'family issue' to his mother. Ms. J described her relationship with her husband as distant, because he seldom came home and only told his mother about any changes to his situation. Ms. J could only get information about her husband, such as the time of his return home, from her mother-in-law. Ultimately, Ms. J was admitted into a refuge because she was beaten by her sister-in-law and suffered blows to the head which caused bleeding. She reported this to police and was referred for a medical checkup. Even when her husband was informed of this, he did not come home or even contact Ms. J to offer his support or concern.

DISCUSSION

These cases of in-law conflict and distant in-law relationships demonstrate themes similar to those set out in previous studies (Chan et al., 2002; Haarr, 2007; Hyder, Noor & Tsui, 2007; Gomez, 1993; Marotz-Baden & Cowan, 1987; Nakazawa, 1996; Soeda & Araki, 1999) in terms of the content of disagreements between parents and the spouses of their children. Disputes range from financial matters, conflicting lifestyles, battles over children, differences in gender role expectations, to being a scapegoat of the husband. These different kinds of disagreements

demonstrate the various ways in which parents-in-law can affect the subsystem of a couple.

Looking at financial arrangements as a source of conflict, we can see the power struggle between parents—especially the mother—and daughters-in-law. No matter who manages the family finances, such conflict still occurs. Before the son marries, the mother-in-law is the sole homemaker and leader of the family home. When the daughter-in-law marries into the family, it now contains two homemakers and house leaders. According to the family system concept, the son and his wife should separate from their original families to build up a new system—that is, a new family. However, such a separation was not clear in some cases, resulting in an inability to avoid the power struggle between mothers and daughters-in-law in terms of home management and, particularly, finances. An unclear boundary between the original and new family results in unclear roles for the mother and daughter-in-law, and their different expectations of each other cause conflict (Merrill, 2007; Silverstein, 1990). Then, in-law conflict is found in a family system with a vague boundary between the couple sub-system and in-law sub-system. The analysis of in-law conflict should be examined taking into consideration the extended family rather than focusing on only the nuclear family or an individual standpoint.

Another source of conflict was the different values of women (daughters-in-law) around whether to work or stay at home. In the current study, traditional parents-in-law expected their sons' wives to follow their family norm or rule. They believed that they had a role in disciplining the daughter-in-law, who, if behaving in a manner consistent with their traditional values, should follow their instructions. Moreover, when the disagreement is over children, and particularly the gender of the child, the gender role expectations of a daughter-in-law strongly reflect the impact of traditional Chinese culture on the Chinese family. The ideas of filial piety and women's behavior under Confucian values are still influential. Women should take care of their parents-in-law, give birth to sons to continue the family, be hardworking at home, follow their husband's decisions, and so on. Patriarchal authority and Confucian filial piety both affect the family's power and control structure. In Confucianism, the traditional three obediences for women describe the requirements of women at different stages of their lives. As daughters they obey their fathers, as wives they obey their husbands, once husbands have died, they obey their sons (Birns, 1988). Women should take a subordinated role in the family; they should walk behind men. The son is expected to carry on the family's name and perform all kinds of familial ceremonial tasks. In addition, the concept of being 'married-in', which describes patrilineality, is an important value in understanding the status of women in the Chinese family. Although the

modern Chinese family may not follow traditional values, women with low socio-economic status and elders in the family still have this traditional mind-set. Abused women who are powerless in their families are affected by this traditional value: men are the decision-makers and women the home-makers, elders in the family should be respected. When the son is not at home, the mother-in-law assumes the 'decision maker' role to monitor and supervise the daughter-in-law. Thus, the mother-in-law is in a dominant position in the family. This aspect of Chinese culture not only cultivates in-law conflict but also encourages parents to join in with their son to abuse their daughters-in-law.

In addition, some parents-in-law transfer their anger or negative emotions from their sons to their daughters-in-law if they have conflict with their sons. Then, the daughters-in-law become scapegoats of their husbands. Under the culture of filial piety and paternity, the son has the responsibility to take care of his parents and the parents are also proud of having a son to care for them. The adult son is the leader of the family so the parents would avoid conflict with him in order to maintain the relationship, especially mothers who are living under the traditional norm for women: 'elder women obey son'. Feminists have criticized this traditional value of gender roles and the unfair situation of women, and have demonstrated how gender inequality promotes violence against women (Sev'er, 2002).

The case of Ms. J also illustrates a disagreement with daughters-in-law, not only involving the parents, but also the sister-in-law (in her case, her husband's sister). The sister-in-law's power came not only from the parents-in-law but also from the husband. In Ms. J's experience, her husband did not deal with the conflict between his wife and sister. He seldom came home, but worked night and day. He tried to avoid and escape the conflict between his wife and sister (and also his mother). In turn, Ms. J's mother-in-law asked her to follow the instructions of the sister-in-law. In this case, the husband facilitated the conflict by supporting his mother and sister against his wife, even in the role of a bystander.

On the other hand, Ms. K was a special case of conflict, involving the son-in-law. This case can help us to understand in-law conflict from another viewpoint. Ms. K's son-in-law restricted her daily activities at home, such as forcing her to sit on the corner of her bed in the sitting room, and stopping her from drinking water and going to the toilet. In this situation, the daughter still blamed her mother for living with her family and making her marital relationship worse. In this case, the daughter's behavior demonstrated the traditional Chinese concept that a woman should follow her husband. She obeyed her husband's instructions and blamed her mother for causing marital conflict. At the same time, the mother-in-law also respected her son-in-law as he was the

leader of the family and she followed the daughter, as a subordinate of the family.

This paper has explored disagreement between parents and children-in-law from the viewpoint of the daughter-in-law, with one case presenting the experience of a mother-in-law in conflict with her son-in-law. This finding can help us to understand a form of in-law conflict which had previously been neglected by professionals involved in family studies. It also sheds light on the close association between in-law conflict and IPV, especially under the influence of traditional Chinese culture.

However, the information gathered was limited to the views of daughters-in-law who were abused and living in a shelter. The anger of such abused women towards their husband and his family may have exaggerated their accounts of spousal violence. Moreover, the data collection was reliant on the memory and handwritten records of the interviewer. Although this approach can reduce the stress experienced by participants, it affects the reliability and validity of the data collection and analysis. Further study is therefore required, particularly to explore the experiences of sons- and parents-in-law.

CONCLUSION

This research not only helps us to identify the content of in-law disagreement but also enhances our awareness of the influence of traditional values on in-law conflict in Chinese families, especially where the subordinate status of women is concerned. The parents-in-law described here would interfere in different aspects of the family and the individual lives of their daughters-in-law. In some cases, the parent-in-law was the leader of the household and controlled the family money and routine, including the daughter-in-law's personal expenditure and lifestyle. The most significant in-law disagreement is found where specific roles and tasks as a daughter-in-law and wife are expected by parents-in-law, couched within their views of traditional Chinese values. Since most women experienced both in-law and spousal abuse, greater awareness of the relationship between such conflict and IPV should be promoted among the public, especially to professionals working in abuse prevention and family support. The results of the current study suggest that the difficulties experienced by Chinese women facing in-law conflict and IPV should be understood from within a view of the extended family rather than only the nuclear family system, or from a family rather than an individual perspective. In-law conflict and IPV are not stand-alone problems. Rather, they correlate with each other, and they reside within the same familial hierarchical structure that is deeply rooted in Chinese culture. The screening and assessment of IPV in

Chinese families should be more holistic to include other possible forms of family violence. Family-based interventions such as home visitations (Olds et al., 1999) may also be appropriate. In-law conflict as a form of violence against women likely reinforces a familial culture of using violence as a means to resolve conflict (Chan et al., 2008) and thus, a failure to stop in-law conflict would be counterproductive to preventing violence against women. In addition, the influences of traditional Chinese culture and values should be acknowledged in the assessment of, and intervention in, cases of in-law conflict and IPV among Chinese families.

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