

Changes in Women's Occupational and Family Roles in Traditional Fishing Societies: The Case of Quanzhou Fisherwomen

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Abstract. In the context of modernization and industrial shifts in traditional fishing societies, this study examines the evolving occupational and family roles of Quanzhou fisherwomen. Historically integral to both fishing activities and household responsibilities, these women have faced significant changes with the advent of new industries like tourism and mechanized fisheries. Using a comparative case study approach, the research contrasts the experiences of Quanzhou fisherwomen with those of Jeju Island's sea women, highlighting similar trends in economic empowerment and shifts in gender dynamics. The study reveals that while new economic opportunities have elevated the social and family status of fisherwomen, they also encounter role conflicts due to traditional expectations and modern career demands. The findings suggest a need for future research on preserving cultural heritage and developing support systems to aid fisherwomen in balancing their multifaceted roles amidst rapid societal changes.

Keywords: Quanzhou fisherwomen, occupational roles, family roles, modernization, gender dynamics

1. Introduction

As a large marine city, Quanzhou has a long history of aquaculture. Fisherwomen are an important part of Quanzhou's fishery society. They are mainly involved in pre-fishing activities such as small-scale fishing and net mending, as well as post-fishing work such as processing, sales and trade [1]. At the same time, fisherwomen are responsible for housework and childcare in the family. The social origins and historical background of Quanzhou fisherwomen are not only deeply influenced by the traditional gender division of labor, but also closely related to the production methods, economic models and cultural values of local fishermen. With the advancement of modernization, Quanzhou's fishery has ushered in a structural transformation, which has brought about major changes in the professional roles of fisherwomen. The original female role that relied on family and production labor has gradually shifted to a more diverse way of social participation. From fishery labor to the expansion of modern commerce and tourism, the status of women in the economy and society has been improved to a certain extent. This paper aims to explore the changes in the professional and family roles of Quanzhou fisherwomen in the traditional fishery society. By analyzing its historical

origins, cultural background and transformation in the process of modernization, it reveals how gender, culture, economy and policy factors work together on the social status and identity of fisherwomen.

2. The evolution of the professional role of Quanzhou fisherwomen

2.1. The professional role of traditional fisherwomen

According to the "Xishan Magazine" during the Jiaqing period of the Qing Dynasty, the history of Quanzhou fisherwomen can be traced back to the Qing Dynasty. Villagers have been working on the sea and mudflats for years. In the past, fishing, shrimps, and crabs in the sea, raising clams, catching clams, and digging oysters on the mudflats almost became the daily work of fisherwomen. When men go out to sea, they are on their own, taking on fishery processing, commercial transportation, and other work, and also participating in "male fields" such as shipbuilding and net weaving. In the 1950s, Hui'an, Fujian, often suffered from natural disasters and needed to build reservoirs. The male labor force went out, and Hui'an women took on the work of repairing the reservoir. More than 80% of the people involved in the construction of the reservoir were women. From teenage girls to elderly people in their seventies, Hui'an women took on the physical work of men and fought for the future of their hometown. While taking on physical labor, fisherwomen are also responsible for housework that women are responsible for in the traditional perspective. They serve their parents-in-law, educate their children, and also undertake work to supplement the family income in addition to these tedious family affairs, such as selling vegetables. "Looking at the River to Find Pu Oysters" bluntly said: Except for the fishing moratorium and weather reasons, Fujian men actually go to sea for only four or five months a year. When the season is good, it is at most 6 months. The rest of the time, they are idle immortals, wandering around, playing mahjong, drinking shochu, and enjoying the high and mighty treatment of kings. Women are so tired that they feel dizzy. If they complain, they will be rebuked immediately: "Why do you complain about the hardship of doing these trivial things? If you have the ability, go fishing!" [2] Men who have returned from expeditions are always the masters of the village and have absolute say. In the fisherman culture, the labor of women is ignored, and their roles in family and production are neglected.

2.2. Transformation of modern fisheries and changing professional roles

With the advancement of fishery mechanization, scale and industrialization in China's coastal areas, the production structure and lifestyle of fishermen's families have undergone tremendous changes, and the roles of traditional fisherwomen have also changed profoundly. Not only in production, but also in family life, significant changes have taken place for fisherwomen. Fisherwomen no longer participate in work such as mending nets, carrying, and assisting in fishing. Instead, they are replaced by low-tech processing, sales or support work, such as fishery processing, e-commerce sales, and tourism. In terms of family, as women gradually participate in cultural, economic and other production activities, their voice in the family has been strengthened and their status has been improved. These new economic opportunities have even made some fisherwomen the dominant source of family income [3].

While women are entering the field of mechanized production, they are also playing an important role in non-traditional fields such as tourism. In recent years, people's attention to traditional local culture has led to the booming tourism industry in many places. The custom of the Xunpu Women (local fishing women in Quanzhou), represented by the "Hairpin Flower Guard", is a representative

item of national intangible cultural heritage. In recent years, the popularity of the "Hairpin Flower Guard" cultural tourism has continued to be hot, becoming a hot spot for Quanzhou's cultural tourism. In early 2023, driven by the celebrity effect, a craze for Xunpu Women and their 'Hairpin Flower Guard' emerged.. Subsequently, a group of celebrities and their fans flocked to the village, and the livelihood of the Xunpu Women changed abruptly. Xunpu Women wear flowers as hairpins on their heads, clove pendants in their ears, and are decorated with gold hairpins and tortoise shell combs. Wearing flowers in the hair is not only a tradition but also a cultural symbol of Fujian fishing women. Today, the popularity of the custom of wearing flowers in the hairpin has created a vivid situation of "three 90%" in Crab Village, that is, 90% of the people engaged in cultural tourism are women, 90% of the cultural tourism income is created by women, and 90% of the service objects are women [4].

3. Comparison with other regions on the evolution of women's professional roles

This year, a Korean drama called When Life Gives You Tangerines became very popular. The three-dimensional image of the female divers in the drama has caused people to think deeply [5]. For more than 300 years, women on Jeju Island have been engaged in the ancient and dangerous profession of female divers, diving into shallow sea waters to catch lobsters, pick abalone, sea urchins, oysters and other take - away sea catches with their bare hands. The family and social roles of female divers on Jeju Island and fisherwomen in Quanzhou have undergone changes with the development of society.

The appearance of Jeju sea women can be traced back to the 17th century. In the early days, their work was not taken seriously, and Westerners who visited Korea referred to them as “women who move naked in the sea,” a prejudicial description that is said to have led many to have erotic fantasies about them. However, as they became the main labor force, they became the breadwinners of many families. The awakening of economic dominance led to a change in the gender power structure of these women. At the height of their popularity, 21 percent of Jeju's female islanders were professional seawomen, and they were known as the “Mothers of Jeju,” as they accounted for 60 percent of Jeju's seafood catch. These women slowly became economically sovereign, forming one of the most pioneering “semi-matriarchal” ecologies in East Asian society. Just as in When Life Gives You Tangerines, when Ae-chun is confronted by her mother-in-law who forces her granddaughter to inherit the profession of “sea maiden,” she overturns the sacrificial table and refuses to allow her daughter to repeat the same mistake. This is not only an outburst of maternal instinct, but also a revolt against the traditional gender order, reflecting a further push by the descendants of the sea maidens to change the gender power structure after their economic status has changed, and to be no longer bound by the traditional patriarchal social discipline. With economic development, the sea woman is no longer a destiny from which Jeju women cannot escape. It is now a free career choice. After removing the burden of struggling for survival, some older women insist on going to sea no longer for the sake of earning money but simply because they cannot leave the sea, while others have returned to their hometowns. It can be seen that both Jeju sea women and Quanzhou fisherwomen have experienced an increase in their family and social status, and their career choices have become more diversified and modernized.

4. The role of the fisherwoman and social expectations

4.1. The dilemma of family - career choices

Women in fishing societies face conflicts and harmonization between family and career choices. On the one hand, the retention of the traditional model of division of labor in the family requires women to be tested against the standard of a good wife and mother. On the other hand, the rapid development of modern society requires professional women to accept the competition for competence between the best and the worst. For example, fisherwomen need to seize the economic opportunities brought about by the boom in the hairpin industry. This makes it necessary for women to possess both traditional charms and the vigor to compete in modern society [6]. The gap between ideal role norms and reality, the imbalance between responsibility for the family and the pursuit of a career have caused many working women to face the problem of role conflict. Women in fishing societies face conflicts and harmonization between family and career choices. On the one hand, the retention of the traditional model of division of labor in the family requires women to be tested against the standard of a good wife and mother. On the other hand, the rapid development of modern society requires professional women to accept the competition for competence between the best and the worst. For example, fisherwomen need to seize the economic opportunities brought about by the boom in the hairpin industry. This makes it necessary for women to possess both traditional charms and the vigor to compete in modern society. The gap between ideal role norms and reality, the imbalance between responsibility for the family and the pursuit of a career have caused many working women to face the problem of role conflict.

4.2. Individual case illustrations

Take Suying, a woman from Hui'an, for example, who spent the first half of her life making a living by the sea, taking on heavy labor such as handling seafood and carrying stones, while also managing the household. With the development of the times, Suying opened a Huian woman's clothing store and participated in modern commercial activities, designing and adjusting clothing patterns and entertaining customers during the day, and then going home at night to cook and organize household chores. Her daughter, Yajin, became an original artist and stepped out of the sea, changing the trajectory of the destiny of the traditional hui women. However, women like Xiaokang's mother, Hui - nui, are still influenced by the traditional concept that women should take care of everything, not only working at the construction site, but also taking care of the whole family, and they also hope that Xiaokang will put the family first after his marriage, which reflects the contradictions and confusions of Hui-nui in the face of the traditional concept of the division of labor in the family and the opportunities for career development in the modern society [4].

5. Conclusion

The shift in the occupational roles of fisherwomen in Quanzhou from tasks such as mending nets, assisting in fishing, and engaging in arduous labor both at sea and on the mudflats to more modern forms of fisheries processing and tourism is a notable change. This change not only reflects the impact of the overall development of the fishing industry towards mechanization and industrialization, but also demonstrates the adaptability of the fisherwomen. Take the booming hairpin industry as an example, fisherwomen have seized new economic opportunities that have enhanced their economic status, and in turn, their status in the family and society. Comparing the

situation with that of the Jeju Island sea women, we can see a similar trend. Women on Jeju Island were once under - appreciated for their work, but as they caught a high percentage of the local seafood, they gradually became the main breadwinners of their families. Their economic dominance triggered a change in the gender power structure. Similarly, the occupational transformation of Quanzhou fisherwomen also led to a certain degree of change in their social status and gender relations. The experiences of both the Quanzhou fisherwomen and the Jeju Island seawomen show that a change in occupational roles can be a powerful catalyst for upgrading women's social status and breaking the traditional gender boundaries. The roles of fisherwomen are closely intertwined with social expectations. This intertwinement creates both challenges and conflicts. In traditional fishing societies, the family's division of labor model expects women to play the roles of good wives and mothers. However, with the rapid development of modern society and the emergence of new economic opportunities, serious role conflicts arise. Therefore, future research could focus on how to preserve the traditional culture of fisherwomen in a rapidly modernizing society. At the same time, how to better support fisherwomen in balancing their family and professional roles also needs to be examined. For example, exploring whether there could be more flexible work arrangements or community support systems to ease the burden of household chores as they pursue modern careers.

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