

# Family memories and gender concealment: a study on the visibility of women based on the Huang family genealogy of Hangzhou

*Zhiyu Huang*

Beijing No.8 High School, Beijing, China

viennahuang0220@163.com

---

**Abstract.** Taking the genealogy of the Hangzhou Huang silk merchant clan as the research material, this paper focuses on the visibility and invisibility of women in clan memory construction from a feminist perspective. By sorting out the recording methods, content differences and marginalized status of female members in Huang's genealogical documents, this study reveals the gender order hidden behind traditional family compilation logic. The research finds that in the male-centered clan memory, men are fully recorded as the core of inheritance, while women are mostly anonymous, brief or even omitted, becoming "invisible people" in family history. Behind this writing difference lies the patriarchal system's restriction on female identity, right and memory expression. Even though women played an important role in family management, silk business inheritance and clan emotional bonding, their contributions are erased by the patriarchal genealogical discourse. This paper reflects on the gender bias in traditional family memory construction, and explores the hidden female history under the mainstream male clan narrative.

**Keywords:** gender concealment, genealogy, gender hierarchy, female visibility

---

## 1. Introduction

Genealogy is not only a carrier of clan memory and cultural inheritance, but also a text constructed by gender power relations. The previous study of the Hangzhou Huang silk merchant clan focuses on migration, business development and regional cultural inheritance within the broader historical context of the Hangzhou silk industry and its associated social transformations, yet ignores the marginalized female group hidden in clan history [1, 2]. As a typical Jiangnan merchant clan that thrived on silk trade, the Huang family's prosperity cannot be separated from the hidden contributions of women in family management, workshop operation, capital maintenance and children education. However, these female experiences are rarely presented in formal genealogical records, a textual erasure that mirrors broader patriarchal structures where patrilineality systematically shapes economic and social outcomes for women [3].

Based on the research topic "Visibility and Invisibility of Women: Family Memory and Gender Order Based on Genealogy Materials", this paper takes Huang's genealogy as a sample, analyzes how patriarchal discourse shapes female invisibility, explores the real female status behind text omission, and supplements the

female perspective for the micro-study of Hangzhou silk merchant clans, so as to rethink the gender logic of traditional clan inheritance.

## **2. The male-centered writing logic in Huang's genealogy**

### **2.1. Male: the fully visible core of clan memory**

In the compilation of Huang's genealogy, male members are always the absolute narrative core. For male descendants of each generation, the genealogy records detailed information including birth and death dates, official career, silk business experience, property inheritance, spouse information and descendants. Male silk merchants, as the representatives of the clan, their business achievements, social reputation and family contributions are fully written down, becoming the "visible subject" of clan memory.

From the perspective of inheritance logic, the genealogy takes patrilineal descent as the standard, defining the continuation of the clan through male bloodline. All family resources, business wealth and ancestral rights are inherited by men, which solidifies men's dominant position in family history writing and makes male experience the mainstream content of clan memory.

### **2.2. Female: the invisible marginal group in genealogical texts**

Compared with detailed male records, female members are in a serious state of "invisibility" in Huang's genealogy, mainly reflected in three aspects:

First, anonymous recording. Most married women are only marked as "Mrs. X" without their own names, birthplaces or maiden families, completely attached to their husbands.

Second, brief and simplified content. Even for Huang's unmarried daughters or female clan members, the genealogy only records marriage information, with no mention of their life experience, character or family contributions.

Third, omission and erasure. Widows who run silk shops alone, women who manage family finances and female educators who cultivate descendants are almost unrecorded. Their efforts in supporting family silk business and maintaining clan stability are completely ignored by genealogical writing.

This writing difference directly reflects the traditional gender order: men are the owners and narrators of family memory, while women are only auxiliary attachments in patrilineal inheritance.

## **3. Hidden contributions of women in the Huang silk merchant clan**

Behind the "invisible" genealogical records, women of the Huang clan have long been important participants in the silk business and family inheritance.

First, women undertake the internal management of the silk family. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, most Huang men were engaged in silk commodity transportation and external business reception. Women were responsible for managing family property, arranging raw silk purchasing, supervising weaving workshops, and controlling household capital flow, becoming the behind-the-scenes supporters of the silk business.

Second, women bear the responsibility of clan inheritance and education. They raised children, passed down the integrity-oriented merchant ethics and silk-related life experience, and maintained the stability of the family in the long-term business operation. When male silk merchants passed away or suffered business losses, widows often took over family shops and kept the silk business continuing.

Third, women built social connections for the clan through marriage. Inter-marriage between merchant families in Jiangnan expanded the Huang family's silk trade network and regional social resources through

women's marital relations, laying a hidden foundation for the long-term prosperity of the clan's business.

These practical contributions are crucial to the development of the Huang silk merchant clan, yet they are excluded from formal genealogical memory, forming the contradiction between "practical value" and "text invisibility".

## **4. The construction of gender order behind female invisibility**

### **4.1. Patriarchal system restricts female subject identity**

Traditional patrilineal clan system takes male blood inheritance as the core, fundamentally constrain female subject identity and economic agency [3]. Women are defined as "outsiders" of their natal families and "attachments" of their husbands' families. In genealogical writing, women do not have independent subject identity, and their existence is only to serve male inheritance and clan continuation. Therefore, female personal experience and individual memory are naturally excluded from official texts.

### **4.2. Genealogy writing is a tool for solidifying gender hierarchy**

Genealogy, compiled by male clan elders, functions as a discursive tool that naturalizes patriarchal order. Its narrative logic actively constructs and reinforces a gendered worldview where "men create family achievements and women obey family duties." This process of textual silencing serves to naturalize a nationalist and familiar gender hierarchy that privileges a paternalistic order, confining women to the internal, private sphere and rendering their historical agency mute [4].

### **4.3. The silence of female memory in merchant clan culture**

For merchant clans such as the Huang family, silk business achievements are codified as male glory, while women's indispensable yet behind-the-scenes labor is often rendered invisible, naturalized as an unremarkable aspect of domestic duty. This cultural logic ensures female memory lacks legitimate carriers for inheritance within the clan archive. Their historical presence, therefore, must be sought outside formal patrilineal records, potentially in the kinds of alternative kinship networks and fluid relational strategies documented in other female-centric diaspora studies [5].

## **5. Conclusion**

Taking the Hangzhou Huang silk merchant clan as the research case, this paper analyzes the visibility difference between men and women in genealogical records from a feminist perspective. Men are fully visible as the core of patrilineal inheritance, while women are anonymous, simplified and erased, becoming invisible in clan memory.

Behind the text difference lies the patriarchal gender order. Women of the Huang clan played important roles in silk business operation, family management, children education and social connection expansion, yet their contributions are covered by male-centered historical narrative. The invisibility of women in genealogy reflects the universal marginalization of women in traditional clan memory construction.

This study supplements the female perspective for the research of Jiangnan merchant clans, breaks the male-dominated single narrative of family history, and reveals the hidden female history behind traditional clan culture, providing a micro case for re-examining gender relations in regional merchant culture.

## References

- [1] Wang, N. *The History of Hangzhou Silk Industry Development*. Zhejiang University Press (2018).
- [2] Zhang, Q. Traditional Silk Trade and Social Changes in Modern Hangzhou. *Journal of Zhejiang Culture and History*, (2): 45-52 (2019).
- [3] Zhang & Lin. Patrilineality, fertility, and women's income: Evidence from family lineage in China, *China Economic Review*: 74 (2022).
- [4] Wang, Clyde, Yicheng, Chen Zifeng. From 'motherland' to 'daddy state': A genealogical analysis of the gender undertone in China's nationalist discourses. *Nations and Nationalism*, 29(2): 751-767 (2023).
- [5] Show Ying Ruo. Fluid motherhood: gender, Chinese religions, and kinship maneuvers in the Buddhist women's Southern Sea diaspora (1880-1960). *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 24(S14), 643-661 (2023).