

11-1-2013

Xiaowei Zang. Islam, Family Life, and Gender Inequality in Urban China. London/ New York: Routledge, 2012.

Vanessa Frangville Ph.D.

Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, vanessa.frangville@vuw.ac.nz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Frangville, Vanessa Ph.D. (2013) "Xiaowei Zang. Islam, Family Life, and Gender Inequality in Urban China. London/ New York: Routledge, 2012.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 5: No. 1, Article 14. DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1176

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol5/iss1/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Xiaowei Zang. *Islam, Family Life, and Gender Inequality in Urban China*. London/ New York: Routledge, 2012.

Xiaowei Zang's study adds to the current debates on Islam and gender in the academic sphere. Chair and Professor of Social Sciences at the City University of Hong Kong, Zang is a prolific scholar, whose work on ethnic relations, gender, and urban life has already significantly contributed to the study of Muslims in China. His *Islam, Family Life, and Gender Inequality in Urban China* focuses on the complex relationship between gender inequality, Islam, and family processes within the Uyghur community in Urumqi, the capital city of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Zang identifies five major aspects of gender inequality, each covered in separate chapters: employment, income, household tasks, domestic chores, and spousal power. Methodologically, he combines quantitative and qualitative data based on fieldwork in Urumqi between 2005 and 2007, collected through 200 in-depth interviews and a survey of 577 local Uyghur families. Zang's conclusion challenges the commonly held idea that Islam alone shapes gender relationships and perpetuates male domination of women. The findings show that in most cases, the family processes (that is, the functions and relationships within family units) play a more significant role than religiosity in creating gender inequality and that such processes affect both the private and public spheres.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The introductory chapter gives a brief overview of the ongoing debate with respect to women in Islam and highlights a lack of investigation into social processes, which, the author asserts, are critical to understanding how Islamic affiliation and gender stratification are linked. Zang's main argument is that religiosity alone cannot explain the relationship between the practice of Islam and gender inequality; indeed, he says, the key to understanding this relationship requires a close examination of family processes. Chapter two briefly introduces the Xinjiang region and Uyghur people and describes the author's fieldwork and methodology.

Chapters three to seven explore the five major aspects of gender inequality mentioned in the introduction. Employment and earnings are at the core of chapters three and four respectively. Chapter three shows that women are less likely than men to be employed partly because of the competitive market (Uyghur women are more discriminated than Uyghur men and Han woman) and the lack of support from their husbands. Chapter four looks at the earnings gap among Uyghurs, explained by gender discrimination at work and women's responsibility for housework. In both chapters, data analyses show that family processes rather than religiosity are the key factor to understanding the relationship between Islamic affiliation and employment and income inequalities between genders. The three next chapters explore gender inequalities in the private sphere. Chapter five focuses on domestic labor through three different tasks including shopping, cooking, and cleaning, for which it shows that women are predominantly responsible. Marriage and motherhood significantly impact on women's routine and share between paid work and housework. Data analysis shows again that the link between religiosity and gender variation in the division of household chores is weak, as the same tendency can be observed in other societies.

Chapter six deals with the mental aspect of domestic labor or household management through family finance, non-monetary activities, and external liaison. The gendered division here lies in the distribution of monetary and non-monetary matters and is possibly better explained by family processes than by religiosity, says the author. For instance, the wife is more likely to manage family money if she marries at a young age. The presence of young children and co-residence with elders also influence gender involvement in family finances. Chapter seven looks at spousal power and reveals that the distribution of domestic power and authority moves towards equality between genders. Women's emotional connections with

their children, their contribution to domestic labor and their domestic expertise are source of women's power at home. The data collected amongst Uyghur families in Urumqi challenge the notion of religiosity as the sole link between observance of Islam and spousal power. Zang argues here, again, that family processes better explain gender relationships than does religiosity alone; indeed Zhang's investigation demonstrates that women gain legitimate power through their contribution to family wellbeing and expertise in household matters.

Zang's concluding chapter tries to explain the movement towards gender egalitarianism. He convincingly argues that the practice of Islam is a weak indicator of gender inequalities because Islam is, for many Uyghurs, an ethnic identity rather than a guiding principle or, as Zang puts it: "Islamic affiliation is increasingly appreciated and experienced in terms of Uyghur traditions rather than religiosity" (p.175). He also reminds the reader of the Chinese State's strict control over Muslim institutions and the possible effect such control has on the Uyghurs' relation to Islam. Finally, Zang proposes that attitudes to family and marriage, or family processes offer a better account of gender inequalities in both private and public spheres than does Islam alone because such attitudes often explain variations in social status, family work, and spousal power.

In Zang's study, there is no comparison with smaller cities or rural areas where religion has a bigger impact on everyday life and family organization. Ildiko Beller-Hann's study, "Work and gender among Uyghur villages in Southern Xinjiang," conducted in the late 1990's, demonstrated that women's contribution to family income remained largely undervalued. One wonders if the situation has changed or whether the role of women with respect to household income still differs today in rural from the role of women in urban areas. Comparisons between the Uyghurs and the Han majority are briefly evoked in the last chapter. However, no parallel with other communities living in Urumqi, particularly other Muslim communities, is proposed. The framework of the research, of course, imposes these limits.

Illustrations, including charts and photographs, are clear and useful, especially tables compiling the impressive amount of data collected by the author. The juxtaposition of numbered data tables and quotes from interviews is interesting, as it gives a voice to the participants in the survey and places the Uyghur people as the focus of the study. The book will also be of interest to scholars of ethnic studies, sociology, and Chinese anthropology. Overall, *Islam, Family Life, and Gender Inequality in Urban China* is a valuable contribution to scholarship on gender and family studies.

Work Cited

Ildiko Beller-Han, "Work and gender among Uighur villagers in southern Xinjiang," in: F. Aubin and J.-F. Besson (eds.): *Les Ouïgours au XXème siècle. Cahiers d'Études sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le Monde Turco-Iranien* 25, 93-114.

Vanessa Frangville, PhD
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
vanessa.frangville@vuw.ac.nz