

# Diverse and Fluid Tibetan Farming and Herding Family Structures

Jicao Sang

*School of Ethnology and Sociology, Southwest Minzu University, Southwest Ethnic Research Institute, Chengdu, Sichuan, 610041, China*

**Abstract:** *Family structure is the way of family composition, i.e. the type and state of the family, which is a kind of dynamic process. The article, through collecting and collating research on Tibetan family structure, concludes that Tibetan family structure is characterised by plurality and mobility. Pluralism is aimed at the type of family structure, and different Tibetan marriage patterns make the Tibetan family structure of various types; the study of Tibetan family structure is generally placed in the study of change, the modernisation process, the birth of the third generation, the game between the family members, and other factors are intertwined to make a strong fluidity and uncertainty.*

**Keywords:** *Tibetan; family structure; diversity; fluidity*

## 1. Introduction

Western theorizing about family structure can be traced back to functionalism, sometimes called "structural functionalism"<sup>[1]</sup>. Once the dominant theoretical perspective in sociology in the mid-20th century, structural functionalism was deeply influenced by Comte's positivism and Spencer's theory of social evolution, and has had a profound impact that continues to be significant in sociological research even today. This theory emphasizes the structure and function of society, which is considered to be composed of a variety of interrelated parts that work together to maintain the stability and functioning of society. The post-Parsonian theory of social systems holds that the components of a social system maintain the dynamic equilibrium and order of the system as a whole through a continuous process of differentiation and integration as they play their roles in relation to the whole. This view has occupied an important place in sociological research and has had a profound impact on the study of family structure. This equilibrium and order is the basis for social stability and development, and an important factor that must be taken into account in the family structure as part of the social system. Therefore, in the study of family structure, it is necessary to explore in depth the interaction among family members, as well as the position and role of the family in the social system as a whole, in order to better understand the changes and development of family structure.

There are many studies on family structure in China, and as mentioned above, we can understand family structure simply as the way of family formation, then how should "family" be understood? It can be said that this will be a proposition with many different opinions. A "family" is a social grouping characterized by shared accommodation, economic cooperation and reproduction. It consists of adults of different genders - at least one pair of whom can have socially sanctioned sexual relations, and the biological or adopted children of the pair (Murdoch). A family is the space (place) or unit of life in which members of blood, marriage, and adoptive relationships live (Wang Yuesheng). A family is a social and economic unit consisting of at least one pair of parents and their children (Zhuang Kongshao). A family is a form of social life that is bound by marriage and blood ties (Pan Yunkang). The family is the group formed by parents and children (Fei Xiaotong). In short, the author believes that the family is a place of social relations constituted by vertical blood relations (including proposed blood relatives) and horizontal in-law relations, with the size of the place being determined by the direct line of descent.

Family types are categorized on the basis of different families. They are categorized according to different criteria. For example, by the line of descent of the members of the family, it can be divided into patrilineal and matrilineal families; by the power of the family, it can be divided into patrilineal and matrilineal families, and so on. Family structure, as its name suggests, refers to the type and state of the living unit (family) constituted by the members of the family's internal relations. It is worth noting that different scholars hold different opinions about the categorization of family structure, which

is generally divided into core family, main family, extended family and combined family. Wang Yuesheng refers to the above as primary type of family and some secondary type of family within it, in addition to pointing out two special types of family, i.e., network family and clan-based family. This indicates that over time, the study of this topic has become a popular field of research, and its level of attention, research interest or investment of research resources is expanding, attracting more researchers to pay attention to and invest in it. The morphology of the family is a dynamic process, and the family structure formed by different types of families is a whole. From the perspective of vertical blood relationship, there is a generational difference among family members; from the perspective of horizontal marriage relationship, there is a difference between husband and wife among family members.

## 2. Analysis of the Types and Causes of Diverse Tibetan Family Structures

Family structure is the external form of the family and is often linked to family size and population size. Differences in marital and intergenerational relationships within families create different types of family structure, and the type of family structure is an important component of family structure.

### 2.1 Types of family structures among Tibetans

On the classification of Tibetan family structure, scholars hold different classifications based on different field materials. In the early period, there were famous Tibetologists such as Li Anzhai, Li Youyi, and Geler (1995), etc., while others such as Zhang Jianshi Tuquang (2005/2006), Liu Zhiyang (2006), Hao Yamin (2007), Lang Weiwei, Zhang Pu (2012), Zhou Muozuo (2012), Wang Yuesheng (2014), Bai Sai (2019), and so on. Tibetan grass (2019), etc. In the 1940s, Mr. Li Anzhai, a famous Tibetan scholar, researched in Dege, Ganzi Prefecture (see Table 1), and classified the structure of farming and herding families into four categories: single men (all men in the family), single women (all women in the family), those who have both men and women but no married couples (men and women in the family without marital relationship), and those who have married couples or relatives cohabiting or have no relatives cohabiting (men and women in the family with marital relationship). According to the study, it was found that in the four types of family structure in Dege agro-pastoralist district the population proportion of the latter is the highest, that is, the fourth type of family structure > the third type > the second > the first, which can be interpreted as the first level of type of nuclear family is the most. In terms of the number of households, there are more women in the two districts than there are men and women who are not married to each other. When comparing the agricultural and pastoral areas, there are more single men in the agricultural areas than in the pastoral areas; there are more single women and unmarried families in the agricultural areas than single women and unmarried families in the pastoral areas; and there are fewer married families in the agricultural areas than married families in the pastoral areas, so that pastoral societies are favorable to the emergence of married families (Li Anzhai 1992<sup>[2]</sup>).

Table 1: Comparison of family structure between Tibetan farming and herding areas

shore	grazing land				farming areas			
Household category	quorum	percentage	number of households	percentage	number of people	percentage	number of households	percentage
bachelor	51	1.37	37	3.08	135	2.89	108	6.44
single woman	613	16.45	307	24.25	1003	21.55	489	29.14
Male and female non-couples	645	17.23	2.69	22.42	1151	24.64	388	23.12
There are men and women as couples	2421	64.95	587	48.92	2375	50.72	693	41.30
(grand) total	372	100	1200	100	4664	100	1678	100

During the same period, a survey conducted in Tibet by Mr. Li Youyi<sup>[3]</sup> concluded that the average size of a Tibetan family was four to five persons, with the first-class type of nuclear family predominating. In traditional agricultural areas, families are limited by their economic resources, overpopulation is difficult to maintain, and the monogamy system and monasticism are used to limit the growth of the population in the family; in pastoral areas, there are fewer restrictions on the land, and life is easier to maintain, with larger herds that require more laborers, and more families with larger derivatives. In the "Survey of One Hundred Families in Tibet" organized and implemented by the Institute of Social and Economic Research of the China Tibet Research Center in 1995,<sup>[4]</sup> the structure

of Tibetan families was divided into seven categories: single-parent families, single-family families, husband-and-wife families (with no children or relatives), typical nuclear families, main-family families, joint-family families, and other special families, and it was concluded that both in the agricultural and pastoral areas and in the herding areas, there was a high proportion of Tibetan families with no children. Derives that the commonality is that the proportion of nuclear families has always been the highest, both in the agricultural and pastoral areas and in the urban areas. The difference lies in the fact that over the past forty years, the nuclear family has been on the rise in Lhasa, especially after the National Reform and during the People's Commune period, while it has been on the decline in the Gyantse Farming Area and Amdo Pastoral Area, especially after the Reform and Opening-up; the main family has been on the decline in Lhasa, with a more pronounced magnitude, and it has been shrinking by nearly half after the Reform and Opening-up compared to the Democratic Reform, while it has been on the rise in the Amdo Pastoral Area and Gyantse Farming Area over the thirty years after the National Reform and has been on the increase in the proportion of joint families in the urban areas. In the thirty years after the National Reform, there has been an upward trend, and the rate of increase has been intensified after the Reform and Opening up; joint families have gone from being present to absent in Lhasa city, while the opposite is true for the agricultural and pastoral areas, especially after the Reform and Opening up; single families have increased after the Reform and Opening up in Lhasa city, but have been decreasing in the agricultural and pastoral areas with a small proportion. To further illustrate, if the above seven types are divided into two categories of extended family (main family and joint family) and small family (husband and wife nucleus, single-parent and single family, etc.), a remarkable pattern emerges: over the past forty years, there have been more and more small families and fewer and fewer extended families in Lhasa City District; extended families have been gradually increasing in agricultural and pastoral areas, and the number of small families decreasing, with both increases and decreases in the pastoral areas after the ethnic reforms. (Geller 1996).

Throughout the research lineage of Tibetan family structure types (see Table 2), different scholars have studied the types of Tibetan family structures at different times and places using the method commonly used in anthropological sociology, i.e., fieldwork, to support different taxonomies.

First of all, objectively speaking, the research spans a long period of time, from the 1940s to the present, which reflects the continuous attention and in-depth exploration of Tibetan family structure. There is a wide range of research areas, including different agricultural, pastoral, and urban areas in Sichuan and Tibet, where relevant studies have been conducted, which shows the diversity of Tibetan family structure in different geographic and cultural contexts. Diversity exists in the number of classifications, with different researchers categorizing Tibetan family structure differently, ranging from two major categories to seven, which may be due to factors such as the purpose of the study or regional differences. However, some scholars believe that it is difficult to analyze the family structure in Tibetan pastoral areas using the concepts and methods of the nuclear family, the main family, and the joint family, etc. Because of the practical needs of production and life, as well as the deep cultural and customary traditions, the family structure is often compatible with the concept of the Han "family", and in some cases, the degree of its closeness even exceeds the traditional definition of the family. In some cases, the degree of closeness even exceeds the traditional definition of family, forming a wider and closer kinship union. This association is not only based on blood and marriage, but also incorporates geographic, religious, and community ties, which together form a complex and solid social network (Hao Yamin 2007). This is similar to the "family network" proposed by Pan Yunkang and Lin Nan, Chen Bo's "Jidu" network, and Wang Yuesheng's "networked family", i.e., it has a strong cohesive force. As we can see from the table, some researchers (e.g., Zhang Jianshi Tuquan) have studied family structure in different Tibetan areas in different years, which reflects the continuous attention and in-depth research on Tibetan family structure. Urban, rural, and pastoral areas were compared, and although many of the studies dealt with both agricultural and pastoral areas, some were conducted specifically on one of these regions. This suggests that there are some differences in family structure between agricultural and pastoral areas, and the fact that some of the studies have dealt with Tibetan family structure in both urban and rural areas contributes to our understanding of the impact of urbanization on Tibetan family structure.

Secondly, there is diversity in the types of Tibetan family structures. From the three major categories usually adopted by the academy to the major sub-tier types, i.e., they will usually be divided into the nuclear family, the main family, and the extended family to the first tier sub-tier nuclear family and immediate family; the second tier couple family, single-parent family with couples living apart, the three-generation immediate family, and the intergenerational family, and so on. With in-depth research, there are more and more types of family structure, and some scholars have pointed out, that in Chinese society, family structure is not only divided into two tiers, but it is worth mentioning that there are also

two special types of families, namely, network families and clan-type families. Again, there is a diversity of different family structure types in the region. For example, the family structure in Jungang village consists of nuclear and main family structure types, while Shannan Lagari consists of first level nuclear, immediate, composite and second level sub-general, transitional, defective and extended families. Finally there are differences in the type of dominant family structure in different regions. In the same rural area of Chamdo, the main family (54.16%) in the village of Junjung (54.16%) is higher than the nuclear family (45.84%), and in the village of Chudo, the nuclear family (52.08%) is higher than the main family (37.5%); and in the same pastoral area, the nuclear family in the villages of Nathuada and Dzong (43.76% 44.23%) is higher than the main family (33.33% 26.92%). The main family (74.1%) was higher than (22.4%) in Hongxing Township, Ruorange, Sichuan. These provide important clues for us to further explore the study of Tibetan family structure.

*Table 2: Study of Types of Tibetan Family Structures*

researcher	timing	field point	shore	Classification of family structures
<b>Li Anzhai (1938-), PRC politician, prime minister 1997-1998</b>	the 1940s	Sichuan Dege	Agricultural and pastoral areas	Four main categories. All men in the family, all women in the family, men and women in the family without marriage, and men and women in the family in a marriage.
<b>Li Youyi (1927-), one of the Gang of Four</b>	the 1940s	Tibet	Agricultural and pastoral areas	
<b>glug-glug haha!</b>	1995	Lhasa city, Amdo pastoral area, Gyantse agricultural area	Urban, agricultural, pastoral	Seven categories. Single Family, Single Parent Family, Couple Family, Typical Nuclear Family, Main Family, Joint Family, Other Special Families
<b>Zhang Jianshi Tuquan</b>	2005	Chamdo Military Village	farming areas	Three main categories. Nuclear, Main, and Satellite Families
<b>Liu Zhiyang</b>	2006	Lhasa Nyange township in Tibet	farming areas	Four main categories. Nuclear, Main, Extended, and Single Families
<b>Zhang Jianshi Tuquan</b>	2006	Chamdo Chudo Village	farming areas	Six of the three main categories. Nuclear, Main, Other, and Typical Nuclear, Core Attached Sibling, Core Satellite, Typical Main, Main Attached Sibling, Main Satellite, Other
<b>Hao Yaming</b>	2007	Senni and Longma villages, Nagchu	grazing land	Four main categories. Nuclear Family, Main Family, Joint Family, Other Family
<b>Lang Weiwei Zhang Park</b>	2012	Nakchuda and Dzong villages	grazing land	Five broad categories. Single Family, Nuclear Family, Main Family, Joint Family, Other Family
<b>Zhou Muo (1947-), chairman of the Board of Directors of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)</b>	2012	Sichuan Ruorgai Hongxingxiang	nomads	Three main categories. Nuclear Family, Main Family, Single Parent Family
<b>Wang Yuesheng (1940-), Chinese-American physicist, Columbia University, 1957 Nobel laureate</b>	2014	Tibet	Urban, rural	Three categories at the first tier (nuclear family, immediate family, single-person household). Five categories in the second tier (couple families, couples living apart, single-parent families, immediate families with more than three generations, intergenerational families)
<b>Paisajangweed (Hemerocallis fulva), a plant in the family of Chinese medicine</b>	2018	Shannanlagari (name)	farming areas	Tier 1 three categories (nuclear, immediate, and composite families). Four categories in the second tier (General, Transitional, Deficiency, and Expansion).

## *2.2 Analysis of the reasons for the impact of changes in the type of family structure*

The famous Tibetan scholar Mr. Li Anzhai, after comparing the types of Tibetan agricultural and pastoral family structures, pointed out that pastoral society was conducive to the emergence of married families. Scholar Li Youyi's research shows that in Tibetan families, because of their limited economic resources, they generally do not like to be overpopulated, and if they are overpopulated, it is difficult for them to maintain their livelihoods, and they generally do not adopt the practice of splitting up the family, and if they do so, the family property is dispersed. Therefore, neither separation nor limiting the number of people in the family is the main way to solve the problem of having more brothers in the family, mainly by sharing wives with brothers, or by the rest of the brothers becoming monks or joining the family in other families. In pastoral areas, because of fewer restrictions on land and larger herds that require more labor, there are more large families. In Tibetan nomadic pastoral areas less popular monogamous marriage system, the establishment of a new pastoralist livestock easy to separate, more

cases of family separation. Geller pointed out that the factors affecting the change of the Tibetan family structure is not only related to the population size, but also, for example, to the land system as the core of the socio-economic reform has a close connection. In addition, they are related to labor force, self-identified changes in family size, marital status of family members, housing problems, migration and mobility, cultural literacy, average life expectancy of the population, changes in interpersonal relationships in the family, changes in the status of women, economic development and urbanization, and so on. Wang Wenchang analyzed the marriage structure of Tibetan families in eastern Tibet from an economic perspective, and concluded that there are differences in family structure depending on the form of marriage. Zhang Jianshi, Tugu, and Baisai Zangcao point out that this is related to the "single marriage and family principle" and the housing custom, i.e., the principle that only one formal marriage can be established within one generation in the local villages of the field sites, and their system of parallel inheritance centered on the "old house". Zhang Jianshi further explains that the reasons for this type of family structure in Jungong village are not due to the land system or the tax system, but are closely related to housing practices, labor conditions, and the scarcity of land resources. Liu Zhiyang, Lang Weiwei, Zhang Park, and Zhou Muozhuo point out that this is related to the cost of child rearing and the concept of childbearing. Hao Yaming points out that it is related to the needs of production and life, culture and customs. Wang Yuesheng linked the type of family structure to population migration and mobility. Zhang Jianshi, Zhang Shuoxun, Wang Zhouta, and Baisai Zangcao, among others, believe that it is related to the pattern of Tibetan marriages.

It is worth noting that the study of Tibetan family structure is often associated with Tibetan marriage patterns, i.e., polygamy, polyandry, and monogamy (Wang Wenchang 2000; Zhang Jianshi 2002; Zhang Shuoxun Wang Zhouta 2010; Baisai Zangcao 2019, etc.), and two theoretical models of cultural theory (Levini) and economic theory (May Goldstein) have been formed in the academic community regarding this study, with domestic and international research results. The results of domestic and international research are as numerous as the stars, and once again, I will not repeat them. According to the research of the scholars mentioned above, in Tibetan society, the types of family structure are diversified, and there are many reasons for the different types, such as: national policy, natural geography, marriage contracting method, residence pattern, population migration flow, life expectancy, family interpersonal relationship, urbanization, and economic development, etc. However, the causes of the different types of family structure lie in the cultural theory (Levini) and economic theory (May-Goldstein). However, the causes of different types of family structure lie in the concept itself, i.e., what constitutes the type of family structure? It is the differences in horizontal marriage patterns and vertical intergenerational relationships that make up the different types, and in Tibetan society, it is the marriage patterns that play a key role, and the different marriage patterns make for a wide variety of types of Tibetan family structures.

### 3. Conclusions

In conclusion, the change in the structure of Tibetan families is a complex social phenomenon that is influenced by a combination of factors. These factors include macro-socio-economic, political and cultural factors as well as micro-family internal factors and personal perceptions. In modern society, family structure is not only diversified, but also highly fluid due to the intertwining of various factors such as children's education and the game of family members' relationship. In the future, with the further development and change of society, emotional factors are becoming more and more important in the change of family structure, which needs continuous attention and research.

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