

Study of Family Visits in a Women's Prison in China

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Introduction

According to PRISON LAW OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, for each month, inmates have the right to have visitation with once at most three of their family (including parents, spouse, children, and siblings) or guardians. Inmates and their families or/and guardians enjoy the organized, inherent rights to stay together for at most 30 minutes during the visits, and enjoying some of the benefits of intimate relationships.

All of the prisons in China offer family visits programs. These visits are granted to male and female prisoners by law if certain criteria are met, such as a present of valid certificate for the relationship of the prisoner and their family.

Family visits are believed to have positive effects during and after confinement: including the reduction of sexual and nonsexual violence among inmates and the provision of opportunities to preserve family ties and marital stability (Turner, 2000). However, only a few studies have focused on the issue that the visits of different family members have different effect on women inmates and prisoners usually hold different attitudes toward the visits of different family members.

Fewer studies have focused on the effect of imprisonment on the mothers (Fogel, 1993; Fogel & Martin, 1992; Houck &

Loper, 2002; Hurley & Dunne, 1991; Lindquist & Lindquist, 1997), and the findings of these studies are inconsistent (Michal Shamai, 2008). Findings of studies revealed that conjugal visitations decreased violent behavior only in male prisons (Hensley et al., 2002). Although most studies on male inmates report positive result of conjugal visits, a single article sought women's perspectives for the opposite (Michal Shamai, 2008), indicating that some female felt disapproval to their spouses' visits. Female prisoners described wanting to reserve family's funds for their children, making a connection between denying themselves "extra or junk" (Michal Shamai, 2008).

This article uses analysis means to gather information in various aspects of women inmates' live in the prison, their attitude to family visits, and their perspectives. The study basically focuses on the understanding and analysis of the thesis and the interrelations between them.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the data of the conditions of different family visits to identify and analyze the connection between (a) the classifications of inmates' crimes, (b) women inmates' attitude toward these visits, (c) the inmates' behaviors within the prison, and (d) inmate's expectation for future.

Background

The profile of female inmates

Because of their different physical and psychological features from males, females' behaviors are governed more by their subjective perceptions before, during, and after their crime (Ziguangge, 1995).

Female prison populations are usually less violent offensive than their male counterparts (Stephanie S. Covington). Most of the female crimes do not involve violent features, instead, an analysis showed that 86.96% of the crimes of the incarcerated women are non-violent (In Touch Today, 2015).

The explosion of drug abuse is a severe modern social problem. Many women are involved in the expansion of drug transaction, and this is one of the crucial causes of female crimes. 50% of the female inmates under 30 years old in Japan are incarcerated due to the violation of Doping Control Act; there was also a 50% increase in the arrested women in the U.S because of drug of abuse and drug trafficking (In Touch Today, 2015). Recently, the relationship between female crimes and drug crimes are revealed. Many women take part in drug trafficking because their actions are more concealed and deceptive (In Touch Today, 2015). In one analysis, 41.88% of the female criminal charge are involved with drugs, around 48.17% of the female non-violated crimes (Cheng Lei, 2015). During my interview with the female inmates in one prison in China, seven out of eight prisoners are arrested on a charge of drug trafficking or drug of abuse.

Raising numbers of female inmates

According to the report from Dui Hua Foundation, in recent ten years, the female incarceration rate has increased substantially, in a far more large speed

than that of males: From 2003 to 2014, the growth of female inmates in China was 46%, ten times more than that of males. In 2013, the number of female inmates in China has surpassed 100,000 (Radio Free Asia, 2015).

One reason of the increasing number of women prison in China is the inequality of wealth which forces women to make a living as a prostitute; the government should be responsible for it because we don't have a long-term, effective protective mechanism for these poor women alike disadvantaged groups (Fu Xiqu, President of the CHINAaid Association, 2015). In any country, it's such a reality that poverty leads to crime (Lu Jun, the governing of NGO, 2015). In the process of urbanization, more and more females feel hard to adapt to the discrepancy between urban and rural areas and undergo great material, spiritual, or emotional pressures, resulted in their high criminal rate in many aspects like drug trafficking and fraud (Radio Free Asia, 2015)

Another reason of the increasing number of women prisoner in China is the increasing discrimination against women in society, economy, and family (Lu jun, 2015). The decrease of women's social status in China should be the main cause of the increasing female crime rate (Zhang Qing, the head of women's right in CHINAaid Association, 2015). In addition, female criminals has shown to be more of younger-age women than before (Zhang Qing, 2015).

These phenomenons have lead to the issue on female prisoners and revealed their lives in prisons to the public. The prisons

in China have offered their prisoners some comfort not available in Western countries: women prisoners don't have to wear shackles while giving birth to their babies; babies should not be imprisoned with their incarcerated mothers. However, there are still many problems in the prisons in China—one of them refers to the insufficiency of prisons for females, barely one in each province on average (Cheng Lei, the deputy secretary-general of China Association of Criminal Procedure Law, 2015).

Under this current situation, it's rather hard for the families of inmates to do the visiting because of the long distance from their homes to the prison. Many prisons in China are newly built, and most of them are in remote areas. According to a survey in 2013, it had become a significant problem that the prisoners lack sufficient meeting with families, and all the inmates wished for more family visits. This is especially important for female inmates, because they played a vital role in caring kids in the family. Although sometimes their families can come and visit them, the glass partitions in the prison meeting room prohibit them from holding their kids in arms. Many present female inmates are mothers, and when more and more females involve in crime and be incarcerated, it become essential for Chinese government to specifically pay attention to this fact (Cheng Lei, 2015)

method

This study aimed to collect information about the four themes, in order to identify and analyze the interrelation of them, and to construct a model depicting how women's attitude and reaction related to

their behavior in the prison and their expectation for the future.

Using both qualitative and quantitative analysis, this study was built on samples with maximum variation of ages, behaviors in the prison, and family status, in order to achieve a broad and deep understanding of the current situation in the prison and to reach an overall conclusion of how the four themes relate to each other.

Our participants and interviewees included the prisoners and prison officers. Following a brief introduction of the main purpose of the study, all of these participants were assured the right to decline answering any questions during the survey or the interview, and also to terminate their participation in any stage of the research.

Quantitative analysis

(a) the classification of crimes

We simply got the information about variety crimes of these women from the prison archive. The documents clearly showed why these women were convicted, in what classification the crimes were and how long their imprisonment would last for. We observed the severity of the women prisoners and the length of their sentence.

(b) the inmates' attitude toward family visits

Our 59 inmate samples for the quantitative analysis were randomly selected, based on a unit of one cell—we invited two participants in each cell to fill the

questionnaires which directly asked them to rate their expectancy and satisfaction on the visitation of their parents, spouses, children and siblings in a scale of a to e (in which a meant the most expected, e meant the least).

(c) the behavior of women in the prison

Our questionnaires for the custody staff asked them to rate the daily behaviors of each women participant, also in a scale of 1-10 (1 meant the most misbehavior or the least willing to obey the orders or rules in prison, 10 meant the opposite). There were also another questionnaire for every inmate participants in order to have their understanding of their roommates. Each participant was required to fill out the survey to grade other participants' behavior from 1 to 10 (1 referred to the worst, 10 referred to the best); the women inmates were also asked to talk about the aggression of each other, in a scale from 1 to 10 (1 meant the least aggressive, 10 meant the most) In case some of the women didn't know about each other so much, or they didn't want to give the score, they had the right to skip any of the rating questions. We then got the general images of our participants and crudely know about their behavior and sentiment in the prison.

We knew about the female inmates' overall condition from the warden and custody staff working in the jail. We further knew about the daily behavior of the eight interviewees (discussed below) from their monitor custody staff in order to get more accurate information about them.

(d) inmates' expectation about the future

In this stage, every participant woman needed to answer several questions on their future expectation. Questions such as “ do you think you can reintegrate into the world as well as before your imprisonment?”, “ do you think your family will help alleviate your pain caused by the imprisonment?” or “do you think the incarceration actually help shape you a better person instead of tainting your life?” allowed us to get the women prisoners' main attitudes to their future.

qualitative analysis

In order to get further understanding of how these women view the family visits, we had a face to face interview with some of the inmate participants. In this state, we randomly pick some of the 60 inmate samples, and had another 8 prisoners for the interview. Within semistructured questions, this interview asked participants to talk about their feelings before, during and after their family visitation. “ What do you feel before the meeting to your kids?” “Do you prefer to talk about your current situation or the things happened outside during the meeting to your family (parents/spouse/children/siblings)?” “How do you feel after the visits of your family?” With the participants' permissions, the interviews were taken notes by the interviewer, digitally recorded and transcribed in order to further comprehend prisoners' sentiments toward the meetings with different family members.

We aimed to draw a conclusion of the interrelation between the four main focus with the results we got. In order to strengthen the trustworthiness and

applicability of the results, each step of my analytic process was details taken notes. All the records and notes were discussed by all the colleagues in the study, the final findings were on the basis of support and approval of each member.

Findings

Within the jail and the family visit system

These women themselves are apparently most depressed over their prison experience:

I was such a lachrymose girl that I have cried very many times during my first two months here. I felt so disappointed about my life; although I tried to ease myself by comparing my situation with those of the long-term offenders and older women, I still hardly overcame the grief from my imprisonment and the departure with my family.

I was in my teenage years[when I got sentenced], and I was so lighthearted, with no pressure, and no burden. It's in the bars where I started to think about what is right and wrong.

At the time I just came in, I felt so stressed out. Not to say the apart with my family, I was under pressure from the manufacturing task in the prison, and the loneliness when there was no one to talk with.

Each time I thought about my family and their consistent visits, I was overwhelmed by the sense of failure and guilt, so I cried a lot. I always told them that I was good and expressed my happiness in front of them. I missed them so much, and they are my motives for survival and do better.

Although there is a large increase in the incarcerated woman population, their numbers are still a minority in the whole justice system, thus result in the lack of female prisons in China. Women are often imprisoned in cities far from their family and friends, and their rights of contact with family are seldom ensured:

My family used to come for visiting once a month, but it was too far here from home— they spend three hours taking bus to the prison, so I asked my husband to come twice a month, and my son to come when he was in vacations.

My husband has come [for family meeting] twice during my three months staying here, but I feel bad because it's too far from our home to the prison and I don't want to be the burden. I wish I can get our earlier.

The only one who have come here was my sister, but due to the long distance between the prison and her home, she barely came four or five times a year. We [the female inmates] all miss our family and expect their visitings, but we understand their difficulties and we don't want to be bothering.

As more women involve in crimes, their families living with or on them are usually left alone and have to bear the mental suffering of their imprisonments and make a living by themselves:

I feel so guilty about my mother. She is getting rather old, so I asked her to come[to visit me] only twice a year. I even told my family to prevented her from coming and seeing me, not because I was shamed to see her, it was because of the her leg disease and the long distance from

my home to the prison. I've never asked for her money because I know she's making a living so hard and I don't want to be her burden. I've written letters to my mom, but there was no reply.

During my six years in the prison, my husband, as well as my mom and my little son, came to visit every month. I know I've let them down so much, but their consistent visits eased my pain of being parted with them and help to strengthen our relationships even when I'm imprisoned.

I didn't let my parents know about my incarceration when I was in the detention house. I was so paranoid that they would be depressed and worried for me. I was sentenced for a 2-year-imprisonment, so I planed to conceal it from my parents, and they only knew I was out for making money. I told my uncle not to tell my parents about it, but they finally knew. Once, my mother, my father, my younger sister, my elder sister and her family, and my aunt all came for the family meeting, I almost cried for the whole 30 minutes. My parents only asked whether I live well, but I knew they could never concern more about me. I owe them so much.

Some of the participants complained about the negative impact brought on their family by their imprisonments:

I divorced with my husband when my son was only a little kid, and he has to live with my husband now because I was here. He never came for the family meeting. I've heard that he didn't do well as he used to, and I pretty much believe that it was my

absence and my imprisonment grieved and shamed him. I feel so sorry and guilty of these negative impact brought to him. I tried to behave well in the prison to get my sentence commuted so that I can reunite with my mom and my son earlier.

My daughter got married this year, she was already 32. I know my imprisonment hampered her a lot, I regret so much that I could not be with her when she needs me, and I feel sorry that I've disgraced her in her interpersonal relationship.

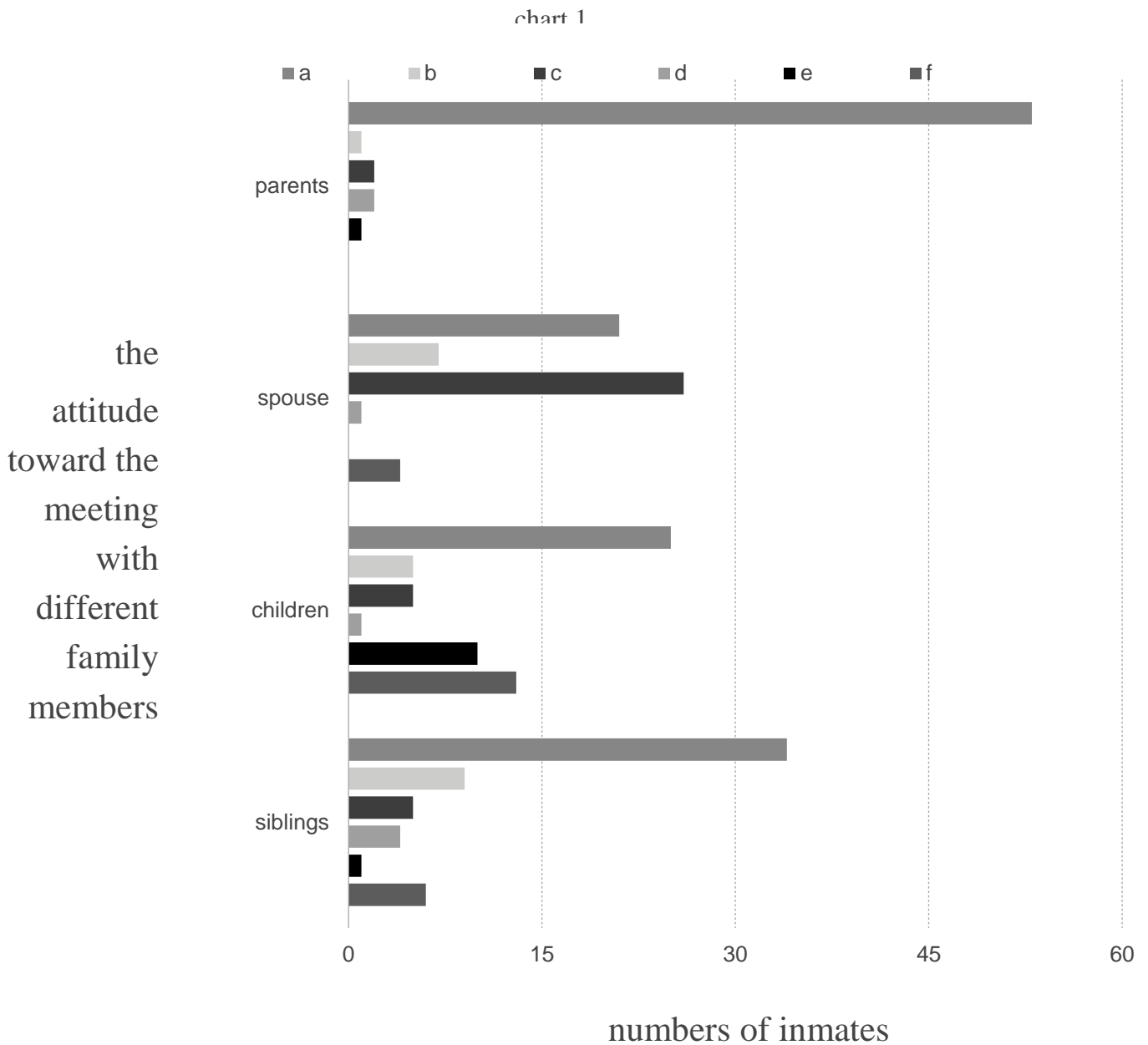
The classification of female inmates' crimes

We randomly distributed the questionnaire in the jail to 60 female inmates in the jail, and randomly selected eight of them for the interview; then we collected both quantitative and qualitative data for analysis. Seven of the interviewees were arrested on a charge of drug trafficking, one was arrested for pyramid selling. The prison archive also documented that more than half of the female inmates in the whole prison were sentenced for drug abuse or selling.

the inmates' attitude toward family visits

Data from the questionnaire showed how the 59 inmates considered about the meeting with different family members:

“a” represents the most desire to meet with the family members; “c” represents that the inmates don't care whether or not to meeting with the family members; “e” represents the least desire to meet with the family member; “f” represents that the inmate don't have the family members.



Data from chart 1 shows female inmates' different feelings on different family visits. Almost all the inmates express their expectation to see their parents and all of them have at least one parent. Almost half of the participants care little about the conjugal visits, and a large portion

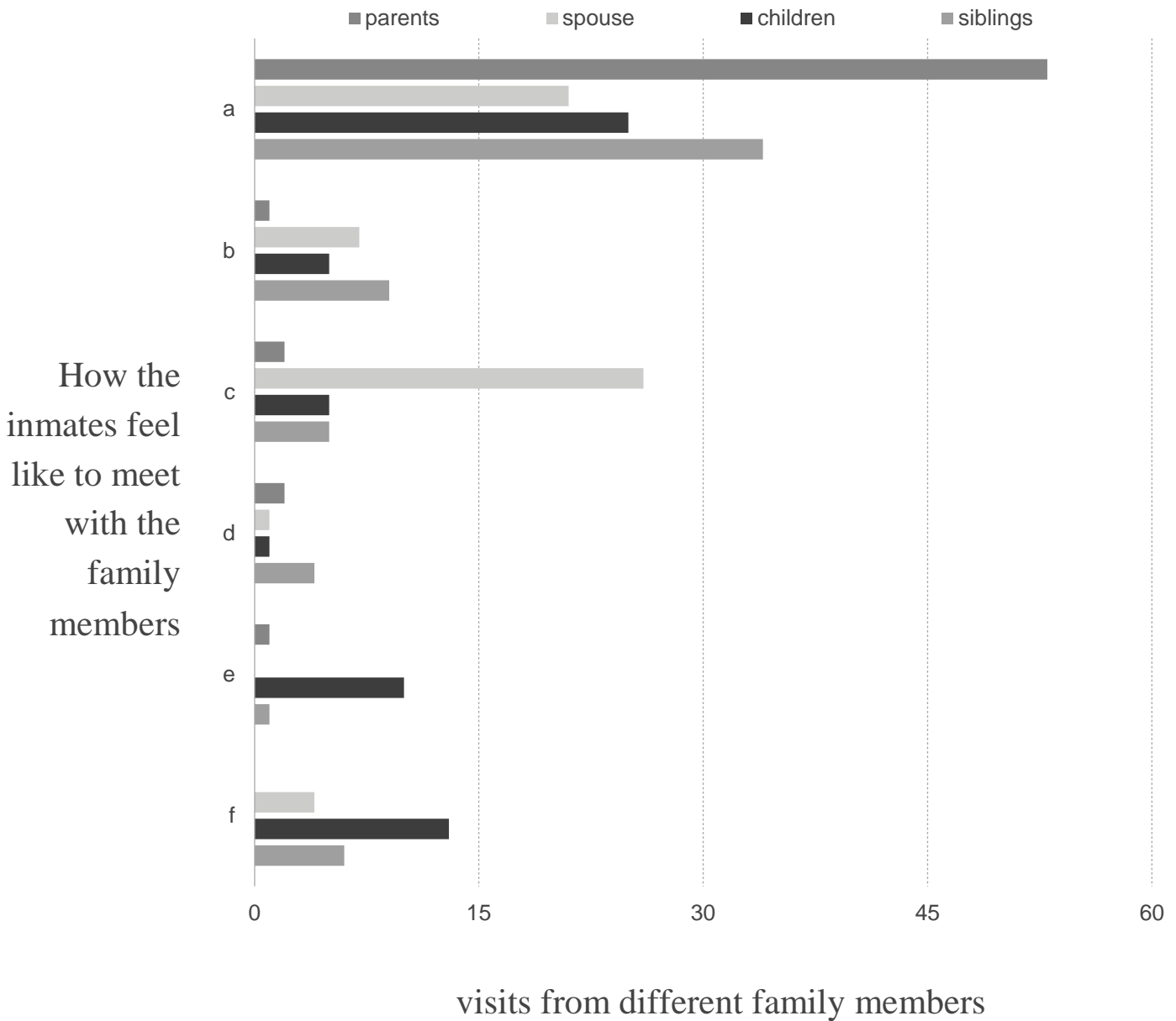
of them still expect meetings with their spouses. There are not many emotional resists or complex emotions of singling visits. Among those who have children, over half of them miss their children and awaited the meeting with them; but more than 20% of them chooses "e"—it is very painful and difficult to meet with their children because they are too guilty.

Data from chart 2 shows the distribution of their different desires levels. Most inmates gave their “a”s to parents and siblings visits, illustrating that they most look forward to seeing their parents and siblings. “c”s were most frequently given in the question on conjugal visits, confessing that the inmates care least

Despite the ambivalent feelings of meeting with their children, female inmates generally expect to be with their blood-tied families, yet less yearn to see their life mates.

Meetin with children Mothers apparently wish to see their kids and usually regard them the motives for

chart 2



about whether to see their spouses or not.

“My son is only nine years old, and he does so well in school that all of

living in the jail.

my family are proud of him. He is a sensible child, and so attached to

me. During my six-year's incarceration here, my son is my motivation to change, I behaved well in order to get the my sentence reduction and to reunite with my family; each time he came here with my family, I was so excited that I could not fall in sleep several days

"Since I was arrested, my son had to live with my ex-husband. He does not behave well as he used to do. I wish I can be with him and cheer him up, so I wrote to him and looked forward his replies, which encouraged me to work better in the jail."said P2, a young mother sentenced to life imprisonment when her son was fourteen.

"My daughter's undesirable marriage made me feel even more guilty than ever, because I realized how badly I had impacted her life. I am not a good mother; I want to give her all I have only to make up my absence when she need me."said P6, 54-year old mother, sentenced for eight years.

A previous study, *"Motherhood Starts in Prison": The Experience of Motherhood Among Women in Prison* documented "All the women reported that their relationships with their children during imprisonment were accompanied by feelings of intense pain. Women either avoided contact with the children, or maintained contact with the children and contained the pain"(Michal Shamai, 2008). Virtually contrary to the previous document, when I asked the participants about their attitude toward the children's visit, all the mothers

before the meeting; I felt very sad after he left, but I know I am very lucky compared to some of my inmates who seldom meet with their family." said Participate 3, sentenced for drug trafficking, who is going to be released in one month.

gave me positive feelings about meeting their kid, and even the younger girls were happy about for other women's meeting with their kids: "Each time I saw them [the mother inmates] came back from the meeting room, they were very happy because of their children. Even I don't have my kid, I sometimes shared their [the mothers'] happiness with their kids."said P5, a young girl at 26, always active in activities in the prison. I purposely asked them how they felt before their children's visit, in an attempt to analyze whether the meetings were so painful that mothers would try to avoid contact with the children though escape strategies such as lying or acting out followed by punishment from the prison authorities that prevented visitation. But all the participant stated that although they were guilty and ashamed when facing their kids, they've never thought about giving up the opportunities be together with them, and they knew no inmates did that. These mothers all felt very excited and looked forward to see their children before the meeting time, some of them talked about insomnia the night before the meeting. The happiness of being together with kids largely overshadowed the pain and guilt when in front of them. Usually, mothers would have a sense of lost or even frustrated after the meeting, "I knew they have to leave, but I was afraid. Nobody love and care my son more than I do. I

want him to do well at school, make good friends, and have a good future, and I worry that he cannot be happy without me.”said P3, arrested when her son was 3.

Noteworthy, one of the 59 women showed ambivalence when filling the questionnaire: she chose both “a” and “e” on the question about children’s visits, indicating that she was so yearn to see her children but felt such great pain and guilty when being with them.

Meeting with parents

The data collected from the interview was highly consistent with that from the questionnaire. All of the participants told me that they wished to meet with their parents.

“My parents never came here during the past two years. Although I hope they can come here and stay with me, I totally understand because my home is too far away.”said P1, a 26-year-old girl sentenced for life-imprisonment.

“My mom is already 66 years old, and I am so regret that I didn’t accompany her for more than five years. I worried about her leg trouble, but each time she came here, I felt so grateful and happy.”said P3.

Some of the inmates haven’t met with their parents during their imprisonment yet, so they asked about their parents from other family members during the meeting.

“My parents are 53 and 54 years old, they ought to be at rest and have an easy life, but they now have to work even harder because of me. My

husband and my sister came for the family visit in my three-month incarceration, I always asked about my parents because even if I cannot see them, their health and happiness ease me a lot.”said P4, a 29 years old newly married girl arrested for pyramid sales.

“I was not so attached to my mother, but every time my aunt came here, I asked about my father’s situation ; I felt so sad because he is getting old and I could not be there with him.” P7, the 37 years old participant said, who lived in a rebuilt family with her father and stepmother.

“My parents’ visits are my greatest motive for change in the prison.” said P5, a very active girl behaving well in the prison.

Inmates’ behaviors in the prison

Compared with their male counterparts, female inmates are usually less violent with less provocative behaviors in the jail. Another issue was related to Chinese criminal justice system: prisoners are incarcerated with stringent rules under strict monitor, and the well-behave inmates who work well, follow the regulations, and even report other’s violative behaviors can have their sentence reduced. Under these conditions, the female inmates hardly ever break the prison laws.

From the monitor custody staff we got the information of the eight participants’ daily behavior. Generally, prisoners under the sentenced to life imprisonment behaved no better than those of relatively shorter

sentence; but those who have very short sentences (barely two or three years) showed much less activeness in their manufacturing tasks, because it was harder for them to get the sentence reductions through well behaviors and their sentences were not too long; those who have got sentence reduction would continually behave better than others.

Besides the length of their sentence, we all so analyzed the correlation between their family visits and their behavior in the prison. P2, the 32-year-old woman who only met her mother twice a year and never had her son come, showed the tendency to conduct an suicide. P1, the 26-year-old girl whose family haven't ever come for her, performed not very well in the jail and did poor in her manufacturing task. P6, the 54-year-old mother with her daughter coming for visit twice a year and with her siblings coming several times each year, was reported to do well managing her interior affairs like hygiene, and also active in her productive work. Another 38-year-old mother, P3, met her mother, husband, and son almost every month; she was a well-performed active worker, and sometimes could report others' violation of the discipline. P5, another 26-year-old prisoner whose parents visited her each month, behaved positively in the jail and often took parts in recreational activities; "they [my parents] sometimes ask me to make decisions for the family because they believe in me, and I become more confident and care less about how others think of me." said the girl.

We cautiously concluded that despite the fact that other factors also affect prisoners' behavior in the jail, the visits they received

from their family play a key role influencing their psychological cognition of their current lives, resulting in their different performance in the prison. Generally, prisoners receiving family visits more frequently or from more family members conduct themselves better.

The inmates' attitude toward their future and the rehabilitation into the society

From the questionnaire, it is also noticeable that 42% of the women regard their imprisonment as a reshaping experience, and they believe they can be a better person after their staying here. Some of these women considered this experience only as one punishment for their crime. Five of the 59 inmates think they can never come back to their normal life because others will cast prejudice on them due to their imprisonment.

When asked about whether they could live a better life than before [their incarceration], most of the inmates think they can achieve a higher life quality after being released. A small portion of these inmates are not sure about how their future will be like. No one of the inmates has a negative expectation of their future out of the bars.

In the interview, more than half of the precipitants indicated that they didn't worry about the life after being released.

"I can go back to the countryside and manage some business, or make a living by working for my friend at her clothes store." stated by P2, a 32 years old mother, who has lived under depression and suicidality lacking of family visits from either her mother or her children.

“I know I can do better when outside the bars, because I have my family’s support and love, and I will also make more effort to do better in my future life.” said P4, a bride with much affection to her husband.

“I’ve never worried about my life out of the prison,” P7, the participant whose sentence would up in one month, said, “no one knows about my imprisonment, so as long as I don’t commit any crimes, it won’t be any problem for me to rehabilitate into the society and have my common life again, happily.” Her aunts who lived not far from the prison came for visit frequently.

“I believe that I can have a happy life after I reunion with my family, because my son and my husband always give my hope, and they released my a lot. Each time my husband came here, he told me that everything is going to be fine after I come out, and I really believe that. I can manage a small business in another city and make up my absence in my son’s growth.”

While their responses presented a fair correlation between the frequency of their family meetings and female prisoners’ positive attitude toward future lives, these feedbacks are to some degree different from our anticipation that most of the women would be ashamed by their experience in the jail and could not well re-set out into the society. After the thematic discussion with all the members,

we attributed this phenomenon to China’s special social environment in which women, especially poor ones live in remote countrysides, is a particular group which receive little social attention yet high tolerant from the society. Women can be easily accepted by men in remote poor areas, regardless of their past experience, because they can live there as wives and mothers for their whole lives, managing family chores and raising their children. In remote places or cities dearth of labor, innocuous women are regarded only as cheap labors which are harmless and easily-managed and controlled, so they are much more likely to be re-embraced by the society and have their new lives.

Still, there are some women complained about their life in the future. Their worries mainly come from mental concerning.

“I won’t come back to my hometown,” said P6, the mother with a 32-year-old daughter, “it is so shameful that I will be downhearted when in face of my acquaintances. I’ll go to my daughter’s city with my mother and help caring my grandson. I can cut myself off from the society.”

Another mother also concerned about being sneered at when coming back to her life, “I feel very paranoid, because I know people will pity for me, or they’ll even disdain me; I hate to be treated out of pity, or be humiliated by their scorn.”

Discussion

With women being incarcerated at an alarming rate, it is imperative to analyze

on the issue of prison and family visits. Data from this analysis shows a significant insufficiency of women prisons in China, resulted in inconvenience of family visits and address the pain and difficulty of living in the prison. We have concluded the interrelationship between the four main focuses—classification of the crimes, inmates' attitude toward family visits, inmates' behavior in the prison, and their expectation for the future—based on all the notes and digital records of the study.

Comprehensibly, the questionnaire and the interview indicate that the female inmates who expect for the meeting with all of their family members tend to be more optimistic about their future live outside, and behave better in the prison; those who refuse or feel detached to the meeting with family generally show negative attitude about their life after the imprisonment, and behave passively in the jail. The well-behaved inmates generally present one of these features: receive consistent family visits from parents, spouses and children; have confidences to live better in the future; regard family visits as motives for change in the prison and wish to get sentence reductions by behaving well. Compared to other three issues, the classification of crimes linked much weaker with the others, although it is indeed true that the drug abused inmates sometimes act out of control or violent prison laws due to their drug addictions.

On one level our task is to provide better understanding of the condition in the prison and bring the family visit issue into the public eye. On a deeper level, we must think more about the efficiency and perfection of Chinese justice system,

whether it is efficiently performed to prevent crimes, especially female crimes, and whether it is perfect on the construction of female prisons and the formulation of family visit system.

Our team advocates for more female prisons, especially in the suburbs of big industrial cities, so that the woman prisoner won't have to leave her home in a highly developed city to a remote area to serve her sentence, which makes it rather inconvenient for her family to come and visit. Also, Chinese lawmakers are supposed to improve the justice system which give better protection to females, especially who live in lower social class, from being involved in criminal activities. Such protection could include more wide-coving and reasonable subsidy to people in poverty, or regular inspection against illegal affair in each city by the Ministry of Supervision.

Limited by relevant regulations on personal analyses of prison affairs, the interview was based on a sample of 8, which might be too small to reach a very authentic results. The interpretation of the interviewees' response were totally relied on the members in our group, thus resulting in, to some extent, subjective comprehension. In addition, due to their intention to avoid punishments and get the sentence reductions or other forms of rewards, the interviewees may have modified some of their response about the interview questions; so the final conclusions might be biased, especially the measurements on their attitude of their futures and rehabilitation abilities.

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