Graduate Women's Beliefs about Gender Roles in China

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Abstract

Despite government laws to protect the rights of women in China, strong cultural values continue to privilege males. Well-educated women express ambiguity about gender roles and responsibilities. This basic qualitative study documents graduate students' perceptions of gender roles in China's rapidly changing culture through content analysis of 21 course essays on the role of gender in identity formation written by graduate psychology students in central China and eight follow up interviews with additional graduate women translated into English for analysis. Participants in this study acknowledged that males are still accorded more personal freedoms, greater acceptance for "bad" behavior at home, and privileged status in school settings and in the job market. Several interviewees indicate they admire "capable" women, meaning those recognized for achievement, but they also wonder if such women can also play appropriate family roles. Tensions clearly exist between job aspirations and traditional roles of wife and mother. A grounded theory approach to analysis using open and axial coding of data identified four emergent themes: Filial piety towards the family; Autonomy versus femininity; Division of labor: Gendered roles and responsibilities; and Media and school as mediators of gender identity. Further research with diverse Chinese women is needed including comparisons of rural and urban experiences of gender roles.

Key words

Gender roles, Chinese women, identity processes, qualitative inquiry

Introduction

China continues to expand opportunity and access to higher education for men and women, including ethnic minority students (Xiaohao & Yan, 2012). However, essentialist notions about gender and gender

roles persist in China, perpetuating social, economic, and political inequalities, even for women at the pinnacle of the educational pyramid (Gaskell, Eichler, Pan, Xu, & Zhan, 2004; Cheng & Xie, 2000). Women in higher education seem caught between cultural and family messages about doing well in school by excelling on tests and studying abroad and conflicting messages about focusing on domestic family roles, such as taking care of household issues, children, and husband's parents.

In studies on gender perceptions in China, researchers found that women understand and can articulate the nature of discrimination towards women in society and the workplace (Gaskell et al., 2004; Shi & Ross, 2002). Less than 50 percent of Chinese women accept an essentialist biologically-based argument about women's roles according to Gaskell et al. (2004), who note that around two-thirds of the men surveyed cited biology as a permanent constraint on what roles women and men play in the society:

> The majority of men (63% of the younger men and 69% of older men) cite biological reasons for the differences they observe and support: physical characteristics, character features or intelligence. Women are somewhat more likely to attribute differences to social structure: family responsibilities and social ideology. Only 41% of young women and 47% of older women attribute differences to biology. (p. 526)

Such beliefs mirror pre-feminist western ideas of permanent and stable role delineation based on reproductive function and physical prowess. Comparing samples from modern urban Chinese and poor rural Chinese most likely would produce different belief profiles.

Despite Chinese laws to protect the rights of women, strong cultural values continue to privilege males, as seen in demographic statistics (Rosenberg, 2009), in stories of male baby kidnappings for families who desperately feel the need of a boy child, and in lack of opportunity for women in government and business leadership positions (Liu, 2000; Tsang, Chan, & Zhang, 2011). Women can be overtly denied employment based on their sex; school performance and knowledge qualifications are less central to hiring processes than gender and social sta-

tus (Turner, 2006; He & Xiaoping).

An assignment, written in 2009 by Chinese psychology graduate students about how gender shapes identity, documented a continuing struggle to reconcile job success and family roles and responsibilities. Two research questions emerged from a reading of these personal accounts of growing up in China: "How do a group of academically successful graduate women in psychology frame the role of gender in forming their identity and future lives?" "What, if any, are their commitments to change?" Eventually, a more structured research project was designed that encompassed student work and interviews with other graduate women. Permission to use class essays was obtained for 21 students and eight follow up interviews with other graduate women were then conducted and translated by an assigned doctoral student with experience in translation work. The class assignments were written in English, but the interviews were audiotaped in Chinese and then transcribed in English for analysis.

While working on this research project, the doctoral student who conducted the interviews graduated and began looking for work in China. Her personal story echoed loudly the dilemma of Chinese women discussed in the literature. Being a woman was clearly a disadvantage in the job market and little effort was made to conceal the preference for male hires. Less attention was focused on performance achievement than on where you went to undergraduate school, your sex, and where your family came from originally (He & Xiaoping, 2006). The "right stuff" in the Chinese job market, according to an assigned research assistant, involved being male, being a permanent resident of Beijing or Shanghai or other large city, and having evidence that you went to the right competitive schools. However, she also notes that pressure on males and their families to provide the material base for purchasing a home shapes society's favoring men over women for jobs and promotions. Many graduate women are in their late 20s or early 30s when they complete their studies and are faced with family pressure to marry and have a child. A lack of educational and job flexibility in Chinese culture exacerbates women's career commitment, which is often perceived to preempt successful family life (Yuk-King, Ma, & Ying-Keung, 2006; Wen/Pei, 2000).

The participants in this study were from both rural and urban

contexts. Some commented on the more physical demands of agricultural labor and how traditional gender roles persist in the countryside. For example, one student wrote,

> I was born in a remote rural area where was very poor and very feudal in Inner Mongolia. My home village was a Patriarchal area where there was serious gender bias. It was generally agreed that boys were better than girls. [Direct quotes from participants are not corrected for English grammar errors].

Yet Schaffer and Xianlin (2007) write about rural women ethnic writers who, since the Beijing Women's Conference of 1995, are finding voice to change such patriarchal patterns in ethnic rural areas in a distinctive Asian voice:

> They are, however, engaging in critiques of China's patriarchal traditions and redefining what it means to be a woman in modern China. There are two words in Chinese for feminism: nu quan zhuyi, which translates as women's rights-ism/power-ism; and nu xing zhuyi, which translates as women's gender-ism. The former relates to what is perceived in China to be a more Western-oriented, politically-based oppositional feminism, a battle for women's rights that is held in suspicion; the latter, more readily adapted in the academy in China, refers to new cultural strategies and attitudes towards women in the twenty-first century. (p. 20)

Clearly caution must be used in framing gender issues in terms of Western feminism. The literature and data from this small study illustrate, however, continuing tensions around gender roles and identity as Chinese society undergoes rapid development, both economically and socially.

Overview and Goals

These introductory remarks are followed by a brief look at governmental laws to protect women's rights and evidence that males still are accorded significant privilege in Chinese society; opportunity in education and work remains uneven. Next is a section on the research design and constant comparative methods using open and axial coding to identity emergent themes, along with an explication of themes using representative examples from the data. Finally, a section on implications of findings and future research is presented. The goal is to better understand how these Chinese graduate women frame gender issues and how cultural values and experiences continue to shape beliefs and attitudes toward being an educated female in 21st century China.

Laws to Protect Women

In recent years, the Chinese government has worked to raise the status and rights of women through laws:

- Under the Constitution of 1982, women have the right to vote and equal rights in the political, economic, cultural, and social (including family) sectors of society.
- The Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women protects the rights of women in the family, extends their property rights, and provides for affirmative action to increase their participation in the political process.
- The Marriage Law was intended to end arranged marriages and allow for divorce based on mutual consent; it placed the responsibility for family planning on both partners.
- The Inheritance Law was designed to end the practice of excluding females from inheriting.
- Labor Law (1995) prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex and provides for maternity leave.
- The Compulsory Education Law of 1986 requires that all children receive nine years of education (Eaton, 1998; n/a, 2000b).

These laws and protections have improved opportunity and access to education for women but changes in attitudes and practices across social groups remain a slow, if inevitable, process. Some researchers claim that the rise of capitalism has actually reduced professional roles for women (Xiaohao & Yan, 2012).

Persistence of Male Privilege

Evidence that boy children are valued over girl children in places such as China comes from demographic data that posit one million "missing" women in population figures despite sanctions on using ultrasounds for selective abortion. Tina Rosenberg (August 23, 2009), in her *NY Times* article *The Daughter Deficit,* comments,

> It is rarely good to be female anywhere in the developing world today, but in India and China the situation is dire: in those countries, more than 1.5 million fewer girls are born each year than demographics would predict, and more girls die before they turn 5 than would be expected. (In China in 2007, there were 17.3 million births — and a million missing girls.) Millions more grow up stunted, physically and intellectually, because they are denied the health care and the education that their brothers receive. (para. 4)

The strong bias toward male children in Chinese culture continues in many areas despite government efforts. Confucian wisdom exhorts men to marry a woman who is not too smart so the husband can maintain control over her. Lower SES men in many developed Asian countries are now importing brides because they cannot find a wife among local women. In 2009 *The China Daily* reported the break-up of a ring of kidnappers who snatched boy babies to sell to families who did not have a male child. The children were usually treated well and often lived in higher economic conditions than when living with their biological parents, but the police often did not pursue these culprits because this value for having a male child was shared.

Looking at educational data on the parents of today's Chinese stu-

dents also gives evidence that, on the whole, men have greater access to education.

> 82.1% of the undergraduate students' fathers graduated from high school, while just about three-fourths (73.8%) of their mothers were high-school graduates. This gender discrepancy held constant at the graduate-student level as well; only 50.9% of the mothers compared with 71.4% of the fathers had graduated from high school. (Jacob, 2006, p. 162)

Parents of graduate students have lower levels of education overall, perhaps because requiring nine years of compulsory education was not enacted until 1986 and parents with older children lived through the Cultural Revolution.

Today more and more Chinese students are studying abroad - often in English speaking countries since all students study English and have to pass proficiency examinations to get into college and graduate school. The females often excel in the language classes and are encouraged to travel, but the messages about how to convert such experiences into job prospects remains unclear (Hung, Chung, & Sui-Chu Ho, 2000; Cheng & Xie, 2000). Turner (2006) conducted research on gender role and found mixed attitudes toward career and family:

> On the one hand, their families financially and emotionally supported their international degree studies and endorsed their career ambitions during their early twenties. Nevertheless, the women also felt themselves pressured to conform to traditional feminine roles in family and society, while grappling with the realities of discrimination at work against married women and mothers. Attempting to resolve these tensions during the five years following graduation was a recurrent theme that emerged from a number of the women's accounts in study 1, and remained unhappily resolved or simply held at bay for the majority, who were unmarried and/or without children in 2004. (p. 8)

The challenge of underemployment after graduation seems to loom large with women students. An article entitled "After graduation, we were laid off" (n/a, 2000a) suggests the seriousness of translating skills in academic areas into real world jobs.

Study Design

Data for this study came from two distinct sources: 21 student essays and 8 in-depth interviews. Participants were all women except for four males who consented to using their essays for the research. As a visiting professor in a graduate psychology department in China, the researcher assigned an essay on the role of gender in shaping identity. The students were all full time students, lived on or near campus, and were in their early to late 20s. The literature clearly documents the strong bias toward males culturally, but the women in the graduate psychology classes were elite students who had made it through the testing labyrinth in Chinese schools to arrive at a respectable graduate program. These women's beliefs and attitudes toward gender roles would be indicative of the trend in thinking for future Chinese women more broadly.

The students gave appropriate consent to use and analyze their essays on gender for the project; only those who chose to return their papers for this study were included. A research assistant followed up with eight in-depth interviews with other women students after the formal class ended. These were audiotaped in Chinese and then translated for analysis. This doctoral student had taught English and done translation of academic texts for her advisor, so was well qualified to interview and translate.

The essays and transcribed interviews were analyzed using constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) for emergent themes. Grounded theory studies emerge "from wrestling with data, making comparisons, developing categories, engaging in theoretical sampling, and integrating an analysis" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 510). Initially the papers and interview data were analyzed separately (the papers were coded first), but the codes and themes were so closely aligned that, in reporting the data, no distinction is made between the two data sources. This also helped to insure confidentiality of subjects since the possible pool for the source of the quotes was larger. In both the essays and inter-

views, graduate women reveal contradictory feelings about male privilege and cultural roles and expectations for women. The role of being a "competent" woman in Chinese society, a women admired for her capabilities and success, is not a role embraced by all the participants who sometimes saw job success as oppositional to fulfilling societal norms and values for women. Expectations are strong for "returning to the family" to nurture the children and take care of the old people.

Initially the texts were entered into Microsoft Word and were descriptively open-coded for each utterance or unit of meaning. Categories identified were then further grouped or subordinated into families or themes using axial codes. No inter-coder reliability was established with an external coder. In comparing "data with data, data with categories and category with category" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 517), the analysis toggled back and forth among the various texts and narratives to identify recurring patterns as well as unique voices or stories that were exceptions to the themes. Portraits of individuals were not used for fear that unique individual narratives with nuanced details would make the participant identifiable in this community. Trustworthiness of the data was enhanced by the personal trust relationship developed with the students and the opportunities to discuss the concept of gender from multiple perspectives. Because the interview data was collected in the home language with questions that probed the categories established in the class essays, the analysis of the eight interviews in translation offered a type of triangulation with the essays written in English, a second language. The fact that the themes mirrored one another, despite these differences, increased the warrant of interpretations.

The focus of this inquiry was on how Chinese graduate women framed the influence of gender on their development, their role in society, their employment opportunities, etc. A list of perceived male and female characteristics and responsibilities was also generated from the data. The grammar and spelling errors from the course essays written in English were not corrected, nor was [sic] used, since students were writing in a second language and the meanings seemed clear. Direct quotes from the student data are italicized in the paper.

The small sample size from one department in one university limits any kind of generalizability, but findings echo the literature about gender role stereotypes for men and women in China. What seemed new

ground were the comments these participants made that acknowledged the injustice of the way things currently are, especially for educated urban women, even as they affirmed the reality of the traditional norms of conduct for women and men. It is important to note that Western notions of feminism have limited applicability across cultures and so a grounded theory approach seemed appropriate to avoid imposing a set of expectations about how the concept gender means cross-culturally. Although ambiguous feelings surface about resolving the dilemma of male privilege in the society, there was little commentary or comment that addressed intent or hope for changing the status quo in the near future as any type of unified movement, so research question two was not answered. A certain level of resignation and acceptance of current realities mingled with a general discontent with the status quo of traditional norms. It was interesting that the males also told stories that acknowledged and highlighted their privilege in the family over female siblings, thus confirming the message of the women.

Interpretations of Themes

The following section identifies, and elaborates with examples, some of the ideas that recurred in the transcripts and essay data. Four emergent themes were identified across the varying accounts of the role of gender in identity formation and opportunity:

- Filial piety: Value for and responsibility to those who make your life possible
- Autonomy versus femininity: Measuring one's worth through independence and relational connections
- Division of labor: Gendered roles and responsibilities
- Media and school as mediators of gender identity: Cultural messages about gender

Each of these themes will be discussed along with presenting the actual voices of participants through direct quotes from the data.

Filial Piety: Value for and Responsibility to Those Who Make Your Life Possible

One of the most frequent responses from the participants involved the theme of filial piety. This value for honoring the family and those who make life possible is pervasive and may stem from Confucianism. Comments that indicate a felt responsibility to "pay back" the work and sacrifice of parents and/or grandparents occurs frequently in both the essays and interviews. Participants reference the educational needs of younger siblings in choosing to enter the workforce or advance into doctoral studies. A bright leader in the class from an ethnic minority group said that she planned to leave after her masters to work so she could help pay for the education of her brother. This was despite being asked to consider continuing as a doctoral student - both by her department and the researcher. Many students wrote about a desire to pay for travel with their mothers who had been unable to have such experiences growing up. A deep appreciation for parents who valued education and pushed kids to succeed, often against village gender norms, emerged repeatedly from these graduate student comments.

> She (my mum) believed that girls should not be looked down upon…. Up to now, my sister and I are the only persons who are still in school in our village. However, because of years of hard work my parents' bodies have been very weak and they have a lot of disease. Their only hope is that their daughters can gain achievements.

Autonomy versus Femininity: Measuring One's Worth through Independence and Relational Connections

The concept of autonomy and gender has been researched extensively in the west. The work of Carol Gilligan (1982), who critiqued Kohlberg's ethic of justice as non-representative of the ethic of care women are socialized into, seems to echo in some of the data. Since China historically represents a more communitarian rather than individualistic orientation, the idea that not losing face is the responsibility of both parties in an interpersonal exchange makes sense. However,

with the new entrepreneurial thrust of material capitalism in the marketplace, the work of care may be shifting into a gender divide as well. As one woman says,

> It should be said I am a very independent person. Even though sometimes I suspect that maybe my act is not like a girl. I remembered that once we went to climbing in my university, other girls were looked after by the boys while only I wasn't. After then I decided to leave the long hair, and started wearing a skirt. I was 20 at the time.

The idea that climbing was for men and that a woman's role was to be looked after by a male was internalized as this young woman experienced difference as inappropriate and leading to disapproval. Leaving her hair long and wearing skirts was her response to feeling out of place, but there were also some feelings of loss at this capitulation.

One of the surprises in the data involved the ambiguous feelings towards women who do compete and succeed in a man's world. The meta-message seems to be summed up this way: If you are successful in outer world as a woman, then you must be single or be neglecting your family. The quote below associates success with being masculine and therefore something to be avoided:

> Generally speaking, a capable woman might be single or her family functioning is poor according to social stereotype. She might have some male traits such as being vigorous, decisive and lacking tenderness. I don't want to be such a woman.

Conflating being "vigorous" and "decisive" with necessarily being "lacking in tenderness" captures approach/avoidance feelings toward career goals. This creates an impossible map for young women to craft an identity of being both strong and nurturing.

The responsibility of politeness and pleasing others is deeply felt. Many of these young women felt conflict about their attachment history with parents. Often they spent time with grandparents as infants and

toddlers and feel emotionally attached to the grandparents although they profess love and respect for parents and try to please them as well.

Since many students travel from home to go to better schools, they learn to rely on peers to give them affirmation as being worthy, both academically and socially. These youth seem to have had minimal supervision during the week at school where they often board and have homework sessions in the evenings. If they get sick, they are sent home.

> There is a very strong sense of inferiority in my mind. My heart is always full of doubt and insecurity and I never know what are my own minds and wishes... My belief is that I will be happy as long as others can [be] satisfy with me. Such a mental state continued until I graduated from my university. Therefore, to some extent, my collage life is bad.

Fitting in and being accepted by peers are important goals as students negotiate exile from homes and form identity within peer groups.

The few men in the study acknowledged their privilege but did not frame it as an injustice. However, one quote from a graduate male student captured the double-edged sword of autonomy:

> My family think the boy should be naughty so they always forgive my mistake. The girl should be obedient so they were strict requirements to my sister. But I have the impression that my parent[s] did not allow me to cry. If I did, they always laugh at me - said 'you are a little girl!' My sister can cry freely.

Male privilege brings both positive and negative aspects. Not being able to cry is framed as a negative in this young man's quote.

In the next comment, there is evidence of autonomy not being nurtured by dad, with resultant lowered self-expectations:

> My father shows great doubt to women that women are easy to be cheated and at risk not only for in academic but also work. I am influenced by his opinions and have no very high achievement motivations.

Overall it appears that these elite women have ambiguous feelings about an autonomous career beyond academic work and struggle to imagine how their personal and professional lives might intersect. Many concerns were expressed in informal conversations in class about finding Mr. Right, who was constructed as someone who would take care of them economically and emotionally. Romantic and pragmatic realities co-existed in tension while the students were negotiating a future. Here is how one student framed her dilemma.

> I think maybe b/c of the rapid development, if women depend too much on men, they might lose themselves. Be a burden to men and make themselves in crisis. Therefore, in modern society, education is of equivalent importance for both men and women.

At the beginning of the quote, issues of autonomy and self seem to be salient, yet in the end the idea of not losing oneself is framed as being supportive and not being a burden to the man. A juxtaposition of old and new ideas is revealed. Women need to be educated so they can better share the economic burden with men.

Division of Labor: Gendered Roles and Responsibilities

The words used to describe the roles and responsibilities of men and women leaned toward essentialist notions of gender but with some budding resistance. Some students admitted that if the woman had a good job, it was okay that she contribute to family finances but clearly it was the male who was seen as responsible for insuring a good life with material things including a home to live in. He and his family need to show their ability to support a wife. A video of a young friend from our stay in China showed the pre-wedding custom of the groom coming to the bride's house and having to pay money to the auntie or other relative who denies access to the bride behind locked doors. Eventually after several bribes and words exchanged, the groom and his groomsmen are allowed access to the home. The male needs to show evidence of his financial stability to be considered worthy to court a wife.

This quote from the essays reveals the persistence of traditional gender roles even while claiming equality with her brother:

> So, I share all the equal right with my brother in my life but being a different gender, you must be treated differently in some situations. After all, male and female play a different role in society. Such as in my family, fetching water is my brother's work, but washing is my work... But when we carrying out clean-up, we have the different division of labor, the boy move stool, we girl clean.

This quote demonstrates a belief that men and women have different responsibilities and roles and that is just the way things are. Another example of a bifurcation of roles involves who gets to use the credit card: "In marriage, I think men should earn the money and women take the bank card. I think women should care for the family and men should care for the work."

Reproductive capability is framed as an acceptable reason for job discrimination in the next quote, but this woman also sees the winds of change that are lessening the emphasis on male privilege. It is like seeing change in progress as it unfolds in contradictory assertions:

> If I were a boss, I would like male employees even if the position is suitable for men and women because biological disadvantages are inevitable. I have no rights to ask my employee to work regardless of kids. … I have to give her a long maternity leave, which is not beneficial for my company. Fortunately, there are many protective measures to guarantee women's rights. Superiority of men to women is fading now. As far as I know, the traditional values that a family should have a boy for family reproduction is not so prevailing now. Grandparents will cherish both grandson and granddaughter. The present couples do not insist on having to have a boy. Even though I want a boy, the birth of a baby girl will also make me very happy.

For me this captures the irreducible tension between traditional views of gender and emerging changing views that value boys and girls equally.

A final desultory comment states the crux of the dilemma for working women everywhere: "At present, the society stresses on equality between the sexes. Women have to undertake both career roles and family responsibilities. It's very hard for women." Change often means the less privileged group has to prove themselves by taking on multiple roles and responsibilities. Tsang, Chen and Zheng (2011) looked at women leaders in Chinese society and concluded, "that the choices these women leaders made were shaped by their continual efforts to reconcile conflicting roles arising from two axes: the "expert-official" and the "private -public" dichotomies" (p. 314).

Media and School as Mediators of Gender Identity

Two arbiters of gender thought are media and schooling. The idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy comes to mind as the power of images and narratives shape expectations and get conflated with the profit motive and advertising. There were a surprising number of commercials on Chinese television that promoted cosmetic surgery to alter shape and looks, as well as ads for products to lighten skin and the admonishments to stay out of the sun - much like English 19th century ladies would hear. Darkening of skin is not seen as feminine. Since there is almost no obesity in Asian culture, it seemed logical that less attention would be paid to dieting than in the US. However, many young women and men pay a great deal of attention to weight and to keeping a certain look. Fashion consciousness is definitely on the rise. Here is one critique of this trend by a participant:

> From the media, I know that the difference of gender can affect us very much... Many people judge a woman from her appearance and they think a woman should wear makeup or pluck her eyebrows or wear "girly" clothes... As a consequence, many girls and boys develop narrow and limited concepts of masculinity and femininity concepts which impoverish their existence.

Just as sports and "chick flicks" might divide audiences by gender in the West, Asian cartoon preferences reflect gender issues as well. As one of the participants commented, "For media's role in the gender, I think it was mostly Cartoon. The boys like the cartoon contained many violent scenes, the girl like emotional cartoon."

Schooling also plays a strong socializing role in gender stereotyping. As one woman states, "Teachers hold expectations towards boys and girls and they may direct themselves as teachers expect." Another woman recognizes how teachers shape the way children learn appropriate behavior for girls and boys:

> So my teachers and other school personnel treated us (males and females) with different an attitude. From this way, they taught us that girls and boys are different. For example, they thought it was appropriate for a girl to be silent and quiet but not for a boy. And also the boys could play a venturesome game but girls who played it were thought no good. So in my primary school I learned that boys are more physically active than girls, and they remain more active throughout childhood, especially when interacting with peers.

Interestingly, the speaker acknowledges the role of the teacher in socially defining what boys and girls can and cannot do, but then, at the end, she reveals how these lessons were internalized as reality. The reinforcement of traditional gender roles by teachers was confirmed by Chen and Rau (2011), who concluded, "Teachers interacted with boys significantly more than girls. They also subtly conveyed traditional Chinese gender values through their repeated use of gendered routines in the kindergartens and their behaviors reflected gender stereotypes" (p. 103).

Other research that looked at social studies textbooks from a gender role perspective and assessed teacher roles in enforcing gendered selves reported that

> The boys perform household chores in a slipshod manner, are absent-minded and more interested in playing, and have no sense of hygiene or safety when buying things. Girls, on the other hand, do household chores conscientiously and carefully, prepare boiled water for their parents, and pay attention to expiration dates, prices, and sanitary standards when purchasing things. (Yi, 2002, p. 72)

The role assigned to girls involves social support activities unlike brothers.

An only child from the countryside talked about how her traditional mom was career focused so breastfed her for only two months. Most women get time off work to care for an infant and with the one child policy, this time off from work is of finite duration. This participant wrote about how her mom shaped her behavior as a girl: "You are a girl; you can't play with those boys to climb the tree. You'd better go home, and wash your dirty hands now." Her father, a policeman, however, supports her bravery: "You are a girl, but you also need a wisdom and bravery." She clearly had a close bond with the father, as did several of the participants, especially in relation to their school success. What follows is the student's account of her father's comment on the all-important examinations:

> The College entrance examination is a very important thing to a Chinese student. It can change your destination. Chinese says that you have an incomplete life if you don't take part. You must work hard, have enough courage to face failure, and have very strong will.

Advocacy and acceptance by fathers seem to support girls' success and persistence and balances school messages of limited gender roles (Shek, 2008).

Gender Role Descriptors

By going through and coding the transcripts and essays, descriptive phrases were identified that describe gendered behaviors. As is evident in the lists, the majority of graduate women in the study retained fairly essentialist notions about gender. As feminist research has documented in other contexts, males are often associated with more character words and women with functional work and subservient roles. More superficial traits seem to emerge for women with a focus on physical beauty and domestic talents. The males, on the other hand, get associated with heroic roles and statuses. Being a good provider seems to be a persistent trait that is widely valued.

The phrases used to represent the "ideal" for females included the following qualities: Quiet, cute, obedient, pure, tender, genial, lovely and simple; help parents do housework; be filial; make oneself beautiful, decorate the house, and be good at arts. One person emphasized that the father should care for her while the mother should be strict with her.

The phrases used to represent the "ideal" for males included the following qualities: Strong, brave, active, naughty, good-hearted, responsible, earnest, steady and capable, bold, frank, and steadfast. Boys should have social tolerance for verbal aggression and have good character, be modest, mature, and self-motivating. Descriptors in the words of participants included "Economic strength", "Kind to his wife", "Buy the house". "Good at sciences", "Father should be strict and mother kind". Strangely, little was noted about appearance for the males despite evidence all around that the males attended to clothes and hairstyle and jewelry a great deal on the university campus. What was included in these descriptive lists by graduate participants echo the findings of Guo and Zhao (2002) who analyzed textbooks for elementary kids with follow up interviews:

> Males for the most part personify such qualities as rationality, erudition, intelligence, and stalwart heroism, while females generally personify such qualities as sentimentality, benevolence, kindness, gentleness, industriousness, and ignorance. Males are mostly active in the broader public domains, whereas females appear mostly in the domains of private life. (p. 35)

Another study by He (2002) analyzed gendered images in texts and found the following patterns:

> In the illustrations, the external image of the boys is (1) short hair and sports clothing; (2) activities mostly related to intellectual activities (math, making designs, exploring); and (3) naughty and troublemaking. The external image of the girls is (1) hair worn in braids, clothing with frilled borders, wearing skirts; (2) activities mostly related to household work; and (3) clinging to people. (p. 54)

Such findings affirm the stories of the participants in this research who put away tomboy climbing for skirts and long hair, etc.

Conclusions and Implications

This preliminary study of how gender is perceived to shape identity in graduate women in China evolved from teaching in China while on sabbatical. In a rapidly changing culture such as modern day China, it is hard to catch the winds of change mid-stream as they blow through traditional cultural roles. Having the opportunity to work closely with a group of graduate psychology majors in a large central Chinese city that still had close ties to agricultural roots was a privilege. The themes presented reveal a tension between traditional gendered roles and responsibilities, a changing landscape of work with more urban white color jobs being taken on by women, and a growing awareness of uneven opportunity and male privilege.

The hard work and hospitality of the students needs to be acknowledged for sharing their lives so generously with the "foreign expert." Involvement in a Gender Studies unit on a large US campus and teaching a seminar on Gender, Language, & Identity prompted curiosity about the life of women in China. The doctoral assistant in China, Xuellian Chen, graciously agreed to conduct and translate follow-up interviews and now teaches in Wuhan after presenting her doctoral research on autonomy in adolescents at an international US conference in

2010. Several close women colleagues in China from Education and English departments also shared their stories with me as educated women of a previous generation. They shared accounts of daughters' and sons' successes and challenges in crafting a self while studying at a university. Such women-to-women talk across cultures included economic and social topics, such as real estate and travel decisions and how women manage resources, husbands, and kids. These informal conversations enriched the interpretation of the data for this study by deepening the cultural context. The insights and narratives of both students and friends are acknowledged as a huge resource in this academic inquiry.

China clearly is poised to be the next super-power. Learning about how gender is constructed and enacted in Chinese culture should benefit many sectors of society. By 2015, the population center in China will shift from rural to urban. China's industrial revolution happened at warp speed. How the tension between career and home life gets resolved for women in China in the future will affect many other developing country's laws and values. This study captures the voices of a small group of graduate Chinese women and what they perceive about identity formation within gendered spaces.

Research on gender concepts comparing rural and urban attitudes and practices is needed. Also large-scale survey research that covers multiple social classes can provide a broader picture of what changes are happening and where. While visiting a Tibetan family of three generations on our travels, we were told that the 13-year-old girl had dropped out of school to take care of the aging grandmother. The family home clearly indicated that they were not poor since they had adequate living quarters and a prayer space with valuable artifacts. What was missing was a value for girls getting schooling.

Urbanization and education will continue to increase job availability for women, but change in cultural beliefs about gendered roles and responsibilities is slower and remains a complex and layered process reflecting a distinctive Asian feminism. The women in this study acknowledge that men continue to be privileged in Chinese culture and that gender has influenced their identity trajectory, but they also affirm

change is happening. They remain caught between competing expectations of domestic responsibilities and economic and educational success. This qualitative study provides a few snapshots in time on the ideas and attitudes towards gender of a small group of graduate women.

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