Understanding the "Three-High Woman" Phenomenon

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Abstract. In this paper, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with three-high Chinese women to understand their self-description as females and their perceptions towards gender-related issues. Three-high woman is a newly invented term and social phenomenon, which has attracted attention from the society. It refers to women who have high educational level, high income, and high position. I explored how the three-high women's perception of gender is constituted and affected by the ongoing reality of gender construction in traditional and contemporary China. A thematic analysis was applied to explore the topic which is constructed in the conversations with three educated Chinese women. Two gender-related themes emerged related to positioning of women, and gender as embedded in language, characterizing the dominant gender-related issues in Chinese societies. Based on a social constructionist framework I co-construct a gender discourse in social interaction, and conclude that three-high women are the new and more liberated generation of Chinese women and they have higher positioning in the societies, but however, they are still constrained by the language which has been sustaining the long-standing unequal relations and attitudes towards women. The implications for gender identity development in Chinese societies are discussed.

Keywords: Chinese Culture, Gender Identity, Positioning, Social Constructionism, Three-high Women.

1. Introduction

In recent years, many new terminologies have been invented in Chinese societies to describe, for example, the modern women of China (see also To, 2013). These words are used in daily conversations and are frequently seen in mass media and the internet. One of the popular terms is the "three-high woman." It refers to women who are intellectual, professional and have high educational level, high income, and high position, and who are quite different from the image of traditional women.

The concept of the three-high woman challenges the traditional image of Chinese women and is often used in a derogative way to describe women who dare to defy gender-appropriate behaviour patterns. For example, some three-high women are sometimes called "leftover women," and To (2013) describe these women as "highly educated career women of marriageable age who are unmarried" (p. 2). The leftover women are socially stigmatised for being single in a society that highly promotes marriage. They are often rejected by men who feel intimidated by their three-high status and who expect a woman to spend less time at work and focus more on the family and domestic work (To, 2013).

Nonetheless, the three-high women should be seen as the new and more liberated generation of Chinese women and despite the newly invented term for this social phenomenon describing the gender identity of women in more developed regions, there is little formal research about the topic. Although there is large body of Western feminist scholarship and studies of gender identity (e.g., Angelique & Culley, 2003; Burman, 1998; Eagly, Eaton, Rose, Riger, & McHugh, 2012; Echabe, 2010; Gergen, 2001; Haraway, 2004), little attention has been given to the gender discourses and identity construction of women in Chinese societies especially the particular group of three-high women. Therefore, the purpose of this project was to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions and experiences of three-high women in a contemporary Chinese society.

2. Background

Underlying the emergence of the three-high woman phenomenon is a complex discourse related to gender and how gender identity has been co-constructed within Chinese societies. In order to understand this

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phenomenon and women's gender identity development in contemporary Chinese societies, it is important to look at the historical and socio-political background. It shows the changing gender discourse and continuous repositioning of women as they are empowered through education, career opportunities and management (Chan, 2007; Sun, 2008).

In ancient China the role of women was depicted in the Five Classics (*Wu Jin*) and women were seen as quite active in both social and political spheres. However, the Confucian emphasis on harmony created a gender hierarchical system that made women become increasingly subjected and subordinated. Sun (2008) refers to the Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC) that (re)assigned women to an inner and domestic role. In this tradition women were subordinate to men as outlined in two ancient texts in the Confucian Canon, the Analects and the writings of Mencius (Sun, 2008). Women were positioned to serve in the household—an interior or private role—whereas men were assigned to the exterior or public roles such as government, politics, military and business. Gradually women became separated from the outside world, and from birth the female child were considered inferior to the male child; hence the son-preference amongst many Chinese families (Wang, 2005).

Fast-tracking to the twentieth century, we see that during the May Fourth Era (1915-1925) there was a cultural movement commonly known as the first wave of studies on women in China. This movement was an "anti-imperialist, anti-Confucian, nationalist, and intellectual movement aimed at rejuvenating the nation [and] made women's issues one of the central foci for public and scholarly discourse" (Chow, Zhang, & Wang, 2004). During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, a-sexuality emerged referring to women as the "iron girl brigades/iron-girls" and representing a team of female agricultural and industrial workers that became the models of a socialist future. They were depicted with "vigorous bodies, strong arms, and robust physiques" (Hanser, 2005, p. 581) previously thought to be the image of maleness. The Maoist philosophy also used this female image of iron-girls to proclaim gender equality and a concept of "women hold up half the sky" (Schaffer & Song, 2007). In the 1980s, after China's economic reforms, the image of women again changed reverting back to the more traditional image of a Chinese woman, albeit without the foot binding of earlier times. The image of women workers in 1960s was considered as "an unnatural product of the country's failed experiment with socialism" (Hanser, 2005, p. 582).

In the past twenty years has witnessed a dramatic growth in the Chinese economy and with the dawn of the 21st century, the "new Chinese woman" appeared on the forefront, particularly along coastal regions. This could mostly be ascribed to the opening up policies, wealth building and advancements in education that brought about greater global exposure and mobility (Chan, 2007; To, 2013). The three-high phenomenon seems to empower Chinese women to overcome the subversion and subjectivity of the past, and enables them to co-construct Chinese style feminism appropriate for the new century. Nonetheless, issues such as gender inequality and women's submissive position prevail. After the reforms, men still have more opportunities in education, employment and financial success whereas women struggle against the dilemma of choosing between the career and family (To, 2013).

From the above historical and socio-political background in Chinese societies, we can see that the position of women keeps changing and women co-constructed their gender identity with the societies. Along with the rapid development of Chinese societies, women have more opportunities to receive education which can help them to get rid of the traditional submissive role. At the same time, people in the societies are also more open-minded to accept the increased position of women. The three-high phenomenon seems to empower Chinese women to overcome the submissive role of the past, and it is a sign of the Chinese conceptualization of gender equality. However, the hierarchical patriarchal system is so deep-rooted in the societies, the construction of three-high women may not be as bright as we expected. Three-high women may experience many difficulties and receive various negative feedbacks such as stigmatization from the societies. Therefore, I am interested in the experiences of three-high women and their perceptions towards the gender-related issues. Three-high phenomenon is very valuable to help understanding the gender identity of new Chinese woman.

3. Method

In this study, I adopted a phenomenological approach to explore the concept of three-high women in conversations with three Chinese women. A phenomenological approach was considered appropriate in order to elicit the variety of meanings shared by the participants, and to "give voice" to women's experiences within the feminist and social constructionist traditions (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011; Van Schalkwyk, 2005). Prioritizing the self-narrated stories also provided access to individual women's feelings and experiences of the world and in relation to how the gendered socio-cultural and socio-political contexts shaped behaviours considered gender appropriate. Therefore, this study employed interviews to explore the central question: "*What are the thoughts and perceptions of so-called three-high women regarding gender and gender-related issues in China?*" I assumed that with this overall focus I not only capture the participants' personal experiences but also how they, as part of collective and social communities, experience and construct their social positioning within particular traditions (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2001).

Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling strategy (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). All three participants fulfil the requirement of being three-high women. Ann (40 years of age) was born in China, is fluent in Mandarin and English and employed at a local university in Macao. Jessica (57 years of age) was born in China but grew up in Macao, speaks Cantonese, Mandarin and English, and works at a local high school. Nicole (32 years of age) was born in Hong Kong, speaks Cantonese and English and is also employed at a local university in Macao. They are all well-educated: both Ann and Nicole have a PhD degree and Jessica has a university degree. Two of them are single and one of them is involved in long-term relationship although she is not married.

I interviewed the three Chinese women in either English or Cantonese as preferred by the participant. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. The conversations focused on the viewpoints of the participants based on two prompts:

What are your thoughts and perceptions of gender-related issues in Macao/China?

How do women position themselves and gain legitimacy in contemporary society (of Macao/China)? Furthermore, although there were only three participants in this study, I considered the small sample size adequate to gain a more in-depth understanding of how these women thought of and perceived the three-high woman phenomenon. I also did not attempt to generalise the findings to all Chinese women. Rather, I aimed to describe these women's perceptions of the three-high woman phenomenon in as much detail as possible (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006) following a social constructionist approach examining the ways in which "events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). Moreover, this study focused on a rather small but specific group of participants—that is, well-educated women living in the Southern part of China—and I envision further research on the topic using the findings of this study to guide such future explorations.

The interviews were transcribed, and the Chinese conversations translated into English. The translation posed some challenges (Haiman, 2005) as the Chinese languages are complicated and difficult to translate the full meanings and nuances into English. However, since I am a native speaker of Chinese, I could also refer back to the original recordings and transcripts to verify credibility of interpretations. Backward translation of 20% of the texts was done by an assistant who is fluent in both Chinese and English so as to enhance the trustworthiness of the transcripts. Also, in the discussion part of this paper, both the Chinese words and their English meanings are represented and explained. Thus, even if the reader is not Chinese speaking, he or she should be able to understand the meaning of the Chinese characters.

I conducted a thematic analysis to examine the women's narratives and experiences from their perspective, and within the broader socio-cultural and socio-political frameworks regarding gender discourse. Thematic analysis is a constructionist method that allows examination of the unique realities and meanings embedded in the socially constructed experiences of everyday life (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Findings and Discussion

Two themes emerged in the conversations with the women I interviewed. The themes related to the (i) positioning of women, and (ii) the way in which the Chinese language, as a means of discourse in everyday life, constructed gender talk. It seemed that the longstanding unequal gender issues were changing, although the language used to construct gender talk revealed a long history within the Chinese language of disgracing

women and with constructs that are difficult to change if at all possible. The language is deeply rooted in the Chinese culture and continues to subject women to inferior beings and of lesser value than their male counterparts; thus, the sometimes derogatory use of the concept "three-high woman."

4.1. Positioning of Women

An important concept in social constructionism is positioning (Davies & Harre, 1990). During social interaction, individuals adopt different positions which explain who they are and guide their behaviours in the interaction. Individuals are both positioned by others and actively position themselves when conversing and co-constructing their relationship (Gergen, 2001; Sun, 2008). This positioning was, for example, evident in how the interviewees talked about themselves referring to their own birth: "*I think my dad and my grandparents on my dad's side, they were very traditional. They were not happy when I was born because I was a girl*" (Ann, 40). The underrating of women was also evident in how women talked about other women (Tin, 2009; Wang, 2005). Ann reflected on her mother's fear of being blamed by her husband and other family members if she were to give birth to another female child, "*as if it was her problem that she gave birth to a girl*" (Ann). For the previous generation, a male offspring is still the only way to gain true legitimacy within the family, and "*in-laws would exercise pressure on them* [the woman] *and she would feel like the only way she could be established in this family was to bring them a boy child*" (Ann).

On the other hand, the women I interviewed agreed that the traditional values of son preference have changed to some extents. The permeation of Western culture and Chinese one-child policy (which will be discussed later) also seemed to have changed the traditional cultural values of a male offspring. Rather, the women spoke of gaining legitimacy through socio-economic development rather than by giving birth to a boy-child. They referred to themselves and allowed others to refer to them as the "three-high" (*san gao*); a concept Nicole explained as follows:

> That term in Chinese...You know "*three high*"... those women, I suppose they are close to...like between 25 to 30 years old... the fact that there are *more and more women taking up a boy's role*, and the fact that they need to sort of become *independent*. They want to be, they want to have, or they want to own both feminine and masculine traits. Not just a pretty traditional or conventional woman (Nicole, 32).

For the women I interviewed, the three-high women implied that they were no longer subordinate or dependent on the man to provide for them (Pels, 2004; Sun, 2008), and their qualifications and social positioning rid them of the submissive role that chained them for so long. To (2013) also commented on the modern Chinese woman having higher requirements for selecting a partner who will value gender equality and her elevated status in society. According to a study in Guangzhou, there was an increase of 35% of three-high women in 2012 compared to the previous year (*Single 'three-high' women increasing in Guangzhou*, 2012). On the other hand, less than 1% of males in the same study stated that they would seek a mate who was wealthy and successful in her career—a "three high" woman. All three our interviewees also commented on the concept of "three-high" and mentioned that the media—newspapers, TV and various discussion forum in Chinese societies—popularised this term and a new way of positioning women in social interactions.

On the other hand, although women had higher position and more power within their career contexts, they were still aware of the biological differences between men and women. For example, men are physically stronger (Burman, 1998). However, our participants agreed that whereas women in the past would consider themselves as weak or powerless because of this physical difference, they no longer thought like that. For them, their lesser physical strength was not as a sign of weakness but a mere biological or physical difference between the genders (Gergen, 2001). They accepted the physical differences as a unique kind of female power and felt no shame in getting help from a male colleague when needed. Nicole reflected upon being a three-high woman who was comfortable accepting the help of men for physically demanding tasks, "*just making the full use of who we are and who they are*" (Nicole).

Psychologically such acceptance brings a self-awareness and problem solving approach that positioned a woman with a sense of power to control her environment rather than allowing herself to be dominated by her male counterparts (Rammstedt & Rammsayer, 2002; Ryan & Kreiner, 2008). Intellectually there is no such thing as men being superior to women (Haraway, 2004). Instead of seeing the physical differences as a reason to be submissive, she now had the intelligence and power to control and benefit rather than feel

inferior. Nonetheless, Luk-Fong and Brennan (2010) posit that the traditional idealized Chinese gender system is still unequal and full of male privileges. In many aspects, Chinese women—even the three-high women—are still seen as "partial members" of the society, and as the women I interviewed commented, although there were more females working on the frontline, upper management was still controlled by men.

4.2. Language and the Gender-Related Discourse

The second theme that emerged in the conversations was the role of the Chinese language in the discourse surrounding the three-high phenomenon. As posited in the social constructionist framework, language plays a central role in how people understand the world and socially co-construct their realities (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2001; Harding, 2004). Language is a social process and locally specific, and through the social action of language people co-construct the discourses prevalent in the culture. Categories and concepts are produced and reproduced by the individuals who share the culture and language.

The three women I interviewed all agreed that the Chinese language reflected the traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucian and Neo-Confucian texts that assigned women to an inner and domestic role (Sun, 2008). They mentioned that the language emphasised the differences in many ways making it both functional and rational to keep women subordinate. For example, it is a virtue for the female not to receive education and be ignorant of public affairs (*nu zi wu cai bian shi de*), and keeping women confined to home. There was also "The Thrice Following" (the three obediences, *san cong si de*) indicating that a woman should obey the male figure in her life (father, husband, son) (Luk-Fong & Brennan, 2010). However, as discussed above, our participants, being educated women, all seemed to have replaced the "three obediences" with the "three high" discourse that brought about a new dimension for women in contemporary China. They were ready to move away from a language that fixated the women in a position of sacrificing, and giving up personal desires and wishes.

The participants also discussed another language feature in Chinese, namely the character structure that represents the female (*nu*) in words or phrases with negative meanings, such as evil (*jian*), monster (*yao*), adultery (*jian*) and so on. Of course, there are many other words where the female segment still has a neutral or positive meaning. However, as one participant pointed out, compared to the male segment (*nan*), in Chinese phrases, the female segment more often seemed to relate negative meanings. It also pointed to the notion of the disgraced female and had been part of the Chinese language for a long time. Jessica openly questioned the anomaly:

> *Why there are so many <u>written words involving the female character segment</u>? First, women were <u>discriminated</u> in the past assigning <u>negative meanings</u> to the female image …* [and words with the male segment are] *rare, very rare. It is very strange that since men are so important in Chinese societies, there are so few words with the male character segment* (Jessica, 57).

Women were socially constructed through the language used to talk about them and to them, and the disgraced female in the Chinese character structure could very well be attributed to the positioning of women (even within the family) as exerting power over other women through their use of language. "*The elderly woman … are in a <u>position of power</u> to use <u>language in a negative and humiliating</u> way when talking about other women, while some have no power to contest this*" (Jessica).

Although there are long-lasting languages and language construction in Chinese societies in which continue to put women in lower position, many new terminologies have been invented to challenge the traditional values. For instance, three-high women represent a new and more liberated generation of Chinese women who may take over the power from men. Looking at the language construction, three-high is a neutral term without any male or female segment inside. People in the societies may attach different values or meanings to this neutral term. For example, three-high women may have positive feeling towards this term because it refers them as intellectual, professional and have high educational level, high income, and high position. On the other hand, people who still hold the traditional values may attach negative meaning to this term. They think that traditional women should be submissive and subordinated to men, hence, three-high women are a threat to them and they describe them as leftover women which has a derogatory implication. The leftover women are socially stigmatised for being single in a society that highly promotes marriage (To, 2013).

5. Conclusion

In this study, I concluded that similar to their Western counterparts, modern Chinese women were under great pressure to find a balance between traditional identities in the family and the changing conditions in the workplace. There is a constant need to negotiate one's sense of self and the continuation of the gender divide particularly as it is expressed through the use of language. As the three women I interviewed attested, they continued to be constructed through a language deeply embedded in the gender divide. Nonetheless, as professional women they might have more power given their "three high" status and were taking a giant step towards constructing an indigenous, Chinese-style feminism. However, they were still somehow constrained by the traditional values and cultures as well as the deep-rooted structures related to the history. Future research is planned to explore the rough and discriminatory cultural practices and values embedded in how we talk about women and allow others to talk about us, and to pursue the development of an indigenous, Chinese-style feminism.

6. References

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