

Chinese Characters and Perspectives: The Social Construction of Gender

Sharon Ma. Psy.D.

Philosopher Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein once said: ‘The limits of my language are the limit of my world.’ Language is the summation of experiences. Unlike most of the Alphabetic languages, Chinese is Hieroglyphics. For instance, the printers in 16th century European countries only needed thirty types to start printing. Meanwhile, in China it required thousands of types to be able to print. However, Chinese characters are organized by up, down, left and right parts. Compared with other languages, it is more efficient when delivering a meaning.

The Oracle bone script was the earliest form of Chinese characters used on oracle bones in late 2nd millennium BCE. It was a mature and fully functional writing system in the Shang Dynasty. According to Li (2002), oracle bone script was used mainly as divination, heaven worship and major events recording. Chinese characters that have been used nowadays were transmitted and transmuted through thousands of years. Remarkably, they have kept the shapes and the meanings of Oracle bone script. One may argue that the Oracle bone did not only function as a written language, but also as a psychological ritual that people created for sacrifice in 1250 BCE.

Today, Chinese characters had been evolved from Oracle bone script into simplified Chinese. Additionally, the meaning of each character became richer and broader.



女

Each Character carries a narrative and imagination itself. The word ‘Nv’ means Female. In its original form, the Oracle letter Nv (Image above: Upper is Oracle letter, bottom is simplified Chinese characters) looks like a person crossing hands in a kneeling/sitting position. Immediately, people would associate the image with the female’s societal position at that time - bending over and obeying with no freedom nor rights. Then one may further imagine what it was like to be a woman in that period.

The word ‘Nu’ (First image below from left) has a left part of female (Nv) and right part as being caught by hand. It was said that during a war period, men were killed, and women were captured as trophies, ‘Nu’ means Slavery. To go further if we add a ‘Xin’(heart) at the bottom of Nu, the meaning changed from Slavery to Anger (Second image below from left). It described an intense

emotion which aroused by being a slavery.



Furthermore, the word 'An' (Third image above from left) is a female (Nv) staying in a house. When women were in danger of been caught, it was better to stay in the house. This word means Safe. Other words like 'Fu' (Fourth image above from left) which has a female (Nv) on the left side and a tool on the right side, this character clearly shows that females are assigned housework. This word means Lady.

To go further, a spike of rice pressing on a female head was called ' Wei' (Fifth image above from left), and there is no matching translation in English or Spanish for this word. It means obeying, feeling wronged but having to contain it. This is one who knows that they would be unfairly treated, but must remain silent, pleasing others and bending over. The idiom Wei Qu Qiu Quan means to bend over and repress the negative feeling, avoid conflict with others in order to keep the relationship harmonious. Again, the last word 'Hao' (Sixth image above from left) is a female with a boy child, which means a woman shall give birth to boy child, that means Good.

Carl Jung (1989) proposed that the collective unconscious is populated by instincts as well as by archetypes. I would go further to say that the Chinese character is a form of collective unconscious itself. The characters can be traced back to ancient rituals, and they conveyed social expectations. Other than phonetic transcription, a Chinese word is a mind picture. When the word has been read and written, the meaning is transmitted right from the visual system to other elements of the brain.

Visual Cortex and Cognition

Wittgenstein (1996) stated that the stories we tell ourselves about the world and the stories we have been told about the world we live in, impact not only our lives but also the world around us. He further said that the cultural narrative is the culture. The right cortex of our brain stores memories of image, sound, touch and smell. Those memories are stored with the emotions they evoke. Van der Kolk (2014) suggested that the stored emotions react automatically when activated by stimulations. The body and brain go through the same journey we experienced in the past (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 45).

Brodamann' area 19 is a region in the visual cortex that registers images when they are first delivered to the brain. The image is then passed on to the right hemisphere for visual communication and drawing (Van der Kolk, 2014). Neurophysiological studies have proved that top-down attention can enhance the baseline of firing rates, fast forward neuronal tuning towards

task-relevant stimulus features. In this way the neuronal response curves can be scaled up (Summerfield, 2009). It is suggested that attention could impinge on perceptual decision-makings. In this way, one might anticipate that attention and expectation have a similar facilitatory effect on visual cortex recognition. The expected stimuli would also be associated with enhanced sensory responses (Summerfield, 2009).

Recognition of a letter and storage in the brain require repetitive visual stimulations. Each time the pictograph enhances the concept of its original meaning through visual cortex processing. If we show the individual a red apple ten thousand times, the individual automatically associates apple with the color red. The social expectations in Chinese culture were being repeatedly reinforced through the Chinese characters. An individual's concepts were informed by the characters. These concepts, in turn, were closely aligned with and influenced one's behavior and decision making. Thus, one's belief and behavior can be hugely influenced by the script of a nation.

Fear and Status

Jung (1989) suggested that an individual could dream of something that serves as a prototype of the collective human unconscious. To illustrate this, I am going to present a dream I had a few years ago, I was not aware of the Oracle bone script back then. In this dream, there are many women lined up, they are all naked, their hands are tied up with rope. They kneel sitting in a line. I did not see their faces, but they were bound to a long stick. Between each woman there is an almond. This line is called Zhu Zhen which means Pig Line. To further associate, almond in Chinese sounds like Xingren. If we redistribute the letters, it is Renxing which means Human Nature. The sound Xingren is also similar as Xinren, which means Trust.

If we see this dream as a sign of collective unconscious, then we may also turn to see how this fear was created for the past 36 years. In 2015, China removed the One Child Policy. This was the first time that families can raise a second child since 1979. There are over 1.5 hundred million people who were born as the 'one child generation'. By the year 2017, the scale of male versus female was 117:100. In some provinces like JiangXi province, the scale reached 140:100.

Inevitably, one could see that under the one-child policy more male infants were born. How did this happen? In feudal society, people valued boys more than girls. As a consequence, some families would continue giving birth to children until they had one or two boy babies. Similarly, the one-child policy implementation did not reduce the gender imbalance, rather, it increased the pressure for women to give birth to boy child. The One Child Policy states that under two circumstances that family could apply for permission to have a second child.

First, the family would be charged a large fine for having one extra child. Second, if the first child has a serious disease or disability then the family could apply for permission to have a second child (Johnson, 2016, P4-14). In some regions, people whose first child was a girl would secretly send the girl away, or never report her birth to the Residence Verification Department. Consequently, girls could not stay with their parents nor receive a proper education—for they didn't have a legal registered identification. Extreme cases were found in Shanxi Province where

girls were reported as mentally disabled so that the family could have a second child. Fear is deeply rooted in every girl's heart in China. Fear surrounded Chinese females of being sent away, abandoned, neglected, and not loved. A patient once told me "I shall behave better, grow up faster, take care of others and never ask for my own, all because I am a girl in China." Inevitably, the girls who were sent to relatives or other families developed attachment trauma due to the escalating birth plan. Without identity, rights or acceptance, those girls had been erased from the moment they were born.

Van der Kolk (2014) suggested that trauma could be triggered which leads the individual to one of three moods: Fight, Flight and Shutting Down. In my clinical experiences, I witnessed many women hiding their strength in relationships. The greatest fear is that of breaking a relationship. The most frequent sentence is: "I am worried what others might think of me." As a main emotion, fear is considered the most efficient tool to control a social system.

Fear and Relationships

With great fear plugging an individual's mind, one turns to one of the three models in their relationship. First, a woman may contain anger towards another gender as she grows up. The unfairness she felt inside became the original aggression towards her partner and children. I would relate this with the Fight model – the individual criticizing, attacking, belittling people close to her. Secondly, and more commonly, an individual goes into the Escape/Flight model.

For instance, you may see a woman choosing to ignore the signals of her husband's cheating or focusing on housework rather than providing any space for emotions (the main focus having turned to other things such as children, work, online-shopping, etc.). The women would rather remain silent and escape into TV shows or fantasies rather than make a change. In addition, they often feel they can't afford to lose a relationship.

Thirdly, the individual reports feeling nothing. They are shutting down their sensation of negative emotions and as a result their perception system shuts down completely. The woman may say she feels fine, but she is actually dying inside. Statistics show that depression and anxiety are positively correlated with emotional isolation. Numbing oneself can also lead to the damage of the immune system. Li (2013) had used CECS (Cotould Emotional Control Scale) to test 1000 Chinese women. The result showed that repression of emotion can predict the status of female breast cancer. Anger is the main repressed emotion.

The Variation of Yin-Yang

The ancient Chinese Character Yin is a glyph of 'sun hidden by clouds', and Yang is signifying 'the sun shining over the land'. Yin is originally written as the meaning of 'northern slope of a mountain' or 'the southern bank of a river' where the sun could not directly reach. Yang in its original meaning is depicted as a 'southern slope of a mountain' or 'the northern bank of a river' which are bathed under the sun (Yan, 1995, P. 23). Thus, Yin and Yang are nature phenomenon. However, Chinese philosophers often approach Yin and Yang as a logical and mathematical way of thinking. In some circumstances, Yin and Yang are opposing principles. Yin also refers to

former feminine and negative; Yang refers to latter masculine and positive.

When children reach the age four, they are aware of social expectations of gender. However, scientists have found that when boys play games, they tend to make rules in order to keep the game running. Laws and principles are modified and discussed among boys. They also build factions and divide people by status. The game is about winning and losing. By contrast, when girls play, they do not consider rules to be the vital issue. As long as the game continues, they are willing to adjust rules and renew the progress. However, when the game puts the relationship between girls in danger, they are more likely to give up the game in order to keep the relationship (Gilligan, 1998, p. 5).

Chinese philosophers proposed that one shall put effort to the task inwardly. When the outwardly appears with conflict, Chinese philosophers believe that it is due to the imbalanced inside. The terms 'Yang Sheng Yin Shuai' and 'Yin Sheng Yang Shuai' refer to the imbalance of Yin and Yang. Femininity is considered as Yin, masculinity as Yang. Nowadays, with one billion more men than women in the population, China is considered to be in a state of 'Yang Sheng Yin Shuai,' which means there is too much masculinity. This leads to a lack of harmony. It is time to adjust and develop Yin for each individual in order to keep this co-existing environment suitable for human lives.

The Tricky Mission

ZhaoDi knew that the only way to be treated fairly is to 'be like a boy'. She knows how her parents want a boy, and when her brother was born, all the attention and caring were devoted to the little one. Her name ZhaoDi means 'recalling a brother'. Many families use this name as an implied meaning of 'wishing for a boy'. ZhaoDi realized her parents would prize her only when she has achieved academic excellence. Her mother would then recognize her as 'Guai.' ZhaoDi holds a high salary job after her graduation from school. She sends money back home every month. It was until recently, she realized that the money was being given to her brother by her parents.

ZhaoDi usually finds herself in competition with male colleagues. She does not fancy beautiful dresses or make up; rather, she wears suits to work, even on leisure days. It was not until ZhaoDi had her first child, that she began to feel the need of being a gentle mother. She started her therapy three years ago. During the work with her therapist, ZhaoDi talked about how she has to fight for attention, gaining love by being a good girl. She claims that she finds it difficult to identify as a woman. She felt that menstruation is nothing but a trouble. ZhaoDi said: 'I never want to be a woman in my next life.'

After several years of treatment with her therapist, she could engage with her female part. She was described as 'hard like a rock', now she wants to be 'soft as water.' With a safe environment, ZhaoDi learned to embrace her emotions. Her way of using intellect as a main defense had transformed into effective expression. She said she does not hate her parents. They have their limitations, and this can be traced back to trans-generational trauma. "I learned from my mother of how to be a woman, a wife and a mother, but I was given the wrong definition. When she saw

herself as being of no value and no use without sacrificing herself to the family, I internalized her repression. I do not want to pass that onto my child.” ZhaoDi’s mission is to seek her identification of being a real self by knowing herself. She allowed her Yin-Yang to naturally develop, thus reaching an inward harmony.

The brother, XueQiang, ironically is not as lucky. He was given enough attention but less freedom to develop. He was overly dependent on his mother and sister. He always pushed things to the last minute and escaped from challenges and responsibilities. He did not pass the colleague examination and became a shop keeper. He was given the mission of bringing home money – but he found it increasingly hard to achieve this goal. Life has no purpose and no meaning for him. Formally, he engaged in dancing as a hobby, but his mother thought it was too girly.

He relied on his sister and parents to pay the first loan on a new apartment and married a girl who was identified by a matchmaker. The mother helps him look after his baby. He sometimes envies his sister as she has more freedom in her life. XueQiang was only allowed to develop his masculinity as he grew up. He could not encounter his feminine part. The cultural and family value told him “Boys do not cry.” His mission is to deliver the next generation and make money for the family. He felt he was losing his life purpose. He lost the balance of Yin-Yang.

ZhaoDi and XueQiang epitomize millions of young people in China. For ZhaoDi, she had to learn boys’ rules in order to survive the competition. In order to ‘defeat a man by man’s rules’, she developed her masculinity part. The philosopher, Lao-Tzu identified all the myriad things that carry Yin on their backs and hold Yang in their embrace. We derive our vital harmony from the proper blending of the two vital breaths. Another philosopher, Chuang-Tzu further suggested that when Yin-Yang lose balance, when ‘cold and heat come in untimely ways, all things will be harmed.’ When Yang goes to extreme, it will turn into Yin and Yin will turn into Yang when it goes to the extreme, just as sunrise follows the sunset. If masculinity becomes too extreme, either in an individual or in society, it will become femininity. Rainer suggested that if one surrenders to the wisdom of earth, one could be rooted like trees. Women shall change themselves, then the narrative shall be changed. Then the world shall be changed.

Nv Shu Enlightenment

Though women rarely had a chance to be educated in a feudal society, there was still sunlight across the dark clouds. Nv Shu, the one and only writing system that is created and used exclusively by women in the world, was developed among the rural women in Jiangyong County of Hunan Province in China. These special women creating a language that women inherited over hundreds of years. The culture of Nv Shu was taught by a mother to their daughters and practiced for fun among sisters and friends. Nv Shu was mainly used for autobiography writings or letters written between sworn sisters. Zhao Liming who is the professor at Tsinghua University claimed that Nv Shu is a cultural expression of female strength. Women could speak with their own voices and fight against male chauvinism (Zhao, 2018, P. 253).

Nonetheless, Nv Shu is influencing the tradition itself. San Zhao Shu is the ‘third day missive’ of

good wishes presented by a bride's friends, this has become the very important tradition on the third day of a newly married couple. Not only did San Zhao Shu was formed by needle work in Nv Shu, the folk songs, riddles and poems are also conveyed in Nv Shu. The picture below shows the form of Nv Shu comparing to Ancient Chinese letter 'Female' (on the left is Oracle bone script, on the right is Nv Shu). One can see that the female is not kneeling nor have the hands been tied in Nv Shu. It appears more like the women are standing up and dancing.

Using three hundred and seventy-nine letters, Nv Shu described marriage, family, social interactions, anecdotes, songs and riddles. Nv Shu could be one of the earliest forms of female individual and group therapy. When one woman writes to another woman in Nv Shu, the privacy has been well protected. Men cannot read nor understand Nv Shu. In those letters that have been preserved, women complained about life struggles, encouraging each other to pass through difficulties. It was believed that women gathered together to sew clothes and sing Nv Shu songs. They helped each other and thought about solutions as a group. With this help of Nv Shu, women they became more optimistic as they found a way of gaining support and problem solving.



Conclusions

Nv Shu inspired Chinese women in three ways. First, women have a natural strength in searching for hope when in despair. Jiang Yong women were under the traditional pressures such as foot binding. They were not allowed to walk far or choose the place to live. They settled their marriage mostly by matchmakers and never had any chance to go to school. Nv Shu was created in such circumstances in order to help women think and speak up.

Second, women have the strength of transforming and sublimation. Women are born with pain built in, both physically and psychologically. A woman carries pain all through her life, such as period pain and childbirth. When a woman's body is seen as a container, one could notice that not just pain was contained, but also shameful and guilty feelings. Nv Shu offers an example of how women had transferred their pain into literature and thus sublimating the sorrow into art.

Third, women can help women. The creator of Nv Shu is untraceable, but one of the purposes has to be helping women. With a group of women gathering together spontaneously, and using their intelligence to help each other, women were free from the impact of male dominated social rules. Not only did women in Jiangyong find their own way of healing, they were able to influence the culture and tradition by adding Nv Shu as wedding gifts.

References

- Gilligan, Carol (1998). *In a different voice: psychological theory and womens development*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.
- Johnson, K. A. (2017). *Chinas hidden children: abandonment, adoption, and the human costs of the one-child policy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Jung, Carl. (1989). *Psychology and Religion: West and East* in Vol. 11 of the *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. P 589-608.
- Kumaran, D., Summerfield, J. J., Hassabis, D., & Maguire, E. A. (2009). Tracking the emergence of conceptual knowledge during human decision making. *Neuron*, 63(6), 889-901.
- Li, Xueqin (2002). *The Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project: Methodology and Results*. *Journal of East Asian Archaeology*. 4: 321–333.
- Min, J. (1995). *The chalice and the blade in Chinese culture: Gender relations and social models*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Pub. House.
- Summerfield, C., & Egner, T. (2009). Expectation (and attention) in visual cognition. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 13(9), 403-409.
- Van der Kolk, Bessel (2014) *The Brain Keeps Score*. New York: Penguin.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1996). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Charlottesville, VA: InteLex.

Zhao,L.(2018). Legendary Women's Book(Chuan qi nv shu).Beijing:Tsinghua University Press.