

Provocations

Live Beneath a Precipitous Wall: The Other Façade of Chinese Women



Vivir Bajo una Pared Escarpada: La Otra Fachada de Mujeres Chinas

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: While feminism is arousing international debates on traditional and new media, collective efforts such as #MeToo are generating visible influences on societies as well, under such collectiveness, I still believe personal stories of women are also worthy of telling. **Provocations:** This provocation intends to start with a young girl who wished to be a teacher as it was 'domestic' and 'perfect for marriage', but now has stepped into a different river, conducting funeral studies in a remote village in China. It offers a chronologic view of how that transaction has occurred and why is that. More importantly, it tries to publicly present the expectations or stereotypes of Chinese culture and society, yet the ultimate goal is to lead the 'gaze' towards a Chinese woman to a broader perspective, to build an individual and living 'her' in a broader world rather than a 'her' on television programs or literatures. **Conclusions:** I believe such telling is necessary as it contributes to the narratives of women in an international dimension by recognizing the efforts and struggles required for a woman's growth and self-identification process and by highlighting the role that society and education have played. The conclusion follows after the personal story, and it highlights the continuous fight against stereotypes and inequalities.

Keywords: personal story; society; education; stereotype; China.

RESUMEN

Objetivos: Mientras que el feminismo está cobrando más atención internacional tanto en los medios de comunicación tradicionales como en los nuevos, y los esfuerzos colectivos como #MeToo están generando más influencia visible en las sociedades, pensamos que las historias personales de las mujeres también merecen la pena ser contadas. **Provocaciones:** Este trabajo comienza con una joven quien deseó ser una profesora porque era una vocación "doméstica" y "perfecta para el matrimonio", pero ahora lleva una vida completamente distinta: realiza una investigación sobre funerales. Ofrecemos una visión cronológica de cómo se ha producido esa transición y las motivaciones detrás de ella; lo más importante, demostramos abiertamente las expectativas y los estereotipos hacia las mujeres en la sociedad y cultura china. No obstante, el objetivo sigue siendo orientar la mirada hacia las mujeres con una perspectiva abierta, construir una 'ella' como individuo y viva en vez de una 'ella' en los programas de televisión o de las obras literarias. **Conclusiones:** Creo que el hecho de narrar es necesario, ya que contribuye a las narrativas de las mujeres en una dimensión internacional, al reconocer los esfuerzos y las luchas durante el proceso de crecimiento y autoidentificación, y destaca el papel que la sociedad y la educación desempeñan. La conclusión sigue a la historia personal, y hace hincapié en la lucha continua contra los estereotipos y las desigualdades.

Palabras clave: historia personal; sociedad; educación; estereotipo; China.

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After taking several rounds of discussion about this work, I wondered how to avoid reinforcing the stereotype towards Chinese women while talking about exhausted women in contemporaneity as a Chinese woman? Giving that the exhaustion comes from the prolonged stress and oppression of culture and society, I intend to offer my story to show that, contrary to stereotypes, a woman can go much further than the social and cultural expectations. On the other hand, although the evaluator wants to convince me to tell my story with more confidence, my intention is never to draw attention to my individuality but to the efforts that a woman must make when carrying out her personal and professional life. I will also offer some examples of the dilemmas; however, the starting point is to direct the gaze towards a fact: that we are capable of navigating against stereotypes.

I was born and raised in a small town, finished my primary school there, and then was sent to the city for high school, as there was better quality of education. For a Chinese family, it is never too much to emphasize the importance of education. During my six years of elementary and high school, every now and then I had to move to different houses: those of my aunts and uncles, with a single objective: education.

In sixth grade, I had English classes for the first time. However, at that time, I didn't know what I could do with the language because foreigners seemed to be an invention of television. Since high school, I have had more opportunities to study English, an Oral English Class given by teachers from Kenya and the Philippines. The class is different from conventional English classes that focus on vocabulary and grammar. I was excited at the beginning of each week, as I had that speaking English class on Monday afternoon. I remember how curious I was when I saw my first Oral English teacher. My classmates and I went to ask him if we could touch his skin because it was dark. He allowed us to do so. This experience allowed me to understand that there are people of different origins living in the world and they have different appearance and presence.

For a teenager in China, the most important task is to prepare for the Gaokao, the college entrance exam. However, I have always been obsessed with literature. Despite being constantly stressed about studying, I had been able to read a bit of Henry David Thoreau, Natsume Kinnosuke, among others. The works allowed me to imagine those remote lands, which, many years later, I could see with my own eyes.

I studied English philology as an undergraduate, hoping to become a translator of literary works. Studying the language opened the door even more to English literature. I met my first boyfriend during college, and my life project was to marry him and become a teacher. It was

the most 'Domestic' profession, in other words, perfect for a marriage. However, the relationship did not end well. Upon graduation, under the Confucius Institute programs, I had a job opportunity at the 'Gimnasio Campestre Reino Británico' school near Bogota, Colombia.

Before I left for Colombia, the only thing I knew about Colombia was Gabriel García Márquez. The first work of Gabo's that I read was *Love in the Time of Cholera*, translated into Mandarin, when I turned 18. Then when I turned 22, I went to the country where doctor Urbino and Fermina Daza grew up and, most importantly, where Macondo was. I took the vacation and went to Aracataca, where Gabo was born. I remember at the bus station, the ticket inspector was yelling at the driver: 'A Macondo!', referring to my destination. At the time, it seemed unbelievable to me that I had traveled so far to see the place where my favorite writer lived; the feeling was real but strange. Suddenly, the plots of the novels came into life. During my two years in Colombia, I made effort to learn Spanish with my colleagues. In addition, during my second year in Colombia, I made a short trip to Amazonas, which played a significant role in my current life project. It is also necessary to point out that the two years in Colombia served me as a peephole to see the world. I've had coworkers from Russia, Australia, Brazil, Japan, etc. This experience also planted in me the idea that "I need more education".

The gift that Colombia gave me was not only two wonderful years but also the language. At the age of 25, I received the offer of Master in Latin American Studies at the University of Granada in Spain. Andalusia is a place of sunshine and tranquility, and there at the university, I was also able to see many more pieces of the world, meeting classmates from Mexico, Argentina, and Turkey, among many others. When I had to decide the subject of my Trabajo Fin de Master (TFM, the master dissertation), I remembered the trip to Amazonas. I was very curious about Leticia, where Colombia borders Peru and Brazil. In my TFM, I worked on the Hispanicization of Leticia under the direction of Professor Ángel Acuña Delgado, a distinguished anthropologist. This is how I entered the world of anthropology.

While doing my master's degree in Granada, I participated for the first time in the M8 demonstration¹. I was quite excited because I had never seen women gathered and acted in such a way and, most importantly, shed light on important issues. I was encouraged and, in a way, empowered to face the challenges and problems in life.

The TFM made me think about my ethnicity as well, as I am from an ethnic community different from where I was studying. Therefore, I decided to pursue anthropology, and work on funeral rituals in a Chinese village with its own ethnic characteristics. Looking back, I was already so

far away from the "marrying to be a housewife" project, but I was (and still am) very happy.

The village is located in southern China. People there prefer burial to cremation. The burial rituals were performed by a group of Taoists and ritualists, who are all men. To collect sufficient data, I had to talk to them, consult with them, and interview them. In many cases, there has been fruitful conversations. They answered my question and treated me with patience and generosity. So, you may ask, what additional efforts does it bring? Here are a few examples.

In the summer of 2021, I went to a funeral for observation. The humidity and high temperature in southern China, especially in a mountainous area, make this observation even more uncomfortable. My informant, W, member of the Taoist group, introduced me to all other group members. After lunch, the temperature rose, few people had the energy to move, and I thought this was a good time to talk to the Taoists.

I have to say that here, at my field site, funerals last several days without ceasing, except for eating, and Taoists take turns to sleep. The host vacates room(s) or a large hall for them to rest. But, during the funeral, the spaces are public/open, that is to say, no one is prohibited from entering.

I went straight to the Taoist hall with my cell phone and notebook. I went in, and a few seconds passed that felt like an eternity. All the Taoists were shirtless. For a woman, regardless of whether she is an ethnographer or not, the only room in which she can stay with shirtless men without causing her discomfort would be one of a Michelangelo exhibition. But I went in that room full of Taoists and went in with the only intention of interviews. It took me a few seconds from the entrance to get to the Taoist I wanted to talk to; I didn't want to run away or hide when I saw them shirtless because I didn't want to stain the silent atmosphere with a sexual color. Besides, I knew perfectly well what I was coming for. I tried to act normal with my presence, gestures, and movement, but inside I was silently shouting with this normality the following: "Please, I come for the interview, that's all". However, I could not stand the discomfort and fled after two or three questions. After that, I could not ask any more questions to any Taoist without remembering those moments, even in a public space. And later when a Taoist started flirting with me, I couldn't act normal without remembering the seconds in that room neither. The discomfort haunted me until the end of the observation.

Confucianism emphasizes that a decent man should not stop 'under a precipitous wall' because it may collapse. A moral man must avoid dangers that may harm his virtue. And on that occasion, has my virtue been harmed? The answer is obviously NO, but I also know I would receive critics if

someone saw me with a group of shirtless men because I didn't avoid that 'precipitous wall'. Being a researcher has been my perfect camouflage, but here's an essential question: Why do I need a camouflage?

By introducing myself to the locals as a funeral investigator, I have managed to know most of the residents, although I have not been able to talk much with some. One day, through a roadside chat among elders, one of the elders praised me in front of my family -the ancestor worship and the strong reverence for elders makes the fact that a person of older generation criticizes or praises a young person a quite normal gesture. Her comment about my presence in the village was: "It's like she were a man" or "She acts like she were a boy".

However, it made me think after the talk: what behaviors or characteristics of mine have led to this comment, although I wouldn't exactly call it a 'compliment'. I think it was the moments when I started the conversation that I didn't show fear to death or that I did not close the door to more opportunities. That is to say, on such occasions, if a woman, regardless of whether she is an ethnographer or not, demonstrates characteristics such as confidence, enthusiasm, and a bit sense of humor, she will be considered 'a man'. I had a hard time processing such a comment as a true compliment, but it was also not my intention to start a demonstration in the village.

According to [Hammersley and Atkinson \(1994\)](#), femininity can be a privilege during field work since masculinity can be manipulated in certain senses due to the 'harmlessness' of femininity. However, in this case, femininity disappeared under the expectations or, in other words, under the stereotypes towards women. If we consider this field study a personal 'rite de passage' ([Clifford, 1986](#)), it seems that I have already passed the liminal phase ([Genep, 1960](#)) and have come to achieve a new identity and gender, those of a man, even if it was against my own will.

Hence, my other question is why I must 'be a man' to deserve such specific (or good) characteristics? Can't women be confident, or must they wait for someone else to start the conversation?

This line of thinking led me to another question: What are the expectations imposed on us by such additional efforts to recognize myself as a man?

Confucius has not directly oppressed women, but Confucianism and neo-Confucianism have excluded women in their works. In addition, Taoism promotes the Yin-Yang characteristic, but Yang (male) is considered superior by nature, so such a belief confronts women against men in a naturally unfair place ([Orozco, 2017](#)). Also, during field work, I have noticed that funerals for the two genders are different. A woman's funeral in the village emphasizes and

devotes to ‘cleansing’ the body and spirit. In other words, women’s bodies are considered contaminated. I guess we extracted some keywords from here to answer the previous question: inferiority and contamination.

Speaking more concretely, within a discipline, when a woman is applying the rudimentary methodology for her study (in my case, conducting the ethnography, doing the interviews, and talking to my informants), we cannot avoid the additional emotional and psychological labor involved; and how can we imagine when women enter this life without the identity of a researcher, living a life being merely a woman, what discomforts and stresses will they have to go through and process?

Returning to the previous situation, under a specific cultural environment, the cost of being ‘her’ is to lose the identity and become a ‘him’. The strategy of being inoffensive strips away gender attributes. But, if we combine the two situations, ‘she’ will not make it as ‘him’. Furthermore, from my perspective as an ethnographer, I know that it is unnecessary to be ‘him’ in this specific case to collect the necessary data. However, arguably, the female attributes made it easier for me, in a sense, to collect data. Despite the awkwardness and insecurities, I managed to interview my informants by being ‘her’. But that’s not to say that I don’t want a society where I wouldn’t have to fear or flee from a room full of shirtless men. On the contrary, I wish

that I could do ethnography by being completely ‘her’. I wish to carry out the reflective process and data analysis with confidence in terms of quantity and quality of such information. I’m happy to be ‘her’, but I want to be happier, more comfortable, and less exhausted.

Going back to personal history, I think literature has played a significant role for me to arrive where I am now. Being born and raised in a remote village in a less-known city does not deny the access to abundant international materials. Studying two languages also opened doors for me to explore my professional life. The transition from a girl hoping to be a housewife to a woman hoping to study ethnicities and funerals has taken a long time. The path has been exhausting, but it is possible. The façade of being a Chinese woman is marked by Confucianism, hierarchy, etc. However, the other facade is the continuous exploration of potentials, knowledge, and skills, the continuous struggle towards breaking the stereotypes and inequalities that impose so much emotional and psychological weight on us as women.

NOTE

1. M8 is the manifestation on the international women’s day, March 8th.

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