

## Chapter 2

# Institutionalization and Resistance: A Qualitative Study of the Daily Life of Female Chinese Scholars During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Cheng, H. (2022). Institutionalization and resistance: A qualitative study of the daily life of female Chinese scholars during the COVID-19 pandemic. In M. Wu (Ed.), *Moral education during the global pandemic* (pp. 27–48). The Asia-Pacific Network for Moral Education. [https://doi.org/10.978.98876579/03.ch\\_002](https://doi.org/10.978.98876579/03.ch_002)

### ABSTRACT

The traditional life of Chinese scholars is characterized by spiritual abundance and inner peace amidst a simple material life, but today's scholars face challenges in their daily life under the “academic tournament” system. Based on the critical theory of daily life, the author describes the spatial and temporal structure of the daily life of female scholars, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, determined through a qualitative study of the daily life of six female professors in humanities and social sciences departments at a Chinese 211-project university. The professors describe the puritanical lifestyle of female scholars and reveal their own experiences of struggling between sinking and advancing, while the author explores the network of relationships between the genders and multiple relationships, and describes subjectivity under the institutional social structure. The author further proposes strategies for female scholars to apply in everyday life aimed at achieving liberation: resistance in collaboration, adoption of an integrated whole-person perspective, and creation of a community of meaning.

**KEYWORDS:** female scholar, daily life, subjectivity, relationship, critical theory

Chinese education has made great strides in promoting equal access to education for men and women, and the number of women entering higher education has skyrocketed. Data from China's Ministry of Education show that in 2019, there were 1,225,310 faculty members in China's general undergraduate institutions, of which 86,040 were female, accounting for 53.97% of the total number of full-time lecturers (Ministry of Education, 2020, as cited in Guan, 2020). The Global Gender Gap Report 2020 documents that China is close to the level of developed countries in terms of gender equality in educational achievement, yet there are still significant gender gaps in economic income and political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2020). University teachers, especially those in key universities, such as those designated as World Class Universities, 985 universities or 211 project universities are seen as the intellectual elite and belong to the middle class based on social stratification. Among this elite, female university teachers are the main representatives of female scholars, and their living conditions can reflect the state of gender equality in intellectual and academic circles. This paper focuses on the daily life of female scholars in China during a segment of the COVID-19 pandemic, from January 2020 to January 2021, as revealed through the application of qualitative research methods to their experiences of survival. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the understanding of gender equality in higher education.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DAILY LIFE OF SCHOLARS**

The daily life of scholars has distinctive professional characteristics. On the one hand, they have relative time autonomy, setting their own long-term goals and arranging their own daily affairs; on the other hand, their habits of regularity, cyclicity, and planning create a relatively fixed pattern of daily life. The most well-known of these patterns in history is the daily life of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Modern scholars, with their three main tasks of teaching, research, and social service, have to some extent departed from the very strict self-disciplined lifestyle of Kant. However, Kant's life still embodies the most central elements of the modern humanities scholar's daily life—simplicity, a focus on work (teaching, thinking, and writing), maintaining contact with others, maintaining harmony with the self, and taking care of one's body. The daily life of current scholars still maintains a certain

degree of distance from and transcends the temptation of the many material attractions in the outside world, a certain calm detachment from the hustle and bustle of various fashionable trends, and even a gesture of voluntary exile and oblivion.

## **THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SCHOLAR'S DAILY LIFE**

Since 2000, as the development of higher education in China has been driven by an increasingly strong motivation to catch up with the world's top universities, the quiet and autonomous life of academics has been disrupted by the ever more rigorous assessment standards for faculty performance in higher education. The worldwide competition between nations to become the most powerful in multiple domains continues to demand new knowledge, and higher education institutions are under constant pressure from the Ministry of Education in China to strengthen and raise the evaluation scores of the university faculty members' research enough to justify promotions and salary increases. This trend is known as the "academic tournament" system. It puts university teachers under the constant pressure of quantitative evaluation of their work and requires them to apply for research grants and publish their results in peer-reviewed journals. The higher the stature of the university, the greater the pressure. Knowledge of one's field, academic journal publications, disciplines, subjects, titles, and so forth, are all ranked by the evaluation system and given different scores and weights.

## **CHALLENGES FOR FEMALE UNIVERSITY TEACHERS**

Although the gender pattern of Chinese families has undergone great changes and the status of men and women tends to be equal, the traditional pattern of "men heads the society and women head the family" still has great influence in China. Young female university teachers usually wait to have children until after they get their Associate Professor title. Also, women's commitment to their family reduces their motivation to pursue administrative promotions (Zhou, 2016). The male-dominated academic circles reduce the opportunities for female participation and promotion. In 2006, a survey of the presidents of 1,792 China's colleges and universities found that 95.5% of them were men and only 4.5% were women (Tao, 2016). The average age at promotion to Full Professor was 44.8 years for the female

teachers and 40.3 years for the males (Yue, 2020). Thus, although more than half the teaching personnel in colleges and universities are women, men are still at the center and occupy the great majority of high-level administrative positions in management and scientific research, while women are at the margins and tend to occupy lower-level positions. These results indicate significant gender segregation, especially in colleges and universities with a strong science and technology focus.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A university is an institutionalized site for learning. Foucault criticized schools for their persistent disciplining of students through spatial separation, hierarchical surveillance, normative rulings, inspections, and requirement of written reports (Foucault, 1975/1999, pp. 194–212). The personal life of the scholar has been inevitably permeated by the institutionalized features of school life, with an emphasis on instrumental rationality, compliance with rules, obedience to authority, and goal-orientation. Personal life is relatively uniform and little individualized.

## CRITICISM OF THE DAILY LIFE OF SCHOLARS

Heidegger argues that daily life is a field of total alienation: “We read, see, and judge about literature and art as they [emphasis added] see and judge; likewise, we shrink back from the ‘great mass’ as they shrink back; we find ‘shocking’ what they [emphasis added] find shocking. The ‘they,’ which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness” (Heidegger, 1962/1967, p. 127/164). The common man is in a state of mediocre averaging: “The they [emphasis added] . . . is the ‘nobody’ [emphasis added] to whom every Dasein has already surrendered itself in Being-among-one-other [Untereinandersein]” (Heidegger, 1962/1967, pp. 128/165–164). Berger and Luckmann (2019) give the reality of everyday life a special supremacy over other realities. They argue that everyday life dominates one’s consciousness in the most comprehensive, most urgent, and most intense way, characterized by a focus on the here and now. It is impossible to ignore it: The reality of everyday life forces the individual to be fully engaged with it. Other types of reality exist only in enclaves of limited significance, fully wrapped up in the reality of everyday life, to which people return when necessary, as if from a

long journey (Berger & Luckmann, 2019, pp. 25-26). Lefebvre (1971), a well-known representative of the critical theory of everyday life, states that daily life cannot be regarded as a mere “non-philosophical” or “non-truth” existence; both philosophy alone and daily life alone have their limitations, the former is “truth without reality,” the latter is “reality without truth,” and only the combination of the two can offset their respective limitations. Therefore, a critical philosophy of everyday life in the modern world should be developed, “attempt a philosophical inventory and analysis of everyday life that will expose its ambiguities-its baseness and exuberance, its poverty and fruitfulness-and by these unorthodox means release the creative energies that are an integral part of it” (Lefebvre, 1971 pp. 13). The daily life of scholars is also at risk of alienation, due to the influence of technocracy and consumerism; the life of scholars is both repetitive and monotonous because of the need to handle daily chores and meet assessment requirements, yet it also opens up a wealth of opportunities.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study focused on scholars’ daily lifestyle during the worst stage of the COVID-19 pandemic (from January to April 2020) and reveals new information about the changes that occurred in this lifestyle during a period of stability in the pandemic (from April 2020 to the end of the year). Due to the research-oriented emphasis of the paper-evaluation system for inclusion in the Science Citation Index, scholars in traditional humanities and social science disciplines are at a disadvantage in their university’s evaluation system. They also feel more pressure to conform to China’s long-standing utilitarian academic tradition, which emphasizes science over the humanities. Female scholars in humanities and social science, therefore, are doubly disadvantaged, because of their discipline and their gender. The paper consists primarily of the results of qualitative research on female scholars in university humanities and social science departments, describing their vivid daily life stories and typical daily living patterns during the pandemic, while exposing the powerful conflicts in their daily life and exploring their path to self-liberation, breaking through gender stereotypes and achieving a well-rounded, holistic life.

The paper describes a case study of University A, a comprehensive university directly under the Ministry of Education. It is a 211 project university, a high-stature

Chinese university (second tier) that has ranked about 50th of among universities for many years. University A is located in central China, and its management level and development status are at the norm for high-stature Chinese universities. It has 1,797 full-time faculty members, more than half of whom are female, and 550 professors, 122 of whom are female (22.19%). National data from 2009 show that there was no significant difference between men and women in Chinese universities in the number having an intermediate title<sup>1</sup>, with the largest gender gap being in Full Professor titles, of which women account for only 25.68%. University A is below the national average in terms of the percentage of women holding the title of full professor. Although like other universities, University A does not have a low percentage of female faculty members, men still dominate the positions of power in the academic and administrative sectors.

Six female professors from University A were selected for this study by both convenience and purposive sampling methods. Becoming a professor is the goal of every young university teacher; however, only a small number of excellent and lucky women can become professors. A study focusing on female professors can provide a perspective on the ecological environment of women's professional development in Chinese higher education as a whole. The criteria for selecting the participants for this study were (a) having a doctoral degree and (b) supervising doctoral dissertations (doctoral supervision responsibility is seen as an important indicator of professional development in Chinese higher education). Some studies reveal that female university teachers born in the 1940s and 1950s regard an academic career as “sacred labor,” a role in which they see themselves more as society builders than as women, and gender identity is completely ignored. Female teachers born in the 1960s and 1970s endure many conflicts and contradictions in forming their gender identity (Wang, 2011). The present study examined female Full Professors in humanities and social sciences at University A. They ranged in age from 40 to 55, and thus most were born in the late 1960s and 1970s. Their disciplines are education, economics, and literature, all relatively prominent at University A. I know all six professors and have interacted with them to a greater or lesser extent in my work. I interviewed each of them once or

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<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, the titles of teachers in Chinese universities are divided into four levels from low to high: Assistant Professor, Lecturer, Associate Professor, and Full Professor. Assistant Professor and Lecturer are intermediate titles, whereas Associate Professor and Full Professor are senior titles.

twice and kept in touch online to ask them some follow-up questions. I also work at a nearby university and know University A well enough to understand the context of their statements.

**Table 1**

Participant Profiles From the Interviews

Code	Relevant information
C	Born in 1975; specializes in education; named a professor in 2013; child is now a minor.
H	Born in 1968; specializes in literature theory; named a professor in 2009; child is now an adult.
S	Born in 1972; specializes in economics; named a professor in 2012; child is now an adult.
X	Born in 1969; specializes in education; named a professor in 2018; child is now a minor.
Y	Born in 1970; specializes in education; named a professor in 2009; child is now an adult.
Z	Born in 1970; specializes in education; named a professor in 2014; child is now an adult.

## DAILY LIFE DURING THE PANDEMIC

With the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019, the Chinese government was forced to adopt a city shutdown strategy and daily life was put on hold. Almost everything was temporarily halted except coping with the daily necessities of life. The year 2020, when the pandemic was most pronounced, can be divided into four periods: the initial period of Wuhan closure (late January–mid-February), the period of online classes (March–early April), the period when the ban was lifted (early April–late May), and the period of resumption of routine life (June).

## THE FOUR STAGES OF THE PANDEMIC

The shutdown of Wuhan came in the earliest stage. The decision to seal the city was so sudden that the people of Wuhan were in a state of great panic due to the lack of supplies and information. They were forced to be confined to their homes, following the news of the progress of the pandemic online every day, hearing about

the deaths of people around them, and panicking even when they pressed the elevator button. Of the six professors interviewed, two (Professors X and Y) mentioned the lack of supplies. During these difficult times, Professor X relied on phone calls with a student every afternoon to get through her predicament, while Professor Y walked around her house every day.

There was no toilet paper and a shortage of everything. For more than 20 days, there were no eggs or meat. Worrying about what to eat every day. Lost more than 10 pounds in a few dozen days. I didn't dare to go downstairs.

It's too hard to fight all this at home alone, and you need to resort to the group for warmth. Call a student or a friend every day, call a PhD student after a master's degree, call a friend after a PhD student, not all at once, or there will be no phone calls to make the next day. (Professor X)

Although Professors H, S, and Z were also in Wuhan, they maintained their work habits and did not pay undue attention to the crisis. Professor C, who went to Kunming to reunite with her family for New Years, was forced to stay in Kunming. Although the risk of the infection in that area was low, she fell into a state of anxiety because she was not able to practice the work habits she had formed over the years and “could not even respond to a simple email.” The faculty work-information-exchange online group at University A suddenly went very quiet, with no messages for more than 10 days in a row. The various notifications for filing projects, filling out forms, and informing of university affairs and administrative requirements seemed to have come to a halt as well.

The second stage was online teaching. The Ministry of Education (2020, as cited in Guan, 2020) launched the “Study Must Not Stop” program, and classes became online in the primary and secondary schools as well as the universities. Normalization of the availability of living supplies and the start of online classes eased people's fears. Online classes brought some new experiences to teachers, and according to the narratives of five of the professors, their students were more active in discussions than they were in the live classes, because they did not experience the pressure and shyness



of speaking in public that they endured during live classes. However, in the primary and secondary schools, online classes did not go well. Professor C, whose son was in elementary school, was caught in the middle of parent-child conflicts over online classes, while Professor X strongly opposed the Ministry of Education's "school closure but learning continues" approach as well as the shift to online classes for elementary and middle school students.

In my opinion, how can I care about learning when I can't even care about my life? Life is more important than study. If we didn't have online classes, we would have our own arrangements to make food, play games and do experiments. Therefore, I don't care how much he can learn. After the online classes, my child's grades were awful, he failed many classes and his grades fell to the last few in the class. I was afraid that he wouldn't even be able to get into a high school.

(Professor X)

The third stage was lifting of the ban. The city of Wuhan was open again, but University A still required an access pass to enter the buildings. Faculty meetings, masters' enrollments, doctoral enrollments, and doctoral dissertation defenses all had to be conducted online. At the same time, a variety of cross-school and cross-region academic seminars sprang up, and because they were all conducted online, the convenience of participation was greatly enhanced and the audience was much larger. Due to the reduction of daily chores at University A, all six professors agreed that they were working more efficiently than usual.

In the fourth stage, routine life resumed. The gated barriers erected in various neighborhoods during the pandemic were finally removed. The gates of University A were open for its teachers, but still not for the rest of the population. At the end of June, online classes for all levels of students ended and schools entered the summer vacation phase. Everything returned to normal, except for people always wearing masks when going out. The gaps in information control and in clamping down on speech, which had opened up in response to people's outrage caused by the news blackout during the pandemic, were again closed. College and university faculty were notified that all papers about the pandemic had to be reviewed before they could be

published. By this time, the social networks of the colleges and universities were again flooded with information about inspections, evaluations, filling out of forms, and message flashing. Many of this information represented top-down requirements from the university.

## **INFLUENCE OF THE PANDEMIC ON DAILY LIFE**

The pandemic pressed the pause button on scholars' daily life, causing them to reflect on social issues and the value of life. After the pandemic ended, Professor X and Y confessed, "I have to slow down the pace of my work" and "living is most important." Value was also found in activities on which the professors had previously been reluctant to spend time, for example, cooking food, beautifying the room, or even taking on household chores.

Overall, the pandemic has reduced the academic output of female researchers (Vincent-Lamarre et al., 2020). The qualitative study also revealed that satisfying the needs of their child had a greater impact on the research activities of the professor if the child was not yet an adult. The pandemic also changed the parent-child relationships. For adult children at home, the pandemic made these relationships more harmonious. As Professor S said, "I found out that my child has a lot of ideas due to the epidemic, and I didn't communicate with him in depth before."

The pandemic has changed work habits, making people more accustomed to working from home. Working from home eliminates travel time to the office and is compatible with exercising. The pandemic increased the faculty's appreciation of the advantages of online learning and online seminars. According to Professor H, online lectures and scholarly exchanges greatly reduced travel time, and as a result she attended more than eight online academic conferences in July and August. The pandemic brought the more active scholars closer to their professional community.

The pandemic affected the way students and faculty communicated with each other, both positively and negatively. Professor C shifted from individual face-to-face mentoring of graduate students to group mentoring in online meetings. The latter were more frequent, more reliable, and less likely to be affected by faculty members' personal chores. Professor H, on the other hand, was forced to change her habit of

meeting with all graduate students for dinner every month. She “has not organized such events for the past year,” so she has had less face-to-face communication with her students.

Nonetheless, the impact of the pandemic on the daily life of Chinese scholars has been either temporary or minimal, especially for those who had already been used to working from home before the outbreak of the pandemic or had adult children. The pandemic caused a temporary change in scholars’ habits of daily life and ways of working; it was just a passing episode in their daily life. After the pandemic subsided, powerful forces likely reintegrated those scholars who had been derailed by the pandemic back into their institution.

## **DISCUSSION OF FEMALE SCHOLARS’ DAILY LIFE**

Some basic features of the daily life of female scholars are of a persistent nature. Most female scholars lead a simple life focused on their work. The interviews suggest that female scholars adopt a puritanical lifestyle characterized by strict self-discipline, struggles with striving and stagnating and lack of entertainment.

### **THE PURITANICAL LIFESTYLE**

Whether working from home or at the office, female academics have a disciplined lifestyle. They place a high value on saving time, and they adopt relatively strict measures to control and plan their time. Apart from their teaching duties, they must work on some holidays, and their so-called “freedom” is the permission they are given to choose for themselves when to work overtime. As professor S said: “Every Saturday, I work at the office. Some of my colleagues have to rush home to write a project application, and their family does not understand why.” Even though they have become professors and PhD supervisors and the pressure of external evaluation is relatively low, practicing the puritanical lifestyle at work has become a habit. This lifestyle is in stark contrast with the modern indulgent lifestyle wrapped up in consumerism.

The professors need “large chunks of time to sit and think and read quietly” and “more time to think without being distracted.” In the time they have at their disposal,

often on holidays, they devote the best part of the day—usually 3–4 hours in the morning—to thinking and writing; after lunch, they often take a 1–2-hour nap and wake up to continue their unfinished writing from the morning. After dinner, they relax, exercise, take a walk, chat, watch TV, and such., and then they do some less mentally demanding work (reading, preparing a lesson, or instructing students). This lifestyle, in essence, is consistent with the Kantian lifestyle, where the day is strictly divided into three segments. Unlike Kant, who felt the dynamism of real life in casual conversation, Chinese female scholars acquire a sense of social reality and human connection primarily through their domestic and child-rearing responsibilities. Their consciousness is constantly moving between the conceptual world represented by book knowledge and the everyday reality of the here and now, and they can quickly sit down at the computer table to continue writing a paper after completing their daily chores or compose an article in their brain while cooking dinner. During the workday, they have to switch their attention between teaching, research, and social service. They spend time teaching and preparing lessons, as well as attending many faculty meetings and engaging in university governance, inspections, and form-filling tasks assigned by the university. All this leaves only a few half-days for reflection, so they often feel they have very little time for research. In addition, working for five consecutive days leaves just one day for household chores such as shopping, cleaning, and doing laundry. Female professors with young children also have to help them with their homework.

When our participants were asked how female scholars can achieve career development in male-dominated academic circles, most replied that they rely mainly on their own continuous effort. Professors all noted that "The academic circle is relatively fair, as long as they can produce results, people still recognize them." In this struggle, especially during the difficult ages 30–45 when they work and raise young children at the same time, they must sacrifice personal hobbies and recreation, shop less, wear no makeup, travel less, rarely enjoy life, and even overstretch the body, simply to ensure that they maximize their time for work. Professor S talked about "My life [as] a two-point line, from home to school, with occasional trips to the governmental sector to do research." Professors C, X, and Y talked about exercising mainly by walking in the neighborhood or in the park. None of them go to the gym because it takes up too much time. They spend very little time on social media during

the day. Because of these struggles, they also need to sacrifice time with their children, and all six of them agreed that they regret not being able to devote more time to their child's development, despite their efforts to balance family and work.

## **SPACE AND BODY IMAGE IN DAILY LIFE**

The word “space” has a distinct meaning in feminism, defined as the ideal of “having a room of one’s own” by Woolf. This ideal has been realized by these six female professors. Professor S chose to work in the office: “I can’t concentrate at home, and though the office is often distracting during the day, I can still concentrate on my work at night.” Professor C has gone through the process of moving her workplace from the office to the home: “I always walk quickly, nearly run when I work at school and drink as little water as possible. I am more relaxed at home, and I can take a nap and have time to exercise.” Female academics who choose to work primarily in offices are more inclined to consciously separate or even create a sharp distinction between their professional and family lives. This professional-family dichotomy facilitates an overall increase in productivity, but further reduces the pleasure of life and increases alienation from their real self. The rift between professional and personal life is “an artificial boundary that separates us from ourselves and from knowledge of self and the world” (Miller, 1990, p. 172). In a sense, the home is a barrier to institutionalized power, protecting itself from this power. “It is particularly pleasant to enjoy working- alone time in my study, which is also my bedroom with my bookshelves, closet and bed” (Professor H). Women can think in this relatively relaxed setting at home, and it is a way for them to successfully return to themselves.

A woman’s body and image are under the gaze of a society dominated by male culture. In a consumer society, the standard of body aesthetics has been dominated by the various media such as advertising, magazines, talent shows, and television dramas. While the social media and consumer culture cause women to become dissatisfied with their body, they have a cure for this “imperfection”: a wide range of body-related treatments or beauty products, including cosmetic surgery (Wen, 2010). However, the puritanical lifestyle of female academics is quite different. Female scholars are less concerned with brands, rarely shop and wear makeup, and instead keep their faces

unadorned. Beauty salons and other standard features of modern life seem to be of no interest to them. They only pay attention to their clothes and makeup when they need to project their professional image. They have no desire for good food; instead, most female scholars are more vigilant about weight gain and moderating their diet, priorities that fit in with their culture of self-discipline.

## **SINKING INTO THE ROUTINE OF DAILY LIFE**

The lifestyle of female scholars is shaped by a long and institutionalized school life. When they were students in school, they were excellent, diligent, and hardworking; when they entered the workplace, they were dedicated, obedient, responsible, and eager to be recognized as teachers. However, this institutionalized life brings on depression and a loss of self-reflection.

When a woman enters the academic field, she actually uses her vivid and round[ed] life as a mortgage and a price. She will forget the bright scenery outside the window, and she needs to imprison herself in the chamber, in the endless up and down roll, suffering the kind of scorching that she is bound to experience in the spiritual field (Wang, 2011).

Academic women are concerned primarily with professional development and have no time or opportunity to focus on the public sphere and their real self; they are caught in their own war against themselves, seeking perfection but also suffering from self-doubt and a fear of “sinking.” This is not a real sinking or degradation, but a weakness of will, a lack of self-confidence, or frustration. They fear that they may lose strict self-control over their own life, abandon their dedication to living up to professional ideals, stop thinking deeply, and bring their professional development to a standstill; they become ordinary people, wives, and mothers, lost in the world, falling into the swamp of a trivial and repetitive daily routine.

A few of the professors are very pessimistic and disappointed with the whole education system. When she was young, Professor X was committed to her academic aspirations, had two post-doctoral research appointments, and used to sit in on the philosophy class at another renowned university nearby for almost 10 years, entirely

because of her interest in the subject matter. For some reason, however, she is now somewhat disillusioned.

The academic plutocracy, the academic jungle, and the connections in academic circles are not academic freedom in the full sense of the word. What status do we have? We are the front-line workers. Who listens to what you say? Who will read what you write? What is the meaning and value of what you do? I'm a degenerate, I'm not motivated anymore. In the past, the motivation of work was that I had to get the Professor title, regardless of whether the system was reasonable or not, and I had to make it desperately. After that, what should support our professional development is the real love for research. But the evaluation system is so bad that I don't want to do it anymore. I publish fewer articles now, and I don't want to compete with young people for resources. If there is no originality, if there is no value, do the results make sense? . . . The peak of my originality has passed, and now I have no passion or motivation. I have no environment to stimulate my thinking, no academic masters around me, and the academic resources to feed my thinking have also dried up.

(Professor X)

However, most academics remain focused on professional advancement. In order to resist the pressure of sinking, female scholars struggle with their environment and themselves. Professor C, who put work above family before the pandemic, now takes a different tack. She began to stray from the university scene and return more to her old way of life. She discovered the beauty of poetry while sipping tea, decorated her room, and tended to her flowers. Changes in lifestyle and work habits allow scholars to establish some kind of connection with social reality beyond the pages of books, a connection that gives them a sense of reality and an immediate and visible sense of accomplishment. At the same time, however, Professor C has been careful not to take up too much time with daily chores and to avoid getting caught up in the minutiae of life.

## DAILY LIFE IN MULTIPLE RELATIONSHIPS

The daily life and work of female scholars are in constant conflict. The conflict between family and work is the main problem, and the secondary problem is the conflict between women and men. The conflict between family and work is caused mainly by the rigid division of social roles. In reality, solving family problems requires the sharing of responsibilities between husband and wife and the construction of a strong family social-support system. The interviews revealed that five of the six female scholars had availed themselves of long-term help (for 3–15 years) from their parents or sisters for the completion of household chores; hiring a nanny in the market was almost always the last resort. Besides, they all chose to have only one child. In the workplace, gender conflicts persist. Most female scholars believe that University A still practices gender discrimination in the evaluation of titles, projects, and awards. “It is impossible for us to go drinking, play mahjong, basketball or other kinds of ball games with leaders,” said Professor S. “Men socialize differently, and it’s impossible for us to fit in,” complained Professor Y. The masculine nature of academic work forces women toward self-alienation (Miller, 1983). Chinese female scholars have to resort to a de-gendered consciousness and behavior to develop themselves. They must gain recognition by pursuing a gender-neutral image, believing that “there is no difference between women and men, and that female scholars can do as well as male scholars” and downplaying gender consciousness. Under the pressure of such de-gendering, individual female scholars have further internalized the stereotypes that men and mainstream society have about female scholars, believing that “women are strong in execution, but not as good as men in academic innovation and originality. As a PhD supervisor myself, I also prefer to recruit male PhDs” (Professor S). As a result, female academics are likely to become unconscious reproducers of unequal social gender structures.

More resistance comes in restoring interpersonal connections. The research evaluation system makes teachers emphasize research over teaching, yet for teachers, especially female teachers, harmonious interpersonal relationships are important for alleviating their stress. Partnerships with spouses, collaborative parenting and fulfilling family responsibilities, maintaining good parent-child relationships, being there for their children’s growth and becoming their friend, maintaining good



teacher-student relationships while guiding and growing with one's students, are all important in the daily life of female scholars. In addition, participation in professional groups and research synergy with colleagues prevent inertia and stagnation. Professor C, H and S, are affiliated with a professional community, while the other female scholars work more independently and in solitude.

## **SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND SELF-REFLECTION IN DAILY LIFE**

The social structure, consisting of social activities and social relations, explains how citizens actually live as such. Its most important components are status, roles, groups, and institutions. The education system and the university, both of which are embodied in the social structure, provide the established institutional environment for the survival and development of each scholar. This environment is difficult to change and shake by the power of individuals alone. The institutionalization of higher education, ideological control, and rigidity of evaluation make this structure increasingly unfriendly to a scholar's autonomy. Hidden discrimination, social isolation, and stereotyping make the evolution of female scholars difficult.

Some studies have shown that each female teacher has her own fragmented coping strategies for loosening and reversing structural social, economic, and gender forces (Ding, 2014). For Chinese female scholars, self-reflection manifests mainly as self-perception, that is, not measuring the value of one's work by extrinsic criteria (e.g., honors or titles). Their work is driven primarily by an intrinsic achievement motive, "doing your own thing." They do not want to be the "big fish" in their own profession but are driven by their inner sense of responsibility and mission to keep striving. Professor S said that "The sense of responsibility to investigate and solve the problems in the economic and social development of China and the sense of reverence for the profession" are the underlying motivations that inspire her to keep devoting herself to her profession. Most of the six professors consider themselves to be scholars, with academic research as their vocation and use the ideal of "the scholar" to redefine themselves within the institutionalized structure and to dissolve the anonymity of women in the system.

Do you consider yourself a scholar? (interviewer)

I didn't think so before, but now I consider myself a scholar. A scholar is different from a college teacher, who is a professional. A scholar should have an independent mind, an internal drive to research freely, and be someone who enjoys the joy of research. (Professor S)

I consider myself a scholar. Scholars are different from experts. The latter has a lot of experience, while a scholar has to have systematic knowledge. (Professor Y)

I have secretly made up my mind to become a scholar in these years. Not to focus on the external environment, not to compete for honors, but to focus more on teaching and professional development. (Professor C)

At a deeper level, the conflict between family and work reflects the crisis that women encounter in dealing with the dilemma of self and others, body and mind, material and spiritual. It pushes women to criticize the simple labeling of “independent woman” and “good wife and mother,” and to reflect on “who am I?,” “what can I do?” and “what should I do?” Female scholars have to reflect on these questions, reshape the perception of themselves and their ideals, and rise up in unfavorable situations to achieve self-development. Female scholars must seek a middle ground between two contradictory goals and find a way out at the crossroad between them: intimacy and distance, rationality and emotion, individual and community interests, external institutions and spiritual growth. If, through sustained reflection and struggle, a balance can be struck between these contradictory goals; and alienation, bitterness, and the experience of sinking can be overcome: women can attain a more unique and powerful experience of self.

## **DAILY LIFE STRATEGIES TOWARD LIBERATION**

It is clear from this study that the growth of female scholars requires both conformity to institutions and de-institutionalization, freeing themselves from the shackles of the objectification of women. The unexpected pandemic brought about a disruption of institutionalized life, allowing individuals to reflect on this

institutionalized life and offering the possibility of stepping away from the overwhelming power of the forces controlling it.

## **RESISTANCE THROUGH COOPERATION**

After all, female scholars are not male scholars, and to require female scholars to be masculine creates a distraction and alienation from their own personal life. Further, if female scholars internalize male-dominated thinking, they further deprive themselves and their female students of development opportunities. Therefore, female scholars must strengthen their gender awareness, be wary of gender hegemony and gender violence, resist the false belief expressed by quite a few men that “Women don't achieve what men do, mainly because they do not work hard enough themselves.” They must enhance their critical thinking about society and culture, abandon the masculine view that objectifies women, and come to have a voice. But on the other hand, women need to work with the current system, not against it, in order to achieve further development.

## **AN INTEGRATED, WHOLE-PERSON PERSPECTIVE**

Reconstructing a balanced, de-institutionalized life with an integrated, holistic perspective is an important way to achieve female emancipation. The de-institutionalized life of female scholars requires the support of relatively autonomous work schedules, space, and interpersonal relationships; it manifests in the balancing of multiple pairs of pursuits: daily life and spiritual freedom, professional development and family harmony, personal development and professional community, research and teaching.

Personal breakthroughs happen in women's daily life, repeatedly, and without the fervor generated by social support; little by little, women rip apart the structural barriers to a satisfying daily life. The perspective of the whole person should permeate the family life and professional life of women: The female scholar does not see students as machines for publishing papers, but sees their development in terms of lifelong achievements and happiness; she does not believe that the value of a person depends only on the social wealth that person creates, but she firmly believes in the

value of morality and dignity. Female scholars must look inward to seek their true self and live their life in a way that promotes inner wholeness.

## **CREATING MEANINGFUL COMMUNITIES**

The efforts of individuals to construct a de-institutionalized life are still easily frustrated. Therefore, attaining such a life requires institutional support. It is still the ideal of scholars to practice education in a way that aligns with the concept of the modern university and to establish an educational system that promotes academic freedom and democratic governance. Along with the institutional change there should be cultural change, specifically, transformation of the culture of individualism and factionalism currently prevailing in universities into a culture of cooperation and symbiosis. The way female scholars can do this is to establish multiple meaningful communities among themselves, deepen the understanding of their own identities, and strengthen their professional ties.

In due course, female scholars should start to participate in public life. The scholar's family can be a force for her liberation; even though the fact that family life is usually the main social dynamic within a family limits the attention female scholars can pay to the broader social reality and restricts their opportunities for reflection. Disconnection from the public sphere can cause the female scholar to withdraw into herself and take away her appreciation of the meaningfulness of her research. In reality, female scholars should be highly involved in the development of the academic community. The experience of sharing the teamwork between female scholars and their male colleagues, and collaborative research with other schools are important. Most importantly, female scholars' team-leadership skills are vital to their academic influence and the sustainability of their professional community.

## **CONCLUSION**

To sum up, this study confirms the conclusion of previous researchers, namely, that female scholars can gradually become important players in the social structure of their university only when they have available to them their own time, space, voice, relationships, and community collaborations. Undoubtedly, the few women who have struggled to become outstanding scholars can serve as role models for young female

teachers and are important inspirations for optimizing gender relations and improving higher education governance. Although this study has methodological limitations, it nevertheless offers some insights into the changing thinking and behavior of a small number of female academics at one specific point in time—the early stages of a pandemic. In this respect it makes a small but important contribution to recognition of the need for further research on the circumstances of female scholars in China and other countries.

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