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# Gender Socialization in Chinese Schools: Teachers, Children and Gender Roles

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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# **Gender Socialization in Chinese Schools: Teachers, Children and Gender Roles**

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## Table of Contents

Abstract -----	iii
Acknowledgements -----	iv
Introduction -----	1
<i>Research questions</i> -----	1
<i>Context and literature review</i> -----	3
Methods -----	7
<i>Data collection</i> -----	7
<i>Cultural considerations</i> -----	7
<i>Participant demographics</i> -----	8
<i>Research limitations</i> -----	9
<i>Sample interview questions for teachers</i> -----	10
Results -----	11
<i>Gender differences identified by teachers</i> -----	11
<i>Shallow gender-blind ideology</i> -----	14
<i>Teaching gendered behavior</i> -----	16
<i>Observation at private elementary school</i> -----	18
<i>Alternative narratives</i> -----	23
Conclusions -----	24
Recommendations for further study -----	26
Works Cited -----	27

### **Abstract**

As the first major social environment most children will encounter outside the family, school plays a pivotal role in the socialization of gender roles for young children. The aim of this research is to examine how young children learn and practice gender roles in Chinese school environments. In what ways do teachers and adults communicate messages about gender to children, and how do children receive and internalize these messages? What do teachers consciously intend to teach children about gender, and what do they unconsciously teach through their actions? Over the course of one month, I attended classes and observed teacher-student interactions during several visits to a recently established private elementary school. Additionally, I conducted formal and informal interviews with teachers, focusing on their beliefs about gender. Though teachers claimed to treat boys and girls equally in the classroom, teachers in fact held different expectations for children based on traditional gender stereotypes, creating a “hidden curriculum” of gender relations that children were expected to learn (Chen, 2010, p. 112). By speaking more frequently with boys in class, demanding quieter and calmer behavior from girls, and permitting more rowdiness and loudness from boys, teachers reinforce a model of gender in which boys can be active and girls must be passive.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

### *Research questions*

“Blue is for boys, and pink is for girls.” Most of the gender lessons children learn in school are not on any formal curriculum; rather, they are taught through small moments in casual everyday interaction. When a teacher tells a male student who stubbed his toe that he shouldn’t cry, or when a female student receives less attention and praise for good performance in math, or when children question and critique one another’s gender performance in clothing or style of playing – these informal interactions form the hidden curriculum of gender education. Children enter preschool with small or nonexistent gendered differences in behavior, but by kindergarten and first grade, they have learned to act and comport themselves completely differently (Martin, 1998, p.496). In the classroom, children learn how to become “boys” and “girls”.

This research uses a model of gender influenced by U.S. feminist scholarship and queer theory, viewing gender and sexuality as fluid and nonbinary and viewing cultural gender roles as socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Influenced by the work of prominent gender theorists such as Judith Butler and Michelle Foucault, I follow C.J. Pascoe’s example in considering masculinity and femininity as “a variety of practices and discourses that can be mobilized and applied to both boys and girls.” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 21). Because gender is a social activity, it must be constantly interpreted and performed so that both observers and the performer themselves can make sense of the performer’s gender identity. Additionally, as gender roles are not innate but learned, children must acquire and practice their own understanding of gender roles. This learning and practice is lifelong, but quite a bit of it takes place during early schooling, which is often children’s first major social environment outside the family. As a result, kindergartens and elementary schools are a valuable site for studying children’s gender practices.

However, masculine and feminine roles and practices only make sense in the context of what Judith Butler calls “the heterosexual matrix.” (Butler, 1990, p. 151). The heterosexual matrix is the combination of social systems of power that create gendered bodies, practices, and desires and declare this to be the natural order of things. Through the heterosexual matrix, masculinity and femininity are constructed as opposites that must be kept separate but must also exist in relation to one another – that is, an individual must embody only traits of their own gender, which must be either male or female and must align with the gender assigned to their body at birth, and they must be sexually and romantically attracted exclusively to members of the other gender. Not only are men and women expected to act in certain ways as individuals, they are also supposed to relate to one another in specific ways, the most important of which is heterosexual marriage and childrearing. This system operates coercively to empower men, while disempowering women and anyone who does not fit into or obey its strictures. Consequently, in studying individuals’ gender behavior, it is important to consider gender identities in the context of wider systems of power (Blaise, 2005, p.87).

Based on one month observing various Chinese school settings and conducting interviews with teachers and parents, this paper asks the following primary questions:

- How do children learn and practice gender in Chinese school environments?
- How are heterosexuality and heterosexual gender relations visible in the classroom?
- What do teachers’ words and actions teach children about gender roles, and how does this differ from what teachers say they want to teach?

*Context and Literature Review*

Considerable research has been done on the gender socialization of young children in U.S. preschools and kindergartens. Generally, researchers have found that these years are crucial to children's formation and understanding of gender identity and gender differentiation (Martin, 1998; Blakemore, 2003; Blaise, 2005). During this time, children learn from their teachers and from their classmates how boys and girls are expected to act, and their behavior changes dramatically to accommodate these expectations. Boys' and girls' bodies are managed and disciplined differently, so that boys learn to become loud, active, and expansive while girls learn to become quiet, passive, and reserved. These differences in bodily conduct are constructed "in ways that are so subtle and taken-for-granted that they come to feel and appear natural." (Martin, 1998, p.510). Children's gender practices do not originate in a vacuum – teachers treat boys and girls differently, interacting with boys far more than girls, becoming "the major agents who [perpetuate] gender stereotypes in the kindergartens." (Chen and Rao, 2011, p. 114).

Whether or not teachers intend to teach students about gender, their educational practices and interactions with students convey numerous messages about gender roles and how students ought to behave based on their gender. In "Gender Socialization in Chinese Kindergartens: Teachers' Contributions", Chen and Rao explore the hidden curriculum of gendered lessons teachers implement in the classroom through everyday actions, interpreting their findings with reference to modern Western feminist scholarship and traditional Chinese gender roles. Tallying and coding interactions between teachers and students, they found that teachers consistently devoted more time and attention to boys than to girls. Overall, teachers interacted with boys 2.16 times as often as they interacted with girls; additionally, a higher percentage of teachers' interactions with boys were negative in nature (Chen, 2010, p. 108). These findings are

supported by K. Martin's research in U.S. preschools, which found that 65 percent of direct bodily instructions – commands about physical actions or posture – were directed at boys, with only 26 percent directed at girls and 9 percent directed at mixed groups. Additionally, most instructions to boys were undirected requests to stop doing something, while girls were usually directly told to take certain actions. This increased attention did not result in more disciplined behavior from boys – boys obeyed only 48 percent of the time, while girls obeyed 80 percent of the time (Martin, 1998, p. 505).

Chen and Rao found that girls and boys were held to significantly different standards of behavior – while boys were expected to be rowdy and disruptive and were more often criticized for disruptive behavior, girls were expected to govern themselves without teacher management. Additionally, boys' and girls' classroom behavior was managed differently – when boys failed to pay attention in class, the teacher would often demand their attention, whereas girls' inattentiveness was noticed but ignored (Chen, 2010, p. 111). In this way, teachers displayed a higher commitment to boys' education. Teachers often separated the classroom by gender for various activities, encouraging competition between boys and girls in various activities such as lining up to leave class. The boys' group usually received preferential treatment without any stated reason, with the girls usually going second and having to wait until the boys were finished, except in specific situations when the girls were allowed to go first because the boys had misbehaved (Chen, 2010, p. 112). This aligns with traditional Chinese cultural values that value boys first and consider girls and women primarily as homemakers. Though teachers at these kindergartens did not explicitly teach male superiority, Chen and Rao found that their prioritization of boys at every opportunity taught children to internalize and accept male privilege as an organizing principle of society. Overall, “[teachers’] common and typical

contributions to gender socialization of Chinese children included gendering the kindergarten teaching profession, being role models for girls, being the authority in the teacher-directed kindergarten classrooms, using gender labels extensively and functionally with the gendered kindergarten routines, practicing differential attention, and granting male privilege.” (Chen, 2010, p. 114).

However, it would be a mistake to view children as passive recipients of socialization – children are active participants in their growing understanding of gender and identity, sometimes enacting and sometimes resisting gendered expectations. Children constantly negotiate and interpret their own understanding of how boys and girls are supposed to act based on their own understanding of which category they are expected to fall into. As children perform their own masculinities and femininities, they contribute to or resist an overarching heterosexual order that defines their gendered roles (Blaise, 2005, p. 104). Children interact with “boy” and “girl” roles in complex ways – sometimes questioning or challenging them, and at other times practicing and enforcing them with other children.

Some gender norms, such as who should aspire to be a doctor or nurse, can be permissibly violated and are viewed as nonserious, while gender norms relating to identity, such as clothing choices, are viewed as moral tenets that cannot be acceptably violated (Blakemore, 2003, p. 419). For the most part, it is considered more acceptable for girls to act like boys than for boys to act like girls. While girls can wear masculine clothes, boys are expected to act disgusted at the idea of a boy wearing makeup, wearing the color pink, or engaging in feminine activities such as playing dress-up (Blaise, 2005, p. 97). Even when engaging in masculine practices, however, girls still are not considered successfully masculine; they remain forcibly associated with femininity. (Blaise, 2005, p. 104).

Because femininity is devalued and masculinity is valorized, although girls are usually expected to participate in feminine activities, it is usually acceptable for girls to engage in masculine activities. Girls' masculine conduct may be remarked upon, but as long as it remains within certain bounds, it is unthreatening to the social order and still upholds the narrative that masculinity is superior. It is generally much less accepted for boys to engage in feminine activities, as that throws larger systems of gender into question. Girls cannot avoid being associated with femininity, so although feminine behavior is valued less than masculine behavior, girls' feminine conduct is still considered natural and acceptable. However, if a boy chooses feminine behavior over masculine behavior and forsakes the masculinity that is supposedly his birthright, he disrupts the assumption that masculinity is always superior. As a result, feminine behavior in boys is usually penalized much more heavily than masculine behavior in girls. (Blakemore, 2003, p. 418).

Overall, boys are encouraged to be dominant and assertive, and to aggressively distance themselves from femininity whenever possible. U.S.-based research has found that boys are socially rewarded for embodying hegemonic masculinity and for maintaining a strict heterosexual gendered order (Blaise, 2005, p. 99). Girls, meanwhile, are expected to remain quiet and submissive, and though girls are less negatively judged for engaging in traditionally masculine activities than boys are for engaging in traditionally feminine activities, girls' success in masculine realms often goes unrecognized (Blaise, 2005, p. 104). Instead, girls can gain social capital by playing into emphasized femininity, positioning themselves as helpless and in need of others' assistance (Blaise, 2005, p. 94). Chen and Rao found that teachers support the creation of these gendered roles in Chinese kindergartens as they do in U.S. settings (Chen, 2010, p. 115).

## Methods

### *Data collection*

To gain a full understanding of participants' attitudes towards gender phenomena, I chose to structure this research around both group participant observation and individual interviews. In both observations and interviews, I sought qualitative data about attitudes towards gender and the influence of gender on behavior. Over the course of the month, I visited a private kindergarten, I attended classes and conducted participant observation at a recently established private elementary school, and I conducted interviews with eight teachers, one college professor, and one parent. For participant observation, I asked teachers if I could sit in on their classes and write about these interactions for my studies, and I took handwritten notes in a small notebook. For interviews, I brought in a list of prepared questions to start with and then adjusted the interview based on the informant's responses, usually asking for further details on relevant topics they mentioned in previous answers. Interviewees gave verbal consent to have their comments used for my paper. Interviews usually lasted roughly one hour. I recorded some, but not all, interviews on my phone, and took notes either on a laptop, on a smartphone, or handwritten in a notebook.

### *Cultural considerations*

Due to the sensitive nature of my topic, I thought carefully about how to phrase my questions and what tone to take during interviews and conversations. Following the advice of my program staff and academic advisors, I chose to frame my investigations not as "research" (研究) but rather as "studies" (学习). At the school where I conducted most of my participant observation, I usually began by telling informants that I was spending a month studying

children's education in China, mentioning that I was considering becoming a teacher myself, and if the conversation continued I would mention gender roles as one of several topics I was interested in studying. In interviews, I usually mentioned more directly that I was interested in studying differences between boys and girls in school. As a general rule, I attempted to use neutral phrasings when discussing gender. Because of the complicated nature of the topic, not to mention my own position as a foreign stranger, directly asking an informant if they believed boys should be prioritized over girls was unlikely to elicit a useful response except from those with the most explicitly traditional gender values. Instead, I found it most useful to ease into the topic by first asking general questions about classroom conduct and then moving to neutrally phrased questions about boys' and girls' classroom behavior and then about teachers' expectations for boys and girls. I wanted to be careful not to frame my questions as critical of the schools I was visiting, the Chinese education system, or Chinese society in general, so I only asked about flaws in these systems if an informant had already indicated dissatisfaction with them.

### *Participant demographics*

For participant observation, the bulk of my research took place at one small, recently established private elementary school, where I observed classes on several occasions and also attended a hiking field trip. The school was divided into first grade, second grade, and "older class", and most children were in either first or second grade, with a few young teenage boys making up the older class. Notably, only two of nearly twenty students at this school were female, while teachers were mostly female. Additionally, I visited a private kindergarten for one day, toured the campus, and spoke with a teacher, though I did not attend classes there. At that school, students appeared roughly evenly distributed along gender lines, and all teachers I saw were

female. As these were private schools with relatively expensive tuition, the students I observed were likely from more affluent families, on average, than most public school students, although I did not obtain specific income data to verify this assumption.

For interviews, I spoke mostly with teachers, who taught at six different schools. Out of the eight teachers I interviewed, one taught calligraphy and Chinese culture at the private elementary school where I conducted most of my observation, two taught English at that private elementary school, one taught at the private kindergarten I visited, one taught physical education and model airplane construction at a mid-tier public elementary school, one led a 55-student class and taught Chinese literature at a mid-tier public elementary school, one taught mental health and sexual education at an elite public experimental middle school, and one currently worked as a private English tutor but had previously taught English in a public middle school. I also interviewed one college professor of women's studies and one parent whose daughter attended the private elementary school. The public-school physical education teacher and one of the private-school English teachers were male, but all other interview subjects were female.

### *Research Limitations*

As a foreigner with a limited command of Mandarin Chinese and only one month to conduct research, my research sites were chosen for convenience and ease of access rather than to represent all of mainstream Chinese education. I was able to conduct interviews with public school teachers, but I was not able to observe classes at public schools due to stringent security requirements and a lack of social connections that might have helped me gain access. Instead, most of my research was conducted at the private elementary school where I attended classes and at the private kindergarten I visited, and as such I mainly interacted with relatively well-off students in Western-influenced school environments that did not resemble the crowded and

work-intensive Chinese public education system. The public school teachers I interviewed stressed that their schools were not necessarily representative of all Chinese public schools – their schools came from the middle and upper tiers of Chinese public education, with more resources, smaller class sizes, and more affluent students than lower-tier schools. As a result, the data I gathered may be more reflective of wealthier children’s experiences than poorer children’s. This paper should not be mistaken for a comprehensive overview of gender attitudes in all Chinese educational settings, but rather should be read as a case study of how students and teachers interacted with gender roles and practices in specific research sites.

Additionally, it should be noted that interviews were conducted across a language barrier, as for all interviews either I was speaking Chinese as a second language or my informants were speaking English as a second language. Though I had translation help, it is possible that I misinterpreted some statements. I tried to mitigate this concern by repeating informants’ statements back to them in their own words to confirm that I had understood what they said.

*Sample interview questions for teachers*

Why did you decide to become a teacher?

How do most people in society think of teachers?

Is it true that most teachers are women, and if so, do you think there is a reason for this?

If a man were to become a kindergarten teacher, what would people think of him?

Do you notice differences between boys’ and girls’ behavior in your classes?

Are there differences between how often and how boys and girls misbehave in class?

How do you respond when a student misbehaves?

Do you respond differently when a boy or a girl misbehaves in the same way?

Do you think that (previously discussed) differences in boys' and girls' behavior are natural, or do you think they are influenced by society?

Do you have particular different expectations for boys and girls? If so, what are they?

Do you treat boys and girls differently in your classroom? If so, why and in what ways?

In your class and in your school, are there subjects that boys study faster or better? Are there subjects that girls study faster or better?

Do you think that boys and girls receive different treatment at home from their parents?

If a boy engaged in traditionally feminine activities, how would his fellow students react, and what would you think? What if a girl engaged in traditionally masculine activities?

## **Results**

### *Gender differences identified by teachers*

“Most of the girls tend to be more quiet, but sometimes they learn a little not as fast as boys. Some boys seem really spoiled and noisy, but sometimes they learn faster.” – Teacher Zhu

Most teachers I interviewed agreed that boys and girls were different in certain ways. Specifically, boys were described as noisier, rowdier, and less obedient, while girls were described as quieter and more obedient. Boys were also identified as quicker learners, more athletic, and less likely to listen in class. Generally, when asked about gender differences, teachers provided more examples of boys' behavior than of girls' behavior.

The teachers I spoke with were usually fairly willing to give examples of gender differences they noticed in their classes. Teacher Zhu claimed that boys in her English classes

were more creative and usually learned faster than girls, particularly in certain subjects – boys were better at grammar, which Teacher Zhu interpreted as showing boys' naturally more logical nature. The male Teacher Li gave specific details from his model-airplanes class:

*When we make model airplanes and boats boys are better with mechanics and so on, how to use remote controls and make machines and so on, but they don't pay enough attention to details. At a national competition, female students won third place in the whole country, while male students' team didn't win anything because they didn't pay enough attention to details. When explaining how to use the remote controls, the boys get it after 5 minutes, but the girls are still frustrated after days. Ideally, genders would be equal, but in reality it's all not the same – girls can do things very well with small stuff, while boys are too sloppy and make coarse miniatures. There are exceptions, but not many and not enough to ignore the trends. – Teacher Li (male)*

The male Teacher Li attributed boys' quicker learning of airplane remote control skills to an innate characteristic, rather than to social factors – for example, Teacher Zhu's claim that boys spent much more time playing video games, which likely require the same type of skills as using a model airplane remote control. The female Teacher Li backed up the male Teacher Li's assertion that girls were better with details and Teacher Zhu's assertion that boys were more creative, saying that "For Chinese literature the girls have better handwriting because they pay attention to details, but boys tend to have more creative ideas about writing, and girls have more sentimental ideas while boys are more logical and rational."

For the most part, teachers identified gender boundaries as fairly rigid. When asked what would happen in their schools if a girl acted like a boy or a boy acted like a girl, teachers generally said that such interactions were fairly rare, but that it was more common and more

acceptable for girls to act like boys than for boys to act like girls. Some teachers felt it was important to enforce separate gender roles, like Teacher Ma, who said that she tried to teach girls not to be rowdy or noisy like boys. Others thought of gender separation more passively, like Teacher Zhu, who said that there wasn't anything wrong with children crossing gender boundaries, but that she would be curious what influence had caused a child to act differently.

*Boys like to talk about their games a lot, and girls like to talk about which male star they like a lot... better for girls to talk about games than for boys to talk about stars.*

*[Interviewer: What would the other children say if the boy was talking about the star?]*

*He must have a sister or something who let him learn that kind of thing, because boys don't care, they only care about their games, so he must get along with his female friends or have a sister or a cousin or something, not just learn on his own. [Interviewer: Would you also think it was weird]? I wouldn't really think that's weird, because there are a lot of them like that... wouldn't think it was a bad thing. [Interviewer: What would kids say about a girl who loves video games?] They would say good for you, and they would also think she has a male who taught her to like those things. – Teacher Zhu*

Here, Teacher Zhu accepts that children can cross gender boundaries, but still considers it an unusual exception to seemingly natural rules. A girl who likes video games is an oddity that needs explanation, while a boy who likes video games is normal and needs no explanation. Rather than setting explicit moral commandments for how boys and girls should act, Teacher Zhu simply expects that a certain form of behavior is natural and that exceptions should be questioned. In this way, she, and teachers like her, can maintain belief in traditional gender roles as normal and correct while still claiming to not care much about gender.

*Shallow gender-blind ideology*

“You’re interested in gender discrimination, right? But here we don’t have this discrimination. Society doesn’t have it.” – Teacher Ma

Both in these interviews and through their actions in the classroom, teachers expressed strong gendered beliefs about girls’ and boys’ personalities and how to handle them. Despite these clear differences in their views and treatment of boys and girls, however, teachers often claimed to hold gender-blind attitudes and maintain gender equality in their classrooms. In almost all of my teacher interviews, the interview subject insisted at first that they treated all children equally regardless of gender, but later in the interview spoke freely about how they felt boys and girls were different and should be handled differently in the classroom. These contrasting attitudes seemed to reflect conflicting values: on the one hand, an understanding of general gender equality and fairness as good things that should be promoted, and on the other hand, an understanding of specific gender differences as natural and inevitable.

Teachers’ uncertainty about how to reconcile these beliefs was reflected in their pro-equality rhetoric and reticence to discuss gender differences early in the conversation. As interviews progressed, however, teachers usually stopped mentioning general equality and became more willing to express specific opinions on how boys and girls were different. I believe that teachers were initially worried I would judge them as sexist, and so they were at first cautious about expressing opinions that might conflict with a general belief in gender equality. My position as a white American visitor conducting gender-based research likely exacerbated this caution. I believe that the conversational shift from equality-focused rhetoric to specific gendered beliefs occurred because teachers grew more confident that I would not judge their opinions and grew more comfortable discussing these topics.

Once teachers began to more openly discuss their thoughts about gender, they often said that though they wished things could be more equal, it was in fact necessary to treat boys and girls differently. The male Teacher Li explained that when he started teaching, he treated all students the same, but he quickly learned that this was not the best way to handle most situations.

*If you're not direct with boys they won't understand or won't care, so you must intimidate them. But if you're direct with girls, they'll be upset and either cry right then and there or cry inwardly. There are different ways of communicating with boys and girls. Even though they haven't done research on the subject, most teachers learn this from their own working experience – boys and girls have different tolerances for criticism, and sometimes with boys you have to criticize them more harshly to have any effect, whereas girls can be too sensitive. – Teacher Li (male)*

Here, the male Teacher Li provides an interesting example of opposition to an equality narrative. Although he originally attempted to ignore gender, once he noticed gendered differences in students' behavior, he felt that it was necessary to abandon his gender-blind attitude and adjust his teaching style to intentionally treat students differently based on gender.

Teacher Ma, who was particularly careful to maintain an equality-focused narrative, provided another fascinating example of the conflict between general ideas of equality and beliefs of natural gender difference. Asked if her school, which she had previously mentioned tried to teach children traditional Chinese models of ethical behavior, also taught children traditional gender roles, Teacher Ma replied: “There are not these rules about how girls and boys should be. We don't teach that girls should be a certain way and boys should be a certain way.” However, she followed this seemingly gender-blind principle with a claim that gendered rules of behavior were necessary because of biological differences, saying that “We do have ladies first,

because physically boys are stronger. Boys can lift two chairs, but for girls, lifting one chair is not easy. So we teach that boys must yield to girls.” To conclude, she returned to an equality-focused narrative by contradicting her previous statement: “In work, and education, we don’t have these gender roles; they have the same education.” Though Teacher Ma expressed belief in firm gender differences that ought to be taught and upheld in school, she frequently reiterated throughout the rest of the interview that modern society was equal and that gender discrimination was a thing of the past.

Teachers’ gender-blind attitudes are not neutral. By claiming to ignore gender, teachers reinforce a heavily gendered status quo as natural and not to be questioned, while avoiding any criticism of sexist behavior by saying that they treat all children equally. Instead, this attitude accepts gender differences as biological in origin and fails to question the social influences that create gendered differences in behavior, making it possible to maintain and reinforce these differences while claiming to have no opinion on gender roles in society.

### *Teaching gendered behavior*

“Girls’ expectations are that they must be like a girl, not like a man. No fighting, or yelling, or being rude or rough. Girls cannot be rude or crude or harsh.” – Teacher Ma

Teachers often came into the classroom consciously prepared to teach children differently based on gender. Despite their frequent claims to support gender equality, teachers often told me that they believed it was important and necessary to teach boys and girls to behave appropriately for their gender. “Here are the bathrooms,” the teacher leading me on a tour of a private kindergarten said, pointing at two doors – one with a bright blue stick figure, and one with a bright pink stick figure wearing a dress. “Most kindergartens don’t have separate bathrooms for boys and girls, but we believe it’s important for children to learn boy-girl separation from an

early age.” Teachers believed in specific and natural gender roles that boys and girls ought to fill, and felt that it was their responsibility to ensure children learned proper gendered behavior.

Because of their beliefs about children’s natural gender differences, teachers often felt that it was important to intentionally handle boys and girls differently in the classroom. For example, the teachers I interviewed generally agreed that female students were much less disruptive and that male students had to be disciplined more frequently. The male Teacher Li said that girls probably only account for 20% of the times he has to discipline students, and added that girls’ problems are usually smaller and easier to deal with. Teachers Zhu, Ma, and Li (female) all mentioned similar themes – that boys were louder and more disobedient. These gendered differences in behavior are not natural, but rather are constructed by different treatment of children (Martin, 1998, p. 503).

In her research, Martin found that teachers tended to discipline boys significantly more often than girls, but that they used different methods – boys were usually given general instructions to stop doing something, leaving them free to choose what to do instead, while girls were often given specific instructions on things to do, usually instructing them to use their bodies in certain ways such as sitting with their legs crossed, speaking more quietly, and so on. Boys were much more likely than girls to ignore teachers’ instructions, allowing them to act as they pleased. “Events like these that happen on a regular basis over an extended period of early childhood serve to gender children’s bodies – boys come to take up more room with their bodies, to sit in more open positions, and to feel freer to do what they wish with their bodies, even in relatively formal settings.” (Martin, 1998, p. 503). Additionally, teachers were much more likely to use loud voices or physical force to discipline boys, which Martin argues contributes to increased aggressive and disruptive behavior from boys. This different disciplining of boys and

girls, which the teachers I interviewed mentioned using in their own classrooms, helps create and reinforce the same gendered differences in behavior that teachers interpreted as natural.

Generally, teachers believed that boys were tougher and that girls were more fragile. Teacher Ma said that the private elementary school strives to teach girls to be gentle and not rough, and that they teach boys to yield to girls in “ladies first” behavior because of girls’ inferior physical strength and ability. The male Teacher Li said that boys had to be disciplined harshly or else they would not listen, but that girls must be disciplined gently or else they would cry. Teacher Zhu mentioned similar themes, claiming that “Boys need to live in a harder environment to grow up more. I think there is an understanding that girls need to be treated more softly.” This aligns with and provides context for prior researchers’ findings that teachers not only interacted more with boys but also gave significantly more negative feedback to boys than to girls (Chen, 2010, p. 108; Duffy, 2001, p.591). Through increased attention to and criticism of boys, boys are taught to be tough, and are also taught that their actions are more important than those of girls. Girls, meanwhile, are taught that they are less capable than boys, and that their work and behavior deserves less attention.

#### *Observation at private elementary school*

“Bath. B-aa-th. Boys don’t like baths.” – Teacher Ying, in English class  
“I like baths!” – several boys in the class

The bulk of my participant observation took place at a small private elementary school in the northwest part of Kunming, established this semester and with less than twenty regular students at the moment. During my time at the private elementary school, I attended classes, observed leisure activities, and took careful notes of gendered interactions. There were only two female students at the school, while there were usually more than fifteen boys (enrollment

fluctuated during the time I visited). Because of the extremely small number of girls, there were fewer opportunities to directly contrast the treatment of boys with the treatment of girls. For example, teachers did not split the class into two groups of boys and girls, as Chen and Rao found that teachers often did in other Chinese kindergartens (Chen and Rao, 2005, p.109) – I suspect this difference was less because of different attitudes towards gender and more because splitting the class into one group of two and one group of thirteen would have had very little usefulness for managing students or organizing activities. However, I was still able to observe significant differences between teachers' treatment of the boys and the girls, which generally tended to fit into the patterns described in previous research on the subject. Additionally, I noted frequent offhand gender-based comments teachers made during class, which taken together created a traditional heterosexual narrative of gender relations male power and female subservience.

In its physical environment and in its curriculum, the school is very different from a standard Chinese public school. The school is located in a traditional Han Chinese complex built over ninety years ago, with a central courtyard surrounded by wooden buildings. In front of the school is a large, beautifully decorated temple, and behind the school are the mountains that surround the city of Kunming. Its traditional environment is not coincidental – part of the school's goal is to teach children classical Chinese cultural practices. In addition to studying math, English, and Chinese grammar, students also take classes in calligraphy, art, Chinese history, music, and Chinese martial arts. Teacher Ma, the respected calligraphy teacher who helped found the school and whose works were on display in a front room of the complex selling for as much as 50,000 CNY(roughly \$8,000 USD), explained to me that one of her goals in helping her sister found the school was to combine the best of Western and Chinese culture in a

single school. Chinese public schools were too strict, she said, and she wanted to create a space where children could be more creative and learn more freely – but she also wanted children to gain a truly Chinese education and understand their own culture. In this unique setting, I attended classes across four visits and observed how gender was discussed and managed by teachers and children.

Although almost all of the children at the school were male, almost all of the adults present were women. One regular English teacher at the school was male, one American man came in twice a week to teach English and lead weekend expeditions, and one other man came in sometimes to teach martial arts. The only other men I saw present were some middle-aged men who sat around the campus and talked, but did not appear to be teachers or parents, and I assumed that they were affiliated with the teachers who ran the school or with the owners or maintenance staff of the building complex.

Though I did not meet all teachers at the school, most of the teachers I met and saw were female. It is possible, though unlikely, that male teachers came in to teach on days I did not attend school; however, for the purposes of analysis I will assume that the gender ratios I observed were representative of the school as a whole. The parents who came to the school were mostly women, too – when I accompanied the students on a field trip, several mothers came along, but no fathers. This matches what I heard from the teachers I interviewed, several of whom told me that almost all kindergarten and elementary school teachers were women, while male teachers were more likely to take higher-paying jobs teaching high school or college. As such, the children at this school saw traditional gender roles preserved in the adults around them, as women taught art, history, and culture while men led hiking trips and taught martial arts. The only potential exception to this rule was the male English teacher – however, although he worked

in a feminized profession as an elementary school teacher, he was in my experience also usually the teacher to supervise the impromptu soccer games that sprang up in the central courtyard in between classes, in which respect he still fulfilled a more masculine role. For the most part, the students were boys, and the teachers were women.

Why were there so many boys at this school? Teacher Ma, who helped found the school, said that the gender ratio was just coincidence. However, in a short informal interview held between classes, the mother of one of the two female students offered a different perspective on why there were so many male students there. “Boys in public school are naughtier,” she explained, so they get in more trouble and the heads of their household have more complaints towards the public education system. “Girls are more well-behaved, so the heads of their households don’t have as many complaints.” In other words, boys’ misbehavior makes it more difficult for them to fit into a strict and regulated public education system. This idea was supported by comments in an informal interview with the English teacher Caroline. Expressing great dissatisfaction with her job and with her students’ behavior, she claimed that all the children in this school were only here because they couldn’t make it public schools.

Caroline’s comments were not groundless – in my own observation, I noted that the boys were frequently loud and disruptive during class. The two girls, however, remained mostly quiet, reflecting other researchers’ findings about what kind of behavior is permitted from boys and girls (Martin, 1998, p.504). Most of the time, the boys were not chastised for their rowdiness unless it became difficult for the teacher to speak. Additionally, when the boys were told to be quiet, often the boys didn’t listen but the teacher did not press the issue. I noticed boys frequently standing at their desks, idly moving around, or otherwise not conforming to traditional standards of classroom behavior. Meanwhile, the girls usually remained seated properly at their desks.

Another interesting arena for observing gender was the main courtyard, where the boys played soccer in between classes while the male English teacher supervised. Almost all of the boys played; meanwhile, the two girls sat and watched, cheering on their favorite player and his team. When I asked the two girls why they didn't play, one explained that she couldn't because of her plastic-jewel-encrusted shoes, while the other said that she didn't want to but might join later (and indeed she did, the next day). The inability of a girl to play a sport because she was dressed in clothing was inappropriate for athletic activity shows how girls are not expected to be active; her pink bejeweled shoes clearly intended for a girl were not designed to run and jump in. Meanwhile, on the soccer court, boys practiced competitiveness and athleticism in a masculine space, loudly jostling with one another and vying for success. The older boys dominated the game, with the younger boys running around trying to get the ball for themselves when they could. As in the classroom, the boys were rowdy and active, while the girls sat quietly.

In the classes I attended, heterosexuality was frequently present and on display through the teachers' comments. For example, the male English teacher explained the English vocabulary word "announce" with the sentence "He announced that this weekend he would marry a beautiful and rich girl." On other occasions, he used traditional gender roles as a language-learning opportunity, asking the English class questions such as "Who is more powerful, the queen or the king?" The correct answer was, as expected, the king. Offhand comments such as these may not be part of the formal educational curriculum, but it would be a mistake to write them off as insignificant. These comments, which occurred frequently, encouraged children to consider the world around them in terms of traditionally gendered roles. Interestingly, despite frequent reference to heterosexuality, sexuality itself was off the table, as I observed when the teacher quietly fast-forwarded past a kiss in a video being played for the class. The fact that marriage is

considered acceptable and convenient to reference, while even mild sexual or romantic behavior is considered inappropriate, suggests that here the heterosexual matrix of traditional gender relations has been divorced from actual sexuality. In other words, though sex is inappropriate, marriage is a normal part of how the world works. In this way, heterosexual power relations are casually reinforced as natural and to be expected in all parts of life, even in seemingly unrelated settings such as language learning.

### *Alternative narratives*

Chinese society is not a monolith, and as in any culture, different individuals interpret and contest cultural values in their own ways. One informant I spoke to, Teacher Xiao, shared some of her own experiences working to change Chinese culture and create a more equitable future for people of all cultures. Teacher Xiao inhabits a rare position – a trained psychologist teaching sexual education at a public middle school. Most public middle schools in China, Xiao told me, cannot teach a proper class on sexual education because of cultural values that treat discussion of sex as taboo – instead, children receive a two-hour lecture on reproductive biology, and perhaps some brief admonitions to use condoms to prevent the spread of STDs. I interpreted this situation as similar to U.S. middle and high schools, where sexual education is limited and often abstinence-only because teens are viewed as simultaneously “too innocent to know about sexuality and too sexual to be trusted with information.” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 35). Teacher Xiao’s middle school, however, is an “experimental school” with more freedom to pursue unusual curricula that other public schools cannot, so she has been able to teach an entire semester on sexual education every spring for the past four years. Her course covers not only basic reproductive biology and health, but also such controversial topics as sexual behavior, gender relations, same-sex relationships, and sexual assault prevention.

During the course of our interview, Xiao explained to me how gender dynamics show up in middle school and how she attempts to promote equality in her classroom and through her teaching. Unlike some teachers, Teacher Xiao freely acknowledged treating students differently in the classroom based on their gender in order to promote a more equal environment. For example, because of mainstream cultural narratives that encourage boys to speak and expect girls to remain silent, Teacher Xiao believes that it is important to push female students to speak up in classroom discussions. She also strives to present a curriculum that promotes fair and equal treatment for people of all genders – her class even includes units on same-sex relationships and trans and nonbinary gender identities. While other teachers professed gender-blind attitudes, Teacher Xiao appeared acutely conscious of gender-based societal issues and how they reflected in her classroom and the school more broadly, and she uses this knowledge to teach in a way that hopefully helps create a more equitable future.

### **Conclusions**

From my observation in classrooms and from my interviews with teachers, I conclude that the children and teachers I studied continue traditional gender patterns and roles, training boys to be active and unfeminine while training girls to be passive and dependent on others. Though teachers claim to promote equality in the classroom, a general desire for fair treatment is not enough to overturn the complex and powerful system of coercive heterosexual gender relations within society. With the exception of sex educator Teacher Xiao, the teachers I spoke with and observed viewed boys and girls as inherently and biologically different along traditional gender lines, and their different treatment of boys and girls created classroom environments that affirmed and reinforced traditional gender roles.

The role models available to children also recreated traditional gendered divisions of labor. The overrepresentation of women as lower-paid teachers of young children reinforced ideas of women as naturally more nurturing and sensitive and as less valuable. Meanwhile, the placement of male teachers as math teachers and physical activity leaders, and the greater representation of men in higher-paid positions teaching older children, reinforced ideas of men as naturally more logical, physical, and valuable. Teachers may tell children that they can pursue any career they want, but when children see only stereotypically gendered role models, these differences in representation convey strong ideas about what jobs are suitable for men and women. Additionally, the large presence of mothers and the absence of fathers at school events encouraged children to view women as inherently more caring and nurturing than men.

I believe that these findings shed light on contemporary methods of dealing with gender in Chinese school environments and can also provide insight for future improvements. Gender-blind methods, which claim to treat all children equally in a shallow sense but fail to acknowledge deeper social causes of gender differences, have not disrupted the transmission of traditional gender roles and ideas. However, a gender-conscious approach that acknowledges the subtle and harmful gender narratives prevalent in schools could help counteract and work against sexist and heterosexist gender roles in society at large. The work of an individual teacher, such as Teacher Xiao and her progressive sex education curriculum, is not enough to change entire systems or undo what children have learned elsewhere, but it is a necessary start. By actively working to provide alternative ways of framing and discussing gender, teachers like Teacher Xiao can help disrupt oppressive gender narratives and create a more equitable society.

**Recommendations for further study**

This project analyzed how gender roles were taught in schools in Kunming. However, because of its limited scope, there is much room for further study on the subject. Future research might ask:

- How are gender roles taught in classrooms in rural areas, as opposed to a large modern city?
- How are gender roles taught in home and family environments?
- How do children practice gender roles with one another in play and in extracurricular activities such as sports?
- How are gender roles taught in classrooms to older students, and how do older students practice gender roles with one another in school?

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