

(Un)doing Gender: Two Chinese academic women's stories of negotiating gender identities

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Gateway

- Women's progression in the Chinese academy: the current number of Chinese academic women slightly outstrips their male counterparts (Ministry of Education, 2020).
- However, equality is not translated into equity in the university leadership positions.
- Women's experiences within the academy are important as the universities are losing women's talents due to the deep-rooted masculine culture.
- Aim: **Unpacking the subtle complexity of two Chinese academic women's identities in both professional and private realms of life from Butler's perspective, which provides an opportunity to understand a perspective for how Chinese gender discourses shape academic women's experiences in HEIs.**

Storying with Theories: Butler's thoughts on gender identities

- Constructed identity categories are "sites of trouble" (Butler, 1990, p. 372) and limit the ways women are able to negotiate.
- Identity is a fluid and unstable process shaped by wider discourses and gender norms (Butler (1990)).
- (Un)doing gender is seen as an approach to academic women's negotiation within multiple identities. In this research, **undoing gender means academic women's tendency to perform their gender in a traditionally masculine way, whereas doing gender means academic women's conformability to femininity.**

Women who narrate the stories with me: a photovoice collaboration

- Two out of twenty women (Liang and Huang) who participated in this research expressed their desire to share their experiences through sharing real-life photos.
- They are academic mothers from the Humanities and Social Sciences(HSS).
- Academic women from HSS is of interest because Chinese universities undervalue HSS but women are often predominantly employed within HSS faculties.

Photovoice: Huang's story: initiatively creating space and time for identity performance

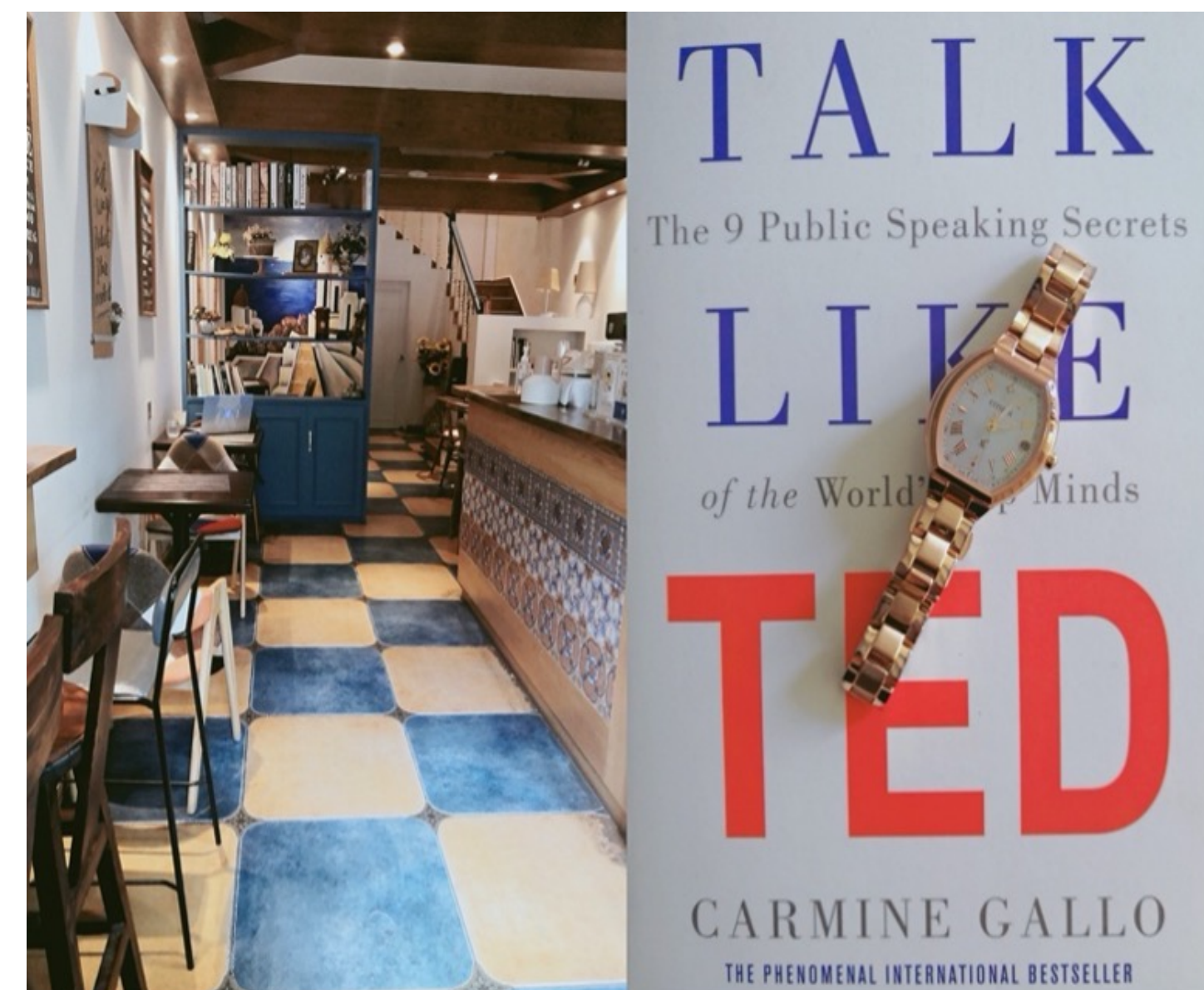


Figure 1. Huang's photo (display of local café and her watch)

'These two photos represent my arrangement of both space and time after class. The café shows my working space, and the watch shows my fragmented time. I put them together because academic women like me often need to deal with space and time management after class. I have to frequently answer the household call after class. This café is close to my place, which is an ideal place for me to work after class. The family atmosphere with endless chores and noisy children leaves me no room to work after class. For me, time management counts most because I undertake most of the chores and childcare. The time that I can manage in this café is very limited, so I no longer use my cellphone here so as to avoid being interrupted by other daily business. If I have to check the time, I prefer to use this watch while working in the café' (Huang).

Key findings:

- Huang's researcher identity is hidden in the private field.
- The café is an ideal site for playing Huang's professional identities.

Photovoice: Liang's story: negotiating with self to accept multiple identities



Figure 2. Liang's photo (a long-time-no-use piano sitting beside the teddy)

'I used to learn to play the piano when I was young. I enjoyed playing the piano and dreamed of having my own piano. After marrying, I eventually owned a piano. But I have yet had no time to play it because I have either been busy with work or with taking care of my family. I put a bear there. It seems that another me was playing the piano. This piano carries my wish, but I can't fulfill it in reality. Additionally, playing the piano well requires hand and foot coordination, just like my work and life, and I'm not willing to abandon any of it, so I must become a "good piano player" in my everyday life' (Liang).

Key findings:

- The piano player metaphor shows Liang's resolution to perform each of her identities well.
- Liang identifies herself as a gender-neutral academic at work, not a women.

Exit

Practical implications:

- Chinese academic women aim to fit into the academy and yet also perform gendered identities recognized by Chinese society.

Theoretical implications:

- Their stories show that the approach of women's negotiation of multiple identities is **doing gender in the private field and undoing gender in the professional field.**

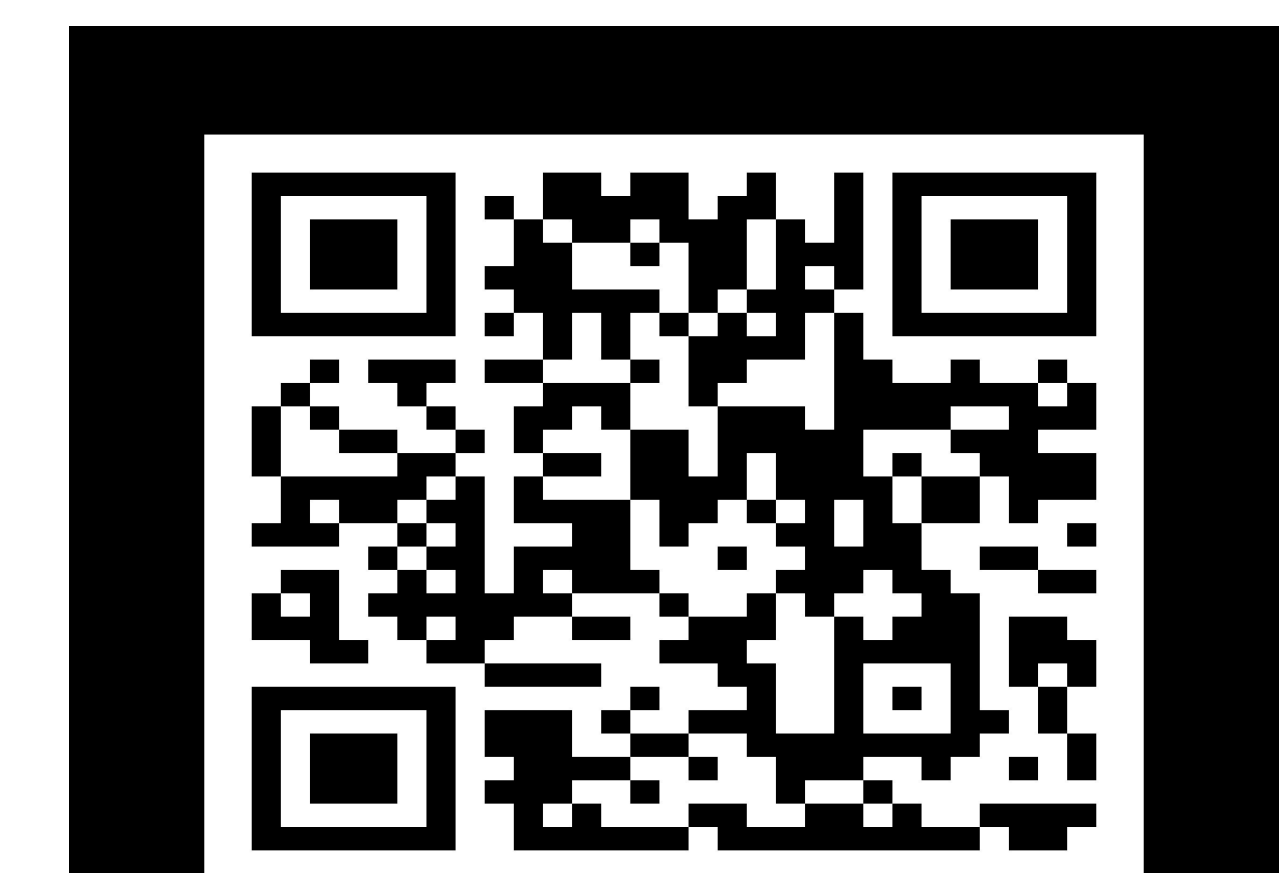
Outcomes of negotiation of gender identities:

- In their efforts to negotiate with different identities and their desires to perform each role well, the academic women defied the traditional social discourse around gender – "a woman without talent is virtuous" (*nvzi wucai bianshade*) (Liu, 2014).
- Both academic women tended to implicitly or explicitly internalize the gendered discourse of 'virtuous wife and good mom' (*xianqiliangmu*).
- Both academic women more or less expressed pressure no matter whether they were doing or undoing gender; however, they took such pressure and struggle for granted, which was harmful to their wellbeing and happiness (Butler, 2004).

Implications for the future:

- Seeking to rebirth **"a new kind of academy that will support – rather than penalise – academic women (and men) in their commitments and responsibilities for the care of others"** (Manathunga et al., 2020, p. 250).

References



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