

The Impact of Patriarchy on the Evolving Roles of Millennial Chinese Women

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Abstract

This study investigates the pervasive impact of patriarchy on the lives and roles of millennial Chinese women. Through a qualitative methodology incorporating in-depth, semi-structured online interviews with 16 participants, the research uncovers how rooted patriarchal and Confucian values continue to influence these contemporary women's educational, career, and personal life choices. Despite some societal changes and a push towards gender equality, findings indicate that traditional norms remain influential, often reinforced through familial pressures rooted in the Confucian philosophy of "filial piety." Participants expressed a common experience of gender biases and discrimination, both within their families and broader societal structures, such as in educational and workplace settings. These biases manifest as a preference for male offspring and greater societal expectations placed upon women in their familial and marital roles. The study highlights that while millennial Chinese women are increasingly aware of and resist patriarchal norms, they often adopt coping strategies that blend resistance with compliance with societal expectations. The findings underscore a critical need for a broader societal shift towards genuine gender equality. The study advocates for multi-faceted approaches that involve educational reforms and cultural negotiations to dismantle entrenched patriarchal structures. It calls for empowering women through increased awareness and education about gender equality as essential steps toward mitigating the impact of patriarchy and advancing women's rights in contemporary China.

Introduction

Patriarchy, as a prevalent social institution spanning thousands of years in imperial Chinese society, emphasizes the authority of male elders within the family unit in matters of property, morality, and status (Benstead 2021). While the promotion of gender equality and the evolution of gender norms since the 20th century have posed challenges to the existence of patriarchy, remnants of patriarchal values, largely influenced by traditional Confucian culture, inevitably persist in the short term; These remnants exert a significant influence on the education, career choices, and personal life decisions of Chinese women (Santos and Harrell 2017; Evans 2021). In recent years, as discussions and debates on gender equality and gender norms have become increasingly intense among young people, exploring the impact of patriarchy on Chinese youth, especially young women, has become a crucial aspect of understanding this demographic.

Many scholars have engaged in profound discussions regarding the impact of patriarchy on Chinese women, analysing the complexities of their struggles within patriarchal systems, the dynamic process of redefining identity, and balancing traditional roles with modern aspirations (Yifei 2011; Attané 2012; Liu 2014; Fang and Walker 2015; Hu and Scott 2016; Gui 2020; Peng 2021). Building upon existing research, this study delves into the intricate dynamics of the roles played by millennial Chinese women under the deeply rooted remnants of patriarchy within China's cultural and historical

context. It emphasizes how the roles of Chinese women evolve, particularly within the rapidly changing domains of culture, economy, society, and politics, with a special focus on shifts occurring within family structures.

Through in-depth semi-structured online interviews conducted with 16 millennial Chinese women, this study found that this demographic continues to be influenced by patriarchy and Confucian culture, particularly in life choices such as education, career selection, and personal life. When the choices of millennial Chinese women conflict with parental guidance, "filial piety," as a core tenet of Confucianism, continues to be widely embraced. Additionally, through the perspectives of participants, this study also discovered pervasive gender biases and discrimination present in various aspects, ranging from favouritism towards male descendants within families to systemic barriers in education and workplace environments. These biases and discrimination serve as both the structural and ideological mechanisms that uphold patriarchy, and they are crucial factors influencing the perceptions and roles of millennial Chinese women.

In response, this study highlights that self-education and heightened awareness serve as the foundation for resisting patriarchal norms. Empowering individuals through knowledge and fostering self-awareness of gender equality form the foundation for protecting women from the influence of patriarchy or any actions aimed at opposing unfair treatment of women. Furthermore, economic independence stands as the cornerstone for women to liberate themselves from the constraints of patriarchy (Wang and Liu 2020). Certainly, achieving the goal of eliminating patriarchal structures and realizing gender equality cannot rely solely on individual strategies. It requires multifaceted approaches at the societal level, including education, collective action, and cultural negotiations.

Literature review

History and definition of Patriarchy

The term "patriarchy" originates from the Greek word "patriarkhēs," meaning "rule of the father." It refers to a societal system where males hold advantages in terms of property, moral authority, and status over females (Green 2018; Benstead 2021). In colloquial terms, patriarchy refers to a system where elder males in a family exercise dominance and control over other younger family members, including women, girls, and younger males, who are expected to comply with their authority (Kandiyoti 1988, 2005; Khelghat-Doost and Sibly 2020; Benstead 2021). This leads to a reality where both women and men may suffer from patriarchy (Glick and Fiske 2001).

While the term "patriarchy" initially emerged as a framework for understanding societies in the Mediterranean region, Sinologists frequently employ it to recognize analogous features within Chinese society (Hamilton 1990). Patriarchy is deemed an essential concept for scholars examining Imperial China due to its prevalence within that society (Hamilton 1990). In Imperial Chinese families, "male elders wielded supreme authority, with wives and children reliant upon males, and lineage traced through the male ancestry," exemplifying a patriarchal paradigm (Hamilton 1990, p.80). Imperial Chinese society was profoundly shaped by Confucian ideals, emphasizing

virtues such as "loyalty" and "filial piety," which embody patriarchal values (Littlejohn 2017; Santos and Harrell 2017).

Patriarchy and Confucianism

Confucianism has been the predominant cultural tradition and political discourse in imperial China for over two thousand years; On the one hand, it provided legitimacy for the emperors' rule, while on the other hand, it regulated the behaviour of rulers towards their subjects, exerting a profound influence on the social structure and family ethics of China (Jiang 2018). Confucianism emphasizes individual moral cultivation, underscores family ethics, advocates for education, and its core values include benevolence, righteousness, propriety, integrity, loyalty and filial piety, and so on (Zhang 2016; Jiang 2018). In addition, both loyalty and filial piety emphasise the respect, love and obedience of family descendants to their elders/brothers. In particular, filial piety is regarded as the foundation of ethics and morality and the first of the behavioural norms, and Confucianism requires people to fix and pass on filial piety as the basic state of existence of human feelings (Hwang 1999; Bedford and Yeh 2019). Meanwhile, Confucianism places a very high emphasis on the requirement of "filial piety," where any behaviour of the younger generation within the family causing worries to their parents, whether in terms of education, social interactions, or work, would be deemed as unfilial (Yeh and Bedford 2019).

Furthermore, within the Confucian school of thought, there exists a denigration of women, portraying them as inferior and "like petty men" (Littlejohn 2017). Confucianism also proposes and demands that women primarily handle domestic affairs, while men are responsible for public and social matters such as agriculture, commerce, and governance (Gao 2003). Confucianism also tacitly recognises women as the property of their husbands (Gao 2003). The widely accepted ideas and strict family ethical norms based on Confucianism for a long time became a breeding ground for patriarchy to grow and interact and develop with patriarchy, making patriarchy one of the distinctive features of imperial China (Hamilton 1990; Littlejohn 2017; Santos and Harrell 2017).

Globalisation perspective of Patriarchy

Evidence of patriarchy exists in both ancient Greece and imperial China on a global scale: works by Plato and Aristotle reflect the prevalent belief among ancient Greeks that women were morally, intellectually, and physically inferior to men, considering women as the property of men who should obey male rule (Dubber 2005; Goldson 2005). This is in line with the idea of Confucianism and patriarchy during the Imperial China era as mentioned by (Gao 2003). During the era of imperial China, under the influence of Confucian thought, patriarchy imposed strict norms and constraints on women's behaviour, social status, and moral conduct (Littlejohn 2017; Santos and Harrell 2017). A prime example is the perspective of Ban Zhao, an advocate for women's education in imperial China, who expressed the view that women's primary concern should be subservience to patriarchal figures, rather than focusing on their own intelligence or abilities (Gao 2003).

Development of Patriarchy

Since the 18th century, influenced by certain knowledge authorities opposing patriarchy, such as Denis Diderot's Encyclopedia (Beattie 2005), Western women began to question the patriarchal interpretations of widely accepted Christian scriptures (Ruether 2014). Similarly, in the 20th century, China also challenged the strict framework of patriarchy. Since its establishment in 1921, the Chinese Communist Party has made commitments to gender equality, vigorously promoting women's employment and education. However, it has yet to establish a fixed gender hierarchy system in family life (Durso 2003; Evans 2021). This results in a situation where, despite women gaining increasing access to education and employment opportunities, conservative notions of women's roles in the family persist.

In recent years, with the prevalence of gender equality concepts, patriarchy has become central to several different theories studying gender relations and feminism, including "radical feminism, Marxist feminism, and dual systems theory" (Millet 1972; Pilcher and Whelehan 2016). In recent years, feminist scholars have narrowed the definition of patriarchy to focus on the dominant role of men in oppressing women, aiming to explain feelings of oppression and submission and to transform resistance emotions into political practices and theories (Khelghat-Doost and Sibly 2020). Recently, some feminist activists in China have launched protests against societal expectations placed on women in marriage and family life, aiming to continue challenging patriarchy (Evans 2021). However, influenced by traditional Confucian culture, remnants of patriarchy are almost inevitably present in the short term, as Evans (2021) pointed out, the "incomplete patriarchy" remains a characteristic of widely held gender assumptions and expectations.

The Evolution of Gender Norms and the Persistence of Patriarchy

With visible improvements on women's legal entitlement as well as in their socioeconomic status, the society has been witnessing certain transition from a traditional misogyny perception. Traditionally, sons are valued more than daughters in China among many other Asian countries sharing a similar attitude (Tafuro and Guilmoto 2020) driven by a patrilineal family organisation. This traditional value has been manifested by the evidently distorted sex ratio at birth (SRB) in China chronically, which has received wide critiques and concerns domestically and internationally. There has been a downtrend since 2009 attributed to the active governance measures together with rapid socio-economic development in the country, however it still exceeds the normal level (Jiang and Zhang 2021; Tang 2021). Chinese women have to be confronted by the traditional Confucianism influenced patriarchal narrative and organisation even before they were born.

Despite the rapid empowerment and modernisation of women within a few decades, however, it has yet to establish a fixed gender hierarchy system in family life (Evans 2021). This results in a situation where, despite women gaining increasing access to education and employment opportunities, conservative notions of women's roles in the family persist, the new generation still finds themselves in a conservative society (Tang 2021; You et al. 2021). A general discrimination has been weaved in the fabric of society that against women's development and entitlement on their education and career path, average income, political presentation, and marriage choices which reminds us that gender equality remains a slogan in today's Chinese society (Chen and Ge 2018;

Gui 2020; Iwasaki and Ma 2020; Qing 2020; You et al. 2021; Zhao and Yang 2021). This structurally discriminatory gender division has left women shouldering a “double burden” on various aspects in their life - as members of the labour force in the society and as the major carers within the domestic sphere in general (Zuo 2013; Santos and Harrell 2017), which has been attributed to a “patchy patriarchy” (Evans 2016) in the contemporary Chinese society. Recently, some feminist activists in China have launched protests against societal expectations placed on women in marriage and family life, aiming to continue challenging patriarchy. (Evans 2021). However, influenced by traditional Confucian culture, remnants of patriarchy are almost inevitably present in the short term, as Evans (2021) pointed out, the “incomplete patriarchy” remains a characteristic of widely held gender assumptions and expectations.

Social expectation under the patriarchy norms

In modern China, social expectations towards women are still widely influenced by traditional Confucianist patriarchal norms and ideology (Ma and Yan; Tang 2022), creating a complex set of expectations that shape women's roles and behaviours ingraining in the society (Eklund 2021).

As mentioned in the previous section that Chinese women are typically confronted by a “double burden” (Evans 2021) as in the spectrum of her life, a tacit expectation underlies the society persists that female should primarily meet her domestic roles regardless her career pursuit, including housekeeping, childcare, and eldercare. This expectation stems from traditional Confucian ideals of women's domestic virtues (Huang 2020; Sun and Zhuang 2022; Qiu 2023) and their roles as caretakers within the household. It would even escalate to a “triple burden” (Gao and Li 2021) of “being an employee” “being a wife” and “being a mother”. Despite women's increasing participation in the workforce, they may still encounter barriers to career advancement and gender-based discrimination in accessing to business and political leadership (Sun and Li 2017; Zhu et al. 2022).

Associated with this expectation in their family role, Chinese women are often expected to marry at a “marriageable age” (Gui 2020) and bear children at a ‘child-bearing age’, which is typically described as under certain age – usually 27 years old – or otherwise would be stigmatised as ‘Leftover women’ (Ji 2015; He et al. 2022; You and Nussey 2022; Li 2023), reflecting one of the most important virtues of Confucianism that emphasis on family continuity and filial piety (Eklund, 2018). Pressure to conform to societal expectations of marriage and motherhood can be intense with unmarried women often facing social stigma or familial disapproval (Liu 2021a; Tang 2022).

Struggling in the Confucian patriarchal environment, women are often valued for their obedience and deference to the patrilineal family (Deutsch 2006; Eklund 2021), particularly towards male members. This pressure could become a life urgency for many women that drives them into suicidal or self-harm behaviours (Lam et al., 2021). In contrary, women who assert their independence or challenge traditional gender roles may face criticism or backlash for deviating from expected societal norms (Liu 2021a; Yu 2021; Blair et al. 2022; Chau and Liu 2023). Therefore, under the patriarchal tradition, woman could suffer from harm and disturbance mentally and/or physically either being obedient or being disobedient(Gao and Li 2021; Yin 2022).

When #MeToo movement emerged in China from 2018, it has further emancipated the younger generation of women to actively explore personal identity as female and challenge the patriarchal frame in contemporary society. Facilitated by social media, the movement provided platforms for individuals to share experiences of sexual harassment (Huang and Sun 2021). Luo Xixi's accusation against her former professor at Beihang University marked a significant and first milestone, sparking a wave of similar revelations and igniting public discourse on gender inequality within academic settings. Challenges emerged from state censorship and societal stigma, posing obstacles to the movement's progression (Xiong and Ristivojević 2021; Huang 2023). Nevertheless, the movement persisted, utilising innovative strategies to circumvent censorship and amplify marginalized voices.

In conclusion, the intertwining of traditional Confucianist patriarchal norms with evolving social dynamics continues to shape the lives and identity of women in modern China. The burden of conforming to societal expectations places immense pressure on women, perpetuating gender inequality and limiting opportunities for advancement. Despite these challenges, the emergence of the #MeToo movement has empowered women to challenge patriarchal structures and advocate for their rights, marking a significant step towards gender equality. Despite facing obstacles such as state censorship and societal stigma, the movement persists, leveraging social media and innovative strategies to amplify marginalized voices and spark public discourse on gender inequality. As China navigates its path towards progress and modernity, addressing deep-rooted societal norms and promoting gender equity remains imperative for building a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

Methodology

In this study, the authors adopting feminist pragmatism as a methodological framework allows for a deep examination of gender complexities (Wickramasinghe 2009). This research emphasis on interpretive analysis and personal narratives enhances our understanding of women's subjective experiences. This approach combines the insights of feminist theory, which addresses gender inequality and advocates for women's empowerment, with a pragmatic focus on practical outcomes. This combination is essential for understanding the experiences of women, especially millennial Chinese women affected by patriarchal norms. By aligning with qualitative research methods, feminist pragmatism helps to highlight the detailed and often overlooked stories of women (Spencer et al. 2014). This qualitative research adopted deeply into the cultural and social environments that influence women's lives, using interviews to reveal how gender, power, and society interact to shape women's identities and actions. Moreover, research based on feminist pragmatism is vital for questioning established narratives and encouraging social change by focusing on the context to understand the effects of patriarchal standards on women's roles and identities.

Research design

To enable a thorough exploration of the participants' lived experiences, this research used a qualitative methodology, according to (Hignett and McDermott 2015). This method is particularly effective in generating rich, nuanced insights into domains that are often deemed challenging for systematic investigation. In alignment with the study's goals, an inductive approach was employed to realities of millennial Chinese women,

capturing their experiences through personal narratives. This strategy is essential for revealing subtle aspects of perceived patriarchy that appear in one's personal life decisions and professional experiences, aspects that quantitative research methods might miss. Consequently, this methodology aids in unveiling novel perspectives on the attitudes of contemporary millennials towards the promotion of gender equality within the sociocultural milieu of East Asian traditions. Moreover, the research adhered strictly to ethical standards, as it received formal approval from the Ethics Committee of Bournemouth University. Informed consent was meticulously obtained from all participants, guaranteeing their full understanding of the research objectives, their rights to discontinue participation at any point, and the measures implemented to ensure the protection of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their contributions. This ethical diligence underscores the study's commitment to upholding the highest standards of research integrity and participant welfare.

Data collection

In this study, following the guidelines proposed by Galletta (2013), a semi-structured interview approach was employed, enabling participants to openly share their thoughts and feelings, thereby enriching the depth of understanding regarding their personal experiences. The recruitment of participants was achieved through snowball sampling, starting with a pre-identified list of volunteers from whom consent was duly obtained. Coordination over the phone or by email came after this initial step in order to schedule the interviews, which took place as on-line phone calls. The duration of these interviews varied between 15 and 60 minutes, with all conversations being audio-recorded upon receiving the participants' explicit consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure a precise reflection of their lived experiences. Throughout the research process, strict measures were implemented to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, including the alteration of names in all research documents. In preparation for the main study, a pilot study was executed to refine the interview techniques and validate the clarity and appropriateness of the questions posed. This preliminary stage was instrumental in assessing the efficacy of the semi-structured interview format and making necessary adjustments to more effectively explore the experiences related to patriarchal influences. The findings and observations gleaned from the pilot study significantly informed the optimisation of the final research methodology, thereby enhancing the integrity and validity of the overall research design.

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) have established thematic analysis as a renowned and effective technique for identifying, articulating, and documenting patterns within qualitative data. Following the transcription of the interviews for this study, we identified recurring terminology and organised it into thematic codes in accordance with Guest et al. (2012) methodological thematic guidance. Our analytical approach was based on the inherent significance of terms within the transcripts, in line with suggestions from Halcomb and Davidson (2006). According to Maher et al. (2018), using NVivo 12 software facilitated the organisation of related codes into larger themes, enhancing the process through rigorous re-evaluations to ascertain a cohesive thematic structure. To ensure the emergence of coherent and meaningful patterns while maintaining the analytical precision Deterding and Waters (2021) described, the research team undertook a thorough review of all coded material. This detailed and systematic procedure enabled the extraction and consolidation of key themes, revealing

the nuanced ways in which cultural engagement influences individuals' perceptions of patriarchal norms. The findings underscore the complex interplay between personal life decisions and professional experiences, highlighting their collective impact on shaping perspectives towards patriarchal influences.

Findings

Thematic analysis examples from interview

This study adopted thematic analysis in order to discern, articulate, and systematise themes within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006) This approach enabled the data analysis process to uncover and amalgamate significant themes, which shed light on the influence of traditional cultural involvement on the life experiences of Chinese women. This analysis placed particular emphasis on the roles of societal expectations and personal reflections on cultural norms. A summary of the resulting themes, codes, and keywords is presented in Table 1, encapsulating the essence of my findings.

Theme 1: Patriarchal Values

Gender inequality within the family unit is a deeply rooted issue that persists across generations and cultures. Through the interviews, we found that gender inequality in the familial context remains pervasive, even as societies evolve and modernise. The stories and life experiences of the participants underscore the importance of recognising and challenging these biases.

A recurring theme across multiple participants is the evident preference for male children within families. Inherent gender preferences across multiple participants:

“In my uncle's family, who holds the prominent position of being the eldest grandson in the family line. While my parents have always treated me well, my grandmother clearly favoured boys over girls. Although my grandmother's preference for boys over girls was evident in how she treated male family members, I've learned to be indifferent to it” (Participant Lily).

The grandmother's evident preference for boys, especially the significance placed on the "eldest grandson", echoes traditional patriarchal values where male descendants are often prized for their perceived roles as lineage bearers and potential providers.

Other interviewees further expose the preferences based on genders from family members:

“Although I'm an only child, I was raised by a single parent. I lived with my mom, and my dad wasn't really involved in my upbringing. Perhaps it's because I'm a girl, reflecting a preference for boys over girls” (Participant Hende).

Subconscious biases revealed the long-lasting cultural influence that cast long shadows on a singleton's daughter:

“When my uncle sought custody of my cousin after his divorce, there was resistance within our family. My father openly questioned the value of seeking custody for a girl, suggesting that it would be more meaningful if the child were a boy. ... That comment left an indelible mark on my psyche. Although I believe he loves me, I think this unconscious behaviour can expose his deep-rooted

prejudice against wanting a boy, which is that the gender of a girl is not good”
(Participant Aurora).

Observations of gender biases are often derived from extended family interactions or from peer’s families:

“My Hui friend’s family prioritises men over women. Her brother recently approached marriage age, and her family used almost all their savings for his marriage preparations. However, with her father’s sudden passing the previous year, the responsibility of caring for the cattle fell on her. She was frustrated, because no matter how hard she tried raising the cattle, the cattle ultimately belonged to her brother. During this time, her mother, grieving the loss of her husband, was somewhat erratic. She treated my friend harshly, assigning chores and tasks, but was especially kind to her brother, even preparing special meals for him when he was back from work” (Participant Margie).

Theme 2: Social Expectations

Participant Rechy mentioned the educational values inherent in Zhejiang, highlighting a strong emphasis on academic success and the ways it defines familial status. In contrast, places like Guangdong, especially regions like Chaoshan, manifest different priorities, with males often accorded higher status and less emphasis placed on higher education, especially for females. Such disparities, while rooted in tradition, also reflect regional variations in values and aspirations.

“I observed that the cultural outlook differs in places like Guangdong, particularly in regions of Chaoshan. Here, male students often have a higher status than female students, and their academic achievements might not get as much attention. For example, in Zhejiang, parents are happy when their daughters pass or are on track to pass postgraduate entrance exams. But in some parts of Guangdong, if a family has a lot of kids, getting a postgraduate degree might not be as important. Instead, these families may anticipate that their children will return home and work locally after completing their undergraduate studies. Greater pressure may be placed on those who want to pursue higher education in Guangdong than in Zhejiang” (Participant Rechy).

The cultural setting plays a pivotal role in shaping the experiences and identities of women. Participant Rechy depicted a full of traditionalism, where long-standing biases, especially gender biases, were evident:

“There’s a stronger adherence to gendered expectations here. Ideas about what roles women should adhere to or the pressure for them to marry by a certain age seem more prevalent” (Participant Rechy),

Participant Ava compared the cultural atmosphere in different cities, which affected her university experiences.

“The atmosphere there leans more traditional, with evident traces of gender bias and some ideas of male superiority and female inferiority. In Xi’an, male teachers in our university make remarks about female students’ future roles as homemakers, including saying that females will teach their children and accompany your future husband” (Participant Ava).

Theme 3: Confucian Principles

The perspectives shared by the participants underscore the complexities of familial responsibilities, especially in the context of caring for ageing parents.

“I often feel a weight of responsibility since I'm the sole child of my parents. If I were to move to another city for work, the distance from them would become a concern. As they age, the need for more hands-on care will likely increase. Bringing them to live with me in a new city is a consideration, but it's important to think about their comfort, especially as they'd be adjusting to a new environment without their familiar surroundings or friends” (Participant Efeir).

Participant Aurora added more details when travel with family. The need for harmony during trips and the consideration of familial preferences were emphasised:

“When travelling with family, if any disagreements or minor tensions arise, someone usually steps back or conceals their feelings to maintain harmony. The general sentiment is that decisions must be made, and even if they aren't perfect, they're acceptable for the sake of a smooth journey” (Participant Aurora).

There is a strong emphasis on the significant role parents play in the lives of their children. From decisions about marriage and property acquisition to career and education, parental influence is pervasive.

“But living close to them in our small town, me and my parents' physical and psychological distance are close, and they really want to take control of my life, including work. Despite my frequent social outings for work, my mother criticises me, viewing such activities as useless and ineffective. My mother is controlling, believing her broader local network entitles her to manage my life. ... they often disapprove and attempt to guide me, even in trivial matters like my clothing or dining choices” (Participant Olivia).

Table1. An example for Thematic Analysis

| Concepts from raw data | Description | Category | Value |
|--|---|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Male siblings receive more inheritance than female daughter | Unequal distribution of financial resources based on gender | Economic Discrimination | Patriarchal Values |
| Parents and grand parents cherish boy much more than girl | Unequal attitude towards grandchildren based on genders | Family Discrimination | |
| Female employee afraid of ask for leave or holiday | Unequal treatment in employment opportunities and benefits due to gender. | Workplace Discrimination | Social Expectations |
| Female employee hard to get promoted | | | |
| Unfair treatment from education resource | Unequal access to educational resources based on gender. | Educational Inequality | |
| Family harmony first during travel when travel with parents in-law | Parental filial piety higher than personal happiness | Travel Constraints | Confucian Principles |

| | | |
|--|--|--------------------|
| Female working place should consider close to parents | Restrictions on movement or location choices due to gender roles. | Limited Mobility |
| Life decisions such as university choice, future partner choice should listen to parents | Lack of agency and control over major life choices due to gender expectations. | Subordinate status |

Coping strategies

In delving into the narratives of Chinese women, it becomes evident that patriarchal norms and societal expectations profoundly influence various aspects of their lives, spanning family relations, educational pathways, and professional environments. The experiences of these women illustrate a wide range of responses to patriarchal challenges, ranging from emotional distress and recognition of gender inequities to strategic engagement with these long existed issues.

In the narratives shared by the participants, there is an illustration of the pervasive influence of patriarchal values and societal expectations on Chinese women, impacting their familial roles, educational journeys, and professional advancements. These narratives not only underscore the multifaceted challenges posed by patriarchal structures but also highlight the resilience and diversity in women's responses to such oppression. According to the participants, their stories reflect the process of opposing patriarchy entails a complex psychological journey from initial hurt and recognition of inequality to critical engagement and psychological resistance or compliance. The participants' experiences reveal a common initial response of emotional pain upon encountering gender-based discrimination, leading to a critical awareness of the deeply entrenched nature of gender inequality. This awareness is often the first step in the journey of resistance. For instance, the realisation among some women that their worth is undermined due to systemic biases prompts a deeper reflection on the origins and manifestations of such biases, catalysing a shift from passive acceptance to active questioning and resistance. These responses can be broadly categorised into direct confrontation, strategic accommodation, and negotiation within Confucian constraints. Each approach varies in its methods and goals, shaped by personal circumstances, cultural contexts, and available resources.

Direct Confrontation

As Participant Aurora serves as an example, some women choose to directly challenge patriarchal norms within their families by engaging in dialogues that confront and work to destroy these oppressive ideologies. This approach often requires immense courage and resilience, as it involves challenging deeply held beliefs and risking familial discord.

Strategic Compliance

In contrast, others, like Participant Lily, adopt a strategy of emotional detachment or indifference as a means of self-protection against the biases expressed by family members. This response can be seen as a form of passive resistance, preserving one's mental well-being while subtly rejecting the legitimacy of patriarchal preferences.

Negotiating within Confucian Constraints

The influence of Confucian values, particularly around filial piety and familial responsibilities, presents a complex backdrop against which women navigate their responses to patriarchy. While traditional values have an influence on participant Efeir's discussion of the care-giving burden, it also creates space for advocating for more equitable familial responsibilities.

Discussion

This analysis provides insights into exploring the pathways through which Chinese women challenge patriarchal norms and the potential for fostering a more equitable society within the context of existing literature and qualitative thematic analysis. Within the scholarly exploration of gender awareness in contemporary China, the pervasive influence of patriarchy remains a focal point, deeply embedded in the societal fabric and manifesting through various aspects of women's lives. The narratives shared by participants in this study illuminate the multifaceted experiences of Chinese women, shaped by enduring patriarchal norms and the evolving contours of gender equality. These narratives not only highlight the individual strategies employed by women to cope with patriarchal impacts but also underscore the broader implications for societal transformation toward gender equality. This discussion seeks to delve into the patriarchal influences detailed in the narratives, the coping mechanisms employed by Chinese women, and the theoretical contributions these insights offer to the broader discourse on gender and society.

After critically deep into the themes of social expectation and self-awareness, it becomes evident that these cultures and residual patriarchy still play crucial roles in the lives of millennial Chinese women. The societal expectations placed upon women in China are not just remnants of a traditional past but are actively perpetuated and reinforced through contemporary cultural, educational, and familial practices. The weight of social expectations on millennial Chinese women manifests in several key areas, including familial roles, educational achievements, and career aspirations. Confucian philosophy through filial piety and gender-specific roles, positioning women primarily as caregivers and moral guardians within the family (Ma and Yan; Eklund 2021) have a significant influence on these expectations. Despite significant advancements in women's rights and gender equality, societal norms continue to enforce a rigid framework of expectations that narrowly defines women's success in terms of marriage, motherhood, and subservience to patriarchal authority (Gui 2020). Patriarchy in China, rooted in historical Confucian traditions, continues to exert significant influence over women's roles within the family, educational achievements, and professional path (Hamilton 1990; Santos and Harrell 2017). This study's participants exposed the gender biases and discriminations that permeate these domains, ranging from familial preferences for male offspring to systemic barriers in education and the workplace. Such biases not only underscore the patriarchal valuation of gender but also highlight the structural and ideological mechanisms through which patriarchy is sustained (Littlejohn 2017). These expectations, which prioritize marriage, motherhood, and subservience within the patriarchal family structure, exert a profound influence on women's life choices and opportunities. The stigma associated with being labelled as "leftover women" vividly illustrates the societal pressures to conform to traditional marital and familial roles, underscoring the challenges women face in pursuing personal autonomy and professional aspirations (Ji 2015). This societal pressure not only constrains women's personal and professional choices but also

perpetuates a cycle of gender discrimination that undermines the value and contributions of women outside the domestic sphere (Sun and Li 2017; Zhu et al. 2022).

On the other hand, the diverse strategies adopted by women to resist patriarchal oppression exemplify the psychological and social challenges faced by women in these endeavours (Liu 2021b; Yin 2022). Against the backdrop of these societal expectations, the development of self-awareness among Chinese women emerges as a critical counterforce. Self-awareness, in this context, involves a reflection and questioning of the gender norms and expectations imposed by society. It encompasses the recognition of one's rights, capacities, and potential beyond the confines of patriarchal definitions of femininity and success (Liu 2014; Wu and Dong 2019). Through education, engagement with feminist ideologies, and exposure to diverse role models and narratives, millennial Chinese women are increasingly cultivating a sense of self that challenges traditional norms and advocates for gender equality. Furthermore, the narratives reveal a critical engagement with Confucian values, particularly around filial piety and familial responsibilities. Chinese women articulate the weight of caregiving burdens, traditionally borne disproportionately by women, and seek to negotiate these responsibilities within a framework that respects traditional values while advocating for gender equality. These coping strategies not only highlight individual agency but also reflect broader trends of adaptation and resistance within patriarchal societies. The negotiation of traditional Confucian values, particularly around filial piety and familial harmony, presents a complex challenge in the struggle against patriarchy. This negotiation highlights the potential for cultural values to both reinforce and resist patriarchal norms, suggesting pathways for cultural transformation that embrace gender equality while respecting historical and cultural legacies (Littlejohn 2017). The negotiation of patriarchal norms by Chinese women involves a range of strategies that reflect a sophisticated understanding of the social and cultural forces at play. These strategies encompass direct confrontation, strategic accommodation, and creative adaptation, allowing women to navigate the complexities of societal expectations while pursuing change. Direct confrontation involves challenging patriarchal norms through dialogue and advocacy, seeking to dismantle oppressive structures and ideologies. Strategic compliance, on the other hand, involves navigating patriarchal constraints in ways that preserve personal well-being, employing tactics of emotional detachment or selective conformity to mitigate the impact of gender biases (Gui 2020).

Finally, millennial Chinese women's identities and ambitions are complicated, highlighted by the interaction between social expectation and self-awareness. Women in China are fighting for more gender equality and inclusion in society by questioning and critiquing the standards that define their worth and duties. Dismantling patriarchal systems is a complex and difficult path, but these women's strength and independence give us hope for the future.

Limitation and future study practice

This research into the impact of societal expectations on millennial Chinese women, while providing valuable insights, is subject to certain limitations that merit acknowledgment and consideration for future studies.

A primary limitation of this study arises from its potential sample bias. The participant pool predominantly comprises millennial Chinese women from urban areas, who are likely to have relatively comfortable living standards. This demographic focus inherently restricts the study's representation of the entire population of millennial

Chinese women, particularly those from rural areas. Given that traditional values and societal expectations may manifest more strongly in rural contexts, the experiences of women in these regions remain underexplored in this research. Furthermore, the study's findings might not be entirely generalizable across all cultures influenced by Confucianism, as variations in the interpretation and implementation of Confucian principles could significantly affect the nature and impact of societal expectations on women. This limitation underscores the need for future research to encompass a broader, more diverse participant base, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which societal expectations shape the lives of millennial Chinese women across different geographical and cultural contexts.

Another notable limitation pertains to the study's scope, which is confined to exploring the experiences and perspectives of women. While this focus is instrumental in shedding light on the specific challenges and pressures faced by millennial Chinese women due to societal expectations, it also omits the potential insights that could be gained from including male perspectives. Understanding how gender roles and expectations are constructed and enforced requires examining the connection from multiple vantage points, including those of men, who play a pivotal role in the perpetuation and challenge of these norms. Consequently, future research could benefit from a more inclusive approach that considers the experiences and viewpoints of both women and men, offering more richer exploration of gender roles and societal expectations within the context of millennial Chinese society.

In light of these limitations, this study calls attention to the complex interplay between societal expectations and individual experiences among millennial Chinese women, while also highlighting areas for further investigation. Expanding the research to include a wider array of participants and perspectives will be crucial in developing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the ways in which societal norms influence gender roles and identities across different segments of Chinese society.

Conclusion

Through a review of relevant literature on patriarchy and a qualitative analysis, this study recognizes that patriarchy, social expectations, and Confucian principles continue to have a lasting impact on the vast majority of millennial Chinese women in terms of their life choices in education, career choices, and personal life. Patriarchy, as an institution and ideology deeply embedded in the social structure for the past two millennia, is still reflected in various aspects of women's lives today. A key finding of this study is that the constraints and social expectations imposed on Chinese women by patriarchy and Confucian ideology do not solely stem from remnants of tradition, but are actively perpetuated and reinforced through contemporary cultural, educational, and family practices. This has had a subtle yet significant impact on the family roles, educational attainment, and career aspirations of contemporary Chinese women, including millennial Chinese women. On the other hand, this study also discusses the various strategies adopted by millennial Chinese women to resist patriarchal oppression and points out that they are increasingly cultivating a self-awareness that challenges traditional norms and advocates for gender equality. This awareness stems from self-education and raising awareness. Overall, it is clear from the thoughts and rebellious spirit of millennial Chinese women that there is great hope for achieving greater gender equality and social inclusion and eliminating the negative effects of patriarchal structures in the future.

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