

How Do People Define Women's Success in Chinese Cyberspace

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ABSTRACT

The comment “a woman's biggest failure is not having a child of her own” triggered heated debate on Chinese social media, which demonstrates that most Chinese people do support women's autonomy and rights of choice. The finding contradicts the criticism that Chinese women encounter in daily life. The qualitative text analysis and quantitative content analysis of 168 comments on defining women's success on Zhihu (a Chinese question-and-answer website) reveal the seemingly progressive discourse reveals that people exaggerate women's autonomy and overlook the gender issues which constrain women's rights.

Keywords: *gender roles, women's success, social media, gender issues, China*

1. INTRODUCTION

In June 2020, Yang Liping, a well-known Chinese dancer, posted a vlog on the Chinese microblogging site Weibo. An anonymous woman commented, “a woman's biggest failure is not having a child of her own.” The comment generated over 10,000 likes, provoking a heated Weibo debate over the question “Is giving birth an obligation for a woman?”.

Phoenix Weekly, a current affairs newspaper that targets high-end readers, conducted a poll on whether giving birth is a requirement for women. Out of 26,000 responses, 4.6% voted “Yes, the biggest failure of women is not having a child”; 53.8% voted “No, do whatever you want”; and 42.3% voted “respect each other and do not interfere with public opinion pressure”.

For this project, I collected 168 comments from Zhihu (a Chinese question-and-answer website) that discuss the above issue in order to understand how Chinese people define women's success. I classified the comments into categories, generated themes, and described the trends of the comments. I then calculated the percentage of comments in support of the most prevalent opposing arguments. My findings from the Zhihu comments reveal four themes that define women's success: 13.7% of commenters indicated that women's success is dependent on their family's success; 20.2% stated that a woman's career success defines her success; 6.5% claimed that both family and career are important for women; 59.5% indicated that there are no criteria for success, and believe the question to be superfluous. My findings from the Zhihu comments align with the poll results.

According to both the Phoenix Weekly poll and my poll, the majority of people agree with the option “do whatever you want”. However, these poll results contradict the criticism that Chinese women encounter in daily life. For

instance, successful unmarried women in their late twenties or early thirties are defined as “shengnü” which literally translates to “leftover women.” In Hannah Feldshuh's *Gender, Media, and Myth-making: Constructing China's Leftover Women*, she states, “Acceptance of ‘shengnü’ as a means of designation and self-identification furthers inaccuracies and restricts women” (Feldshuh 5). This sexist term is normalized in Chinese media representation [1]. According to Luzhou Li's study of the Chinese dating show, *If You Are the One*, “Women are essentialized, represented as subordinates and dependents who need material support from men, and encouraged to be sexual subjects by internalizing the male gaze” (Li 531). Moreover, Li states, “images of women in the show appear to be progressive, but they are conservative in nature”(Li 532) [2]. Findings from previous studies have questioned the results of the Phoenix Weekly poll. Is it really the case that the majority of Chinese people support the equalitarian definition of success? Why did the majority of the participants vote “do whatever you want”? How do Chinese people define women's success today?

Although the statistics show progressive values, my analysis of the comments demonstrates women's overstated autonomy which draws attention away from the real issues, thus, constraining women's rights.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In different countries, people use different criteria for women's success. For example, in Carol Ekinsmyth's study, *Mother's Business, Work/Life, and the Politics of 'Mumpreneurs'*, she analyses views of the term “mumpreneurs” and the hindered gender role expectations and arrangements within families (Ekinsmyth 1231) [3]. In countries like the UK, as the term “mumpreneurs” becomes popular, more women and mothers are entering

the workforce, and the expectations of a successful woman seem to be having both a career and a family. In Smitha Radhakrishnan's study of respectable femininity and the cultural politics of a "new" India, she examines "the interplay of gender, class, and notion in contemporary urban India as individualized, gendered efforts to accumulate symbolic capital" (Radhakrishnan 196). In India, women prioritize their families over their careers. The Indian core cultural value of the importance of family and women's role in it influences women's choices [4]. In Lorraine S. Dyke and Steven A. Murphy's qualitative study of what matters most to women and men, they examine women's and men's definitions, and how these focuses affect men's and women's choices in life (Dyke 358). They find that men value career and personal achievement over relationships. In contrast, balance is critical for women. In the U.S., the criteria for women's success is to having both a family and a career [5]. In Sally Ann Davies-Netzley's study *Perceptions of Corporate Mobility and Strategies for Success*, she found that white men believe in the ideology of individualism as an explanation for success (Davies-Netzley 339). In contrast, women emphasize social networks and peer similarities. Not only do women have to do well at work, but they are also expected to manage their relationships. There are more criteria for women's success than for men's [6]. Diana Zilli's research analyses personal and professional media coverage of Hillary Clinton in *The New York Times*. She finds that gender was less important in Clinton's career than it is for most women [7]. However, in her study, *The New York Times* is one of only a handful of media sources. Knowing that *The New York Times* has endorsed the democratic candidate 20 times more than the Republican candidate, the magazine itself might not be generalizable to the national media. Moreover, knowing that Clinton has been in office for decades, her representation as a female politician might vary from other female politicians in the United States.

Few researchers have studied how Chinese people define success, and how this varies for men and women in China, where cultural assumptions of gender roles are rooted in its people's views on life. They could potentially have different opinions and ideologies on gender roles, and also different definitions of success for women and men.

3. FINDINGS

The majority of the 168 Zhihu comments stood for no criterion for success; less than a quarter believe a woman's career success defines her success, and only a handful indicated that women should have both families and careers, or that a woman's success is dependent on her family. I start this section by analyzing the reasoning behind those who hold traditional views. Then, I analyze those with the more progressive views that a career is more important, and that a career and family are equally important. I end by analysing the comments with most supporters, and which seem to indicate progressive thinking: women define their own success.

3.1. Family success defines women's success

3.1.1. A woman without talent is virtuous

Chen Zhou, a construction worker, commented, "Maybe I'm a bit traditional. A woman without talent is virtuous." This is an old saying from Chinese feudal society. It reflects the value people hold in a society in which men and women have to behave as the culture and the society expects them to. In premodern China, women were supposed to stay home, do housework, take good care of the kids, and their parents and parents-in-law. Most importantly, they were expected to remain quiet and support their husband's career. Confucianism promotes the distinction between men and women. The core of this ideology is to guard women from promiscuity. The more books a woman reads, the more knowledge she will have. This will lead to independent thinking, making the women hard to control. The power is not only in social privilege, but also in a moral sense. Men were afraid of intelligent women because women were deemed to be a threat to them. In order to maintain and protect the patriarchal system, which privileges men in society, men promote the idea that it is virtuous for men to show their talent, but shameful for women to do so. This is because men with talent are the start of greatness, while women with talent are the cause of chaos. In other words, women were expected to remain ignorant, follow the rules, and be good girls, daughters, or wives. Even if they did have talent, they were expected to hide it. This phenomenon persists in contemporary Chinese society.

3.1.2. Pursuing family success is a woman's career

People who espouse the beliefs above argue that a woman who is approved by her husband, mother-in-law, and children is successful. Moreover, a woman's success depends on her husband's success. An extreme commenter has argued, "You want to be a success? Just find a rich old man who's dying, and you will become successful very quickly" (Seng Luo Wan Xiang). These arguments demonstrate the indirect sexist cultural norm of men marrying down and women marrying up. In other words, men are looking for women of lower social status, educational level and financial status. Meanwhile, women are looking for men who can raise their social status and living conditions. The stereotypical thinking of women living a better life by simply finding a good man and marrying him without any hard work or self-enrichment has given many Chinese people the impression that finding the right husband is a woman's ultimate "career", as well as a life goal. In terms of defining success, the criterion for a woman's success is attracting a man of equal, if not higher, social status who can provide the women with good living standards and high social status.

A man, from a parent's perspective, lists all the "achievements" he wants to see in his future daughter, including a husband, money, children, education, and happiness. Marrying a good husband is at the top of the list. "I am not sexist?"

Another finding is that people emphasize that they are not being sexist before making comments on any difference between women and men. For instance, phrases like "I am not patriarchal....."(Zhang San), and "It is completely the stereotyped thinking of the traditional view that..... But then again, masculinity and femininity are inherently different. Women are truly synonymous with tenderness and kindness, while men are a symbol of responsibility" (Chuan Zhang). The characteristics of each gender are essentialized as gendered differences.

Patriarchy is a system in which we are all involved (Johnson 31). The system has rules, roles, ideas and values. We, the people who are part of the system, follow the rules unaware that we are embedded in the system. The gender roles in the system suggest tender, soft, and kind women, and responsible, tough men. Men who claim they are not patriarchal but emphasize patriarchal values reveal that many people lack an understanding of patriarchy. Therefore, they are unaware of the system of which they are a part. Their values and expectations for the genders in society derive from the dominant values, but have been normalized because they have lived in the patriarchal bubble their entire lives. This lack of awareness of what lies outside the system is the root of such contradictory comments.

3.2. A woman's success depends on herself

3.2.1. Career-oriented

Many commented that family success does not necessarily define women's success. These commenters believe that it is unfair to say that a woman who is only successful in her career but does not have a happy family is incomplete. Similarly, we cannot call a woman successful only because she has done well in terms of her family. Women and men should have the same criteria for success. Female entrepreneurs like Dong Ming Zhu, chairwoman of Gree Electric, are successful, but can those who do good in the family not also be considered successful? One commenter states that "the threshold is too low" (Xiao Xue). Instead of advocating diversified success standards, they believe that women's success should be career-oriented.

Beauty and sexuality

Some comments mention that women should maintain their femininity, instead of acting like men, to be successful. One of these commenters claimed that if a woman is involved in the board of directors of a company, it is not because she is like a man, but because the board of directors recognize her unique character, quality, and characteristics, as well as her positive contribution to decision-making. Maintaining and demonstrating women's

femininity is critical. Among these comments, despite the fact that they believe in the more progressive perspective that family success does not necessarily define women's success, the characteristics of a woman being kind, sexy, positive, good-looking, independent thinking, and feminine are emphasized in the comments. While supporting women to pursue their career, the word "beauty" comes up throughout the comments. In the beauty industry, beauty standards have homogenized. This is unhealthy, and only applies to a small group of people. In countries like China, beauty standards are limited to the point that women can only be skinny, have light skin, big eyes, double-fold eyelids, dainty noses, wasp waists, and the list goes on. Women are all born different, the one standard cannot fit them all. This is where the problem lies. While the comments say that women define their own success, at the same time they need to be beautiful. However, beauty is defined by society, men, and other women. This is contradictory in that family and love life do not define women's success. Rather, it is beauty, sex, and femininity.

You need to have both!

6.5% of the commenters argued that women need to have both family success and career success in order to be considered successful. One post said:

To be a successful woman in both career and family, it is necessary to face her career rationally and family emotionally. In the aspect of business, find trustworthy partners. You can make the enterprise bigger and stronger through command. You only need to grasp the overall health of the enterprise and the direction of its development. And for the family, to show the woman's unique flexible side, and to show more attachment to her husband and love for her family on the emotional side, the necessary understanding is also a must. Haha! Easy to say, not easy to do. This is not only to learn all kinds of knowledge but also a very good state of mind (Shen Shijun).

In order to be successful, women are expected to be successful in work, as well as be emotionally attached to their family and husbands. Excelling at both sounds like the perfect criterion for a woman's success. However, is it really possible to have it all?

Sheryl Sandberg, author of *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, is the chief operating officer at Facebook. As a successful and busy woman herself, she admits that she cannot do it all without help from her husband and the people around her. How is it going to be easy for women without such high positions, and therefore without people to assist them with both their families and their jobs? Overgeneralizing the question by implying that successful women need to have both a successful career and family is not practical. No one can have it all and balance it perfectly. 47% of the U.S. workforce is women, and 70% of mothers work (DeWolf 1). As society progresses, more women and mothers enter the workforce [8]. What has not changed is women's gender role in family life, where women remain responsible for the family. In addition to work, women are expected to perform three times as much work as men, including household chores and childcare.

Because of this expectation of being a good caregiver, from both society and women themselves, the phenomenon of “mom guilt” is common. Mothers often feel guilty about not spending enough time and effort with their children. In terms of work, women are no less ambitious than men. Rather, the phenomenon of imposter syndrome, in which one doubts his/her achievement, is more common in women than men. This drives women to work even harder. With limited time, a potential consequence is overworking, which has detrimental effects on women’s mental and physical health.

3.3. *There is no criterion for women’s success*

3.3.1. *Live the life you want*

Out of 100 comments (a sample of 59.5% of all comments), 39 mentioned the words “happiness” or “satisfaction”. A representative comment states, “If you are happy and satisfied with your life, you are very successful” (Feng Dou). These commenters argue that everyone should have their own standards for success. Some people want to pursue family life, some want successful careers, others seek lives of leisure and ease. All lifestyles and personal pursuits are good. One comment claims that success means that ability matches desire.

The distraction from relevant topics is a red herring that is unintentionally used in these comments. The idea of pursuing happiness and living a satisfying life distracts the commenters by skipping the key question, thus leading to a false conclusion in which the question is unimportant. The issue of double standards for women and men’s success is real. These comments take the easy way out by assuming there is no problem, and reducing the problem to the idea of happiness. The disadvantage of using the red herring is that we will never know the underlying problem. Thus, we can never solve the existing problems.

3.4. *The unnecessary question*

Out of 100 comments (59.5% of all comments), 31 comments argued that the question “how do people define women’s success?” is unnecessary. Some even used an angry tone to criticize the question; for example, a commenter said, “So what? Are women and men two species? Do we have to create two different standards to measure success?” (Fan Zerui). These comments impart strong opinions on the question because of the word “women”. They argue that men and women should have the same criteria when defining success. Moreover, it is unfair to define women’s success because some of them believe that it might limit their success on the family level. Therefore, rather than asking that question, we should assume that men and women are the same. Overall, there is no need to discuss this issue.

Unlike the “a woman without talent is a virtuous” argument, these commenters are arguing from the feminist perspective because they argue that men and women are equal. However, I assert that these comments overgeneralize the issues. The commenters avoid the question and address the issues by blindly repeating “men and women are equal”. Equality is different from equity. Although women and men have the same ability to live life and do work, underlying gender-based discrimination, stereotypes, and unintentional beliefs do exist. In order to achieve the real equality for which these commenters argue, we must take action to achieve equity first. Instead of generalizing it by ascribing women and men the same resources, opportunities, and criteria for success, it is more important to take action by discussing the problems and identifying the underlying issues women face. Then, we can provide women with the “criteria” and support they need to overcome unspoken and overlooked discrimination.

4. CONCLUSION

The statistics are uplifting: most Chinese people support women’s autonomy and their rights of autonomy. However, this seemingly progressive discourse reveals that people exaggerate women’s autonomy and overlook the gender issues which constrain their rights. To summarize, they speak of equality, but they do not think of equality. Needless to say, those commenters who are obviously sexist emphasize that they are not sexist or chauvinistic. The essentialized gendered differences are normalized for them. Those who support women to pursue their careers still count women’s feminine characteristics such as sexuality, beauty, or kindness as criteria for their success. They seem to support women’s autonomy, yet the socially problematic criteria persist. Furthermore, commenters who believe men and women are equally important neglect that having it all might be impossible. Lastly, the majority of the comments supported women’s autonomy. However, they stressed that the question “How do Chinese people define women’s success?” is unnecessary. Rather than discussing the existing problems and identifying the issues, they shift attention by asserting “equality for men and women”. In conclusion, the commenters on Zhihu present an array of understandings of gender-issues.

The phenomenon whereby most are inclined to support women’s autonomy derives from the demographic features of Zhihu and Weibo users. 52.83% of the users are between 26 and 45, 20% are between 19 and 25, 10% are under 19. The top users are from big tech companies like Tencent, Alibaba, Baidu, and Google; elite institutions like Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Zhejiang University; major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen (World). These statistics demonstrate that Zhihu users tend to be highly educated, younger, have relatively high incomes, and high social status. This means that the statistics in my findings are not representative of the entire Chinese population. Likewise, most Weibo users are young, which is also not representative. Because of the sample size limitation, my statistics, as well as those from

Phoenix Weekly's poll are not generalizable to the entire Chinese population.

For future research, I suggest capturing a full picture of Chinese public views on defining women's success by studying a more representative sample size. This would include Chinese people in all age groups, genders, occupations, income levels, and educational levels. This will produce better understandings of how Chinese people define women's success.

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