


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Have Chinese women’s gender attitudes become more conservative? A study using an agency approach

Yuan Tian 

Shandong Normal University, Jinan, China
Email: cfm75532@gmail.com

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Abstract

Given the historical nature of gender consciousness against the backdrop of the nation’s social system transformations and the deficiencies related to physical and mental determinism commonly found in research on the performance of female gender roles, this study innovatively uses Butler’s agency approach to examine gender consciousness. Women in China have experienced the female liberation movement of “equality between men and women” under the Chinese socialist regime as well as the movement of “women’s return to the family” after the introduction of the market economy. The current study uses the agency approach to present the processes of post-1980s Chinese women when balancing their paid work, housework, and childcare roles and the contradictions therein as well as the ideologies they have adopted to resolve such contradictions. This study comprehensively examines the effect of conservative and non-conservative ideologies on the gender consciousness and behavior of women acting under their own agency. The findings, which are based on a comparison of the gender consciousness and behavior of various cohorts, yield the conclusion that post-1980s women expect non-conservative behavior in the future but choose conservative behaviors strategically. Such strategic behavioral choices deepen inner gender role-related conflicts.

Keywords: agency approach; Chinese women; cohort comparison; gender consciousness; socialist modernization

Changes in social structures, including ones related to gender, modify people’s normative consciousness.¹ China’s social system has undergone a transformation, and there have been major shifts pertaining to policies for the general population. Approximately 30 years after the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the country was operating under a socialist government. Then, in 1978, China switched to a market economy system, which remains active to this day, more than 40 years later. In 1979, a one-child policy was implemented; it was replaced by a two-child policy in 2016.

China’s policies for the general population are linked to changes in its social and economic structures (Zhang 2013), as shifts in the country’s economic structure led to modifications in people’s livelihoods, employment, education, and reproductive patterns. In the socialist system, urban residents lived in state-run *dan wei* (單位 “work units”), which integrated work, housing, school, and leisure

¹Gender consciousness refers to the awareness of gender and gender differences. “Gender norms” refer to the “requirements and expectations for men and women in their daily behaviors and appearances” (UN Women Japan Office 2018). A person’s understanding of gender norms as structures is referred to as “gender consciousness.” To analyze and compare women’s adjustment process in terms of paid work, household chores, and child-rearing, this paper deems the norms of upholding the patriarchal division of labor – men as breadwinners and women as homemakers – as conservative, while considering behaviors attempting to deviate from such norms as liberal.

facilities. Workers' daily lives were highly dependent on the *dan wei*, and primary groups (e.g., the family) were also encompassed by the *dan wei*, while individuals noted that the *dan wei* was the "only group to which one belonged" (Hishida and Sonoda 2005). As individuals spent most of their daily lives in the *dan wei*, their lifestyles and values tended to become uniform with those of the group in the *dan wei* (Li 2001).

Nonetheless, with the implementation of the reform and opening-up policies and the introduction of a market economy system in China, the *dan wei* society began to collapse, with the *xia gang chao*² (下岗潮 large-scale layoffs) phenomenon of 1997 becoming a symbol of the complete dismantling of the *dan wei* society (Chen 2000). Welfare facilities gradually became market oriented, and people began to procure or purchase their own welfare services. This began to create disparities throughout society in access to welfare benefits, which had previously been homogenous under the socialist system, and strengthened people's desire for wealth and access to better benefits, education, and leisure activities. However, as a result of the pursuit of efficiency and better cost performance in line with the new market economy system, the wages of Chinese women are reportedly currently only 60% of those of men (The Research Group of the Third Chinese Women's Social Status Investigation 2011), and the sex-related income gap is widening.

In China, researchers have frequently highlighted the shift toward a market economy system (and its impact on women) and the conservative attitudes of younger Chinese people toward gender as growing problems (Li 2016; Xu 2010). Through an analysis of national survey data, Li (2004) found that gender attitudes tend to be more conservative in economically developed regions. Workplace experiences can also influence women's drift toward conservatism. Aoyagi (2013) pointed out that China witnessed a resurgence in gender consciousness after the reform and opening up, especially among the younger generations. Survey findings suggest that, although in 1990, when economic reform and opening-up policies were still a relatively new topic in the country, the employment rate of women in urban settings (aged 16–54 years) was 76%, while this number decreased to 60% in 2011 (The Research Group of the Second Chinese Women's Social Status Investigation 2001; The Research Group of the Third Chinese Women's Social Status Investigation 2011). It has been suggested that this decline is a result of conservative attitudes toward gender among younger Chinese people.³ It is not difficult to observe that nationwide statistical analyses can, to some extent, predict the behavioral tendencies of women. However, a high employment rate necessarily signifies a shift away from conservative gender consciousness; some research indicates that during the planned economy era, the main aim of promoting female employment or education policies was to address labor shortages or control population growth, rather than liberate women (Currier 2008; Jin 2006). Due to "cultural lags," deeply ingrained personal values are not entirely synchronized with social changes in the real world (Ogburn 1957). Therefore, the "high" employment rate before the reform and opening up cannot be hastily interpreted as a rapid shift in women's gender consciousness toward liberalism. Research on the employment of Chinese women from the 1950s to the 1970s shows that despite the increased participation of women in the labor force due to the promotion of such policies, women did not have control over income and continued to do the bulk of household labor (Zhao *et al.* 2016). Thus, top-down policies in Chinese society may have led to a discrepancy between behaviors and personal intentions, potentially resulting in diametrically opposed interpretations of the conclusions of previous research on national surveys. Hence, the viewpoints and frameworks for analyzing the gender consciousness of Chinese women require updating and expansion.

Meanwhile, in a survey on attitude, Chinese women were shown not to becoming more conservative regarding gender consciousness; considering that there have been national campaigns to promote

²Chinese notation – 下岗潮. The term refers to large-scale layoffs.

³The age range of youth varies with national conditions, policies, and other factors. There is no universally agreed upon international definition. For example, the United Nations defines "youth" as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, while the recommendation "toward expansion of youth support policy" of the Science Council of Japan in 2017 defines people aged 15–40 as youths. Considering China's historical background of the one-child policy and the reform and opening-up, as well as the division of cohorts in this study, "youth" in this paper refers to those born after 1978.

women's employment since 1949, it is possible to infer that employment has been promoted among women and that some gender equity-related values (e.g., women and working women are not inferior to men) are taking root in society. According to a 2011 report, 86.6% of Chinese women feel self-confident and independent, 88.9% say that they do not depend on others in any way, and 91.2% agree that men should play an active role in housework and childcare (The Research Group of the Third Chinese Women's Social Status Investigation 2011).

In relation to efforts from the government to promote women's status in Chinese society while promoting the one-child policy, the Chinese government launched the slogan *Shēngnán shēng nǚ dōu yīyàng, nǚ'ér yěshì chuán hòu rén* (生男生女都一样, 女儿也是传后人), which means "boys and girls are the same; girls can also carry on the bloodline" in English. The implementation of this policy was also influenced by concepts related to *jus sanguinis* that are deeply rooted in Chinese society, leading both male and female children to be raised to have "manly" characteristics, which would allow them to fulfill their roles as family heirs (a role traditionally mostly ascribed to men) regardless of sex (Li 2016). One of the side effects of the one-child policy was that women started to show increased rates of higher education, with 30.4% of women under the age of 30 years having graduated from college (including junior college), a rate 4.5 percentage points higher than that of men (The Research Group of the Second Chinese Women's Social Status Investigation 2001; The Research Group of the Third Chinese Women's Social Status Investigation 2011); the cited study also shows that women received higher ratings in performance-based schools that evaluated students based on their grades. In this context, we deem it rational to suppose that educated women tend to have higher career expectations and a desire to be free from conservative gender norms.

Prior research has shown that young Chinese people currently have a mix of conservative and liberal attitudes toward gender; therefore, the conservative and radical attributes of the gender consciousness of Chinese youth are complex. Therefore, it is difficult to draw a clear-cut conclusion as to whether Chinese women's gender consciousness is becoming increasingly conservative. Considering that the gender consciousness of young people in China may be characterized by both conservative and liberal aspects, there seems to be scope for examining gender consciousness in China using an analytical framework. The existence of significant differences in values, including gender consciousness, between female cohorts is another characteristic of Chinese society that is described as an outcome of the rapid development of the economy and social system transformations, which remain to be investigated. For example, one study showed that there are currently four generations of women in Chinese society, which, in turn, have substantial differences in cultural capital and gender consciousness (Li 2016).

Therefore, to understand the current state of gender consciousness in China and its future direction, it is important to present and compare the characteristics of gender consciousness among various cohorts in China. We also see the need for analyses based on historical social system transformations in China. By looking at both the conflicting attitudes toward gender roles held by Chinese women and their experiences throughout the rapid period of modernization and using gender order theory and the agency approach, this study aims to better understand the gender consciousness of Chinese women.

In line with the characteristics of the gender consciousness of Chinese women and their social background, and considering the limitations when analyzing the actors in the methodologies of the previous research, this study seeks to delve into the following two issues. First, by employing a novel analytical approach and perspective of gender order theory and agency theory, this study examined the role adjustment of Chinese women in terms of household chores and child rearing, thereby visualizing the dynamic process of adjusting gender consciousness, which was challenging to capture in prior research. Through comparisons of women across multiple generations, this study discusses the trajectory of Chinese women's gender consciousness from the perspective of actors. Second, through the sorting of gender order theory and agency theory, this study elucidates the role of the above theoretical perspective in enriching the analysis of gender consciousness and investigates its feasibility for interview analysis.

Previous research and analytical framework

Cohort comparison perspective: application of gender order theory

Regarding gender consciousness in China, Sechiyama posited a hypothesis that the shift among women from being homemakers to becoming part of the paid labor force, realized during the three-decade socialist period in China, was “merely a dual role burden created before the birth of the housewife, or created after the disappearance of the housewife” (Sechiyama 1996, pp. 82–83). Others have speculated on the modernization of the Chinese family by considering the country’s gender-based division of labor (Ishizuka 2014; Miyasaka 2007, 2013; Miyasaka and Jin 2012). These researchers share the perspective of Sechiyama’s study, which focused on understanding the qualitative changes that occurred in Chinese women’s participation in the labor force as the country shifted toward a market economy and grew rapidly. A prior review of Sechiyama’s work described the same view presented in the book “Patriarchy in East Asia,” in that the shift toward the paid labor force among Chinese women most likely began after the birth of the role of homemaker (Sechiyama 2017). Still, other studies have shown that younger Chinese people tend to be more conservative in their gender consciousness (Aoyagi 2013), with a high percentage of them agreeing with family relationships characterized by notions of “male high, female low” and “male head, female subordinate” (Li 2004). Some researchers posit that it was during the introduction of the market economy system in socialist China that the role of full-time mothers came to prominence (Ishizuka 2014; Miyasaka and Jin 2012). The gender consciousness of Chinese women has also been described as likely marked by a mixture of both conservative and liberal aspects (Miyasaka and Jin 2012).

In socialist China, there have been governmental efforts to liberate women from the country’s patriarchy by promoting their rights to labor policy and marriage law. Despite these advancements, the reality is that the Chinese women’s liberation movements until the 1970s were more related to issues of class struggle and securing labor power than to women’s empowerment (Li 2016). Once the class struggle was over, women’s rights were not given back to them, as they were placed under the trinity model of “individual, *dan wei* (work units, a state enterprise), and state” within the context of the socialist system (Li 2016). That is, the Chinese women’s liberation movements during the socialist period disseminated the “gender-free” ideology for society overall, but when looking at policy implementation, we see attempts at making women more “manly” (the “iron daughters”) by promoting principles strongly related to patriarchy and totalitarianism. Hence, the Chinese feminist movement was not based on the individual (e.g., on the transformation of gender consciousness in line with individuals’ needs and desires) because women in socialist China were required to include themselves in the “communist construction” without being acknowledged as “individuals.” Although feminism without individualism was a fundamental feature of Chinese feminism during the socialist period, these elements have often been overlooked in the indigenization of gender theory in China.

According to Ehara’s theory of gender order (Ehara 2013), when discussing changes in consciousness regarding gender role-based divisions of labor, one cannot determine whether an action is conservative or liberal without first confirming whether the actor considers oneself to be the subject of the activity. Therefore, when examining women’s gender consciousness in China, it is necessary to consider the position of both the “individual” and the “organization.” In a social context where totalitarianism is strongly supported, like China, judgments about whether an action is conservative or liberal will differ depending on whether there is an assertion of the desire of the “individual” and on the positional relationship between the desire of the “individual” and that of the “organization.” Accordingly, Ehara notes that it is too early to judge young people’s orientation toward the gender role-based division of labor as having become “conservative,” mostly because they are strengthening their “sense of self-control over one’s own body and way of life” (Ehara 2013). Ehara explains that if the sense of self-control is strong (i.e., you have a strategy in place, something that is harder to experience when the “individual” is weak), even behavior that appears to be “conservative” may be a response to the changing social environment. Thus, it is difficult to say whether individuals who belonged to and were disempowered by organizations with strong power (e.g., the socialist Chinese government), such as

people who lived in socialist China, would have a strong sense of self-control. This means that, although Chinese women enjoyed greater guarantees regarding their participation in the labor market and the right to education in socialist China than in pre-modern China, concerns remain regarding how their participation and rights promoted a gender-free consciousness at the level of habits.

Based on this reasoning, the fact that young Chinese women are becoming homemakers cannot be attributed to their conservative gender consciousness. This is because these young women, who were raised under the one-child policy, have a strong sense of individuality, and because of the principles of the market economy system, they are not as restricted by organizations as their predecessors before the post-80s cohort. This can be seen as an opportunity for women to shift from a notion of the disempowerment of the “individual” to empowerment. With the dismantling of the *dan wei* society, individuals were freed from the strong bondage of the related trinity structure, and the policy reforms led to an influx of Japanese and Western media into China (e.g., movies and animation) and the diversification of values; the introduction of the market economy also led to more employment options. Women under the one-child policy were also able to acquire educational resources and were evaluated solely based on their performance in school, with no gender constraints. As a result, the younger Chinese cohort (born around 1980) has become more individualized than the previous cohort (Shi 2015). Although the concept of individualization means that “the individual now has choices” (Yamada 2019), the Chinese social context and its advocacy of totalitarianism has often led to societal criticism of attempts at satisfying the needs of the “individual.” Accordingly, the post-80s cohort is often criticized by the general Chinese population as being *ken lao zu* (啃老族 “parasites”); they are described as being spoiled and hedonistic by their parents, and their only-children status has led them to generally become “solitary schemers,” in that they became mobilizers of the resources around them (Goh 2011). Hence, the strategic behavioral choices that led to a sense of self-control can be considered to have been inculcated in early childhood in this cohort.

Considering that a seemingly “conservative” consciousness and behavior can have underlying strategic elements, we believe that examining the concept of the “individual,” which is directly related to sense of self-control, is important for confirming gender consciousness in young Chinese people. Therefore, to ensure that China’s historical social structural transformations and its feminism without individualism are considered when examining gender consciousness among young Chinese people, this study compares female cohorts and examines the relationship between the concepts of the “individual” and the family.

The complexity of gender consciousness: application of the agency approach

If gender norms are created based on particular historical backgrounds, they are subject to change. The norm of “husband outside, wife inside” configures a “modern” gender role division of labor, rather than a “traditional” one (Ochiai 2013). In addition, the relationship between gender consciousness and behavior is not always positive, and there are situations in which even if a person has liberal gender consciousness, it may not translate into practical outcomes (Nameda and Sato 2013). Young Chinese women live in a discursive world in which the conservative and liberal aspects of gender consciousness are mingled.

Cultural anthropology researchers have often described how intergenerational and gender relations have not become egalitarian in contemporary China. From a structural functionalist perspective, one may regard individuals as encompassed by structures; if the structures of relations and gender consciousness surrounding the individual are not egalitarian, it may be easier for individuals not to have egalitarian ideas. Even “countervailing discourses, including feminism, [similarly] rely on authorized aspects of ideology to determine what to argue and what to persuade” (Fineman 1995). Thus, if we investigate the gender consciousness and behavior of women solely in terms of the consequences of gender role division, we may be biased toward concluding that the status of gender consciousness and behavior is a reproduction of the structure itself. Although strategizing is likely to be a rational action that concurs with an actor’s current situation, assuming that action outcomes are always concordant

with the underlying structure is an unavoidable thinking pathway for those living in paternalistic social structures.

However, the constructivist perspective criticizes this assumption, stating that structures can be modified by individual actors and are, in themselves, variable or even absent at times. Following this understanding, one may consider patriarchy as constantly being reproduced, rewritten, and challenged in practical settings. By supporting the agency approach (explained below), we can focus not only on the outcomes of the gender role-based division of labor but also on the processes that lead to these outcomes, in turn delivering in-depth discussions on the operation of patriarchal ideology and the ideologies that challenge it.

When attempting to examine the behavior of women, a question arises: How do we deal with the conflicts that exist in behavioral processes and in the reproduction mechanisms of the gendered division of labor? There are two perspectives in feminist studies: material-structural determinism and subject selection theory (Yamane 2011). In material structural determinism, women are described as being oppressed by the family and labor market within the context of a patriarchal social structure, and the gendered division of labor is reproduced through the social structure. Subject selection theory interprets the reproduction of the gendered division of labor by proposing that women take on feminine roles by internalizing societal norms. Although both perspectives can explain the reproduction mechanisms of the gendered division of labor to some extent, they become limited as values become more diverse and the need arises to examine disparities among women (Yamane 2011). Based on the shift in the concept of gender developed by Butler (1990), Yamane points out the need to use an agency approach that goes beyond the dualism found in these structural and subject theories.

Various researchers have used Butler's concept of agency, but they differ in their application. While examining women's cosmetic surgery practices, Davis (2003) incorporated the concept of agency into the analysis to emphasize that "individuals can actively participate in the composition of social life." However, as Nishikura (2005) pointed out, while Davis emphasized women as actors with the capacity to make decisions, the concept of agency was attributed to women only as actors. Meanwhile, Yamane (2011), using the concept of the fictionality of the subject as pointed out by Butler (i.e., that the discourse practice in itself is gender, and that the subject is merely the result of the discourse practice), defined the practice of "changing society through the repetition and quotation of discourse as agency." This shows that Yamane proposed a new definition of agency, one that considers the critical and reflective power of the actor; this cited author further describes that agency is "an active practice based on an interpretation of structure," and states that in order to examine agency, it is essential to consider "how the actor perceives the structure and how the actor tries to change the situation in light of the actor's meaning-making" (Yamane 2011). From this perspective, it is possible to examine the active practices of actors who become agents. At the same time, we can approach gender norms that become structures through actors' signification.

In addition, the active practices of actors who become agents include engagement with both resources, which are the material basis, and discourse, which is consciousness. Considering the wage gap between men and women, women tend to carry out the gender role-based division of labor under the influence of "femininity" discourse and the material basis, which in turn allows them to live off of men's earnings. However, conflicts in carrying out this role division, the spread of gender-free discourse, and the acquisition of economic resources by women can interrupt the gender role-based division of labor (Yamane 2011). In other words, the confirmation of conflicts and the discourse used to justify conflicts lead to a visualization of behaviors that deviate from norms, are obedient to the norms, and are situations between norms in active practice.

This study attempts to analyze active practice by applying the agency approach proposed by Butler and Yamane, diverging from prior studies that analyzed individuals who make up agency. Therefore, this study considers role performance as the "active practice," dividing it into the following categories: current role assignments, meanings attached to role assignments, conflicts, and discourses and social resources used to justify conflicts. Specifically, this study examines the intricate gender consciousness

of Chinese women, which is an “ongoing achievement” (Kido and Nakagawa 2017), by presenting the interlinked processes of consciousness and actions. In addition, this study analyzes the adjustments made by Chinese women when performing their work and housework/childcare roles, with a focus on the historical background of China’s social and structural transformations and on comparing different female cohorts. We believe that the data yielded by these analyses are helpful for understanding how Chinese women perform their roles against the backdrop of the Chinese social background, gender consciousness, and role adjustments. Moreover, by clarifying the current conflicts in role performance, it may be possible to better visualize the gap between consciousness and action and present an unbiased picture of the gender consciousness of young Chinese women against the backdrop of conservative and liberal discourse. Furthermore, we believe that we can approach the direction of change in gender consciousness at the actor level by comparing older and younger cohorts.

Methods

Characteristics of the participants: post-80s and post-70s Chinese women

In this study, we analyzed data from two cohorts of post-80s and post-70s Chinese women during their child-rearing years. The term “post-80s” (八零后 *ba ling hou*) has become a common term in Chinese society (Zhao 2007), which is experiencing a “compressed modernity” (Chang 2010), and where there is a generational effect for every 10 years (Zhang 2015): every decade is marked with a “post-xxx” nomenclature and is considered one generation (e.g., those born from 1980 to 1989 are commonly known as post-80s, and those from 1970 to 1979 are known as the post-70s). According to Mannheim (1976), “By belonging to the same ‘year of birth,’ individuals are given a similar status in the historical flow of social development.” The status of belonging to a specific generation is used to limit the possibilities of people’s experiences to a certain range, specifically by conferring to individuals from a generation “a particular status in the space of social and historical life, and at the same time, to define a particular type of experience and mode of thought, a particular type of connection with the historical process” (Mannheim 1976, p. 175). This definition includes natural attributes (age) and sociodemographic attributes (shared historical and social experiences), and thus is “consistent with the meaning of generation” (Zhong 2010). Past research has used various definitions for the period that underlies the term “post-80s” (e.g., some have divided it into “before-85” and “post-85”). However, this study defines post-80s women as those born between 1978 and 1989 and post-70s women as those born between 1968 and 1977.

A comparison between the post-80s and -70s cohorts was suitable for the purposes of this study because of their characteristics. Post-70s women experienced the enforcement of two pivotal policies (implemented around 1979): the open-door policy, which changed China’s social structure, and the one-child policy, which changed China’s population structure and related policies. The child-rearing period for post-70s women spanned from the end of the planned economy to the beginning of the reform and opening-up period (the late 1980s to the 1990s). In contrast, post-80s women experienced the dismantling of the *dan wei* and the acceleration of market economy system reform (after the 2000s), so they raised their children without being bound to the *dan wei* or having access to any of its benefits. These historical differences make the comparison between post-70s and post-80s women appropriate for examining the changes of “individuals” amid the transformation of China’s social structure, namely, as it went from a *dan wei* society to a market economy-based one. This comparison allowed us to examine the characteristics of the responses of these two groups to gender norms, which seemed contradictory.

Outline of the survey

The participants

Data were collected from twelve post-80s women and eight post-70s women. Their characteristics include being in heterosexual relationships, having an urban household registration, living in urban areas, and having both a spouse and parents alive and well during their child-rearing period.

In addition, there were cases of post-70s women with siblings, but all post-80s women in this study were only children. Participants' attributes are listed in [Table 1](#).⁴

A survey was conducted locally among post-80s women in China in 2016 and 2017. Face-to-face interviews were conducted for approximately 1 hour at a location designated by the study participant (i.e., the participant's home or coffee shop). A post-interview survey was conducted in 2018 via internet calls. The survey was conducted with post-70s women in 2018 via Internet calls with participants at their respective homes, with no other family members present during the interview.

Overview and characteristics of the study setting

Shandong province is located in the eastern coastal region of China, covering an area of 158,000 square kilometers, with a resident population of over 100 million as of 2018. Approximately 28.36 million live in urban areas, and the average number of people per household is 2.80.⁵ As the birthplace of Confucianism, Shandong emphasizes filial piety (Shandong Provincial Women's Social Status Survey Issue Group 2003; Wang 2008), and other values related to the importance of family. Nevertheless, the rates of opposition to conservative gender consciousness, such as the beliefs that "men are superior to women" and "wives' careers should be subordinate to their husbands," exceed the national average (Shandong Provincial Women's Social Status Survey Issue Group 2003). A prior study shows that the percentage of the participants who agreed with the statement that "men are for society, women are for family" and disagreed with the statement that "women should avoid appearing stronger than their husbands in society as much as possible" was also high (Shandong Provincial Women's Social Status Survey Issue Group 2003). Issues related to gender norms can be found in the Shandong province. Therefore, it can be said that Shandong can serve as an observation site for investigating Chinese women's gender norms.

Analysis methods and ethical review

In this study, the recordings of the interviews were transcribed into text, and the excerpts used for analysis were translated. A third party checked the similarities and differences between the source

⁴This research employs an analysis strategy of conducting analysis concurrently with interviews. Following the interview with the first participant, data analysis was conducted instantly, with the resulting category then applied to the interview and coding of the next participant. After interviewing five participants, no new concepts emerged in the interview analysis of new participants. By combining the qualitative analysis strategy and the judgment method of sample saturation proposed by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) and Constantinou, Georgiou, and Perdikogianni (2017), it was preliminarily concluded that the sample in this research has reached saturation. In this research, nine women born in the 1980s, the main research subjects, were interviewed, along with interviews conducted with five women born in the 1970s as a comparative group. To further ensure the scientificity of the sample size and analysis, and factoring in the suggestions of reviewers, interviews with three women born in the 1980s and three women born in the 1970s were added from 2023 to 2024.

As the research observes and discusses the trajectory in women's gender consciousness through analyzing the adjustment process of women's gender role, taking into consideration the influence of China's one-child policy on multiple generations, the research subjects, women born in the 1980s, were limited to only-child women who resided in urban areas and had work experience during the child-rearing period when selecting the sample. Given the characteristics of significant participation of grandparents in child-rearing in China, the participants with living parents during the child-rearing period were selected. Considering the differences in age groups and child-rearing burdens, the participants with child-rearing experience before their children reached the age of six were uniformly chosen for analysis. This age range broadly spans from early childbirth to enrollment in kindergarten, allowing to a greater extent the observation of women's role adjustment in the process of taking maternity leave and returning to work. Furthermore, the participants' subjective economic perceptions were examined during the interviews to confirm their economic status, and their spouses' income was also recorded. Despite variations, the participants' annual income conformed to the level of economic development of their respective places of residence. In addition, FW currently does not earn a salary but receives rental income.

⁵"2010 Census Information" compiled by the Population Census Office of the State Council and the Department of Population and Employment Statistics of the National Bureau of Statistics. <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/6rp/indexch.htm> (accessed October 15, 2018)

Table 1. Participants' attributes

Subjects no.	Academic background	Job situation	Annual income (yuan)	Family yearly income (yuan)	Presence of siblings	Child age	Living with parents
Post-80s							
AW	University	Regular employee	40,000	180,000–190,000	None	3 years	Living apart (husband's parents' house: about 20 minutes by car, wife's parents' house: about 20 minutes by car)
BW	University	Regular employee	30,000	80,000	None	4 years	Living apart
CW	University	Regular employee	200,000	300,000	None	5 years	Living apart
DW	University	Regular employee → Telecommuting	40,000	140,000	None	3 years	Living apart (husband's parents' house: about 10 minutes by car, about 20 minutes by walk; wife's parents' house: about 20 minutes by car, about 20 minutes by walk)
EW	University	Regular employee	200,000	350,000	None	1 year	Living apart (husband's parents' house: less than 10 minutes by car, wife's parents' house: about 30 minutes by car)
FW	Junior High School	Self-employed → housewife	0	100,000	None	2 years	Living apart (husband's parents' house: slightly farther than wife's parents' house, wife's parents' house: about 15 minutes by walk)
GW	University	Regular employee	30,000	75,000	None	5 years months	Living apart (husband's parents' house: 5 minutes by walk, wife's parents' house: 30 minutes by walk)
HW	University	Regular employee → Telecommuting	100,000	200,000	None	3 years	Living apart (husband's parents' house: about 30 minutes by car, wife's parents' house: about 30 minutes by car)
IW	University	Regular employee	50,000–60,000	110,000–130,000	None	2 years	Living apart (husband's parents' house: about 90 minutes by car, wife's parents' house: about 20 minutes by car)
JW	Junior College	Regular employee	50,000–60,000	120,000–130,000	None	8 years (2023)	Living apart
KW	University	Regular employee	40,000	120,000	None	7 years (2023)	Living apart (husband's parents' house: about 10 minutes by car, wife's parents' house: about 15 minutes by car)

LW	University	Regular employee	60,000	130,000	None	9 years (2023)	Living apart
Post-70s							
MW	University	Temporary suspension → Regular employee	100,000	100,000–200,000	Existence	13 years	Living apart
NW	Vocational School → Junior College	Regular employee (state-run)	30,000–50,000	60,000–100,000	Existence	13 years	Experienced living together (3 months) → Living apart
OW	Junior high school	Regular employee	10,000–30,000	40,000–80,000	Existence	19 years	Living together (since marriage, husband's parents)
PW	University	Regular employee (state-run)	60,000	120,000	Existence	6 years	Lived together (4.5 years) → Living apart (husband's parents)
QW	Vocational School → Junior College	Regular employee	30,000–40,000	90,000–100,000	Unknown	High school student	Living together (1 year, husband's parents)
RW	Junior High School	Regular employee	50,000	100,000	Existence	19 years (2023)	Living apart
SW	University	Regular employee	100,000	180,000–200,000	Existence	High school student	Living apart
TW	Junior High School	Regular employee	60,000	160,000	Existence	High school student	Living apart

and target texts. Inductive and deductive methods advocated by Sato (2009) were used in the analysis.⁶ The qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA2018 (Release 18.0.8) was used. In addition, the interviews met the ethical review criteria of the author's university.

Results

In the following, the gender role execution is analyzed as an "active practice," in accordance with the analytical framework in the agency approach and gender order theory presented in the "Previous Research and Analytical Framework" section. Focusing on the narratives of post-70s and post-80s Chinese women, we describe the current division of gender roles regarding (1) situations involving the execution of gender roles and the meanings attached to gender role execution and conflicts; (2) conflicts in the execution of gender roles and the discourses and social resources used to justify conflicts; and (3) the meanings attached to the roles and the justification of conflicts.

The situations involving the execution of gender roles

First, we confirmed an orientation toward quality in the gendered division of labor, as both participants perceived that their spouses should share housework and childcare duties. For example, E, a post-80s participant, stated that she uses half of her energy for work and half for housework and childcare, as well as shares the nurturing-related household chores with her husband:

If it is housework, my husband and I do half. Nowadays, it is no longer time for women to take care of the house and men to be outside. In my case, I entertain clients at work while my husband performs housework at home. This is a typical scene from our house. In terms of income, mine was higher than his. (EW)

Nonetheless, with regard to actual gender role execution, some cases are contrary to the ideal. For example, husbands are sometimes responsible for earning income, women may be mainly responsible for housework and childcare, and women are sometimes responsible for providing income, housework, and childcare (AW). Some post-70s women criticized the division of labor by gender, emphasizing that they avoided such division of labor with their husbands in their daily lives; still, MW reported having interrupted her career to focus on childcare due to her husband's work:

My husband's participation in childcare is very, very low. He was rarely home until our child was three years old. Even when he returned home, the children were not friendly with my husband. They are still not friendly toward him, since they come to me whenever something happens. (MW)

As can be seen, both post-80s and post-70s women played a leading role in housework and childcare, regardless of also playing an income-earning role.

⁶This research analyzes textual interview data using the analysis software MAXQDA 2018. First, the data were meticulously read and subjected to open coding. During the process, I centered around secondary analysis themes and executed detailed coding of relevant sections. Subsequently, considering the relationships and differences between concepts generated in open coding, selective coding was undertaken in the creation of categories. When coding, both inductive and deductive methods proposed by Sato (2009) were utilized for open coding and category generation. Sato (2009, p. 96) emphasized that to write a detailed descriptive paper, "it is paramount to build a bridge between the 'language on-site' and the 'language of theory' utilizing the researcher's personal world of meaning." Furthermore, this process can be examined not only from the perspective of "respondents' world of meaning → researcher's world of meaning" but also from the inverse perspective of "researcher's world of meaning → respondents' world of meaning." Sato (2009, p. 96) stressed that the inductive method involves generating concepts through co-authors' verbal data, whereas the deductive method produces concepts by referencing previous research.

Conflicts in the execution of gender roles

The conflicts were summarized as follows: conflicts between paid work and housework/childcare, conflicts between husband and wife, conflicts with relatives, and conflicts related to one's physical and mental state.

Conflicts between paid work and housework/childcare

The analysis revealed that women born in the 1980s actively pursued their careers. For instance, JW stated, "I started working right after postpartum care and could not stay at home for even a day." However, the degree of conflict varied according to the circumstances and social resources available, and the relationship between work and childcare for women was often characterized by a forced trade-off situation. Specifically, pregnancy and childbirth are often inconvenient for companies, interfering with opportunities for promotion and creating conflicts at work. CW, a post-80s women, provided the following excerpt:

At the time, I had a chance for a promotion, and my supervisor asked me about my future plans. I honestly answered that I was going to have a baby. Sure enough, my chances for promotion have gone. (...) All I can say for now is that I will try to balance work and family as best as I can. I also changed jobs. During my year-end evaluation, I told my boss that as a mother and employee, I would do my best to balance work and family to the best of my ability, meet the expectations of both, and work hard until my family was satisfied. (CW)

Are there any difficulties? (Q)

There's not enough time. (CW)

Post-80s women who continued to work described having conflicts when coordinating work with housework/childcare and that being a homemaker did not entail a lack of worries about paid work and housework/childcare. FW described how she became a homemaker.

I have worked as a makeup artist throughout my life. Teachers travel to Shanghai, Beijing, and other large cities around the country to give lectures, and I am sure they feel a strong sense of accomplishment. I wish I could do the same, and I am envious. It is not that I do not want to work now. I must leave my dream for a while until my children grow up. I sometimes think I need to study something. However, it is not easy to study while taking care of a child; there are restrictions here and there, and after much worry, I finally devoted myself to raising my child. (FW)

Hence, although FW is currently focusing on raising her children, she wants to study to improve her career, which leads to feelings of conflict regarding her inability to do so while engaged in child-rearing.

The keyword for the conflicts of post-80s women is "career," but for post-70s women it is "fatigue." NW said, "I never worry [about paid work and housework/childcare]. Sometimes I feel tired. Sometimes I wonder why I have to take care of everything." For post-70s women, career and housework/childcare may not have a direct oppositional relationship; to clarify the reasons for this, we need to present their use of available social resources (e.g., childcare support and workplace support), which is done below in "Conflicts with relatives."

Conflicts between married couples

Post-80s women who continue to work are often aware that they perform most of the housework and childcare and that there is an uneven division of labor between them and their husbands. AW showed signs of being torn between her desire to support her husband's work, her concern about the current imbalance in labor division, and its negative impact on her children:

Essentially, I believe that [child-rearing] should be done 50/50. If I do half the work, he should do the rest of it, and that is how we become a single family. Currently, this situation is unbalanced. The child wants to see his father so badly and gets unusually excited upon seeing him. (AW)

Some post-80s women were also concerned about the impact of their many responsibilities (i.e., housework, childcare, and earning roles) on their marriages, which left them with less time for their relationships. EW said that she used to take walks in the suburbs with her husband and that now this time is taken up by childcare. This demonstrates how paid work and housework/childcare conflicts affect a couple's relationship. This imbalance was also observed in post-70s women, but none of their narratives emphasized time spent as a couple.

Conflicts with relatives

Most interviewees received some type of household/childcare support from relatives, especially parents, which tended to be a source of both support and conflict. DW (post-80s) experienced conflicts regarding differences in beliefs pertaining to child-rearing:

I wish my husband and I could take better care of our children. (...) Because my own educational policy is different from that of my mother and my mother-in-law. I also think that I should be more involved in the upbringing of my child since I gave birth to her of my own free will. The older adults see me and my husband as their children, and because I am the only child, they habitually try to do everything for us. (DW)

The mismatch between the available support and the needs of post-80s women created conflicts between housework and childcare roles. For HW and FH, their reliance on the support of their parents or relatives was a risk factor for conflict and even hindered role execution; specifically, they often assumed that they could rely on parental assistance but experienced times when their parents were unable to assist due to physical conditions or other unforeseen circumstances. They also experienced conflicts regarding their parents' perspectives. EW was told by her parents that she should perform more housework/childcare instead of working outside the home all the time. Although she experienced conflict with her mother-in-law, who insisted that she needed to perform more housework/childcare duties, EW continued to focus on her career as she pleased.

Post-70s women experienced an even greater scope of conflict sources compared to post-80s women, as the sources included not only parents/parents-in-law but also work superiors, as suggested by NW:

[After I married], I began to associate with my husband's family, his brothers' wives and his brothers and sisters. Once married, the relationship becomes complicated. When I disagreed with my mother-in-law, my husband took her side even though I thought he would take my side. (...) As for my friend, when she lived with her mother-in-law and had a fight, her mother-in-law went to complain directly to her supervisor at work. She said that she no longer wanted to live with her mother-in-law. (NW)

In response to her mother-in-law's perspective, NW stressed that she should make concessions to prioritize her family's feelings and emotions.

Physical and mental conflicts

Women reported feeling physically and mentally exhausted when performing housework/childcare roles. AW perceived participating in the interview as a refreshing change of pace, and described her current performance of housework and childcare roles: "Really, life is very boring if all you do is stay at home every day, surrounded by the necessities of life, taking care of your children, and taking care of your husband" (AW).

Although this continued only during her postpartum leave, she experienced boredom and a strong desire to leave the house as soon as possible. EW reported performing income-earning and housework roles and assessed her current physical and mental state as "very tired and completely fatigued." When GW was asked about having another child, she said, "I have not thought

about it yet because I am very tired. I might think about it after I have a little more free time and can forget about my tiredness, but I cannot think about it right now.” She further noted that childcare caused both mental and physical burdens. Thus, post-80s women were responsible for housework, childcare, and income-earning and reportedly endured physical and mental fatigue while still needing to manage their individual lives. Post-70s women reported similar physical exhaustion, as one respondent said:

(...) Mom is quite tired. In a family, the mother is the most tired. I must think about everything for my children. I have to take care of my children at night, and everything else about them during the day. (PW)

Compared with post-70s women, post-80s women were less likely to make statements like “childcare is boring” or “I am bored” and more likely to describe the physical burdens of childcare. There were no negative evaluations of child-rearing roles.

The meanings attached to the roles and the justification of conflicts

Role connotation

Post-80s women positively evaluated their ability to simultaneously perform income-earning and housework/childcare roles and noted that the income enabled them to enjoy a good standard of living. Some also explored the impact of employment on status within nuclear and extended families. EW said as follows:

If you are dependent on men, you will not feel secure. If you can buy what you want with the money you earn, you will not be dependent on men, you will not feel guilty, you will feel at peace, and you will feel confident. You may not know this yet, but for a while after I gave birth, I felt unconfident, similar to postpartum depression. It’s true; I contemplated it not only by myself but also with other moms in my class. We experienced a similar period. I had lost my connection to society, my job, and my direction in life. My confidence would have disappeared if all I ever did was chores for my family and other everyday things. (EW)

Post-80s women also described how their income-earning roles constituted a risk-avoidance strategy, with BW saying, “If I have to leave my husband in the future, I will lose everything [if I am a homemaker].” Therefore, having a job is a protective measure for me. Regarding their housework and childcare roles, some post-80s women recognized this as a woman’s responsibility and agreed with the division of labor by gender, as BW described:

Men should support their families’ finances. Women play important roles in housework and childcare. Women should be responsible for caring for their children and parents. Women should work and earn their own income according to their abilities after taking good care of their families, including housework and childcare, as well as caring for their parents. (BW)

IW provided similar narratives and held a negative opinion of career women, who seemed to concentrate more on their work and less on housework and childcare.

Although post-70s women also emphasized the importance of performing housework and child-rearing roles, they attached different meanings to their income-earning roles and the relationship between their income-earning and housework/child-rearing roles. Post-80s women directly linked self-actualization and income-earning, whereas post-70s women did not directly connect the two, even if they acknowledged the importance of income-earning roles. MW said, “It is important for a woman to have her own income, but she does not need to make lots of money nor earn as much as her husband.”

Conflict justification

The justification of conflicts regarding gender role execution can be summarized into two aspects: mental strategies, including adjustments in one's way of thinking, and the use of resources, including role management and social resource use.

Mental strategies: adjustments to one's way of thinking. Post-80s women tried to justify their gender role execution conflicts through mental measures, such as reaffirming the current division of gendered labor. Specifically, they recognized their conflicts as temporary, postponed their personal dreams for the future, and reaffirmed the benefits of motherhood. EW provides a clear example by stating that the current telecommuting work situation is tentative and could be improved in the near future.

I heard from a friend that it would change when my child turned 3 years old. However, I believe that the day the current situation will improve will come sooner because I believe that the current situation is gradually changing as the child grows older. (EW)

Thus, although she is no longer able to work as she used to, she hopes to resume work and do what she wants when her children are older. As described above, these women described the physical and mental exhaustion they often experienced by playing all three roles; to deal with and justify this, they tried to identify the benefits of the mother's partaking in child-rearing, with HW saying:

I think that the current division of roles is most suitable for my family. If I left my children with my parents, it would not be good for their food and lifestyle habits. After all, it is better to raise children independently. (HW)

Regarding conflicts that arose from the trade-off between paid work and housework/childcare, post-70s women tended to try to accept the current situation rather than hope for future changes; as PW described, "Since I am used to doing it, my husband seems to think that even when he is at home, [housework and childcare] should not concern him much. I shop for daily necessities, vegetables, etc."

Management and use of resources in role performance. Post-80s women confirmed that they made role adjustments with their husbands and utilized help from relatives and workplace resources to execute their roles. In communicating with her husband about role adjustment, CW said:

Since my child started going to kindergarten, we have had more conversations to ensure that we understand each other's feelings. This is the first time I have become a parent and I am raising my child while learning, so if there is a problem, I communicate first to make adjustments. We do not suddenly decide how to do things. (CW)

Meanwhile, EW described how childcare support from parents was an important human resource:

Before we had the children, we [the EW and her husband] focused on what we wanted to do. After having a child, individuals tend to devote more energy to tasks at home. Typically, it is the woman [who makes sacrifices]. In my case, I was able to avoid sacrificing my career because both my parents helped me. This has lessened the impact of my work. (EW)

Likewise, EW said that her parents were able to share childcare roles and that the entire family worked together to maintain the home. Nonetheless, HW received little parental support; therefore, she negotiated with her workplace and used their policies to adapt her career to her situation.

After my child was born, I was forced to leave my job because of my work and family commitments. I left my job once, but after talking to my boss, he allowed me to continue working from home instead of going to the office every day, provided I could keep my clients. (HW)

Additionally, to ensure sufficient funds to purchase child-rearing resources, KW, born in the 1980s postponed the child-bearing period and opted to give birth only after securing sufficient child-rearing

funds. Household resources and auxiliary child-rearing services were purchased during the child-rearing period.

Post-70s women reportedly communicated with their spouses as well but seemed to be more passive than post-80s women. Regarding social resource use, post-70s women described receiving support from their relatives, parents, and external resources (e.g., workplace) more abundantly than post-80s women. PW, a post-70s woman, described her experience: “After the baby was born, my in-laws were so active in childcare that they didn’t even turn to me... We also hired a babysitter and had help from my mother-in-law, so it was never exhausting” (PW). OW further posited that her relatives helped her with childcare, while NW collaborated with her neighbors to drop off and pick up her children from kindergarten. Post-70s women also said that they had abundant workplace resources, as NW mentioned:

The kindergarten was open for long periods throughout the day, so I was able to leave my child early in the morning before going to work, have my child receive all three meals every day, and freely allocate my time throughout the day. (NW)

Narratives on the ease of using support resources, such as kindergarten locations and sufficiency of services, were somewhat scattered throughout the sample.

Discussion

In this study, we examined gender consciousness at the actor level using the agency approach, focusing on the historical context of China’s social structure transformation while drawing comparisons between cohorts. Therefore, we compared multiple female cohorts in terms of their responses to the historical social and structural transformations in China. This section examines the current situation and direction of change in gender consciousness among post-80s and -70s women based on findings regarding the meanings attached to gender role execution, conflicts, and justifications in the “active practice” of gender role performance.

Regarding the current status of role performance, post-80s and -70s women were reportedly primarily responsible for housework and childcare. Regarding gender status-quo perceptions, no noticeable differences were observed by cohort, but there were divergences when comparing them according to the dimensions of connotations, conflicts, and justifications. For role connotations, the post-80s women emphasized the connection between income-earning roles and self-actualization, whereas the post-70s women described their income-earning roles as having a supporting position. For conflicts, post-80s women remarked about a trade-off between paid work and housework/childcare, while post-70s women expressed their “tiredness,” although the cause of such tiredness was not clarified. Regarding justifications, post-80s women relied on their parents as childcare resources, demanded that their husbands participate more in housework and childcare, and actively utilized workplace resource policies, while post-70s women could take full advantage of resources from relatives, external sources, and the workplace, so they tended to be more passive rather than actively managing their gender roles.

Although both cohorts emphasized the importance of simultaneously earning income while performing housework/childcare roles, post-80s women apparently faced more conflict in the role execution processes. Most conflicts were caused by the trade-off between paid work and housework/childcare, leading to difficulties in self-actualization and role management. The self-actualization and management of post-80s women may have led them to what Ehara calls a “strengthening of a sense of self-control” (Ehara 2013), with our findings implying that the “individual” directly linked to a sense of self-control is stronger among post-80s women than that among post-70s women. Thus, in China, where contradictory gender norms (e.g., a societal emphasis on men) coexist with gender equality advocacy, the gendered division of labor oriented toward housework and childcare being done by women may be an outcome of the control by the “individual” of post-80s women, hindering the possibility of concluding that their gender consciousness has become more conservative. This

stands in contrast to the conservative predictions made by Xu (2010), Li (2016), and Aoyagi (2013). This research presents the specific process of the interaction between gender consciousness and behavior and visualizes the contradictions between conservative and liberal tendencies in nationwide survey results. By comparing the meaning attributed to child-rearing behavior by those born in the 1980s with those born in the 1970s, this study concretizes Nameda and Sato (2013) hypothesis that gender consciousness may not always correlate positively with actual behavior. Moreover, it offers an effective demonstration and validation of Li's (2016) theory of gender consciousness for four generations of Chinese women. This explanation serves as a reminder that in future social surveys and analytical discussions, it is imperative to differentiate between the dimensions of behavior and consciousness.

In addition, our evidence shows a strong relationship between labor division implementation and social structure transformations in China. We observed significant differences in the use of social resources by post-80s women (i.e., raising their children during the market economy promotion period) and post-70s women (i.e., raising their children in *dan wei*-based society). When trying to resolve conflicts regarding their roles in childcare and earnings, post-80s women mainly used their parents and private social resources, but they still needed to manage various aspects of the conflicts by themselves. Meanwhile, the post-70s women could easily use *dan wei* resources (e.g., nursery schools) and received social support from their relatives. The average quantity and quality of available services and the stability of the *dan wei* may be one reason that post-70s women did not pursue income as strongly as post-80s women. During the child-rearing period of post-80s women, privatized services were more extensive, but their quality varied according to economic power. In a consumer society where needs are constantly being created, childcare in China has become increasingly intensive in recent years. Therefore, it may be the case that the current demand for more personal investment in child-rearing is one of the factors that has led post-80s women to pursue their role as earners more strongly.

Although research by Jin (2006) and Zhao *et al.* (2016) suggests that the rise in employment rates due to top-down ideological reforms may be temporary, our findings also show that although both cohorts are oriented toward the simultaneous fulfillment of their income-earning and housework/childcare roles, post-80s women tended to place more emphasis on the former. Considering that the sense of self-control is likely to increase in younger generations, it may be the case that younger generations have further empowered themselves as "individuals." Therefore, the conservative aspects of gender consciousness are likely to grow stronger in the future, although the same may not hold true for behavior. Considering the current social situation related to the progress of the Chinese market economy, intensive parenting, and declining birth rates, it is not rational for women to abandon their income-earning roles in the future.

Post-80s women dealt with many of their conflicts through mental reconciliation so that they would eventually be resolved. This provides a glimpse into the risks posed by the accumulated stress experienced by these women pertaining to role conflicts, showing that they may "explode" should they find that their reality does not match up with their ideals.

Our results also show that the social support resources available to post-80s women tend to be limited to their parents and that the receipt of such support may often be largely dependent on their parents' physical condition. Some interviewees stated that they were unable to work when parental support was discontinued. Furthermore, in China, where family oriented values are deeply rooted, those who have a stronger "individual" sensibility are often seen as self-centered and are subject to criticism by society. Therefore, a need remains to examine how the increase in the self-actualization of the "individual" among post-80s women will affect their intergenerational relationships. Data from such investigations will yield important perspectives for a holistic understanding of gender consciousness among Chinese women. Although the current research was focused on the post-80s women as "individuals," I would like to discuss the relationship between husband and wife further in the future.

China has undergone collectivist and socialist market economic reforms. To provide an observation of personal gender consciousness and behavioral characteristics within this grand historical context, this study adopted the novel perspective of subjectivity to explore the tendencies, frustrations, and confusion of Chinese women's gender consciousness and validates the hypotheses proposed in previous

literature. Nonetheless, the generalizability of the results of this study is limited, and further expansion of survey subjects and areas is necessary for ongoing investigation and analysis in the future.

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