The Power of Language: The Female Radical and the Representation of Women in Chinese Society

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The majority of people throughout time and place have operated within some form of patriarchy. Patriarchy is an overarching social system that is experienced through the culture, politics, economics, social structures, systems, and institutions within a given society. These systems ensure the subordination of femininity, the female sex and gender, as well as all people who are perceived to be women.\(^1\) Being female is not the only way in which a person may be disadvantaged in a given society. There are numerous other intersections of privilege and repression that operate within societies; however, this paper will focus on how Chinese women are disadvantaged through systems of power. The main system of power and domination that will be examined throughout this paper is language. Language works to generate and perpetuate patriarchal structures through the creation and assertion of a universal norm as well as various Others. This paper will argue that language is intrinsically related to, informed by, and informs constructions of gender in Chinese society. Furthermore, this paper will illustrate the ways in which language is used to create images and ideas that reflect cultural understandings and beliefs about the ideal woman in Chinese society, as well as punish women who do not meet the necessary criteria.

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\(^1\) The words ‘woman’ and ‘women,’ in many ways, are simplistic as they denote ideas of a binary opposition between males and females. This paper wishes to recognize that gender identity operates on a spectrum and does not contain any fixed ideas, beyond what society dictates, about what it means to be a woman, a man, a trans*, or genderqueer person. However, this paper will utilize the word “woman” to refer to people who are female in gender as deemed by societal powers. This is due to the fact that the large amount of research that has been done on the relation to language and gender has focused solely on the binary ideas of women and men. Further research should be conducted on words associated with the trans* community, however, due to the limits of space and time, that topic will not be examined in this paper.
In order to validate this argument, numerous aspects of language and female representation in Chinese society will be examined. The importance of words and language will be discussed in order to establish an understanding of the power that language has in creating a society’s reality and reinforcing the dominance of patriarchy. Specifically, an analysis of the Mandarin radical for woman (nü), along with the numerous words that utilize this radical, will be examined in order to demonstrate the ways in which language is used to represent women in Chinese society.

The use and creation of language provides human beings with a method to understand and perceive the world. However, this leads to a construction of a reality that is inherently related to structures of power and privilege. Language is also viewed as such an integral aspect of human society that it is largely invisible as a structure of patriarchal domination and oppression. The development and use of language reflects the attitudes, prejudices, and culture of the people who create and utilize it. In Chinese society, traditional Confucian values and beliefs around proper gendered behavioural roles and standards are intrinsically linked to the language employed to describe and create patriarchal attitudes towards women and female sexuality. Therefore, both language and gender are employed to justify political power and patriarchal authority. Through the placement of women in subordinate positions of power and prestige, language works to cement male dominance and privilege in Chinese society. According to the scholar Deborah Cameron, language was largely developed by men and subsequently created from a male point of view. This process of language creation transpired from a position of privilege within the patriarchal system of power, although it was largely elite men who created language while men who were subordinate due to class, age, ethnicity, and other forms of intersecting oppression were subjugated and ignored. The process of language creation, including Mandarin, demonstrates that languages support sexist ideologies and work to benefit the people in positions of privilege and power. Language mirrors the society and its inequalities, as well as

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maintaining those same inequalities through the instruction of language to subsequent generations.\(^7\) Therefore, constructions of femininity and ideas about the ideal woman, which are created through language, work to disadvantage numerous generations of women throughout time. Although ideas around femininity and women do change over time, women remain in marginalized positions throughout Chinese history as patriarchal authority is maintained through numerous avenues, including language.

This paper will utilize the *Oxford Chinese Desk Dictionary* as the primary resource for the translation of words that are classified with the female radical. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize that other scholars and dictionaries may translate these words differently or place more or less emphasis on various meanings. Furthermore, it is important to note that the biases of the connotations associated with words that have been translated from Mandarin to English that are classified by the female radical may have varying connotations within each language and society.

This paper will emphasize the semantic derogation within written Chinese. In addition, this paper will specifically examine Mandarin Chinese, which the People’s Republic of China has declared to be the “standard Chinese language.”\(^8\) Therefore, for the remainder of this paper, the Mandarin Chinese dialect will be referred to simply as ‘Chinese’ and will be the dialect of analysis for gender-related representations and semantic derogation. Although, according to the scholar Charles Ettner, the majority of gender-related discussions have relevance to all dialects of Chinese, especially in relation to the use of the female radical.\(^9\) The radicals in the Chinese language carry semantic knowledge and are able to stand on their own as words in themselves. Radicals are also combined with other components, which typically denote the phonetic element of the character, in order to make another word. However, the semantic derogation of women is most clear in the radicals.\(^10\) This paper will specifically focus on the radical *nü*, which denotes the term ‘woman,’ or ‘female,’ as well as the numerous characters that include this radical in their composition.

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\(^8\) Charles Ettner, “In Chinese, men and women are equal—or women and men are equal?” in vol. 2 of *Gender Across Languages: The Linguistic Representation of Women and Men*, eds. Marlis Hellinger and Hadumod Bussmann (Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 2002), 31.

\(^9\) Ibid.

\(^10\) Ibid., 55.
In Bee Chin Ng and Kate Burridge’s article “The Female Radical: Portrayal of Women in the Chinese Script” and Charles Ettner’s chapter in *Gender Across Languages: The Linguistic Representation of Women and Men*, the authors categorize words that utilize the female radical into four distinct groups: kinship terms of women, terms denoting activities and roles traditionally associated with women, terms referring to the physical attributes of women and feminine beauty, and derogatory terms or terms with negative connotations. This paper will utilize this model of identification and categorization as it demonstrates the different types of words that are associated with the female radical.

The first category concerns women and their kinship terms. Some scholars, including Charles Ettner, believe that words such as *xìng*, which means ‘surname’ or ‘family name,’ which use the female radical in the composition of the character demonstrates that, at some point in time, ancient China may have been a more matriarchal or matrilineal society. Numerous words in this category of kinship terms also examine the intersection of age and gender within the household hierarchy. Words such as *zi*, meaning ‘elder sister,’ demonstrate the hierarchical standing and power of women within a household based upon age. Along with age this hierarchy implicitly indicates a woman’s procreative capacity and marital status. The word *yù* means ‘old woman’ and illustrates the lack of procreative ability within women of a more advanced age. The devaluation of women in relation to their procreative capacity is demonstrated in the Confucian proverb “a man at thirty is like a blossoming flower but a woman at thirty is like cow dung.” As women began to enter into the non-procreative stage of their lives, their perceived value to society drastically decreased from an already marginalized position. However, it is important to recognize that some women as they aged, specifically if they had sons, could acquire status and power within the household. In addition, numerous kinship terms for women demonstrate patriarchal authority. An example of this is the word *shen*, which translates into English as ‘aunt;’ however, it specifically denotes the ‘wife of a father’s younger brother’ in Chinese.

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12 Ettner, “In Chinese, men and women are equal-or-women and men are equal?” 33.
14 Ng and Burridge, “The Female Radical,” 68.
16 Ng and Burridge, “The Female Radical,” 68.
Other examples include terms such as *sao*, which means ‘elder brother’s wife,’ and *pó,* which denotes both an ‘old woman’ and a ‘husband’s mother.’\(^{18}\) While in English these words would simply mean aunt, sister-in-law, or mother-in-law, the Chinese terms denote specific relationships to male figures within the family. This demonstrates that women are defined by their relationship to male members of the household, which perpetuates beliefs and values of patriarchal authority through the direct linkage of women to men through language. These terms of kinship demonstrate that the Chinese language places women in subordinate positions in the social hierarchy.

The second category examines terms that relate to activities that are typically associated with women. Words such as *mā* and *qī,* which mean ‘mother’ and ‘wife’ respectively,\(^ {19}\) denote the roles of women, which are perceived to be some of the most important female responsibilities in Chinese society. The use of the female radical *nü* in the construction of *mā* and *qī* illustrate that the role of mother and wife was reserved for women, which helped to perpetuate patriarchal power and traditional Confucian ideas concerning the appropriate roles of women in Chinese society. Furthermore, there are terms, which utilize the female radical that specifically denote ideas of pregnancy (*rèn*) and childbirth (*mian*).\(^ {20}\) These words are ideologically encoded with traditional Confucian values and beliefs concerning women’s roles in society being procreative and family-oriented in nature in order to continue the patriline.\(^ {21}\) It is also important to note that these terms tightly tie women to nature through their procreative abilities, which further excludes them from the realm of society and culture that is dominated by men.\(^ {22}\) There are also numerous words that employ the female radical, such as *qu* and *yīn,* which specifically relate to the idea of marriage.\(^ {23}\) The word *jià* also translates to mean ‘a woman marrying;’ however, the secondary meaning of this word translates as to ‘shift’ or ‘transfer’ and ‘lay blame on someone else.’\(^ {24}\) This suggests that marriage is related to the idea of a burden on the husband’s family by taking on ownership of the woman. Furthermore, the term *jià* implies that women have limited value in society and actually cause material difficulty and hardship for the husband’s family. The numerous terms analyzed in this

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18 Ibid., s.v. “sao” and “pó,” 384 and 347.
19 Ibid., s.v. “mā” and “qī,” 298 and 350.
20 Ibid., s.v. “rèn” and “mian,” 377 and 310.
22 Ng and Burridge, “The Female Radical,” 69.
24 Ibid., s.v. “jià,” 209.
category illustrates that language is used in the societal construction of gender insofar as these words denote women’s roles, value, and purpose in Chinese society. The crossover of terms in the previous two categories also illustrates the importance and value placed on women for their procreative abilities and roles as mothers and wives in Chinese culture.

Beyond the reproductive role of women in Chinese society, the third section examines the physical attributes of women along with ideas of feminine beauty. In many ways, the words used to describe beauty and physical female features can be viewed as terms that employ the female radical in a positive manner. However, these terms have positive connotations because they work to create the image of ideal woman in relation to Chinese cultural norms and societal standards. An example of this are terms such as 首, 眼, and 郑, which all translate to mean ‘beautiful.’ The fact that three words that employ the female radical all translate to denote beauty demonstrates the importance placed on female attractiveness in Chinese society. Other words that focus on feminine attributes and physical beauty are words such as 率, which means ‘tender’ and ‘charming’, along with ‘delicate’ and ‘fragile.’ In addition, the term 嫩 also translates as ‘tender’ and ‘delicate.’ Lastly, the word 懒 means ‘gentle’ and ‘tactful’ along with ‘graceful,’ ‘elegant,’ and ‘lovely.’ All of the above words relate to ideas around feminine beauty and work to create the cultural norm that ideal Chinese women are gentle, beautiful, and delicate. This highlights the ornamental role of women within Chinese society. Additionally, implicit in all of the above terms is an understanding of quietness, composure, and passivity, which are all highly valued cultural attributes of women in China. These words and subsequent concepts about feminine beauty create an image of the ideal Chinese woman to be physically beautiful as well as submissive, passive, and subordinate to the male members of society. When value is placed on women solely based upon their physical features, their position and worth in society is devalued. The use of these terms enhances the subordination of women and perpetuates the dominance of patriarchal authority because they reinforce ideals of femininity and womanhood that are detrimental to women’s emancipation. By trying to achieve this ideal, women are further

26 Ibid., s.v. “率,” 221.
27 Ibid., s.v. “嫩,” 327.
28 Ibid., s.v. “懒,” 464.
29 Ng and Burridge, “The Female Radical,” 71.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
marginalized because they are typically unable to achieve it; while at the same time this ideal works to emphasize their subordinate position within Chinese society. This demonstrates that the female radical, and the Chinese language more generally, support sexist ideology and leads to constructions and ideals of femininity that are detrimental to the status and treatment of women.

The final category that the female radical is organized into is terms that are derogatory or have negative connotations. According to Ng and Burridge, as well as Ettner, approximately twenty percent of the words that are constructed using the female radical contain negative or derogatory implications.\(^\text{32}\) According to my own research, of the ninety-two words that contained the female radical in the *Oxford Chinese Desk Dictionary*, fourteen percent were negative or derogatory towards women. However, it remains that a significant portion of these terms are negative. Similarly, there is no corresponding set of terms with the male radical that denote such negative ideas and behaviours.\(^\text{33}\) A large number of the negative words that contain the female radical denote sexual immorality, or ideas about certain sexual behaviours that are seen to challenge accepted Chinese social norms and morals. An example of this is the word *chāng*, which translates into English as the word ‘prostitute.’\(^\text{34}\) The word *jì* also denotes a ‘prostitute,’ and the word *biao* or *biaozi* translates into English as both ‘prostitute’ and ‘bitch.’\(^\text{35}\) Lastly, the word *piáo* simply means to ‘go whoring.’\(^\text{36}\) The negative connotations of these words demonstrate that women are not valued in Chinese society if they are sexually promiscuous, have sexual intercourse with someone other than their husband, or lose their virginity before marriage.\(^\text{37}\) The language and connotations around these negative words illustrates the construction of socially unacceptable female characteristics and behaviour in relation to sexual morality. The numerous sexual terms that employ the female radical illustrate that women in Chinese society are primarily viewed as sexual beings.\(^\text{38}\) This explicitly links female sexuality with negative words in order for language to act as a method of controlling female sexuality. Controlling the sexuality of women is seen

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32 Ibid., 66. And Ettner, “In Chinese, men and women are equal-or-women and men are equal?” 34.
33 Ng and Burridge, “The Female Radical,” 72.
35 Ibid., s.v. “jì” and “biao/biaozi,” 204 and 35.
36 Ibid., s.v. “piáo,” 343.
37 Ng and Burridge, “The Female Radical,” 61.
38 Ibid., 63.
to be important in order to maintain the “purity” of the patriline as well as enhance patriarchal power and the subordination of women. These words also demonstrate how language is linked to the constructions of ideal femininity in relation to monogamous sexual practices in marriage for women. This largely occurred by punishing women who do not adhere to this ideal through these derogatory terms and the subsequent representation of sexually promiscuous women in society.

There are other words that utilize the female radical in a negative manner, although not all of them necessarily translate to ‘sexually promiscuous.’ The term dù denotes being ‘jealous’ and ‘envious.’ The word ji also denotes jealousy and envy, although also translates to mean ‘hate.’ The use of the female radical in the construction of these characters demonstrates that certain emotions and behaviours, such as jealousy, are thought of as particularly characteristic of women in Chinese culture. This leads to the negative representation of women in Chinese society as well as constructing femininity as petty and envious in order to punish women who do not adhere to the socially acceptable form of behaviour. Furthermore, there are words that utilize the female radical in their character construction that signify an evil woman. The word jiān translates to mean ‘wicked,’ ‘evil,’ and ‘treacherous.’ These terms demonstrate that treacherous and wicked behaviour is seen to be characteristic of women and female identity in Chinese society. The word yāo translates into English with many meanings, including ‘goblin,’ ‘demon,’ ‘evil spirit,’ and ‘witchcraft.’ A tertiary translation for yāo is ‘seductive’ or ‘coquettish.’ This illustrates that women are seen to be evil, along with the explicit connection between the feminine and witchcraft. Furthermore, the idea of women being witches or evil spirits is also intrinsically linked to ideas of seductive women and sexually promiscuous behaviour. Again, this illustrates the negative representation of women who do not remain in a strictly monogamous marital relationship. These terms demonstrate the fear and prejudice that the patriarchy in many times, cultures, and places have concerning female sexuality. The use of the female radical in the construction of these characters that have negative and derogatory connotations demonstrates that language influences the representation of women in

40 Ibid., s.v. “ji,” 199.
43 Ibid., s.v. “yāo,” 519.
44 Ibid.
45 Ng and Burridge, “The Female Radical,” 73.
Chinese society, as well as the ways in which femininity is constructed in relation to ideas around proper behaviour and the need to punish those who do not conform to these social norms.

Language alters over time, adapting to new requirements, social conditions, and cultural shifts. In this manner, many words take on connotations beyond their original meanings. Numerous words concerning women and femininity have altered over time. The majority of these words have appropriated negative connotations, specifically relating to ideas around sexual promiscuity. The degeneration of terms related to women is frequently associated with the perceived contaminating abilities of coition. Beliefs around the idea that women are naturally polluted through sexual intercourse, menstruation, and childbirth are prevalent concepts in Chinese society. This has also occurred with Chinese words that employ the female radical nü. The term chàng degenerated from its original meaning of 'entertainer' and over time took on negative connotations, which caused it to currently translate to denote a 'slut' or 'prostitute.' The pejoration of the term biao has also occurred in Chinese society. Biao originally meant 'display,' though it has since degenerated to denote a 'prostitute' or 'bitch.' Furthermore, while previous to their degeneration these terms were either classified with the radical rén, denoting 'human,' or were unclassified, they have since acquired the female radical. This intrinsically links the female radical and beliefs around women to the pejoration of certain terms. The pejoration and sexualisation of terms that contain the female radical illustrate that language and constructions of femininity are influenced by each other and work to the semantic and cultural marginalization of women in Chinese culture.

In summation, the written Chinese language supports sexist ideologies and operates as a system of patriarchal subjugation. The Chinese language is intrinsically related to, informed by, and informs constructions of gender in Chinese society. This has been demonstrated throughout the paper through an analysis of the female radical nü. The use of the female radical in constructions of words that relate to kinship terms illustrates the subordination of women within the patriarchal

47 Ibid., 66.
48 Ibid., 71.
50 Ng and Burridge, “The Female Radical,” 61.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
hierarchy and social order. The use of *nü* in the making of terms that
denote female physical attributes and activities traditionally associated
with women demonstrates the way language is used in the construction
of the idealized woman and femininity. Lastly, the female radical is also
used in the construction of negative and derogatory words, specifically in
relation to sexual promiscuity, that works to police and punish women
who do not conform to traditional Confucian and Chinese cultural norms.
The terms that utilize the female radical in their construction demonstrate
how language mirrors traditional Confucian cultural understandings and
beliefs about women in Chinese society and work to perpetuate the
subjugation of Chinese women.
Bibliography


