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# Chinese Proverbs: How are Women and Men Represented?

Jackie F. K. Lee

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## Abstract

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Chinese proverbs, a mode of language that children encounter in their early stage of learning, are important tools with which to instil values and transform the social order. Any biases hidden in them may affect children's self-images and their perceptions of others. The present study examines the images of men and women represented in Chinese proverbs as found in a dictionary published in Hong Kong. Despite the absence of the under-representation of women, gender inequality is evident in the stereotypical depiction of women, who are described as dependent on and submissive to men, and who are valued for their physical charm, chastity, domestic roles and ability to bear sons to continue the family line. For men, on the other hand, values are placed on their talents, friendship building and such personal attributes as bravery, modesty and kindness. Men's fondness for women is neutrally or positively portrayed as unrestrained or romantic, reflecting the sexual objectification of women. Male supremacy is also evident in the common use of masculine generic constructions and male-firstness in Chinese proverbs.

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**Keywords:** Chinese, gender, Hong Kong, proverbs, stereotyping.

# Proverbios Chinos: ¿Cómo están Representadas Mujeres y Hombres?

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## Resumen

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Los proverbios chinos, un modo de lenguaje que los niños y las niñas se encuentran en su etapa inicial de aprendizaje, son herramientas importantes con las que inculcar valores y transformar el orden social. Cualquier sesgo oculto en ellos puede afectar a la propia imagen de los niños y las niñas y sus percepciones de los demás. El presente estudio analiza las imágenes de hombres y mujeres representadas en los proverbios chinos que se encuentran en un diccionario publicado en Hong Kong. A pesar de la sub-representación de las mujeres, la desigualdad de género es evidente en la representación estereotipada de las mujeres, que se describen como dependientes y sumisas a los hombres, y que son valoradas por su encanto físico, la castidad, los roles domésticos y capacidad de dar a luz hijos para continuar la línea familiar. Para los hombres, por el contrario, los valores se colocan en sus talentos, la creación de la amistad y los atributos personales tales como la valentía, la modestia y bondad. La afición de los hombres por las mujeres se retrata de manera neutral o positiva como incontrolable o romántica, lo que refleja la cosificación sexual de las mujeres. La supremacía masculina también es evidente en el uso común de las construcciones de masculino genérico y en primer lugar en los proverbios chinos.

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**Palabras clave:** chino, género, Hong Kong, proverbios, estereotipo.

**L**anguage and culture are intertwined and are not separable (Abdollahi-Guilani et al. 2012; Okon & Ansa 2012). Proverbs from the folk are ‘the mirror of a culture’ (Ennaji, 2008, p. 168), as they can reflect the customs, traditions, values, opinions and beliefs of a particular society. They emanate from people’s experiences, mentality and ways of thinking at a certain point in time. The rich linguistic data found in proverbs enables us to study the cultural beliefs and social values of a society, including its attitudes towards the two genders.

The word ‘proverb’ is interpreted in a broad sense in this paper, including maxims, popular sayings and idioms. The aim of this paper is to examine the images of women and men that are mirrored in Chinese proverbs. It includes a discussion of whether the identity of the two genders constructed in Chinese proverbs reflects their roles in contemporary Hong Kong society, and how teachers can help promote gender equality when teaching Chinese proverbs to young learners.

### **Proverbs and Thought**

Many proverbs are short, well-known random sayings taken from literature, history and famous people like philosophers. They address different aspects of life, including education, work, human aspirations, personal concerns and relationships. Since proverbs are generally regarded as truths and serve as advice for people, they are important tools with which to instil values and transform the social order. Fasiku (2006, p. 51) remarks that proverbs constitute ‘a powerful rhetorical device for the shaping of moral consciousness, opinions, and beliefs’.

The cultural concepts and norms of the language are imparted to children during their learning of a language. Some proverbs have been passed on from generation to generation for hundreds or thousands of years. If they include biased representations of different races, age groups and the two genders, these biases or stereotypical views can have insidious impacts on children’s development in various ways, including distorting their self-image and their images of other people. The present study is based on the principle of linguistic relativity, popularly known as the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis or Whorfianism (Whorf, 1956), which underpins that the structure and lexicon of a language can influence how a person perceives

and conceptualizes the world. Language embodies people's interpretation of reality and can influence their thoughts about reality (Lucy, 1997; Tohidian & Mir Tabatabaie, 2010). Regular encounters with a word or phrase can have an impact on our habitual thought (Lucy, 1992).

Proverbs, in their concise forms, provide us with rich linguistic data to examine the cultural beliefs and social values of a society. In general, a proverb becomes popular if the social experience depicted in the saying corresponds with social expectations. Zhang (2002) observes that almost every aspect of women's lives is depicted in Chinese proverbial lore. There are proverbs representing the traditional cultural expectations of women concerning their behaviours and familial roles, and emphasizing the gender hierarchy of male control over women. In contrast, there are very few proverbs depicting the male gender role. It seems that women were traditionally subject to society's close scrutiny and were expected to behave according to the norms and social values presented in proverbs.

Previous studies on the representation of women in proverbs include Storm's (1992) analysis of Japanese proverbs, Ennaji's (2008) examination of Moroccan Arabic and Berber proverbs and Hussein's (2009) investigation of Ethiopian, Sudanese and Kenyan proverbs. These studies revealed that many proverbs represent an archaic discourse on women, that women are relegated to a secondary position, being confined to private spaces, families and marriage and that women are portrayed as both physically and intellectually fragile. Hussein (2009) concluded that there are strong intertextual and intercultural threads between proverbs and the representation of women's roles, statuses and identity, and that the linguistic resources, as found in proverbs, are used to perpetuate inequality.

Gender representation in Chinese proverbs has also been discussed by some scholars (e.g. Yang, 2001; Zhang, 2002; 乙常青 2007; 李莉、王晶 2010; 李福唐 2009; 錢進 2003; 羅振 2009), who focused on the portrayal of women rather than men. The writers argue that many Chinese proverbs discriminate against women and relegate them to a lower position than men. These proverbs attach importance to women's beauty, chastity and to women resigning themselves to their destiny. Most of these discussions, however, are based on the authors' introspection regarding some proverbs rather than on objective, systematic studies. The few proverbs selected for discussion by the writers themselves may include subjective biases.

### Forms of Gender Inequality

To conduct a systematic, objective study of gender representation in Chinese proverbs, it is deemed important to understand in what forms gender inequality can appear in such discourse. An overt type is quantitative imbalance. As found in other genres, the under-representation of women in school texts (e.g. Equal Opportunities Commission, 2000; Hellinger, 1980; Lee, 2014b; Lee & Collins, 2008; Porreca, 1984) and the predominance of males as central figures in TV commercials (Siu, 1996) suggest that some people still hold to the traditional view that women are of lesser importance than men.

Another form of gender inequality is gender stereotyping. Traditionally, men are regarded as the chief breadwinners of the family, and women are expected to be the homemakers and are engaged mainly in the domestic domain to look after the family. Such stereotypical thinking is present in different genres. Previous textbook studies show that men are commonly depicted as occupying a wider range of social and occupational roles and that females are more likely to be portrayed in domestic and nurturing domains (e.g. Au, 1993; Cincotta, 1978; Law & Chan, 2004; Lee & Collins, 2008, 2009, 2010). In a similar vein, analyses of Hong Kong advertisements have found that women are stereotyped as subordinates, homemakers and sex objects (e.g. Association for the Advancement of Feminism, 1993; Fung & Ma, 2000; So & Speece, 1991).

Gender stereotyping may also be revealed in the personal attributes associated with the two genders. In previous textbook studies, women are generally presented as affectionate and emotional, associated with adjectives such as *afraid* and *annoyed* (e.g. Hartman & Judd, 1978; Lee, 2014a), and are described mainly in terms of their age and appearance (*x years old, little, old, young, beautiful, pretty, tall*) (Carroll & Kowitz, 1994; Lee, 2014a). On the other hand, men are more likely than women to be portrayed as aggressive, argumentative and competitive (Evans & Davies, 2000), and associated with physical and mental strength (*tall, big, heavy, strong and brave*), and with wealth and success (*rich, poor and important*) (Carroll & Kowitz, 1994; Lee, 2014a).

Another common manifestation of sexism in the English language is the ‘generic’ use of masculine pronouns (*he, him, his*), and of *man* and *man-*

compounds in reference to people in general or to people whose gender is unknown. Examples of sexist language can be found in some English proverbs, for example: *Every man has his price; The bad workman blames his tools*. In Chinese, gender inequity is also manifest in the non-parallel use of gendered nouns. For example, nouns with the semantic feature <+masculine> such as 子 (child/son), 兒 (child/son) and 孫 (grandchild/grandson) are the unmarked category, meaning that they can be used in reference to people in general, as in 子子孫孫 (generation after generation; descendants). In contrast, the character 女 (daughter) is used exclusively for females. The non-parallel use of the gendered nouns reinforces the myth that ‘Man will always be the standard against which Woman is measured’ (Farris, 1988, p. 278).

Non-parallel gender representation can also be found in the order of presentation at the syntax level. The Confucian social order relating to the propriety of relationships has been embedded in Chinese word order. The grammatical rule normally requires that the male-gendered term precedes the female-gendered term (Ettner, 2002), which reflects male supremacy. According to Farris (1988, p. 297), the classical injunction ‘婦者，後人也’ (Women are those who come afterwards) is still observed in the Chinese language and culture of today. While the English language also has the conventionalized practice of putting a male-gendered constituent first in paired expressions, the prescribed order is less strictly observed in English than in Chinese. Reversion of the order usually results in an ungrammatical expression in Chinese (Ettner, 2002). Compare 男女平等 (Men and women are equal) and \*女男平等 (Women and men are equal); 父母 (father and mother) and \*母父 (mother and father); 夫妻 (husband and wife) and \*妻夫 (wife and husband). While the female-first versions are deemed ungrammatical in Chinese, they are acceptable in English. The subordinate status of women in Chinese society is clearly apparent from the highly invariable male-female word order.

### **The Present Study**

Proverb learning plays an important part in Chinese education in Hong Kong. The Curriculum Development Institute (2002, 2004) recommends that the learning of Chinese proverbs should be integrated into the key learning

area of the Chinese language at the primary level. Questions on proverbs can be found in the Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA).<sup>1</sup> For example, in the 2012 assessment for Primary 6 students, students had to evaluate the appropriateness of using 一索得男 (having a son at the first birth) and 喜獲麟兒 (the joy of having a son) on a birth-congratulation card (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2012). Considering the importance of proverb learning in one's schooling, it is deemed important for educationalists and learners to understand the hidden meanings that proverbs may convey. Nevertheless, so far, scant attention has been paid to the construction of gender in Chinese proverbs in Hong Kong. Although there are writings on the representation of women in Chinese proverbs (e.g. Yang, 2001; Zhang, 2002; 乙常青, 2007; 李莉、王晶, 2010; 李福唐, 2009; 錢進, 2003; 羅振, 2009), they are based on the writers' introspection on some Chinese proverbs used in Mainland China. So far, there has been hardly any systematic research in this field conducted in Hong Kong. Further, the writings tend to overlook the representation of men. To fill these gaps, the present study made a comparison between the depictions of women and men in the proverbs found in a children's dictionary published in Hong Kong, with the aim of uncovering any hidden gender inequalities that exist in them. It is hoped that the study will heighten the awareness of educationalists and learners of the gender bias and inequality present in some proverbs and of the need to develop strategies for addressing the problem.

In view of the common forms of gender inequality that exist in different media (e.g. Association for the Advancement of Feminism, 1993; Equal Opportunities Commission, 2000; Fung & Ma, 2000; Lee & Collins, 2008; So & Speece, 1991), the following research questions pertaining to Chinese proverbs were examined in the study:

1. Are there more proverbs depicting men than women?
2. How are women and men portrayed in proverbs?
3. How are gendered nouns used generically?
4. Are men always presented before women when both appear in a proverb?



## **Methodology**

The proverbs examined in the study were taken from a dictionary entitled *新編成語辭典* (禰文杰, 2004), which was published by Sesame Publication in Hong Kong. According to a bookshop that specializes in the sale of primary school textbooks (personal communication, 19 April 2011), this dictionary is popular among primary pupils in Hong Kong. At the time of the study, a number of primary schools had this dictionary in their school library for students' use. According to Sesame Publication, the dictionary is one of the company's best sellers and has had reprints every year. The dictionary comprises of approximately 6,500 proverbs. The preface states that through this dictionary, people of all ages can have a better understanding of Chinese cultural heritage and can express themselves more effectively with the appropriate use of the proverbs.

To investigate Research Question 1 concerning the number of proverbs depicting the two genders, all the gendered proverbs were identified and classified based on whether the description was about men, women or both (see examples in Table 1). Only around 4% of all proverbs matched the criteria. To answer Research Question 2 on how women and men are portrayed in proverbs based on the images or gendered roles created, the proverbs relating to women or men were classified into these categories: appearance, age, obedience, chastity, sexual desires/affection, talents/character, marriage/family, family care, friendships and brotherhood/sisterhood, negative image and others. The same proverb could be assigned to more than one category. For example, the proverb 美人遲暮 (a beauty in her old age) was categorized as a proverb on 'appearance' and on 'age'. Regarding Research Question 3 on generic constructions, the study included an investigation of the use of 'masculine' or 'feminine' generic words in Chinese proverbs. Finally, to examine the order of mention for Research Question 4, the study included an examination of the order of gendered words when both women and men appear in a proverb.

The investigator read the dictionary twice in order to identify the relevant proverbs and classify them according to the codes presented above. Intensive training was given to a research assistant, who helped to enter and crosscheck the data. The inter-rater reliability was 0.93.

## Findings

### Research question 1: Are there more proverbs depicting men than women?

Unlike some previous textbook studies which found female under-representation (e.g. Hellinger, 1980; Lee & Collins, 2008; Porreca, 1984), the present study echoed Zhang's (2002) study and revealed a higher representation of women than men in Chinese proverbs. As Table 1 shows, 144 proverbs depict women, and 86 depict men. Nevertheless, if the proverbs depicting physical appearance are excluded from the analysis, there is a more balanced representation of men and women in the proverbs studied, with the ratio being 76:63.

Table 1  
*Gendered proverbs*

Gender	Example	Frequency
Men	難兄難弟 a well-matched pair of brothers 文質彬彬 well-mannered and soft-spoken (of men)	86
Women	紅顏薄命 a beautiful woman has a short life 河東獅吼 a shrewish wife	144
Men and Women	結髮夫妻 husband and wife by the first marriage 善男信女 devout men and women	33

### Research question 2: How are women and men portrayed in proverbs?

#### *Appearance*

As shown in Table 2, over half of the proverbs depicting women describe their appearance (81 out of 144), compared to only ten proverbs describing men's countenance. This suggests that female beauty holds a high social value. Another difference that was noted was that while men's charm lies in their manner and talents, the beauty of women is associated with their

tenderness, shyness and body parts (see proverbs (1)–(13)). Plant and fruit are the common metaphors used to describe women, as in (1) 出水芙蓉 and (2) 櫻桃小口. This finding echoed Hegstrom and McCarl-Nielsen’s (2002) study of metaphors, which found that a flower was used to describe women significantly more than it was for men.

Proverbs depicting women’s attractive appearance:

- (1) 出水芙蓉 as a lotus breaking the surface
- (2) 櫻桃小口 a small, cherry-like mouth
- (3) 閉月羞花 being so beautiful that the moon hides its face and flowers feel ashamed at the sight of her
- (4) 沉魚落雁 female beauty captivating even fish and birds
- (5) 含情脈脈 with loving eyes and deep tenderness
- (6) 嬌羞答答 lovely, tender and shy
- (7) 雍容華貴 elegant and poised, dignified and graceful
- (8) 玉手纖纖 the slender hands (of a pretty woman)
- (9) 明眸皓齒 bright eyes and white teeth

Proverbs depicting men’s attractive appearance:

- (10) 氣宇軒昂 having an imposing appearance
- (11) 文質彬彬 well-mannered and soft-spoken
- (12) 一表人才 a fine-looking man with talents
- (13) 風度翩翩 graceful bearing

Table 2  
*Types of proverbs*

	Men	Women
Appearance	10	81
Age	1	12
Chastity	0	6
Obedience	0	4
Sexual desires/affection	17	10

	Men	Women
Talents/character	23	10
Marriage/family	40	31
Family care	0	3
Friendships and brotherhood/sisterhood	13	0
Negative image	19	18
Other	11	15

### *Age*

Table 2 shows that there are 12 proverbs referring to women's age, but only one referring to men's (村夫野老 rustic, middle-aged and elderly village men). This disparity conveys the message that age, which is closely associated with one's appearance, concerns women more than men. An analysis of the proverbs reveals that women's beauty is deemed important whatever age they are, as can be seen in the following proverbs describing the different age groups of women and their physical attraction:

- (14) 含苞待放 be in bud, meaning 'in early puberty'
- (15) 豆蔻年華 a blooming girl, a maiden of thirteen years old
- (16) 徐娘半老 a charming woman in middle age
- (17) 美人遲暮 a beauty in her old age

### *Obedience and chastity*

Traditionally, Chinese women were expected to preserve their honour and the honour of their family. As seen in Table 2, proverbs about obedience and chastity are exclusively associated with females, with a total of 10 proverbs based on these attributes. The oppressive and prejudicial attitudes towards women are captured in the maxims of (18)–(21) below. Proverb (18) 三從四德 reveals the inferior status of, and the absolute obedience demanded from women in ancient China: A woman was required to follow the three obediences (obeying her father before marriage, her husband during marriage, and her sons in widowhood) and to maintain the four

virtues (fidelity, charm, propriety in speech, and efficiency in needlework and household chores). Proverb (19) 冰清玉潔 refers to the expectation of unmarried girls to be as clean and pure as ice and jade. Proverb (20) 一馬不被兩鞍 reveals the traditional thinking that a widow had to be faithful to her deceased husband and could not remarry. Proverb (21) 三貞九烈 holds the value that, to a woman, preserving her chastity is very important.

(18) 三從四德 the three obediences and the four virtues

(19) 冰清玉潔 as clean as ice and as pure as jade, meaning ‘pure and noble, being a virgin’

(20) 一馬不被兩鞍 a horse doesn’t have two saddles, meaning ‘a widow does not remarry’

(21) 三貞九烈 a woman’s preservation of her chastity

### ***Sexual desires/affection***

As opposed to the social sanctions on women’s chastity, men’s sexual desires or affection for women are more positively portrayed in Chinese proverbs. A total of 17 proverbs describing men’s sexual desires or affection were found in the dictionary (see Table 2). Although there are several proverbs carrying negative connotations about men’s loose morals and promiscuity, as in (22) 拈花惹草 and (23) 問柳尋花, the majority are neutral or positive proverbs, as in (24)–(27).

(22) 拈花惹草 pick flowers and attract weeds, meaning ‘be fond of women and promiscuous’

(23) 問柳尋花 rove among willows and flowers, meaning ‘be loose in sexual relationships, visit brothels’

(24) 醇酒美人 pure strong wine, pretty woman, meaning ‘love good wine and pretty women’

(25) 憐香惜玉 pity and cherish a fragrant, jade-like woman, meaning ‘be fond of women’

(26) 金屋藏嬌 keep a mistress in a splendid abode

(27) 拜倒石榴裙下 throw oneself at a girl’s feet

Meanwhile, the present study found six proverbs about women’s sexual conduct and four about their affection for men in the dictionary examined. As opposed to the tendency to depict men’s sexual interests in a neutral or

positive way, the proverbs on women's sexual pursuits are more pejorative, as seen in proverbs (28)–(31).

- (28) 水性楊花 as changeable as water and willow flowers, meaning 'a woman of loose morals'
- (29) 殘花敗柳 withered flowers and willows, meaning 'women who have lost their virginity and/or who are loose in sexual relations'
- (30) 搔頭弄姿 stroke one's hair in coquetry, referring to the seductive act of a woman
- (31) 神女生涯 the life of a prostitute

The study shows that men's sexual desires are more openly and positively portrayed in Chinese proverbs, whereas the same drives in women tend to be restrained by social conventions, and if they are revealed, they are usually negatively described. The larger number of proverbs depicting men's sexual desires further implies that women are commonly portrayed as men's sex objects in Chinese proverbs. The findings echo Cameron's (1992, p. 208) 'sexual double standard': while women should have no sexual desires, men should be insatiable.

### ***Talents and character***

This study recorded a total of 23 proverbs about men's talents and character, and 10 about women's. Men's qualities, which include bravery, modesty and kindness, are highly esteemed in Chinese proverbs, as shown in the following examples:

- (32) 謙謙君子 a modest, self-disciplined gentleman
- (33) 赳赳武夫 a valiant, gallant man
- (34) 仁人君子 a kindly man of high character
- (35) 血性男兒 a man who has a strong sense of justice and is ready to help the weak

Among the few proverbs about women's talents and character, one says 女子無才便是德 (a woman without talents is virtuous), which reflects the traditional belief that women should not display talents so as not to outperform men. When women demonstrate talents, they are often depicted as 'masculine'. The following are some examples:

- (36) 女中丈夫 as a man among the womenfolk
- (37) 巾幗鬚眉 a woman who acts and talks like a man

(38) 有鬚眉氣 having manly qualities (of women)

### *Marriage and families*

Table 2 shows a more balanced portrayal of the two genders with regard to marriage and the family (40 for men, 31 for women). Nevertheless, as seen in proverbs (39) 大家閨秀 and (40) 小家碧玉, women's physical attraction is an important quality that is mentioned, regardless of their family backgrounds. In contrast, as seen in proverbs (41)–(45), the important qualities for men are their wealth and noble blood. Their physical attributes are not portrayed at all in the maxims about their families.

(39) 大家閨秀 an elegant girl of a wealthy family

(40) 小家碧玉 a pretty girl of humble birth

(41) 世家子弟 the son of an aristocratic family

(42) 公子王孫 blue-blooded young men

(43) 千金之子 the son of a wealthy family

(44) 紈褲子弟 the son of a wealthy family who does not attend to his proper duties

(45) 膏粱子弟 the son of a rich and important family

A woman's major role, as portrayed in some proverbs, is to get married. In the Confucian hierarchical social order, a wife was subordinate to her husband. Some proverbs reflect this hierarchy and show overt discrimination against women. Women were taught to exercise self-sacrifice and to accept their destiny. Women's powerlessness and passiveness are clearly reflected in the following two sayings:

(46) 嫁雞隨雞，嫁狗隨狗 When a woman is married to a rooster, she has to stick with a rooster; when she is married to a dog, she has to stick with a dog

(47) 夫唱婦隨 husband sings, wife follows

A woman's value in a traditional Chinese family appreciated with her producing male offspring to perpetuate the family name. As Mencius, a famous philosopher, said: 不孝有三，無後為大, meaning 'there are three major offences against filial piety, and of these the lack of posterity is the greatest'. Corresponding to this cultural value, the study found some proverbs depicting the joy of having a baby boy, as seen in (48)

一索得男 and (49) 弄璋之喜. Proverb (50) 伯道無兒, in contrast, depicts the misfortune of not having a son.

(48) 一索得男 having a son at the first birth

(49) 弄璋之喜 the joy of having a baby boy (who is given a jade to play with)

(50) 伯道無兒 a man without a son; feeling sorry for a family without a son

(51) 弄瓦之喜 the joy of having a baby girl (who is given a tile to play with)

Gender discrimination is clearly evident in the different metaphors employed in the proverbs about the birth of a baby boy and a baby girl: proverb (49) 弄璋之喜 compares a baby boy to a precious ‘jade’, whereas (51) 弄瓦之喜 compares a baby girl to a ‘tile’. The different metaphors clearly reveal the unequal treatment of the two genders as soon as they are born.

### ***Family care***

It is also noted that some proverbs reflect the traditional gender stereotype that the importance of women lies in their domestic work at home, as seen in (52) 侍奉箕帚 and (53) 巧婦難為無米之炊. No corresponding proverbs about men’s domestic duties were found in the study. The proverb 男耕女織 (men plough and women weave) indicates that while a man’s job was to earn a living by doing farm work, women were expected to stay indoors weaving and taking care of the family.

(52) 侍奉箕帚 perform one’s wifely duties such as cooking and cleaning

(53) 巧婦難為無米之炊 Even a good housewife cannot cook a meal without rice

### ***Friendships and brotherhood***

While a woman’s role, as depicted in Chinese proverbs, was confined to the domestic domain, men’s sphere went beyond their married life. This study recorded a total of 13 proverbs about the importance of men’s friendships and brotherhood (see some examples below). No corresponding proverb about women’s friendships or sisterhood was found.

(54) 四海之內皆兄弟也 Within the four seas all men are brothers



- (55) 手足之情 brotherly affection (as close as hands and legs)
- (56) 稱兄道弟 treat each other as brothers; call each other brothers
- (57) 難兄難弟 a well-matched pair of brothers; two of a kind
- (58) 煮豆然其 boil beans with beanstalks, meaning ‘a fight between brothers’

### *Negative images*

The study found some proverbs that project overt negative images: 19 for men and 18 for women. While those about men mainly concern their lack of talents (e.g. (59) 庸夫俗子), and indulgence in sexual relations (e.g. (60) 遊蜂浪蝶), the proverbs presenting females pejoratively degrade women in different ways. Women are portrayed as gossipy, nosy and loud, as found in (61) 三姑六婆, (62) 村婦罵街, (63) 枕邊告狀 and (64) 河東獅吼. Proverbs (65) 婢學夫人, (66) 老嫗能解 and (67) 婦人之仁 suggest that women are ignorant, incapable and foolishly kind. Some others are about women’s unappealing appearance, as in (68) 色衰愛弛 and (69) 鬢亂釵橫, while some describe how women behave by flirting with men, as in (70) 妖聲妖氣.

- (59) 庸夫俗子 ordinary men without talents or knowledge
- (60) 遊蜂浪蝶 a loafer who has lust for women
- (61) 三姑六婆 women of the lower classes in old China with disrespectable professions, meaning ‘gossipy and nosy women’
- (62) 村婦罵街 village women bawling in the street
- (63) 枕邊告狀 speak ill of others on the pillow, meaning ‘a wife speaks ill of others to the husband’
- (64) 河東獅吼 lioness’s roar, meaning ‘having a shrewish wife’
- (65) 婢學夫人 a maid learns to act as her mistress, meaning ‘not able to learn despite efforts’
- (66) 老嫗能解 intelligible even to a senile woman, meaning ‘simple enough for everyone to understand’
- (67) 婦人之仁 the kindness of women, meaning ‘petty kindness’
- (68) 色衰愛弛 When a woman gets less pretty, love for her is less
- (69) 鬢亂釵橫 messy sideburns and loose hairpin, meaning ‘untidy (of women)’
- (70) 妖聲妖氣 evilly coquettish voice

To conclude this section about how women and men are portrayed in Chinese proverbs, the study has revealed overt gender biases. Traditionally, women are expected to be beautiful, honourable to the family, faithful and submissive to men. They are recognized through the domestic roles that they play in the family, and are negatively depicted as being foolish, nosy and loud. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to be portrayed in a positive or neutral way with regard to sexual desires. They are described as talented, brave and kind. Wealth and the public sphere are the domains of men.

### **Research question 3: How are gendered nouns used generically?**

The study recorded a total of 52 proverbs using literally masculine words for generic metaphoric meanings, but only four proverbs using feminine words for the same purpose. The gap reflects the ‘male-as-norm’ ideology. Examples include Proverb (71) 醉翁之意不在酒, in which the noun phrase 醉翁 is no longer confined to a drunken old man. Instead, it refers to ‘drunken people in general’. Likewise, while 子 can refer to ‘son’ and 孫 ‘grandson’, maxim (72) 子子孫孫 refers to ‘descendants’. The following show some examples of masculine generic constructions.

- (71) 醉翁之意不在酒 The intention of the drunken man lies not on the wine, but on other purposes, meaning ‘having an ulterior purpose’
- (72) 子子孫孫 sons and grandsons, meaning ‘descendants’
- (73) 望子成龍 hope a son will become a dragon, meaning ‘hold high hopes for one’s child’
- (74) 以小人之心度君子之腹 gauge the abdomen of a gentleman with a villain’s heart, meaning ‘being suspicious of others’
- (75) 僧多粥少 There are too many monks and too little gruel, meaning ‘cannot meet the needs of people’

The few proverbs using feminine words generically reveal the semantic denigration of females. For example, (76) 老嫗能解 ‘simple enough for everyone to understand’ implies that old women are ignorant and (77) 婦人之仁 ‘showing wrong kindness’ reflects the stereotypical perception of women as naive and simple. Objectification of women could be seen in Proverb (78) 賠了夫人又折兵, which literally means the loss of a wife and soldiers, and refers to ‘great losses’ metaphorically. This saying

demonstrates that women were traditionally treated as men's property and could be used as a commodity for transaction by their husbands.

- (76) 老嫗能解 intelligible even to a senile woman, meaning 'simple enough for everyone to understand'
- (77) 婦人之仁 a woman's kindness, meaning 'petty kindness'
- (78) 賠了夫人又折兵 lose a wife as well as soldiers, meaning 'great losses'

**Research question 4: Are men always presented before women when both appear in a proverb?**

The findings of this study indicate that 24 proverbs follow the order of the male preceding the female and only six have the order of 'female-before-male'. Some examples are shown below.

Male-first proverbs:

- (79) 公說公有理，婆說婆有理 an old man says he is right, and an old woman says she is right, meaning 'one says one is right'
- (80) 男盜女娼 men as robbers and women as prostitutes
- (81) 才子佳人 a gifted scholar and a pretty girl

Female-first proverbs:

- (82) 怨女曠夫 women and men who are not yet married
- (83) 妻離子散 be separated from one's wife and son, meaning 'with one's family broken up'
- (84) 陰陽怪氣 female-male mystifying, meaning 'queer; eccentric'
- (85) 一決雌雄 to decide who is female and who is male, meaning 'to fight a decisive battle'

Among the few proverbs with a 'female-before-male' order, Proverb (83) follows the generation/age order (妻離子散 loss of the wife and the son). Two involve the term 陰陽 'female-male' (as in (84) 陰陽怪氣), and two others involve the term 雌雄 'female-male' (as in (85) 一決雌雄). Ettner (2002, p. 39) mentions the phonological constraint of 'qing-before-zhuo' ('voiceless preceding voiced initial') as the reason for non-compliance with the semantic rule of 'male-firstness' for the two terms 陰陽 and 雌雄.

## Discussion

Proverbs portray social values and mirror attitudes. The present study found that sexist beliefs are deeply entrenched in Chinese proverbs in various ways. Regarding Research Question 1 about the number of proverbs portraying women and men, it was found that there were more Chinese sayings describing women than men. Nevertheless, over half of the proverbs about women depict their physical attributes. If these are excluded, a fairly balanced number of proverbs portraying men and women exist. This finding suggests that, traditionally, femininity is equated with glamour and physical charm. Gender stereotypes are further revealed in the attempt to answer Research Question 2 about how women and men are portrayed in Chinese proverbs. The study shows that while the value in men is placed on their talents, personal character and friendship building, the beauty in women lies in their physical appearance, chastity, submissiveness to men, nurturing and caring for the family and son-bearing to continue the family line. Some Chinese proverbs have locked women into the role of mother and wife in the domestic sphere, and they have to be submissive and faithful to their husbands.

Do the gender stereotypes and inequalities witnessed in Chinese proverbs, which mirror the history and culture of traditional Chinese society, still exist in contemporary Hong Kong? While the high value placed on women's physical attraction can still be found through such media as educational materials and advertisements (Chan & Cheng, 2012; Equal Opportunities Commission, 2009; Lee & Collins, 2008), with the advancement of Hong Kong society, it is no longer appropriate to view modern Hong Kong women through the traditional attributes. Improvements in their educational and training opportunities have resulted in an increasing number of women participating in economic activities and gaining increasing financial independence. According to the Census and Statistics Department (2014), the increase in the labour force was more significant for women than for men from 1986 to 2013: a rise of 880,400 (or 89.3%) for women and 278,700 (or 16.3%) for men. The growth in the female labour force is partly attributable to the increased number of foreign domestic helpers working in Hong Kong households, marriage postponement and an increased prevalence of unmarried women. From 1981 to 2013, the median

age at first marriage for women was postponed from 23.9 to 29.1, and during 1986 to 2013 the number of never-married women increased by 62.9%. Meanwhile, the number of divorces increased substantially from 2,062 in 1981 to 22,271 in 2013. The number of remarriages of the bride increased from 1,956 (or 4.5% of the total number of marriages) in 1986 to 13,036 (or 23.5%) in 2013.

The unequal treatment of boys and girls reflected in some Chinese proverbs is also diminishing in reality. It is pleasing to find that many parents nowadays treat daughters and sons equally. Statistics show that females receive equal educational opportunities to males, with the former making up more than half of the students (52.3%) attending post-secondary education in 2011 ([Census and Statistics Department, 2014](#)). Valuing sons over daughters is commonly regarded as conservative and outdated in contemporary Hong Kong. Having said that, some traditional beliefs that are passed down through old sayings are still entrenched in some people's minds. The concept of 'male superiority and female inferiority' is evident in some people's preference for sons over daughters. For example, a tycoon who had a burning desire for grandsons was featured in a news report regarding his prayers in a temple for male offspring ([Headline Daily, 25 April 2007](#)). His wish was realized when one of his sons found a surrogate to bear triplet boys. It was noted in a news report that 'the pressure of producing male offspring' was then removed ([Lee, 2010, p. 1](#)). The presence of conflicting modern and traditional ideologies reveals changing social values in present-day Hong Kong.

Regarding Research Question 3 on the generic use of gendered words, the presence of several proverbs using feminine words figuratively to demean women manifests gender inequality. Meanwhile, the inbuilt bias of 'male-as-norm' in a number of Chinese proverbs exacerbates the problem of gender inequality. In order to address the bias, newly coined proverbs using feminine words to replace masculine generic constructions, to include women explicitly can be found in contemporary Chinese. For example, the counterpart of the proverb 望子成龍 (hope a son/child will become a dragon) is 望女成鳳 (hope a daughter will become a phoenix). Although the latter has not yet been formally entered into dictionaries, it is not uncommonly used in Hong Kong society. A WiseSearch<sup>2</sup> of Hong Kong newspapers found 229 instances of 望女成鳳, compared with 2,185

instances of 望子成龍 in the period from 2009 to 2013. Other examples of newly coined proverbs using feminine words as a substitution for the traditional masculine generic words are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

*Proverbs using masculine generic words and their feminine counterparts.  
WiseSearch 2009–2013*

Proverb	Gender	Frequency
望子成龍 (hope a son/child will become a dragon, meaning ‘long for a child to succeed in life’)	masculine	2,185
望女成鳳 (hope a daughter will become a phoenix)	feminine	229
知子莫若父 (no one knows a son/child better than the father)	masculine	22
知女莫若母 (no one knows a daughter better than the mother)	feminine	10
父慈子孝 (a kindly father and a son/child with filial piety)	masculine	246
母慈女孝 (a kindly mother and a daughter with filial piety)	feminine	11

Research Question 4 concerns the order of mention when a female and a male are referred to in a proverb. The findings confirm the traditional ‘male-first’ norm, though it is occasionally violated when the respect for seniority and the phonological constraint of ‘qing-before-zhuo’ are observed. In contemporary Hong Kong, with the higher status of women and people’s increased gender awareness, newly coined proverbs reversing the word order and the meaning are sometimes found. One such example is the co-existence of the traditional proverb 夫唱婦隨 (husband sings and wife follows) and the newly coined proverb 婦唱夫隨 (wife sings and husband follows). A WiseSearch for these two proverbs shows 660 occurrences of the former and 158 of the latter in Hong Kong newspapers in the five-year period from 2009 to 2013.

Proverbs are one register of language that plays an important role in transmitting cultural values and shaping one’s thoughts, including gender attitudes and identities. Attention should be paid to the biased images of women and men that exist in some proverbs. To avoid perpetuation of gender inequality in the learning of Chinese proverbs, children could be given opportunities to critically evaluate the representation of the two

genders, the male-as-norm order and the coinage of new proverbs which use feminine words as substitutes for masculine words. School education should include the acknowledgement of demographic changes, especially women's increasing economic status and independence.

### **Conclusion**

It is commonly believed that proverbs provide advice and wisdom about personal and public matters through the social norms and beliefs presented. The present study, however, found that not all proverbs offer good advice, as there are some that carry within them gender discrimination and stereotypes. It was found that although women are not under-represented in Chinese proverbs, over half of the proverbs describing women are about their physical attributes, implying that a woman's importance lies in her physical beauty. While men are treated with a focus on features such as talents, bravery, friendships and sexual desires, women's sphere is their family. They are submissive to men and are portrayed as men's sex objects. These traditional images and stereotypes, nevertheless, do not accurately represent the status of women in Hong Kong today. The present study also found the prevalence of masculine constructions and the male-first convention in Chinese proverbs. Hussein (2009) suggests that sexist proverbs that denigrate women should be discouraged so as to improve the unhappy conditions of women. From my perspective, a better resolution to the problem would be to encourage learners to critically evaluate the sexist proverbs and heighten their awareness of the coinage of new proverbs in the media so that children may come to understand the Chinese culture and the thinking of previous generations on the one hand, and appreciate the evolution and emancipation of women over time on the other. According to Ennaji (2008), proverbs are imbued with culture, and are worth studying, provided that learners do not take the gender-biased proverbs for granted. It is deemed important for educationalists and parents to pay attention to the hidden gendered messages and help children to develop a heightened awareness of the undesirability of the gender-biased features in some proverbs so as to promote a gender-fair society.

A limitation of the present study is that the investigation was confined to one dictionary, the results of which were based on the proverb entries

selected by the writer and the publisher. Despite this limitation, the findings of the study confirmed the introspection of some writers and revealed the various ways that gender biases are hidden in some traditional proverbs. Further studies involving corpus studies of how proverbs are used in contemporary Chinese and a deeper investigation of people's attitudes towards sexist proverbs could enhance our understanding of the development of Chinese proverbs and how language changes in response to societal changes.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> TSA is an assessment for Primary 3, Primary 6 and Secondary 3 students to provide the Hong Kong Government and school management with information on school standards in the key learning areas of English, Chinese and Mathematics.

<sup>2</sup> WiseSearch is a database that covers the key newspapers and publications from leading Hong Kong newspaper publishers. It includes the daily delivery of 7,000 new articles on local and global issues (*Wisers*, 27 September, 2014).

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