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Cooking Soup to Writing Papers: A Journey Through Gender, Society and Self

By Zenobia Chanⁱ

Abstractⁱⁱ

This paper describes my roles as a housewife, previously, and a doctoral student, currently. It examines crossing the border from the family domain to the university domain from a gender perspective. When I was a housewife, I was stigmatised by society and without any prospects. As a doctoral student, I am considered a worthy woman and my life has been romanticized. The analogy of cooking soup represents my life as a housewife, while writing papers represents my life as a doctoral student. Describing this dramatic transition from seven years as a soup-cooking housewife, to a third-year, paper-writing, doctoral candidate, I will explore two major aspects - both from a gender perspective: (1) What do cooking soup and writing papers mean to a housewife in Chinese culture? (2) How do I experience my new role as a doctoral student, compared to my role as a housewife? Following this discussion, I call for a deconstruction of the femininity of cooking soup and the masculinity of writing papers. The paper closes with an attempt to empower housewives to challenge the dominant discourse that defines a woman as useful or useless in contemporary society.

Key words: gender, China, women's roles

Introduction

A gender-based analysis of the link between the desire to be the perfect writer with the desire to be the perfect soup maker is the heart of this paper. The information provided is autobiographical. My intention is to present my changing role from a housewife, who is stigmatised in the family sphere, to a doctoral student, who is romanticized in the academic field. Gender plays a part in this discussion by virtue of the fact that the housewife's act of cooking soup is feminized in society, while the doctoral student's act of writing papers is masculinized. To begin this discussion, a review of the literature on the role of a Chinese female and the merit of women's voices will be provided. Following this review, a description of my changing role from that of a housewife to a doctoral student will be offered. Cooking soup stems from a disciplinary regimen and is seen as a type of self-construction, while writing papers is a resistant regimen and a type of self-reconstruction. These two contrary life experiences come together to demonstrate how a gender perspective affects my perception of women's

worthiness in Chinese society.

Expectations and roles of the Chinese female

Gender refers not to biology but to a set of social meanings attached to male and female that is a relational, socially constructed dichotomy for distinguishing the sexes (Bordo, 1989). It further refers to a social construction of femininity and masculinity, and indicates the cultural aspect of identity and social relations (Hall, 1990). In Hong Kong, traditional Chinese culture is deeply embedded, and there are context-specific female role expectations based in Taoism and Confucianism. Taoism mentions that maleness (yang) and femaleness (yin) are nearly equally valued: the reservation arises as yin has been conceptualized as more passive, negative and weaker than yang (Ortner, 1974). In Confucianism, the Three Obediences and Four Virtues indicate how women should behave (Teng, 1996). For instance, attaining marital and familial bliss are considered a woman's success and happiness (Tam, 1999). As such, women should strive to be good mothers, which is a socially desirable female role.

Gender roles have been delegated thus: family-centered activities for women, and society-centered activities for men. Women are socialized to place primary emphasis on the family and to obey their husband and honor the specific family roles assigned to them (Hall, 1990). Food preparation has been assumed as the woman's role (Charr & Kerr, 1988). The mother's role of cooking for the family then takes on a normative rather than purely instrumental value. As it is a woman's role to nurture family members, a woman's sacrifice for the good of the family is also considered normal. The fulfilment of motherhood is the measure of women's happiness (Watanabe, 1999).

Hong Kong's westernization -- in terms of adopting certain concepts of individuality and personal achievement -- has in some ways pulled women away from a strictly family-centered identification (Chan & Ma, 2002). But the traditional cultural forces of loyalty and sacrifice continue to exert themselves over women's roles - and will keep them locked up within the family sphere. Conflicts over trying to be both a homemaker and a working woman are emerging (Tam, 1999). For instance, a telephone survey of 731 female staff at one Hong Kong University found that most of the respondents wanted to have a happy, healthy family, but they also wanted more leisure/personal time for personal growth (Ng, 1999).

The merit of women's voices

To give women a voice, we must put women at the center of studies, sensitize people to the reality of women's lives, perceive women's experience as a source of knowledge that can reveal women's voices, and respect women as the authors of their own stories (Harding, 1986; Lewis & Moon, 1997; Oakley, 1980). Autobiography can be

regarded as a powerful and authentic source to represent women's voices (Joyappa & Martin, 1996; Lindsey, 1997). Autobiographical writing produces particular versions of identity, framed by social context and dominant gender relations (Kehily, 1995). Autobiography plays a role in defining and setting the geography of the self and its relationship to the outside world (Elsadda, 2001). As case study can be a powerful tool to capture women's experience (Padula & Miller, 1999), so my own autobiography could be a context-specific, woman's experience reflecting both society's gender role expectations and my own perception of women's roles.

To open up academic discourse to multiple voices and to enable women to find a voice in the academy is significant to revealing the hidden voice (Doherty, 1994). Writing can allow people to see themselves with their own eyes rather than via a representation constructed through the eyes of others (Cubbison, 1997). Writing mediates the relationships between the self and lived experience (Ray, 1998). Writing shares the private events that can express our feelings and share intimate thoughts (Balk, 2000). Writing about a traumatic experience can increase a subject's well-being and immune functions (Joplin, 2000).

Organization of the paper

This paper comprises four sections. The first deals with how I became an ideal housewife, and how the act of cooking soup functioned as a disciplinary regimen and a means of self-construction. This section explores my own internal gaze as well as society's external surveillance, both of which reinforced my commitment to continuing to cook soup. The second section discusses how, after I began my doctoral studies, the role of cooking soup was replaced with writing papers - which now functioned as a resistant regimen and a self-reconstruction, as I sought to shape myself into an ideal doctoral student. The third section discusses three points: making a gender-based analysis of my changing role; revisiting the ideas of cooking soup and writing papers; and deconstructing the split between the useful and useless woman. The paper ends by pointing out limitations and significance.

I was a housewife

Between 7:30 and 8:00 every morning, I would go to the market to buy food -- fresh vegetables, meats and fish were all carefully selected. I did this in order to cook soup for my son -- every morning from the time he was 6 months old until he was 5 years old. In Chinese society, 6 months is considered an appropriate age for a child to absorb various kinds of nutrition through soup. When my son turned 5 years old, I could no longer cook soup for him because I had to go to the university every day. Before discussing this drastic change of my role, the meanings and functions of cooking soup should first be

explored.

The symbolic meanings of cooking soup

There are four major symbolic meanings of cooking soup. First, cooking soup served as an instrument to maintain my son's good health and to provide a disciplinary regimen in my striving to be a good mother. Second, from a qualitative point of view, in Chinese society, being an ideal and outstanding housewife is considered a requirement for the development of a child's good characteristics like cheerfulness, joyfulness, a positive attitude and optimistic traits which can be realized by eating the right kinds of nutritious soup. Third, in terms of a quantitative view, the more weight my son gained, the more varieties of soups I had to cook for him. In short, the measurable outcomes of keeping my son healthy through the means of cooking soup would be the most effective indicators of whether I was an ideal, outstanding or even a successful housewife in Chinese society.

Metaphorically, cooking soup represented how much I loved and cared about my son; it had gone beyond simply meeting his basic need for food. To a large extent, performing this task was an attempt to conform to social expectations of a mother's role, and eventually the ability to cook soup became the criteria for measuring whether or not I was a good mother.

From the marital viewpoint, cooking soup became a means of increasing my bargaining power with my husband -- a traditional, well-educated man who believes that a good mother has to know how, and be willing, to cook soup for the family every day.

Cooking soup can be considered a housewife's most important task, as compared to other housework -- such as sweeping the floor, ironing clothes, washing dishes, etc. -- because it can significantly affect the health of family members. For example, family members might easily complain that common ailments like sore throats, low fevers and poor concentration were due to a lack of the right soup every day.

The functions of soup

The classifications of Chinese food and medicine currently in use have their roots in the Yin-shan cheng-yao (YSCY), or "Proper and Essential Things for the Emperor's Food and Drink" (Buell & Anderson, 2000), a dietary manual from the 1300s. In the YSCY, each food was placed into one of five categories: Je, "heating"; Wen, "warming"; P'ing, "neutral"; Liang, "cooling"; and Han, "chilling". From my own understanding and definition of the functions of cooking soup, I would divide foods into four categories.

In order to build up my son's body mass, and considering the rapid growth of a child from time of birth until six years old, I decided that the soups I cooked for him should contain meat or fish as a main ingredient to ensure adequate nutrients for healthy growth.

After growth came prevention of sickness. I was a registered nurse working in a hospital before my son's birth, and as I was responsible for the care of 40 patients in the medical ward, I was quite sensitive to different symptoms of illnesses. After quitting my nursing job, the major thrust of the housework I did every day was guided by my knowledge and experience as a nurse. I applied this to the home setting as well as to the care of my son in order to keep him from getting ill and to promote better health for him.

The cooking of soup was a common topic among housewives chatting in the park. Among the circle that met in my neighborhood park, I was the well-educated one. No one wanted to discuss academic issues or social events in this circle; instead, the hottest topics were family matters such as cooking soup and rearing children. We always competed with each other, striving for the position of Number One Housewife by showing the greatest ability in cooking soup for their families. I was a perfectionist who always wanted to be the top in every arena. Thus, I was determined to strive for the medal of "best housewife," and cooking soup was the most effective way to construct and ensure this identity I had chosen for myself.

Becoming the best housewife by means of cooking soup

Fulfilling my desire to be the best housewife was achieved in several steps: buying fresh ingredients for soup in the wet market every day; seeking advice from vendors who had experience cooking soup; watching as many cooking programs on TV as possible in order to collect as many soup recipes as possible; and going to three different herbalists in order to collect as much accurate, useful information as I could about cooking nutritious soups that would strengthen my son and keep him healthy.

I would assess his food intake and observe the nature and quantity of his urine and faeces. Also, I would compare and contrast the effects of different soup recipes, in terms of his appetite and the color of his face, in order to determine the suitability of these recipes for my son. I even sought to measure the effects of different soup recipes by inviting my relatives to cook them for their children. If those relatives returned positive feedback on the recipes I recommended, I would not only feel very proud, but also it could further my quest to become known as an ideal housewife within my social circle.

Based on the above illustrations of my attempts to enhance my soup-cooking ability, one can conclude that the feminization of cooking soup served as a most effective means to discipline my behavior and to play a part in constructing my identity as an ideal Chinese housewife. However, even though I was recognized as an ideal housewife in my social circle, I was not yet visible in the larger society because of the devaluation of housework. When my mother took over my role of cooking soup for my family and supported me in my desire to become a doctoral student, the second part of my life began. Now came the transition to writing papers, which is recognized as masculine work.

My mother

The mother-daughter relationship is highly significant in many cultures (Rastogi & Wampler, 1999). Even modern infant research has proved that the first attachment and internalization during infancy is with the mother (Turkel, 2000). Daughters may acquire a motherly consciousness -- such as internalizing the message that they must learn to sacrifice themselves for others (Watanabe, 1999). Daughters tend to understand their similarity to and dependence on their mother (Levissee, 2000). My mother took over my role as soup cook and helped to free me from the family domain. Without her help in taking care of my son, I could not have taken up my studies. The next section will discuss the radical change in my role.

I become a doctoral student

The experience of changing from cooking soup to writing papers was panicking and unforgettable. Although I was an experienced housewife, I had rarely written anything. In the first few months of university, everything seemed very new to me. No more wet market as my daily hang out and housewives as my peers -- only many cool faces of academia, journals and computers appeared in front of me one by one. The topic of competition shifted from the ability to cook the best soup for my son to the ability to write the best papers for international publication. As a housewife used to managing the family domain for seven years, it was not easy to adapt to and survive in the university.

My determination to now become an ideal female doctoral student now emerged. To explain how I developed such a strong determination to pursue my studies and how I struggled with my changing role, several aspects of my university life will be presented: the first day of enrolment; moving from the periphery to the center; pre-writing papers and participation in conferences; and the process of picking up writing.

The first day of enrolment

From the first day of my enrolment in the doctoral degree course in February 2000, everything seemed novel and exciting to me. I first went to the registration and examination department to pay the school fee and obtain a student handbook. The staff was polite and the first sentence spoken to me was "Are you enrolling for the postgraduate course?" The term "postgraduate" carried special significance for me; it represented a promotion of sorts from my former, inferior, status as a housewife. What a great feeling! My identity really changed on that day. The day before I, as a housewife, was just a useless woman as perceived by a majority of people, but there seemed to be some magic power in academia that could change me into a useful woman. I was wholly addicted to that romanticized idea. A deconstruction of my old self-identification as a

housewife and a simultaneous reconstruction of a new one as a doctoral student took place, simply from crossing the physical boundary from my home into the university.

From the periphery to the center

In the Department of Social Work, some professors commented to me that I was lucky to be entering the university to study again. That statement seemed to expose an underlying belief that a housewife could not take up doctoral studies and lacked the ability to conduct research. A strict dichotomy between family affairs and academic study was strongly reflected in the statement. My immediate inner response to such comments was mixed. I had questioned myself whether I could meet the demands of this program or not. Thinking for a while, I firmly decided to strive for excellent results in order to disprove this negative view of a woman who has been a housewife for several years. I also wanted to demonstrate that any classification of human potential and ability based on sex is full of gender bias and tunnel vision.

Over the past two years, I passed the comprehensive examination required by the university, becoming a Ph.D. candidate in the 13th month. The average time required by other doctoral students in my department to obtain this qualification varied from 18 to 36 months. I also succeeded with my research proposal in the 19th month of my studies, while the average time required by other students was between 24 and 48 months. In June 2002, I will complete my doctorate degree, 30 months from the time I began. The details of my progress prove conclusively that having been a housewife prior to becoming a doctoral student created no disadvantage for me when compared to male students and other working female students.

Along with writing papers, I reasoned that the most effective means for me to reconstruct myself in society's eyes as a useful woman would be via participation in academic conferences. This was the next step in my fight for visibility and my movement from the periphery to the center of the academic realm.

Conference participation

At my university, many different academic conferences are held each year on topics such as philosophy, translation, religion, anthropology and so forth. I enjoyed attending these conferences not only for a sense of satisfaction and recognition, but also to express my resistance to being delegated to the bottom rungs of the university.

To make myself visible at these conferences, I gathered my courage and began asking questions in hopes of demonstrating my intelligence to the presenters, who always sat at the center and were often senior professors of the university. I, on the other hand, as a first year research student, was normally treated as a sideboard at the conferences. It became a type of resistance: keeping silent would amount to complicity

with the system that sought to suppress my voice and oppress my behavior. This was the first important thing that I learned from these conferences: how to ask about crucial issues or point out gaps in presentations. This garnered me a degree of recognition from these – a recognition in the sphere of academia that became a substitute for my former recognition as an ideal, outstanding housewife in the family sphere. Although it would last only for a short time, I treasured being visible on that big campus.

After participating in this manner at several conferences, the conference chairs or other distinguished scholars began to remember me, and often encouraged me to continue. This motivated me to keep up my efforts, preparing questions prior to conferences in order to further my strategy of recognition and resistance. Writing and presenting papers of my own became my new goal, which I decided to pursue seriously as part of my university career.

Learning to write

I seldom wrote any papers before taking up my doctoral studies. In order to obtain my bachelor's and master's degrees, I was required to submit only fifteen (or fewer) assignments for each, as the courses placed much more emphasis on examinations. When I started the doctoral program, I found that writing was foreign to me. I had to work hard to make my papers more readable and publishable -- especially since the field of social science is so international in its scope, and places so much emphasis on academic merit.

It was important to have ability in writing papers in order for getting myself to be the top students among my peer groups in the same department. Then, I developed several strategies to enhance my ability of writing. Learning to write was to write continuously. From the very beginning, when my thesis supervisor required me to hand in a monthly concept paper with a length of 10,000 – 20,000 words, I felt very shock to hear such requirement for a Ph.D. student. I had asked myself how I could fulfill this requirement as I just changed from the role of a housewife to a doctoral student. How could I pick up this task quickly? An additional problem occurred that the topic of the first concept paper was about the relationships among the social development, social welfare and social work that I was not trained in such discipline. I tried to ask myself how I could write such a lengthy paper under such a broad scope of the topic. Since I was lack of the concepts for discussing this topic, what I could do was to read as many relevant books as I could during the daytime period in the university. After that, I would make a literature review and then borrowed other related books again. Every day, I read the textbooks from 8 pm to 3am without skipping the whole course of the study. Finally, I could really understand that hardworking and continuous learning was a key to success no matter how difficult it was.

Concluding both the experience of cooking soup and writing papers, they were so

significant to me particularly when I was a housewife and a doctoral student respectively. A thorough discussion will further be made.

Discussion

Learning to write was the best way for me to reconstruct my identity as an outstanding doctoral student. The first result of this change was the termination of my housewife's role. Taking up doctoral studies allowed me to exchange the feminization of cooking soup for the masculinized pursuit of writing papers, as the latter is so much more highly valued by men in mainstream society. Frankly speaking, this change of roles was not free from moments of panic. I would now like to discuss three aspects of this transition: a gender analysis of the change; another look at cooking soup and writing papers; and a deconstruction of society's divisions between what it considers a useless and a useful woman.

A gender analysis of my changing role

Changing my role from housewife to doctoral student, from a family to a university environment, and from cooking soup to writing papers, all involved an interplay of internal conflict and external pressures. In terms of the internal conflict, I had to convince myself that I had the right to be a student again, that my value did not rest merely on how many types of soup I could cook, and that my femininity could be maintained even though I no longer cooked soup.

The external pressure came from several angles. My sister-in-law, for example, a 38 year-old secondary school teacher, said that my son would suffer a lot because I would no longer be a good mother. My studies were an individual matter, but they also related to my family -- especially to my mother, who took over many of my childcare responsibilities. My in-laws did not recognize my right and ability to enter university; they believed I should be locked up at home, caring for their son and grandson according to Chinese tradition. As for my neighbors and friends, they too expressed some disapproval of the change in my role. Some suspected that I was experiencing marital conflicts with my husband, and that studying was a way of gaining independence and obtaining bargaining power through knowledge. Others thought that I regretted marrying early, and that I was trying to recreate an experience of single, early adulthood. Some even commented that I was being irresponsible, disloyal and cruel to my family. Even without these comments, at the beginning of my changing role and my crossing the border from the family to the university, I experienced the conflict between being a housewife, a university student, and a combination of both.

The feelings I experienced at that time - guilt over not performing my housewife duties; excitement over my liberation from the family sphere; uncertainty over entering

the university; the mixed responses from others and from myself - all of these created for me a lot of self talk. To name a few examples, when I stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom at the university every morning, I would tell myself that I had to work hard and complete the tasks related to writing papers that day. As I walked through campus, I talked to myself about how I had to complete my Ph.D. as fast as I could, to break the university record and to try to win awards for an outstanding thesis. I had many dreams about the how my doctoral studies would proceed. The main and recurring theme, however, was always to be a top achiever.

To fulfil these dreams, I had to write more papers, present them at more conferences and have them published in more international journals. Writing became my major task in life - replacing the functions of cooking soup. Writing papers was extremely significant to my self-identity and sense of worthiness.

Revisiting cooking soup and writing papers

During these 27 months of self-reflection, I found that cooking soup was similar to writing papers in light of a gender perspective in four ways: Both cooking soup and writing papers require the self-discipline and persistence necessary to performing a task regularly. Without trial and error, you would never know how to cook good soup; without practice, you can never learn how to write effectively. Both require creativity: cooking soup needs different combinations of ingredients in different quantities; writing papers requires focus on different topics and themes depending on which central ideas you want to present, and requires different lengths, styles and tones according to the audiences and journals for which one writes. Both are arts that incorporate scientific skills. Cooking soup requires analysis of the nature, desired functions and purpose of the soup before cooking it, while writing papers also requires careful crafting in order to deliver the message that can inspire or move others. Both are a continuous engendering process. Cooking soup has been labelled woman's work, while writing papers has been classified as a manly task (as writing wields power, consists of knowledge, and can be a tool for men to acquire power and climb the social ladder in Chinese culture). Due to the westernization and globalization of Hong Kong, women are being given more chances to receive a higher-level education. The old myth that only men are deserving of such an education is waning.

Writing papers appears to be superior to cooking soup because of these differences between them:

- (1) the well educated peer vs. the poorly educated peer;
- (2) professional knowledge vs. common sense required to perform the task;
- (3) a license required to enter the field vs. no license required;
- (4) an independent role vs. a dependent role;

- (5) a Ph.D. student can more easily become a housewife than vice versa; and
(6) the very small number of elite female academics vs. the large number of housewives in society.

Women who spend their time cooking soup are regarded as useless because this task is related to the family sphere, is considered non-productive, and is perceived as a simple task. These women are labelled as being closer to nature. Women who write papers are viewed as useful because writing papers is related to the academic sphere, is considered productive work and is perceived as a sophisticated task. This category is considered closer to culture. To share my experience as a case study and to rethink the classifications of housewife and doctoral student are the first steps; to cross the border from the family to the university is the second step; but most importantly, deconstructing the split between a useless and a useful woman must follow.

Deconstructing the split between a useless and a useful woman

Gender differences and gender discrimination are nothing new. However, limiting us to external, macro analysis of such differences and discrimination will not add new, context-specific knowledge of gender stereotyping to that, which already exists. Within any woman's life, she will gain a diversity of experience that is all gender related – whether it is cooking soup or writing papers. The fragmentation of a single woman's experience is a fact, and every fragment represents different gender ideas that come into play at that specific time, within the environment of those specific events, and in relation to the others present at that moment. The in-depth exploration of a single case can reveal much about our cultural norms, human interactions and self-perception. As this is the case, reflecting on one's own life experience paints a vivid portrait of how gender perspective affects one's behaviors and the interpretation of one's worthiness.

Conclusion

The story of my experiences with cooking soup and writing papers has both limitations and significance. The limitations of this paper should be declared first. This adopts a life history approach but is not a comprehensive review. Rather, it is a purposive selection of some representational personal experiences. Its contents do not aim to generalize or to induce any concepts or theories. My experience in these two roles is offered as a means for illuminating some of the ways in which gender impacts women's roles in Chinese society.

The significance of this paper is threefold: to describe how women's experiences can provide a foundation of knowledge; to challenge the view that work within the family is non-productive while work in academia is, and to insist that women have the right and ability to cross that border; and to call for deconstructing the artificial split

between "useful" and "useless" women imposed by patriarchal society, by challenging its conceptualization of women's worthiness.

My docile voice

It is not easy for a woman to obtain a post in academia (Ward, 2001). As I finish this paper, my thesis is also almost finished and my degree will be completed in August 2002. What are my prospects after graduation? Will I be able to find a position in the university? Will the decision-makers of my university offer me employment? Will they decide that the seven years I spent as a housewife makes me a candidate who is not academic enough? There are too many uncertainties. Of one thing I am very certain: I must be strong and work even harder instead of mourning or giving up. However, there are moments when I cry from the fear that after graduation will be the start of unemployment. I have been financially dependent on my husband since we married when I was 23. I want to share in the financial responsibilities for my family. Not earning money when I was a housewife was acceptable because my relatives, friends and society considered my role in the family domain acceptable. I will soon be a woman with a doctoral degree, and will be subject to social expectations that I be productive in financial terms. These expectations make me feel suffocated. What can I do? I need a place in academia, because I have to continue revealing women's voices -- for others and for myself!

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