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Akemi Alden

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One-Child Policy Propaganda: An Analysis of How Chinese Propaganda Depicts and

Reconstructs Female Identity

Communication Studies Capstone

University of Portland

Akemi Alden

Supervised by Dr. Natalie Nelson-Marsh

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Abstract

The following study works to gain a better understanding of the reconstruction of female identity through the communications and depictions in propaganda of China's one-child policy. With this in mind, a critical discourse analysis was conducted of 22 propaganda ads from the era of the one-child policy. With the communication theory of identity serving as a framework, three themes emerged from this analysis; propaganda depicts a forced identity, responsibility, and gender stereotypes. This research reveals the need for more public images that make less stereotypical generalizations and an understanding that social influences as public as propaganda can affect the reconstruction of identity to fit the expectations as portrayed.

Introduction

China introduced its infamous one-child policy in the late 1970s and is known for its seemingly extremist birth quotas. Through their propaganda and “incentive programs”, China intended to successfully control the country’s population. The projected outcomes were far from what China aimed to achieve with the implementation of the policy and are still heavily understudied, specifically its effects on women. In the context of the era of the one-child policy (late 1970s – early 2000s), three themes emerged within literature that calls for the needed further study of female identity reconstruction. These themes include: gender inequality, shaming and blaming, and forced identity. Through this intervention project, the end results will consist of proposed slogans and advertisements for China’s current family planning policies that are not gendered and do not place value on one sex offspring and children over the other.

Literature Review

Theory

Communication theory of identity (CTI) “draws on the notion that identity is based on social categorization and shared group memberships” (Hetch and Lu). Societal norms and practices are internalized in the form of social identities based on social categories. CTI theorizes a person’s sense of self is part of their social behavior and the sense of self emerges and is defined and redefined in social interaction and influence. CTI also centers “identity as relational and takes into consideration identity as a discursive process” (Hecht and Lu, 2014). CTI will be the framework to discuss and discover how social interaction and influence surround China’s family planning policies redefine female identities in China.

Gender inequality

Gender inequality remains a prevalent issue within Chinese culture and society. These inequalities are apparent in public media, governmental regulations, and cultural expectations. During the height of China's infamous one-child policy, women and girls were hugely discriminated against and the overt sexism persists. Males are valued over females in Chinese culture and this is portrayed in China's naming practices. Scholars Patrick Shaou-Whea Dodge and Elizabeth A. Suter write of patronymy, a gendered phenomenon in which "a person's name is derived from the name of a father or paternal ancestor". Dodge and Suter also refer to previous studies of marital name changing which found that this practice reproduces the gender inequalities laced into patriarchy. Women in China are expected to take the name of their husband when they marry, meaning that their own name, their maiden name, disappears. Continuing the family name and legacy is greatly valued by Chinese families, therefore, having a son who will marry and have more children to carry the family name is ideal (Dodge and Suter, 2008). This cultural reliance on males is what led to the gender imbalances of the one-child policy.

China introduced the one-child policy to control the increasing population in 1979. This policy limited urban families to be permitted to have one child and rural families to have 1.5 children, the 0.5 signifying a female child (Ebenstein, 2010). With restrictions on the number of children a family could have, families desired even more so to only have sons. Families began to selectively abort, prematurely kill, abandon, or give away baby girls in an effort to ensure compliance with population control policies and laws (Dodge and Suter, 2008). This led to China's case of 'missing girls' (Ebenstein, 2010), the distorted population sex ratio of males to females. (Li, Yi, and Zhang 2011). Families desired to only have sons and if a family had a girl

as the first-born child, in rural areas, the female child would likely remain as an unregistered child until the family had a son. “This is because, since the mid-1980s, villagers can legally have a second child if the first is a girl. However, if the family’s second child is a girl, then parents may decide not to register the second daughter until after a son is born, and then formally register the son as the “second” child” (Shi and Kennedy, 2016).

Shaming and blaming

In a male-dominant and male dominated society, females are under the most scrutiny for their actions and are considered the sole person responsible for child-bearing. If women did not or do not meet their husband or family’s expectations as the child-bearer, they are subjected to copious amounts of shame and blame. In 1982, a rural woman named Liu Xiufang killed herself after being subjected to incessant abuse by her husband and mother-in-law (Anagnost, 1988). The husband and mother-in-law attributed the abuse to her failure to bear sons. Liu Xiufang had given birth to three children, all girls, and after her second child she had attempted to practice contraception in accordance with the China's birth policy. Her attempt was met with violent opposition by her husband and mother-in-law, as they still wanted her to have a son. At the birth of her third daughter, Liu Xiufang was barely able to keep her husband from killing the infant but then killed herself 100 days later (Anagnost, 1988).

Xiufang’s story is not unusual, Chinese media regularly publish letters from women who are victims of family violence resulting from the tensions produced by attempts to meet state-imposed birth quotas. “These letters, despite the violence they describe, are all monotonously alike. They invariably describe marital happiness disintegrating into a nightmare of recrimination and physical abuse after the birth of daughters” (Anagnost, 1988). The abuse and violence these women face stem from their family’s belief that they have not succeeded as a woman or a mother

if they are unable to produce a male child. This is a violent form of shaming that is a reality for some women in China. Women face being shamed and blamed if they deviate from the cultural expectations of their country and of their family. The familial and societal practices such as abuse or shaming form and reshape identity of women in these families.

Forced Identity

The shaming and blaming females face contribute to loss of self-identity and the consequences of the one-child policy lead to the creation of new identities for females in modern China. “Shengnü” has become a popular term for women in China and its loose translation to English is “leftover woman” (Feldshuh, 2018). The Ministry of Education defines ‘shengnü’ as highly successful unmarried women over the age of 27 with advanced degrees. With the surplus of men resulting from the one-child policy era, marriage rates are down in China. Instead of blaming the older generations that created and implemented this policy or blaming the parents that had sex-selective abortions or abandoned babies if they weren’t boys, women are blamed for marriage market challenges through sexist narratives and terminology. Shengnü has become a derogatory term and “can also be viewed as an artificial construct created through socially generated gender stereotypes and furthered through media messaging” (Feldshuh, 2018). The groups of women that achieve academic accomplishments and succeed professionally are not recognized for their capabilities, but rather for the untrue claim that they are ruining the future of China by not marrying and having kids in their 20s (Feldshuh, 2018). Through the public portrayal of shengnü in popular Chinese television shows, their individual identities are suppressed, and they are reidentified by Chinese society as a shameful population. “Shifts in marriage practices in China do not constitute a crisis, nor is late marriage a problem that ‘shengnü’ are responsible for resolving” (Feldshuh, 2018).

This phenomenon of shengnü women is relatively new, but the practice of labelling and assigning negative or derogatory identities to groups of women in China is not. When the one-child policy was announced, the government used language in its official statement that identified women as the “problem” for the population increase and the need to reduce numbers (Li and McKerrow, 2019). The policy also stated that those who understood and followed the policy would be considered “rational and considerate human beings”, implying that those who did not, were not (Li and McKerrow, 2019). The Chinese government is assigning identities to females by labelling and categorizing them without taking into considerations the obstacles they may face in attempting to follow this restrictive policy, such as failed birth control and unplanned pregnancies.

Not only were there legal ramifications for women who were unable to adhere to the policy, but they were reidentified within their towns, families, and individual cultures. In smaller, rural villages in China, they were able to have more than one child, if their first child was a girl (Greenhalgh, 1994). But if a woman was not able to produce a male child, some would continue to have children in an attempt to give birth to a male to please the family and avoid the abuse and shame that existed. However, even if a woman were successfully giving birth multiple times, the more likely that she would still be targeted and labelled as a “troublemaker” (Greenhalgh, 1994). No matter a woman’s attempt to adhere to the policy or stray from it in an attempt to please family and meet cultural expectations, her actions become connotated with a negative, forced identity given by others.

Culturally, Chinese women have never really had the chance to construct and create their own self-identity, separate from what their families believe. Feminism is a relatively new theory and discussion in modern-day China and the majority of Chinese females adhered to the cultural

notion that women's purpose is to bear children (Greenhalgh, 2001). Of the feminism that does exist, "Chinese feminism embraces that women are tethered to their bodies and ability to reproduced and destined to give children" (Greenhalgh, 2001). Women in China are given the identity of a 'mother' before they physically give birth to a child and this identity is assigned without the consideration that every female may not want to become a mother.

Drawing from this previous literature, it is not apparent how the one-child policy affected singular identities of women since historically, women were assigned identities. My research question is: How do aspects of the family planning policies in China contribute to the construction of female identities in China? Drawing upon the communication theory of identity, I plan to further examine how female identities have shifted in China as a result of the one-child policy, specifically with the use of family planning propaganda. There is a lack of research on how the language used in the propaganda affects female self-identity, even though it is a public social construct that affects identity.

Context

The one-child policy was an official program initiated in the late 1970s and early '80s by the central government of China, the purpose of which was to limit the great majority of family units in the country to one child each. The rationale for implementing the policy was to reduce the growth rate of China's enormous population. China began promoting the use of birth control and family planning in the 1940s. By the late 1970s, China's population was rapidly approaching the one-billion mark and by 1979, the demand grew for making the limit one child per family. However, that stricter requirement was then applied unevenly across the country among the provinces, and by 1980 the central government sought to standardize the one-child policy nationwide. On September 25, 1980, a public letter, published by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, called upon all families to adhere to the one-child policy (Kane and Choi, 1999).

The program was intended to be applied universally, although exceptions were made, e.g., parents within some ethnic minority groups or those whose firstborn was handicapped, or female were allowed to have more than one child. It was implemented more effectively in urban environments, where much of the population consisted of small nuclear families who were more willing to comply with the policy, than in rural areas, with their traditional agrarian extended families that resisted the one-child restriction.

Enforcement of the policy was somewhat uneven over time, generally being strongest in cities and more lenient in the countryside. Methods of enforcement included making various contraceptive methods widely available, offering financial incentives and preferential employment opportunities for those who complied, imposing sanctions against those who violated the policy, and, invoking stronger measures against women such as forced abortions and

sterilizations. This policy technically ended in 2015, when the Chinese government announced its plan to end the program by 2016 (Kane and Choi, 1999).

China's one-child policy promoted its rules, concerns, and purpose through propagandist advertisements, billboard, and national songs. These methods of communication are the data which I will analyze using a critical and rhetorical paradigm, as no new data will be collected. Through the critical and rhetorical analysis of the propaganda and its language, I will understand how it contributes to reconstruction of female identities in China and the cultural expectations of females now as portrayed in modern family planning advertisements and policies.

Ever since the termination of the one-child policy in China, the current Chinese family planning policies do not seem as relevant in mainstream international media, as it does not seem to be more extreme. However, this shift created large ramifications in Chinese society, specifically for Chinese women and not enough research has been conducted to analyze its effects on female identities.

RQ: How did propaganda of the family planning policies in China depict and construct female identities in China?

Methods

This research project utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the analytical approach for critically describing, interpreting, and explaining the ways in which Chinese propaganda of the one-child policy can construct and reconstruct female identities. CDA rests on the notion that the way we use language is purposeful, regardless of whether discursive choices are conscious or unconscious.

Propaganda images and graffiti published and approved by the Chinese government to promote the family planning policies of China from the 1970s to early 2000s was analyzed. It was decided that these images would most strongly convey how the powerful implications made with language and images can greatly affect how one can reconstruct their identity. An advanced image search through Google and the website chinese posters.net was done to obtain propaganda from the one-child policy. The resulting search found 22 ads, 8 of which were photographs of graffiti throughout various cities in China, and the other 14 were copies of print ads that were published in magazines or on billboards. These 22 ads were categorized based on similarities in language used or images that depicted the same issue or idea.

Findings

The propaganda of China's one-child policy depicted and communicated a gendered image of women that forcefully pushed gender stereotypes. They also constructed a forced identity and defined qualities of what a woman must be.

RQ: How did propaganda of the family planning policies in China depict/communicate and construct female identities in China?

Through data analysis, the three themes of forced identity, responsibility, and gender stereotypes help to develop a better understanding of how gender is depicted in Chinese propaganda and how female identities are constructed. The following sections of the paper will explicate the themes in more depth.

Theme 1: Propaganda depicts forced identity

In many propaganda images and visual advertisements, women are depicted often carrying a child, caring for a child, or planning to have a child. This communicates the message that females in China are always associated with some aspect of motherhood. It does not consider or consider that not all women are or want to be mothers. The following ad (Yuwei, 1986) says, "Carry out family planning, implement the basic national policy".



Through the portrayal of a woman carrying a child, the identity of ‘mother’ can be assigned, hence the coding for this ad to be “assigning”. Within this ad, the young boy is being lifted onto the mother’s shoulder, being placed physically higher than her, “highlighting”. China, as previously highlighted in the literature review, had portions of the one-child policy that outwardly expressed preferences for boys. This ad also highlights the importance of boys as future children for China’s next generation. This emphasizes China’s position at the time that only male children would be deemed beneficial to society and female children were undesirable, especially when most families were only allowed to bear one child.

In another ad, the identity of a mother is once again forced through the depiction of how women can contribute to society. The implication is that becoming a mother and bearing male children is the only rational way that a woman can provide. The following ad reads, “Do a good job in family planning to promote economic development” (Zhenhua, 1986).



This ad represents the widely held belief that existed in China at the time, that females' true contribution to society could be and would only be any possible male children they could bear. In the slogan, "do a good job" implicates that the only way to do a good job in family planning is to have one child, and to have that one child be a male. This forces the identity of mother onto women because it reflects the idea that the only positive contribution women can make to China's society can be fulfilled through becoming a mother.

Theme 2: Propaganda depicts a responsibility

Chinese propaganda often refers to a "duty" or "service" that must be carried out for the benefit of China, and in ads targeted at or depicting women, this responsibility and sense of civic duty to the country is portrayed as one that can only be fulfilled through motherhood. In the

following ad, the graffitied phrase reads: “fewer and better births, a service to the nation” (Unknown, 2001).



This ad portrays “serving”, meaning that females having less children and “better”, better signifying male children, births will fulfill their civic duty. Females will serve their country in a way that only females can, by providing the future of China. The theme of responsibility emerged through the use of words like “service” and “duty”. It is a call to all citizens to bear children, especially females since they are seen as the primary caregivers and “vessels” for carrying and giving birth to the children.



This other graffitied ad appeared in Haikou city, Hainan and reads, “it is the right and obligation for citizens to carry out family planning” (Unknown, 2009). With the use of the words “right” and “obligation”, it signifies a sort of legal obligation to China. This “obligation” is an order and does not offer much free will or choice to females in China at the time, as it is a legal-policy that was punishable by fine.

Theme 3: Propaganda depicts gender stereotypes

In propagandist illustrations, it is observed that women are never placed in positions of power and are often depicted in more submissive or domestic roles. They are often shown caring for the children inside the house wearing feminine clothing, such as dresses or aprons. If fathers or male figures are depicted, they are not shown caring for the child. The mothers are often the ones carrying the child in an image. For example, the following image portrays a mother inside the house with her child.



优生幸福

The caption reads, “Eugenics cause happiness” (Junfeng, 1987). This image assigns the role of mother with the depiction of a child at her side. She is inside the house, presumably a kitchen or dining room of some sort wearing an apron. It normalizes and stresses the role of females as primary caregivers and domesticizes them with the depiction of the apron.



This ad is entitled, “Returning to a married woman's parents' home” Guozhu and Zemin (1983). The woman is depicted at the primary caregiver of the child, through the portrayal of her physically holding the child rather than the father. The title also points a part of Chinese culture that further domesticizes and stereotypes the woman as submissive. In Chinese culture, it was traditionally that when a woman marries, she abandons her own family to live with her

husband's. This ad exemplifies this practice with the use of the word "returning" meaning that she has been absent from her parents' home.

Throughout the analysis of Chinese propaganda regarding the one child-policy, the three emergent themes of forced identity, responsibility, and gender stereotypes help to develop a better understanding how female identities are constructed through the propaganda of China's one-child policy.

Discussion

Through these findings, it can be concluded that the propaganda of China's one-child policy was overtly sexist and placed values on males over females. These ads were placed all over public spaces and impacted the Chinese public in some significant way. Unfortunately, no data was collected on how it impacted specific female identities, so it can only be theorized on how it possibly impacts female identities, when drawing upon CTI. Communication theory of identity (CTI) "draws on the notion that identity is based on social categorization and shared group memberships" (Hetch and Lu). Societal norms and practices are internalized in the form of social identities based on social categories. CTI theorizes a person's sense of self is part of their social behavior and the sense of self emerges and is defined and redefined in social interaction and influence. In the context of this situation, the social influence can come from public media messages, like the propaganda. With this social influence, the sense of self of Chinese females seeing these ads can constantly redefine their identities.

Communication theory of identity (CTI) "draws on the notion that identity is based on social categorization and shared group memberships" (Hetch and Lu). Through the assignment of women to the role of "mother", identity can be reconstructed into this context. This social categorization done by the propaganda, as seen in the first theme; force responsibility, can be

polarizing and force or pressure women to fit the status quo and become mothers, even if they don't necessarily want to. In all messaging from the propaganda, there is no phrase attached that implies an "if" to the receivers of the message, such as "if you have a family", or "if you want children", signifying that all females must carry out family planning. The phrasing and verb conjugation indicate an order to the viewers of this ad, specifically any female viewers of it. This can force females to reconstruct their identity into one that fits the societal expectations, as depicted by these ads.

Within the propaganda, there is also a portrayal of what is acceptable or desired as a part of the family planning policy, and this is shown through the depiction of boys as desired children and females as only important in domestic and motherly roles, as seen in the theme of gender stereotypes. China, as previously highlighted in the literature review, had portions of the one-child policy that outwardly expressed preferences for boys. In other ads where young children were depicted, only one child was illustrated, in accordance with the policy of the time, and they all seemingly were presented as male children. This emphasizes China's sexist position at the time that only male children would be deemed beneficial to society and female children were undesirable, especially when most families were only allowed to bear one child. This can force females who birth female children to believe that their daughters are not as important as sons and can also lead to younger females reconstructing their identity, propelled by the belief that they, as daughters, are not as worthy to their parents as sons are. This creates a collective female identity in China and puts pressure on people to be within the bounds of what is expected, as seen in the second theme of responsibility, and to uphold the cultural values and expectations, and to encompass the role of what Chinese culture represents, even if the values are not reflective of their own.

Limitations

A major limitation of this study was that it only analyzed the ads of the one-child policy and does not include and data from actual females who would be able to account for the identity reconstruction during the one-child policy. In further research, surveys or interviews conducted with females who lived in China during the one-child policy would expand the findings of this study and more conclusive information could have been found. Another limitation was the lack of access to propaganda from the one-child era, since most of it has been destroyed or covered up and replaced by new, more current ads that reflect today's family planning policies. The information also could have been more conclusive if conducted by a researcher who may have closer connections and a deeper understanding of the culture of China. As one living in the United States, with no relations or knowledge of anyone who lived or currently lives in China, there is still a cultural barrier that exists that may have limited my knowledge and ability to obtain information.

Intervention

This project demonstrates a need for more inclusive and understanding depictions of women, not just in propaganda, but all ads/public images/art. Using the context of the one-child policy, language can greatly shift to reduce the implication that all women must become mothers. Ads that address the personal topic of having children need to be reflective and understanding that not every female desire or plans to have children. Many of the ads of the one-child policy could have drastically shifted the meaning by adding in a simple "if". For example, instead of phrasing a sentence as an order like "Practice family planning policies", the sentence can be reframed to "If decided to have children, practice family planning policies". If the phrase is perceived as an order, it seems as if the assumption is that everyone will be having children.

Another intervention needed, would be the widespread education of birth control methods that are not depicted as a woman's burden. As reviewed in the literature, sex-selective abortions were considered a form of birth control and some abortions were often forced upon women if they already had children. The widespread knowledge of birth control, such as condoms, hormonal methods, and sterilization by choice, could prevent the unnecessary blaming, shaming, and forced actions that can result from unplanned pregnancies.

Conclusion

This study furthers the understanding of propagandist influences and how it can reconstruct female identities. It also provides more insight as to how harmful language and depictions of gender stereotypes can be, especially at a mass, country-wide scale. This study can also encourage a more empathetic and understanding approach to creating propaganda and ads to promote a policy that can be as personal as one like family planning policies. It can further educate the public on the most appropriate way to describe or depict groups of people instead of making assumptions and generalizations.

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