

# TEACHING THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER USING SIMPLE CHINESE CHARACTERS

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## ABSTRACT

*In the Chinese written language, the words for male and female contain highly gendered messages. This paper describes how the characters representing male and female are written. After a review of their historical and cultural origins, the visual images for the characters become immediately apparent. They reveal that the word for male is associated with strength and field. The image of a torso with crossed legs is used as the word for female. Instructors can use this information in sociology and other courses to teach students a simple yet compelling lesson on the social construction of gender.*

## KEYWORDS

Social Construction of Gender; Chinese Characters; Gender and Language; Gender Expectations; Patriarchy

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*Language is, no doubt, like the clothing in which thought is dressed up—Emile Durkheim (Traugott, 1978, p. 102)*

Chinese is one of only a few pictographic languages in the world. It allows a visual dimension for societies to communicate messages about gender. By examining the unique visual images of words in the Chinese language, one can begin to understand how gender expectations were initiated in pre-modern times in China and continue to be used today. Upon close inspection, distinct gender messages emerge from the squiggly and seemingly chaotic lines of individual Chinese characters representing the words for male and female. The visual images contained in the characters and their apparent meanings can be used by teachers to facilitate explorations into the social construction of gender.

In society people can take on and hold different expectations for the behavior of men and women. These gendered expectations largely pre-exist the individual, are passed down generations through interaction, vary from one society to another, and can be altered. They are socially constructed and pattern how men and women think, view themselves, act, interact, communicate, emote and so on (Anderson 2006; Komarovskiy 1992; Ryle 2018; Wade and

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Ferree 2019). The social world is full of symbols that convey shared meaning regarding appropriate gender expectations. Using the symbols for the common words of male and female in written Chinese (the first and second language of the authors and hence the focus of this article), sociology instructors can replicate their unique classroom lesson on the social construction of gender.

An abundant number of studies reveal the many subtle ways through which messages about gender are transmitted in the United States (Coates 1998; Hall and Bucholtz 1995; McHugh and Hambaugh 2010; Wade and Ferree 2019). Research on the views of American parents found that they think of their new daughters as being soft and gentle whereas they view their sons as strong and alert. They encourage more active play from their sons and more smiles from their daughters. School textbooks were found to contain many more men than women characters. When women were depicted, they were often shown in passive rather than active roles (Walum Richardson 1981; Anderson 2006). In the workplace men and women are not equally distributed across all occupations. Occupations such as teaching, nursing, social work and childcare tend to be dominated by women (U.S. Department of Labor 2010). Men tend to take on occupations such as doctor, lawyer, CEO, police officer, and laborer more so than women (Charles 2003; Fox and Biber 1984; Ryle 2018). Although there has been movement of women into more traditionally male occupations over time, the rate of change is slow.

According to George Herbert Mead, language and its associated symbols and meanings make society possible (Ashley and Orenstein 2005) and are “the source of social structure” (Cuzzort and King 1995, p. 142). Gender expectations can thus become embedded in a society’s language and research bears this out. Studies of language use in the United States show that women tend to use more tag questions, high intonations and supportive words than men. Men talk and curse more than women. Men interrupt women more than women interrupt men (Shelby Hyde 1985; Linneman 2013; Unger 2001). Overall, it appears that men tend to communicate with more confidence when speaking while women express more hesitancy which is consistent with the stereotypes of men acting masculine and women feminine (Walum Richardson 1981; Anderson 2006) and men more likely to be in positions of power in society (Phillips 1987).

Language is a complex communication process. Meaning can be communicated through multiple channels and the senders and receivers of communication messages can be affected by internal and external factors. For example, experts have explored body language and how it differs between men and women. Men tend to maintain greater personal space but they touch women more than women touch men (Shelby Hyde 1985). Researchers also investigate how words might be interpreted differently depending on the messages attached to them in society. For example, the phrase “she *is easy*” is often interpreted as having a negative sexual connotation for women but not for men (Walum Richardson 1981). Women’s talk cannot be simply labelled and dismissed as “gossip” or “chit-chat”. It plays an important part in constructing friendships and gender (Coates 1996).

Although many articles contain advice on how to teach about gender in college classrooms, only a few focus on language. For example, Steele’s (2003) article on sex and linguistic relativity partially mirrors the goals of the present teaching exercise. Although the exercise involves analyzing words that students use to communicate about the topic of sex, the

main point is very useful: language is heavily deterministic in that it predisposes people to see the world in certain ways. This is essentially the thesis of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, namely that cultural behavior is codified through language. This hypothesis has been challenged over time however (Moore 2009). Bell and Bradburn's (1996) article on gender inequality in the workplace focuses on communication. They described a classroom exercise which involved assigning students a powerful versus subordinate identity as they went about completing a group task. Students who were assigned to the subordinate role expressed how frustrating they felt to more or less arbitrarily not have their thoughts and ideas listened to or acted upon. Indeed, power can be exerted through language (Bourdieu 1991).

One classroom exercise on gender construction through language is titled "Walk like a Man, Talk like a Women" by Berkowitz, Manohar and Tinkler (2010). Student volunteers are asked to act like someone of the opposite sex when walking across the classroom, sitting down in a chair and greeting a close friend whom they have not seen in a long time. The exercise works well to illuminate the difference between sex and gender, the constructed nature of doing gender and the power relations running through the expectations at the individual and societal levels. However, it does not examine how gender might influence the creation of a language and the messages embedded within it from its creation.

Another classroom exercise revolves around using five vignettes to encourage students to think about how language is used in social interaction (Mallinson 2009). Women are told to simply say "No" to unwanted advances from men. Men are taught to listen for a firm "No". But in everyday interaction, as the students discover through responding to the vignettes, directly saying "No" seldom occurs. Thus, women can be put at a disadvantage even after some well-intended assertiveness training. Again, this exercise, similar to the one above, does not examine visual messages emitted by the written language.

A thorough review of the content contained within communication and psychology books on language and gender reveals a complete lack of coverage of how a language's visual images could convey messages about gender (Crawford 2001; Ehrlich, Meyerhoff, and Holmes 2014; Hendricks and Oliver 1999; Hall and Bucholtz 1995; Holmes and Meyerhoff 2003; Spender 1990; Wood 1999). One instructional book on language and gender by Goddard and Mean Patterson (2000) encourages students to think about how men and women are depicted in everyday symbols such as signs for public restrooms (man in pants, woman in a dress), but not in the language itself.

Written English is not a visual language in the same manner as pictographs in Chinese (DeFrancis 1984). The word "door" for example, does not create in the reader's mind a visual image of a door on hinges capable of opening and closing as it does in Chinese (門). Thus, the use of Roman letters in written English precludes the generation of meaning through the language's physical images. The written Chinese language at times contains visual images that convey meaning. Knowing a bit of history behind the Chinese language will aid teachers who use the characters presented below in their lessons on how gender is socially constructed.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHINESE CHARACTERS

The Chinese written language is the oldest language in continuous usage today (DeFrancis 1984). According to historian Holcombe, it may be "the most Chinese thing about

China” having provided cultural cohesion to a large part of East Asia over several millennia and resulting in the most commonly spoken language in the world, the Mandarin dialect of Chinese (2011, p. 14).

Early symbols resembling characters of the Chinese written language appeared in various forms as early as 6,000 years ago during the Yangshao period. During this time, ancestors of the Chinese people were living in a settled society involving simple dwellings, small villages, horticulture and the first evidence of pottery (Go 2004; Zhang and Fan 2003). Legend has it that ruler Huang Di ordered one of his smart officials, Cang Zhe, to create a written language. The official drew inspiration from the tracks left by birds and animals in mud indicating what had passed through (Zhang and Fan 2003). Over 3,000 years ago during the Shang dynasty people in China began using a written language to communicate with deities, ancestors and others (Wood 2007). They carved pictographs on objects to represent things in their physical and social environment (Go 2004; Practical Chinese Reader 1986). The carvings revealed much complexity and sophistication; among other things they contained sentences, numbers, a decimal system, a lunar calendar system and calligraphy. Events such as sacrifices, hunts, war, national affairs, and crop cultivation were recorded. In short, a “culture was embedded in the characters” (Zhang and Fan 2003, p. 25).

Many rulers and kings fought for and controlled different sections of China during its early civilized history and they often left their own stamp on it. Thus, the language that was emerging took on local variations. The Shang dynasty led to the Zhou dynasty which led to the Warring States period. Chinese characters likewise evolved over this time as states used their own varying forms (Chang and Chang 1978). Special “seals” emerged to represent the ruler’s mark or signature on important documents. At the end of the Warring States period China’s first emperor emerged, Qin Shi Huang. He conquered the various states and unified the country. Under his plan, the imperial characters were declared the official ones and only ones to be used throughout the land (Wood 2007). Writing with a brush was soon invented and it replaced the old and slow stylus writing instrument. As a result, Chinese characters were modified to conform better with the capabilities of the brush and ink (Go 2004). Several modifications to the Chinese characters occurred during the Han dynasty, from arches and bends to squares and straight lines as it became the official script, and then it was further simplified and became regular script in the Eastern Han dynasty. This script has not changed dramatically since then and can be considered the standard script (Yong and Peng 2008).

In recent times, the Chinese Communist Party after obtaining power in 1949 altered close to 2,000 Chinese characters. The party’s goal was to simplify the written language with the hope it would improve literacy rates (Holcombe 2011). The number of strokes needed to write a character was reduced. In addition, the strokes were modified anywhere from slightly to drastically in form thus creating another change to a small set of the thousands of characters that were in common use over the centuries.

Around a hundred or so years ago farmers unearthed ox shoulder blades and turtle shells containing strange writings etched onto their surfaces. Believing that they were the scales or bones of dragons, which is the most important creature in the Chinese zodiac system (Eberhard 1996; Fazzioli 1987), many were sold, ground up and consumed as medicine (Price and Feinman 2001). A language expert who was seeking treatment for an illness happened upon one of the so-called “dragon scales” and quickly recognized their significance. The rare

archeological artifacts and their carvings opened a new window into social life in China's early societies (Chang and Chang 1978; Han 2008). Although the ancient Chinese characters found on what has become known as oracle bones were modified over the centuries, some characters have remained very similar to the originals.

**Picture 1.** A so-called "Dragon Scale" on display at a museum in Guangzhou, China.



## GENDER IN CHINA

For most of its existence, Chinese society has been patriarchal. Ancient legends about creation describe the earth being formed by a male entity. However, humans were created by a goddess who was lonely and needed some company (Xie 2009). The mythology and records of the first historians suggest that early forms of civilized society in China included a matriarchal period with goddesses and fertility rituals. This came to an end during the New Stone Age some 4,000 years ago. Archeological evidence clearly portrays that males then played the dominant role in a patriarchal, clan-based society. Women played a secondary role. The Zhou dynasty continued this type of society (Zhang and Fan 2003). Subsequent dynasties reflected the same pattern throughout China's pre-modern times with only a few exceptions such as the short-lived reign of China's first and only powerful woman, Empress Wu in the Tang dynasty and Empress Dowager Cixi in the final decades of the collapsing Qing dynasty (Murphey 2010).

Towards the end of the Warring States period some 2,500 years ago, a philosopher by the name of Confucius helped solidify the position of men over women in Chinese society. His teachings seldom discussed women (Waley 2009) and when they did it was in a lesser status compared to men (Chin 2009). He emphasized the father and son relationship as the most important dimension of the family. This patriarchal family structure was considered the foundation for broader social stability under a benevolent ruler. Chinese families over the centuries have exhibited a particular structure: patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal (Queen, Habenstein and Quadagno 1985).

The twentieth century was one of tremendous changes for China. At the forefront of social change in the beginning of the century was a revolution in thinking about women's place in society. Internally developed ideas regarding the emancipation of women, aided in part by Western ideas, began to take hold (Shen 2016). Marxists, in their struggle to gain control of China, aimed to free all Chinese women, especially those from peasant backgrounds, from the domination of men under Confucian thinking. A year after gaining power they banned arranged marriages and concubinage (Li 1969). They promoted loyalty to the party. They also discouraged the use of the traditional ways of saying and writing marriage. For a man it was literally "to take a female". For a woman it was "to marry a home". The preferred term now represents "forming a marriage" (Chang and Chang 1978).

Women have made great strides at achieving equality with men in China. They have much better access to education, jobs, and positions of power in the political system. Illiteracy, a widespread problem, has been nearly eliminated. Arranged marriages are mostly a thing of the past. The one child policy has been lifted relieving the pressure to choose boys over girls. Yet women have not caught up with men completely. They lag behind men according to some social indicators such as political leadership positions, or are experiencing a decline as in their employment rates (National Bureau of Statistics 2004). These recent trends lead some to continue to label China a patriarchal society (Gaetano 2017; Santos and Harrell 2017).

Given the patriarchal nature of Chinese society over time, one should expect that its language, perhaps the most important symbol system in a culture, will continue to reflect aspects of the society's gender regime. Everyday words in Chinese, can be examined for whether they continue to transmit messages about gender relations as languages around the world often do. The results can be used by instructors to teach about the social construction of gender.

## GENDER MESSAGES IN CHINESE CHARACTERS

In the Chinese language, the words and characters associated with male and female contain clear symbolic messages about male and female traits and behavior. The messages are simple to see and easy to teach regardless of one's Chinese language ability. Utilizing the descriptions that are provided beneath each character in Figures 1-4 and a little practice writing them or pulling them down from the internet, any instructor can incorporate the material into their introduction to sociology or other classes.

The lesson begins with the word for male. Words in Chinese are often made from a combination of two characters. Instructors should first draw the character for the word strength: 力. Then ask students what they think it represents. Teachers of Chinese say that this character, pronounced "Li" (as in Bruce "Lee"), can be taken to represent a vertical torso intersected by a horizontal shoulder with an arm and hooked hand at the end (Fazzioli 1987)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>The ancient character looks more like a hunk of sinew or muscle (Go 2004). Many characters were modified from their traditional to a simpler appearance over time and in the mid-1900s by the Communist government in an attempt to increase literacy across China (Chang and Chang 1978). Taiwan, Hong Kong and Chinatowns in the United States continue to use the traditional Chinese characters.

During class instructors can extend their right arm to the right, turn their forearm down with fist in, and flex their bicep. Students can be encouraged to strike the same pose. It is apparent that men are represented by the image of physical strength. Instructors can ask “What motions do we use to display the message that a person is strong?” Some students will likely raise their arm and flex their muscle. They can be pointed to in order to connect the old character’s meaning to behavior found in men in the United States today.<sup>2</sup>

The other character comprising the word for male is field: 田. It is pronounced “Tian” (as in “Tea” “n” with no break) and is very easy to write. It looks like four small square rice paddies within a larger square field (Fazzioli 1987; Go 2004). In the flat countryside of China and Taiwan, square shaped rice paddies are ubiquitous. Before telling them that it represents a field, one can ask the students to guess what they think it represents.

Finally, by linking the field and strength characters together in the word 男 (pronounced “nahn” as in the “non” part of non-intervention) inventors of the Chinese language created an image for men involving strength in the fields (Chang and Chang 1978; Fazzioli 1987; Go 2004; McNaughton and Ying 1999). These two characters can be drawn together on the board. The word conveys a cultural expectation of men to expend labor power outside the home to tame nature and provide subsistence. There is an aphorism in China, that “men must plow the fields and rice paddies to grow food in order to survive.”

**Picture 2.** Agricultural fields in Southern China



**Picture 3.** Agricultural fields in Central China



<sup>2</sup>The bicep is pointed to as the sign for the word muscle in English sign language. In sign language, outlining the shape of the bicep muscle is the sign for the word strong (Bornstein and Saulnier 1984). Sometimes it can be seen that male students have the character for strength, 力, tattooed on their body. When asked, they generally say that they did not know what it meant until they had this lesson. One student was so inspired by the lesson that he had the character 力 tattooed on his bicep.

**Figure 1.** Characters Associated with “Man”

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力	+	田	=	男
<b>Li</b>	<b>+</b>	<b>Tian</b>	<b>=</b>	<b>Nan</b>
<b>Strength</b>	<b>+</b>	<b>Field</b>	<b>=</b>	<b>Male</b>

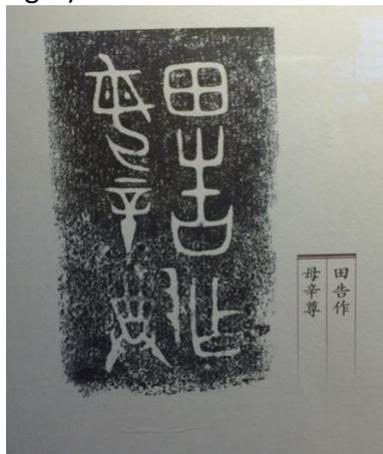
The components for the word male are depicted in Figure 1. Instructors should first draw the Chinese characters on the board one at a time for all to see. The characters are not that difficult to draw, especially if blown-up copies of them are taken to class and used as a guide. Below each one they can write and pronounce the phonetic pronunciation in pinyin, a common tool used to represent the sound of Chinese words in Mandarin since it cannot be deduced from the characters.<sup>3</sup> Below both the character and pinyin write the English translation after students are given an opportunity to guess their meanings. Finally, ask the students, in a slightly sarcastic manner, to use the English interpretation of the plus and equal signs. Otherwise, in Chinese the “+” symbol means “10” and the “=” symbol means “2”. The dash or minus sign “-” means “1” (Go 2004). Also, one might note that Chinese is written from top to bottom and right to left (as in Pictures 4 and 5).

Before providing the meaning of each Chinese character, instructors should ask their students to think about what these characters might represent visually. They will need some hints to get them to respond. Pose a question such as this: “What would someone in China’s emerging agricultural society see as they looked around?” Students always guess that the character for field represents a window so they need to be reminded that the character was created four thousand years ago before windows existed such as the ones around us today. The dwellings of the early civilized people in China’s fertile river valleys were mud or straw huts. Pottery was still very primitive and paper had not been invented. However, the cultivation of rice had been going on for several thousands of years (Li 1957; Price and Feinman 2001). Students enjoy trying to guess the meaning of the characters. Humorous answers might pop up. The interaction can provide opportunities to verbally reward students who think visually and creatively.

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<sup>3</sup> The only information missing from the pinyin pronunciations is an indicator of the correct tone to use when pronouncing the word. Unlike English, Chinese is a tonal language. Thus, one sound could have different tones where in each represents a completely different word. For example, the sound “ma” could mean mother, horse, hemp or revile. This feature poses an additional obstacle to learning and speaking Chinese (DeFrancis 1984). It is important to note that pinyin is not always pronounced the same as it looks in English. If instructors desire to correctly pronounce the Chinese words listed above, then they should consult with a native speaker of the language, Google translate, a simple Chinese dictionary such as the one produced by Rough Guides (1999) or the language/pronunciation guide in Freund Larus book (2012, p. 443).

**Picture 4.** Character for “Field” (田) rubbed from an Ancient Bronze Sacrificial Vessel from the late Shang Dynasty, c. 1,300-1,046 BCE, on display in the Forbidden City, Beijing— (located top right)



After stimulating creative thinking and sparking some lighthearted interaction, the students are eager for more. Now write the character for female on the board and ask them to describe what they see. After a while it is usually a woman who says that it looks like either a dancer or someone with crossed legs (Fazzioli 1987; Go 2004; McNaughton and Ying 1999). Instructors can cross their legs and bend over to imitate the image of the character. They can walk casually around the classroom before the students guess the correct answer and point out students who are sitting with their legs crossed. This connection of ancient Chinese symbols with the present-day behavior of college students suggests that social norms can last a long time and arise independently across societies.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 2.** Characters Associated with “Woman”

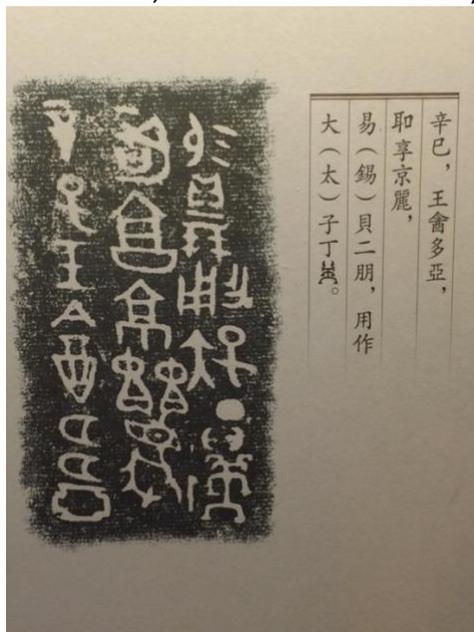
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女	+	子	=	好
<b>Nu</b>	+	<b>Zi</b>	=	<b>Hao</b>
<b>Female</b>	+	<b>Infant</b>	=	<b>Good</b>

<sup>4</sup> Sometimes students will mention the practice of foot-binding. This centuries old Chinese tradition fits in with the lesson’s themes, limiting the possibilities of women, and can be connected somewhat to the modern expectation that American women should, on appropriate occasion, wear very impractical high-heeled shoes. Foot-binding was one of the first harsh gender expectations to be challenged by progressive thinkers and to fall to the wayside as China’s imperial society collapsed and modern thinking took hold. Interestingly, Herbert Spencer’s ideas about women being equally capable of developing as men helped fuel the rise of feminism in China (Shen 2016).

Next, instructors should modify the 子 character for infant by erasing the horizontal checkmark on top of the character and replace it with a circle. Then ask: “What does it look like?” Be ready because students will quickly guess that it looks like a baby and this is absolutely correct. Add that the character has changed a bit since it was first created (Fazzioli 1987; Go 2004). One of the main changes occurred in order to standardize the various written languages that were in use around 2,000 years ago when the first emperor Qin unified the country and built the Great Wall along with his enormous army of 8,000 terra cotta warriors (Wood 2007). The change along with others made it easier to write with ink and brush (Han 2008).

**Picture 5.** Character for “Child” (子) rubbed from an Ancient Bronze Sacrificial Vessel from the late Shang Dynasty, c. 1,300-1,046 BCE, on display in The Forbidden City, Beijing— (located in left column, second character down)



By now the students should be primed for more interesting challenges. Begin the finale. Draw the equal sign and then closely combine the Nu and Zi characters. Ask the students what the combined word represents. They guess that the characters for female and infant when combined form the word for *family*. It seems so obvious. But tell them immediately that their answer is wrong! The word for family is represented by the image of a *pig under a roof* (McNaughton and Ying 1999)! Another aphorism in China in the old times was “In order to marry, men should have a house and a pig” (Fazzioli 1987). Students will try hard but never be able to guess what the two combined characters represent. This is where instructors can introduce their students to the phrase for “Hello” in Chinese: “Ni Hao” (pronounced “Knee how”). The “Ni” part of the greeting means “You” and the “Hao” part means “Good” (Discovering Chinese 2010). At that point combine the Nu (as in “Knee”) and Zi (pronounced like the letters “zi” in “zit”) characters to form the word Hao and they represent the aphorism that life must be good if a woman is able to have a baby (Go 2004). Indeed, she is more than expected to bear a baby in Chinese society—she should provide a *son*. Bearing a son provides a

man with someone who will worship him and continue to make more ancestors to provide for his spirit in the afterlife (Eberhard 1996).<sup>5</sup> “A son is the greatest of goods” as Chang and Chang note (1978, p. 17) and this expression has extended to modern times.

**Figure 3.** Characters Representing the Most Common Chinese Greeting

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你好

**Ni Hao**

**Hello (or literally, “You Good”)**

Students are fascinated with the breakdown of these Chinese characters and their connection to gender expectations. If time is limited, the lesson could end at this point. Otherwise, several more characters and words in Chinese can be introduced to reinforce the basic message. One such word is peace. By placing a simple cap like line representing house or shelter *across the top of the character for female* one ends up with the word for peace or peaceful (Go 2004; Han 2008).<sup>6</sup> Instructors can ask their students who is more likely to be aggressive and they typically reply men. Another interesting word is the one for brave. It is based mostly on *the character for male* with two small lines like a horizontal check mark added to the top (the same ones which are on the top of the character for child 子). “Who is more likely to be brave and courageous?” instructors can ask to stimulate discussion. Note that in the United States, as a result of globalization, a piece of the ancient Chinese language appears on the uniform of a popular National Basketball Association team’s uniform, the Golden State Warriors, around the Chinese Lunar New Year in February (see Picture 6).

**Figure 4.** Characters Associated with Feminine and Masculine Traits

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安静

**An Jing**

**Peaceful**

勇气

**Yong Qi**

**Brave**

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<sup>5</sup> All of the talk about dragons, spirits, ancestors and the afterlife begs instructors to jump into a discussion of Chinese religious beliefs. Indeed, the bones, shells and sacrificial vessels upon which early Chinese characters were carved served initially as devices for communicating with ancestor spirits in the heavens (Han 2008). Instructors might also note that the present-day sex ratio imbalance of 120 males to 100 females has been attributed to the effects one-child policy combined with the cultural preference for boys in China (ex. Ryle 2018, pp. 131-135), producing concerns for the tens of millions of missing girls (Li, Jian, and Feldman 2017) and other social problems for women and men (Freund Larus 2012).

**Picture 6.** Character for “Brave” on a current day Golden State Warriors NBA uniform



The lesson above takes about twenty minutes of time in SOC 101 Introduction to Sociology class.<sup>7</sup> It is a great springboard into a discussion of how gendered roles are socially constructed in the United States in many subtle ways through the use of Barbie dolls, Hot Wheels, lipstick, skirts, skin-tight jeans etc. and how they are being continually challenged and changed. If language as a social construction can contain sexist elements that have a negative impact on the life of women in society (ex. “policeman” and “mailman”), then it can be changed to promote the position of women as well (Hendricks and Oliver 1999; Pauwels 1998; Shibley Hyde 1985). The lesson is also a great way to talk about how language as a symbol system reflects culture and in order to best understand a particular culture, one should learn the language.

#### ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING

To test students’ understanding of the above lesson about gender expectations hidden in Chinese written language, instructors can add several questions on the appropriate exam. One multiple choice question can ask them to identify in English the two images used in the Chinese language to convey the meaning of “good”. A majority of students will typically choose the correct response which is women and baby. Similarly, another question can ask them to identify the two images connected to the word for man. Again, a majority of the students will typically choose the correct response which is field and strength. The percentages of students answering these questions correctly varies between around 70 to 90%. This rate approaches the rate in which students generally score on easy, basic definition type exam questions (high 80s to 100% correct). It is higher than the rate that students generally score on more difficult questions about theory, causality, and critical analysis etc.<sup>8</sup>

Some students might ask if they need to memorize all of the Chinese characters presented in class. Tell them that although they will not be asked *to write* any Chinese characters, they will need to know the meanings behind the words. If they ever go to China on business or pleasure, then they should recognize the characters because they are used to identify the men and women’s rooms in China (see Picture 7).

<sup>6</sup> By adding the ancient image of a broom being held in a person’s hand to the top of the character for female one obtains one of the Chinese words for wife 妻 (Fazzioli 1987). This character and its message can be connected to images of cleaning products in the media which seem to more often feature a woman tackling the chore. The commercials for Swiffer sweepers and Dyson vacuums can be described as well as the results of extensive sociological research on the gendered division of household chores (Blair and Lichter 1991).

**Picture 7.** Characters for Male and Female on a Sign for Restrooms in Shanghai



## CONCLUSION

Many of the sociological studies on language in the United States focus on how it is used differently by men and women. Since English is not a picture-based language, its words and letters do not provide insights into what was on the minds of the people who created the language in the same way as Chinese characters. Examining the visual messages in ancient and modern Chinese pictographs allows for a whole additional dimension for sociologists to pursue in order to increase our understanding of how language shapes thinking and behavior. They provide a unique approach to the discussion of the social construction of gender--one that appears to be completely absent in various comprehensive handbooks on language and gender which were reviewed for this article. Durkheim once wrote that “every language presupposes and represents a certain articulation of thought” (Traugott 1978, p. 102; Westby 1991). His point cannot be made any clearer in the Chinese symbols reviewed here. Presenting the images of Chinese characters for male and female is a simple and effective way to draw students into the study of the social construction of gender.

<sup>7</sup> The lesson can be extended in appropriate classes (small ones or the sociology of sex and gender or family) by asking students to create their own pictographs that everyone in society will understand and use for communicating the meaning of male and female. In more advanced classes such as the sociology of work or China, discussions could be had about the irony between the messages in the old characters and the position of women as sweatshop workers in the booming Chinese economy (Ngai 2005).

<sup>8</sup> At this point in time the lead author’s university does not require IRB approval for using summary data collected from students in the classroom for program, general education or other forms of assessment.

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