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# A gendered point of view on the challenges of women academics in The People's Republic of China

Robert A. Rhoads · Diane Yu Gu

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**Abstract** The authors conducted a qualitative study of women's experiences as faculty members at Northern Research University, a pseudonym for a top 40 university in The People's Republic of China. Based on 27 semi-structured interviews with women (15) and men (12), and drawing from feminist standpoint theory and symbolic interactionism, the authors identified four key findings that highlight serious barriers confronting Chinese women faculty. They describe these as: (1) working double time, (2) the glass ceiling, (3) the boys club and social exclusion, and (4) comrades in arms. The first three findings support previous international studies of women's experiences as faculty members and thus contribute to an expanding global body of knowledge about challenges faced by women academics. The fourth finding—comrades in arms—highlights a structural quality somewhat unique to the Chinese university and raises important concerns about the limited role women play in critical personnel decisions influencing academic promotions and advancement.

**Keywords** Women faculty · Academic women · Academic life · Chinese universities · Gender equity

## Introduction

In *Outsiders in the Sacred Grove: Women of Academe*, Aisenberg and Harrington (1988) constructed a rich portrait of the challenges confronting women academics in the United States in the 1980s. They offered a strikingly vivid definition of the situation for women at

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that period of time in one particular country. Throughout the book, the authors described the multifaceted and textured narratives of women struggling to find their place in a male-dominated organizational environment—the university, or metaphorically speaking, the sacred grove. In this article, we follow a similar line of thought, although on a more modest scale, and seek to advance understanding about Chinese women and their experiences as faculty members in The People’s Republic of China. We adopt a theoretical perspective that draws from both feminist standpoint theory and symbolic interactionism and seek to better understand the academic lives of women, as conveyed to us through semi-structured interviews conducted at one Chinese research university. We are particularly interested in the challenges and/or obstacles Chinese women face as they attempt to advance their careers and professional roles, including their academic rank and standing within their university. Additionally, we also include perspectives from male faculty about the experiences of women, as a means to develop a more multifaceted perspective of what symbolic interactionists describe as “the definition of the situation” (Thomas 2002).

The idea that women academics face serious barriers in their career pursuits in China should of course not come as a major surprise, given that women academics around the world have been described as dealing with a variety of barriers different from their male counterparts (Bagilhole 2002, 2007; DesRoches et al. 2010; Gregory 2006; Ismail and Rasdi 2006; Jones and Lovejoy 1980; Normile 2001a, b; Ozkanli and White 2008; Skachkova 2007). Our intent here is not to single out China for the extra or more-taxing challenges faced by women academics, but instead we are interested in contributing to a global dialogue about women’s lives in the academy and how they might be improved. We believe that many of the issues faced by women academics may be best addressed through transnational organizations (e.g., international disciplinary and professional associations), global movements (e.g., women’s rights movements), and non-governmental organizations (e.g., international development agencies), thus our interest in the global quality of women’s experiences in academe.

Given the need to contextualize the experiences of women academics in China, we choose to focus our empirical inquiry on one specific Chinese university, which for the purposes of providing greater anonymity to our research participants we call Northern Research University (NRU). We select NRU because of its important role nationally as one of China’s leading research universities; this latter point is supported by the fact that NRU is included by the Ministry of Education in two major national initiatives known as Projects 211 and 985, often described in Chinese as *èr-yāo-yāo* and *jiū-bā-wū*. These projects are aimed at increasing the funding and performance level of approximately 100 universities in the case of 211 and about 40 universities in the case of 985.

### Women academics and university life from a global perspective

As a starting place for grounding our study of academic women in China, we review some of the literature on women academics around the world, focusing more on the lived experiences of women and less on their actual demographic representation. Although obviously achieving fair representation of women in academe is important, including their representation across diverse disciplines, our focus is more on their experiences as women within the university. Our logic is rather straight forward: Representation does not necessarily ensure fair treatment and equal opportunity. After reviewing some of the key literature on women academics around the world, we move on to focus on the Chinese context, building on the work of Gaskell et al. (2004), who developed an excellent

summary of the important historical and cultural factors contributing to the role of women at Chinese universities. We briefly review some of their points, but encourage readers to examine this work further, as well as that of Hayhoe (1989, 1996), Israel (1998), Yeh (1990), and more recently the edited work of Morgan and Wu (2011), if a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural context of the Chinese university, including the place of women (in the case of Hayhoe's work), is desired.

Research and writing in North America have consistently noted barriers women academics face in managing home and work responsibilities (Acker 2003; Caplan 1993; Skachkova 2007). For example, tension between career and family care among women faculty in Canada and the United States is captured by Caplan's (1993) work, who noted that a common dilemma many female faculty members face is whether to inform their departments about childcare or motherhood obligations. Furthermore, she noted that women academics face a paradoxical situation where on the one hand society and institutions believe that women who refuse to take an academic job due to family priorities are not serious about their academic careers, while on the other hand women who are willing to accommodate their careers and their commitment to elderly parents, partners, or to marriage and family in general may be considered uncaring or even unwomanly. Similarly, Gregory's research (Gregory 2006) on Black women academics in the Caribbean and Probert's (2005) work on women faculty in Australia demonstrated that women experience serious role conflicts related to family obligations and their academic responsibilities.

Not all studies of academic women's lives found family obligations and professional responsibilities as competing challenges. In their study of "high-flying" women academics in Malaysia, Ismail and Rasdi (2006) noted that some women may actually benefit from their families as a source of support, especially when they have a supportive husband. Here though it should be noted that the focus of their study was on highly successful women academics (so-called "high-flying" women), hence their results may highlight the situation of a unique subpopulation of women faculty.

A body of empirical work has described a form of glass ceiling faced by academic women, often manifested in differential rates of achieving tenure and promotion to higher ranks within the professorate, as well as promotion to upper-level administrative positions (Bagilhole 2002, 2009; Currie and Thiele 2001; Fan 1998; Gaskell et al. 2004; Jones and Lovejoy 1980; NCES 2002; Ozkanli and White 2008). These studies reveal a global pattern in which women are less represented at the middle and upper levels of faculty ranks, primarily explaining these differences in terms of time constraints women face due to family responsibilities and the related lack of adequate university policies for leave taking, but also in terms of the role male-dominated networks and cultural forms play in university decision making (Normile 2001a, b; Zhang 2010). Similarly, several scholars attribute the lower representation of women at upper-level administrative ranks to differences in organizational culture and the dominance of male-based patterns of leadership, communication, and mentoring (Tedrow and Rhoads 1999; Thanacoody et al. 2006; White 2003).

Turning to the Chinese context, the Ministry of Education in Beijing (MOE) (2009) reported that among 1.27 million faculty members in higher education, slightly over 45% are women. Although the representation of women is quite high in China, compared to many other nations around the world, the general pattern of women being less represented at the higher ranks still holds. For example, faculty at Chinese postsecondary institutions are divided into four levels: *zhèng jiàoshòu* (similar to full professor), *fù jiàoshòu* (similar to associate professor), *jiǎng shī* (considered a lecturer in China, which is only slightly above assistant professor), and *zhù jiào* (similar to assistant professor). At most Chinese universities only faculty attaining the status of *zhèng jiàoshòu* (full professor) can advise

doctoral students and both *zhèng jiàoshòu* and *fù jiàoshòu* can advise master's students. Based on MOE data, over 200,000 faculty hold the title of *zhèng jiàoshòu* and *fù jiàoshòu*, and women comprise 25% of this group. Furthermore, women only account for slightly more than 10% of the 10,605 faculty holding the title of *zhèng jiàoshòu*. The MOE data on women's representation in China provides some background for our analysis, but again, our primary concern is not representation but lived experience.

Gaskell et al. (2004) studied the experiences of women academics at five normal universities (these universities originally were developed to train teachers, but many have evolved into more comprehensive universities), surveying over 900 faculty members (men and women). They also summarized important literature describing the historical and cultural context of university life, highlighting the influences of Confucianism, the Mao-led communist revolution, the Open Door period under Deng Xiaoping, and more recent global influences linked to media and popular culture. Although Confucian traditions tended to restrict the participation of women in advanced study, communist ideology and then later global forces linked to the opening and the eventual globalization of China helped to refashion the place of women in Chinese society. The aforementioned historical and cultural influences provide great complexity to the institutionalized landscape of women's academic lives, at times supporting greater egalitarianism and at other times seemingly closing the doors to women.

In terms of their empirical findings, Gaskell et al. reported that women are more likely to be located at the lower levels of the professorate, spend significantly more time on housework than their male counterparts, and see themselves as having to work much harder than men to succeed. They also noted that gender-based stereotypes are quite prevalent among faculty at the universities under study. Along these lines, Zhang's (2010) mixed-method study of women faculty members at Chinese research universities revealed perceptions of limited access to professional networks, negative effects of stereotyping, gender-based discrimination in promotion decisions, and role conflicts related to work and family life. Both of these studies addressed important research questions somewhat similar to our own. However, Gaskell's study focused only on normal universities, while Zhang focused mostly on measuring stress levels, in part examining whether or not differences exist among women and men. Although both studies make significant contributions to knowledge concerning the experiences of women academics in China, taken together they leave a considerable gap related to a lack of understanding of the lived experiences of women academics, especially at the nation's leading research universities.

## Theoretical perspective

This study drew from feminist standpoint theory developed by Harding (1991, 2004), Hartsock (1983), Smith (1987, 1990), and other feminist scholars as a means for exploring the experiences of women at NRU, from both the perspectives of their lived experience as well as the positioned perspectives of their male colleagues. Additionally, we employed aspects of symbolic interactionism, drawing primarily on the concept of "the definition of the situation," where the work of Thomas (1923, 2002) and Thomas and Thomas (1928) was instructive.

Feminist standpoint theory argues for the importance of situating women's lives at the center of analysis and then using the understanding/knowledge generated to critique and challenge androcentric-based institutions, structures, and processes. Hartsock (1983), a key theorist in the development of standpoint theory, argued that, "A standpoint carries with it

the contention that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible” (p. 285). Feminist standpoint theorists thus point to a variety of social realities and forms of knowledge that have been shaped by androcentric positions, often to the detriment of females and females’ lives.

In the introductory chapter to *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, Harding (2004) pointed out that feminist standpoint theory “emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a feminist critical theory,” and like other critical theories rooted in a Marxist/Hegelian tradition, it focused on “the production of knowledge and practices of power” (p. 1). More specifically, feminist standpoint theory seeks to unravel and overturn the ways in which men’s lives and experiences serve to define reality, both past and present. In this sense it is a political project in that it targets networks of power that have limited and undermined the opportunities for women and women’s lives to shape reality, and more specifically, to influence the production of what constitutes meaningful knowledge. Such networks include, for example, science and scientific inquiry; as Harding (1991) pointed out, science has largely been directed by powerful institutions acting predominantly in the interest of dominant groups. The solution for Harding is not simply adding women to various networks of power, such as the scientific establishment, but rethinking the very operations that largely have evolved from the exclusion of women as knowers. As she explained,

The issue is not whether individual women have gained scientific trainings and credentials and have made important contributions to the growth of knowledge; thousands and thousands have done so. The issue for the feminist epistemological critiques is a different one: “woman the knower” (like “woman scientist”) appears to be a contradiction in terms. By “woman the knower” I mean women as agents of knowledge, as actors on the stage of history, as humans whose lives provide a grounding for knowledge claims that are different from and in some respects preferable to knowledge claims grounded in the lives of men in the dominant groups. (1991, p. 47)

The points raised here extend beyond simply the types of issues that get examined scientifically (more often than not, issues that men in dominant groups define as important), but the very nature of scientific inquiry itself, such as, for example, the dominance of methodologies built on false claims of objectivity and value-free inquiry, when in fact this was and is rarely the case in science.

Smith (1987, 1990) advanced similar claims as Harding, but focused more specifically on the field of sociology. She argued that sociology has contributed to the marginality of women by constructing a form of conceptual currency based mostly on the lives of men, largely ignoring the actualities of women’s experiences and understandings of the social world. But the adoption of a standpoint perspective involves much more than simply shifting one’s focus to the lives of women. Indeed, this epistemological shift calls for a fundamental recognition of (and perhaps sense of responsibility for) the relationship between the researcher and the researched. As Smith wrote in *The Everyday World as Problematic*, “Taking the standpoint of women means recognizing that as inquirers we are thereby brought into determinate relations with those whose experiences we intend to express. The concepts and frameworks, our methods of inquiry, of writing texts, and so forth are integral aspects of that relation” (1987, p. 111).

Standpoint theorists have made major contributions to the transformation of knowledge and social understanding. For example, for years females were defined as morally

underdeveloped as a consequence of theories of moral development grounded in men's experiences. Gilligan's (1982) important work served to challenge such models by pointing to their androcentric bias; as she pointed out, Kohlberg relied mainly on male populations to advance his initial theories of moral development. Similarly, MacKinnon (1983) analyzed critical flaws in the judicial system, noting that the very nature of what constitutes a crime or criminality is typically defined from the limited perspective of males, highlighting, for example, that what counts as rape is based on men's perceptions and interactions with women. As MacKinnon argued, "The law sees and treats women as men see and treat women" (p. 644). MacKinnon went on to argue that this form of male perceptual dominance has come to shape the essence of the modern state and its judicial apparatus.

Feminist standpoint theory served as the key theoretical and methodological guide throughout our study of Chinese women's lived experiences *as women in academe*. Our goal was to better understand academic life at a top Chinese research university *as it is experienced and lived by women*. We believe that placing their narratives at the center of our analysis is a position consistent with the goals of feminist standpoint theory; accordingly, we seek to better understand women's lived experiences and then use such understanding to critique structures and processes that ignore women's constructions of social reality.

In addition to feminist standpoint theory, we also called on the sociological school of symbolic interactionism to help frame our thinking. Thomas (1923, 2002) argued that the definition of the situation is a critical tool to investigate and understand how people define and reinforce meanings in their organizations; the definition of the situation can either reinforce social norms or help to locate the problems of certain social norms. On the one hand, when people agree on certain types of habitualized behaviors through their social interaction, and essentially their approval, they reinforce the social and organizational order. On the other hand, when people in the context of their social interaction and exchange disagree on certain norms or behaviors, their actions point to fundamental problems with particular situations. A key facet of the definition-of-the-situation idea, commonly defined as the Thomas Theorem, and paraphrased here, is that, *situations defined as real are real in their consequences* (Thomas and Thomas 1928, p. 572). We find a definition-of-the-situation approach to be helpful in framing the contradictory ways in which female and male faculty members at a Chinese research university describe the problems faced by women academics. We see real consequences for women faculty, for example, when their male colleagues fail to understand the complexities and challenges of women's lives, given men's disproportionate power and influence in shaping institutional norms and policies at Chinese universities (Gaskell et al. 2004; Hayhoe 1996).

## Methodology

The basic research questions guiding our study may be stated as follows: (1) In what ways do women faculty members see their status as a woman as a factor in shaping their academic experiences? (2) What unique challenges do women perceive themselves facing (as women) as they seek to progress through the ranks as faculty members? (3) In what ways do male faculty members describe the academic experiences of women and what (if any) unique challenges do they see women facing?

Consistent with our efforts to better understand the lived experiences of women faculty in China, as well as the positioned points of view of their male colleagues, we utilized qualitative methods as a research strategy, relying on well-established qualitative texts to

guide our methodological decision making (Bogdan and Biklen 2007; Denzin 1989; Maxwell 1996). As numerous methodologists have noted, qualitative methods are well suited for studying phenomena in their natural settings, especially when little is actually known about the social and cultural dynamics of a specific set of lived experiences (Bogdan and Biklen 2007; Lincoln and Guba 1985). We see qualitative methods as a sound choice given the need for research flexibility and a desire to develop a rich narrative-based understanding of women's academic experiences in China.

We selected Northern Research University because of its importance to Chinese higher education and our ability to access faculty at this university (our access derives in part from a previous professional relationship between the lead author and key staff at NRU). With an enrollment of over 22,000, nearly evenly divided among undergraduate and graduate students, NRU is a comprehensive university as the term is commonly used in China—meaning that it has a comprehensive curriculum, including most major fields. As a comprehensive research university, it is consistently ranked among the top 40 universities throughout the country. In terms of faculty members, NRU has over 1,750 teaching faculty (approximately 500 professors, 600 associate professors, and 650 lecturers).

The primary tool used during the data collection stage was the semi-structured interview. Interview participants were recruited through faculty and staff contacts we have at NRU and all faculty members participating in the study were informed of the nature of the project in a manner consistent with the project's IRB-approved informed-consent guidelines. The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour in duration and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. A total of 27 interviews were conducted during two separate site visits: one taking place in the early summer of 2009 and another in the spring of 2010. Interview questions focused on three major concerns: (1) changes in the nature of Chinese universities and academic life (relative to recent higher education policy changes), (2) the influence of various global forces on Chinese universities, and (3) the experiences of women at Chinese universities. The latter set of questions is of primary concern for this paper. Interviews were conducted primarily in English, although subjects were given the option of using Chinese Mandarin to explain any ideas or issues that proved to be too difficult to express in English. Several subjects switched back and forth between Mandarin and English at different points throughout the interview.

Faculty were purposely selected across a wide range of fields with the goal of achieving fairly similar representation across three basic academic ranks; due to much confusion in translating *jiāng shī* (lecturer) and *zhù jiào* (assistant professor), we chose to group faculty at these ranks into one category "lecturer/assistant professor." The breakdown by rank is: 9 professors, 11 associate professors, and 7 lecturers/assistant professors. All of the professors were men, with the women coming entirely from the associate professor (9) and lecturer/assistant professor (6) categories. In terms of disciplinary affiliations, the faculty came from the following fields, representing 17 different schools or departments (most are schools but a few are lone standing departments): Agricultural Economics and Rural Development (1), Business (2), Economics (1), Environment and Natural Resources (1), Finance (1), Foreign Languages (2), History (4), International Studies (1), Journalism and Communication (2), Law (1), Marxism Studies (1), Public Administration (4), Philosophy (1), Physics (1), Psychology (1), Sociology and Population Studies (2), and Statistics (1).

Data analysis included both deductive and inductive strategies aimed at formulating key categories related to our primary research questions. In terms of deductive strategies, our initial assumption that women faculty are likely to have different experiences and perceptions about their work drove development of a key section of our interview protocol. Accordingly, differences in perceptions among women and men about women's academic



lives formed a major thrust of our initial data coding and analysis. Essentially, any comments from faculty related to gender issues and/or the experiences of women as academics were included in a broad category called “Gender/Gender-Related Issues.” Individual comments ranging in length from a sentence to an extended page-length discussion were grouped under this category.

Once all appropriate interview data were included under the broad category of “Gender/Gender-Related Issues,” both researchers analyzed these data in search of further sub-themes. The actual process involved organizing and reducing the data through cycles of reading and analyzing data pieces (i.e., phrases, sentences, and paragraphs containing relevant ideas). Ultimately, several dominant subthemes emerged from this analysis and are incorporated into our presentation of the findings. This portion of the data analysis reflects the more inductive aspect of the project in that the subthemes generated largely were unanticipated and in this sense arose from the actual data. Thus, while deductive strategies shaped many of our broad data categories (e.g., “Gender/Gender-Related Issues”), corresponding sub-categories emerged primarily through inductive strategies (e.g., “working double time”).

## Findings

As noted in the preceding section, a focus on women’s gendered experience at NRU was part of a larger project to analyze changes at Chinese research universities. Facets of our project focused on the impact of national policies, namely the previously mentioned 211 and 985 projects, as well as the general influence of globalization. We offer a brief discussion here as a means of better contextualizing our key findings related to women’s academic experiences.

Generally speaking, faculty members at the nation’s leading universities are under greater pressure these days to engage in empirical research and scholarly writing. Such changes reflect increased funding levels, especially at 985 universities such as NRU; at these universities, scholarly expectations have changed in significant ways since the implementation of 985 in the late 1990s. For example, faculty evaluations and promotion criteria increasingly are tied to research productivity, typically measured in terms of publishing in top journals. These changes may be understood in terms of two broad movements, linked in part to globalization and the changing context of higher education. First, is the growing recognition of the role of research universities as sources of economic development in what some term the global, new knowledge, high-tech economy (Peters and Besley 2006; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). Chinese policy makers recognize this reality and intend to build research universities capable of producing scientific innovations linked to economic development. Some universities of this type, such as Peking University and Qinghua University in Beijing, already exist, but the goal is to strengthen those already in place, while also adding to their numbers; hence, roughly 40 universities are targeted by 985 for high levels of research support. Second, as a world economic leader, Chinese policy makers desire for their universities to occupy a similar world-wide leadership role. Here, global ranking schemes play a role as Chinese leaders want to see their universities in the upper echelon of world’s top universities. Of course, research capacity is a key component of earning world-class status, as is internationalization, another facet stressed by Projects 211 and 985.

Hence, academic life at China’s top universities is evolving rapidly, at times taking on a similar appearance of the leading Western universities, such as those in the United

Kingdom and the United States. Indeed, findings from our research reveal extensive international collaborations and partnerships across most academic departments and schools at NRU. With the growing emphasis on increased research productivity and internationalization, today's Chinese faculty members face higher levels of stress, as they adjust to a new organizational environment. And, of course, such changes are greatly influencing the academic lives of women faculty.

In terms of our key findings focused on women's academic experiences, we first delineate differences in the way women and men defined the nature of the experiences of women as faculty; essentially, we explore their definition of the situation concerning whether or not women face more challenging circumstances as faculty members. We then identify and discuss four key themes related to the nature of the challenges confronting women, described in the following terms: working double time, the glass ceiling, the boys club and social exclusion, and comrades in arms.

### Gender differences in the definition of the situation

Our study revealed significant differences in terms of how female and male professors defined the general challenges confronting women as academics. Women tended to see the challenges they faced as quite serious, while more times than not male professors saw either no serious challenges associated with being a woman at NRU or defined any obstacles as fairly minor and outside the scope of university policy.

Women professors readily pointed to some basic problems, including their underrepresentation at the upper ranks of the professorate. Indeed, the fact that women are underrepresented at the rank of professor (*zhèng jiàoshòu*) was more likely to be defined as a problem by women. One female professor put it this way: "They haven't paid attention to that. They think it is normal for women to be one-third of the professors. That looks like a good sign to most people, yeah." In this instance, the faculty member's estimate of one-third is actually quite high, as national data reveal that women account for only about 10% at the rank of professor. The idea that women's underrepresentation at the top of the faculty hierarchy is considered a "normal" state of affairs suggests widespread acceptance of women's subordinate place in academic life.

Several ideas were offered as to why women may be underrepresented, including possible hiring discrimination against them based on fears of them having a child. As one woman explained, "Male leaders will discuss this only among themselves. 'Oh, she's a woman. She will get married soon. She will have a child.' So just like that, it happens." This faculty member went on to add, "Here in China they just show their gender discrimination. They might just act like they don't want any women in a particular position. This is the case here." Another woman added, "There's no support at all. I don't think China has a policy to support women in that regard. I think if you complain about it, you'll get discriminated against...I feel so bad for my female students when they go into the job market...I keep hearing about how they don't get interviews, they don't get hired because they expect that you're going to have babies soon."

One female professor felt that women faced significant barriers pursuing faculty careers because of the general favoritism Chinese culture has for boys. As she explained, "So many families stress the importance of the boy. You know, the family will continue from the boys, not from the girls. And girls, you know, when they marry a man and have a baby that baby will take the father's surname. So, girls do not get the same treatment as the boys. Maybe this is why there are more male professors than female. The females may not get

the encouragement to achieve so much.” This issue is particularly profound given China’s one-child policy, which applies to the vast majority of Chinese families.

Retirement policies may also play a role in gender imbalances, especially at the upper ranks, given that Chinese women must retire at an earlier age than men. As one woman explained, “Yeah, we officially discriminate against women. We need to retire 5 years earlier than men even though we live longer...I think it’s officially different. But it’s different for professors too... I don’t know. I think officially 55 but if you’re a professor you can stay until 60.”

In terms of perspectives offered by male faculty members, some of the men in our study also recognized the difficult challenges that women face. Several spoke about how Chinese traditionalism still influences the opportunity structure for women and men. For example, one male faculty member offered the following remarks: “But from a traditional perspective, the women or the rights of women, during our long history, have not always been so highly respected. So actually, from this more traditional influence, women still struggle.” This faculty member noted that the problem may be greatest in the rural areas of China. Another openly acknowledged that discrimination exists against hiring women for academic positions, expressing his own frustration for his female doctoral students: “There’s also a problem in China, I think...you know literally, women have the equal rights of course to get this kind of job, but universities or research institutes, they prefer to hire male researchers or professors...I mean we have many more male professors at universities, so that’s a fact...Some of my students, female students, Ph.D. students, cannot get a position—it’s much more difficult to get a faculty position. The universities or other institutes they have lots of reasons they give.”

The majority of male professors did not see the state of women’s representation in academic positions as a problem. As one male faculty member explained, “Let me say that a gender concern may exist, but not so much in law [the School of Law]. For example, now we have nearly 100 faculty members, and maybe one third are women...Among the full professors here, maybe only one quarter, among the associate professors, maybe one third.” A second male faculty member offered similar remarks: “I don’t know about other universities, but in this university there are a lot of female full-time faculty members. For example, in my school, one-third of the faculty is female. That’s high.” Another pointed out that China may actually be better than other countries, in terms of offering opportunities for women: “I don’t have official stats to backup my observation but my feeling is that Chinese women are better represented in higher education than elsewhere.” This faculty member is actually correct in that women in China constitute over 45% of the professorate, but of course, they are mostly at the lower levels.

Several male faculty members saw no differences between the experiences of female and male academics, arguing in some cases that gender should not be a consideration at all. As one argued, “It is considered discrimination to say you only want to hire a male or female...And frankly speaking they just need to be really excellent, yeah, regardless of gender.” Another also saw no gender-related problems in academic life: “But by and large we have, especially among the junior faculty, at the interim level, lots of females doing very well. In part it may be due to the communist tradition, but also in school the girls are doing better than the boys.” These two faculty members tended to see academic life as meritocratic, with women having the same opportunities as men to advance their careers.

Among those who acknowledged some differences, most attributed these to the choices women make, such as whether or not to pursue high-level academic posts. As one male faculty member noted, “It turns out that all the deans and vice deans are all males in my school. I think there are some female full professors; they are very excellent in the field and

they do their research but they don't care about the administrative positions. Well...I don't know...they're not that competitive." Other male faculty members echoed this type of explanation, hence dismissing the possibility that problems within the university may in fact serve to limit the opportunities for women to serve in high-level academic posts.

### Working double time

When women were asked to elaborate on their general view of the state of faculty life for women, a key theme focused on a sense that women essentially have two jobs, or at least work two shifts or "double time." As one woman maintained, "The university treats us all the same, but at home we're not the same...And so the women have more work to do at home...and it gives the husbands more free time for watching TV." Another woman added, "I have no time. I have to find time for work. Especially for the past year I felt very tired because I needed to take care of my child and I had to finish my work. I also needed to write many articles and books for my research. I don't think this academic atmosphere is too good for creative work, but our university supports this trend." She went on to add that in China, "Men and women are unequal in nature. Because in China, in most times, men just do their own work, they can have much time to make their work perfect. But for women, I have to, for example, take care of my child, and do housework. Also, I have to do teaching and research work. So each night, I have to stay up very late." A third woman echoed this view: "My son is 3 years old now. I think I had a difficult time in my first 2 or 3 years, after I started at the university. I was a new faculty member then...and then I had a baby. So it was very difficult. I was a new mom and a new faculty member. So it was a big challenge." Just like earlier comments about inequities at the upper faculty ranks between men and women suggested that such a state of affairs is "normal," here a similar logic is implied in explaining why some see men's academic achievements as exceeding those of women—"men and women are unequal in nature," with of course men/superior and women/inferior as the standard presumption. But the reality is, as the preceding woman highlighted, that societal and organizational factors contribute to different opportunities for academic success.

As part of their double duty, women talked about having to make difficult choices between opting to spend more time on their research or choosing instead to spend time with their child. As one female faculty member said, "As a woman professor, sometimes we can face more problems than male professors...We have to balance family and work... It's been very hard. That means I have to do more work without complaints...My son is about 10 years old now. In China, our child's education is very hard. So I have to spend more time helping him." Another also contrasted her situation with that of her male counterparts: "Maybe some of the male professors' wives are not faculty members and so they don't have to work in the evening. So the research work has no time limit. Maybe the wife is a housewife so the husband can focus on his work. But I can't! My husband is not a househusband. So I have to do research work and have some family responsibilities at the same time."

Another woman spoke of her struggle to find balance between family and work: "I just think the tension between family and work is common to any woman with a career. I had a baby 3 years ago and when my child was born I had to spend more time with him and take care of him. I didn't want to lose my job just because I had a baby and so I tried to maintain a balance between family and work. But sometimes I felt exhausted. Before I had a child, I didn't feel any tension between family and work." This faculty member eventually

convinced her parents to move in and help care for her child. But some women did not have such an option or did not see it as viable. As one woman explained, “I know that some other women professors maybe can find assistance and get their parents to live with them... they can invite their parents to do something. But I don’t want to do that. That’s why I’m so tired...I don’t think there should be any difference but some male professors, if they don’t have such a burden, I think they can do better.” This faculty member went on to add that many of her evening hours are spent helping her child with homework, time that male professors might use to advance their research. Other female faculty noted that many women eventually drop out of the research part of academic life and simply accept the consequences—no promotion to full professor. Some women faculty take time off when having a child, but then face living on a reduced salary. As one explained, “We only get half of the pay if we take maternity leave...if I have a child I only get half of the money.” Consequently, many women do not take time off but simply focus on their teaching, while ignoring their research for 6 months to a year or perhaps longer.

### The glass ceiling

A second common concern raised by nearly all the women we interviewed concerned limitations placed on their advancement within the university, especially to the upper ranks of the professorate and to high-level administrative positions. As one female faculty member maintained, “You know, the university, the leaders, or the government have not really paid attention to this problem—gender is not seen as a problem. They think it’s normal, you know, maybe that women should be less than men among the faculty. I don’t know, but it seems like it may be a problem...And women may be mostly at the assistant professor rank. The full professors are mostly men...In my department they are all men... Yeah, before there was one, but you know, there should be some, but not now.” Part of the explanation for such differences was linked to their heavier workload at home, as expressed in the previous section. But additional factors also emerged, many of which served as challenges to any arguments suggesting that gender-based inequities are somehow “normal.”

One woman spoke of the ways in which the basic culture of the university favored men: “The university culture is male dominated. But in terms of the policies and administration, you can’t really find any clues suggesting that males and females are treated differently. But when it comes to funding and research, you can see the clear difference between men and women; you will find female professors doing a lot of basic work to connect with the students but not getting the same opportunities to connect with the government or the administration.” This woman went on to add that, senior-level administrators see female faculty members as “better fit for doing some basic research and teaching. But the male professors are better suited for getting funding from the government.” A male faculty member reinforced the view that a form of gender divide exists relative to research: “I will say in our school the ratio between male and female professors is about half and half. We are, I would say, the most open—in this field, we are the most open school...But the dominance, let’s say, in terms of research, the professors, the senior professors, most of them are males. That’s where the big difference is...So there may be a difference at the higher ranks but not lower down.”

Several female faculty members focused mainly on differences in terms of high-ranking administrative positions. As one explained, “For the academic positions, yes [there is mostly equality]. But for the administrative positions, I don’t think so. I noticed that there are many women presidents in the US, I mean at the university. But here there are very

few.” A second woman noted, “During my informal conversations with some older female professors, they say ‘I like doing research but I don’t want to get involved in the politics and the competition. Too many meetings take up my research time.’ As I come to think about it, if I was promoted to be a full professor, I might not like to be a dean at the same time.” Along these lines, one woman believed that the politics of the university favored men and their ways of dealing with social relations. From her perspective, the basic culture of the university gave preferential treatment to men and their communication styles. For example, having several bottles of beer over a lunch or dinner meeting to resolve basic differences or to lay the foundation for an important project is quite common among male administrators and faculty members and yet for many women in this study consuming large or even small quantities of beer was not a practice they commonly adopted.

### The boys club and social exclusion

Some of the remarks in the previous section call to mind a related concern raised by several women—the idea that male social relations and networks excluded women at times. One woman offered the following: “Men have their own way of networking and we are left out. So when the dean chooses his assistants, he naturally selects those people he knows best—it’s that kind of thing. But at the same time, we wish that we could have leadership opportunities. We don’t want to do the dirty politics but we wish we could still take on leadership roles.” The following two comments reinforce such a perspective:

In China, especially drinking, it’s around drinking. Drinking and going to dinners is a big issue. If you don’t drink, you can’t get anything done!

Some men when they talk to us, they would say ‘so and so is a bad enemy; so and so are buddies.’ I just don’t know how they can work together...if you play less politics, then you may have a disadvantage...But I can feel that if I was in the male network, I’d have more knowledge about who will speak for me...But since we’re left out, we never know. We feel more uncertainty.

Other women echoed these views as well, noting that women often are excluded from the male decision-making networks, while others pointed out that women frequently make choices based on their disdain for politics and male-dominated networking, or based on their preference (sometimes expressed as obligation) to spend time with family.

### Comrades in arms

Another key theme that emerged from our study appeared to us initially as somewhat of a contradiction to the boys-club-and-social-exclusion idea—that being the notion that women and men academics are all comrades in arms, and necessarily equals. This perspective is consistent with Mao’s famous saying that, “women hold up half the sky” (*fù nǚ chéng qǐ bàn biān tiān* or *fù nǚ néng dǐng bàn biān tiān*), and hence, should be the equal of men. The comrades-in-arms idea also may be linked to the communist tradition of workers in the same organization being tied together in the tradition of the *dānwèi*, where workers actually live together as a kind of extended family or close-knit community. Hence, one might rightfully expect the elders of such a community to look after those who are more junior. For the sake of argument, this type of comrades-in-arms arrangement may seem like an improvement over the highly politicized context of many academic departments at US universities. However, when one recognizes that the NRU organizational leaders who look

after their colleagues as “comrades” are almost always men, then a deeper more critical interpretation must raise issues about the degree to which male privilege undergirds the comrades-in-arms idea.

Several faculty members alluded to the communist revolution and the emphasis that was placed on gender equality. One male faculty member explained it this way: “With the founding of the new China, from 1949 onward, we set up the rule that men and women are equal. They have equal rights in every area, in research, in work, in education, in everything...So they got their equality at that time.” Another male professor pointed out that salary equity exists in the academy: “In universities, male and female members have the same salary.” The assumption here is that men and women at the same rank share the same salary, but this does not necessarily mean that men and women academics earn similar salaries overall, given that there are far more men at the upper ranks.

An example of the potential for male privilege to surface relative to the comrades-in-arms approach is obvious in this woman’s comments: “Because the department dean is a nice guy...He said, ‘Ok, you’re pregnant. We’ll reduce your teaching load as well as the supervision of students’ essays to give you more time.” Comments from a second woman also raised the comrades-in-arms idea:

Well, I have been treated the same as my male professors, and I don’t think there is any gender discrimination. But, you know, the promotion, if I want to be promoted to full professor, the females may actually have to work harder...But when I had my promotion meeting—when you apply for a promotion you must present to your colleagues, you have to do a presentation in front of the academic community. I remember the last time I did this, I wanted to be promoted to associate professor. I told them, yeah, I said, “I am a, you know, a girl, and so I feel much more stress from life, because I’m a mother...And this is so hard you know, I have to take care of my daughter.” And also at that time I had to take care of my husband. I had to cook and I had to do the shopping and do laundry, everything, you know, housework took lots of my time and energy. I had to do all of that. But the male professors, they can, sometimes they can just let the wife do all the housework and they can concentrate on teaching or writing. I have academic work to do also, but the female professors, they often have to take care of the house, the family—be a mother and a wife, and a professor at the same time. So I said to the committee, “I tell you this, I am not, you know, asking for less work from you guys, but I just want to tell you the truth.” And they agreed with me.

This faculty member was promoted to associate professor despite a less than stellar research record. Her promotion was granted in recognition of her extra family responsibilities. Although the specific outcome may be seen in positive terms (being promoted is “good”), the problem is that women relying on trusted male comrades, no matter how thoughtful and understanding they may be, tends to reproduce structures in which men control key organizational decisions and the related outcomes. The potential consequence, especially over the long-term, is the continued marginalization of women academics and the furthering of male privilege.

## Discussion

Some of the key findings in this paper support previous work on women’s academic lives from many regions of the world. For example, the finding that women faculty at NRU face

challenges in balancing professional work and family life is not a new one (Acker 2003; Caplan 1993; Gaskell et al. 2004; Gregory 2006; Probert 2005; Skachkova 2007). Balancing work and family obligations seemed particularly challenging during pregnancy and the early years of child rearing, but the demanding nature of Chinese schools and the intense competition for eventual seats at the university also appeared to extract a good deal of women's time in the capacity as evening and weekend tutor for their child. Here, we are reminded of the importance of feminist standpoint theory and the work of Smith (1987), and specifically, the idea that the social organization of schooling extracts labor from parents by assigning high levels of homework, but typically it is the mothers who bear the brunt of this burden.

Our findings also point to a virtual glass ceiling confronting women as well as organizational structures and processes reflecting male-dominated norms and practices (the boys club and social exclusion). Again, our findings are not so different from what other researchers have reported (Bagilhole 2002, 2009; Fan 1998; Jones and Lovejoy 1980; Ozkanli and White 2008; Thanacoody et al. 2006; White 2003; Zhang 2010). In order for women to move to the upper ranks of academic life, including academic administration, they must adapt to the communication and leadership practices associated with men, including a type of politics that at least a few women in this study have little interest in deploying. In this regard, the organizational context of the Chinese university calls to mind the classic critique of the modern corporation offered by Kanter (1993) and the ways in which women's success in such settings invariably demands that they conform to structures of communication and power defined by and ultimately serving the interests of men.

Although our findings related to working double time, the glass ceiling, and the boys club and social exclusion are not entirely new, nor surprising, they nonetheless offer additional evidence toward the goal of building a global solution to the common problems faced by women academics around the world. Given that such problems exist world-wide, then perhaps one way of approaching them is by adopting both local and global change strategies. Thus, in addition to action at the institutional level, initiatives involving transnational organizations, social movements, and NGOs may also prove fruitful. For example, universities around the world are increasingly caught up in the pursuit of global ranking. What impact might such rankings have on the betterment of opportunities for academic women, at a global level, if they actually required universities to report gender data and then used such data in their complex ranking schemas? It does not seem to be too great a leap of faith to suggest that a truly world-class university ought to achieve high levels of women's participation in academic life. At a more national level, the awarding of government research funds, such as Project 985 funds in China, could also be tied to a university's efforts to enhance the experiences and opportunities of academic women.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this paper resides with the notion that women are linked to a close-knit group of workers looking after one another—the comrades-in-arms idea. As we pointed out, although male academic leaders may have women's interests at heart, the potential to reproduce cultural norms and practices limiting women's roles in academe is quite likely. Such a system is not unlike findings of the ritualistic practices of a brotherhood in which women participate, but only on the basis of the men's terms and in line with the dictates of their male brethren (Rhoads 1995).

Time also may lead to significant changes in women's representation at the upper levels of academic life in China, as female students now appear to be outperforming males across a wide range of fields, and at the lower level of the professorate are highly



represented. Several of the faculty in our study, both women and men, noted as much. Time will only tell if the current flow of women into the lower levels of faculty ranks will progress upward; however, findings from this study suggests that some fundamental changes in institutional structure and policies may be necessary for this to in fact take place.

Such changes might include a stronger leave-taking policy for women, one that does not penalize them financially for having a child. Also, greater numbers of women need to be included in key departmental and school decision-making bodies, including personnel committees. Waiting for enough women to achieve the rank of professor likely will take too long and result in negative consequences for many women as they seek promotion to the upper ranks of the professorate. Finally, male faculty need to be better informed about the ways in which their basic communication and decision making processes may serve to alienate and exclude women. Where possible, institutional policies should be developed to eliminate or deter such marginalizing practices.

## Conclusions

Our findings highlight problems NRU women encounter related to a workload that amounts to working double time, a glass ceiling that limits promotion and advancement, a form of social exclusion that limits women's opportunities, and a comrade-in-arms approach to decision making that holds the potential to reproduce male privilege and male domination. Many of the problems highlighted here are consistent with a growing body of knowledge about the academic lives of women around the world, while other aspects of our findings shed new light on the challenges and barriers academic women face. In this regard, our study offers additional weight to bear on the development of solutions to gender inequities in academic life that have the potential to be implemented at both the local and global level.

At a more local level, key policy makers, institutional leaders, and faculty can play a vital role by calling attention to gender-related inequities and pushing for changes in structures, policies, and practices that may help to limit academic opportunities and advancement for women. For example, partial pay during maternity leave leads many women faculty to continue teaching (for financial reasons), while mostly dropping their research. At top research universities such as NRU, setting one's research aside for an extended period of time may later limit academic advancement, especially in light of a system increasingly driven by the number of publications. At a more global level, it is often difficult for the problems of women academics to become central concerns, given a wide range of serious problems confronting females of all ages around the world. However, academic and disciplinary associations involved in international forms of engagement and scholarly exchange can play a vital role in addressing global inequities faced by women academics. They might, for example, apply pressure to the various organizations involved in driving the global university rankings movement to consider universities on the basis of gender equity among faculty, as a measure perhaps of a truly world-class university. Also, non-governmental organizations and women's rights organizations can at the very least elevate the discourse surrounding the challenges of women academics around the world. Indeed, confronting the obstacles faced by women academics requires work on many fronts. If women are truly to hold up half the sky then at the very least they ought to hold up half the university as well.

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