

## Media Portrayals of Military vs. Working Women in China

### Intro

Women's rights in China are a fairly new concept, and because of this, it faces an uphill battle. However, through Communism and global women's rights movements women are at an all time high of enjoying their rights. In the past sixty years, China has implemented several women's rights policies, from banning foot binding and child marriages down to maternity rights. As women's rights become an ever-growing custom in China, more and more women want and are expected to work. However, outdated feudalistic attitudes towards women can still be found in society, but does societal attitudes differ to what type of woman it judges?

As an American woman in the military, I understand how both military and workingwomen can be portrayed in the United States. However, during my time abroad, I saw relatively few women in Harbin Institute for Technology's ROTC program. The women I did see were never included with the men and were treated as weaker individuals. This prompted my thinking of how China portrays these women in the media. Are they praised? How hard is it to become a soldier? How do these women differ than regular workingwomen? Is there even a difference? It is a well-known fact that Chinese media is heavily restricted, so I would only be able to see what the government approves of sharing to the world. Therefore, it can be thought that media portrayals of Chinese women could also share China's governmental ideology. All of these reasons made me extremely interested in my topic.

### Research Question

**Are and if so how are women portrayed differently in the technical/professional jobs as opposed to military women in Chinese newspapers, media, and social studies in the period 1990 to now?**

### Literature Review

There are two broad types of theories with regard to expectations about women's portrayals of military vs. workingwomen in China. One type expects both groups to be the same, while the other type expects the two groups to be different.

### Theories

**A. Even with different jobs and lifestyles, military and workingwomen share sameness.**

**1. All women are mothers and share the same general expectations.** South China Morning Post wrote an article on how mothers who are experiencing "mummy guilt" can be manipulated by their children who catch on to their mother's stresses. Mummy guilt is the belief that because of working, children have behavioral problems, and rely on others in times of need, etc. Another South China Morning Post found that children of working mothers are more likely to commit crimes, bully, and partake in drugs. The general consensus is that mothers should work, but at the same time give their children the exact amount of attention as if they were stay at home mothers. The inability to do so creates a sense of failure in these women. According to this theory, I expect newspapers to present both military and workingwomen as stressed mothers.

**2. All women share the same rights.** China has protective policies for women created by world culture and communism. The global woman's movement in China was especially helpful in two regards: reproductive rights and domestic violence (Kaufman,

2012). China's top down reform has protected women in several regards, pregnant women are not allowed to work in cold or elevated conditions; all women are granted maternity leave regardless of their job; and marriage rights (i.e. Chinese woman can no longer be sold to her husband's family for profit). According to this theory, I predict newspapers to present both military and workingwomen protected from previous grievances in the same regard.

**3. Women share stress due to the ideals of a two-income household and lingering ideas of Confucianism.** A gender and job mobility study in China found that educated men are more likely to be hired for a job over an educated woman. Researchers Cao Yang and Hu Chiung-Yin believe wider gender gaps are caused by lack of state's effort in promoting women's rights, the labor market's emergence, family dynamics in regards to gender roles all play a part in job mobility gaps (Yang, Cao and Hu Chiung-Yin, 2007). This causes women to be stressed for multiple reasons. One is the lingering idea that women still only belong in the home. Another study found that rural Chinese women lack self-confidence; half the people surveyed (54.4% women and 61.6% men) believed women's work is in the home, and men's work is in the public (Benxiang, 2014). This societal view stems from a long history of Confucianism. In Confucius's teachings, women were portrayed as obedient, serving helpers. They first must serve their fathers, then serve their husbands, and after their husbands die; they must serve their sons. The new societal belief of a two-income household directly opposes old gender roles; creating confusion of gender roles in the household.

In the professional regard, every woman is expected to work. A Chinese professor once told me that every household depends on a double income in today's society,

however society has not yet accepted the ideas of a working mother. Therefore, women are expected to work, but not as hard or as successful as men, and be able to be the perfect mother.

Another stress would be the fear of workplace gender discrimination. "In a survey of 55,000 working women released on Monday by recruiters "Zhaopin.com," over 80 percent of respondents said they had encountered gender discrimination in their work, or in their search for a job" (China Daily, 2017). This discrimination can range from not being hired to the job because of her gender to being sexually harassed for being a woman. A study done in Hong Kong in 1984 found that of the 169 college-educated women employees, two-thirds of encountered sexual harassment at the workplace (Dolecheck, 1984). Hong Kong Coalition Against Sexual Abuse (1992) conducted a questionnaire survey on sexual harassment in the workplace. It found that of the 455 women interviewed, over 80% of them faced some form of sexual harassment since 1990 (Chan, So-Kum, and Chan, 1999). According to this theory, I foresee newspapers to present both military and workingwomen to struggle with workplace/home identity.

**B. Although Chinese women share several similarities, their media portrayals can also be different.**

**1. The media portrays higher expectations for women in the military.**

**a. Military: it is an honor and privilege to serve in the People's Liberation Army as a woman.** Joining the PLA as a woman requires going through a rigorous selection process. Therefore, officials judge women off their previous schooling, physical fitness abilities, their allegiance to the communist party, and their interview skills. It is important to note that the interview skills are not a requirement for men (Allen, Kania,

2016). According to this theory, I expect newspapers to present military women more sacred than workingwomen.

**b. The military being too bloody led to specialized jobs for professional women.** The researcher of "Chinese Women in the People's Liberation Army: Professionals or Quasi-Professionals?" found that women in the military are trained the same as men. However the majority of the jobs women do are medical, translations, behind the scenes work, etc. The author sample 61 women to see where they fell in the military. 22 women were medical workers, 16 were scientists/engineers, 12 were cultural workers, 5 are commanders with 3 staff, and the last 3 women were pilots. The author notes that if there are only three million people in the PLA, then women account for 4.5 percent (Li, 1993). Since 1993, progression has been made. PLA enlisted women and officers are only prohibited from serving in submarines (Allen, Kania, 2016). Only a few units do not have women serving in them. It was also found that most women serve in all women subunits, with little progression to integration training (Allen, Kania, 2016). According to this theory, I believe newspapers will present military women as highly specialized workingwomen.

**2. Mulan was a story of masculinity for military women and femininity for professionals.** The classical Chinese version of Mulan had a young woman dressing as a man to take her father's place in war. She fought in the war for 12 years and no one knew she was a man. This is significant to my thesis because, now, femininity plays a large role in the PLA (Huang, 2014).

**3. Military women used as propaganda in the media can lead to over-sexualizing them.** The new PLA recruitment video featuring woman soldiers dancing

showed nothing about the actual roles of military women, but just women dressed their best dancing around. It was stated that these women's first honor guard lesson was nothing but a beauty class (Huang, 2017). China Daily reported that women had to take part in a talent show to test artistic ability to become part of the Chinese Army. "Wang Qian, a vice battalion commander in the Second Artillery Force ... believed it was extremely necessary to include the talent shows, and told METRO: 'Female soldiers are a special element of the army.' She said the army did not only want someone who is intelligent" (China Daily, 2009). The South China Morning post wrote an article on China's all female color guard welcoming team for Turkmenistan's president. There, it described women in short skirts carrying guns marching right behind the men. The Chinese military states that the "addition of women to parade unit a step in the right direction" (Huang, 2014).

The theories and research provided show that yes, women are perceived differently in Chinese media and scholarly articles, but it does not give further insight into *why*. I will study the *way* these media outlets analyze these women, what specific words are constantly used to describe them, while considering the relationship between the words and the women. For example, workingwomen are described in multiple accounts as "stressed" whereas military women are described as "lovely." I want to figure out why society views these women in different lights, even when they are both professionals. According to this theory, I expect newspapers to present military women as commodities, not leaders.

### Methods

1. By using a comparative historical method, I will be comparing media portrayals of military women vs. civilian workwomen. Observing mass media will give me a better insight into the into women's social structure change in China, and the societal attitudes towards it.
2. By using Chinese newspapers and media sources and other studies, I will compare the societal views of Chinese workingwomen versus women participating in the People's Liberation Army. I will also use previous research on women's rights in China to get background information on theory, but will not use those sources to find the answer of why these women are portrayed differently in the media. The newspapers I have analyzed so far are:
  - a. China Daily
  - b. China Military Online
  - c. China Brief
  - d. South China Morning Post

I will analyze this material by coding specific words, recognizing patterns and relationships, and identifying common concepts found in the media. China Daily is an important news source because it is one of the main English sources for Chinese news. Chinese military online is all in Chinese, and offers different insight into what is happening in China. It provides a deeper insight into the world of the People's Liberation Army that the English websites do not offer. China Brief and South China Morning Post are helpful because they offer reading materials on attitudes towards women in China. I also plan to read Chinese blogs such as Zhihu to get a better understanding to the reasons behind women's media portrayals.

Preliminary Findings

My theory— **Military women are a subset of workingwomen. However their media portrayals are different because of conflicting societal views on what a modern-day woman should be.** The strictly Chinese newspaper, China Military Online describes military women's jobs, roles, and growth, whereas China Daily (or other English publicized works) only portrays Chinese military women as lovely, and a nice sight to see in the military. I want to find out why China's English newspapers report purely on women's femininity and why Chinese newspapers give facts. In regards to workingwomen, why are all of their newspaper reports on motherhood instead of protecting women's rights in the work place? China has gone through great strides and lengths to promote equal rights, however their media sources still focus on trivial issues. I plan to find out why.



## Bibliography

- Allen, Kenneth, Elsa Kania. "Holding Up Half the Sky? (Part 2)-The Evolution of Women's Roles in the PLA." *Jamestown*, 26 Oct. 2016.
- Benxiang, Zeng. "Women's Political Participation in China: Improved or Not?." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, Jan. 2014, pp. 136-150. EBSCOhost.
- Blurton, Jadis. "How 'Mummy Guilt' Can Get in the Way of Good Parenting." *Shibboleth Authentication Request*, South China Morning Post, 29 Jan. 2012.
- Chan, Darius K. -S., Catherine So-Kum Tang, and Wai Chan. "Sexual Harassment: A Preliminary Analysis of Its Effects on Hong Kong Chinese Women in the Workplace and Academia." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. Cambridge University Press. (1999), 661-672.
- China Daily. "Women Sing and Dance into the Army." *Women Sing and Dance into Army*, China Daily, 30 Nov. 2009.
- Coalition Against Sexual Abuse. (1992) *Women's experience of sexual harassment: Survey report* [in Chinese]. Hong Kong: Coalition Against Sexual Abuse.
- Dolecheck, M. M. (1984). Sexual harassment of women in the workplace—A hush-hush topic in Hong Kong. *Hong Kong Manager*, 20(5), 23-27.
- Huang, Keira Lu. "Dressed to Kill: First Female PLA Honour Guards Steal Limelight at Leader's Visit." *South China Morning Post*, South China Morning Post, 13 May 2014.
- Huang, Zheping. "Great at Dancing and Taking Phone Calls-How China Portrays Its Female Soldiers." *Quartz*, Quartz, 24 July 2017.

Kaufman, Joan. "The Global Women's Movement and Chinese Women's Rights."

*Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 21, no. 76, July 2012, pp. 585-602.

EBSCOhost.

Li, Xiaolin. "Chinese Women in the People's Liberation Army: Professionals or Quasi-

Professionals?." *Armed Forces & Society (0095327X)*, vol. 20, no. 1, Fall93, pp.

69-83. EBSCOhost

Moy, Patsy. "Children of Working Mums at Risk." *Shibboleth Authentication Request*,

South China Morning Post, 29 May 2006.

Yang, Cao and Hu Chiung-Yin. "Gender and Job Mobility in Postsocialist China: A

Longitudinal Study of Job Changes in Six Coastal Cities." *Social Forces*, vol. 85,

no. 4, June 2007, pp. 1535-1560. EBSCOhost.