Gender Roles in the Public Sphere:
A Study on Chinese Women's Leisure Spaces in Beijing

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This thesis titled

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A Study on Chinese Women’s Leisure Spaces in Beijing

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this research is to examine the relationship between women’s leisure spaces and gender roles, as well as the gendered nature of public leisure spaces in Beijing. China is a country that has undergone one of the most rapid social, political and economic transformations of the past century. The shift from a highly patriarchal imperially ruled society, to a closed off totalitarian form of socialism under Mao, and now to the more open yet strictly regulated free-market era, has entailed a whirlwind of implications for China’s society as a whole, especially for women. As these changes have taken place, so has women’s position in society and gender roles. One way to gain a greater understanding of gendered social structures in any society is through examining public places. The types of public places in Beijing now available to women for leisure activities are numerous, however little remains known regarding their perceptions and use of these places. I conclude that although new types of public spaces have been opened up for women, which provide greater opportunities for challenging hegemonic gender norms, women’s role in the public sphere remains highly traditional.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to analyze the relationship between women’s leisure spaces and gender roles, as well as the gendered nature of public leisure spaces in Beijing. The relationship between gender and space lies at the heart of this research, for gender is largely a social construct that is often reinforced or contested through the use of space. Because places exist as sites of social relations imbued with power, an examination of place allows for a deeper understanding of the pervading socio-political structures that are influential in shaping the identities of individuals within a society.

This research is set in the context of the rapid economic, political and social changes that have taken place in Beijing over the past half-century. China has undergone one of the most historically rapid periods of modernization since the economic reforms of the late 1970s were implemented. In addition, China’s political history over the last century has shifted drastically from imperialism to totalitarian socialism and now to a more moderate form of socialism with a free-market capitalist twist. These political and economic changes have had numerous impacts on the social characteristics and hierarchies of the society and perhaps most importantly, people’s identities.

While the changes that have taken place in China offer limitless possibilities for research, the concern for this thesis project pertains to how these changes have altered the experience of women in terms of their gender roles, their perceived gender roles, and their place in society. The socio-political ideologies inherent to Confucianism and socialism have extremely different attitudes towards women. However, in the present free-market era, little is known as to what elements of these ideologies remain influential
on the social position and everyday experiences of women. I argue that one way that allows for a better understanding of women’s social position and the experiences of women, is through examining how they use public places.

Spatial issues for women are a form of analysis that speaks to the new visibility of women in societies and to ideologies related to women’s access to and use of various places (Henderson et al. 2002). Historically, many societies around the world have been patriarchal, which has often entailed a gendered manifestation of space where men are associated with the public and women with the home. Due to this fact, women have often been excluded from many public spaces. Feminist geographers take particular interest in understanding the gendered nature of spatial relationships and the spatial dimensions of power relations between the sexes. Concepts stemming from the work of feminist geographers have advanced our understanding of the relational and symbolic nature of space and with the gendered representation of space and place (Aitchison 1999). As studies on “the extent of spatial variations in gender relations and in women’s position across the globe; the distinctiveness of the relations and of the social construction of gendered identities in particular places” (McDowell 1993, 159) continue, this research on women’s gender roles and leisure space in Beijing attempts to add to current debates within the feminist geography project by bringing the experiences of young urban Chinese women into the discussion.

Leisure space is an important indicator that reflects gendered public space and there is a direct connection between women’s leisure space and their gender roles (Chai et al. 2003). Women’s gender roles and identities affect their leisure behavior as well as
their choice of leisure space. In addition, various studies have shown that the ability to participate in leisure activities, especially in public places, can provide women with a means for negotiating and challenging prevailing gendered identities. Thus, this research project on women’s gender roles and leisure space in Beijing is based on the following three research questions:

1) **What factors are most critical to women’s selection of leisure spaces?**

This question addresses the motivations behind the choices women make in their selection of leisure space throughout Beijing and how these choices are related to their gender roles and status in society. It will help to address both the individual differences and commonalities in leisure site selection amongst Chinese women. Both this question and the following question will provide much needed insight as to what the current gender roles of young women are in modern urban China.

2) **How do women perceive their leisure spaces as being gendered?**

This question will aid in revealing how ‘gendered space’ is understood and conceptualized amongst different age groups. Women’s perceptions of public space as being deterministic of their use has been a key element throughout the literature regarding leisure space, yet little remains known about these issues of perception in modern China. Understanding how Chinese women perceive and conceive of gendered space will not only be more revealing about current gender roles in China, but will also be illustrative of the overarching social structures of Chinese society.

3) **How do women’s leisure spaces serve as a site where gender roles are reinforced or contested?**
This question focuses on what activities are taking place in the leisure spaces being researched and the meanings behind these activities in relation to conventional gender roles. Gaining insight as to how women behave in public spaces can not only be indicative of their gender roles, but can also be revealing as to what social behavioral norms are prescribed to women.

The fieldwork portion of this research took place in Beijing from June 14th to August 20th, 2010. A qualitative methodological approach was taken which incorporated semi-structured interviews with seventeen young women age 25-35 and participant observations in three of Beijing’s central metropolitan districts (Dongcheng – Xicheng – Chaoyang). All interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and analyzed using the latest NVivo8 software. Field notes were also coded and analyzed using NVivo8. The results of this research are all based on data stemming from these two sources.

Following this introduction is a review of the most relevant literature upon which this research seeks to build. In the literature review, terms such as ‘public space’, ‘public leisure space’ and ‘gendered space’ are thoroughly discussed. In addition, an overview of how the relationship between gender roles and public space has been approached in the academic disciplines of feminist geography and leisure studies is presented. Chapter three presents an in-depth historical contextualization of women’s gender roles and social status, as well as the changing function of public spaces in China. The purpose of this chapter is to show how the various social, political and economic changes which have occurred over the past fifty years has created a unique and complex identity for women in modern China, and has additionally impacted accessibility to and functionality of public
spaces. Next, the research methodology implemented for this project is discussed in Chapter four. Here, an overview of the various methods used for data collection and analysis is presented, as well as the characteristics of research subjects and research sites.

Chapters five and six contain the research findings of this project and conclusions drawn from these findings. Chapter five focuses on the complex and often contradictory nature of women’s gender roles in both the private and public sphere as they are related to ideas regarding women’s role in society stemming from Confucian and socialist ideology. I found that women’s gender roles in the private sphere are often less traditional than in the public sphere and that public spaces remain highly gendered masculine, which is influential on the way women behave in public. However, I also found that women’s selection and use of public places is simultaneously influenced by a widely held notion amongst women of what it means to be a “traditional Chinese girl”, a discourse which also has numerous implications regarding their behavior in public. In chapter six, I conclude the thesis with a summary of the findings from this research, as well as how this research fits into the greater context of studies focusing on the relationship between women and place, as well as women and leisure.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This research is situated in the sub-field of feminist geography that examines the gendering of space. The topic of gender roles and leisure space can relate to a variety of academic disciplines, many of which see overlap in topics of interest. These disciplines include women’s studies; leisure studies; human, urban, and feminist geography; sociology and various others. However, pertinent to this research project are ideas relating to how ‘space’ and ‘place’ exist as sites vested with numerous symbolic meanings and social relations which can effectively shape how people perceive and use them. In this chapter, I discuss how this research topic of gender roles and leisure space is situated in the academic disciplines of leisure studies and feminist geography. I conclude by arguing that although great strides have been made towards bringing women and gender into the discourse regarding public space and leisure, research has largely taken place in the context of nations in the western world, leaving much room for inquiry as to their applicability and value for nations in East Asia, such as China.

Public Space

As modernization continues to change urban landscapes, the use and identity of urban public spaces has become a widespread topic spanning many disciplines within the social sciences. There is no one single overarching definition of ‘public’ space as it pertains to urban landscapes. This becomes especially true when comparing discussions about public spaces that stem from different civilizations around the world. However,
over the past twenty years many researchers cite definitions put forth by individuals such as Carr et al. (1992), Lefebvre (1990), and Mitchell (1995). According to Mitchell (1995, 116), public space “represents the material location where the social interactions and political activities of all members of ‘the public’ occur.” While this definition alludes to what public space represents, it leaves much room for inquiry into the different forms of public space and what part of ‘the public’ may use these spaces.

Many academics and scholars seek to draw a more clear representation of specific types of ‘public’ urban spaces. However, in doing so there has been a tendency to create a dichotomy between what is ‘public’ and ‘private’. This has been characteristic of literature disseminating from the western world (Ruwanpura 2008). Many think of such general spaces as parks, bars, the streets or any place located outside the home as one large homogenous public space. In the modern western contextual idea of ‘public’ space though, many scholars note that it is important to distinguish between these types of public spaces and to what degree they are in fact ‘public’. Lofland (1998, 10) considers public spaces as “domestic physical sites that are distinguished by their relative accessibility such as dance clubs, parks, restaurants, bars, cafes, the street, etc.” Others, such as Carr et al. (1992, 43) note that true public spaces are those of “non-commercial physical sites of congregation like parks or plazas.” Both accessibility and the presence of commercial elements are important when discussing public spaces in that both of these can be deterministic in who has access to and is able to use these spaces.

Public spaces in cities have always been important. Perhaps one of the most important functions of public space over the years has been to serve as a medium for
interacting with and engaging political structures surrounding the society. Mitchell (1995, 119) highlights this fact by stating, “public space is an unconstrained space within which political movements can organize and expand into wider arenas. The public arena is where one has the opportunity to meet with others, communicate political ideas and voice these ideas.” At least, this has been an underlying characteristic of public spaces in nations operating under a democratic political framework. Mitchell must be careful in this assertion though, for he states that public space is an ‘unconstrained space’, implying that there are no barriers to using this space or restraint on activities which take place there. This is not always true as power relations within and exclusionary aspects of public spaces continue to be a critical element of research on public space (Gaventa 2009).

Not all individuals living in a city are able to use the public spaces of that city equally. The term ‘public’ is misleading in this aspect, because there are many cases in which people are deterred from using certain spaces due to various social, political and economic factors. Such factors might relate to citizenship, class, social status, ethnicity, poverty, religion, gender and others (Hägerstrand 1970). This inability to use public spaces has been called “social exclusion” (Jones and Smyth 1999). It is deemed important by academics that we examine all factors regarding who has access to public spaces; including gender, ethnicity, social class, religion, and sexuality.¹ Jones and Smyth (1999) argue that social exclusion explains the disadvantages and the factors (often

¹ A large majority of studies examining issues such as access to and exclusion from public places focus on truly public places often regulated by ‘public’ governing bodies such as parks, plazas, or community centers. My research however focuses more on what Mitchell (1995) refers to as ‘pseudo public spaces’ which are often perceived as public in a similar manner as parks, yet privately owned. These (often commercial) public spaces include shopping malls, bars, restaurants, coffee shops, bookstores, etc.
compounded) that impede a person’s ability to participate fully in society. These ideas can be compounded with those of Silver (1998) who states,

> Whereas poverty and inequality are concepts reducible to money, an exclusion perspective combines economic and social problems, material and symbolic relations, distributional conflicts and identity politics, class and status orders, social rights and human rights. (quoted in Jones and Smyth 1999, 12)

In this light, it becomes apparent that there are many structures that exist around public spaces in cities that can be deterministic of who will use that space. This idea of “social exclusion” is important in that it highlights the multiple ways in which we must think about spaces as more than merely physical environments. For this research, this idea of “social exclusion” becomes useful regarding women’s gender roles and their use of public leisure spaces, for, gender roles can often determine both men and women’s public behavior (Aitchison 2000).

There are various other ways in which people use public spaces in cities. First and foremost, public spaces can serve as sites of social interaction. Social interactions in public space can occur between friends and acquaintances, or with strangers. Public spaces provide the opportunity for people to interact and socialize away from the home and work environment (Humphreys 2010). Public spaces in cities are also used for recreational and leisure purposes. The types of recreational and leisure activities that take place in public spaces are numerous indeed and it is from this general idea that the term ‘leisure space’ arose.
Public Leisure Space

Leisure has always been an important element in people’s lives and the ability to engage in leisure activities is often associated with ‘quality of life’ (Iwasaki 2007). Generally speaking, leisure activities can take place almost anywhere. However, we tend to disassociate leisure from work and the workplace. Traditionally, the home has been the main site for leisure activities (Dart 2006). Dart (2006) notes that leisure activities taking place in the home have increased over the last three decades as the number of electronic media devices entering the home has increased substantially. Although this is true, there still remains a significant amount of leisure time spent in urban public spaces.

Participation in leisure activities individually, in a group, with family, or in the community, can create a sense of enjoyment and relative freedom. These feelings might emanate from physical, mental, social, spiritual, or aesthetic origins (Henderson and Bialeschki 2010). While leisure can take place almost anywhere, people have always understood the intrinsic value of ample public leisure space in cities, as is evident through the emphasis placed on such spaces in public policy formation and as demanded by citizens (Banerjee 2001). Governments in a number of countries strive to provide leisure-oriented public spaces such as parks, plazas, shopping centers, gardens and recreation facilities (Lloyd and Auld 2003). This is because whether for economic benefit, aesthetic purposes or to improve quality of life, leisure spaces have always been an important indicator of a city’s progress and development (Song et al. 2009).

In many ways, public leisure spaces and public space share an overlap regarding type and function. Both provide an area for various groups to meet, exchange information
and interact. Whether or not a public space can be considered a leisure space is something that is left largely to interpretation. For example, one might view Tiananmen Square in Beijing as a public space whose main purpose is an arena for political gatherings and military parades. However, every day you will see local citizens there flying kites, exercising, socializing and doing other various activities. Based on my observations, leisure activities actually take place there more on a daily basis than those of a political nature. Therefore, it is quite common that by engaging in leisure activities in public spaces that were not necessarily designed as a leisure space, these spaces can be transformed into leisure spaces. It should be noted that we must apply the same types of concepts such as ‘social exclusion’ to public leisure spaces in that public leisure spaces are a form of public space.

There are of course a number of public leisure spaces that were designed specifically for leisure. These include parks and urban green spaces, cafés and tea houses, plazas and shopping malls, theme parks, sports venues, music venues, museums, pubs, restaurants and many more. However, like public spaces in general, leisure spaces can also be marginalizing to people of certain classes, race and gender (Lloyd and Auld 2003). As a result, an interest has stemmed from analyzing public space in general, to looking specifically at the various social conditions surrounding public leisure spaces.

Peters (2010) argues that there are three pillars of leisure studies: social identity, leisure, and space. Many academics in the fields of sociology and geography place a heavy emphasis on the relationship between leisure, identity and space (Green 1998; Massey et al. 1998; Skeggs 1999; Aitchison 2001; Henderson et al. 2002; Vaiou and
Lykogianni 2006; Peters 2010; Gagne and Austin 2010). These works are influential in explaining how leisure activities that take place in the public setting allow the individual to be self-expressive and therefore shape individual identities. Identities are plural and dynamic and in many cases people assume different identities based on the social setting and activities taking place around them. At work or school, rules and regulations can restrict this process, while during leisure, identities can be negotiated and constructed more consciously (Peters 2010).

Leisure activities themselves are influential in shaping people’s identities, but another important element in social identity construction is where these activities take place. The field of leisure studies has often been more concerned with the psychological process of activity involvement than with the spatial parameters in which they operate (Henderson and Bialeschki 2010). The lack of spatial consideration in former studies on leisure was pointed out in the late 1990s by (Skeggs 1999, 213) when she stated,

The challenge for leisure studies is to complement its already multidisciplinary base by drawing on work that opens up the complexities of space, not merely in the recognition of ‘new’ lifestyles and the conspicuous consumption of leisure, but also, as a site for the maintenance and reproduction of complex power relations.

Skeggs’s comment supports the idea that ‘place’ is a complex phenomenon that has symbolic meanings and often contains ‘power relations’. She is arguing that by looking at the complex nature of the spaces in which leisure activities take place, we can uncover more profound meanings regarding larger overarching structures of society. This topic of examining the power relations that exist in and around places leads to the following discussion regarding more critical ways of examining of the dynamic nature of ‘place’.
Feminist Geography and the Spatiality of Gender Relations

One focus of feminist geography explores how gender relations are illustrated and amplified in the physical layout of spaces, both in the public and private spheres (Rosewarne 2005). The ‘feminist turn’ in geography spawned new types of research, which brought women into focus when discussing how individuals and groups interact with local landscapes. As Browne (2009, 542) notes, “Feminist geographical research since the late 1970s has offered crucial lines of inquiry into the ways space is constructed, used and recreated.” Notable early studies of women and public spaces focused on understanding how gender shapes the experience of public space. Works such as Mozingo (1989); Gardiner (1994); McDowell (1983); Bowlby (1984); Boys (1985) and Pickup (1984) discuss how gender roles are deterministic of the way in which women move throughout the urban landscape. The conclusions of many of these studies draw attention to the fact that women’s access to and use of public space is significantly smaller than men’s (Mozingo 1989).

Studies have progressed since this time to incorporate a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between gender and public space. A form of ‘spatialized feminism’ (McDowell 1993) has emerged within geography which “seeks to identify and explain the spatial dimensions of power relations between the sexes…which includes the differential use, control, power and domination of space, place and landscape for social, economic and environmental purposes” (Aitchison 1999, 25). In addition to gaining perspective on gender differences in terms of spatial relations, feminist geographers now seek to identify and explain the social and symbolic constructions of gender and spatial
relations (Mowl and Turner 1995). Perhaps one of the most influential writings which problematized the ways in which space and gender is analyzed was that of Massey (1994).

According to Bryant and Livholts (2007), Massey (1994) referred to symbolic meanings of spaces and gendered messages associated with them. She used the examples of limitations of mobility within spaces. For example, distinctions between the public and private and the gendering of those domains with their prescriptive identities for women and men. Ideas such as Massey’s provide an avenue for exploring how dimensions of power are constructed in public space and thus how space can be restrictive to women and deterministic of their behavior within spaces. Space can no longer be viewed as neutral then. Instead, it should be understood as a social production (Aitchison 2000). This way of conceptualizing space and gender put forth by Massey (1994) is critical for this research on young Chinese women’s leisure space in Beijing in that this research seeks to understand the symbolic nature of women’s leisure spaces, as well as how social relations existing in and around places factor into women’s behavior in public spaces.

Gendered Public Space

Space has now become largely problematized in relation to gender and identity, where aspects of agency are often examined much more so than structure (Bondi and Rose 2003). One of the most common ways in which academics have approached the topic of gendered space is through examining how women are restricted from using public spaces. These discussions often take an exclusionary form, highlighting the
various constraints that women face in moving through and using public spaces (Hubbard et al. 2002; Scranton and Watson 1998). Often, ideas about fear and safety come to the forefront when discussing this topic. There is a large body of literature on women’s fear of crime and perceptions of safety and danger in relation to urban spaces (Koskela and Pain 2000).

Fear can exist in many forms and also stems from many different origins. Research on fear typically examines the perceptions of those who fear, emphasizing women’s experiences of vulnerability in public space (Day 2006). A full understanding of urban violence and crime cannot be gender neutral, for Epstein (1988) and Koskela (1997) claim that we must take into account that women and men experience violence differently and thus develop different fears. Sexual violence is the most common form of fear associated with public spaces (Day 2006). The awareness of the problem of women’s safety in the urban environment has mainly been the result of demands for action by women themselves, who have effectively defined the problem of women’s safety as a widespread feature of the condition of women in male-dominated societies (Kallus and Churchman 2004). A common result found in many studies is that the potential presence of violence determines to a large extent the place, time and kinds of activities in which women participate (Keane 1998; Morrell 1996).

Where this fear of violence in public spaces for women comes from has been another form of debate amongst feminist scholars. Some claim that the fear women have comes from the social construction of gender roles in the society. This has been called the ‘social production of fear’ through exaggeration of real dangers (Altheide 2002). The way
that men, women and sexual violence are portrayed through the media in a society can be influential in shaping gender identities for individuals living in that society. Therefore, although the risk of being subjected to violence might be higher in a private rather than a public setting, most women still fear it will happen in the opposite manner (Day 2001). A study in 2005 sought to make a connection between women’s fear of public spaces as a result of sexualized advertising in outdoor urban environments. In this study, Rosewarne (2005) gives examples of how the sexualized portrayal of women fuels women’s perceptions of fear and offence and therefore forces them to limit their time in public space. This is because women who often see themselves portrayed as sexual objects feel that men will exclusively view them in this manner and will not be able to separate their fantasies from reality (Rosewarne 2005). Apart from fear, there are other ways in which women are constrained from using public leisure spaces, many of which stem from entrenched gender roles.

The topic of fear as being deterministic in how women perceive and move through public space has also been explored in terms of public leisure spaces. Due to the fact that there is often an overlap in subject matter regarding gender roles and public spaces, and gender roles and public leisure spaces, the remainder of this chapter will move forward to focus on public leisure spaces more specifically. It should be kept in mind that the topics and concepts discussed from this point forth can also relate to discussions regarding public space.
Women’s Leisure Space

Many researchers in the field of leisure studies have recognized the significance of gender as a variable affecting leisure behavior (Aitchison 2001). This recognition has coincided with a need to develop theoretical approaches which accommodate both women’s and men’s experiences of leisure. In addition to bringing ideas of gender into the leisure discourse, there has been a call for the greater incorporation of space as a tool of analysis (Skeggs 1999). New ways of approaching leisure theories often conceptualize the role of leisure in women’s lives and the relationship between leisure and structured gender relations in society (Henderson and Hickerson 2007). The most common ways in which these relationships have been examined in spatial terms relates to constraints in pursuing leisure activities and how leisure activities can serve as a means for resisting or challenging existing patriarchal structures or social inequalities.

There have been a number of scholars who argue that gender roles associated with being a wife or a mother, can in many ways determine how women choose their leisure spaces in cities. In the literature on western women, such scholars as Wilson (1991) and Valentine (1992) give reference to the ‘Victorian separation of spheres’ in which it was encouraged for women to be relegated to the private space of the home. This was highly related to their socially constructed gender roles as caretakers of the home and children. Due to this fact, women’s general movement through the city and access to public space has been limited. Studies discussing the domestic roles and responsibilities of women argue that women who take on such responsibilities are limited in their ability to participate in leisure activities in general due to time constraints (Knuth 2006). This
extends into the realm of leisure space as well, where women with limited leisure time will thus engage less in public leisure spaces than in the home (Dart 2006).

Other ways that academics have discussed gender roles as constraining women from participating in certain leisure activities have to do with women’s “ethic of care.” Gilligan (1982) first used the expression "ethic of care" in a discussion of the difference in the psychological development of women in comparison to men. This term suggests that women focus on responsibility and commitment to others, often viewing their needs as second in importance compared to other individuals (Henderson 1991). Thus, women’s ethic of care can be viewed as a constraint to engaging in leisure activities in that it may impact their decision to become involved in an activity due to other felt obligations. For example, a woman might choose not to attend her dance class because she feels the need to stay home and help her child with homework. In a recent study on women’s involvement in recreational motorcycling, a 33 year-old mother of two is quoted as saying, “There’s always the thing of, ‘well, you’re a mother, you have kids, you shouldn’t be on a motorcycle because it’s too risky’” (Gagne and Austin 2010, 7). Here we see the mother’s ethic of care as constraining participation in a leisure activity due to her gender role as the caretaker of the family. We should not think of women’s leisure as being constrained by a single variable though, for, often there are numerous intertwining elements that factor into women’s decisions making regarding leisure activities.

Regarding the more direct correlation between gender, leisure and public space, certain academics argue that overarching social and patriarchal structures create an
identity for women which often influences how women think they are supposed to behave in public (Massey 1998). These social norms prescribed to women can also be viewed as a form of constraint on women participating in certain leisure activities in public spaces. Green et al. (1990) drew a link between sexuality, dress and leisure behaviors, noting the importance felt amongst many women to avoid behavior and dress that contravenes the limits of what has been perceived as ‘respectable and womanly’ behavior in public places. In the same study previously mentioned regarding women’s involvement in recreational motorcycling, there is discussion of a woman who strongly desired to learn to ride, but her husband (a rider himself) refused to teach her, telling her that her job was “to ride on the back, look pretty and keep his motorcycle clean” (Gagne and Austin 2010, 8). Thus, it is important to recognize the relationship between patriarchal and social structures, and women’s behavior in public space.

While a formidable amount of research has centered on how gender norms prescribed to women can be constraining on the ways in which they choose leisure activities and behave in public, there has surfaced a distinct part of the literature which recognizes how women can use leisure activities in public spaces as a site for identity construction, empowerment and resistance (Green 1998). Arguments for resistance through leisure, are often based upon a conceptualization of leisure as a site of personal choice and self-determination, which can also provide opportunities for individuals to exercise personal power and break from traditional roles, thus shaping new identities (Green 1998). This line of thinking views women more as active agents in constructing their identities rather than as passive victims of predetermined structures. A sociological
study on karaoke in China by Fung (2009, 46) highlights how karaoke clubs present not only women, but also all Chinese with “an opportunity to express identities in a novel way, which temporarily brackets a structured social environment that strongly constrains their range of expression.” He further describes how “on the macro and collective level, youthful consumers of karaoke co-perform to project and construct common identities that are distinct from the youth formations ideologically dictated by the Youth Communist Associations, formal party organizations, and schools” (Fung 2009, 46). Fung’s discussion of karaoke clubs fall in line with arguments on how public leisure spaces can serve as sites of identity construction, empowerment, and resistance, for we see all three taking place in his example.

From Fung’s research, it becomes clear that places exist as more than simply physical structures. There are a multitude of vested meanings attached to places, which are created and perpetuated through the use of places. Thus, it is important to remember that space and place are important components in the construction of gender relations and associated identities. As Hanson and Pratt (1995, 18) suggest, “gendered identities, including aspirations and desires, are fully embedded in – and indeed inconceivable apart from – place and that different gender identities are shaped through different places.”

Perhaps one of the more critical ways in thinking about the concept of gender and identity was put forth by Davies (1996), who argued that we must view gender not as an attribute, but as a relational quality stemming from social process or social construction. He also argued that because gender is a social construction, we should seek to understand the behavior of men and women, however historic and cultural constructed masculinities
and femininities are a primary source from which subjectivities, identities and behavior regularities emerge and thus must be acknowledged. This idea put forth by Davies (1996) is key to this research on Chinese women’s gender roles and leisure space in urban China, as current gender roles and behavioral norms are deeply entrenched in historical roots and thus must be considered when discussing the social structures of China in modern times.

Feminist researchers are challenging the universalizing tendencies in the writing of white, middle-class American feminists (hooks 1990) regarding women’s experiences in public places. Today, we recognize the need to illuminate the diversity and historical-cultural specificity of women’s experiences and gender relations. Just as feminists have been “critical of the patriarchy for not acknowledging the contributions of women” (Henderson 1996, 149), we can also be critical of how people studying women sometimes have ignored diversity. Feminist scholars claim it is necessary to part from universalizing notions of descriptions regarding women’s experiences and deconstruct the category of ‘women’. In this regard, many feminists have broken from the more essentialist ‘modern’ perspectives on women and leisure and turned to possibilities within postmodernism to theorize key differences between women (Henderson and Bialeschki 2010). This has allowed for a more refined understanding of the ways in which different women are located within dynamic structures of gender relations. In a benchmark integrative review on women’s leisure discourse, Henderson (1996) makes use of the phrase ‘one size doesn’t fit all’ as a means for criticizing this lack of diversity within women’s leisure studies.
Since this call for greater acknowledgement and incorporation of diversity into the leisure studies discourse, which is inherent in the post-modern approach, a number of academic works have arisen in recent years that discuss more diverse types of women and social situations. These include looking at various ethnicities (Atencio 2008), women of marginalized social groups (Juniu 2000), experiences amongst different age groups (Sun 2001), women with different sexual orientations (Pritchard et al. 2002) and women with physical disabilities (Ma 2009). Studies have also expanded out to examine women’s leisure in other parts of the world, including such countries as Greece (Vaiou and Lykogianni 2006), the Netherlands (Peters 2010), Iran (Arab-Moghaddam, N and Henderson, K.A. 2007), and Sudan (Knuth 2006).

Although progress has been made in leisure studies to be more inclusive of these diverse types of women, there remains a large gap in the literature regarding women in East Asia, especially China. While there have been a few studies on women’s leisure in Taiwan (Shaw 1994; Chen 2008), the focus of these studies largely relates to quality of life and the exploration of new identities through participation in leisure, thus lacking a critical spatial element. In addition, ideas about gender roles and the relationship between gender and public space are largely absent from the literature. Thus, given the rapid pace at which China has been developing and the drastic shift in social structure that has taken place in the post-reform era, China presents numerous opportunities for the further exploration of numerous topics relating to women’s gender roles and the use of public leisure, as well as the gendered nature of public spaces.
CHAPTER 3:
WOMEN’S SOCIAL STATUS AND PUBLIC SPACE IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

Introduction

In order to better understand the gendered elements of public leisure spaces in Beijing, it is necessary to explore the city’s unique historical background. When engaging a topic such as leisure spaces, one must always remember that knowledge creation is culturally specific. Therefore, in order for this research to be more accurately interpreted it is important to understand (from a historical perspective) the social, political and economic structures surrounding Chinese society. China makes a unique study site for this type of research due to the various social, political and economic changes over the past century that have continuously altered the position of women in society. These same changes that have altered the position of women have also had various impacts on public spaces in terms of number, functionality, and the social relations that exist in and around them. In this chapter, I will discuss the social status of women and the development of public space in Beijing throughout the past century. I argue that existing influential elements of Confucianism and socialism have created a unique gender experience for women in the post-reform era. In addition, I argue that new types of public spaces have been opened up for women, which provide greater opportunities for identity exploration. However, while women are gaining new and diverse access to public spaces in the post-reform era, it remains in a context in which they are still struggling for a place in the public sphere that is not so clearly defined by ideology nor by the state as it was during Imperial China and the Mao era.
Gender Inequality and Women’s Social Status in China

Beijing (See Figure 1) was chosen as the research site due to the rapid social and economic changes that have taken place over the past 30 years. Beijing, alongside other major coastal cities such as Shanghai and Shenzhen, represents the new ‘modern’ China that has come about since the enactment of the 1979 reforms by Deng Xiaoping. Many cities on China’s rapidly developing east coast are years ahead of the country’s more rural interior in terms of per-capita income, development, modernization and quality of life. As China has become more open to international culture and liberal ideas, Beijing’s position as the capital city has seen considerable exposure of these ideas to its people. Before discussing how these ideas have reshaped modern Chinese society with regards to women, it is necessary to first discuss the other elements of past ideological systems that can still be found in modern urban China.

Examining gender inequality and women’s social status in present-day China is interesting because of the two influential and often contradictory ideological systems that have existed in China over the past century. The two ideological systems have been Confucianism and socialism. Each system implies different gender roles for women in society based on certain social structures and hierarchies inherent in the system. Although we can distinguish between historical periods when these ideologies were most dominant, what must be understood is that elements of both remain in existence today and can be found in different aspects of the lives of Chinese people. Therefore, in order to best understand women’s social status and gender roles at present, it is necessary to discuss how women’s role in society has changed alongside overarching ideological systems.
Figure 1: Map of Greater Beijing Municipal Area and Beijing Metropolitan Area.
**Women in the Late Imperial Period**

Traditional Confucian attitudes characteristic of Imperial China dominated Chinese society until being challenged by the Communist government in 1949. In this system there was a strong hierarchy based on gender and age that existed both within and outside the family (Bauer et al. 1992). It was a very patriarchal and masculine system that had developed over thousands of years. One of the key elements of this system was a hierarchy of authority based on the Wu Lun, which means ‘five relations’. The five relations were: ruler-ruled, father-son, elder brother-younger brother, husband-wife and friend-friend (male friends) (Leung 2003). Women were always subordinate to men, therefore young women were of the lowest status in society.

The patriarchal nature of the Confucian system forced numerous restrictions on women. Women were not in any way in control of their destiny and were severely oppressed under the social and moral hierarchy of gender relations inherent in Confucian doctrine (Bauer et al. 1992). The male head of the household held power. Women could not own or inherit property and also there was no freedom for women to choose whom they wanted to marry. All marriages were arranged by elder figures in the familial structure. In terms of how women were supposed to behave, women’s subservience to men was indoctrinated in the Confucian ideology as the ‘Three Obediences’. The three obediences were: as an unmarried girl she must obey her father and brother; as a married woman she must obey her husband; and as a widow she must obey her adult sons (Leung 2003).
Due to the heavy subordination of women under the Confucian ideology, Chinese women’s identities were largely shaped by their role in relation to men (mother, sister, daughter and wife). Thus, most of women’s activities were confined to the household (Stockman 1994). Because of this, women were excluded from all significant extra-familial occupations, including crafts, mercantile trade and commerce, and imperial civil service (Stockman 1994). The exclusion of women from such activities during this time was a central feature of the patriarchal structure in the gendered division of labor inherent in Confucian doctrine, which stated that men are primarily outside the home, and women are primarily inside the home (Chang 1993). For women, keeping one’s activities to and focus on household matters and family was seen as virtuous. Because of this, women were largely excluded from education as well. Women’s gender roles and status in society during this period are perhaps best illustrated in this small excerpt from Chang (1993, 45):

A virtuous woman should suppress her emotions and not desire anything beyond her duty to her husband. It was all right to miss her husband, that was virtuous, but a woman was not supposed to complain…In fact, a good woman was not supposed to have a point of view at all, and if she did, she certainly should not be so brazen as to talk about it.

To sum up, women’s gender roles and social status under the Confucian system were that women were at all times subservient to men; they had no individual rights; they were regarded as unworthy or incapable of education; and the majority of their activities and duties were restricted to the family and household.
Women in the Mao Era

The social structures just discussed were prevalent in China until the revolution in 1949 and subsequent formation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under the rule of Mao Zedong. Mao was heavily influenced by Marxist ideology, which stresses the need for disintegration of social class distinctions and the subordination of individual interests to the higher interests of the party and state (Bauer et al. 1992). Women’s significantly lower social status, which was still a dominant feature of the society leading up to the revolution, was seen by early Chinese communist revolutionaries as an obstacle towards the formation of a utopian socialist society. Therefore, the CCP reasoned that one of the keys to its success was its ability to emancipate women and grant them full entry into the labor force (Bauer et al. 1992).

Mao’s ideology sought to create a country with a more equitable distribution of resources and he believed that the economy as a whole would benefit if people were motivated to work for the collective rather than for private interest (Leung 2003). In order for this to happen the role of women had to change. Women were now expected to put production first and the needs of their families second, which is in stark contrast to Confucian ideology. The role of women became to contribute to the country’s struggle towards communism and they were subsequently mobilized into the revolutionary effort and units of collective production (Leung 2003). Female participation in the work force was not only seen as being an integral part of the formation of a socialist society, but was also the basic road to the achievement of women’s equality. This approach that Mao took has been noted by academics as following in accordance with Engel’s theory that “the
emancipation of women will only be possible when women can take part in production on a large, social scale” (Engels 1975, 221).

In 1955, Mao told women they formed “a great reserve of labor power in China. This reserve should be tapped in the struggle to build a great socialist country” (Mao, 1977, 269). At this point in time, several conditions had been identified amongst CCP rulers as needing to be met in order to achieve women’s liberation in China. These were the abolition of private property (because previously men had the sole right of ownership); women’s participation in social production; the socialization of domestic labor and child rearing; a state-sponsored women’s movement; the undermining of the family as a unit of production; the granting of women’s rights to challenge male authority within the family; and women achieving independence through paid labor (Leung 2003).

In the early Mao period, a purely domestic role of women was criticized as being bourgeois labor. Therefore, the family unit and former domestic household duties were replaced by a more external social collective. Women worked outside the home in more socialized domestic labor such as collective kitchens, childcare centers, laundries and service centers (Beaver et al. 1995). Due to this fact, it has been argued that during the 1950s women were actually not allowed equal participation in the labor force, but rather there was an officially sanctioned subordinate division of labor (Beaver et al. 1995).

Women had become glorified under the country’s socialist rhetoric with sayings such as *fu nv cheng qi ban bian tian* “women hold up half the sky”. However, elements of former patriarchal views of women were still present. For example, according to Leung (2003, 365) “unmarried women over thirty were still considered social burdens or sexual
abnormalities, and were often demonized as lesbians under Maoist norms of conformity.” Although some remnants of patriarchal society remained, it was without a doubt that women’s identity had changed. Women’s identity now was defined within the socialist discourse through their political role, their family role, their role as workers, and their role as communist heroines (Leung 2003).

The most extreme assaults of former patriarchal attitudes during Mao’s reign came during the Cultural Revolution period of 1966 to 1976. This is when women were given complete access to the productive workforce, not just socialized domestic duties. Placing even more emphasis on the importance of women in the drive for socialism, Mao was now making statements such as “Whatever men comrades can accomplish, women comrades can too” (Mao 1977, no page available). Women were encouraged to be vocal and active in politics, as well as condemn family members for their ‘wrong-doings’ (Yao 1983). In terms of fashion and sexuality, women were masculinized by being told to wear shapeless clothes and behave like men. Almost all the art, literature, films, operas, and ballets produced during the Cultural Revolution featured women in conventionally masculine roles and appearing as militant fighters or political activists (Evans 1992). Rae Yang (1997) emphasizes in her autobiography the masculinizing nature of being a red guard as she discusses how she could not wear a skirt, shorts, sandals or anything that would make her look bourgeois.

Although some previous patriarchal gender inequalities had been left behind, it is now well known that policy towards women during the period fell far short of living up to the promise of full gender equality in employment, education, wages, and political
participation that the socialist agenda had sought to create (Evans 1992). Some have argued that notable gender equality was not fully achieved because ‘gender equality’ as a goal was secondary to that of overall class struggle (Stockman 1994). Although this was true, others argue that it was more due to the fact that many Chinese at that time and still today view the female as being biologically weaker, less intelligent and creative, and more susceptible to emotional fluctuations and small-minded interests than men (Leung 2003).

It is now generally accepted that great strides were in fact made for gender equality during the Mao period. Looking back, it is easy to identify the incomplete nature of the liberation of women during this time, however what the leadership under Mao Zedong did do was bring women into the public sphere and allow them to function as agents of a productive society. This significantly elevated the status of women and paved the way for more women’s rights and involvement in society later on. As Deng Xiaoping took over in 1979 though, the economic reforms he enacted would once again bring about a reconceptualization of women’s place in society.

Women in the Post-reform Era

The social and political system, which has been operating in China since the economic reforms of 1979, is very complex and cannot be easily generalized. The gradual disintegration of the socialist job placement system into a competitive labor market, the emergence of a private sector, and privatization of many state-owned enterprises have had numerous impacts on the social strata of Chinese society, especially
women. To begin, women’s involvement in the labor force has changed. Despite the fact that the number of women being educated has had annual positive growth since the early 1980s, modernization and free market enterprise have created structural barriers for women in the work force. Although gender equality remains part of the CCP’s rhetoric and numerous pieces of legislation have been passed, research has shown that there in fact has been increased discrimination against women in terms of hiring, salary, rewards, and promotion (Zhang et al. 2008).

It is common knowledge that the government’s deliberate efforts to improve women’s status by ensuring equal employment opportunities have resulted in a dramatic rise in the proportion of women in the paid labor force. The general trend from the pre-Mao era through 1987 show that, for example, in Nanjing before 1949, 70.9% of women were jobless; however of women married between 1950 and 1965, 70.6% were employed; among women married between 1966 and 1976, 91.7% were employed; and by 1987 female participation in urban China was among the highest in the world, with about 9 in 10 urban women working (Pan Yunkang et al. 1987). These numbers, in comparison to other East Asian countries, fare much better. For example, in South Korea, employment rates among 25-29 year old women rose from 38% in 1980 to 58% in 2000. In Japan, corresponding figures were from 49% to 70% (Hannum and Fuller 2004). Although women’s employment rates in China are high, just because the government has been quite successful at increasing women’s participation in the paid labor force,

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2 See Figure 2 for the most recent employment rate based on The Urban Household Survey carried out by the Urban Survey Organization of the National Bureau of Statistics.
participation alone will not ensure equality between women and men nor will their participation necessarily upset the traditional sex-gender system (Wolf 1985).

As industrialization and free market ideas have spread throughout China, elements of capitalism have penetrated as well, especially regarding how the labor force is viewed and organized. In an article on gender inequality and social structure in urban China, Stockman (1994) argues that former patriarchal structures existing in the pre-Mao era have resurfaced due to the capitalistic approach to the commodification of labor and increased separation of the productive and reproductive spheres which have arisen in the post-reform era. As many former state-owned enterprises make the transition to the private sector, they mirror capitalism in that they seek to raise labor efficiency and reduce over-employment. Because of the fact that “women are often judged as typically unable to devote their attention exclusively to the business of the enterprise, due to their responsibility for family concerns, a responsibility which can under certain circumstances become an over-riding or at least a distracting consideration,” they are viewed as being less productive than men (Stockman 1994, 768). Stockman (1994, 769) best summarizes the disposition of women under new free-market contexts in saying:

Women can only be employed to the extent that there are compensating advantages to the employer: if they can be paid lower wages than men for performing the same work; if they can be employed on certain segregated tasks at lower rates than it would take to attract men into them; if they can be employed under certain less advantageous conditions, of hour, wages, or security of employment, because their income is not intended to be sufficient to support a family household, or if they are more disposable and subject to enterprise control than men would be.

Because of this, women’s employment rates have actually been declining since the mid-1990s (See Figure 2). In addition, women typically earn less than men when they are
employed, and work under less favorable conditions of employment (wages, hours, job security, promotion opportunities, etc.) than men (Stockman 1994).

Figure 2: Employment Rate for Men and Women in Urban China, 1988-2004. The employment rate on the y-axis represents percentage where .10 = 10% (Source: Industrial and Labor Relations Review, Zhang 2008)

In national, city-based surveys from 1997, it was shown that young women in all major occupational groupings in China on average earned between 80-82% of men’s earnings, reducing to around 70% in age-groups over 40 (Parish and Busse 2000). These trends of women earning less than men are not uncommon across East Asia. For example, in Taiwan estimates suggest that full-time employed women earn about 69.8% of men’s earnings, while in South Korea, full-time employed women earn only about 54.6% of men’s earnings, with the gender wage gap being particularly wide for older workers (Brinton and Lee 2001, 16). Some research on why these gaps have emerged in China has considered discriminatory attitudes, but has also placed a high degree of emphasis on the
difficulty for mothers to balance family and work life (Yu 2001). In a multi-city study in China, Cao and Hu (2007) show that married urban women are more likely to face terminations, more likely to change jobs for family reasons, and less likely to experience career-advancing job changes. Therefore, the structural conditions that separate production from reproduction (typical of industrialized capitalist societies) which have increased in the post-reform era in China have contributed to women’s less advantageous position in the workforce (Kreckel 1992).

The reemergence of gender-based discrimination in the labor market has little to do with the educational attainment of women. Women’s enrollment in China’s universities has increased drastically during the past 50 years (Riley 1996). According to data published by the All-China Federation of Women (Nihao, Zhongguofunu [Hello, Chinese women] 2003), women comprised 44% of all university students in China (McKeen and Bu 2005). Data from the World Bank paints a clear picture as to just how much more women are educated today than thirty years ago. The literacy rate for adult women over the age of 15 in 1982 was just over 51%; by 1990 it had risen to 68%; by 2000 it had reached 86%; and the most recent data from 2008 is 90% (WDI Indicators). The 2008 number is only slightly less than adult men’s literacy rate of 96%.

Conclusions

It appears then, that gender equality in the workforce has actually been on the decline since the reforms enacted by Deng Xiaoping in 1979. It is not access to or quality of education amongst women (for there are numerous studies which show women
outperforming men in academia in various fields at various levels) that has caused this. Instead, it can be summarized as a mix between free-market forces and a ‘cultural revivalism’ which stresses an essential national character and the importance of traditional, cultural, family and ritual issues (Leung 2003). This cultural revivalism has apparently brought back certain patriarchal perceptions of women that existed before the communist revolution; women as biologically inferior and gender-based division of labor being two of them (McKeen and Bu, 2000; Yi and Chien, 2002). The emergence of more traditional rhetoric regarding women can be seen as early as the late 1980s. Only eight years after the economic reforms had taken place, there was an increased rhetoric in the Chinese media concerning the employment of young married women with children. Due to over-employment in many industries notable social scientists and administrators argued that young employed married women with children should ‘return to the home’ to look after their husbands and children (Leung 2003).

The influential nature of Confucianism and China Communist Party (CCP) ideology on women’s identities has been discussed. In the post-reform era though, women’s identities are shaped in additional ways which are distinct from Confucian and socialist ideologies. Studies have shown that popular media depict women almost exclusively as housewives and associate them with a new image of fashion and beauty (Croll 1995). Leung (2003) notes that amongst urban women there is now more than ever a growing concern to express status difference, self-image, individuality and gender identity. Part of this is due to the former restraints on these during the Mao era. Due to this increased individuality, specific businesses catering to women’s interests have been
growing rapidly since the early 1980s, such as beauty salons, fitness centers, department stores, etc. Therefore, it can be said that gender identity construction nowadays is being shaped increasingly by individual self-expression, although it is important to remember that influences from both Confucian and socialist ideologies still remain. To what degree these previous ideologies remain influential is uncertain. However, I explore this topic in further detail in chapter five when discussing the results of my research.

There are many other facets that facilitate an understanding of women’s social status in modern day China. However, in order to create a more clear understanding of women’s social status and gender roles in urban China, I chose to discuss those areas of society in which the largest amount of research and discussion has taken place: the influential mix of Confucian and socialist ideologies, the reorganization of labor in the Mao and post-reform eras, the participation of women in the workforce, women’s educational attainment, and the increasing nature of self-expression. An exploration of these topics allows for a more well rounded comprehension of what forces currently shape women’s status in society. As this thesis proceeds, ideas discussed in this section should serve as a point of reference when thinking about how modern urban Chinese women view and conduct themselves in the public sphere, and thus how they choose to engage in leisure activities.

It is also important to note here that the demographic changes that have taken

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3 When discussing issues regarding non-traditional gender norms for women in the post-reform era, it is important that these be distinguished from the non-traditional norms that were present during the Mao era. Although the term 'non-traditional' is used to describe women's behavioral norms and gender roles in both eras, the context is in fact different dependent on the era being discussed.
place under the one-child policy in the post-reform era has had a tremendous impact on women’s gender roles and their participation in the public sphere. Since the one-child policy was enacted, women are encouraged to have less children and are having children later in life. This has effectively shifted the focus of women’s familial responsibilities towards elder members of the family and in many cases is also allowing women more time for personal leisure activities.

The next section moves forward to discuss how public spaces and, more generally, the public sphere, have undergone significant transformations throughout the three eras mentioned thus far. The Confucian, Mao, and now free-market eras all entail different ideological conceptualizations regarding public space and the public sphere, which have been deterministic as to who has access to public spaces, what activities take place there and the main function(s) of public spaces. Often, social structures, relations and hierarchies are best understood through an examination of place, as places are vested with meanings. Also, places can be viewed “as a process where the activities of people and institutions produce and are produced by social structures that are saturated with power” (Cresswell 2009, 175). Thus, a discussion of women’s social status and participation in public spaces cannot be complete without contextualizing the dynamic power relations that have existed around public spaces in China leading up to the present.

Public Space in the Chinese Context

While the influential ideologies of Confucianism, socialism and free-market capitalism have had transforming effects on the role and status of women in society, these
ideologies have also had similar transforming effects on the formation and function of public spaces. In this chapter, I illustrate this transformation by discussing the historical development of public spaces in Beijing. I argue that in the free-market era there has arisen a variety of new public spaces available to women which are less controlled by the state, and that these spaces provide women with the opportunity to explore new activities and identities that were formerly unavailable during the previous eras.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how public space is conceptualized and used in modern urban China, it is necessary to first draw some comparisons to prevalent ideas about public space as they exist in the western literature. Here, it is important to distinguish between conceptualizations of public ‘sphere’ and public ‘space’, for, these terms do not mean the same thing, but are intrinsically related. One of the most influential writings stemming from the western world, which characterizes public space, discusses the preconditions of the emergence of a public ‘sphere.’ In Habermas’s (1962) work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, he contends that the public sphere was something that arose out of the increased economic, social and political activity of the late seventeenth century bourgeoisie in Europe.

The ‘public’ of the public sphere referred at the outset to the bourgeois class alone, that segment of society which was propertied, literate, articulate, primarily urban, and increasingly politicized. However, it eventually came to describe a third realm intermediate between the state and society (Huang 1993). As economic, social and political advancements progressed, a variety of new institutions arose to serve the needs of the new commercial public (Rankin 1993). This brought about the establishment of
'public' places which “functioned as a third realm between the state and the people such as coffee houses, theaters, salons, public libraries, journals of popular taste, civil organizations and subsequently the commodification of news and information” (Rowe 1990, 312). Thus, Habermas (1962) contends that a public sphere develops in conjunction with the onset of modernity. Various academics have argued the capacity of applying Habermas’s concepts of a public sphere to an analysis of China’s social formations (Rowe 1990; Huang 1993; Rankin 1993; Shi 1998). While no solid conclusion has been reached, for this thesis I contend in a similar manner to Rowe (1990) that the formation of a public sphere in China began to take shape in the late Imperial era. However, the materialization of ‘public spaces’ in China came much later than in Europe.

The importance of Habermas’s writings is that it implies there must first exist a public sphere in order for the development of public spaces to begin. This line of thinking is understandable in that the function of public spaces is most often for the purpose of serving the public sphere. Public space can then be thought of as the public sphere in its spatial and physical form (Shi 1998). However, it is important to remember that, in China, the state has always played a considerable role in the formation and regulation of public spaces. The following section will discuss how the relationship between the state and people has been deterministic in the establishment of a public sphere; what has constituted public spaces; who uses these public spaces and for what purpose; and finally the state of public space as it exists in urban China at present. The discussion will flow in a historical manner from the late Imperial period to the present, focusing particularly on the formation of public spaces in Beijing.
Urban Public Space in the Late Imperial Period

It has been argued that a public sphere began to emerge in China during the late eighteenth century (Rankin 1993). Those who support this argument site the evolving linguistic usage and conceptualization of the word *gong* (public) that took place during this period. Prior to the eighteenth century, the word *gong* was used to describe the business, property, and personnel of the imperial-bureaucratic state (McMullen 1987). However, by the mid-Qing dynasty the term had expanded to become applicable to processes involving both the state and non-state activities. For example, during this time *gongsuo* was a state office, *gongwen* were state documents while *gongshi* meant public business, *gongwu* meant public affairs, and *gongchan* meant public property (Rowe 1990). What caused this change in conceptualization and usage was the rise of extra-bureaucratic activities of administration not directly controlled by the imperial power (Rankin 1993). Today, there is a clear distinction drawn in Chinese texts between official (*guan*), public (*gong*), and private (*si*) activities (Rankin 1986). These three terms imply an intermediate arena in which open, public initiatives are undertaken by both officials and the populace. Therefore, *gong* now is distinguishable from direct state administration or coercive control and from private spheres. Today, we see *gong* as being used more for this intermediate sphere, such as *gonghui* (labor union) and *gongren* (worker).

Urban space in Beijing was highly defined and partitioned by the ruling imperial power in the early 20th century (Gaubatz 2008). The design of the city consisted of few open urban spaces that were accessible to the public. The city spaces were highly sectioned off by walls. In many ways, the design of the city reflected the social hierarchies that existed
throughout society (Hassenpflug 2004). The largest open spaces, such as gardens and parks were under control of the emperor and thus cut off from the use and even the sight of most Chinese people. Walls were the defining physical feature of traditional Chinese cities, especially Beijing. As David Strand (1989, 1) noted, “early twentieth century Beijing remained a city stubbornly defined by walls, walled enclosures, and gates. The fifteenth-century Ming plan of the capital decreed boxes within boxes and cities within cities.” Open space consisted of narrow and constricted alleyways (hutongs) and inner courtyards of traditional Chinese homes (siheyuan). Thus, the spatial organization of the city restricted a large amount of leisure activities to the walled domain of the home.

Activities that took place in public spaces during this time were very limited in scope. While most open spaces were reserved for the elitist few, common people had their own forms of public entertainment and amusement. These activities revolved around temple fairs, urban teahouses, markets, and theaters in larger cities (Shi 1998). The temple fair was a popular ‘public’ place that combined cultural, commercial, social, and recreational functions. Men, women and children would gather to shop, barter, meet friends, watch variety shows such as acrobats, musicians and operas, enjoy music, and taste various kinds of local snacks and specialty foods (Shi 1998).

Apart from temple fairs, there were a small number of open spaces for recreation accessible to the public. One such place was the Taoranting pavilion located in the southern part of the city. Men often used Taoranting as a place to hold their wine and poetry parties, and other various social gatherings (Shi 1998). The hills in the northwest part of the city had a few scenic spots where people would go to enjoy views of flowers.
in the spring, foliage in the fall, and scenes of snow in the winter. Still, many of the sites
traveled to in this area were temples, such as Jingmingyuan, Jingyiyuan, and Wofosi.
These places were open to the public, but were not used on a widespread basis due to
their isolated nature and the lack of transportation to get there. To sum up the use of
public space during the late imperial area, it can be said that the best urban spaces were
reserved for the ruling elite and remained off-limits to ordinary people. Therefore, public
spaces were few and most leisure activities took place in and around the walled enclosure
of the home. Imperial urban planning before the twentieth century therefore dictated that
Beijing was to be a city offering an abundance of recreational space to the ruling class but
generally neglectful of the needs of ordinary city dwellers (Gaubatz 2008).

This strict control over public space characteristic of imperial China began to
change though in the years shortly after the fall of the Qing dynasty. During this time
there arose a strong push amongst local gentry-merchant organizations for the
establishment of more public parks in the city. This demand stemmed largely from a
growing Japanese and European influence (Shi 1998). In 1914, inspired by Western
experience of municipal administration, the republican government founded the
Municipal Council of Beijing, which launched a vigorous public works program to
improve the city’s physical environment. This council embodied aspirations of many
progressive reformers who had some form of western education (Shi 1998). Building
parks was one of their top priorities and they launched a publication, Shizheng Tongbao
(The Municipal Gazette), aimed at promoting the public’s awareness of and desire for
public parks in the city. As one issue of Shizheng Tongbao discusses:
It has become a common practice in other countries that people will take a
day off every seven days, and every city has to have one or two public parks
for people to refresh their spirit and exercise. In the past, people in our
country did not know about this secret [to health] and totally neglected the
importance of recreation…Within this great capital city of ours, there is still
not a decent place for recreation and entertainment, and [consequently]
many men are driven to seek pleasure in alcohol, gambling, and
prostitution… Creating public parks is one good way to help our unhealthy
society. (Shizheng Tongbao 1914, 9-10)

From this quote, it can be understood that the growth of a public sphere had already taken
place in Beijing. This public sphere gradually demanded the creation of public spaces
established for the interest of the broader society. In these demands, there was
recognition that in order to establish such public places there had to be collaboration
between people and the state. This falls in line with the ideas put forth by Habermas
(1989) that the creation of public spaces require “a state presence, a degree of
autonomous or voluntary social involvement, some social impact on policy, and a
legitimizing idea of the common good” (Rankin 1993, 160). The Municipal Council of
Beijing is just one exemplary form of how a commonly held civic attitude amongst the
public was instrumental in the establishment of public space in Beijing. What is
important is that former imperial spaces were gradually becoming transformed into
public spaces.

Urban Public Space in the Mao Era

In the years leading up to the revolution of 1949, great strides had been made in
opening up public spaces in the city. The ‘public parks movement’ (Huang 1993) had
brought about an enormous transformation of urban space. In less than fifteen years,
between 1914 and 1926, nearly all former imperial gardens and temples were made open to the public (Shi 1998). This had tremendous implications for Beijing’s society as a whole, for public parks became multifunctional environments where recreational, athletic, educational, commercial, cultural, social, and political activities took place.

One of the most important functions of parks during this time was their use as a political arena. Prior to the opening of public parks, people would hold secret meetings in their homes or small establishments such as restaurants and brothels (Xu and Gu 2008). Public parks provided a new space for these types of meetings to take place. Now, these public spaces are regarded as facilitating agents of the various political movements that have taken place in Beijing during this past century. Alongside parks, plaza areas had also become open to the public and also played a key role in political movements. Tiananmen square is a prime example. Tiananmen was used as a place for political activity dating back to the 1920s (Quan 1991). While political activity in public parks has been a focal point of much of the literature on public space in Beijing, it should be noted that public parks provided an open forum for the dissemination of ideas and the mobilization of the urban populace in general. Therefore, “moralistic, educational, feminist, philanthropic, mutual-aid, religious, athletic, academic, and cultural organizations all found the newly created public parks an ideal place to campaign for their causes” (Shi 1998, 243).

Women became common visitors to parks and plaza spaces (Cheng 1996). It was during the 1920s that women were just becoming more visible outside of the home and participating in various social activities. Traditional attitudes towards women were
changing, as was discussed in the previous section of this chapter, and public parks became an ideal place for women to go (Cheng 1996). Although attitudes were changing, Confucian norms of allocating women to the home still held sway, for men or other members of their family still largely accompanied women when they went to parks (Gaubatz 1999). Courting in public and for women to be seen alone was still looked down upon during this time.

It should be noted that while these parks were opened to the public, the implication that they were accessible by the entire public is misleading. This is often overlooked in historical writings on public space in urban China during this time. Shi (1998, 245) argues that “newly created public spaces during the 1920s did not foster new patterns of mixed-class socialization.” This was due to the financial barrier created by admission fees, which were usually more than an urban worker could afford. This prevented almost 80% of the urban population from frequenting the parks (Shi 1998). High admission fees were in place to prevent beggars, homeless and other “undesirables” from entering those spaces. This adds a new dimension in understanding just how ‘public’ these spaces were.

The 1949 revolution and new authority of the CCP brought about an entirely new vision of a public sphere. This vision was based on the participatory ideals of socialist society. New development was structured around large walled work-unit compounds where people lived as small communities centered on the workplace or danwei (Stockman 1994). These compounds consisted of three-to-five story block like buildings that accommodated varied enterprises such as housing, production facilities, dining halls,
and infirmaries. These designs were planned on the assumption that most residents would rarely need to travel beyond the compound (Gaubatz 1999).

The restructuring process that took place during the Mao era also saw the construction of wider roads, open spaces, and public places in cities that had been largely mazes of closed space in earlier years (Gaubatz 2008). There were many Soviet advisors working closely with the Chinese during these construction projects. However, these changes failed to transform the walled-in nature of Chinese cities. In many ways, the concept of the *danwei* placed even more restrictions on public space than during the imperial era, because new factories, housing, building complexes, public institutions and production facilities were usually sited within compounds behind high walls or fences (Huang 1993). Public parks were often walled off, with limited access and gates locked in the evening. The CCP controlled and regulated public spaces very heavily. Because of this new organization of Chinese society, public life retreated, to a large extent, to the confines of the *danwei* compound. Also, commercial and entertainment sectors within the city were sharply curtailed, which further limited the public life of urban residents (Gaubatz 2008).

While parks were still sites of public space during this era, the activities that took place there became more regulated. The most dominant new type of public space that came to prominence during the Mao era was the public square or plaza (Gaubatz 1999). Throughout China, many cities created large public squares modeled after the Soviet example. In Beijing, Tiananmen Square was the largest and most symbolic. These public squares, while advertised as viable public space, more often functioned as sites for mass
demonstrations supporting the CCP. Dieter Hassenpflug (2004) argues, that the ‘open space’ created by these squares during the Mao era did not necessarily constitute ‘public space’. Rather, it served as a space of exclusion, meant for the staging of mass demonstrations. In this sense, the space was more ‘pseudo-public’ than ‘public’ (Mitchell 1995)

The conceptualization and function of leisure also changed during the Mao era and this had an impact on how people used public spaces. Because of the strong push for productivity of Chinese society in their strive for communism, leisure time was viewed in two ways: as a recuperation time from work which would allow the person to be rested well enough to perform at their highest ability the next day, and as a time to heighten one’s political consciousness (Stockman 1994). Thus, the primary function of leisure was to make better socialist workers. Although leisure was important, it was still subordinate to work and therefore leisure time was often sacrificed to boost production. In line with prevailing ideas of collectivism, many leisure activities took a group form rather than individual.

Because collectivism was highly valued, the government organized many of these group leisure activities. Basketball, soccer and volleyball were promoted in schools, army units and factories. Team games were considered as an instrument of cultivating such desirable personal traits as group loyalty, willingness to cooperate with others, self-sacrifice, and so on (Davis 1992). Those values were fully consistent with the official ideology of ‘collectivism’. Thus by the 1950s, the CCP controlled not only the way in which individuals divided their time between work and leisure but also the ways in which
they engaged in leisure activities. It became a very totalitarian way of life and this in turn tremendously affected how people conducted themselves in public space.

_Urban Public Space in Post-reform China_

Urban public space in the post-reform era has undergone a redevelopment toward international standards and models, and toward the accommodation of rapidly increasing economic activities and populations (Gaubatz 2008). The nature and prevalence of walls and the _danwei_ system has been diminishing. New architectural styles influenced by international design have transformed the face of Beijing into a more open landscape in many areas. New structures that do require a wall for security purposes are today more likely to erect a metal fence that provides security without interfering with the visual line of site (Pow 2007).

Contemporary Chinese analysts have used a number of different methods to categorize public space in urban China today. A survey of people’s perceptions of urban public space conducted by Beijing University identified eight types of urban public space: commercial retail space, service space, local markets, auditoriums/performance space, recreational space, clubhouses, formal urban public space (landscaped plazas, etc.), and parks (Long et al. 2008). A different analysis places emphasis on public squares, parks, and open space, and pedestrian streets (Xu 2008). What is most important to note about these classifications is not whether or not they are a correct categorization, but that it is obvious the amount of urban spaces used by the public sphere have increased.
New concepts and uses of public space since 1979 have coincided with greater individual freedoms and mobility in society. In contrast to the very totalitarian organization of space and activities that characterized the Mao era, today both men and women experience a significantly higher degree of access to public spaces. In thinking about the two main types of public spaces discussed in previous sections (parks and public squares), the use of these spaces has changed as well.

Since the reforms, these two types of public spaces have become the most heavily used areas of outdoor public space in Beijing. Today, parks are one of the most unique and symbolic areas of Chinese social activity (Gaubatz 2008). In a park such as Tiantan (Temple of Heaven), one can find families with their children, elderly, young teens, both men and women enjoying the spaces independently and tourists as well. The range of activities that take place in such parks are enormous. These parks are perhaps most utilized by the older Beijing population. You will find older men and women singing songs in groups, playing traditional Chinese music together, exercising, dancing, flying kites, making crafts and playing various games such as chess, mahjong, badminton, and hacky sack amongst others. The older population also is found to engage in leisure activities in a group form, which is seen as carrying on from the Mao era. It is not unusual to find groups of 20 or more women all practicing a dance in sync or a group of 40 or more people all singing together in unison.

Many of the activities that take place in parks can also be found happening in many of the city’s public squares. It is commonplace to find a large group of people dancing in a public square just outside of a subway station or doing group exercises in
front of the art museum at dusk. Activities in public squares have been accompanied by the reemergence of vendors offering a wide range of services, from snacks and balloons to children’s tricycle rides. Public squares have thus been transformed into areas of recreational and commercial activities more so than political and now a large amount of people’s recreational activities take place in public spaces.

The topic of public spaces in China today cannot be discussed without noting the rise of commercial landscapes in urban areas. The development of commercial areas in Chinese cities has had an enormous impact on the use of public space and society in general, especially in Beijing (Long et al. 2008). Six of the twenty-five largest enclosed shopping malls in the world are located in China; all of which have opened within the past eight years. Of course, the activities that take place in these spaces differ greatly from those of public squares and parks. While public squares and parks often function as a means for people to socially interact with others, in the more commercial spaces, people are engaged in activities more restricted to small groups. While there are many restaurants and venues for enjoying the surrounding atmosphere, activities are more consumption oriented.

One of the most notable changes in the use of public space since the reforms has been the emergence of nightlife. During the Mao era, nightlife was virtually non-existent (Farrer 2008). The majority of vendors closed down shortly after dark and people remained in and around their homes or the danwei. Before the Mao era, women were still restricted to the home, so whatever nightlife existed only happened amongst men.

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4 See data compilation at www.easternct.edu/depts/amerst/MallsWorld.htm
However, since the reforms of 1979, nightlife in urban areas has exploded. It is now common for many restaurants to stay open until midnight and sometimes later. Bar streets and dance clubs can be found in larger urban areas and many leisure activities now take place at night. People often gather in public squares during the evenings to sing, dance and socialize, especially in the summertime to escape the heat of their homes. Walking streets and night markets are a common phenomenon as well. People enjoy an evening stroll to the night markets for some light shopping, to enjoy a snack or just to socialize and people watch. Popular night markets and walking streets in Beijing are Qianmen, Wangfujing, Wudaokou, Dongsi, and Women’s Street to name a few.

The fact that there is a market area named Women’s Street is telling of the greater liberties that women have obtained to enter into and enjoy public spaces. Women’s Street first began to take shape in the mid-1980s (Farrer 2008). It is an outdoor market and shopping area that caters specifically towards women’s tastes and interests. Many items women might enjoy including bags, jewelry, clothes, shoes, art, home décor and other commodities can be found here. However, Women’s Street is more of a day market than a night market, which implies certain notions of women in public space as it pertains to social gender norms.

A number of other types of public spaces have emerged in urban areas as places for leisure that are worth mentioning. Internet cafes are a popular leisure space for many young Chinese. Advancements made in computer and internet technology in China have created formidable business opportunities for entrepreneurs running internet cafes in urban areas. In many cases, internet cafes operate non-stop 24 hours a day and it is not
uncommon to find a large number of individuals still inside during the early hours of the morning. While these spaces are accessible to both men and women, my observations suggest that they are usually dominated by men from the evenings until early morning.

Conclusions

This chapter has sought to historically contextualize women’s place in Chinese society and discuss the conceptualization, formation and use of public spaces in Beijing from the early 20th century to the present. Although this chapter provides a thorough social and spatial contextualization of the geographic study site for this research project, it also raises a number of issues pertinent in examining the relationship between women and public space in Beijing.

First, the post-reform era has resulted in the greater ability for women to participate in the public sphere in a notably less regulated manner. During the time leading up to the Mao era, women’s presence in the public sphere was highly curtailed due to the patriarchal nature of Confucian ideology which delegated women to the home. Even during times when women did venture outside the home, they were supposed to be accompanied by a male. Thus, women were largely prescribed an identity in relation to Confucian ideology. In the Mao era, although the CCP sought to break from patriarchal customs and a gendered division of labor, which brought women out of the home and into the workforce, public spaces and activities within them became highly regulated by the state. In addition, women were prescribed a new kind of collective identity that was very masculinized and non-individualistic. Thus, while a greater number of public spaces such
as parks and plazas had been established prior to the Mao era, women’s access to and use of these spaces during the Mao era remained highly constrained.

Second, the greater ability for women to participate in the public sphere has coincided with the opening up of new types of leisure spaces for the greater public. The free-market era has resulted in a notable transformation of the spatial construct of many areas in Beijing. It is not only the physical construction of new public places, such as shopping malls or cafés, which are important, but also the ways in which people are using urban spaces which have existed for years. As more extreme notions of public behavior that existed during the Mao era have decreased, individuals are discovering new ways to use existing public space for leisure activities, such as morning tai-chi sessions in a local bank parking lot or evening group dances in the open space outside of a subway station. Perhaps what is most important, is the fact that public spaces now provide the opportunity for individual and group self-expression.

It is this coinciding nature of women’s greater ability to use public space and the increasing diversity of public spaces that I argue has created a unique opportunity for Chinese women to explore new avenues for individual self-expression and identities. Thus, in order to gain a better understanding of women’s gender roles and social status amidst the rapid changes that are taking place in modern urban China, an examination of their perceptions and use of public space becomes crucial. Men and women both have been granted greater liberties to move through and use public spaces in urban China, however there are still a number of social, political and cultural forces that remain influential in how women perceive and use public spaces. To what degree and form these
forces operate is still largely unknown. These questions are the crux of this research project and shall be discussed in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

During the summer of 2010, I traveled to Beijing in order to conduct the fieldwork portion of this research project. The primary data gained during this time stems from seventeen interviews with young women age 25-35 and also over twenty hours of participant observation. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the geographic study area, discuss the methods that were used to collect data, and lastly to give an overview of how this data was analyzed.

Overview of Study Sites

Beijing, as the capital city of People’s Republic of China, is the country’s political center (Figure 1). It is a city characterized by constant modernization and change. The current population of Beijing is about 17.55 million and the sex ratio is 119 males for every 100 females (Beijing Today 2010). The city is situated in the northern portion of the North China Plain. The western, northern and eastern parts of the city are surrounded by the mountains of Hebei province, while the southern extent of the city is connected to the neighboring city of Tianjin.

The metropolitan area of the city is comprised of six main districts (See Figure 3). The majority of research took place in three of these districts – Xicheng, Dongcheng, and Chaoyang – which will be described in more detail. The two most interior and smallest districts of Beijing are Xicheng (West City) and Dongcheng (East City). Xicheng and Dongcheng are traditionally known as ‘old Beijing’ due to their proximity east and west
of the former Imperial Palace or Forbidden City as it is often called. Xicheng district has always been associated with the country’s ruling party. It was traditionally the home of many imperial leaders and is currently home to the Zhongnanhai compound, which is the central headquarters for the Communist Party of China and the State Council of the People’s Republic of China. In recent years, Xicheng has experienced a rapid increase in the number of public leisure sites, such as the famous Xidan shopping district, Houhai bar district, Xinjiekou music street, Beijing Zoo, the newly built National Theater, as well as the famous Beihai and Jingshan parks (Xicheng 2011).

Dongcheng district covers the eastern half of ‘old Beijing’. Dongcheng district was traditionally home to the middle and upper class residents of the city before the communist takeover. While a majority of traditional architecture has been destroyed throughout the rest of Beijing as the city has modernized, Dongcheng district is the only part of the city where the government has made an effort to preserve such traditional architecture. Within the Dongcheng district there are a number of very important historical sites such as the Forbidden City, Lama Temple, Temple of Confucius, The Temple of Heaven, Beijing Bell and Drum Tower, and Tiananmen Square. Many of these sites serve as leisure spaces for the city’s residents alongside other public parks such as Zhongshan Park, Ditan Park and Longtan Park. Dongcheng district does not only consist of historical sites and parks; rather, for over the last ten years the commercial areas of Wangfujing and Dongdan have arisen to become internationally recognized sites of imported high-end luxury shopping (Dongcheng 2011).
The third most notable district in which my research took place was the Chaoyang district. Chaoyang is the largest and most densely populated district in Beijing, covering 470 square kilometers and having a population of around 2.5 million people (Chaoyang 2011). Since the opening up of the Chinese economy, Chaoyang has grown to become the city’s central financial and business district. While careful efforts have been made to preserve the historical nature of the Xicheng and Dongcheng districts, Chaoyang (which is located further east than Dongcheng) has been allowed to modernize at a more rapid
pace. Chaoyang is viewed as being the most globalized and developed part of the city. The majority of foreign embassies are located here near the growing commercial center of Sanlitun and for a number of years the area around Guomao in Chaoyang has been called the CBD (Central Business District). Over 3,000 foreign companies have offices in Chaoyang such as Halliburton, Sinopec and IBM (Chaoyang 2011).

In Chaoyang, there are numerous market areas, shopping malls, restaurant strips and parks. The fact that Chaoyang district was chosen as the main site of the Olympics in 2008, which included the massive construction projects of Olympic Village, The Bird’s Nest and The Water Cube, is illustrative of the important role that Chaoyang plays for Beijing’s development. Apart from the Olympic sites and business district, Chaoyang contains numerous public leisure spaces which include Chaoyang Park, Ritan Park, Tuanjiehu Park, Guomao China World Shopping Mall, Silk Street, Women’s Street, Sanlitun and the recently established 798 Art District (Chaoyang 2011).

These three districts (Xicheng, Dongcheng, Chaoyang) constitute the spatial extent of the research area for this project and all of the respondents live in one of these three districts. These three districts were chosen as the primary research area for the following reasons. First, Xicheng, Dongcheng, and Chaoyang are still considered to be the central urban areas of the city. While the three remaining districts (Haidian, Fengtai, Shijingshan) also provide ample opportunities for research, the levels of development and ‘centrality’ to urban Beijing result in less usage for leisure by the city’s inhabitants. Secondly, these three districts contain the largest density of public leisure spaces in the city in terms of number, type and accessibility. The majority of public leisure spaces in
these areas are accessible either by subway or bus, whereas public leisure spaces outside of these three districts might only be accessible by bus or neither. Therefore, these three districts were selected due to their central location, number and accessibility of public leisure spaces. Also, given the limited time available to conduct research, choosing only three districts allowed for more focus on specific sites of leisure activity.

**Methodological Approach**

This research project was conducted using qualitative research methods, with a focus on understanding how women’s gender roles in urban China influence their access to and use of public leisure spaces. The qualitative method design was guided by a feminist postmodern and constructivist approach to social science research. Postmodern research is a “transformative endeavor” practiced in order to denaturalize and transform oppressive power-knowledge relations (Denzin and Lincoln 1998, 205). Unlike positivist research, which assumes the researcher and researched are on different planes, feminist research aims at “developing knowledge with their research subjects who bring their own experiential knowledge, concerns, and emotions to the project” (Hesse-Biber et al 2006, 12). The goals are to establish collaborative and non-exploitative relationships, to place the researcher within the study so as to avoid objectification, and to conduct research that gives voice to marginalized groups (Creswell 1998, 83). By immersing myself in participant observations and conducting personal interviews, I was able to incorporate all of these guiding elements inherent to the postmodern feminist approach.
As a researcher using qualitative methods, it is recognized that the knowledge produced about the society being studied has multiple implications. Qualitative research allows for the researcher to be a part of the research process and emphasizes that knowledge is situated, not universal. Therefore, it is critical for the researcher to understand and be aware of their own positionality throughout the research project (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). In this light, the research process and knowledge generated are both subjective.

My positionality as a researcher during this project assumed two roles: observer-as-participant and complete membership (Warren 2002). These roles could often change quickly depending on where I was in the city and who the research subjects were at the time. At certain times, my identity would be strongly research oriented and not cross over into the domain of friendship. An example of this position is when I would conduct observations in public places such as a local park. There were many instances where I would observe women for an ample amount of time I had never previously met and then only briefly engage one or two of them with questions. My position during instances such as these was strictly as a researcher. However, there were other times where I had a personal relationship with the research subject, such as a relative, colleague or former classmate. Researchers in the complete membership role are those who study scenes in which they are already members (Adler and Adler 1992). While both positivist and constructionist approaches tend to assume that the interviewer and respondent will be strangers, this is not always the case (Warren 2002). It has been argued that a sampling strategy which begins with acquaintances can allow for greater success in further locating
respondents, such as was described in Warren (2002) regarding Richardson (1985), Warren and Levy (1991), as well as Esterberg (1997).

Finally, I was able to establish rapport with research participants. Regardless of whether or not I had a personal relationship with the research participant, first, my Chinese ethnicity and gender allowed me to enter into various women’s social settings as a member of the group. In addition, through engaging in various activities with my respondents numerous times throughout the summer, I was able to establish a more solid relationship with them. This was exemplified by the fact that some of the respondents would continue to contact me post-interviews to check on my whereabouts, inquire about the research process, and have some light conversation in general. Having good rapport was important in that it allowed me to make observations in a more natural setting and form a more rigorous analysis (Baxter and Eyles 1997).

Research Method Design

The methods for this research project were designed so as to facilitate an understanding of women’s perceptions of gender roles and then observe how these perceived gender roles relate to their selection and use of public leisure spaces. In order to achieve this, I used a methodological approach that incorporated semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observations. In-depth interviews allow for the cultivation of deeper information and knowledge than can be gained from surveys or informal interviews (Johnson 2002). Many women have different conceptualizations of their gender roles. Thus, the goal of in-depth interviews in this research is to provide the
best means of discerning both the respondents’ individual and collective understandings of the various topics that make up this research. In addition, this research takes a constructivist approach (Guba and Lincoln 1994) whereby key issues about gendered leisure space professed by the interviewees guided the research project. Participant observations were chosen in collaboration with in-depth interviews in that observations facilitate a deeper understanding of issues discussed by respondents. In addition, compared with more structured methods, observation has the flexibility to yield insight into new realities or new ways of looking at old realities (Kidder 1981). Also, participating alongside the women interviewed allowed for a continuous conversation to take place between the researcher and the respondents, which brought more insight towards understanding the connection between perceptions of gender roles and use of public leisure space.

**Interviews**

In total, seventeen interviews were conducted in Beijing during the summer of 2010. In designing this research project, a theoretical sampling strategy (Warren 2002) was initially used for selecting the types of respondents to be interviewed. To begin, an initial age-based category of young women 25-35 years old was selected. The primary reason for limiting the respondent group to this age is because women born after 1976 are the first generation of women to grow up in the post-reform era; characterized by rapid modernization, the influx of western political, social and cultural elements, and the One Child Policy. Thus their experiences, identity and worldview have been shaped in a
different way than the preceding generation (which is categorized by the researcher as over the age of 40).

Within this group of 25-35 year old women, certain elements of diversity were deemed necessary in order to highlight or contrast patterns in perceptions of gender roles and the use of public leisure space amongst respondents. Having a more diverse set of respondents also allows for improved rigor as well (Fontana and Frey 1997). In sum, the parameters for respondent type were women between 25-35 years old who had a diversity of educational backgrounds, relationships status, motherhood, and who lived within the spatial boundary of the districts of interest.

To have respondents with different levels of education was a desired element of diversity, for it has been noted in studies that perceptions of gender can differ greatly based on educational background (Shu 2004). A study examining the effect of education on gender attitudes in China revealed that better educated individuals hold more egalitarian gender attitudes, and this positive effect of individual education indicates a strong empowerment effect for women (Shu 2004). Secondly, diversity regarding family and marital status was also sought after. In another study on perceived gender roles in modern China, it was claimed that opinions may differ based on whether or not the woman was involved or had ever been involved in a marriage. The authors contend that gender roles can become more entrenched or visible once a woman enters marriage, especially if they become a mother (Parish and Farrer 2000). Therefore, I was interested in interviewing women who were single, in a relationship, married, or married with

5 In regards to religion and sexuality all the women were Buddhist or non-religious and all self identified as heterosexual.
children. Finally, I sought to interview women who lived in one of the three districts of interest. This was to reduce the problem of respondent’s spatial proximity to public leisure spaces of interest in these districts.

Interviewees were initially selected using a snowball method (Hay 2005). Some interviewees of whom I already had a familial or friendly relationship were selected prior to beginning the research project. These preselected interviewees were used as an initial starting point for locating subsequent informants. This resulted in a total of thirteen respondents. Informants were also selected at sites where observations were conducted. Seven respondents were acquired in this manner. In some cases, I would observe women in public leisure spaces and then approach them for the possibility of an interview.

Following on this sampling strategy, a diverse group of seventeen respondents was acquired. Thirteen had been to college; and out of this thirteen, three had postgraduate education. Eight of the women were married and four others were currently in a relationship. This left a total of five single women. Out the eight married women, three had children. In terms of housing location, seven lived in Dongcheng, six lived in Xicheng, and four lived in Chaoyang. Ten women were between 25-30 years old, while the remaining seven were over the age of thirty. Additionally, the majority of these women were employed. Only three women stated they did not have a job.

All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner and consisted of mostly open-ended questions. This format allowed for a wide variety of individual interpretations about gender roles and leisure space in Beijing. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview and I explained to the informant my position as a
researcher and the intent of the research project as suggested by Warren (2002). Interviews generally lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and the informants often selected locations where the interviews took place. This gave greater control to the interviewees by putting them in a more comfortable environment of their choice.

The interview process moved from basic background and information questions to more detailed questions regarding perceptions of gender roles, experiences in gendered spaces, and where they enjoy spending their leisure time. Asking basic questions first allowed the interviewee to get comfortable with the interview process (Johnson 2002). More personal questions regarding income and relationship status were limited in number and usually came towards the end of the interviews. However, in China questions about income and relationships are not as sensitive as they are in the west. If interviewees wanted to open up and discuss more personal issues that was their choice, however I did not have particular sensitive questions about their family history.

All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and audio recorded with a digital recorder. Recording interviews allowed for a more focused conversation in that it limited the distraction of taking notes. However, some observational notes were taken during interviews regarding body language associated with responses. Often times, body language can be indicative of individual’s emotions and feelings towards interview topics (Warren 2002). For example, there was one female who began chain smoking once the interview moved into the realm of educational background. Although she answered the questions rather calmly, her behavior implied that she felt uncomfortable discussing such matters.
Since returning to the United States, the digitally recorded interviews have all been fully transcribed into Mandarin, with partial transcriptions of important data to English. After the transcribing process, texts were then analytically coded using the latest N-Vivo8® software. First, I used the method of descriptive coding in order to identify the data’s basic topics spread throughout the interviews (Cope 2005). In terms of gender roles, some examples of descriptive codes used were the topics of responsibility, status, home, and education. In terms of leisure space, descriptive codes were often related to geographic locations such as park, restaurant, shopping mall, and plaza. Having descriptive codes allowed me to quickly navigate the data and locate particular topics of interest.

After establishing descriptive codes, a second round of more focused in vivo coding took place (Cope 2005). Here, the purpose was to highlight important terms and phrases used by the interviewees. In vivo codes were extremely important for this research project in that they allowed me to uncover patterns in participants’ meanings and understandings of gender roles and experiences with gendered leisure space. Having a large set of direct quotes via in vivo codes then gave me the ability to compare and contrast statements between the situationaly diverse women (i.e. education and relationship). Using in vivo codes was a key element in discerning how educational and relationship situations can be influential in women’s conceptualization of ideas central to the research project. An example of in vivo codes regarding gender roles are words and short phrases such as “my job”, “enough time”, “responsibility”, and “cooking”. An
example of *in vivo* codes regarding leisure space are “go there often”, “don’t go there”, “feel comfortable”, “man’s place”, and “not appropriate”.

**Participant Observation**

Over forty hours were spent engaged in participant observations at various times from June to August 2010. Participant observations are important to qualitative research because “observers who place themselves in the same situations as their subjects will gain a deeper existential understanding of the world as the members see and feel it” (Adler and Adler 1992, 386). There were a total of twenty-two different sites where observations took place (See Figure 4 for the location and type of observation sites). The uses of leisure spaces fluctuate with time of day and day of the week. Therefore, in order to gain the most well rounded understanding of women’s leisure spaces, a specific effort was made to conduct observations at different times. Most often, I accompanied interviewees to do activities they chose themselves. This was informative as to what types of activities these women were comfortable doing and which places they enjoyed.

During participant observations, there were six questions of interest, which were:

1) How do women and men interact in those spaces?
2) Who holds the dominant role?
3) Which activities are the most common for men and for women?
4) What gendered elements exist around that space?
5) How women’s behavior changes when they enter those spaces?
6) Are spaces being used in a manner that is empowering to women?
Figure 4: Map of Observation Sites in Xicheng, Dongcheng, and Chaoyang districts.
One way that participant observations were used to be telling of gender roles and
gendered space, was through accompanying women in various social situations. For
twelve out of the seventeen respondents, I not only had one-on-one outings, but also
joined interviewees during times where she was accompanied by her significant other.
This enabled me to see first hand how gender roles changed based on the presence of
others. Thus, I could see how certain leisure spaces, as well as who the women were with,
could change women’s behavior in public places.

Typical observations where I accompanied interviewees lasted between 1-4 hours
and often involved going to more than one location. During these observations, it was
difficult to record field notes, so rather than try to write them during observations, I
waited until observations were complete. The majority of field notes were written in the
evenings after observations had already taken place that day. Apart from the twenty hours
spent engaged in participant observations where I would interact with women, there was
an additional ten hours of covert observations, as have been discussed in (Adler and
Adler 1992). These covert or complete observer type observations took place in the same
settings as participant observations. When participating with other women, my position
as a researcher was known and thus could inadvertently influence the behavior of others.
However, taking a more covert observational position allowed me to observe behavior
taking place in a more naturalistic manner. During these observations, I was still focusing
on those themes previously mentioned, however, I was able to take detailed field notes
while observing, unlike during participant observations.
All forms of observational data were recorded in the form of written fieldnotes. Fieldnotes were transcribed alongside interview data using NVivo® software after returning from Beijing in the fall of 2010. For fieldnote data, an initial round of descriptive coding took place which identified certain topics of interest regarding types of activities taking place, behavior of individuals and groups, as well as to identify topics of conversations; for, in a large portion of my participant observations I had numerous conversations with respondents. Therefore, fieldnotes often included summaries of conversational data, which were also coded. A second round of coding then took place, which focused more on my own interpretations of the text. For example, if my fieldnotes were more descriptive of general activities taking place, during coding, I would read these texts and could forge deeper meanings by interpreting what these activities meant. Therefore, many codes on fieldnotes are my reflections on how these events and dialogues relate to the larger picture of the research focus. In this light, a notable portion of my results and analysis come from interpretations of fieldnote data.

Finally, I should note that I do not intend for this study to be representative of all Chinese women’s perceptions and beliefs about current gender roles in China. According to Wilkinson (2004, 271) “The design and conduct of a research project, the questions that are asked, the methods of data collection, the type of analysis that takes place, the perceived implications or utility of that analysis all incorporate particular assumptions, models, and values.” All of my research took place in only a portion of one city in China, therefore the study is a contextual analysis only of those involved in the research project. While the experiences and situations of the women in this research project should not be
generalized to all women across China, this study can hopefully create insight as to the current and changing nature of certain women’s position in China’s modern urban environments.

Reflections

As a way to conclude this chapter on the methodology used for this research, it is important to touch briefly on my positionality during the portion of research that took place in Beijing. My role as a researcher took various forms. To those women I interviewed with whom I was already an acquaintance, I held more of a complete membership role (Adler and Adler 1992). A complete membership role is described as “one who studies a scene where they are already members or those who become converted to genuine membership during the course of their research” (Adler and Adler 1992, 380). While the women with whom I already knew were few in number, these women often accompanied me when introducing me to another respondent. Therefore, being familiar with the initial respondent allowed me to establish rapport more easily with new respondents.

For others whom I was not already an acquaintance, my role can be seen as more of an active member (Adler and Adler 1992). This was often the case with women I met while conducting observations. In all cases, the women I approached were of similar age to myself. Also, as a native Mandarin speaking Chinese woman, I was well positioned to be able to approach these women. However, I do acknowledge the fact that I am part of the research demographic, at least in terms of ethnicity, age, origin, and education. I am
aware that my positionality has certain implications for the construction of the research project itself in all facets; including, the formation of research questions, the sampling strategy, choice of observation sites, as well as the interpretation of data. For, I must acknowledge that my interpretation of found phenomena could be significantly different from another who conducts the same research.
CHAPTER 5: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

In this chapter, drawing from interviews, field notes and observations, I will discuss the current nature of women’s gender roles that exist amongst respondents and the relationship between these women’s gender roles and their use of public leisure spaces. I argue that regardless of women’s level of education, employment, income and the fact that certain gender roles have changed within the private sphere, women’s role in the public sphere remains very traditional. Second, I argue that elements of Confucian and socialist ideologies remain highly influential in the formation of women’s gender roles and China’s social structure, and have subsequently created a gendered masculine nature of many public spaces where leisure activities take place. In spite of these conclusions, as was suggested in chapter four, I argue that public leisure spaces may nonetheless provide women with a means to break from their more traditional gender roles and public behavior.\(^6\)

In order to best contextualize the results of this research regarding women’s gender roles in public places, it is necessary to first discuss the nature of women’s gender roles in the private sphere. I address women’s gender roles in the private sphere first in order to build a foundation upon which to reference as this discussion proceeds. This will

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\(^6\) In this chapter, discussions regarding how women ‘challenge’ traditional gender roles should be distinguished from how they were challenged during the Mao era. Although the terminology of ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ is used in a similar manner when describing gender roles in both eras, they do in fact have different contextual meanings.
provide the ability to formulate some cross comparisons between gender roles and behavior in the public and private spheres.

Gender Roles in the Private Sphere

*Non-traditional Gender Roles*

Even if I am so rich that I don’t need a job or I am married to a rich man and don’t have to work, I will still choose to have a job even if it’s some part time job. Because, I don’t want to fall behind the society and just stay at home and be a housewife. You know, Beijing is the capital city with so much information passing in front of you all the time. I don’t want to stay at home all the time and be left out. – Jin Li, 29 (Excerpt from interview June 23, 2010)

This excerpt is indicative of the ways in which many young women feel about their role as a woman in society. As exemplified in the quote above, women no longer view themselves only as caretakers of the home or ‘virtuous wives’, but rather see a need to be integrated into society as a whole and not be “left out”. However, how do women view themselves in relation to the home and family? It is necessary to look at all the various social, cultural, political and economic elements that factor into the formation of young Chinese women’s current gender roles in Beijing. However, in this section, I draw on interviews with young Chinese women wherein discussions regarding familial responsibility, division of labor within the household, education and career aspirations took place as a means for illustrating the current nature of women’s gender roles in the private sphere. I argue that women’s gender roles within the private sphere are often contradictory, shifting between traditional and non-traditional.
Throughout the rest of this thesis, I will use the term “traditional” as it relates to ideas regarding men and women’s roles that stem from Confucian ideology. These include a gender based division of labor that regards household work such as child rearing and daily chores as women’s work, while men assume the role of a breadwinner working outside the household to bring financial support to the family, while their role in household work is limited to ‘helping’ their wives. When discussing such issues with respondents I found that this type of traditional situation is not so common, especially regarding household responsibilities.

Women’s gender roles are often explored in terms of the responsibilities they take on inside the household. This includes examining who does certain household duties like cooking, cleaning, and laundry, as well as women’s role in financial decisions and who shoulders greater familial caretaking responsibilities. All of these topics were explored with respondents. The situations and perceptions that were found to exist amongst these women were actually quite different than one might assume. Traditional gender roles for women in the household, especially in more patriarchal societies, imply that women should be responsible for most of the cooking, cleaning and for taking care of the other family members. However, this traditional type of situation was very rare amongst respondents. This is perhaps best illustrated by one respondent named Yuan Yuan, who is 28 years. She is married to a man who is 34, has his own apartment and manages a real estate company. She has been working as a real estate agent for four years at a separate company. When asked about her role at home, here is what she had to say:

My husband does all the cooking. It has always been this way. He does all the cleaning as well. Sometimes I will help a little bit, but he doesn’t think I can
clean as well and detailed as him, so he doesn’t let me do it so much. Every morning, we get up and he prepares some small breakfast for us. While I eat, he takes the dog out for a walk and then when he comes back he washes the dog quickly then eats his breakfast. Then we go to work. On the way home from work, I buy the vegetables and other food we will cook for dinner that night and when my husband gets home he starts to cook. Sometimes I will wash the dishes, but usually I take the dog out while he washes the dishes. By the time I return he is finished in the kitchen and then he washes the dog’s feet again. He does the laundry and is always diligent to iron his shirt in the morning before he goes to work. – Yuan Yuan, 28 (Excerpt from interview June 25, 2010)

In Yuan Yuan’s quote there is very little evidence of traditional gender roles taking place. Both the man and woman work, however the man bears the majority of household responsibilities. There are some tasks assigned to Yuan Yuan, such as taking the dog for a walk and buying some vegetables on the way home from work. However, Yuan Yuan’s situation remains very non-traditional.

While this type of arrangement could be viewed as unique, it was found to be quite common amongst those interviewed for this research project. The normalization of this type of situation was expressed by another respondent named Feng Ming. I discussed Yuan Yuan’s arrangement with Feng Ming and in responding Feng Ming stated:

I know a lot of people who have this kind of distribution of the housework. I think this is pretty common nowadays. The man needs to have this ability to look after himself so then he can look after other people when he has his own family. Guys who can’t take care of themselves are kind of looked down upon and no one wants to marry them. I think Beijing women have a really high standard for choosing a guy and also the girl’s parents do too. The guy should be able to impress a girl by his ability to maintain a clean environment, cook and also have a successful career and be able to buy a house. This is kind of showing that you are a man and will make the girl’s parents feel like you are worthy to marry their daughter. So, I think nowadays there aren’t so many cases of the young women who are like the traditional housewives of the past and just stay home to cook, clean and raise the kids. It does happen though. – Feng Ming, 31 (Excerpt from interview June 26, 2010)
From this quote it is apparent that many traditional gender roles for women and men inside the home are changing, especially amongst the younger generation demographic. There was a general consensus from the women interviewed that it was not “their job” or “obligation” to maintain the house and cook. There were of course some women who had a more traditional arrangement of household duties, however what is important is that it was not so common amongst respondents. Nonetheless, to say that there is an uneven distribution of housework in the younger generation that falls more heavily on the man would be an overstatement. Perhaps the situation is best summed up by Wang Feng, who stated, “It’s not mine or my husband’s responsibility to cook or clean or take care of our son. We are family, so we both should make an effort and be involved.” (Wang Feng, 30 – Excerpt from interview June 26, 2010)

I argue that the present non-traditional state of gender-based household responsibilities is largely remnant of the Mao era. As I discussed in chapter four, Mao sought to break down patriarchal norms and gender based divisions of labor in Chinese which delegated women to the home by bringing women into the workforce. Also, Mao’s ideology required that women put production first and the needs of their families second (Leung 2003). As ideas about collectivism became rampant, this extended into the realm of household duties as well, for, one of the conditions identified as needing to be met in order to achieve women’s liberation was the socialization of domestic labor and child rearing (Mao 1977). Domestic tasks during this period often became equally distributed or shared tasks between the male and female of the household as well as the commune. Maoist ideology effectively changed the division of labor within the family as well as the
public sphere and this division of labor still appears to be dominant within the families of those interviewed. Thus, here we have a prime example of one way in which women’s (and men’s) gender roles are shaped by previous socialist ideology.

*Traditional Gender Roles*

While household duties did not constitute a large part of the respondents’ gender roles in the private sphere, there were other elements that did take a more traditional form. This was in the realm of familial responsibilities. I inquired each respondent about their family life and how they function in their familial circle. Only three of the women interviewed had a child, so the majority of these discussions were geared towards familial responsibilities towards the elderly. From these conversations it became apparent that familial responsibilities play an integral role in the lives of these women. All of the women expressed a duty to maintain close ties with and care for their parents and grandparents. Out of the seventeen women interviewed, nine were presently living with their parents and stated that they would probably continue to do so until they got married. One of the main ways in which these women expressed their familial responsibility was by stating how they wanted to improve their parents’ living situation. Ling Ye, an engaged 27 years old that works at Cisco exemplified this.

Right now, my main goal is to earn enough money to be able to buy my parents a new apartment. I think they are happy where they are right now, but they live on the 6th floor of an older building that has no elevator and I don’t want them to have to keep walking up and down the stairs as they get older. Hopefully, when I get married my husband will already have an apartment, so then I can use the money I earn to do this for my parents. Then I’ll be satisfied. – Ling Ye, 27 (personal interview June 18, 2010)
The younger generation of Chinese these days, especially those who have had access to education in larger urban areas, are increasingly seeing the opportunity to earn incomes substantially higher than their parents generation. In addition to having a desire to improve parents’ living situation through financial means, other forms of felt familial obligations were discussed. Regular visits to grandparents’ homes also appeared to be a priority amongst respondents. In an interview with a young woman named Xiao Feng, she explains that it is a woman’s responsibility to tend to elder members of the family. She stated:

I go to visit my grandmother and grandfather at least three times a month and so does my cousin sister.

*Who is responsible for arranging the visits to your grandparent’s home?*

Whether we go to visit my mother’s parents or my father’s parents, my mother is always the one who arranges when we will go. And when we go, she (her mother) always prepares some fruit and other things that they might need.

*Do you think this is something you will continue to do for your parents when they are older?*

Yes. Definitely, we (women) should do that. It’s a tradition.” – Xiao Feng, 28

(Excerpt from interview June 20, 2010)

Many other respondents in this study described similar notions of familial responsibility. Here, it can be seen that these women understand they have a role to maintain close ties and provide care for members of both their immediate and extended families. This is part of their perceived gender role as a female member of the family. This notion of familial responsibility can relate back to ideas discussed in chapter two regarding how the demographic changes associated with the One Child Policy have shifted women’s familial responsibilities from child care more to care for the elderly and other members of the extended family.
The fact that many women viewed tending to the elder members of the family as their job rather than their husband’s, or other male members of the family, is in stark contrast to the more equal division of household labor that was discussed in the previous section. Here, we see women assuming more of a traditional gender role, which I argue stems from a Confucian notion of women as caretakers. This falls in line with the literature (Beaver 1995; Leung 2003) discussed in chapter two, which suggests that many Confucian patriarchal norms were merely suppressed during the Mao era, but not eliminated completely. This contradictory nature of gender roles, which is exemplified through household and familial relations amongst respondents, supports one of the main arguments put forth in this chapter that both Confucian and socialist ideology remain influential in the formation of gender roles.

One final way that I was able to form an understanding of women’s gender roles in the private sphere was through hearing their perspectives on employment, education and providing income for the household. This discussion can relate back to the initial quote put forth in this section from Jin Li, who insisted that she remain employed regardless of how wealthy her husband was. In chapter four, I discussed how there had been an increased rhetoric emanating from the CCP in the late 1980s for women to ‘return to the home’ to look after their husbands and children due to over-employment (Leung 2003). From interviewing these women, it appears that this rhetoric has not been successful in forcing women out of the workforce, for, out of the seventeen women interviewed, only two were unemployed, one of whom was planning on returning to work the following year. This coincides with the literature that suggests that although there has
been evidence of a recent backlash against women’s participation in the workforce in China as pressure mounts for enterprises to increase efficiency, young urban Chinese women continue to be career driven (Yi and Chien 2002). By the year 2000, some 90% of working-age women in China’s urban areas were employed outside the home.

Through conversations with respondents, it became clear that the majority of these women had a desire or felt a need to be employed and contribute income to the family. This coincided with a prevailing lack of desire to assume a more traditional role as a housewife. This was especially true regarding educated women and their perceptions of themselves as educated women. Out of the seventeen women interviewed, fifteen had finished college. Most of them were pursuing a career, but some stated that their undergraduate degree was not enough and were continuing secondary education. In regards to the role that education plays in these women’s perceptions of themselves as members of society and as family members, Xiao Wang had this to say:

Once you are educated past college then I think it’s rare that you are willing to become a housewife. I mean, some people might like it, but most women I know are excited about pursuing their career and earning money. If you are educated, then you are supposed to contribute something to your family and the society. What’s the point of paying all that money and spending all that time studying if you just end up staying at home? – Xiao Wang, 29 (Excerpt from interview June 20, 2010)

This quote shows that Xiao Wang perceives herself as being educated and thus has the role to improve her family’s well-being, as well as contribute something to the greater society. This has changed her perceived gender role. For her, pursuing a career and earning money appear to be more valued than staying at home and raising a family. This line of thinking was shared by most of the other women interviewed.
Reflections

This section sought to illustrate the nature of gender roles as they exist within the private sphere. By presenting interview data from discussions with various young women regarding household responsibilities, familial responsibilities, employment and education, I argue that there exists a complexity of influences from both the Confucian and socialist ideologies which are influential in the formation of gender roles in the private sphere. These discussions imply that women often see themselves as equal in regards to their male counterpart within the home and thus assume a more non-traditional role. This is perhaps best illustrated in a comment made by Feng Ming, who stated:

My husband and I, we discuss things and make decisions together. There is never a time when he always gets to make the decisions. I think we are equal in the home and just because he does a lot of the cooking and housework that doesn’t mean that I am inferior. That’s just what a good husband is supposed to do. – Feng Ming, 31 (Excerpt from interview June 24, 2010)

Although there were some elements of traditional gender roles present amongst those interviewed, such as familial obligations as caretaker of the elderly family members, these instances were fewer than the non-traditional ones. As this chapter moves forward, this section on women in the private sphere should serve as a guiding frame of reference for the remaining discussion which centers on the main focus of this research, women in the public sphere.

Women’s Selection of Leisure Spaces

One of the main research questions for this research was ‘what factors are most critical to women’s selection of leisure spaces?’ This section presents what were found to
be the most critical factors in women’s selection of leisure spaces and which spaces are most frequented by these women. These results are based on multiple encounters and outings with respondents as they engaged in their favorite leisure activities. While the types of leisure spaces cited amongst respondents were numerous, the most common leisure spaces mentioned (listed in no particular order) were hair salons, karaoke clubs, shopping malls, parks, coffee shops, bookstores and bars.

There were a variety of reasons stated which factor into these women’s selection of leisure spaces. Aesthetic elements such as the ‘quiet atmosphere’ of a coffee shop or bookstore, or the feeling of ‘being surrounded by nature’ in public parks, or the ‘scenery’ at a shopping mall were often noted in their reasons for choosing certain places.

However, a number of women discussed their selection of leisure spaces from the perspective of constraints (Hägerstrand 1970). The most commonly talked about constraints were time and spatial proximity. The following statement from Mei Li represents the way many women felt:

For me, money is not an issue that constrains my leisure time or activities. I work and my husband works also, so if I want something I’ll buy it. But, I’m not going to sit on the bus or subway for over an hour just to go to some shopping mall that’s a little bit better. I’m busy; I’ve only got so much free time. The great thing about Beijing is that because it is such a big city there are shops and things to do everywhere. So, I usually choose somewhere that’s close by so I don’t have to spend so much time on public transportation. For me, it’s not a leisure activity if I have to fight traffic and waste time to get there. – Mei Li, 26 (Excerpt from interview July 2, 2010)

Mei Li’s statement alludes to the idea that she would be willing to sacrifice quality of leisure spaces for convenience of access to them. It is also obvious that she equates shopping and shopping malls with the idea of leisure. Financial aspects of her leisure
activities and spaces were a lesser concern than time and location, which were found to be true for the majority of women interviewed. Another woman named Fei Dong simply stated, “I don’t care about the money part, because it’s always the man who pays for it.”

Whether the women were employed, in a relationship, have children, enrolled in school or had other types of obligations, the issue of time always came up in conversations regarding leisure. Although most women did not explicitly make the connection between time constraints and gender roles, the connection was often there, especially if the women were in a relationship, married, or married with children. The following excerpt, which illustrates the connection between time constraints and gender roles, is from fieldnotes written after an interview and outing with a woman named Chen Fei.

Chen Fei is 32, married and has a six-year-old daughter. Her husband’s mother lives with them. Chen said her favorite place to go for leisure is the nearby bookstore called Xinhua Shudian, which is comparable to a Barnes and Noble here in America. Chen is temporarily unemployed and is dedicating herself full time to taking care of her daughter and accompanying her mother-in-law. When the next summer comes around she hopes to open her own flower shop. Her husband works two jobs and stays busy during the daytime; so all the household responsibilities are done by her and her mother-in-law. Her personal leisure time is usually in the mornings from 10 a.m. to noon. She said that she usually needs to return home though around 11 a.m. to prepare the lunch for her mother-in-law. So, on a weekly basis she only has two or three hours of ‘personal’ leisure time, she claims. Because the majority of her leisure time is spent with family, Chen said that she thinks of her family first when choosing leisure activities. She emphasized that if the place is not suitable for her daughter or mother-in-law then she won’t go there. She likes to go to the park because it is a place they all can enjoy together. If she had more time, she would spend it at the bookstore she said. – (Excerpt from field notes June 28, 2010)

Chen’s story reveals how her gender roles as a mother and a daughter-in-law constrain her leisure time and choice of activities. She clearly makes a distinction between personal
leisure time and family leisure time, emphasizing that the family’s leisure time takes precedence over her own. If her familial obligations were not so time consuming, she would be able to spend more time in her personal favorite leisure spots like the bookstore.

The above statement, along with other conversations had with respondents, revealed that gender roles definitely factor into women’s’ choices of leisure space and activities. Due to maternal and familial responsibilities, some women select their leisure spaces based more on convenience in terms of time and spatial proximity. Others put family first in selecting their leisure spaces in that they prefer to use spaces that their children or other members of the family can enjoy. Because time for leisure activities can be limited, especially for women with familial and maternal obligations, then the choice of leisure spaces in the city shrinks. It does so because almost all the women interviewed rely on public transportation for getting around the city. This leads to another element of constraints for women’s use of leisure spaces: mobility.

Only one out of the seventeen women had their own car and those whose husbands owned a car usually took it to work. Although public transportation is cheap and widely available, and bicycle riding is often common practice, these two forms of transportation can take significantly longer to access certain places than taking a taxi or personal car. Most of the women said that it was not “worth it” to pay for a taxi to travel to spaces that are far away unless they would be able to spend a notable amount of time there. However, I contend a deeper correlation exists between their limited mobility and gender roles that is distinct of financial aspects. This is exemplified in the next section regarding the masculine nature of public spaces and the ‘traditional Chinese girl’
discourse. The relationship between gender and mobility has been explored in various literatures, which suggest that gender often shapes mobility and mobility can shape gender (Hanson 2010), and also that increased mobility can be empowering for women (Mandel 2004; Kwan 2009). Chinese women’s access to public leisure places can be conceptualized in terms of mobility, however this was not explicitly examined during this research project, but is present in various contexts.

While aesthetic elements and issues of time and location of leisure places were often noted as being a factor in their leisure space selection, there were many women who also discussed leisure places in terms of the social relations that exist there. This topic is very important and will be explored further in the last section of this chapter titled ‘Women’s Perceptions of Leisure Spaces’. However, first the gendered elements of women’s public leisure spaces that were discovered to exist will be discussed.

Gendered Elements of Women’s Public Leisure Spaces

In this section, I draw upon both interviews and participant observations with respondents to argue that women’s role in the public sphere remains very traditional, regardless of their level of education, employment status, income level, and the fact that certain gender roles have changed within the private sphere. This argument is formed based around two key findings: the prevailing masculine nature of most public spaces observed, and the existence of a “traditional Chinese girl” discourse, which appeared throughout many conversations with respondents. In addition, I argue that the masculine nature of public space, women’s perceptions of themselves in public space and their often
traditional behavior in public spaces all relate to a mix of elements stemming from Confucian and socialist ideologies.

*Gender Roles in Public Space*

One of the most exemplary forms of the gender masculine nature of public spaces that was observed has to do with the idea that the man is always supposed to pay when in public places. This was seen taking place throughout observations and was also reinforced through discussions with respondents. In every outing I went on with one or more participants where there was a man or men involved, the women never paid. This took place in restaurants, taxis, and bars, as well as for other leisure activities such as karaoke, and when buying admission tickets to public parks. I discussed this social custom with a number of respondents. One respondent, Jin Li, had this to say:

In China, if the woman pays at the restaurant and there are men there, the men will be looked down upon as being weak and inferior…I think we (women) still are not seen as being the main income earners or leaders of the household. Although in many couples both the man and woman work, it is kind of rare to find a couple where the woman earns more than the man, except for some celebrities. – Jin Li, 29 (Excerpt from interview June 23, 2010)

In this quote, Jin Li implies a number of issues regarding gender roles in China. By stating that the men will be viewed as weak and inferior, she is suggesting that men are still viewed as being strong and superior in the society. This coincides with the literature (Hibbins 2004; Louie 2010; Song 2010) that argues that China remains a male dominant society. Also, Jin Li’s comments on women not being viewed as the main income
earners, nor that they earn as much as men also supports this notion as women being inferior, especially in public settings.

I experienced this social male dominance first hand while having an informal lunch with a former male classmate during the period of conducting research. Before we left the restaurant I paid the waitress while he was in the restroom. When he came back and found that I paid, he said in a frustrated manner, “Why did you learn some bad habits while you’ve been living abroad? You know the woman isn’t supposed to pay. I am supposed to pay” (Wang Hao, 28 – Excerpt from field note June 19, 2010).

What was perhaps the most interesting element found regarding this custom of the male paying for everything in public was the fairly passive acceptance and sometimes perpetuation of this gender role amongst women interviewed. This was true even for those women who were highly educated and earned substantial incomes. The following comment from Yu Yang is quite illustrative of this:

There have been a number of times when my husband and I have gone out to eat dinner with a group of friends and he didn’t have enough money to pay. So, in order to save face for him I gave him the money under the table to make it seem like he was the one who paid, even though it was my money. – Yu Yang, 29 (Excerpt from interview July 1, 2010)

In this quote, there are two elements of power relations and gender roles taking place. Obviously, the woman understands the necessity to keep her husband’s reputation by making it seem like he is a man and can buy the dinner for everyone. However, by doing this, she is accepting this traditional gender role and the male-dominance of the social setting. At the same time, she is playing the role of being a ‘good wife’ by knowing how to save her husband’s reputation in public. Having a reputation (or “face” as it literally
translates in Chinese) is a very important element of Chinese culture that has remained since the Confucian period. Knowing how to save your husband’s reputation was and still is considered an important element in being a virtuous wife. I argue that the previous quote from Yu Yang exemplifies one way in which women behave in a more traditional manner in the public sphere. It is also illustrative of the elements of Confucian society that remain influential on social behavior in modern China.

**Women’s Behavior in the Presence of Men**

The second exemplary form of the gendered masculine nature of public spaces relates to the ways in which respondents behaved differently in public spaces when men were present. One place where this took place was at a karaoke club. Karaoke clubs were a very popular type of leisure space mentioned amongst respondents. Karaoke clubs in East Asia take a unique form. They are usually located in a large commercial building and have many individual rooms that you can rent by the hour. The rooms vary in size based on how many people are in the group. One can rent a room for 1-2 people, 2-4, 4-8, 8-12, and more than 12 people. Each room has its own flat screen TV and a computer console where songs are selected. One can order drinks and some small snacks, and many businesses provide a buffet of food in the main lobby. So, although karaoke clubs are

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7 It is important to note that in this example of women knowing how to keep their husband’s reputation, that we are not only seeing the construction of femininity in the public sphere, but also the construction of masculinity. For gender roles are often co-constitutive and the women in this research all understood the masculine nature of public spaces, the importance of maintaining that at certain times and how to maintain it through their behavior.
located in public space, they are often very private settings contained within a larger public space.

I found that karaoke clubs are a type of leisure space that respondents stated they enjoy going to with groups of other women more so than with men. I was able to join one respondent for an evening of karaoke on two separate occasions. The first time, I accompanied the respondent with a group of three other women. The second time, it was with the same group of women, however two of the women’s husbands were present. On these two separate nights, I observed notably different behavior taking place amongst the group of women.

During the first night when men were not present, the women took on a more dominant role and behaved in a much more free manner than when accompanied by men. I say that they took on a more dominant role in that they were in charge of selecting the room to use, which songs to sing, ordering the food and drinks and also paying the bill. Some of the women even drank a considerable amount of alcohol. The situation changed though when I observed this same group of women on the night at the karaoke club when the two husbands were present. On this night, upon entering the club, the respondent’s husband directed everyone to go sit in the lobby while he went to arrange the room. A few minutes later, he came back with a server who then showed us to our room. We all sat down and the two men looked over the food and drink menu and then asked us (women) what we would like to drink. After we told them, they called the server over and placed the order. Throughout the evening, the men drank alcohol, singing occasionally, while the women sang more and mostly drank some juice or tea. One woman was always
attending to the men’s drinking glasses, making sure that they were never empty. As the
time in the karaoke room was winding down, one of the men slipped out and went to pay
for everything.

One of the most notable differences in the women’s behavior between the two
nights had to do with the consumption of alcohol. The women as a whole drank
significantly less alcohol during the mixed male-female karaoke night. I asked one of the
women about this as we were leaving the karaoke club. The short conversation took the
following form:

*Did you not want to drink some alcohol tonight? I remember the last time we
all came here together we all had so much fun drinking some drinks and
singing together.*

I did drink a little bit tonight. I had a sip or two of my husband’s beer. You
know, sometimes it is not so lady-like to drink too much alcohol in front of
other men. I did not really know that man very well and I don’t want him to
get the wrong impression. – (Excerpt from fieldnote July 8, 2010)

You will notice that she stated she drank a sip of her husband’s beer, not one of her own.

It seems from this woman’s comment that there is a negative connotation for women to
drink alcohol. Also, because she was not so familiar with one of the men, she acted in a
more conservative manner so as not to give a negative impression.

In addition to changing their alcohol consumption behavior, I also noticed a slight
difference in the song selection. During the night without males, one of the women (Pan
Qing) sang two songs in English by Celine Dion, but did not sing them during the night
when the men were there. During this night, I suggested that she sing one of them, to
which she pointed to her friend’s husband and quickly replied, “Ah, he doesn’t like it
when I sing English songs.” When she sang these English songs during the all girls night
she received much praise. However, the woman became more docile and did not sing the songs on the mixed night so as to appease her friend’s husband.

While this section on the masculine nature of public spaces shows that women behave a certain way when men are present and often assume a more traditional role when in public spaces with men, it does not paint an entirely clear picture of how women perceive themselves in relation to public space more generally. In the next section is a more detailed discussion of what was found regarding women’s perceptions of their gender roles in public spaces. Here, a more clear connection is made between gender roles and public space by showing that it is not only a male presence in public spaces which is deterministic of women’s behavior, but rather a more deeply embedded social and cultural discourse held amongst women and men regarding how women are supposed to behave in public space.

The “Traditional Chinese Girl” Discourse

In this section, drawing upon interviews with respondents, I argue that there is a correlation between women’s discourse on being a “traditional Chinese girl”, their selection of leisure spaces and their perceptions on how they should behave in public space. In the early stages of conducting interviews with young women in Beijing, the phrase “traditional Chinese girl” often surfaced when discussing various aspects of leisure activities and leisure spaces. As it became apparent that this was a common phrase used amongst respondents early on, I then incorporated this topic into further interviews wherein I would ask women their opinions about what a “traditional Chinese girl” is at
present and how one is supposed to behave in public. Their comments regarding this topic allow for a more clear connection to be made between how women perceive themselves and their choice and use of public leisure spaces.

One of the first women to use this phrase was Wen Jun, a 29 year old married woman who has a son and works at a bank in the Dongcheng district. Wen Jun stated that her two favorite public leisure spaces are a bookstore near her home and the Taoranting park where she often takes her five-year-old son to play. During the interview, a number of different types of public leisure spaces throughout the city which women use were discussed. When discussing why she did not go to so many of those places, she mostly cited time as being a constraint, not a lack of interest. However, when the topic of bars and dance clubs came up, Wen Jun noted a different reason for not frequenting those places. She stated:

I don’t like going to bars and clubs. That’s not my world. Sometimes I have to accompany my husband to go there, but if I didn’t have to then I would never go. It’s always so loud there and the smoke is so much that I just can’t feel comfortable and relax. Plus, I don’t like to be some meat for the men to look at.

So, you don’t like the environment so much?
Well, I just don’t think many traditional Chinese girls go there. I don’t think it is a place for some good girls to go. Those places are dirty and sleazy and there is always some guy trying to hit on you. I don’t really see those places as a leisure space. – Wen Jun, 29 (Excerpt from interview July 6, 2010)

Wen Jun’s comments are illustrative of a number of issues regarding women’s gender roles in public spaces and also the idea of a “traditional Chinese girl.” In discussing why she does not go to bars and clubs, she states general aspects of both the physical and social environment that make her feel uncomfortable. However, her comments regarding the fact that traditional Chinese girls do not go there have deeper implications. First, she
connects the idea of a traditional Chinese girl to that of a “good girl,” who would not go to such “loud”, “dirty” and “sleazy” places. She says that those places are “dirty and sleazy”, however her comments can also be interpreted as being critical of the kinds of activities that take place there. In this sense, being a traditional Chinese girl does not coincide with engaging in activities such as drinking, smoking, dancing, or partying. Finally, by claiming that bars and dance clubs are not a place where traditional Chinese girls go, it can be inferred that she views herself as part of this group of traditional Chinese girls because she does not go to those places. One other interesting thing to note in Wen Jun’s comments is how she said she has to accompany her husband in going to bars. The fact that she accompanies her husband even though she does not have to shows that she understands her role as a wife is to accompany her husband in various social situations, which relates back to Confucian notions of being a virtuous wife.

One of the most common ways in which women used this phrase was as a means for indicating something they do not do or take part in, rather than something they do. For example, the phrase “I am a traditional Chinese girl, so I don’t…” was often used by respondents. Another respondent, Wang Lei, who also referred to herself as a “traditional Chinese girl” at one point during the interview, had a similar opinion about bars and dance clubs and what kind of activities women do not usually take part in. She stated,

I have heard a lot of stories about some girls being taken advantage of at the bars because some guy has made them drink a lot or someone has put something in their drink. It just seems like when there is so much alcohol and loud music that some bad things can happen.

_Do you drink alcohol?_

No, not really. That’s more for the men in my opinion. I don’t think it is very elegant for women to drink or smoke and I am always shocked when I see a young woman doing either. A little alcohol is ok sometimes I guess, but to go
to a bar or club and drink a lot is not something that I think traditional girls should do. – Wang Lei, 27 (Excerpt from interview July 7, 2010)

Again, here in Wang Lei’s comments she distances herself from women who are engaging in certain activities and frequenting certain places that are not so common for “traditional” girls. She uses the word “elegant” as a means for describing what the women in those places are not, which suggests that more traditional women should act elegantly in a public setting. In addition, she relates the activities of drinking and smoking to men more than women, which also suggests that this type of behavior is not ‘lady-like’ in the traditional sense. Finally, one other point to take from Wang Lei’s comments is that there is an underlying notion of fear or danger present. She has a fear of being taken advantage of by men in those places. Here lies another example of the gender masculine nature of public spaces taking shape, which supports the argument discussed in the previous section.

I found that there was a correlation between women who stated that they were a “traditional Chinese girl” and a subsequent avoidance of bars and dance clubs as leisure spaces. While one of the main arguments of this chapter is that women assume a more traditional role in public places, the comments just discussed regarding bars and dance clubs might seem counterintuitive. From the descriptions Wen Jun and Wang Lei gave about bars and dance clubs, it seems that women do not behave in a traditional manner in these places. I argue that this is often true, which relates to the third argument I make in this chapter: that public leisure spaces are providing women with a means to break from their more traditional gender roles and public behavior. However, this discussion is reserved for the last section of this chapter.
There was one other aspect found in the relationship between the “traditional Chinese girl” discourse and women’s behavior in public space. This had to do with the fact that most women expressed a need to be accompanied in public space. Coffee shops were a popular public leisure space noted amongst respondents. A number of women stated that they enjoyed the quiet bustle and the relaxing atmosphere found in these places. Often, one might think of a coffee shop as a place where individuals like to go to have some personal alone time to read, study or use their laptops. However, while instances of women venturing to coffee shops alone were found, it was not so common.

Xue Qing, a 29 year old computer IT specialist, claimed that coffee shops were one of her favorite leisure spots. However, she stated,

If there is no one to go there (coffee shop) with me, I won’t go.

Why not?

I think for doing the leisure activities that we have been talking about, like shopping, going to eat or to some park, a woman should be accompanied. Whether it is a man or woman doesn’t matter so much, but she shouldn’t be alone for so long, especially at nighttime. – Xue Qing, 29 (Excerpt from interview June 23, 2010)

Xue Qing’s comment is telling of women’s attitudes regarding their role as a woman in public space. While it can be understood how women might feel the need to be accompanied in places which have a stigma as being more dangerous, such as bars or night clubs, Xue Qing’s comments suggest that it is not necessarily the place which requires a need to be accompanied, but rather the fact that they are women out in public. She says that it does not matter what or where the activity is or who accompanies the women (male or female), as long as she is in public she should accompanied.
The need to be accompanied in public space was expressed by the majority of women interviewed and was indicated not only through dialogue, but also through the types of leisure activities that the women favored. The majority of women stated they preferred to engage in leisure activities that took more of a group form. This often involved going to places such as parks, hair salons, restaurants, karaoke clubs and shopping malls. In an interview with a respondent named Wen Wen, she expressed this notion:

My favorite leisure spaces are the ones that I can enjoy with other people. Sometimes it is my boyfriend, sometimes it is with my best girlfriends, and sometimes other family members. I really enjoy going to the Temple of Heaven park on Saturdays. Usually, there is a group of about six of us who go: my boyfriend and some of my old classmates from elementary school. We will take a picnic lunch and just enjoy the surrounding environment. We like to kick the jian zi (hacky sack) together and listen to the older people sing and play music. Afterwards, we always go out for a big dinner…hot pot usually. – Wen Wen, 30 (Excerpt from interview July 12, 2010)

I argue that women’s perceived need to be accompanied in public space and the fact that women choose to engage in many leisure activities in a group form should be distinguished as relating to two different ideas. In thinking about Xue Qing’s comment regarding how women should be accompanied in public space, this can be related to the discussion about women’s perceptions of themselves and the “traditional Chinese girl” discourse. I view this notion as stemming from more traditional Confucian ideas regarding women’s presence in a male-dominated public sphere. However, the fact that women often choose leisure activities and leisure spaces in a group form rather than individually relates more to the collective ways of thinking that prevailed during the Mao era as was discussed in chapter four. While these women have grown up in the post-
reform era, it has not been without many overarching elements of socialism, which
preaches collective identities over individual and group activities over independent ones.
This collective ideal can still be seen in various facets of Chinese society such as school
uniforms nationwide, and also now in women’s selection of leisure spaces. In this light, I
refer back to one of the main arguments in chapter four, which is that existing influential
elements of Confucianism and socialism have created a unique gender experience for
women, and that this unique experience can be seen through an examination of women’s
perceptions and use of public leisure spaces.

The following excerpt is from an interview with a woman named Jiang Lei. This
interview was one of the last interviews conducted in Beijing, thus I had the opportunity
to incorporate the ideas and experiences of women previously interviewed throughout the
summer into our discussion. This quote perhaps best exemplifies what women mean
when they use this common phrase “traditional Chinese girl”. Jiang Lei, who labeled
herself as a “traditional Chinese girl” gave her opinion about what a “traditional Chinese
girl” is:

So, you say you are a traditional Chinese girl. What does that mean?
Well, I think it relates to a number of elements in a woman’s life. Your way
of thinking, your family values, your attitude towards life, how you behave in
public…For me, I was raised in a pretty traditional family and a good family
that taught me how to be a smart and well-behaved woman while I was
growing up. My parents were really strict, but I think it was for the best. I will
be strict on my child just like they were on me.
You mentioned that one of the elements of being a traditional Chinese girl is
how to behave in public. How do you think a woman should behave in
public?
I think you should act in a normal, elegant way, which does not attract so
much attention to yourself. Don’t be sloppy or speak too loudly, or be waving
your hands all around when you explain something. If you are out with your
husband, don’t argue with him in front of other people and don’t talk about
his shortcomings. Always try to make him look good. Don’t stay out too late
or be out by yourself too late either.

Do you think that there are some places a traditional Chinese girl should not
go? Some of the other women I interviewed said that bars, dance clubs and
night clubs aren’t places where traditional girls usually go. What do you
think?

I consider myself to be very traditional, but I enjoy going to bars from time to
time. I guess those are places where traditional girls might not go so often,
but just because you go there doesn’t mean you aren’t traditional, you can
still act in a traditional way when you are there.

Jiang Lei’s comments regarding “traditional Chinese girls” exemplifies the multiple
facets of a woman’s life that this term holds meaning for. It is clear to see that there exists
a “traditional Chinese girl” discourse, which has certain implications for how a woman is
supposed to behave in public. As has been exemplified through the different women’s’
references to this term, being “traditional” can take various forms and be applied to a
variety of social situations. Therefore, I reiterate the argument that while public spaces
are often gendered masculine, which can be influential in how women behave in those
spaces, there also exists amongst women a socially embedded understanding of how they
are supposed to behave in public, regardless of whether or not men are present. This can
be just as influential in determining how they perceive their gender roles in public spaces
and thus behave in public spaces.

Reflections

From this discussion on perceptions and gendered elements of women’s leisure
spaces, it is apparent that there is a traditional social status relationship between men and
women that remains entrenched in the public sphere. The examples presented in this
chapter exemplify the fact that men still hold the dominant status and women are seen as
inferior. Thus, although the discussion of gender roles in the first section of this chapter presents the idea that women, especially educated and employed women, are breaking from traditional gender roles within the home, the overarching structures of society still remain gendered masculine, which can be seen through men and women’s behavior in public spaces. Thus, while the literature in chapter two suggests that Chinese women’s gender roles in the public sphere are becoming less traditional alongside greater modernization and development, this chapter show that this is not entirely true. For, as we see from the examples presented in this section, women’s role in the public sphere often remains very traditional.

Through discussing both the masculine nature of many public spaces, as well as the prevalence of a “traditional Chinese girl” discourse, the argument that elements of Confucian and socialist ideologies are still deterministic of women’s gender roles and China’s social structure and have thus created a gendered masculine nature of many public spaces where leisure activities take place, becomes more clear. However, there is another element that must be examined when discussing the relationship between women’s gender roles and public leisure spaces, which is how public leisure spaces can serve as sites where women can break from more traditional roles and behavior. A discussion of this relationship will be informative as to the greater significance of public leisure spaces the respondents in general.
Women’s Perceptions of Leisure Spaces

The last section of this chapter focuses on how women perceive their leisure spaces in terms of social relations and how public leisure spaces serve as sites where women can break from more traditional roles and public behavior. Massey (1994) writes that spaces and places, and our perceptions of them, are gendered in ways that vary across time and between cultures. The gendered nature of spaces and places both “reflects and has effects back on the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live” (Massey 1994, 187). Often, it is the social relations within a place, rather than the design of the place itself that can be deterministic of whether or not one chooses to go there. Based on concepts put forth by Massey (1994) and Cresswell (2004) regarding the gendered nature of places and how places are socially constructed, I argue that amongst the group of young Chinese female respondents, selection of leisure spaces is largely based on their perceptions of the social relations that exist within places. In addition, because women are aware of their role in the public sphere and the social structures that exist around public spaces, women are also aware of how to use public spaces as a means for challenging these more traditional gender roles.

The second section of this chapter, ‘Women’s Leisure Space Selection’, contained a large excerpt from fieldnotes regarding Chen Fei (See p.93), a married woman who’s personal leisure time is often constrained due to familial responsibilities for her child and mother-in-law. Chen Fei noted that the park is her most frequented leisure space because it is a place she can take her child and mother-in-law. While Chen Fei’s story was initially used as a means for illustrating various constraints on women’s leisure spaces, it
also exemplifies how women often perceive places in terms of social relations. For, Chen Fei views the park as a safe place for her child to play, as well as an environment that her mother-in-law can enjoy. This implies that Chen Fei has a certain perception of the park in terms of the social relations that exist there. Another aspect of Chen Fei’s story that is important is how her gender role as a mother and caretaker of the family were largely deterministic of her selection of leisure spaces. This finding coincides with a number of studies that have cited women’s gender roles as a constraint for using particular public leisure spaces (Scranton and Watson 1998; Green 2006).

This idea of gender roles as a form of constraint was briefly discussed earlier in the chapter, but is revisited now, for it can be applied in a variety of contexts to topics discussed thus far. In thinking about the “traditional Chinese girl” discourse, public behavioral norms implied by this discourse can be viewed as a form of constraint to women’s behavior in and use of certain types of public leisure spaces. In addition, women feeling the need to be accompanied in public space can also be viewed as a mobility constraint due to their gender roles. There have been numerous studies which suggest that women’s mobility and use of place is often restricted due to feelings of being uncomfortable due to the gaze of men (Rosewarne 2005), or from fear of attack and physical violence (Day 2001). While fear was never something that was explicitly discussed by respondents, it was present in a subtle manner in some of their discussions of certain public leisure spaces. This was exemplified in the quote from Wen Jun earlier in this chapter when she described why she did not like going to bars. She stated, “I just can’t feel comfortable and relax. Plus, I don’t like to be some meat for the men to look
at... there is always some guy trying to hit on you.” Wen Jun did not explicitly state that she feared these places, however she expressed feeling uncomfortable there due to the presence and gaze of men, which alludes to certain notions of fear (Rosewarne 2005).
This is a prime example of how gender and gender roles can form a constraint to women’s use of public leisure spaces. These examples all support the argument that gendered social hierarchies that exist in China’s public spaces often form a type of constraint for women in using and accessing public leisure spaces.

I return now to the argument that women often understand and are aware of the social relations that exist within a place and that this factors into their decisions when choosing public leisure spaces. Earlier in this chapter, karaoke clubs were discussed as a means for illustrating the masculine nature of public places and how women’s behavior often changes when men are present. Another way in which we can examine this phenomenon is through the idea that place and the identity of place can change depending on the social situation (Cresswell 2009), such as who is using the place and for what purpose. The fact that women behaved in a more free and non-traditional manner when men were not present supports this notion of the complex identity of places. From observing and interviewing these women, it became clear that karaoke clubs can often serve as sites that allow them to break from more traditional modes of public behavior. A comment from a respondent named Ai Bulak exemplifies this:

I love singing, but don’t always like to sing in front of other people at my home or some other places. But, when I am in the small room and have the good music and sound behind me like in the KTV (slang for karaoke), it makes it much more easier and fun. Even if there are some guys in the room, I still feel more comfortable singing there than anywhere else.

*With whom do you usually go there?*
It varies. Sometimes I go with two really good girlfriends of mine. Sometimes I go with my boyfriend and some of his friends, but really my favorite time to go is with my best girl friends.

*What is it about the KTV place that you enjoy?*

I like the privacy. When my best friends and I go there we can be loud and go crazy singing if we want to, or we can just let the music play and talk about what’s been going on in our lives. That’s kind of why I like going with just the girls sometimes. It gives us a chance to talk about all that stuff that we can’t in front of our boyfriends. – Ai Bulak, 26 (Excerpt from interview July 12, 2010)

Ai Bulak’s comments suggest that she feels very comfortable in this space due to its more private nature. She notes that although she goes to karaoke with her boyfriend from time to time, her favorite time to go is with a group of women. Without the presence of men, she claims that she can be “loud” and “go crazy” and talk about things she otherwise would not in front of men. These comments imply a certain degree of independence and freedom gained through using this place. However, I argue that these feelings are not gained solely due to the setting of the karaoke club itself, but rather the social circumstances that exist within the place. Without the presence of men, the social relations and power relations within that space transforms the karaoke club into a new type of space that provides greater freedoms of behavior.

In a study on karaoke consumption in China, Fung (2009, 46) found that karaoke clubs provide one of the “few entertainment activities through which the young can articulate and explicitly express their own lifestyles, attitudes, and values.” He further notes that singing karaoke also “manifests a performative modernity in which the young learn and seek to express identities in a novel way, temporarily bracketing a structured social environment that strongly constrains their range of expression.” This quote correlates highly with the behavior observed amongst respondents and their discourse on
karaoke clubs, such as the example given earlier in this section where the women drank alcohol and sang songs in English. This can be viewed as a form of identity expression as facilitated through public leisure spaces.

If the approach of examining places as sites of social relations is taken, it allows for a better understanding as to why women choose certain leisure spaces. Place then must be viewed “as a process where the activities of people and institutions produce and are produced by social structures that are saturated with power” (Cresswell 2009, 175). When women choose their leisure spaces, they are aware of the social structures within places and their implications. From interviewing these women, it became clear that most of them were aware that there is a widely held view of how women are supposed to act in public, such as that expressed in the “traditional Chinese girl discourse”. Because women are aware of their role in the public sphere and the social structures that exist around public spaces, women are also aware of how to use public spaces as a means for challenging more traditional roles, such as going to bars or dance clubs, or a number of other types of public places.

Although bars and dance clubs were not a very popular type of leisure space amongst respondents, it is important to briefly discuss the women who did cite them as being favorite spots for the purpose of illustrating how women can use these places as sites to challenge existing public gender norms. The following excerpt is from fieldnotes taken after a night spent with a woman named Dong Shao Qing:

It was a Tuesday night around 10 p.m. Dong Shao Qing and I had been at the Black Sun Bar for a little over half an hour when her other two girlfriends arrived. She had invited me along to come and see her typical ‘girls night out’. The smell of smoke flourished throughout the bar and the sound of pool
balls cracking kept ringing in my ear. One of the girls shouted, “Have you ordered the drinks yet?” as she entered the bar. As I looked around, I noticed there were other women scattered here and there amongst groups of men. All of a sudden one of the girls signaled us to come over to the pool table she had just acquired. We carried the drinks over and as Dong Shao Qing lit her cigarette, she said, “let’s have some fun!” Thus the night began. (Excerpt from field notes July 8, 2010)

This excerpt is indicative of some of the ways in which women break from their traditional gender roles by the use of leisure spaces. When thinking about traditional leisure activities of women in China, going to the bars, drinking, smoking and playing pool were not expressed by respondents as being so common. In fact, many respondents denoted these spaces and activities as being more associated with men. For Dong Shao Qing, going to the Black Sun Bar is a way to engage in certain activities that cross the boundaries of what is prescribed to her as acceptable traditional gender norms, which I argue she is fully aware of. Thus, what I observed this night supports what the literature (Green 2006, 857) suggests on how “new lifestyles and leisure spaces are a critical and contested space in which identities are formed, reformed and negotiated.”

**Reflections**

The discussions in this section have sought to illustrate how women’s selection of leisure spaces is highly correlated to how they perceive places in terms of social relationships. The concept of place as being a container of social relations as well as having multiple identities based on the social relations present, was incorporated into the discussion so as to facilitate a deeper understanding of the ways in which decisions regarding leisure space selection are made. While certain leisure spaces present women
the opportunity to break from traditional public behavior, we must not solely relate this idea to place, as women may challenge traditional gender roles in a number of ways outside the realm of leisure spaces or public spaces more generally. Earlier in this chapter, Jiang Lei brought up an important point in saying that just because one enters a non-traditional space where non-traditional activities are taking place, does not mean that one has to act non-traditionally. This comment contributes an understanding of how young women can both actively construct their identities, for example, by contesting established gender discourses, and yet continue to be constrained by dominant discourses which represent them as traditional women.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

This thesis research sought to examine the relationship between young women’s gender roles and public leisure space in Beijing, China. Of particular interest were what factors are most critical to women’s selection of leisure spaces, how women perceive their leisure spaces as being gendered, and how women’s leisure spaces serve as a site where gender roles are reinforced or contested. By conducting interviews and participant observations with various young women living in Beijing, I was able to answer these questions, and inadvertently uncover more deep and complex issues regarding women’s social status and how the greater social structure of modern Chinese society materializes in public spaces.

The findings of this research are numerous indeed. I found that the gender roles, identities and social status of young women in Beijing are shaped by a complex web of ideological influences that contains elements of Confucianism and socialism. This ideological mix has subsequently resulted in a unique experience for young women in both the private and public spheres that is by no means unvarying, for there were numerous instances of both traditional and non-traditional gender roles performed in both spheres. While two of the main findings were that 1) the nature of public space in Beijing continues to be gendered masculine, and 2) women’s role in the public sphere remains largely traditional, there were exceptions to this. The context of social relationships within the places examined could be just as deterministic of women’s behavior as overarching social structures. Thus, what this research perhaps best illustrates is how in any study on the relationship between gender roles and public space the nature of
findings will often be contradictory and complex in regards to both expectations of people’s gender roles as well as how they are lived out in public space.

There were a number of elements that arose in this research that were not fully explored, but can possibly serve as take-off points for future research. To begin, the post-reform era in China has indeed resulted in a transformation of the types and functionality of public spaces. In many ways, there has been a commodification of public space and of leisure activities. The descriptions given of public spaces and leisure activities during the pre-Mao and Mao eras presented the idea that many leisure activities took place in areas such as public parks in which financial barriers were largely absent. However, many of the leisure spaces mentioned amongst respondents for this research often require some form of financial expenditure, such as coffee shops, karaoke clubs, bars, hair salons, etc.

While respondents often noted that financial barriers to participating in the types of activities in these places were not of importance, this does not necessarily hold true for all women living in Beijing. Income disparities in China are rampant and this means that there are surely women who would desire to frequent such places, but do not have the financial means. Therefore, there is a large amount of room for further exploration into how the increased commodification of leisure spaces is perceived amongst those who do not possess the financial means to use them, as well as how this has changed women’s use of public space. This topic is highly correlated to the exclusionary nature of public spaces regarding class disparity and income inequality as discussed by (Mitchell 1995). The exclusionary nature of public spaces also incorporates discussions regarding
ethnicity and sexual orientation, which were largely unexplored in this research on young women in Beijing, but requires a brief acknowledgement.

Although the respondent sample for this research project did not include any women who identified as homosexual orientation, the results suggest the apparent importance of sexuality and heteronormativity in the structure of social space in Beijing. Many of the social relations discussed in terms of constraints and the ways that spaces are gendered had a latent assumption of heterosexuality among men and women. The perceptions and experiences of spaces expressed by respondents were mostly set in relation to men as boyfriends and husbands. Furthermore, the masculine nature of activities, such as men paying for everything in public or men having the dominant position, not only suggests that elements of gender structure social space, but norms of sexuality as well. The descriptions given of public spaces imply that they perceive them as heteronormative and thus implies an assumption that people are heterosexual and behave according to heterosexual norms. There exists a vast array of literature regarding geographies of sexuality (Hemmings 2002; Oswin 2008; Johnston 2008). While homosexuality in China has been explored in various facets, apart from a few studies (Eng 2010), these are largely exclusive of a spatial element. This research on women’s leisure spaces in Beijing suggests that there is much room for inquiry and research into the experiences of homosexuals and public space in China.

A second element that surfaced in this research which could be further explored is the role that more liberal ideas regarding individuality and materialism which have penetrated into China during the post-reform era have in shaping women’s perceived
gender roles and identities. The majority of the discussion in this thesis pertained to ideological elements of Confucianism and socialism, however certain aspects of the women’s personalities, such as being highly career driven, delaying childbirth, and the desire to earn expendable incomes for material purposes, allude to the fact that there are other influential elements apart from those found in Confucian and socialist ideology that are shaping their identities and perceptions of themselves as women in modern times. The increasing openness to external influences and ideas, as well as the relationship between leisure activities, increasing wealth, materialism, self-expression and individualism that is occurring in various places throughout China entails numerous possibilities for future research.

Third, this research only examined the experiences of young women between the age of 25-35. The changes that have taken place in China’s post-reform era have impacted people of all ages. The opening up of public spaces and diminishing nature of restrictions on activities within public spaces has resulted in new and diverse ways in which public spaces are used amongst older individuals. As was discussed in chapter three, many public parks, community gathering areas and public squares in Beijing flourish with the presence of the city’s older citizens engaging in numerous activities from singing and dancing, to flying kites and playing games. In addition, many public spaces, which were not originally designed as leisure sites, are used as such. For example, if one takes a walk around The Forbidden City in the morning, they will observe people fishing in the former imperial lakes, people walking their dogs and exercising, joggers running by, groups of people doing tai-chi and much more. The examples of public
spaces that are used for the purpose of leisure are numerous and this is especially the case for older individuals. At present, few studies exist in the leisure space literature or social sciences literature more generally which explore how the changing nature of public space in the post-reform era has effected this demographic.

While the number of potential research topics regarding women (both young and old) in modern China is plentiful, this study also has further implications for future research on women’s gender roles and experiences more generally. I argue that this research has shown that the incorporation of place into a study on topics such as women’s gender roles and identities can be of great benefit. The incorporation of ‘place’ as a lens of analysis into studies examining women’s gendered experiences allows for a deeper and more meaningful understanding of how social relations materialize and play out in places. A large number of studies in the social sciences focusing on women’s experiences lack the incorporation of a spatial element (Henderson and Bialeschki 2010), which can result in an incomplete understanding of the topic at hand. I contend that this research project on young women in Beijing would have produced notably different results if I had only interviewed women about their perceived gender roles and not incorporated questions regarding the use of place, nor observed their activities in places. For example, if I was trying to determine gender roles by asking them questions about their home life and domestic responsibilities, it would have appeared that their gender roles are quite non-traditional. However, through inquiring about the use of places and then observing their activities within places, it was seen that in fact their gender roles are much more complex than originally appeared. Therefore, examining perceptions and use of places
can result in new and unique ways of understanding women’s gender roles, social status and functionality in society.

Finally, while the incorporation of place is of great benefit to studies on the experiences of women, so too can the incorporation of leisure. A large amount of the research that has incorporated ‘place’ into research frameworks have ignored leisure, often seeing it as unworthy of geographical analysis (Waitt 2005). Studies on women, especially produced outside the United States, tend to focus on women in the workplace, livelihoods, women in politics, etc., which lack a geographical incorporation of leisure and leisure spaces. This study on women’s leisure spaces in Beijing highlights the fact that there is a lot that we can understand by looking at leisure that cannot be gained by looking at dynamics in the workplace or home. While some leisure spaces and activities can reinforce or perpetuate gender norms, this research demonstrated that others can be liberating and empowering. Thus, the incorporation or greater acknowledgement of leisure and leisure spaces into geographic analysis could add nuance to current discussions regarding women’s identities, gender roles and gendered space.

As China continues moving forward on the path towards greater modernization, it will entail numerous social, political, economic and environmental implications. While China’s sphere of influence is expanding across the globe, ideas and elements stemming from countries abroad are simultaneously flowing into and taking root in China. Thus, the identities of China and its people are not static, but rather in constant motion. Studies such as this one on a group of young women in Beijing can but only attempt to accentuate a brief and partial moment of the complex reality that exists in such a rapidly
changing environment. However, it is important to remember that studies such as these, however small they may be, remain necessary in building a bridge of greater understanding between diverse societies that are becoming ever more interconnected in the age of globalization.
REFERENCES


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