2001

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A Study of Overseas Taiwanese Ph.D. Students Regarding Beauty

“There are no beautiful women at National Taiwan University” is a prevailing proverb in Taiwan. Many people, especially male college students, devalue women who attend the best university in the country by joking about their appearance. Why are those university women judged unattractive? Two basic assumptions about women’s bodies account for this popular belief. The first assumption is that women’s intelligence is the inverse of their beauty. The second assumption devalues women’s achievements by using an unrelated judgment standard (appearance). Both assumptions represent typical patriarchal attitudes in the appraisal of women’s beauty. They also impose certain social expectations and judgments on women with higher levels of education.

In 1998, I interviewed 22 Taiwanese Ph.D. students (both males and females) at a large university in the midwestern United States regarding their perceptions of women’s beauty and knowledge. In this study, I found that Ph.D. women’s accomplishments were devaluated by their counterparts and significant others. In general, men placed greater value on women’s femininity and beauty than on their achievement and intelligence, but women were very confident about their own appearance and professional knowledge.

The gender gap in education in Taiwan has been decreasing, and more and more Taiwanese women pursue graduate studies, especially abroad. However, pursuing a Ph.D. degree is still widely regarded as “inappropriate” or “unnecessary” for women in Taiwanese society. Since most Taiwanese professors are trained in the West, especially in the United States, the knowledge system in Taiwan is still very Americanized. Therefore, Taiwanese people who wish to earn a Ph.D. degree often study abroad. The years spent earning a doctorate in a foreign country separate Taiwanese students from their home society during their “golden age,” the years during which in Taiwanese culture they are expected to marry. As a result, many Taiwanese Ph.D. students remain single while studying, but the social costs of this phenomenon are different for men than for women. Upon returning to Taiwan, a single man with a Ph.D. is viewed as a “valuable single noble,” whereas a single woman over 30 with a Ph.D. is often called an “old virgin.” Moreover, Taiwanese men tend to “marry dawn,” both in age and education, so Ph.D. women older than 30 years find it relatively difficult to marry after they return to Taiwan.

Even women who have partners during their study in the United States often suffer from patriarchal stereotypes imposed on highly educated women concerning the “appropriateness of womanhood.” A female doctoral student’s study is often regarded by her male partner as unnecessary and sometimes is even viewed as a limitation on her femininity and on her “price” in the marriage market. One male informant, Kuo-Hsiung, said, “I told all my female friends that they should care about their appearance and dress rather than wasting time studying. Nobody would appreciate a woman’s high education or knowledge. What men want is a wife, but not a Ph.D.” June-Hung, another man, said, “I would never marry a Ph.D., since a too-intelligent woman will argue with me all the time, while a tame and beautiful one will listen to me and admire me.”

Unfortunately, female Taiwanese with doctorates pay greater social costs than men during their student careers. Their gender roles, rather than their academic achievement, are emphasized and even “supervised” by the society. Even so, every woman in this study valued her accomplishments. Although the patriarchal stereotypes and the unequal relationships bothered them, Taiwanese Ph.D. women in my study were very strong-willed. They were confident of their intelligence and beauty and they enjoyed pursuing knowledge and successful academic careers. What they need is more respect, appreciation, and equal treatment from their peers, partners, academic community, and the larger Taiwanese society.

Source: Chien-Juh Gu, Department of Sociology, Michigan State University. This essay was written expressly for the ninth edition of In Conflict and Order.