

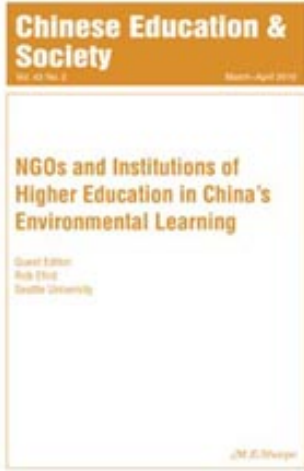
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The Shaping of a Gendered School

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05

LEE SHU-CHING

The Shaping of a Gendered School

A Case Study

Abstract: Gender education has been emphasized in Taiwan in recent years. Related research undertaken such as textbook reviewing and teachers' gender consciousness has pointed out potential problems in regard to gender in education. The process of shaping gender in a school per se has not yet been explored. This article aims to elaborate on how school authorities produce/reproduce stratification of school organization through the differentiation of male-strong/female-weak traits and through the segregation of educational work. An examination of school discourses and institutional arrangements demonstrates the underlying gendered nature of a school culture and the reproduction of differentiation, segregation, and stratification.

Examining the gendered micropolitics of a school requires dissecting the school culture on a deeper level in order to render more clearly the forms taken by its inequitable or discriminatory content. Using qualitative research methods, I conducted field research in September and November 2005 at a public junior high school that we will call Yuan Shan (not its real name). The research was exploratory in nature. I conducted semistructured interviews with the principal, office directors, and teachers, as well as study groups. The work also consisted of observing administrator meetings, teacher meetings, and student activities. In addition, school data files and informal conversations with some teachers provided contextual information.

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Yuan Shan Junior High School, located in a county-controlled city in an agricultural county in Taiwan, is a medium-size school with a top promotion rate among the county's junior high schools. It has both rural and urban characteristics and can be described as an urban school in a rural area. It has approximately 2,200 students, whose parents are from relatively high socioeconomic backgrounds for that area; at least 25.7 percent have a college education. The occupations of the parents were 37.5 percent "professional and technical, management, clerical," 15.0 percent "sales and services," 18.5 percent "laborers," and 5.7 percent "agriculture, fisheries, and animal husbandry."

The school's culture and atmosphere tend toward centralized management, which is expressed in terms of gender. We are able to observe a gendered administrative system in which female department directors and teachers feel confined, suffocated, and oppressed. Like many schools in Taiwan, while nearly 70 percent of the teachers at Yuan Shan are women, only three females are office directors in counseling, personnel, and general affairs. These three departments or offices are generally relatively weak within a school, and Yuan Shan is no exception. Since the principal holds the power to appoint administrators, the school is under his firm leadership. The administrative culture is imbued with a male-dominated "bureaucratic" atmosphere. At the root of this bureaucratic element is a hidden masculinism. It is an ideology of naturalized and rationalized male domination over females that is packaged in rationality and efficiency.

Although the administrative system in many metropolitan area schools plays the role of supporting teaching, Yuan Shan has consistently taken a stance based on a consensus (of unclear origin) that "administrators are officials." Administrators are the "officials" at Yuan Shan, while teachers are at the "basic" level and receive their orders.

Although the female administrators are also "officials," they seem to have a harder time doing the job. They not only have to endure ridicule from the men in charge, but even "low-level" male teachers dare to directly challenge female directors. In addition, their abilities are denigrated in the highly gendered school administration culture. Female executives who work too hard may be ridiculed, but, if they do not, they might be caught up in the notion that "women are not capable." This situation is typical among female administrators at the school.

How did the gendered administrative system at Yuan Shan come about? Hegemonic masculinism is able to maintain its hegemony because those who are weaker or have fewer masculine traits, and feminine characteristics in all forms, are placed in the position of "other," which is then maintained through this process. What are the social technologies or institutional arrangements of such processes? How does the school's administrative culture intentionally or unintentionally use the discourse of biological differences between men and women to create a "strong/weak" distinction and the appearance of a "natural" division of labor, essentially giving form to gendered occupational segregation? How do female executives and teachers grapple with it? The results of this field research are shown in Figure 1, later in the article. I have laid out four points to illustrate them.

Formation of a Discourse on Gender Differences

At Yuan Shan, characteristics such as intimate, sensitive, sympathetic, empathetic, and gentle were often labeled as feminine traits, and then linked to “weak” and “teacher.” Dignified, rational, strong, achievement, and order were labeled as masculine and directly linked to “strong” and “administrator.” This use of biological differences between men and women as criteria for differentiation is, in Foucault’s (1977) words, using “nature” to stratify high and low positions, and then linking them to the value of ability. As a result, men’s stronger and women’s weaker “nature” gradually become differences generally recognized by society, which then provides the legitimacy rhetoric for occupational segregation between male and female, strong and weak, administrator and teacher.

A gendered school emphasizes competition and rationalism; it is therefore incorrect to express emotion. Even relatively gentle, slender male teachers will be classified in the ranks of the “weak” and receive unequal treatment. One male teacher at the school was very kind and had a democratic style. After some matters occurred in his class that were not handled well, the principal said to him in front of a number of people, “XXX, you are not even as good as a woman!”

Measurement criteria appear when “weak” is differentiated, so the implications of “strong” naturally emerge. During the field research process, I often witnessed this scene when the school bell rang: the heads of the discipline and athletic sections, and other administrators (all male), would loudly blow their whistles on campus, urging students to hurry back to the classrooms, while scolding them for “being so slow when going to class!” This is military-style management, emphasizing order, efficiency, and dignity, which is their definition of “strong!” With regard to students’ daily routines, the school requires teachers to be “a bit strict,” “keep an eye on them,” and “there must be order and dignity.” In dealing with discipline, they are therefore required to be tough, not have too much faith in gentle methods, record demerits at every turn, and transfer students out.

Emphasizing academic performance means emphasizing competitiveness. This is also a characteristic of male organizational culture. Yuan Shan is a promotion-oriented school; in addition to order, the school naturally places the greatest focus on student performance. When not taking exams, the students are taking more exams. During my field research period, I often saw the vast majority of students quietly writing on test forms during their early study hall period.

Female Teachers Go the “Basic” Route

Female teachers take the “basic” route relative to the “official” path of the administrators. Through discursive power, an invisible and seemingly natural process embedded in everyday practice, female teachers “naturally” acquire and internalize such a discourse, and then come to play their own role in producing the discourse.

The school’s discourse, on the one hand, guides women toward the “teacher”

route and, on the other hand, finds ways to make them “set up a household” as soon as possible. Then the argument that “female teachers cannot throw themselves wholeheartedly into the school” (respondent “Gray”) is used to hinder women from taking the administration route. “Male teachers in the office feel that women are more suitable to be teachers. Female teachers can manage lots of things, small matters and all!” (respondent “Carrot”). Administrators want young female teachers to get married as soon as possible, because otherwise “they don’t know anything” and “don’t know how to take care of children, so then they don’t know how to be a teacher” (respondent “Sun”). In addition, many senior female teachers long ago internalized the values that they should “get married quickly” and that “women teachers are very popular in the marriage market, because everyone fights to get us” (respondent “Sun”). Many teachers believe that, after female teachers “set up a household,” they know more about how to be teachers. Because of the influence of traditional family responsibilities, “female teachers cannot throw themselves wholeheartedly into the school; they do that for their families” (respondent “Gray”). This further justifies the argument that women are not fit to be administrators.

Strong Offices/Weak Offices

When “order” and “academic performance” become the focus of the school’s work, and these are classified as “strong” traits, the importance of each office is demonstrated “naturally” as either strong / masculine / administrative path / strong office, or weak / feminine / teaching path / weak office. In other words, the importance of the school’s work itself is a gendered outcome that results in the phenomenon of administrative stratification. The office of student affairs is primarily responsible for student discipline; the academic affairs office is responsible for the school curriculum and academic performance; the counseling office is mainly for student psychological counseling and advising. The “emotional work” of the counseling office is easily linked with femininity. The student affairs office naturally emphasizes discipline and order, and the academic affairs office sets the performance requirements, resulting in a link between these two offices and masculinity. This is not difficult to understand. Due to their varying responsibilities, there is a difference in the importance of the offices, which results in differences in power and implicit rank. The academic affairs office is generally acknowledged as the most important office in the school. The counseling office tends to be a cooperating unit; its director makes more concessions when coordinating with other offices.

The arrangement of space itself is an expression of power. The term “right-hand man” means “able assistant,” and the right hand is more important. The arrangement of meeting locations at Yuan Shan is characteristic of the power ranking described above. The principal has the greatest discretion, the academic director second, followed by the directors of general affairs and student affairs; the female counseling director falls in behind all of them. Perhaps because of power differences, the wording used by the various directors when speaking during meetings also displays such differences.

The Weaker of the “Strong” Offices

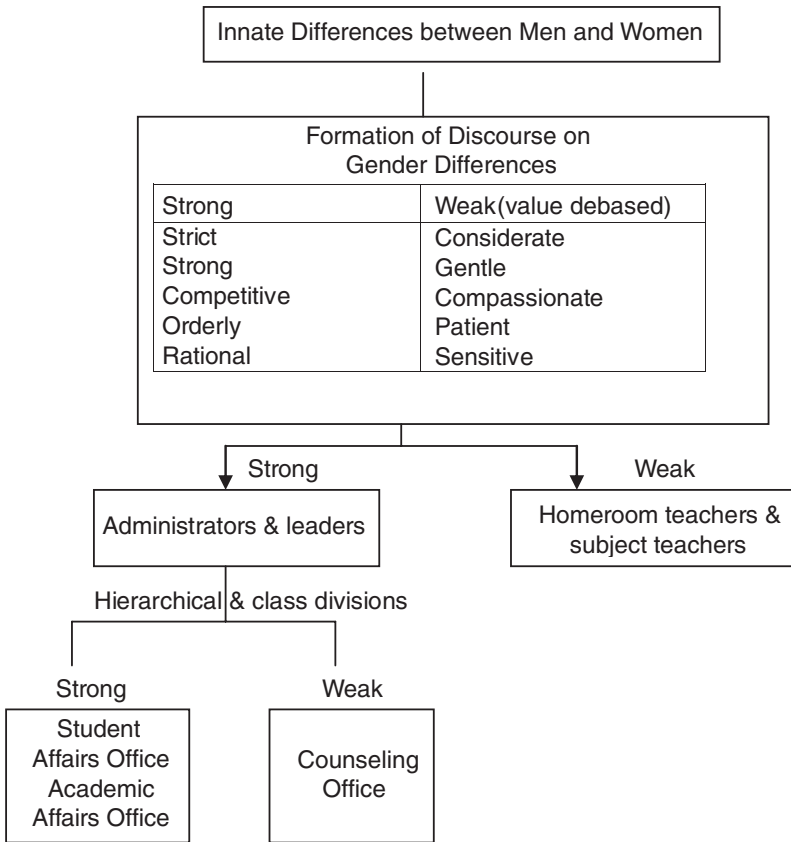
Even the work distributed among strong offices is classified as primarily strong or weak, which constitutes gendered work distribution. Women in the male-dominated offices still find it hard to escape emotional work. The administrators in Yuan Shan’s student affairs office were originally all men. According to a description by “Gray,” the director of student affairs (male), they did things differently due to considerations of the Gender Equity Education Act, but it was only to find a woman to be the deputy head of the behavior section. The meaning behind this practice is worth further discussion. The primary qualification for a woman to be deputy head of the section was her ability to provide emotional work to substitute or supplement the work of the counseling office.

This gender division of labor could be found everywhere at Yuan Shan Junior High School. For example, an administrators’ meeting took place just as the election for county mayor was heating up. The incumbent deputy mayor, who was about to run for mayor, came to “visit” the school along with the PTA president (everyone knew very well that he was really there to campaign). Since the PTA president arrived first, the principal was chairing the meeting, but wanted to leave when the deputy mayor arrived. He asked an administrator to go find a female teacher. Soon afterward, a beautiful female teacher appeared at the conference room door, and the principal said to her, “XXX, you be the communications director today, OK?” (field notes, October 24, 2005). When “Stone,” Yuan Shan’s principal, allocates work, he “has already accounted for the qualities of men and women” (respondent “Lion”). As the principal himself said in an interview, “It is easier for male teachers to promote school activities. Female teachers are softer, so they are . . . kinder when counseling students, coming into contact with them, and taking care of students’ problems.”

Conclusion and Discussion

This research found that a gendered school administration system has shaped the discourse “men are strong and women are weak,” which uses biological differences between men and women and definitions of strong and weak, and then applies ranked value judgments. The gender differences discourse distinguishes between male/strong and female/weak qualities. Characteristics such as strict, strong, competitive, orderly, and rational are labeled “strong,” and are linked to masculinity. By contrast, considerate, gentle, compassionate, patient, and sensitive are labeled “weak” and linked to femininity. These feminine traits are denigrated when “assigning value.” In the course of distinguishing, labeling, and linking these qualities, the “masculine” nature of school administration and leadership work link it to “strong.” The characteristics of teaching work are linked to “weak,” resulting in occupational segregation and producing a hierarchical division between administration and teaching. When any new blood joins the organization, the strong discourse of the school’s culture steers people of different genders in different career directions. The strong/weak distinction

Figure 1. Processes and Technologies for Shaping a Gendered School



appears not only in the divergent administrative/teaching path but also within the administrative system itself. Different offices are accorded strong/weak characteristics, which are linked to gender characteristics, resulting in administrative stratification. Women in “strong” offices find it hard to escape being assigned emotional work. As shown in Figure 1, a gendered, patriarchal school is shaped through the repeated definition of strong versus weak and through the process of linking.

There is inevitable resistance in places of power, but it appears in different forms. Teachers show three types of resistance or defiance toward the strong patriarchal culture of the school. The first is not to respond as a means of expressing opposition, which is practiced by most teachers most of the time. The second is to indirectly and artfully use their “feminine qualities” to negotiate or to “feign weakness” to achieve a purpose. Third, they attempt to demonstrate the strengths of “weakness” itself, taking action to illustrate how a “weak” approach can also achieve a

goal, with potentially better results. The ways that teachers at Yuan Shan Junior High School resist domination have some resemblance to the “arts of resistance” described by James C. Scott (1990).

This exploratory research attempts to tease out possible correlations and models, but the “context of power” and “power of context” may manifest in different ways at different schools, which limits our ability to generalize and make inferences. The school culture explains to some extent the situation of the male leadership at the school, including the administrative culture’s emphasis on masculinity, the discourse on biological differences, the technology of occupational segregation, the stratification between administration and teachers and between offices, and the gendered allocation of work. But the design of the educational administration promotion system itself also requires further examination. Does the system dispare opportunities for women leaders? Is the decision-making process for directors and section heads adverse to women’s qualifications? Who decides? Are the decision-making standards themselves gendered? In addition to the school’s organizational culture, gender education involves its teachers’ understanding of gender equity education policy and practices, the tensions between school innovation and gender policies, and parents’ expectations for student achievement and school performance. It also involves gender relations throughout the larger society, including social expectations of women’s family responsibilities and the frequently negative assessment of women holding power.

We can see here that exploring the correlation between school culture and leadership has policy implications. In recent years, Taiwan’s government has actively attempted to “awaken” teachers’ gender awareness. But in light of this school case study, merely “awakening” is not enough, because only a certain proportion of teachers are awake to begin with. Teacher workshops on the subject may awaken them further, but when nothing can be done about a patriarchal school culture, perhaps it is time to think about the next steps for the gender education policy itself. How can we change the school culture, so that feminist or gender-conscious teachers hidden within such patriarchal schools can use their voices and operate freely? How can we overturn existing school definitions of strong and weak, allowing the school organization to develop a gender-friendly culture rather than a system that reproduces and even further strengthens society’s existing gender relations? These questions will require the careful consideration of policymakers and executives.

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