Beyond the Victim Narrative: How a Dong Minority Elite Woman Constructs Identity Through Cultural Repertoire

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Abstract. In cultural sociology, gender is increasingly less seen as a fixed biological essence but as a highly flexible social construction rooted in symbolic order and cultural memory. Previous research has convincingly shown how people use cultural resources from narratives and rituals to collective memories to make sense of, legitimate, and transform contemporary and traditional gender order. Based on this theoretical insight, this study uses in-depth interviews to explore how Ms. S, an elite Dong woman, builds her egalitarian identity in her life story. The result shows that as a cultural symbol, her egalitarian narrative is well-used by her as a cultural tool to transform mainstream gender bias, to draw ethnic-cultural boundary, and to connect her cross-boundary life experience. Furthermore, the article shows that she is actively building her identity between ethnic identity and mainstream Han society by selectively mobilizing cultural resources. Capturing this case of co-constructed egalitarian identity, the author tries to explore how ethnicity, gender and modernity entangle in contemporary China.

Keywords: Dong women, gender equality, identity, narrative construction, The agency of ethnic minorities.

1. Introduction

"'We should treat sons and daughters equally.' My father, born in 1952 often said this when I was a child. It was not an angry rebuke, but rather a matter of course, a casual line tossed into the fabric of our stories about Dong culture" (Interview with Ms. S, 2025). This is the strand of egalitarian thinking that Ms. S inherited from her lineage.

"Poverty among ethnic minority women in China is distressingly high, with the roots of such conditions lying in weak development opportunities, low levels of social security, and stagnating cultural traditions [1]." Under such circumstances, while the idea that "lifelong educational coverage is an essential component of Chinese-style educational modernization and a key task for overall advancement of educational modernization in ethnic regions" may provide a basic approach to the development of women in ethnic areas [2]. Although social change is playing a key role in shaping gender ideologies], most of the current research focuses on the analysis of macro structural factors, and thus relatively neglects the subjectivity and internal cultural resources that people at the micro level invoke in the face of challenges [3,4]. This paper conducts a reflective study based on an in-depth life history interview with Ms. S, using her as a key case to explore how she proactively utilizes the Dong cultural repository [5]. According to Weber et al., this system of skills, habits, styles, and symbols——to actively construct a powerful narrative of gender equality within mainstream Han society and on the global stage [6]. This narrative functions as a tool of resistance, a boundary-defining mechanism, and an initiative of self-integration, offering fresh perspectives for research on the development of ethnic minority women.

This study employs the theory of "cultural repertoire" proposed by Ann Swidler as the core analytical framework. Swidler believes that culture is not simply a collection of values, but more like a “toolkit” including symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews. Different cultural resources are picked from this toolkit and applied in certain situations to formulate action strategies and sustain a coherent self - identity. This is the same as West and Zimmerman's “doing gender” viewpoint. They believe that gender is socially constructed through people's daily behaviors and responses, and it is essential to recognize social interaction and relational self [7]. Ms. S's recognition of equal narrative

is exactly how she picked some specific symbols of equality (assembles in the Gulou and worship of Sasui) from her ethnic Dong cultural resource base, and then interacted with the family and the external world to use these resources as a tool to cope with the mainstream social gender pressure.

The latter part explains the Dong cultural repository that constitutes the scriptive material of Ms. S. That is, how her family is the socially acceptable interpreter of these cultural resources. Subsequently, this paper analyzes how Ms. S seizes upon this well-prepared script to cope with the world in ways that are simultaneously resistant to gender bias but still culturally distinctive and thus self-integrated, an analysis that also reveals the centrality of personal agency analysis. The concluding section summarizes the core arguments and explains how this study breaks through the inherent victim narrative framework in research on ethnic minority women.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Subject and Case Selection

This discussion is based on a case study of Ms. S (pseudo name). As an ethnic Dong woman, she is selected as the subject because of her unique experience and her engagement in the affairs of her own ethnic group. Ms. S is a ethnic Dong lady who once gained her B.A. and M.A. in architecture in sequence from the best Chinese and British Universities. She is a qualified architect who has stepped into the international stage with rich professional experience and cross-cultural background. She was born in Longsheng Multi-Ethnic Autonomous County of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, known as a land of ethnicities.

Her father and mother are both Dong people. The ancestry of the two can be traced back for 200 or 400 years. They are Dong people who have kept close ties with their native villages. They are relatively successful in their local ethnic community. The reason of selecting Ms.S as a crucial subject is that her experience shows the theoretical aspects in multiple levels: elite education background, career achievement made in male dominated field, and her engagement in Dong culture in global contexts.

2.2. Data Collection and Interview Process

Data collection: This study collected data through life interviews online for around 3 hours. Interviews took place in Hong Kong and Los Angeles. Interviews were recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim for qualitative analysis.Semi-structured interview guide with the following thematic questions.

1. Childhood and Family Education: Investigating early processes of gender socialization, family value formation, and intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge mechanisms

2. Educational Pathways: Exploring the formation of critical educational decisions, learning across diverse academic environments, and the role of family support systems

3. Building Cultural Identity: Exploring individuals' awareness of and participation in Dong cultural activities, such as elements of ritual practice, symbolic expression, and communal relations

4. Occupation and Cross-Cultural Encounters: Record the gender- and ethnicity-based experiences of individuals in different sociocultural contexts, i.e., intercultural individuals contact in Dong ethnic communities, Han dominant mainstream society and international settings.

2.3. Data Analysis

This study adopts thematic analysis method and uses deductive coding based on previous theories of “cultural repertoire" and “doing gender" with inductive coding of related patterns found in life interviews of Ms. S. Through iterative process in analysis of interview transcripts, different levels of invoking, interpreting and utilizing cultural resources in different social and institutional contexts are explored.

3. Strategic Cultural Utilization and the Enactment of Identity in Interaction

The Dong people, an ancient ethnic group in southwest China originating from the rice-cultivating Baiyue peoples, possess a rich cultural heritage, characterized by distinctive social structures and practices that inform Ms. S's egalitarian worldview [8]. She describes a culture in which participatory decision-making and relative gender equality are deeply embedded in everyday life. On one hand, studies show some egalitarian elements, such as women's active involvement in song groups, participation in economic activities and productive labor, as well as matrilineal symbolism in the worship of Sasui. On the other, anthropological texts also show clear patriarchal structures, especially in the public sphere: traditional decision-making is male-dominated, women are usually excluded from important community decisions and most people still practice patrilocal residence after marriage [9].

It is precisely in the presence of this multi-faceted cultural system, both egalitarian and patriarchal in kind, that Ms. S's narrative reveals a definite selectivity. Ms. S's narrative selectively emphasizes the egalitarian aspects while downplaying the patriarchal aspects of her society. She repeatedly invokes Gulou gatherings, which is a common Dong composition where members of a community sit in circles and converse on communal issues and frequent family gatherings as proof of an entrenched custom of equality:" The Dong people used to get together in a Gulou, where members of the community sit in a circle to chat about significant issues. In my family, frequent family gatherings are conducted, occasionally weekly or even daily. It is an entrenched custom of equality in life." (Ms. S, 2025) Within my family, regular family meetings are held. Sometimes they are weekly, sometimes they are every day. This is a habit of equality in our daily life." (Ms. S, 2025) This social mode of communication makes sure that every person has an equal voice, no matter what age or gender they are. Moreover, she also mentions that materials also historically formed a flexible division of labor:“The Dong people live in a special social environment. Usually they live in mountain valleys where labor is limited. In such a situation, the allocation of labor is decided by necessity and not by gender, so they have to cooperate with each other closely, either men and women or the whole community." This selective narration is not a neutral reflection of Dong culture. From a rich repertoire of cultural resources, Ms. S subjectively selects those things, such as the participatory spirit of the Gulou, the matriarchal symbolism of Sasui worship, and the pragmatism of labor allocation, that can serve her values and help her build a tradition of equality. She rearranges these tools to define her identities, aspirations and goals [10]. This selective narration works as a cultural toolkit that helps her define herself and confront gender norms in broader Han dominated society.

The Sasui belief system plays a key role in this process. With many different names such as “Sa'an,” “Damo Tianzi,” or “Damo Popo,” Sasui is considered as the great grandmother or primordial ancestress in Dong cosmology [9]. As Sasui is the highest protective deity, she establishes a cultural paradigm of matriarchal reverence which offers religious legitimisation for gender equality: "I think, in our context, we've kind of been kept under these big mountains for so long, I think it's also related to this kind of feminine-based faith. There is no expectation to be strong or to be weak"(Ms. S, 2025). By creating this particular framing, the religious sphere of spiritual ideology and the secular sphere of practice are seen as mutually reinforcing, constituting a particular conception of gender within Dong culture.

She learned of this gender-equality in interactions with her father, an aspect of interaction established through oral tradition. There was no written Dong script until relatively recently [11]. From a young age, her father engrained these values into her through constant use of the cultural toolkit: “It's wrong if non-locals prefer sons to daughters,"which can be interpreted as having either a son is as valuable as having a daughter. It is through the everyday use of her cultural toolkit that she performs an gender construction. By telling certain stories and invoking certain customs, she constructs and displays a gender identity as an“equal, culturally rooted modern Dong woman"in her interactions with another, which this interaction continually performs.

4. Family as Cultural Intermediary: Modernizing Tradition Through Practice

Ms S's family played the role of interpreters of Dong heritage, the ones who systematically bridged traditional cultural resources and contemporary needs by consciously preserving and modernizing some items from their cultural repertoire ---picking, adapting and applying values such as egalitarianism and collective decision-making for new purposes.

The most obvious expression of this conscious preservation and modernization of cultural traditions lies in the family's education. One clear example is their gender-blind application of the Dong people's principle of “distribution according to need". According to Ms S, "In terms of educational investment, we treat everyone equally. However, if a child has great potential in studies, they will get more. It has nothing to do with girls or boys. It is determined by their academic potential" (2025).

It is an exercise in utilizing cultural resources: the family consciously uses the Dong tradition by extracting it from patriarchal environments and refiguring it as robust tools of her education. Her later inclusion in elite schools is not just a question of personal achievement, but ethnic and gender achievement too -- illustrating the contemporary ethos of self-reliance of the Dong in Han-dominated elite education. The gender roles that her parents wanted her to abide by --"learn to survive anywhere"-- not only made her independent education, but also went contrary to traditional gender roles of dependence.

Family education needs to be placed within a structural context. In geographically isolated ethnic minority communities such as the Dong, traditional education has been a family process for a long time that is considerably different from what takes place in traditional schools in the majority of regions that are majority Han. In this context, the consultative methods used by Ms S's family are similar to the Dong tradition of Gulou assembly: the household has been turned into a cultural space where gender and identity are co-produced through dialogues. Major decisions, such as education or relocation, were reached through guided discussions and collective consensus. Ms. S described this as “deep talk”:“We often sat in a circle, regardless of age or gender, and everyone had a voice. This process had a profound impact on us"(2025). These circle discussions were not ordinary family conversations but active sites for practicing gender construction—where notions of equality were continually enacted, reinforced, and internalized. Through the above interactions, Ms. S is aware of claiming both voice and authority. She is practicing the same skills to step into the academic and professional fields dominated by Han and global in future. Therefore, the family should be seen as the first crucial incubating place where she learned to claim voice and authority and practiced the same skills later and was able to accept and incorporate some items of the Dong cultural repertoire into her own “identity tool kit"so as to claim authority in different cultural contexts and maintain a coherent identity.

5. Agency and Identity Performance: Applying Cultural Repertoires Through Doing Gender

This chapter shows how Ms. S uses agency (the ability to act intentionally and strategically within constraints) to negotiate and construct her identity [12]. Her agency is not only reflected in her acts of resistance but also in her strategic invocation and reconstruction of cultural resources to perform gender identity. That is, by invoking certain traditions, rebuilding family narratives and practicing certain ethnic and gendered behaviors, she built a modern female Dong identity that could be flexibly adapted to different social contexts. Ms. S's strong egalitarian identity endows her with extraordinary agency. She strategically invokes narratives and practices in the cultural repository and is continuously reconstructing her gender identity through her daily actions and presentation in response to external gendered expectations and in resistance to and beyond them, which is a dynamic process of gender practice.

Her first encounter with different gender norms took place when she was a student at Tsinghua University. One male peer declared that he " could not accept his girlfriend eating with male

classmates in the canteen". This assertion clashed profoundly with her Dong-informed knowledge regarding gender relations. Her response "I was very surprised... The concepts of control and gender segregation shocked me so much" (Ms. S, 2025) illustrates not only cognitive dissonance but also an active doing of gender: in rejecting the naturalization of gender segregation, she performed an alternative femininity founded upon autonomy and equality. Rather than incorporating the prejudice, she employed her cultural repertoire as a defensive framework, interpreting such external norms as deviant rather than questioning her own beliefs.

In addition, Ms. S actively utilizes her Dong identity to establish a positive and unique image of herself, by invoking her Dong identity to distinguish from Han majority and other ethnic groups, demonstrating a unique and dignified ethnic subjectivity. In international situations, she actively promotes things such as Gulou gatherings and Sasui worship, and advocates for Dong culture being egalitarian and resilient in nature. As she clarified: "I would introduce our culture... mainly to reveal China's diversity... Then they would know why China can develop as a multi-ethnic country." (Ms. S, 2025). In such narrative actions, she not only resists essentialist stereotypes but also sets the terms of performing gender and ethnicity conjuncturally—creating a modern, articulate, and assertive identity that commands respect.

Finally, her cultural repertoire is an integrative resource in the sense that she can easily combine Dong traditions and her professional architectural training. Her design philosophy is consciously based on Dong collective and spatial practices: "I emphasize public space (the Gulou), public affairs (matters discussed therein), and the consensus-building mechanism (the process of reaching consensus in the Gulou).". These are inextricably intertwined with Dong architecture and social culture" (Ms. S, 2025). She transcends narrow technical roles to take a holistic approach from conceptualization to people gathering together—a philosophy echoing the Dong people's deference to process and participation. This doing of gender is expressed in her professional practice. She is, in her professional practice, constantly interpreting and re-creating her identity and translating indigenous communal values into a universal language.

This strategic move allows her to negotiate different social and geographical circumstances. From the villages of Dong to the world cities, she turns her cultural heritage into an empowering instead of a confining force. Through long and contextualized action Ms. S not only exists but also constructs and performs it by invoking certain patterns and resources of culture. This effective integration allows her to move from the Dong villages to Beijing, London and Los Angeles with ease, converting cultural background into unique cultural and professional resources rather than a handicap in development. In this process of long-term and contextualized actions Ms. S not only possesses a given identity but also constructs and enacts it. And her life story shows cultural identity to be no brake on advancement but an platform for agency and a source of cultural innovation. A quantum leap forward this is from stereotyped "victim" narrative scripts.

6. Conclusion

This research shows that Ms. S's egalitarian identity was not passively received but actively constructed through prolonged gender practices. This identity was rooted in certain cultural resources from the Dong tradition, such as the patterns of activities at drum tower gatherings, labor practices based on need-based division of labor, and the Saisui belief system. These resources were selectively interpreted and modernized through her family's education, participatory parenting and guidance. Ms. S invokes this cultural tool in order to navigate social spaces, resist gender biases, reassert ethnic identity and incorporate cross-boundary experiences.

This study uses a cultural sociological perspective to reframe gender issues in a “victim narrative" into one showing how ethnic minority women, as agents, construct their belonging and achievement in a mainstream world flexibly using cultural resources. This study suggests that academic communities should move from a “deficit paradigm” (focusing on external forces degrading subject agency) to a “resource paradigm" (focusing on subject agency and using cultural

resources). The study also suggests that identity is a strategic outcome formed through a negotiated construction between subjects. Using Ms. S as an example, she feels her self-identification is affirmed along two lines: one, using gendered strategies employed in the family that are always recognized; and two, continuously interpreting, defending, and reconstituting her personal narrative when facing others' differences. Her experience shows that ethnicity, gender, and modernity are not fixed, but instead traditional resources were purposefully used in a contemporary context. Her situation maps the dynamic tension among ethnicity, gender, and modernity, and how the traditional resources are utilized strategically to address the issues of contemporary times.

As a single-case study, this research has certain limitations. Ms. S was from a family with privileged economic circumstances, high parental values, and continued cultural transmission. Her experiences, including private school education, elite university attendance, and international mobility，strongly impacted her acquisition and use of cultural capital. This is not the case with all Dong or other ethnic minority families. Therefore, the results of this study are not directly applicable. The subsequent research could contrast gender identity construction among various ethnic minority groups, explore gender analysis from the point of view of cultural sociology in greater depth, or employ longitudinal follow-up to examine how women of various socioeconomic backgrounds from Dong utilize cultural resources across various life stages. It would enhance our understanding regarding subjectivity in the converging domains of ethnicity, gender, and class and offer more precise points of reference for theory development as well as policy making.

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