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Cultural Gatekeeping: The Role of Oriental Superstitions in Limiting Women's Access to the Technology

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the reduction effect of the Oriental cultural superstition, women's bodily normality, and body's normative conception on women's access to technologies in East Asian societies. Male gendered norms are often the embodiment of culture's functions that systematically exclude one from male spheres which are the paradigm of the active element (technology). As a representative instance of such norms, females in Oriental culture are assigned to the passive, nurturing part (Yin), in contrast to the masculine aggressive and rationality (Yang). This body's subjectification is a deeper commonality of Western and Eastern phallocentric traditions. The passive and fragile nature of women has been superstitiously as well as philosophically believed to be linked to the natural world rather than technical or mechanical fields. An embodied practice in hazardous locations is that women are not supposed to sit on the box of equipment, which represents one of those superficial ideas of women regarding a specific configuration of organisms and technology—the tool box.

The absence of women's bodies on this object does not only simply formulate the norms; it bears the otherness of women and maintains the myths of the danger of the cooperation between the two organisms gifted with opposite natures. This built-up of the traditional myth is developed to be a barrier for women to get into the technical field. As such, superstitions, beliefs, and social norms are not only the cause of women's under-representation in technology; they are also the tools to create psychological, physical, and institutional barriers for women to access technology. This research aims to understand the roots of the problem and to suggest a better future for women.

1 Introduction

Technology is often described as a universal tool—an ostensibly neutral mechanism that shapes and is shaped

by modern life. In principle, the development of technology is meant to transcend categories of gender, class, and culture, enabling society-wide benefits for

all who engage with it. However, a growing body of research suggests that technology spaces are not as universally accessible as they appear. Instead, cultural traditions, deep-seated superstitions, and pervasive biases can operate as systematic barriers to entry for historically excluded groups—including women. In East Asian contexts, one such barrier involves long-standing Oriental superstitions, particularly those informed by yin-yang theory, that label women as “fragile,” “unfit,” or “unlucky” in technical or mechanically oriented environments.[1] This study investigates the phenomenon of cultural gatekeeping—the ways in which traditional beliefs and narratives restrict women’s access to technological fields[2]. Although technology itself need not discriminate, the social, cultural, and institutional frameworks around it often do. For instance, in some performance or production settings in East Asia, it is considered taboo for women to sit on equipment boxes (also called a apple box). The logic behind this taboo may be vague, but the superstition persists, reinforcing an exclusionary message that certain technical spaces or tasks are reserved for men. Similarly, cultural concepts of a “weak female body” or “female dampness” have been used to rationalize the exclusion of women from engineering environments. Beyond anecdotal practices, empirical data underscores that cultural biases have real effects on women’s representation in technical fields. According to a UN-led campaign and other global workforce reports, women are still grossly underrepresented in STEM areas. This under-representation is not merely an outcome of personal choices or educational pathways; instead, systemic cultural factors—reinforced by superstitions or biases—push women away from these opportunities. The social stigma attached to technical tasks for women is also echoed in remarks like “girls might break the equipment,” or “too much yin energy spoils the machines,” effectively rationalizing exclusionary practices[3]. Such beliefs do not only impact women’s self-confidence and career decisions but also shape institutional norms. Over time, these cultural myths coalesce, creating a self-perpetuating cycle in which fewer women enter the field, fewer role models exist to challenge the misconceptions, and biased attitudes remain unchallenged[4].

2 Historical Background

2.1 Historical Development of Yin-Yang Theory and Gender Interpretations

The yin-yang concept is a fundamental pillar of ancient Chinese philosophy, initially referring to interdependent forces in nature that cycle, complement one another, and create balance. Yin corresponds to elements considered to be cool, dark, or passive; yang corresponds to warmth, brightness, and activity[5]. In principle, neither side is inherently superior; the two energies flow into each other in an ongoing dance of equilibrium. However, as Confucian and later Neo-Confucian thought gained influence, the yin-yang concept was recontextualized in ways that often reinforced male authority and female subordination. Philosophers like Dong Zhongshu (2nd century BCE) welded yin-yang theory to a strict social hierarchy, positing that “male is to yang as female is to yin” and equating yang with strength, rationality, and leadership, whereas yin became associated with weakness, emotion, and nurturing. Over centuries, this conflation of cosmic principle with social norms ingrained deeply into many aspects of East Asian culture[6]. It makes the mainstream assimilation often correlated female identity with “inferiority” or “passivity”.

2.2 Superstition and the “Weak Female Body” Narrative

In tandem with yin-yang interpretations, various folk beliefs and superstitions emerged around the idea that a woman’s body carried a special kind of “negative energy”. Traditional medical texts at times suggested that women’s physiology was prone to “dampness” or “fragility,” inadvertently fueling a lasting assumption that women were unsuited for strenuous or high-risk tasks[7]. Within historically agrarian and patriarchal societies, these beliefs were manageable in domestic contexts. However, when carried forward into modern-day technologies—think advanced electronics, heavy machinery, or complex software systems—these same stereotypes become a potent cultural barrier. One prominent example is the taboo in certain film or music engineering settings: women are discouraged from sitting on the “apple box,” an equipment crate used on set. The taboo, though not universal, is reported enough to garner attention from female interns who are cautioned or reprimanded if they inadvertently break it.

Such small acts can become powerful signals: “equipment belongs to men”. This phenomenon illustrates how superstition can morph into cultural gatekeeping, preventing women from feeling wholly accepted or trained in tech roles. Even in technologically advanced economies, there are intangible cultural gatekeepers who continue to use ideas of a “weak female body” or “unlucky female presence” to sideline women[8]. Over time, these beliefs get systematized into real consequences: fewer women admitted into technical majors, fewer leadership roles assigned, and persistent wage and status gaps.

3 Contemporary Phenomenon

In contemporary media-technology fields, a persistent pattern of gatekeeping continues to shape women’s experiences. An striking example is the taboo surrounding women sitting on a piece of standard equipment on set - commonly referred to as the ‘apple box’ or ‘equipment box’. According to a handful of production staff interviewed for this study, women are advised against sitting on this box because it is ‘too close to their vagina’, which is considered a site of ‘yin’ and ‘wet’ energies. Some, in turn, believe that these energies are detrimental both to the equipment and the overall ‘luck’ of production.

As one senior cinematographer from Guangzhou put it, “It’s not something we talk about loudly, but everyone knows: a woman’s body carries more dampness, and the equipment must stay ‘pure’. If a girl sits on the box, it might bring us bad luck.” Although such a statement appears blatantly superstitious, its impact is tangible. Junior female crew members often feel uneasy, even embarrassed, trying to find a place to rest between long production, lest they break this unspoken rule. The taboo effectively marginalizes women by signaling that certain aspects of physical comfort or convenience are off-limits to them.

Through interviews with a group of women who had initially pursued majors in media technology (with particular emphasis on audio engineering or film production) in various Chinese universities, it became evident that many changed their career trajectories. Some were told it was ‘too physically demanding’, while others were warned: ‘You should take care of your body: too many late nights and heavy lifting will harm your health’. One respondent, who preferred to be identified

as Summer, recalled how she was continually discouraged by older male mentors who said, “Skills like these are traditionally passed down to men, not to women”. You might pick up some basics, but you’ll never keep up with the demands of a real studio.”[9]

This tradition is historically tied to certain apprenticeships in fields like martial arts or fine craftsmanship, where knowledge was jealously guarded and inherited through male lines[10]. Another woman, Ran, recalled how excited she was about pursuing audio engineering. However, after repeated remarks like, “Don’t strain yourself by moving heavy speakers,” she gradually lost her confidence. “They made me feel like I was biologically incapable,” she said. “Eventually, I realized that every small aspect of the job—lifting stands, connecting cables, even setting up microphones at certain heights—was deemed too tiring for a woman.”[11]

Several interviewees mentioned that their professors or peers suggested “more suitable” paths, such as art management etc, portraying these as “logical” moves for women. “I was told by my department head that I had better switch to an art-management track before it was too late,” recalled Xin[12]. Over time, these repeated micro-messages morphed into internalized barriers: women began to doubt whether they truly belonged in hands-on technical roles. The social stigma around “overly strenuous” work for women contributed directly to them either dropping out of these programs or completing the degree only to never seriously pursue a career in the field.

4 Discussions

By systematically shunting women into “soft career fields,” production companies and creative industries miss out on innovative perspectives. The taboo around the apple box—representing the broader perception of the female body as “yin and wet”—functions as a potent symbol of ongoing gatekeeping. Many students end up pivoting to art management, art education, or similarly perceived “lighter” roles, underscoring how deeply these views affect individual life choices. Far from being a simple misunderstanding, these beliefs reflect an entrenched narrative: that women’s bodies and energies are unsuited to the intensity and precision of technical work. The result is not merely a few isolated incidents but a consistent pattern of career redirection away from areas where women’s creative and technical talents might flourish.

Yet Chinese history and mythology contain numerous examples of powerful women who both challenge and subvert the notion that the female body is too “delicate” or “unlucky” for innovation. Nüwa, the primordial goddess who mended the heavens, stands as an archetype of female ingenuity and creation—her story is fundamentally about “fixing” and “building,” acts that symbolize technological know-how. Similarly Hua Mulan, though most famous for her martial prowess, stands as a cultural reference point for challenging male-dominated spaces; the story of her disguising herself as a man to serve in the army underscores the artificiality of rigid gender divisions in traditionally male spheres[13].

Beyond myth, more historical examples also exist. Empress Wu Zetian—the only woman in Chinese history to assume the title of Emperor—promoted advancements in print technology and governance structure.[14]. Ban Zhao, an early female historian and scholar, exemplifies intellectual contributions by women in classical times, defying the stereotype that women’s “yin” disqualifies them from rigorous inquiry or leadership in scholastic endeavors[15]. While many of these stories and figures carry their own historical complexities, they remind us that the assumption of women’s unsuitability for serious, technical, or physically demanding work is hardly consistent with the more inclusive undercurrents of Chinese cultural heritage.

Ultimately, normalizing these powerful female figures in popular discourse—just as the cautionary superstitions have become normalized—could inspire a more inclusive environment. This cultural shift would allow more women to remain in media technology, unconstrained by whispered rules about “bad luck” or “fragility.” In this way, the continuity of female invention becomes a compelling rejoinder to the superstitions that still lurk on set, providing a potent cultural counter-narrative that asserts a woman’s rightful place in every sphere of technological practice.

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