

## Canadian Chinese Adolescent Girls' Gender Roles and Identities

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**Abstract:** An autovideography approach was used to investigate the gender role and identity perceptions of ten adolescent Chinese girls in Vancouver. They were asked to take 20 photos in a week from the media that could illustrate “what women should or should not be and what women should or should not do”. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted discussing their choices. Six dominant themes emerged related to appearance, personality, work, family, interests and health. The results reveal that the interviewees aspired to be active in managing their body image, family and career. They valued financial independence and pursuing their dreams. They emphasized a woman's right to work and aspired to balance work and family. They showed little enthusiasm for the traditional Chinese female characteristics of gentleness and submissiveness.

**Keywords:** Adolescence, media consumption, gender roles, autovideography, China, Canada, women's studies, feminism

### 1. Introduction

Adolescents from one culture who have emigrated to another face particular challenges and difficulties. Ethnic identity crisis is an important issue that immigrant adolescents need to solve. In globalization theory, hybridization has been the concept used to describe the interplay of the global and the local, the modern and the traditional, as well as the symbolic and the material in today's more global landscape (Durham, 2004). For emigrant females, sexuality is often a focus of power and active agency among the conflicting values they must deal with (Durham, 2004). Recent studies of immigrant girls in the United States have found that they experience tension because of the different expectations imposed on them by mainstream America and by their families (Espiritu, 2001; Pyke & Johnson, 2003). The girls themselves were found to be dissatisfied with the sexualized images of girls portrayed in popular American media (Durham, 2004). The second generation of immigrants, who are mainly children and adolescents, feel the sometimes-conflicting pressures of ethnic and mainstream cultures (Pyke & Johnson, 2003). Gender role conflict can be generated because of disparities between the ethnic and mainstream worlds (Zhou and Bankston, 1998). How, then, do immigrant adolescent girls and the daughters of immigrants perceive their gender roles and identities? Ethnic identity development is especially important during adolescence (Phinney, 1989). In fact, little is known about how immigrant adolescent girls and the daughters of immigrants perceive their gender roles in today's media-saturated world.

In this study, auto-videography (collections of visual images) was used to investigate Canadian Chinese adolescent girls' perceptions and interpretation of gender roles and identities based on the media images they consume. The study was designed to discover (1) What do

adolescent girls in Canada who have immigrated from China and those who are the daughters of immigrants think about what women should be or should not be? and (2) What behavior do they think appropriate or inappropriate for women? The questions were posed using an auto-videography approach involving the presentation of collections of visual images. This technique is able to reveal insights which are unlikely to be obtained by other means (Flick, 2007). The findings have implications for gender and media researchers who are concerned about girls' negotiation of their gender identities and for marketers emphasizing gender appeals.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Identity Development in Adolescence**

Learning about masculinity (for boys) and femininity (for girls) during adolescence is crucial for preventing identity confusion and role diffusion problems (Erikson, 1963, 1968). Sex is a biological and physical phenomenon, but gender is a psychological and sociological construct which is an important element of identity formation during adolescence (Rice & Dolgin, 2005). Religion, culture and society in general influence individuals during adolescence to learn to behave appropriately based on their biological sex (Bem, 1993). Boys are encouraged to be assertive, dominant and independent; girls should be sympathetic, gentle and understanding (Bem, 1993). It is essential for adolescents to form a healthy and fully developed gender identity, and they do it through a process of exploration and commitment (Erikson, 1963, 1968).

The socialization and cognitive approaches are the current focus of theory and debate in the field of gender development (Zosuls, Miller, Ruble, Martin & Fabes, 2011). The two approaches differ in the degree to which they emphasize the role of the social environment in learning of gender roles. The socialization approach emphasizes how children interpret the messages of socializing agents such as parents and peers. The cognitive approach stresses the cognitive information-processing mechanisms involved in observational learning (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Ruble, Martin & Berenbaum, 2006). Both approaches, however, emphasize on the forming of children's behavior to fit the cultural norms of gender roles (Bandura & Bussey, 2004; Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

For immigrant and second generation adolescents, learning roles and identities can become a complicated process. According to Phinney's (1989) theory of ethnic identity development, adolescents do so in three stages. In the first stage—unexamined ethnic identity—adolescents have untested positive or negative perceptions of their own ethnic group. Phinney's second stage is ethnic identity search, when adolescents have started to discover the meaning of being a group member. In the last stage—achieved ethnic identity—the adolescent has formed a clear meaning for his or her ethnicity. Research has shown that collective self-esteem as a member of an ethnic group increases during adolescence (French, Seidman, Allen & Aber, 2006).

### **2.2. Cultural Influences on Gender Roles and Identities**

The formation of gender roles and ethnic identities among Chinese girls are of course affected by Chinese culture. China's male-centered society is still deeply influenced by Confucian

thinking. The female intellectual Ban Zhao wrote *Lessons for Women* three thousand years ago emphasizing “three obediences and four virtues” for girls and women, and her influence is still felt today. The three obediences mandate that a woman should obey her father as a daughter, obey her husband as a wife, and obey her son in widowhood. The four virtues for females emphasize that a woman should know her social status and behave according to the appropriate social norms; she should speak softly and politely; she should have a humble manner; and she should do housework diligently (Lee, 2000). Such feminine subservience is reinforced by Chinese traditions of ancestor worship, filial piety, and patrilineage (Li-hsiang, 2006).

Confucianism still has enormous impact on the lives of Chinese, and its beliefs and customs of it are still valued in mainland China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, and among Chinese throughout East Asia (Ko, 2004). As a result, other cultures often view Asian women as hyper-feminine, passive, quiet and excessively submissive (Espiritu, 1997). Eastern females in turn perceive western females as disturbingly assertive and independent (Pyke & Johnson, 2003). It is only in recent decades that Asians have come to accept that females nowadays should have education and career opportunities to pursue a better life and freedom (Kim, 2010).

This great cultural difference can lead adolescent girls of Asian heritage living in Western countries to experience conflicting gender expectations. An interview study of 100 second-generation Korean and Vietnamese girls and young adults in the United States has shown that they often constructed a trans-racial gender identity (Pyke & Johnson, 2003). Some interviewees thought that they were not really Asian because they were independent, assertive, and career-oriented. They perceived themselves as active and self-confident Americans rather than as passive and submissive Asians (Pyke & Johnson, 2003). Some of the interviewees reported being able to change personalities as they moved between ethnic and mainstream contexts (Pyke & Johnson, 2003).

### **2.3. Perceptions of Media Representations of Gender Roles and Ethnic Identities**

The mass media are an important socio-cultural factor in adolescent girls’ identity construction (Currie, 1999; Durham, 1999). Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore (1994) conducted a content analysis of U.S. magazine advertisements and found that about half of them presented either a trendy, a classic, or an exotic type of female beauty. And previous research has of course documented that the media portray women as sex objects when aiming to draw the attention of men (Wolin, 2003). According to communication theories such as Gerbner, Gross and Morgan’s (2002) cultivation theory and Brown’s (2002) social learning theory, after repeated exposure an audience starts to accept media portrayals as representing the real world. For example, women’s magazines suggest ways of thinking about the self and propose certain desirable lifestyles. Their readers may then actively use that content in establishing their sense of identity (Gauntlett, 2008). A meta-analysis of experimental and correlational research has shown that exposure to media portrayals of thin women as ideal induces body dissatisfaction among women (Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008).

Chan and her colleagues’ research group has conducted a series of qualitative studies using an auto-videography approach to investigate how pre-adolescent and adolescent girls in Hong Kong evaluate female images in the media and how they perceive their gender roles and ethnic

identities. Hong Kong can be considered a media saturated city, and girls there are exposed to the internet, television, magazines, newspapers, outdoor billboards and indoor posters (Chan, Tufte, Cappello & Williams, 2011). Studies have confirmed that they pay attention to media portrayals of females, and those portrayals usually present a skinny body, perfect skin and a perfect face (Chan, 2011a; Chan, Ng, & Williams, 2012b). Many of the interviewees criticized the female images portrayed in media as inactive, too sexy, unnatural and unrealistic. They said their ideal female image combines the traditional female roles of presentable, gentle and caring with the modern ideals of independent and equal (Chan, 2011a; Chan et al., 2012b). The adolescent girls surveyed also professed to be inspired by media celebrities who are intelligent, self-confident and achieving (Chan, 2011b). However, when teenage girls were asked to show what girls and women should be and should do based on the media-portrayed females, very few interviewees expressed strong educational and career aspirations (Chan et al., 2012b). The researchers attributed that response to a lack of portrayals of professional women in the media (Chan & Cheng, 2012). The interviewees were also found to hold conservative attitudes toward sexuality, demonstrated by their disapproval of girls and women in the media wearing sexy clothes (Chan et al., 2011).

Young and middle-aged women who migrated to England from China, Japan, and South Korea expressed that life is under the eyes of society in their home countries. Education guarantees nothing because of work inequality, and there is social pressure for women to get married and have children before 30 years old. Women are considered as a personal failure if they cannot fulfill the society expectations in their home countries (Kim, 2010). However, they commented that women in the media such as *Sex and the City* are able to live out their dreams. These women in the media are not expected to make self-sacrifice for the family. Their lives are free that they enjoy their life after age 35, which is not possible in their own countries (Kim, 2010). Exposure to the media has influenced a changing sense of self and attitudes toward work and marriage among females (Kim, 2010). Another study has shown that South Asian girls in the U.S. were conscious of the unreality in the media. They felt that their life experiences were not the same as the media representations of adolescence (Durham, 2004). Many of Durham's interviewees still perceived themselves as Indian and not as American. For example, they consumed both Indian and American media such as music and movies, but they did not want to consume alcohol or have pre-marital sex as those portrayed in the American media ostensibly do (Durham, 2004).

A review of the literature reveals that there have been few studies of the perspectives of Canadian Chinese adolescent girls and of how they make sense of the popular culture and media images they encounter in their everyday life. Furthermore, the current debates make little reference to specific visual media images that adolescents rely on in the formation of their gender roles and identities.

## 2.4. Theoretical Framework

According to the socialization and cognitive approaches, the formation of children's behavior is influenced by their culture's gender role norms (Bandura & Bussey, 2004; Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Media representation helps communicate those norms, which leads the audience to

accept media portrayals as representations of real life (Brown, 2002). This study was designed to examine how Canadian Chinese adolescent girls interpret the gender roles and identities presented in Canadian media.

## 2.5. Research Objectives

This study was designed to extend these enquiries to Chinese adolescent girls living in Canada. The Chinese constitute the largest group of new immigrants to Canada in recent decades (Statistics Canada, 2009). Do immigrant girls and the second generation of immigrants with a Chinese background value the traditional female gentleness and submissiveness, or do they endorse modern Canadian gender roles with their greater equality and independence? Are their perceptions of the gender roles and identities portrayed in the media different from those of adolescent girls in Hong Kong? This has been the first study to examine Canadian Chinese immigrant girls' perceptions of gender roles and ethnic identities using an auto-videography approach.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Interviewees

Eight adolescent girls who had emigrated from China and two who were born in Canada were interviewed. All had lived in Canada for at least five years. Their ages ranged from 15 to 18 years ( $M = 16.2$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ). Three interviewees were in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, one was in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, four were in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and the remaining one was in her second year of university. Their years of residence in Canada ranged from five to seventeen ( $M = 10.8$ ,  $SD = 4.9$ ). The interviewees' demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Interviewees

Name	Age	Grade	Years in Canada
Allison	15	11	Ten
Bonnie	18	12	Five
Chris	17	12	Born in Canada
Elisa	15	10	Eight
Gigi	18	Yr 2 in University	Fifteen
Joyce	17	12	Born in Canada
Monica	15	10	Five
Rachel	17	12	Five and a half
Sheila	15	10	Ten
Tina	15	10	Ten and a half

*Note:* Pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality.

### 3.2. Procedures

Interviewees were recruited through snowballing among a Chinese Christian church community in Vancouver, yielding a non-probabilistic sample (Berg & Lune, 2012). The church was located in suburban Vancouver and had about 100 to 120 regular attendees. Most of the members were first and second generation Chinese immigrants. The church offers services in English, Mandarin and Cantonese. Each interviewee was asked to find other Chinese adolescent girls to participate in the study, generating a chain of interviewees based on referrals (Berg & Lune, 2012). Due to the lack of any standard sampling frame, snowballing was regarded as the most appropriate sampling approach in view of the study's exploratory nature (Creswell, 2003). Informed consent was obtained from each interviewee's parents before the interview. The parents were informed that the study was about the perception of female gender roles. The interviewees themselves were assured about confidentiality and informed of their rights in the study. Each interviewee received C\$15 (approx. US\$15) for participating. The interviews were conducted in the summer of 2011 in Vancouver.

The study protocol adopted an auto-videography approach combined with individual interviews (Belk & Kozinets, 2005). Each interviewee was instructed as follows:

On each day, please take 4 to 5 digital pictures of images from any media that are about *what girls should be or should not be, and what girls should do or should not do*; and another 4 to 5 digital pictures of images from any media [sic] that are about *what women should be or should not be, and what women should do or should not do*. Please keep these images into two separate folders, named girls and women respectively. These messages can come from all sorts of media, including newspapers, magazines, outdoor posters, television programs, on subways or buses, web sites, books and so on. The media should be the one you will expose to [sic] or sometimes use in your daily lives. The media can be aiming at people like you or aiming at people who are different from you. You are required to do this every day for 5 days. At the end, we'll invite you to come to a place to download your pictures on to our computers.

The approach was used because the resulting collections of visual images can reveal insights unobtainable by other means (Flick, 2007). As photographers the subjects are more self-directive and spontaneous, showing what they are interested in and what is crucial to them instead of what may be of interest to the researcher (Belk & Kozinets, 2005). It can lead us to see the world as the interviewees see it and to better understand what they want to tell us (Mizen, 2005). The interviewees can explain the images selected in the subsequent individual interviews (Belk & Kozinets, 2005). This study focused on how the interviewees interpret the visual images they had collected. As a result, the photos were analyzed not by the authors, but by the interviewees themselves. And taking photos is an integral part of contemporary life for today's youth. The semi-structured interviews were conducted after the photo taking.

The questions are shown in the Appendix, but they were used flexibly to allow the interviewers to answer beyond the scope of the prepared, standardized questions and to allow the interviewer to probe for fuller responses with regard to the respondent's opinions and feelings



(Berg & Lune, 2012). The interviews were conducted in English—half by one of the authors and half by a trained Chinese Canadian female graduate student serving as a research assistant. The interviewees reviewed the photos they had taken and interpreted the images one by one. The interviews lasted 20 to 51 minutes ( $M = 31.8$ ,  $SD = 8.28$ ). All together the interviewees collected 405 photos. The number of photos taken by an individual interviewee ranged from 16 to 51 ( $M = 40.5$ ,  $SD = 10.0$ ). Although one interviewee failed to take the required minimum of 20 photos, her responses were still analyzed and she received the promised compensation. All of the interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed by a research assistant. The transcripts were proofread by the interviewers. The 318 minutes of interviews and 405 photos provided data sufficient to allow insightful generalization.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

The researchers reviewed the transcripts multiple times to familiarize themselves with the data. The constant comparative method was then applied in the analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). The constant comparative method aims at developing a ground theory and then applying it in order to generate meaningful categories by systematically exploring and investigating the phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The interviewees' images and interview comments were first sorted into the "*what girls should be or should not be, and what girls should do or should not do*" category and the "*what women should be or should not be, and what women should do or should not do*" category. Only the analysis of the "*what women should be or should not be, and what women should do or should not do*" category is reported here.

From the initial comparisons of what girls and women should or should not, contrasts between themes were discovered. Appearance, Personality, Work, Family, Interests, and Health were the key themes in interviewees' discussions of gender roles. Interview transcripts were subsequently coded for discussion of *Appearance* (e.g., the interviewees' discussions of similarities or differences between girls and women's body images, clothes, and makeup), *Personality* (the interviewees' attitudinal, behavioral, and emotional responses about girls and women), *Work* (e.g., work and skills), *Family* (e.g., having family and children), *Interests* (e.g., having dreams and hobbies), and *Health* (e.g., healthy eating, smoking, and drinking). Following procedures of the constant comparative analysis, negative cases were then searched to identify exceptions to the general themes. The themes were modified and developed when necessary. The excluded cases were then returned to the themes to conduct more comparisons (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Notes were constructed, discussed, and refined based on the themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The processes of data analysis were stopped when new themes ceased to exist in qualitative research (Charmaz, 2006). Finally, 12 themes were generated summarizing the six categories. Only the six themes of the "*what women should be or should not be, and what women should do or should not do*" category are discussed here. The other six themes related to the "*what girls should be or should not be, and what girls should do or should not do*" category will be analyzed in another paper. Quotes representing the themes were then chosen.

The trustworthiness of the data in such qualitative research can be expressed in terms of its reliability, credibility, confirmability and transferability (Shenton, 2004). The themes were

coded twice by two trained coders working independently. The inter-coder reliability was 0.90 for the “*what women should be or should not be, and what women should do or should not do*” category. That exceeds the level of 0.80 generally accepted as indicating useful reliability (Krippendorff, 2004). The credibility of the categorizations arises from the coders’ prolonged engagement with the data during which each interview transcript was read several times. In addition, the results are congruent with those of previous research (Chan et al., 2011; Chan et al., 2012b). The detailed description of the interviewees, the procedures and the techniques of data reduction and analysis make the results confirmable.

#### **4. Results**

Altogether six themes emerged. They will be discussed individually with supporting quotations from the interviews. The quotations have been edited for clarity and readability. Pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality, but the interviewees’ ages and years in Canada are reported in Table 1.

##### **4.1. Theme 1: Appearance**

Overall, when talking about what women should be or should not be and what they should do or should not do, the interviewees’ descriptions centered on body image, clothing and makeup. They thought that women should have a positive attitude toward their body shape and appearance. Wearing sexy clothes was not considered appropriate for women because the girls felt it is not appropriate to be seductive. They expressed the view that women can wear light makeup, but should not enjoy wearing heavy makeup.

Four interviewees mentioned body image when talking about gender roles. All expressed the view that females should accept their existing body image. One interviewee showed a photo of a group of girls (Figure 1) and said,

Since they all look different, women should have different body sizes. This one is short and this one is tall, so women should be different. (Sheila, age 15)





Figure 1<sup>1</sup>. A Group of Girls with Different Body Sizes.

She was emphasizing the individual differences in body size. Chris (age 17) discussed the media influences on individuals' perceptions of their own body image. She showed a picture of a thin girl looking into a mirror and perceiving herself as fat. She expressed the opinion that the prevalence of skinny female images in the media has a strong impact on women's perceptions of their own bodies. She also commented that women should not be influenced by the media or celebrities, and should be happy about their existing body image.

This is like a body image. I think this effect is from the media, you should be displayed or acting like a certain way. She's looking into a mirror thinking that "why do I look so fat and not like them on the TV or in the movie." (Interviewer: Why do the TV and the media always portray thin women?) I guess it's just everywhere, even where you go, when you look in the magazines, or books or ads at the Skytrain station or bus station. It kind of affects the women's mind, thinking that. "Oh she's so beautiful; I want to be like her too." I think there're just a lot of negatives.  
(Chris, age 17)

Others felt similarly.

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<sup>1</sup> The image was taken by one of the informants from a magazine or newspaper. The informant did not record the source of the image. The editors assert Fair Use "for purposes such as criticism, comment [...], scholarship, or research" under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, Section 7.

Watching your weight is important for women. Most of them are too concerned about it. I know how when you're a celebrity, it's really important to have an ideal body image, but they overdo it sometimes. It's hard to control but we shouldn't be too obsessed of our weight. We should have a healthy body image because I've seen so many anorexic or bulimic celebrities like Demi Lovato got into rehab because she was bulimic. She already looks really good. I don't think she should have that kind of problems.  
(Rachel, age 17)

In this quote, she was aware that an ideal body might be important for some female celebrities, but felt that should not apply to the general public. She showed pity for female celebrities who went too far and became victims in achieving a perfect body shape.

Five interviewees discussed what types of clothing women should wear. Among them, four stated that women should not wear sexy and revealing clothing. One felt wearing revealing clothes would encourage males to take advantage of her.

I don't think they should wear suggestive clothing because that's not being responsible of themselves. They are not respecting themselves. They shouldn't try to seduce men.  
(Elisa, age 15)

Another respondent based the same idea on her religious beliefs:

Recently, clothes are showing more and more skin. That's not really appropriate. I think that because I go to church and we're supposed to cover up and stuff. For people that don't go to church, it might be okay with them. Because everybody is told that they have to look good in the presence of God, so you can't wear really skanky clothes.  
(Sheila, age 15)

One interviewee addressed the differences between what girls and women should wear. She opined that girls can wear something unisex. When they grow up, as a woman they should no longer dress like men. She did not specify, however, what type of clothes women should wear.

Personal opinion, I think it's okay for girls to be tomboys but I think women should not dress like men. Girls being tomboys is like a part of them exploring themselves and who they are, but when they reach a certain age or somewhere along the way, they should know what they are really like. So they shouldn't dress like men anymore. (Interviewer: What would you say that age be like?) I don't know, I still don't know very much about myself so maybe when I get into university and see how big the world is and get a sense of what they should be.  
(Rachel, age 17)

Two interviewees mentioned that women should not wear heavy makeup. Here is one typical quote.

Too much make up. It's OK for woman to wear makeup but there has to be a limit. She's wearing way too much make up. It seems to me that she needs make up to make herself feel good. So it's like relying too much on other things.  
(Rachel, age 17)

#### 4.2. Theme 2: Personality

Instead of focusing on outer beauty, interviewees stressed the inner beauty of women. They said women should be independent, caring and polite, but that contemporary women should know how to take care of themselves and should not depend on men. At the same time, they valued traditional Asian virtues such as having a polite manner.

Women should be independent. That one just shows these guys holding drinks to her and she's turning her back on them because she doesn't need them in her life (Figure 2). She just needs to focus on what she needs to focus on right now. (Interviewer: So for independent, what do you mean by independent? No need to depend on others?) Depend on others for some situations, but sometimes when you don't need the help of others, you just do it by yourself. You just have the idea in your head. You just carry out the idea by yourself and not really dependent on other people to help you as much.  
(Monica, age 15)



Figure 2<sup>2</sup>. “She Doesn’t Need Them in Her Life.”

<sup>2</sup> The image was taken by one of the informants from a magazine or newspaper. The informant did not record the source of the image. The editors assert Fair Use “for purposes such as criticism, comment [...], scholarship, or research” under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, Section 7.

When a girl grows up, the respondents felt she should have learned how to be an independent woman. One interviewee emphasized the changes in this way.

Well, I think when you're a bit older, all the fun and games should be more over with. (Interviewer: So you think women should be more serious?) Not necessarily always. Having fun is a good thing. But I think women, by then, should be able to know who yourself is and feel legit and independent.  
(Allison, age 15)

Four interviewees expressed the opinion that a woman needs to be compassionate. One even suggested it is not good for a woman to be aggressive. Another interviewee stated that women should not be mean and should have good manners.

They have to have manners, and it depends on their personality, they can't be bad. We all have different personalities. I'm shy, but I'm super nice, and others aren't really shy and are really loud and stuff.  
(Sheila, age 15)

#### **4.3. Theme 3: Work**

Seven of the interviewees expressed the opinion that women should be financially independent. They felt women should work and support themselves. Besides enjoying economic independence, women should be able to maintain a family-work balance. None of the interviewees expressed an aspiration to be a full-time housewife. Full-time housewives were perceived as depending too much on men, lacking a personal life, and enduring monotony. Instead, women should work.

I think women should work. I don't think they should just stay in the kitchen. When people say women should stay in the kitchen, it makes me really angry because we do have a life, and that way we can support ourselves, even without men. Women can support themselves even without men. (Interviewer: You think all women should be working?) They should know how to financially support their own family without men, well, just in case. Women can do it. We can do what we want. Driving, work, and not be a housewife. We can choose our own path.  
(Rachel, age 17)

But three interviewees commented further that women should be capable of balancing family and work. They felt a work-life balance is possible if a woman can manage her time wisely. Three interviewees said a woman should have both a happy family life and a successful career. Here is one illustrative quote.

A family, ultimately what women should be looking forward to? I mean they look happy and everything, like this picture of a family of four. (Interviewer: Do you think women should stay at home after they have a family?) I think it would be perfect if you

can have your family but then also look like the Caucasian woman that I just pointed out in the picture of how you're still going to work looking all fit and everything (Figure 3). It would be perfect if you could have all that both.  
(Gigi, age 18)



Figure 3<sup>3</sup>. Women Can Still Work When They Have a Family.

#### 4.4. Theme 4: Family

There was a clear consensus among the interviewees that women should have a family and take care of children. However, they made it clear that bearing children is an option and women should have a choice. Four interviewees reported that when women have a family and children, they should take care of the children. However, when the interviewees were asked if they think women should have children, three replied that having children is a woman's responsibility, but it is not a must. This is reflected in the following quotes.

If they have a child, they should be more caring and not abusive to them. Because some women, they tend to stress over. (Interviewer: Should all women have a child?) It depends on the person, if they want one, they should. If they don't, then they shouldn't.  
(Joyce, age 17)

This picture is a woman holding a baby. In the end, the woman should be having a

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<sup>3</sup> The image was taken by one of the informants from a magazine or newspaper. The informant did not record the source of the image. The editors assert Fair Use "for purposes such as criticism, comment [...], scholarship, or research" under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, Section 7.

child and carrying on her genetics. (Interviewer: Do you think all women should have children?) Not really, I mean I personally don't want to have a child, but it's kind of expected for women to carry on their next generation.  
(Gigi, age 18)

#### 4.5. Theme 5: Interests

Five interviewees highlighted that women should do what they want and have interest in something. Pursuing an interest was perceived as enjoyable and rewarding.

I don't think there's limit for what girls should do. Even though people say that "You can't do that, it's a guys sport" it just makes them feel, in a way, to want to do it more because people are saying that you can't do it. I think women should do what they want to do even if it's men dominated. They should do it anyways just to show that we are all the same, but we are just different genders.  
(Chris, age 17)

An interviewee remarked that individuals should have the right to pursue their dreams, regardless of gender. Allison (age 15) reported that women should be interested in doing things that make them feel delighted.

That's Lauren Conrad. She's originally on The Hills [a TV reality show], and then she realized that she loved being a designer. She expanded on that, which is pretty cool because her line for fashion is super popular now. (Interviewer: So you think all women should be career oriented?) I think they should have a strong interest in something that benefits them well. You don't necessarily have to have the typical lawyer, doctor or whatever kind of career. It's just whatever you're good at and you're happy with and benefit you well.  
(Allison, age 15)

#### 4.6. Theme 6: Health

Three of these rather young girls took the initiative to repeat the conventional view that women should not smoke, drink or use recreational drugs. They agreed that these behaviors were not good for health as well as destructive of an individual's image. Other interviewees also remarked that women should look after themselves. One referred to a female celebrity who died of alcohol poisoning.

Amy Winehouse just died recently. I don't think women should be like her because she smokes and drinks. She doesn't look after herself, that's why she died recently. I feel like they shouldn't do that because they are harming themselves. Women I feel like they shouldn't drink a lot because if they walk around drunk all the time, then it'll be a bad image.  
(Sheila, age 15)

Four of the respondents said that women should exercise and eat healthily to take care of their bodies. Exercise was perceived as capable of making a woman happy.

## 5. Discussion

The findings suggest that these girls showed a high level of interest in body image, family, and work. The media play an important role in individualizing these Chinese Canadian girls (Kim, 2010). Because similar themes were generated, the results were compared with those of previous studies on how pre-adolescent and adolescent girls in Hong Kong perceive their gender roles and identities (Chan et al., 2011; 2012b).

Regarding body image, they valued a woman's acceptance and appreciation of her current body size. They showed resistance to being led and heavily influenced by thin media images in defining who they are and how they should look. This result demonstrates the interviewees' rather high level of media literacy, as they are able to evaluate the female images in the media in a critical manner. Despite of the prevalence of thin female images in the media, several interviewees reported the importance of accepting your body size. This is inconsistent with the results of a meta-analysis of the role of the media in forming women's body image which found that exposure to media images presenting a thin body as ideal negatively affects body image perceptions (Grabe et al., 2008).

Regarding appearance, these rather young interviewees generally disapproved of sexy and revealing clothing. They perceived wearing seductive clothes as disrespectful of the wearer's own identity, and also irresponsible. These results are consistent with those of Durham's (2004) focus group study which found that girls are aware of the unreality of the media's representations of women. Instead, the subjects in this study appreciated women wearing feminine clothes and light make-up. This appreciation of decent clothing and rejection of sexy attire among Canadian girls was similar to the observations reported among Hong Kong adolescent girls (Chan et al., 2012b) and also consistent with Vares, Jackson and Gill's (2011) finding that pre-adolescent girls in New Zealand evaluate the sexualized presentations of the media critically. When those New Zealand girls consumed sexualized media content, they took into account social and parental concerns (Vares et al., 2011). However, the Canadian girls did not show the strong condemnation of cosmetic surgery and heavy make-up reported among Hong Kong adolescent girls (Chan et al., 2012b).

The Canadian Chinese girls showed an appreciation of independence both as a personality trait and in terms of financial independence. As in Kim's (2010) study, these interviewees interpreted the visual images in the Western media in terms of female individualization. They perceived depending on others financially and socially, and especially depending on men, as undesirable. They reported that they would like to have a life of their own. In keeping with their high regard for financial independence, the traditional female role of a full time housewife was not appreciated. One interviewee even expressed anger about people putting such expectations on females. The emphasis on financial independence among Canadian Chinese girls is in line with the typically Canadian personality traits of assertiveness, confidence, independence and self-possession (Pyke & Johnson, 2003). Unlike the findings among adolescent girls in Hong Kong (Chan et al., 2012b), personality traits such as gentleness and kindness were



not emphasized by the interviewees in this study. This indicates that gender stereotyping of gentleness and kindness was not prevalent among the sample. The repeated use of the phrase “right-to-work” demonstrated that the ability to work was perceived as a personal choice that should not be taken away by others. This finding was in sharp contrast with the aspiration of being a mother and housewife caring for a family reported by the pre-adolescent girls in Hong Kong (Chan et al., 2011).

The strong intention to attain financial independence and to work after marriage was consistent with the career aspirations of Canadian adolescent girls reported in a previous study (Wall, Covell & MacIntyre, 1999). According to Statistics Canada (2013), the female labor force participation rate in 2012 was 57.9 percent, and it was 54.9 percent among Canadian females of Asian origin. This may explain the interviewees’ strong career aspirations. They also aspired to marry and enjoy family life, but they stressed that they would like to continue working after marriage. They believed that with good time management they would be able to maintain a balance between work and family. Work-family balance was perceived as a major concern for employed women (Byron, 2005). Women leaders who are successful in their careers and who can also manage their family life regard themselves as experts in multitasking (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). The interviewees in this study seemed to admire female achievers who are able to enjoy success in the family as well as in their working life. Chinese adolescent girls in Hong Kong in a previous study often mentioned the domestic responsibilities of wives in the family (Chan, Ng & Williams, 2012a), but the interviewees in the current study did not mention any details about the supportive role of a wife in the family. It suggests that Canadian adolescent girls endorse gender equality in the domestic arena.

The Canadian Chinese girls’ appreciation of women’s engaging in activities that interest them and in pursuing their dreams was similar to that observed among Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong (Chan et al., 2012b). In both studies such appreciation was supported by identifying female role models who had illustrated achieving. This highlights the importance of media celebrities in stimulating aspirations for self-actualization among adolescent girls.

The Canadian Chinese girls reported the conventional concerns about the health and well-being of women and about smoking, alcohol consumption and taking recreational drugs. They did not identify specific sources such as government publicity for such messages.

It is interesting that in the discussion of gender roles, none of the interviewees drew on the conventional ethics of their Chinese background. The development of their identities in Canada apparently was little mediated by identification with or rejection of Chinese values and virtues. This is in contradiction with the results of a study of Hong Kong emigrants in Chicago who often acknowledged their Chinese cultural heritage and considered themselves part of the Chinese diaspora (Lan, 2012). These young girls’ lack of identification with the Chinese diaspora indicates that racial classification did not play a dominant role in the formation of gender identity. This may be because they have been growing up in Canadian society and the intention to regress to the values of Chinese ethics is weak.

## 6. Limitations

The small sample size restricts generalizing the findings beyond the sample. In addition,

seeding the snowball recruitment through a Christian church may well have yielded a sample unrepresentative even of the Chinese community in Vancouver. The worldview of that particular religious group may limit the generalization of the findings. Studying a more diverse sample with different religious beliefs and socio-economic status would provide greater insight into how demographic variables affect immigrant and second-generation immigrant girls' perceptions of gender roles and identities. It should also be noted that three of the interviewees had lived in Canada for only about five years. This may have limited their ability to express fully their ideas about such abstract topics in English. Obviously, interviewees from Vancouver may not be representative of girls in other parts of Canada.

## 7. Conclusion

Combining adolescence with immigrant status and balancing the cross-pressures of ethnic and mainstream cultures make learning gender roles and identity a complex process. The Chinese girls studied endorsed modern gender roles featuring independence and autonomy rather than the gentleness and submissiveness of traditional Chinese culture. They expressed the importance of a woman's appreciating her own body image. They put emphasis on having a personal life through the pursuit of work and interests. Being a full-time housewife was not admired. These Canadian Chinese adolescent girls' perceptions of gender roles and identities differed significantly from those found among Chinese adolescent girls in Hong Kong. This study has been the first to use an auto-videography approach to illuminate how Canadian Chinese girls perceive gender roles and identities.

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## **Appendix**

### Interview Questions

1. From these pictures, what do you think about what girls should be or should not be?
2. From these pictures, what do you think about what women should be or should not be?
3. From these pictures, what behaviors do you think are appropriate or inappropriate for girls?
4. From these pictures, what behaviors do you think are appropriate or inappropriate for women?
5. In comparison to what your parents say an ideal girl or woman should be or behave like, do you see any similarities in the females portrayed in your images?