

# **The Formation of Gender Concepts Among Chinese High School Students: Case Studies of Beijing and Henan**

## **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the generational transmission of gender perceptions among Chinese high school students by comparing high schools in Beijing and Henan. Using semi-structured interviews and a grounded theory approach, the research investigates four core pathways: family, education, peers and media, and institutional sequence. Data were analyzed through axial and selective coding, combined with continuous comparison, to identify both shared mechanisms and region-specific emphases.

Findings reveal four interrelated themes. First, in primary socialization and emotional labor, care and supervision are predominantly provided by mothers and sisters, while fathers contribute primarily in economic and symbolic ways. Second, in academic performance and self-construction, “learning first” is a shared priority, and increased visibility of individual capabilities helps loosen traditional gender expectations. Third, in the domain of appearance and peer interaction, body evaluation and social maintenance operate as a social mirror, with students establishing boundaries through strategies such as de-grooming and comfort-first dressing. Fourth, the institutional temporal structure, anchored in further education, shapes rational postponement and evaluation of marriage, romantic involvement, and childbearing.

The study proposes a four-path integration framework to clarify the differential weighing of these mechanisms across distinct opportunity structures and offers practical recommendations for curricula and extracurricular programming. Cross-regional comparison indicates that while the underlying mechanisms are shared, Beijing students experience stronger visibility of resources, whereas Henan students navigate the system primarily through school rules and examination rhythms, reflecting an intra-structural consultation approach. Limitations of the research include the restricted school-level coverage and limited collection of non-verbal data. Future research could replicate this framework across additional regions and incorporate quantitative measures in small-sample studies to enhance generalizability.

## **Introduction**

In the context of a unified education system and the pervasive influence of digital media, the high school stage has become a critical arena for the formation and renegotiation of gender concepts. The materials indicate that this generative process is not linear but a dynamic system shaped by four interwoven pathways: family–education–peers and media–institutional chronology. Within this shared mechanism, distinct regional patterns emerge. The Beijing sample more frequently demonstrates an individualized “exit” strategy, whereas the Henan sample reflects a gradual trajectory of consultation–delay–revaluation. These differences reveal how regional contexts shape the rhythm of change and the diversity of strategic responses.

At the macro level, youth development unfolds within the broader conditions of individualization and global mobility. Young people’s life planning and risk assessments increasingly exhibit characteristics of self-management and autonomous decision-making (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2009). Correspondingly, Chinese evidence highlights substantial heterogeneity in marriage and childbearing behaviors: urban and highly educated groups tend to postpone both marriage and parenthood. This temporal divergence is already embedded in high school students’ early imaginations of academic success, intimate relationships, and family roles (Ji & Yeung, 2014). Such macro-level patterns provide the structural background for young people’s practical choices concerning whether to delay and how to negotiate.

Based on these observations, this paper adopts an analytical framework and continuous comparative approach summarized as path–situation–initiative. The study proceeds along four main lines of analysis: (1) family division of labor and emotional labor; (2) school division of labor and ability correction; (3) peer order and media scripts; and (4) marriage and childbearing

timing under institutional expectations. The research makes three key contributions. First, it conducts a cross-regional comparison centered on Chinese high school students. Second, it proposes a four-path integration framework that links interactive processes with structural opportunities. Third, it identifies two recognizable practice orientations: exit and intra-structure consultation, based on empirical data from both regions. Together, these findings offer practical insights for curriculum development and collaboration between home and school in fostering more equitable gender understandings among youth.

## Literature Review

Gender is widely understood as a social practice continuously recreated through interaction. Foundational work emphasizes that individuals reproduce gender order in everyday contexts by doing gender through speech, gesture, and use of objects (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Building on this, status belief theory explains how inequality persists even in the absence of explicit hierarchical structures: gender, as a remarkable and inferable social distinction, shapes expectations and evaluations in both cooperative and competitive situations (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

Research on peer hierarchies and masculinity further reveals that gender order is not static but actively produced and sustained through convertible performances within specific social fields. Hegemonic masculinity is thus not a fixed set of traits but a configurational practice. It is a dynamic assemblage of power relations and boundary maintenance that can also be challenged and redefined (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Campus ethnographies show that feminized behaviors often invite ridicule and temporary status gains among peers, yet this hierarchical stability weakens when competence and achievement are visibly recognized (Pascoe, 2007). These findings point to a tangible intervention strategy at the school level that by redesigning tasks and assessment criteria to reduce significance of gendered rewards and recognition, schools can help to undo some of the effects of gender (Deutsch, 2007).

The family provides the earliest site of gendered socialization. Research on emotional labor demonstrates that responsibilities such as pacifying emotions, coordination, and preemptive concession are often distributed along gendered lines, shaping not only family relationships but also children's developing understandings of the care-achievement role (Erickson, 2005). Moreover, social class and parenting logics interact with school systems in distinct ways. Middle-class families' concerted cultivation aligns more closely with institutional expectations and evaluative criteria, whereas the accomplishment of natural growth typical of working and lower-class families fosters different practical orientations. These patterns overlay existing gendered divisions of labor and influence students' modes of self-presentation and participation in school life (Lareau, 2002).

Meanwhile, the media and peer networks together construct the everyday foundation of body politics. Aesthetic discipline that is expressed through filters, body management, and dress enters students' self-monitoring systems and is continuously reinforced in peer interactions through ridicule, irony, or approval (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Within this framework, the present study conceptualizes aesthetic discipline-self-monitoring-strategic alienation as the central chain of the peer-media pathway and uses cross-regional data to map the spectrum of responses ranging from compliance to resistance.

Finally, from the perspective of institutional sequence, the discourse on individualization and the risk society suggests that young people constantly make temporal choices such as delaying, accelerating, or rearranging key life events amid expanded education systems and increasing social mobility (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2009). In the Chinese context, regional and educational heterogeneity in marriage and childbearing produces distinct orientations: resource-rich urban youth are more likely to adopt an exit strategy that secures time and space for self-exploration, while those embedded in more rigid exam-oriented environments often engage in intra-structural negotiation, using academic grades, holidays, and school rules to manage relational rhythms (Ji & Yeung, 2014). Accordingly, this paper organizes its comparative analysis around the interplay of

common mechanisms and local specificities, highlighting how gendered pathways are both structured and regionally weighted.

## **Methodology & Ethics**

### **Research Design and Samples**

This study employs a side-by-side comparative design, selecting public high schools in Beijing and Henan as comparing field sites. The analysis centers on four main dimensions: family, education, peer and media, and institutional sequence. The research is based on semi-structured interviews and analyzed through a grounded theory approach. Core analytical procedures include the three levels of open, axial, and selective coding, with the constant comparative method applied throughout to identify both shared mechanisms and regionally specific variations.

The study adopts a small-scale, in-depth qualitative approach. All participants are female high school students, totaling nine respondents including six from Beijing and three from Henan. This female-homogeneous sampling controls for gender-based variation and highlights regional differences in gendered socialization. Supplementary statistical information is provided in Appendix C. To ensure anonymity and traceability, each participant is assigned a de-identified code in the format Region–Serial Number (e.g., BJ–B). These identifiers serve only for reference and do not carry any evaluative implications.

The primary research objective is to uncover the common mechanisms and local weightings within the four generative pathways, ultimately proposing practical educational strategies for promoting gender equity and reflective learning. Data collection concluded upon reaching theoretical saturation when no new analytical categories emerged. Recruitment would only resume if additional participants were needed to refine emerging theoretical distinctions.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Interviews were conducted following a semi-structured outline (see Appendix A). The questions were designed around the four core dimensions to ensure both comparability across sites and contextual flexibility in participants' responses. All interviews were audio-recorded on-site and subsequently transcribed for coding and analysis. The four analytical dimensions also served as theoretically sensitive cues during the analysis process and were systematically reflected in the coding framework (see Table 1: Three-Level Coding Framework).

This study follows the three-stage analytical logic of grounded theory, integrating the systematic procedures of open coding, axial (spindle) coding, and selective coding. Interview data from the Beijing and Henan samples were abstracted and integrated iteratively and comparatively at each stage. Through constant comparison, emergent concepts were refined into categories and subcategories, allowing for the identification of shared generative mechanisms and regionally specific patterns in gender cognition and practice.

As summarized in Table 1, a simplified coding overview presents the key categories, operational definitions, and representative evidence types aligned with the four analytical axes. This table demonstrates the multi-layered generative mechanisms of gender understanding among high school students, while also illustrating the regional divergences that shape these processes in the Beijing and Henan contexts.

Table 1. Three Level Coding Framework

Main Axis	Secondary Category	Level 3 coding/factual citation	Theoretical Support
Family Path	Absence of paternity and overload of maternal duties	"My mom and I live in Beijing...My dad lives alone in Fujian, we meet twice a year." (BJ-B) "My mother works and does makeup, and others say she is amazing." (BJ-A) "My dad just gives the money." (BJ-B)	Gender division of labor theory; Intimate labor theory
	Intergenerational chain of care for women	"Before the second grade, I was taken care of by grandma and aunt, and then by mother. "(BJ-A)" Life is taken care of by my mother, and my father and sister are in charge of studying. " (HN-B)	Intergenerational transmission theory; Family socialization theory
	Parent-child emotional Negotiation	"Mom used to be cold, but now she talks about everything. "(BJ-A) "My mother scolded me during menopause, 'It's better to raise a dog than to raise you', and later 'get along like a friend'. "(BJ-B)	Emotional labor theory
	Family power structure	"My father is machismo and has to listen to him in everything." (BJ-D) "My mother has a gentle and optimistic personality, and the father is more silent." (BJ-D)	Gender order theory; Analysis of the patriarchal system
Educational Path	Gender allocation of educational resources	"His mother gave up his Fujian career for Beijing education. "(BJ-B)" My father stopped studying because he was too tired. (HN-B) "My sister urged me to study even more, even stricter than my dad." (HN-B)	Sociology of education; Theory of cultural capital
	Education as a strategy for equality	"I hope to prove the value of women through results." (BJ-A) "I want to enter the investment bank to prove my ability and fight gender bias." (BJ-B)	Gender equality theory in education; Knowledge empowerment theory
	Educational autonomy and resistance	"My mother wanted me to go to art school, but I strongly refused. "(BJ-C)" decided to apply to a university abroad and did not want to be arranged." (BJ-C)	Theory of educational autonomy; Individualization theory
	The change in the mother's view of education	"I was scolded for half an hour in the Olympic mathematics class... After junior high school, pay attention to physical and mental growth. " (BJ-F)	Family socialization theory
Peers and media paths	Gendered bullying and social isolation	"There was a man in the extracurricular class who kept scolding me... Say I look like a deep-sea fish... Splash water on me. "(BJ-C)" High school disdains talking to boys." (BJ-E)	Social learning theory; Theory of gender socialization
	Women's Mutual Aid and Support Network	"Friends refute boys' negative evaluations of themselves and will say about them." (HN-A)	Peer support theory; Women's sense of community
	Internalization of the image of women in the media	"I appreciate the heroine, and I feel that the housewife and the heroine persona do not conflict." (BJ-C) "Seeing the feeling of a lot of heroines, women are very independent." (BJ-D)	Gender reproduction theory; Feminist communication theory
	Internet culture influence	"There are a lot of 'catching mistresses' TV series on the Internet, which makes her distrust marriage." (BJ-F) "The Haitang literary incident made her not understand why society is harsh on women. " (BJ-E)	Media socialization theory; Cultural Studies

Main Axis	Secondary Category	Level 3 coding/factual citation	Theoretical Support
Institutional sequencing path	The concept of marriage and Childbearing is passed on from generation to generation	"My mother wants me to get married before the age of 28 and may not accept that I am a lesbian." (HN-C) "My parents want me to be traditional, get married and have children, but I am annoyed and don't want to get married." (HN-A)	Intergenerational fuzzy theory; Heterosexual discipline theory
	Fear of marriage and individualized choice	"It's too scary to live a life with someone easily." (BJ-A) "I don't get married and I don't want to have children." (BJ-E)	Post-familial theory; Risk social theory
	Regional and traditional order	"Fujian has a serious preference for sons, and women are not allowed to go to the genealogy." (BJ-B) "I go to wash the dishes by myself when I do housework, and my brother won't." (HN-C)	Patriarchal culture; Gender order theory

## Ethics and Quality Control

### *Informed Consent*

Before each interview, the researcher clearly explained the purpose of the study, its intended use, and any potential risks in accessible and plain language. Participants were informed of their rights to withdraw at any time without consequence. Voluntary consent was obtained from all participants. For cases involving minors, informed consent was also sought from their parents or legal guardians, in accordance with local ethical review and school procedures.

### *Anonymity and De-Identification*

All interview data are presented using anonymous identifiers only. No information that could directly or indirectly reveal the identity of individuals, schools, or families is disclosed. The coding system and illustrative examples are described in the appendix. De-identification was applied consistently across transcripts, quotations, and analytical tables.

### *Data Minimization and Security*

Data collection was limited strictly to information necessary to address the research questions. All transcribed materials were stripped of identifying or directional details and stored in encrypted form on secure servers accessible only to members of the research team. No data were shared beyond the research purpose or reused for secondary analysis without permission.

### *Sensitive Topics and Participant Care*

Special care was taken when addressing potentially sensitive subjects—such as appearance-related concerns, body image, and attitudes toward marriage and childbearing. Interview questions were phrased in open-ended and non-evaluative terms to reduce the impact of discomfort. Participants could pause, skip, or terminate discussion at any time. When distress or discomfort arose, information about relevant school or community-based support resources was provided. Citations were context-compressed to preserve meaning while preventing traceability, with extended contexts archived separately in Appendix D.

### *Citation and Presentation of Quotations*

Only brief, de-identified quotations, typically a single sentence, are used in the main text. Longer contextual excerpts are compiled and cross-referenced in Appendix D to further reduce re-identification risk while maintaining transparency of interpretation.

## Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study follows a material-driven and inductive logic, progressing gradually from textual description to theoretical proposition. The purpose of the analysis is not to verify a presupposed framework, but to generate explanatory propositions that reveal the mechanisms underlying the formation of gender concepts through cycles of comparison, abstraction, and integration.

At the stage of concept generation, open coding was carried out by treating action, meaning, and emotion as the smallest units of analysis. Eight interview transcripts were coded line by line, keeping close to the original language of respondents to avoid premature theorization. For instance, statements such as “My dad is busy... Dad worked hard in his career and opened a company” reflected the absence of fatherhood and the overload of motherhood. “My mother works and maintains makeup, and others say she is great” illustrated the coexistence of female role modeling and dual labor expectations, while “It’s too scary to live a life with someone easily” conveyed a modern anxiety toward marriage and childbearing. These and other excerpts provided the basis for a number of initial concepts that captured core themes, including the family division of emotional labor, educational investment, physical presentation, peer relationships, media representation, and attitudes toward marriage and childbearing.

The next stage, category aggregation, corresponded to axial coding and focused on organizing similar concepts into intermediate categories according to their causal contexts, situational conditions, action strategies, and outcomes. In the family path, categories such as “absence of fatherhood and motherhood overload,” “female role models and emotional transmission,” and “parent–child relationship reconstruction” were clustered. In the educational path, new categories emerged around “learning investment and self-validation,” “ability and goal setting,” and “education as a route to class mobility.” Within the peer and media path, the analysis identified “body and aesthetic discipline,” “peer relationships and female mutual support,” “media representations of femininity,” and “appearance evaluation and self-defense.” Finally, the institutional-sequencing path brought together categories such as “intergenerational negotiation of marriage and childbearing concepts,” “institutionalized rhythm and individual resistance,” and “self-risk consciousness and modern anxiety.” These categories were synthesized and presented in Table 1 (Three-Level Coding Framework), along with representative quotations that form a chain of empirical evidence. For example, the dialogue “‘My mother wants me to get married before the age of 28’ – ‘I don’t want to get married’” captures the ongoing tension and negotiation process surrounding marriage and family expectations. The constant comparative method was employed throughout to examine situational differences and shared mechanisms between the Beijing and Henan samples.

The third stage, path integration, involved selective coding and the synthesis of categories within the four major generative pathways of gender concepts. In the family path, the absence of fatherhood, the overload of motherhood, and the redistribution of emotional labor positioned the family as the primary site of gendered habit formation. The educational path demonstrated that education serves both as a practical arena for gender equality and as a form of symbolic capital through which individuals realize self-worth and class mobility. The peer and media path revealed how interpersonal interaction and media representation shape female identity and aesthetic consciousness, constituting a dual process of emotional and cognitive socialization. In the institutional-timing path, marriage and childbearing were shown to form an institutionalized timetable, within which individuals negotiate self-positioning through strategies of delay, consultation, or rejection.

Following this integration, a cross-regional comparison was conducted to assess the relative weight and significance of each mechanism. Three indicators guided this process: evidence coverage, situational intensity, and outcome significance. Categories appearing in both field sites were identified as common mechanisms, while high-frequency phenomena occurring predominantly in one region were regarded as local particularities. Situational intensity was assessed by considering the triggering conditions, persistence, and social costs associated with each category, whereas outcome significance examined whether a category directly reshaped family division of labor, social status, or life rhythm. For instance, motherhood overload appeared

in both regions but took different forms: in Beijing, it manifested as a dual burden of occupational and emotional labor; in Henan, it was expressed as implicit sacrifice framed by traditional ethics of responsibility. Despite these contextual differences, both represent a homologous mechanism of emotional labor and gender habituation.

In presenting evidence, the study adheres to the principle of concise, de-identified, and traceable citation. Only two or three short quotations are retained in the main text for each proposition, while longer excerpts and full contextual information are provided in Appendix D. The complete coding system, including operational definitions and category descriptions, is presented in Appendix B to ensure the transparency and verifiability of the research process. Through this multi-stage analytic process, the study constructs a coherent theoretical model that reveals both the shared mechanisms and regional variations in the formation of gender concepts among Chinese high school students.

## Findings

This section presents both the shared mechanisms and local variations revealed through the four analytical pathways: the family path, the educational path, the peer and media path, and the institutional-timing path. Each subsection combines theoretical anchoring with representative quotations and interpretive synthesis, using short, de-identified excerpts to illustrate typical cases while maintaining anonymity and brevity.

### Family Path: The Symbolism of Maternal Care and Fatherhood

The family serves as the primary site of gender socialization, where the gendered division of labor becomes stabilized and routinized through the interplay of maternal care and paternal symbolism. Across both Beijing and Henan, everyday family life is sustained by what might be described as a female relatives' chain of care where mothers and sisters provide continuous supervision, emotional support, and coordination of learning and domestic routines. Meanwhile, fathers are more often associated with economic and symbolic support, occupying the role of provider and authority figure even when physically absent. Differences between the two regions are mainly observed in the frequency of paternal presence and the forms of emotional support, shaped by patterns of mobility and family structure.

BJ-A noted, "My dad is busy... he works hard in his career and runs a company, so he travels between countries." BJ-A then explained, "I don't see him often; my mother goes to my father every month, but I can only see him once every few months." BJ-B remarked, "My mother and I live in Beijing... my dad is alone in Fujian. We see each other twice a year." These narratives demonstrate a recurring configuration that mothers and sisters perform the daily labor of care, emotion, and supervision, while fathers maintain a symbolic or economic presence from a distance. Family governance revolves around the principle of "learning first", with academic performance functioning as both the currency of control and the basis for negotiated freedom. Cross-regional differences in mobility and resource distribution further shape the pattern of emotional labor and management intensity of family life in Beijing and Henan (see Appendix D1, entries 1–12).

### Educational Path: Academic Priority and the "Women's Chain" of Supervision

Education occupies the top position in the hierarchy of life priorities for high school girls in both regions. Female relatives, especially mothers and older sisters, act as agents of academic supervision, discouraging romantic involvement at younger age and emphasizing the legitimacy of academic achievement as the foundation for personal stability. As BJ-B reflected, "My mother told me that I am not in a hurry to fall in love now. I think it makes sense, and I should pay attention to learning." HN-B added, "My sister urges me to study." A third observed, "She's stricter than my dad. My eldest sister didn't study well, went to a junior college, and she's not doing well now. So she keeps telling me to study hard and have a good life in the future."

These accounts reveal a transgenerational moral narrative of effort and redemption, where the family's emotional economy and division of labor converge on academic success. The shared mechanism across Beijing and Henan is the moral and emotional legitimacy of learning, which links academic achievement with future security. Yet the specific routes to recognition differ. In Beijing, students often rely on public performance spaces such as extracurricular societies, competitions, and leadership roles, to demonstrate ability and achieve symbolic mobility. In Henan, the national examination system remains the dominant route for social validation and name correction. While linguistic performance and social confidence can bring short-term peer status, such symbolic advantages diminish once measurable academic outcomes become visible to teachers and classmates. Together, these patterns emphasize the interplay between gendered care chains and educational meritocracy (see Appendix D2, entries 13–23).

### Peer and Media Path: Appearance Discipline and Boundary Negotiation

Peer evaluation and family aesthetics jointly construct a social mirror of the body, where ideals of appearance, comportment, and femininity are constantly negotiated. Both Beijing and Henan students articulate a tension between appearance shame and inner comfort, balancing family expectations about neatness and dress against personal preferences and peer norms. As HN-A explained, “Beauty is to look comfortable, have affinity, and the inside is more important than the appearance.” HN-B recounted, “They say I’m short, I have small breasts, and many boys will say that.” A third added, “I laughed, but I felt very uncomfortable.”

These accounts reveal how aesthetic discipline enters daily peer interaction, generating both emotional discomfort and opportunities for resistance. Students in both regions reframe value hierarchies by emphasizing inner qualities over outward appearance, developing everyday negotiation strategies such as de-grooming, comfort-first dressing, and peer protection alliances. Within this relational matrix, boundaries are maintained through a combination of individual strategy and small-group solidarity, resulting in a trajectory from passive endurance to strategic alienation and relational support. The shared process of “value reset” (inner > appearance) illustrates the subtle ways students reinterpret body norms and gender expectations under the joint influence of school regulations, family expectations, and peer cultures (see Appendix D3, entries 24–31).

### Institutional-Timing Path: Academic Anchoring and the Postponement of Marriage and Childbearing

The final pathway concerns the institutional rhythm of time in high school life, where the pursuit of further education serves as the primary temporal anchor. Across both Beijing and Henan, academic achievement is prioritized, while marriage and childbearing are increasingly treated as deferred or optional life events. The discourse of caution and risk permeates these reflections. HN-A remarked, “My mother told me that I am not in a hurry to fall in love now; I think it makes sense and I should pay attention to learning.” HN-A then expressed frustration: “My parents are quite open, but they hope that I will be more traditional, get married and have children. I am annoyed and don’t want to get married.” HN-B voiced a sharper critique: “Giving birth is too tiring, spending time and money, and you may die on the operating table.”

These statements illustrate a shared baseline ranking of ‘academics–career–marriage/childbearing’ and a conscious awareness of the costs and risks of domestic life. Among students in both regions, the norm of marriage has shifted from obligation to contingent choice, reflecting broader social trends of individualization. However, differences persist in the emotional intensity and justificatory logic behind these attitudes. Beijing participants tend to frame delay as a self-development strategy, while Henan respondents often justify postponement through familial duty or resource constraints. The result is a nuanced pattern of timing consultation, in which the institutional schedule of education and the affective schedule of family expectations become



intertwined, jointly structuring decisions about intimacy and reproduction (see Appendix D4, entries 32–38).

## Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that the combination of father absence, maternal overload, and the gendered distribution of emotional labor constitutes a stable and foundational pattern in the socialization of gender among high school girls. Father absence manifests across three dimensions: spatial, functional, and emotional, while mothers assume what can be described as intensive motherhood, carrying the dual burden of daily life management and emotional support. In some Beijing cases, this maternal role extends into a dual professional-emotional line, as illustrated by statements highlighting mothers who simultaneously maintain careers and household responsibilities. This configuration establishes the contextual basis for the formation of initial gendered habits, shaping subsequent understandings of care, responsibility, and family roles.

Education emerges as a site of both empowerment and intergenerational supervision. In Henan, mothers often assume primary responsibility for daily life care, while fathers contribute financial support, creating a structured environment in which an extended sister–mother supervision chain reinforces academic diligence. Within this framework, students internalize both the value of competence and the principle of financial independence, exemplified in remarks such as “feeding yourself... you don’t have to get married.” Education thus functions simultaneously as a supervised trajectory and a resource pool for self-certification and gender recalibration, allowing young women to cultivate autonomy and challenge traditional expectations.

The peer and media domain highlights the tension between internalization and resistance in the formation of gendered body and aesthetic norms. Experiences such as ridicule over skin color or shame surrounding menstruation indicate the ongoing influence of gendered body discipline. Yet, participants also demonstrate strategic negotiation and reinterpretation, leveraging peer support and media literacy to cultivate confidence and reassess normative ideals. For instance, exposure to popular science content and supportive peer interactions fosters self-assurance, allowing respondents to revalue their bodies without entirely rejecting prevailing aesthetic norms. This illustrates a complex interplay of constraint and agency in daily practices, where disciplinary pressures are continuously negotiated rather than fully relinquished.

Regarding marriage and childbearing, the data reveal two parallel trajectories. The first is an instrumental understanding of marriage as a cooperative partnership and a direct engagement with the risks of fertility. The second is a strategy of refusal or postponement of designated plans, used to preserve personal autonomy and control over one’s body. Across both trajectories, a discernible causal chain emerges: maternal and sibling guidance → individual soft resistance (annoyance or avoidance) → rational risk assessment. This chain explains how gender norms, familial expectations, and personal agency interact to shape decisions around reproductive life.

While these mechanisms are broadly shared, regional phenotypes differ in their expression. Beijing participants exhibit a more individualized orientation characterized by withdrawal resistance, openly asserting refusal to marry and emphasizing personal developmental trajectories. In contrast, Henan students adopt a more gradual and negotiated strategy, which involves a pattern of consultation, delay, and re-evaluation, mediated by extended educational supervision and peer networks. Both trajectories reflect the broader process of modernity, in which marriage and childbearing have been downgraded from inevitable life destinations to optional life choices. Regional context, particularly family structure, mobility, and educational resources, shapes both the tempo and strategy of this transformation, highlighting the interplay of common mechanisms and local contingencies in the formation of gender concepts.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the gender concepts of Chinese high school students

are not the product of any single socialization factor, but emerge from a dynamic, interrelated system composed of four generative pathways: family, education, peers and media, and institutional chronology. Within this system, the family provides templates for the division of labor and emotional labor, shaping early experiences of care and responsibility. Education constructs the gendered meaning of knowledge and ability, enabling both self-certification and corrective mechanisms that reinforce or challenge traditional expectations. Peers and media co-construct images of women and perceptions of male otherness, shaping aesthetic, social, and relational norms. Finally, the institutional and temporal context delineates the feasible boundaries within which these paths operate, influencing decisions about life planning, marriage, and childbearing.

Within this systemic framework, regional variations are pronounced. Beijing students tend to follow a pathway of reflective, individualized construction, actively engaging in daily practices of gender resistance through strategies such as postponing marriage and childbearing, asserting autonomy over their bodies, and pursuing academic achievement as a means of self-realization. In contrast, Henan students follow a path of consultative modernization, negotiating the tension between tradition and modernity while achieving limited, incremental reshaping of gender norms through education, family guidance, and peer support.

The process of gender concept formation can be understood as a dialectical interplay between structure and agency. Family structures provide templates for gender division; education offers mechanisms for value correction and empowerment; peers and media supply identity networks; and institutional and temporal frameworks create the spatial and chronological conditions for negotiation. Beijing students, situated in a more fully individualized context, exhibit high levels of reflection and self-directed planning. Henan students, situated within a partially modernized context, demonstrate strategies characterized by consultation, negotiation, and gradual adjustment.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the generation of gender views is neither a mechanical replication of structure nor a fully autonomous exercise of individual choice. Rather, it represents a continuous, “structure–agency” interplay, in which institutional exposure to family division of labor, the resource leverage of educational empowerment, the negotiation of daily body politics, and the temporal shaping of marriage and childbearing systems collectively constitute the conditions and strategies through which gender concepts are formed. This dynamic perspective underscores the complex, contextually mediated, and agentially navigated nature of gender socialization among contemporary Chinese high school students.

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## **Appendice**

### **Appendix A Interview Outline and Coding Interpretation**

### **Appendix B List of topics and judgment caliber**

### **Appendix C Interviewee Overview**

### **Appendix D Key Citations**

## **Appendix A Interview outline and Coding interpretation**

### **A1 Code Definition**

Rules: Region-Gender-Code.

e.g. BJ-C = Beijing, 3<sup>rd</sup> place; HN-B = Henan, 2<sup>nd</sup> place.

The code is only an anonymous identification and has no evaluation meaning.

This interview will focus on four main lines: "family, school/education, peers and media, and institutional sequencing (further education, marriage, love, and birth planning)".

### **A2 Interview outline**

Opening and numbering description: self-introduction, research purpose, anonymity and recording description; Informed consent of the respondents (can be skipped/stopped at any time). (1–2 minutes)

Basic background: region, grade level, family structure, primary caregiver/educator; Probes: Family members and division of labor (who is outside/inside), whether there are siblings and their roles in the family. (2–3 minutes, warm-up)

Family Path: Division of Care and Emotional Labor (8–12 minutes)

Gender Awareness and Self-Identity: Growing Experiences (8–10 minutes)

Educational Pathways: Academic Sequencing and Empowerment (6–8 minutes)

Peers and Media Paths/Body Politics (8–10 minutes)

Institutional Chronological Path: Planning for Marriage and Childbirth (8–10 minutes)

Geographical comparison and "counterfactual" (5–7 minutes)

Closing and Replenishment (1–2 minutes)

## **Appendix B Interview questions with coding labels**

### **B1 Family path (absence of father - overload of motherhood - division of emotion and care)**

Topics & Coding:

There are three modes of paternity absence: (1) geographical (long-term remote location, shadow father), (2) functional (economic supply only), and (3) emotional (familiar strangers). As a result, mothers take on intensive motherhood, all-weather care and emotional/economic burdens, and there is a gendered emotional division of labor of "maternal emotional support vs. father's financial support".

Sacrificial choice that accompanies care responsibilities (occupational transfer/geographic transfer).

Representative quotes (short quotes):

"My dad is busy... Dad worked hard in his career and opened a company, so he traveled between countries. " (BJ-A)

"My mother and I live in Beijing... My dad is alone in Fujian and sees me twice a year. " (BJ-B)

"My dad will give me money." (BJ-B)

Theoretical Direction:

Gendered emotional labor and intensive motherhood.

### **B2 Educational path**

Topics & Coding:

Education and self-worth construction: making major family-regional choices for access to educational resources; Individuals assert autonomy in their further education and academic paths.

"Knowledge-ability-gender correction" path: challenge stereotypes with results/tracks, and enter male-dominated fields (such as investment banking) as proof of ability.

Representative quotes (short quotes):

"My mother told me that I am not in a hurry to fall in love now, I think it makes sense that we should pay attention to learning." (HN-A)

"My dad gave me money to study and take care of my studies, but he doesn't care about it now because he's too tired." (HN-B)

"She's stricter than my dad... I have always been able to study hard and want to have a ... Good life. " (HN-B)

Theoretical Direction:

"Use academic achievement as a 'weapon' for gender equality."

### **B3 Peers and media paths**

Topics & Coding:

the "internalization-resistance" tension of appearance anxiety and the practice of bodily sovereignty; Aesthetic pressure inside and outside the home and negotiation in daily choices.

Representative experience: gendered bullying such as physical humiliation and being

splashed with water; the hedge between family dress expectations and personal comfort;  
Self-expression with symbols such as perfume.

Representative quotes (short quotes)

"There was a man in the extracurricular class who kept scolding me... Say I look like a deep-sea fish... Splash water on me. " (BJ-C)

"Friends will refute boys' negative evaluations of themselves, 'My friends can defend me and talk about them'." (BJ-F)

"There are a lot of 'catching mistresses' TV series on the Internet, which makes her distrust marriage." (BJ-F)

Theoretical Direction:

Body discipline theory, aesthetic reproduction and body autonomy.

#### **B4 Institutional Sequencing path**

Topics & Coding:

Intergenerational transmission and individual resistance of the concept of marriage and childbearing: parents' "openness" expression coexists with traditional expectations; The individual performs soft resistance with "annoyance/avoidance".

rationalization of fertility risk: economic costs and physical risks work together; The marriage-birth bondage has been loosened.

Redefinition of intimacy: Marriage is understood as an instrumental relationship of "cooperation/mutual benefit".

Representative quotes:

"Fujian's preference for sons over daughters is serious... Women are not allowed to go to the genealogy. " (BJ-B)

"My mother wants me to get married before the age of 28, and she may not accept that I am a lesbian." (BJ-F)

"When you get married, you think of having children, but not necessarily." (BJ-F)

Theoretical Direction:

Individualization/post-familialism, risk society, forced heterosexuality.

### Appendix C Interviewee Overview

Dimension	Category	Number of People
Region	Beijing: Henan	6: 3
Sex	Female	9
Grade	10 <sup>th</sup> grade: Not labelled	2: 7
Discipline (self-report)	Arts and Sports: Stem: Not labelled	2: 1: 6
Form of Study	Not labelled	9
Family Composition	Non one-child family: Not labelled	3: 6

## **Appendix D Key citation index**

### **D1 Family Path**

1. "My dad is busy... Dad worked hard in his career and opened a company, so he traveled between countries." (BJ-A)
2. "My mother and I live in Beijing... My dad is alone in Fujian and sees me twice a year." (BJ-B)
3. "My dad will give me money." (BJ-B)
4. "Bachelor's and master's degree students from Beijing Institute of Technology... In order to accompany me to Beijing, he handed over the company to my dad." (BJ-B)
5. "My mother works and maintains makeup, and others say she is amazing." (BJ-A)
6. "Life is taken care of by my mother, and my father and sister are in charge of learning." (HN-B)
7. "Mom may be a little strict, but my dad works outside and doesn't care much, and he is relatively relaxed." (HN-A)
8. "Grandma and aunt take care of it before the second grade, and then take care of it by the mother." (BJ-A)
9. "Mom used to be aloof, now she talks about everything." (BJ-A)
10. "My mother scolded me during menopause, 'It's better to raise a dog than to raise you', and later 'get along like a friend'." (BJ-B)
11. "Father is macho, listen to him in everything." (BJ-D)
12. "Mother has a gentle and optimistic personality, and father is taciturn." (BJ-D)

### **D2 Education Path**

13. "Mother gave up Fujian career for Beijing education." (BJ-B)
14. "My father is too tired and no longer cares about studying." (HN-B)
15. "My mother told me that I am not in a hurry to fall in love now, I think it makes sense and I should pay attention to learning." (HN-A)
16. "My dad gave me money and took care of my studies, but he doesn't care now because he's too tired." (HN-B)
17. "She's stricter than my dad... I have always been able to study hard and want to have a ... Good life." (HN-B)
18. "The teacher will tell you... There is a physiology class in junior high school... There will be lectures dedicated to these things." (BJ-C)
19. "Want to prove the value of women through grades." (BJ-A)
20. "I want to enter the investment bank to prove my ability and fight gender bias." (BJ-B)
21. "I decided to apply to a foreign university and didn't want to be arranged." (BJ-C)
22. "My mother wanted me to go to art school, but I firmly refused." (BJ-C)
23. "I was scolded for half an hour in the Mathematical Olympiad class... After junior high school, pay attention to physical and mental growth." (BJ-F)

### **D3 Peer and Media Path**

24. "There is a guy in the extracurricular class who keeps scolding me... Say I look like a



deep-sea fish... Splash water on me. ” (BJ-C)

25. "High school disdains talking to boys. ” (BJ-E)

26. "Friends will refute boys' negative evaluations of themselves, 'My friends can defend me and talk about them'. ” (BJ-F)

27. "There are many 'catching mistresses' TV series on the Internet, which makes her distrust marriage. ” (BJ-F)

28. "Seeing a lot is the feeling of a big heroine... Girls are very independent, and then they are self-reliant and self-loving. ” (BJ-D)

29. "I appreciate the big heroine, and I feel that the housewife and the big heroine do not conflict." ” (BJ-C)

30. "Having a girlfriend is a love brain... I don't like this kind of behavior. ” (BJ-F)

31. "The begonia literary incident made her not understand why society is harsh on women. ” (BJ-E)

#### **D4 Institutional Sequencing path**

32. "Fujian's preference for sons over daughters is serious... Women are not allowed to go to the genealogy. ” (BJ-B)

33. "My mom wants me to get married before I turn 28 and probably can't accept that I'm a lesbian. ” (BJ-F)

34. "Getting married is about having children, but not necessarily. ” (BJ-F)

35. "My parents are quite open, but they hope that I will be more traditional, get married and have children, I am annoyed and don't want to get married. ” (HN-A)

36. "It's too scary to live your whole life with someone easily. ” (BJ-A)

37. "I don't get married and I don't want to have children. ” (BJ-E)

38. "I go to wash the dishes by myself when I do housework, but my brother won't." ” (HN-C)