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Bodies of Civility: Exploring Menstrual Experiences of Women in Beijing, China

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Abstract

The main objective of this research is to discern the menstrual experiences of women in Beijing, China. I interview 25 women during a comprehensive field work in Beijing on their lived experiences and thoughts regarding menstruation. From these interviews, I use Goffman's theory of stigma and Goldenberg and Roberts' theory of objectification to discuss the various processes of internalization, de-valuation, and marginalization that these women may have experienced. From there, I examine these interviews from a cultural perspective utilizing the Chinese conceptual framework of 'face' and the processes of self-cultivation women must complete in regards to menstruation in order to prevent loss of 'face' in society. Finally, I look at these interviews from a gender perspective and discuss if these experiences may signal gender disparities or the denigration of female gendered people in Beijing, China.

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CHAPTER I: Introduction

When Fu Yuanhui, a Chinese Olympic medalist unabashedly broke the silence on periods amongst not only female athletes, but Chinese women in general; a swarm of female support broke through the internet.¹ Yuanhui's outspokenness was lauded as "awesome," "amazing," and a symbol of pride by many women, Chinese or not.² In short, her willingness to break the silence surrounding periods and menstruation was an effort celebrated as heroic. The fanfare from speaking out about a regular bodily function almost all women possess demonstrates that perhaps, the overall inclination towards period silence is indictive of an issue that is both gendered and stigmatized. In fact, while Yuanhui's comments were celebrated by women, many male critics argued that swimming in a pool while menstruating was "unhealthy and unhygienic."³ There is a myriad of beliefs surrounding menstruation, whether through myths, lore, legends, superstitions, or all things in between. While some beliefs are positive, empowering, or champions menstrual blood as a proud and positive force in society; other beliefs and attitudes complicates how menstruation is viewed, and can even relegate menstruation to secret management outside of the public sphere. In the case of Yuanhui, the transgression of period blood from the personal sphere into the public instigated discomfort from many; and the menstruating individual herself became stigmatized in some communities as 'unhygienic' or dirty. Yuanhui's critics correspond with many discourses surrounding menstruation in contemporary cultures across the world; one that positions periods as a bodily waste that must be managed in shame and secrecy. By revealing her menstruation in a public

¹ Emily Feng, "Uninhibited Chinese Swimmer, Discussing Her Period, Shatters Another Barrier," *The New York Times*, August 16, 2016, , accessed June 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/17/world/asia/china-fu-yuanhui-period-olympics.html>.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

sphere, Yuanhui was consequently framed by many as a polluter, who's bodily discharge infringed on the foundations of a 'clean' public spheres and thus subjected unaware outsiders to the abject horror of 'uncleanliness.'

What is it about menstruation then? As a woman typically menstruates for a significant portion of their lifetime, menstruation can be seen as a universal physiological phenomenon that women⁴ experience, no matter their geographical, material or socio-political location. As such, menstruation transgresses a biological phenomenology, and can shape women's socio-cultural experience and relationships, thus informing how society itself views women. Because menstruation is a significant aspect of a woman's life, it is important to acknowledge the negative perceptions and stigma surrounding the topic as menstruation plays an important role in the construction of womanhood.⁵ Such negative responses to a young Chinese woman publicly addressing an mundane issue raises important questions as to why menstrual blood evokes such passionate social judgments rooted in aversion, disgust, and fear.

Many menstruation related myths and cultural perceptions persist to the present day and influence contemporary attitudes towards women. While stigma can often vary in severity throughout cultures, it frequently enforces the marginalization of women through perceived norms of gender related roles and femininity.⁶ As such stigma exists, determining the nuances of how menstruation has become 'othered' and stigmatized is necessary. Furthermore, its necessary to differentiate universal stigmas surrounding menstruation experienced by women across

⁴ It is important to note that not only women menstruate as genderqueer and transgender men also menstruate. However, this study focuses primarily on cis-women.

⁵ Julie-Marie Strange, "Menstrual Fictions: Languages of Medicine and Menstruation, C. 1850–1930," *Womens History Review* 9, no. 3 (2000): 607-610, doi:10.1080/09612020000200260.

⁶ Inga T. Winkler and Virginia Roaf, "Taking the Dirty Bloody Linen Out of the Closet – Menstrual Hygiene as a Priority for Achieving Gender Equality," *Cardozo Journal of Law and Gender* 21, no. 1 (March 17, 2015): pg. 1.

different culture from the specific cultural perspectives that may limit women's participation in society through the perpetuated negative stereotypes of menstruation as being unsanitary and embarrassing.⁷

Narratives and experiences of menstruation are often demonstrated through what cultural perspectives construe as feminine. Through my research on this topic, I have found that contemporary studies on menstrual experiences in China to be sparse, with the majority of Chinese menstrual studies related to psychological or epidemiology studies in the early 2000s. Because China is a country that has rapidly developed economically and politically in the last half century, there is a necessity for further studies into how modern Chinese women experience menstruation in the country. Further, while there are a wide range of menstrual related practices, many traditional attitudes towards menstruation persist in contemporary Chinese society. Traditionally, Chinese society views all body refuse as "dirty" because it is rejected by the body and ejected from the body by natural and normal systems.⁸ Because the pervasive negative symbolism associated with menstruation constitute a problematic meaning of menstrual blood in the public realm, there must be research on the menstrual experiences of Chinese women and how it informs the treatment of women in society as it impacts upon their personal experiences of gender and bodily alienation. The association of menstrual blood with secrecy and concealment may limit a menstruating woman's power to conduct various social activities without adhering to the stigmatized attitudes about menstruation.⁹ Because how society views

⁷ Paula Weideger, *Menstruation and Menopause: The Physiology and Psychology, the Myth and the Reality* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1980), 85-89.

⁸ Charlotte Furth and Ch'en Shu-Yueh. "Chinese Medicine and the Anthropology of Menstruation in Contemporary Taiwan". *Medical Anthropology Quarterly, New Series* 6, no. 1 (1992): 30-33, accessed July 21, 2018, doi:10.1525/maq.1992.6.1.02a00030.

⁹ Lisandra Rodriguez White, "The Function of Ethnicity, Income Level, and Menstrual Taboos in Postmenarcheal Adolescents' Understanding of Menarche and Menstruation," *Sex Roles* 68, no. 1-2 (2012): pg. 65, doi:10.1007/s11199-012-0166-y.

menstruation is often an indicator of how they view women broadly, menstruation related stigmas can create institutional challenges that obstruct women from full enjoyment and participation in cultural and social activities due to the stereotypes concerning menstruation. Thus, menstruation stigma and cultural rules of conduct must be adequately considered in the cultural context of China in order to discern the discriminatory cultural factors that may impact the experiences of livelihoods of women.

Due to the specific circumstances that China as a nation has experienced in the past century; from dynastic rule, to military control through various regional factions, to the Communist regime in the Mao and post-Mao era, history and tradition play a specific role in determining cultural attitudes towards menstruation.¹⁰ Menstruation has not been extensively explored and analyzed through a cultural and human rights lens despite some medical related studies that many Chinese women experience health-seeking avoidance behaviors when concerning menstruation and abnormal menstrual patterns.¹¹ By examining attitudes and cultural perceptions towards the female body and menstruation as indicators of women's substantive equality within China, this study will add to the current body of literature concerning menstrual stigma and build upon how stigmatization in society adversely effects participation from women.

This research project aims to examine the stigma and beliefs surrounding menstruation within the regional context of contemporary China in its national capital: Beijing. Specifically, this study seeks to answer how lack of knowledge, stigma, silence and misinformation among young women in Beijing informs attitudes about menstruation and the female body. This study

¹⁰ Susan L. Mann, "The Body in Medicine, Art, and Sport," *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, 2011, 90-92, accessed December 12, 2018, doi:10.1017/cbo9781139013307.006.

¹¹ Catherine So-Kum Tang, Danni Yuen-Lan Yeung, and Antoinette Marie Lee, "Psychosocial Correlates of Emotional Responses to Menarche among Chinese Adolescent Girls," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 33, no. 3 (2003): 196-200, accessed June 27, 2018, doi:10.1016/s1054-139x(03)00049-1.

will furthermore ask how stigma in this cultural context inform women's perception of their menstruation and femininity, and how these beliefs can be negative or positive in a socio-cultural context.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The intention to conduct this study was due to the lack of qualitative studies in the experiences of menstruating women in China. This study intends to bring to light the perspectives and experiences of menstruation for Chinese women, and in doing, gain a larger cultural understanding of how women experience menstruation. While menstruation remains a largely stigmatized process around the world, cultural and social influences are important factors in differentiating the varied experiences women experience in certain contexts.

Because I aimed to unpack the stigmatized experiences of menstruating women in China, this study is grounded in the history of works by scholars writing on stigma theory, objectification theory, socio-cultural studies, and the impact of these factors on experiences of women around the world. This literature review, therefore, covers the main aspects of stigma theory in a wide range of cultural contexts in order to ascertain whether cultural context is a generally important factor. It is split into three parts. The first part presents a summary of Erving Goffman's theory on stigma, as well as current and past contributions of theorists utilizing stigma theory to study menstruation. The second part is a review of studies related to stigma and objectification theory and how experiences inform how women participate in society; and the third reviews socio-cultural findings of scholars focused on menstruation, culture, and taboos.

Stigma and the Menstrual Mark

The term *stigma* itself originates from the ancient Greeks, who used it as a physical branding to mark the devalued and deviant status of criminals, traitors, and slaves.¹² Erving Goffman, who authored the seminal 1963 book on stigma, defines stigma, in the modern sense, as a dynamic process of devaluation that significantly discredits an individual in the eyes of others.¹³ Stigma is often associated with negative social attitudes and discriminatory behavior towards individuals marked by unwanted condition or characteristics.¹⁴ Goffman considers stigma's discrediting effects as a constituent factor in how an individual is constructed as someone who is "quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak," therefore reducing the individual "from a whole and usual person" to a "tainted, discounted one."¹⁵ Goffman posits that there are three different types of stigma: abominations of the body (such as physical deformities), blemishes of one's character, and then the tribal stigma of race, nation, class, and religion.¹⁶ Stigma theory can be useful in this study by understanding how women react to the sudden nature of reaching menarche as well as the management of an act perceived as stigmatized in the public realm. According to Goffman, certain performances, objects, or people can be associated with social rejection and discreditation.¹⁷ In societies across all cultural landscapes, there are means of categorization in which a complement of attributes and stereotypes are established for each person to be treated as ordinary and natural.¹⁸ These attributes are characterized by social

¹² Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan C. Chrisler, "The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma," *Sex Roles* 68, no. 1-2 (2011): 11, accessed June 12, 2018, doi:10.1007/s11199-011-0052-z.

¹³ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 2-4.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 3

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ *Ibid*, page 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 23.

routines, discourses, and performances which establish routines that can be anticipated by others without “special attention or thought.”¹⁹ Thus, one’s social identity is built on anticipations and normative expectations; and transgressional behavior infringes upon the makeup of expected social intercourse. Goffman theorizes that deeply discrepant behavior breaks social interaction as it prohibits others from anticipating routines, which then engenders discomfort and *stigma*.²⁰

Building on Goffman, social psychologists J. Crocker, B. Major, and C. Steele concluded that the key dimensions of stigma exist as peril (the perceived dangers to others), visibility (the obviousness of the stigma), and controllability (whether the stigma is accidental, congenital, or intentional).²¹ Furthermore, they found that the controllability of such stigma is important, as they influence the degree of rejection stigmatized individuals experience from society.²² Crocker, Major, and Steele found that stigmatized conditions that were uncontrollable were often more accepted, whereas the intentional (or even accidental) display of controllable stigmas can cause a person to be disliked and rejected.²³

Although a natural process, menstruation fits into all three of Goffman’s archetypical stigmas. Based on expected social and behavior anticipations, a social category is established for members of society based on certain characteristics, and menstrual stigma prescribes a largely limited range of accepted anticipations for menstruators. As such, menstruators alter behavior and conduct in public settings around others due to the anticipation that other menstruators will hide their menstruation, and that non-menstruators will negatively construe the transgressional

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid, pg. 2.

²¹ J, Crocker, B. Major, and C, Steele, “Social stigma” In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology 4th Edition*, Vol. 2, Boston: McGraw Hill (1998): pg. 504–553.

²² Ibid, pg 510-512.

²³ Ibid.

nature of menstruation. Several studies in the past few decades have focused on social stigma and menstruation, which will be important to refer to in this study. Rozin and Fallon utilized stigma theory to theorize why certain functions and actions can elicit feelings of disgust in 1987, in which disgust was used as a model for cognitive affective linkages as well as a model for acquisition of values and culture.²⁴ In 1999, Rozin et al. conducted another study on disgust and sensitivity, in which various items, including a wrapped tampon, was presented and participants were asked to hold the item, touch it to their lips, and touch it with their tongue. Rozin et al. found that 3% of participants (male and female) refused to touch the wrapped tampon, 46% refused to touch it to their lips, and 69% refused to touch it with their tongue.²⁵ This study is important in showcasing feelings of disgust and aversion in stigma studies, as it suggests stigmatized bodies and conditions as a site of contamination. Another important study in 2000 by Kowalski and Chapple focused primarily on menstruation as a stigma and examined the effects of social stigma. This experiment examined menstrual stigma and its effects on impression management concerns of menstruating and non-menstruating college age women, and further hypothesized that if individual impressions affect how people perceive and treat others, menstruating women would police how they are perceived through impression management.²⁶ In-depth interviews and surveys were conducted by men who were either aware or unaware if the participant was menstruating and the research findings indicated that female participants believed interviewers had a positive impression of them when they were unaware of their

²⁴ Paul Rozin and April E. Fallon, "A Perspective on Disgust.," *Psychological Review* 94, no. 1 (1987): 23-41, accessed September 29, 2018, doi:10.1037/0033-295x.94.1.23.

²⁵ Paul Rozin et al., "Individual Differences in Disgust Sensitivity: Comparisons and Evaluations of Paper-and-Pencil versus Behavioral Measures," *Journal of Research in Personality* 33, no. 3 (1999): 330-351, doi:10.1006/jrpe.1999.2251.

²⁶ Robin M. Kowalski and Tracy Chapple, "The Social Stigma of Menstruation: Fact or Fiction?" *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (March 1, 2000): 74-80, accessed November 22, 2018, doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.2000.tb01023.x.

menstrual status.²⁷ Consequently, participants who believed that interviewers who were aware of their menstruation adopted stigmatized behaviors and identities, or “self-presentational resignation,” and subsequently categorized the interaction as negative.²⁸ Thus, Kowalski and Chapple found that women rated a higher amount of motivated and confidence in self presentation when others were unaware of their menstruation, and furthermore adapted stigmatized and resigned personalities when others were aware.²⁹ Roberts and Goldenberg conducted a study in 2002 that also sought to discover how individuals rated women based on menstruation and menstrual products.³⁰ Female and male participants were paired with undercover females to work on an unrelated assignment, in which the undercover female would reach into her bag and 'accidentally' drop either a wrapped tampon or hair clip.³¹ Roberts and Goldenberg found that participants ranked women who dropped the wrapped tampon significantly lower in both competence and likeability, alike Rozin's study conducted on disgust and aversion to certain items and statuses.³² In light of these important studies, it seems Fan Yuanhui's critics and celebrators adhere to various processes concerning menstruation. The research findings of these three studies demonstrate that menstrual blood can fit into all of Goffman's empirical categories, and further demonstrate that generalized associations such as hygiene products can also cause devaluation in women.

The Objectified Feminine: Objectification Theory and Menstrual Stigma

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Tomi-Ann Roberts et al., ““Feminine Protection”: The Effects of Menstruation on Attitudes Towards Women,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (2002): 131-139, accessed November 22, 2018, doi:10.1111/1471-6402.00051.

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

Why then, does a benign bodily process evoke such feelings of disgust at all? As previously indicated in the three experiments I referenced, stigmatization of menstruation often invokes devaluation and loss of credit. As most menstruators are women, the stigmatized status of menstruation brings about a rather concerning problem: does menstruation stigma stem from attitudes about what women ought to be like? Objectification has become a rather important theory in the realm of menstrual studies due to the lengths in which participants in the previously mentioned studies were self-conscious, embarrassed, or disgusted by the presence of menstrual fluids or generalized associations.³³ I will reference an overview of objectification theory in scholars and how it has been attributed to menstruation in the past. As such, objectification theory can be useful in my particular study in evaluating how women's experiences of menstruation translate into how they experience and perform their gender.

Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler references objectification in "The Menstrual Mark" to explain why certain women are self-conscious about menstruation and go to unusual lengths to manage their periods in secrecy.³⁴ Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler found that in cultures where women are routinely sexually objectified, women internalize objectifications of their bodies and view themselves through the lens of a critical male gaze, therefore leading them to alter self-presentation and hide indicators that can possibly expose one's self to stigmatization.³⁵ Roberts and Goldenberg also notes this issue in the previously discussed study, as they theorize that menstruation serves as "an emblem of women's inferiority."³⁶ This study also provides a useful framework for understanding female identity construction and how menstruation related

³³ Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, "The Menstrual Mark" pg. 9-18.

³⁴ Ibid, pg. 13.

³⁵ Ibid, pg. 11

³⁶ Goldenberg and Roberts, "Feminine Protection," 131-139.

challenges can be informed by gender roles within a cultural community.³⁷ The measures that women take to conceal and control menstruation, and hence their association with nature, thus can be argued to become their passage to civilization. In this work, Roberts and Goldenberg utilize feminist theory to postulate menstruation as a stigmatizing mark on a woman's identity construction.³⁸ They formulate the principles of "terror management theory" to explain that menstruation function as existential angst for women due to its frequent framing as a stigma. The social stigma attached to menstruation influences how women conceal and control menstruation in order to conform to social standards of femininity.³⁹ This indicates that women are not only frequently prohibited from the full enjoyment of social activities, but also internalize expectations of femininity and stigmatizes one's own behaviors during menstruation.

Furthermore, primary studies of menstrual experiences of adolescent and young adult girls demonstrate that their primary concern is concealing their sanitary products from male peers.⁴⁰ Utilizing objectification theory and how menstruation signals itself emblematically in social contexts, Roberts and Goldenberg argues that in traditionally patriarchal contexts, a women's inferiority is defined by attributes that distinguishes them as female.⁴¹ As such, features that differential women from men are attributed to enigmatic, problematic, or derogative, thus stigmatizing specifically female-sex attributes like menstruation, lactation, and childbirth. In relation to stigma, Goffman's categorization of tribal stigmas refers to stigmas that are related to

³⁷ Jamie Goldenberg and Tomi-Ann Roberts, "The beast within the beauty: An existential perspective on the objectification and condemnation of women" in Greenberg et al. *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology*. New York: Guilford Publications, (2010): pg. 79

³⁸ *Ibid*, pg 81.

³⁹ *Ibid*

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Arveda Kissling, "'Thats Just a Basic Teen-age Rule': Girls' Linguistic Strategies for Managing the Menstrual Communication Taboo," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 24, no. 4 (1996): 292-309, accessed November 12, 2018, doi:10.1080/00909889609365458.

⁴¹ Goldenberg and Roberts, "The beauty within the beast," pg. 102.

identity and attributed to marginalized groups based on characteristics such as race, gender, or sexual orientation (not limited to just these categories).⁴² Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler also refer to tribal identities, as menstruation often functions as an indicator and trait of “femaleness.” Menstruation becomes a vital identity trait as it is the essence of femaleness, and thus differentiates them from males. Terror management theory (TMT) stems from these aspects of objectification. From the previously discussed study that Roberts and Goldenberg conducted on the hairclip and the tampon, the negative responses to indicators of women’s bodily functions are derived from anxieties towards the “animalistic” and “creaturely” mortality of women’s bodies.⁴³ TMT hypothesizes that women’s bodies exhibit more aspects of ‘creatureliness’ (menstrual fluids, childbirth, lactation), objectifying women helps conceal these mortal anxieties and shifts the value of women towards objective traits such as attractiveness, cleanliness, propriety, and etc.⁴⁴ Because TMT implies that the motivations of objectification are existential, it informs how women are treated and socialized, as natural bodily reactions and processes are often treated as unattractive, thus resulting in un-natural and artificial forms of value and attractiveness to be favored in objectification culture.

Many researchers in psychological, sociology, and feminist studies now are considering the effect of objectification on how women view themselves when their natural bodies are incompatible with artificial traits society tends to prefer.⁴⁵ Johnston-Robledo has found that college aged women with high objectification tendencies typically prefer to not menstruate, or

⁴² Goffman, *Stigma*, pg: 3.

⁴³ Jamie Goldenberg and Tomi-Ann Roberts, "The birthmark: An existential account of the objectification of women. In R. M. Calogero, S. Tantleff-Dunn, & J. K. Thompson (Eds.), *Self-objectification in women: Causes, consequences, and counteractions* (pp. 77–99). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association (2010). doi:10.1037/12304-004.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*,

⁴⁵ Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, “The Menstrual Mark,” pg. 9-18

eliminate the occurrence of menses through continuous oral contraception.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Young argues that such objectifying views of women and menstruation positions menstrual cycles as a source of oppression for women due to the shame and stigma attached to menses and the challenges women face when menstruating in the public space.⁴⁷

In relation to how objectification can inform stigmatized views on menstruation as well as poor self-image, Earnshaw and Quinn's work can inform the actual consequences of experiencing stigma and objectification. Psychologists D. Quinn and V. Earnshaw expanded upon this study through the psychology of concealable stigmatized identities and their impact on mental health and development.⁴⁸ Quinn and Earnshaw argue that stigma exists in three parts: through internalized stigma, experienced discrimination, and the anticipation of stigma.⁴⁹ In their study, Quinn and Earnshaw found that stigma contributed to the construction of identity and produced psychological outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and stress.⁵⁰ These psychological outcomes then contribute to behavioral outcomes such as decreased, delayed, or interrupted healthcare utilization, non-adherence to medical treatment, and decreased overall health.⁵¹ This study indicates that women may experience a combination of these outcomes due to the stigmatized nature of menstruation and construct a separate "self" to interface with the subdued, anti-stigmatic public realm. To further the extent of objectification and self-objectification of

⁴⁶ Ingrid Johnston-Robledo et al., "Reproductive Shame: Self-Objectification and Young Womens Attitudes Toward Their Reproductive Functioning," *Women & Health* 46, no. 1 (2007): 25-39, doi:10.1300/j013v46n01_03.

⁴⁷ Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing like a Girl" and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 20-25.

⁴⁸ Diane M. Quinn and Valerie A. Earnshaw, "Concealable Stigmatized Identities and Psychological Well-Being," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 7, no. 1 (2013): 40, doi:10.1111/spc3.12005. doi:10.1111/spc3.12005.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pg 42

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 41

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

menstruators, in a study on women who reported severe PMS, Ussher found that that women understood, experienced, and interpreted PMS symptoms as violations of the norms for “appropriate” femininity (for example: resisting the need to nurture others at one’s own expense, displaying anger or annoyance one would usually conceal, experiencing one’s body as unruly or out-of-control).⁵² Furthermore, Ussher argues that a woman’s tendency to pathologize premenstrual experiences and to apply the PMS label to themselves represents a form of behavioral self-policing that allows them to distance themselves from their embodied selves in an effort to retain their femininity.⁵³

These tendencies all paint a rather problematic experience for menstruators, as stigmatization and objectification frequently cause modified behaviors and negative emotions. As such, these are pivotally important studies to my research on menstrual experiences in Beijing, China, as the negative experiences associated with menstruation can also impact how women are treated in public space. Patkar, Aidara, and Winkler argue that menstruation stigma is a significant barrier to women as “social restrictions, beliefs and myths that influence the management of menstruation and, as a result, affect the daily lives of women and girls” and that “women and girls are subjected to various religious, food-related, domestic or sexual prohibitions, which often lead to further isolation or stigmatization.”⁵⁴ In reference to how menstruation affects social barriers, there are many underlying factors at the community and individual level that can cause stigma to surface; and often, they are perpetuated by cultural

⁵² Jane M. Ussher, "Premenstrual Syndrome and Self-policing: Ruptures in Self-Silencing Leading to Increased Self-Surveillance and Blaming of the Body," *Social Theory & Health* 2, no. 3 (2004): 257-261, doi:10.1057/palgrave.sth.8700032.

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Archana Patkar, Rockaya Aidara, and Inga T. Winkler, "From Taboo to Empowerment: Menstruation and Gender Equality," *OpenDemocracy*, May 27, 2016, , accessed June 10, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/openglobalrights/archana-patkar-rockaya-aidara-inga-t-winkler/from-taboo-to-empowerment-menstruation>.

values and attitudes about menstruation. Additionally, stigma and discrimination relating to menstruation undermine not only policy efforts to increase gender parity, but also significantly impact how everyday people *experience* their gender. Because menstruation often occurs in women, objectification theory and TMT provide a framework of how menstrual experiences can enforce specific social roles for women, and either aid or discourage their substantive equality in society.

Culture, Stigma, and Contextualizing Menstruation in China

In Kelland, Paphitis, and Macleod's "Contemporary Phenomenology of Menstruation,"

they note that "the menstruating body is always lived in situation—the negative symbolic associations made with menstruation and the different socio-material conditions in which women live can lead to the alienation of women both from their bodies and from others, as well as a restriction of women's freedom to move about comfortably in the public domain."⁵⁵ This indicates that there are multiple factors that contribute to menstruation stigma, and through public discourses and cultural norms, experiences of menstruation stigma can vary throughout different cultures and that furthermore, how cultures perceive menstruation can inform how they view women in general. Associations surrounding menstruation can be found across all regions, borders, and cultures. I have outlined various studies on stigma, menstrual stigma, and objectification theory, yet it must be noted that socio-cultural and outside influences stemming from a geographic or locational point may also influence how and *why* menstrual stigmas are experienced. While menstruation is a normal biological event for the majority of women,

⁵⁵ Lindsay Kelland, Sharli Paphitis, and Catriona Macleod. "A Contemporary Phenomenology Of Menstruation: Understanding the Body in Situation and as Situation in Public Health Interventions to Address Menstruation-related Challenges." *Women's Studies International Forum* 63 (2017): 33-27. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2017.09.004.

ideologies about what menstruation *is* or *represents* has varied from menstruation being an undesirable factor of female biological function, to menstrual blood magical and empowering properties. These various associations that occur in cultural settings can be informative of whether certain taboos can stigmatize or celebrate menstruation. A taboo differs from stigma, as Gottlieb and Buckley situate menstruation as a cultural event and that menstrual taboos exists as “a wide range of distinct rules for conduct regarding menstruation.”⁵⁶ Conduct regarding menstruation can possibly stem from pre-existing patriarchal cultural norms that position menstruation in relation to either gender roles, or community roles. Other scholars in this field such as Kissling and Williams postulate that as menstruation moves beyond a biological event, attitudes and meanings around menstruation can be varied depending on cultural contexts, and experiences may further be ambiguous within specific cultures.⁵⁷ However, most scholars who engage critically with menstrual taboos believe that how menstruation is situated in cultures is important, as how individuals or cultures view menstruation informs how they view women more broadly.

As such, its necessary to examine the cultural context of China and what culturally relevant stereotypes, taboos, and processes may imprint on the menstrual experiences for women. Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler examine both approaches to menstruation and assert that the stigma of menstruation is through a variety of sociocultural routes. These routes are typically negative attitudes surrounding menstruation through public discourses such as media transmission, cultural norms that have progressed through generational knowledge, and

⁵⁶ Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb, "A Critical Appraisal of Theories of Menstrual Symbolism," in *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*. Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, (1988): pg. 7.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Arveda Kissling, "Bleeding out Loud: Communication about Menstruation," *Feminism & Psychology* 6, no. 4 (November 1, 1996): pg. 481, doi:10.1177/0959353596064002.

perpetuation of stigma through silence and avoidance.⁵⁸ This can be seen through the mythical tales of menarche that abound Chinese history and characterize menstrual blood from being unstable to infectious. Tan, Haththotuwa, and Fraser state that in Pre-modern China, menstrual blood was often regarded as the most dangerous bodily refuse as outward flowing blood is associated with pain, death, and bad luck.⁵⁹ This belief also affected the public realm, as women are often told to not wash their clothes with the males in their family; they should not sit on a chair that the husband will occupy when they are menstruating; and furthermore, barred from attending public temples, ceremonies, and ancestral halls when menstruating.⁶⁰ These beliefs are also explored by Charlotte Furth, who found that in Chinese traditional medicine and Confucianist beliefs, women were also associated with *yin* in the yin yang dyad. Blood from the female body was regarded as an “instability in boundaries: now penetrated sexually or chilled by invading winds, leaking and draining what cannot be contained.”⁶¹ Furth’s history survey also indicates that Song dynasty doctors believed that menstrual symptoms must be regulated and categorized into pattern analysis based on yin/yang, cold/hot, and depletion/repletion.⁶² Irregularities in the menstrual cycle were classified as infertility, unfaithfulness, or even sometimes sorcery.⁶³ These beliefs in Chinese history provide a revealing portrait of the perception of women in traditional Chinese society and can inform this study on the perceptions surrounding current menstruation stigma through traditional taboos.

⁵⁸ Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, “The Menstrual Mark,” pg. 9-18.

⁵⁹ Delfin A. Tan, Rohana Haththotuwa, and Ian S. Fraser, "Cultural Aspects and Mythologies Surrounding Menstruation and Abnormal Uterine Bleeding," *Best Practice & Research Clinical Obstetrics & Gynaecology* 40 (2017): 121-133, doi:10.1016/j.bpobgyn.2016.09.015.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*

⁶¹ Charlotte Furth. *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History*. CA: University of California (1999): pg. 32

⁶² *Ibid*, pg. 72

⁶³ *Ibid*.

Since menstrual blood is regarded as an expulsion of impurities, menstruation is also regarded as bodily instability and the loss of vital soul essence. Tan's analysis of Furth's historical survey concluded that gender-linked beliefs of mythological, cultural, and religious (mis)interpretations of the menstrual process in various traditional societies persist in present-day society as the portrayal of menstruation in menstrual product advertisements consistently reflects traditional negative myths with the persistent message of "tainted femininity" and the constant need to conceal this unclean attribute.⁶⁴ Menstruation should become "invisible and irrelevant if properly hidden or shameful and unclean if not."⁶⁵ The association of menstruation with the yin/yang dyad seems to continue to construct attitudes towards menstruation through cultural myths and stigmatized beliefs passed down through generations. Nancy Chen, Charlotte Furth, and Susan Browning all seek to illustrate that physiology informs a wide array of cultural beliefs, whether about society, marriage, or love.⁶⁶ Believed by many scholars to be unique to Chinese culture, bodily function has served as the central metaphor for social and political life. These cultural beliefs about physiological differences shape the way gender is defined and create symbolic systems in which ritual avoidances and taboos symbolically manage social boundaries. Menstruation is inexorably gendered and sexed in China, always exerting itself as definitively characteristic of sexuality as it is linked to reproduction and fecundity. In relation to objectification, Mann argues that historical views of the body in Chinese medicine have profoundly shaped bodily and gender identity in contemporary China.⁶⁷ Femininity and expectations of women are also embedded within vastly different representations of beauty in

⁶⁴ Tan et al, "Cultural Aspects and Mythologies," pg 129.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Susan Brownell and J Wasserstrom, "Blood, Qi, and the Gendered Body," *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*. Oakland: UC Press (2002), pg. 287-329.

⁶⁷ Mann. "The body," pg. 83-102.

contemporary China. Eva Kit Wah Man discusses how female bodies function in China and how expectations of women and ‘being a Chinese woman’ is deeply embedded in historical ideals of beauty rooted in cleanliness, self-restraint, and docility.⁶⁸ While these representations of women have evolved, adhering to standards of femininity is often tied in with political and national contexts, therefore instilling a sense of pride for Chinese women to be ‘feminine.’⁶⁹ How Chinese people adhere to standards of femininity and menstrual taboos can be explored further through moral positioning. Moral positioning, or ‘face,’ is how people uphold intrapersonal and interpersonal obligations.⁷⁰ As such, one’s status as a ‘moral’ community member is deeply connected with the ebb and flow of said community, and ‘losing face’ is equivalent to breaking a social taboo. Fei Xiaotong’s anthropological text on China discusses how ‘face’ functions as the most basic social currency in Chinese society, and can be valuable in investigating how internalizing social stigmas may be an intrinsic part of the ‘face’ moral system.⁷¹ Fei emphasizes the importance of adhering to traditional rituals and practices in Chinese society, and can be valuable in analyzing how Chinese women particularly internalize and organize stigma.⁷²

Theoretical Framework

In order to facilitate a rather well-rounded approach to the menstrual experiences of women in China, I will be utilizing Goffman’s stigma theory along with the follow up studies on

⁶⁸ Eva Kit Wah Man, "Female Bodies in China: Literati Fantasies, Iron Girls and Olympics Hoopla," *Artistic Visions and the Promise of Beauty Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures*, 2017, 117-118, doi:10.1007/978-3-319-43893-1_8.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Lawrence Hsin Yang and Arthur Kleinman, "'Face' and the Embodiment of Stigma in China: The Cases of Schizophrenia and AIDS," *Social Science & Medicine* 67, no. 3 (April 15, 2008): 400-402, accessed June 25, 2018, doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2008.03.011.

⁷¹ Fei Xiaotong, "From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society. A Translation of Fei Xiaotong’s Xiaotong Zhongguo.," trans. Kate Xiao Zhou, Gary G. Hamilton, and Wang Zeng, *Social Forces* 73, no. 3 (1995): 1156-60, doi:10.2307/2580590.

⁷² Ibid.

objectification and TMT in menstrual stigma in order to analysis my findings and discussion. It will be beneficial to provide distinction on stigmatic processes using these theoretical frameworks. As these theories have been utilized in Western settings, I will also utilize theories on taboos, femininity, and ‘face’ in the context of China in order to discuss the various menstrual stigmas (or lack of stigma) that women experience. These theoretical frameworks will also inform discussion on cultural communities and their understanding of moral standing, and how moral statuses shift and change due to internalization and ritualization of social stigmas.

CHAPTER III: Methodology

This thesis draws on field research conducted in Beijing city between August and November 2018. I interviewed 25 female sex individuals ranging from the age of 19 to 52 from various backgrounds. Two women had medical backgrounds and medical knowledge due to their chosen profession, but most were not in patient-facing professions.

I chose to focus my research on Beijing with no discrimination to the administrative districts within the city. My choice of the capitol city mostly stems from a) its large population size and b) the lack of concrete studies on menstrual experiences of women in any specific region or demographic in China. As such, Beijing was chosen for its position as the country capital since the formation of the People's Republic of China, and how urbanized the area is in comparison with provinces such as Jiangsu or Xinjiang. This is to establish the narrative of menstrual experiences in a relatively well-known city, and perhaps incite further interest in filling the gap of menstrual studies in China to future scholars.

I advertised for interviews through the usage of WeChat posts, a popular social media application in China, as well as asking friends based in Beijing to share my interview request through WeChat. Twenty-five women responded to the interview request and I interviewed each woman separately in private locations without onlookers or passersby (with the exception of two women who were associates, who requested to interview together). This research is not to find a large sample of respondents to build an representative experience of all women, but instead focus on interviews at length with participants to find thematic trends on the experiences and narratives of menstrual experiences in these particular women.

For my interviews, I asked each women a series of identical questions and asked them to talk at length about their lived experiences and perceptions towards menstruation. I chose

specific questions about augmented behavior in social settings, when men are present, and how the respective women choose to view and manage their menstruation to see if there were any trends concerning stigma, shame, and cultural taboos. Interviewees were asked of reactions and attitudes they faced when experiencing their first menses; how they have perceived their own menstruation from the beginning of their menses to their current age; abnormalities they have experienced and their process for management; limitations they may have experienced due to menstruation (social and cultural); and how they perceive others view their menstruation.

Additionally, I asked women questions concerning their openness with communicating their menstruation and their processes for menstrual management. This was to understand if women felt any restrictions or stigma when having to communicate their menstruation to others. All of these questions were to discover the various experiences of menstruation in Beijing women.

Limitations

Due to the small number of participants (N=25), the results of this study are not broadly generalizable to Chinese women in Beijing as a group, nor Chinese women as a whole. It must also be conceded that the recruitment of women can also be limiting, as internet communities are often populated by young people. Therefore, while there were a few older participants, there may be significantly different experiences in certain demographics regarding menstruation (and even lack of menstruation in menopausal women) that this study cannot account for. Furthermore, my advertisement asked for women interested in answering questions on menstruation and their experiences, which may inversely espouse participants that are more comfortable talking about menstrual experiences, versus those that feel extremely uncomfortable or embarrassed about the issue.

However, the collection of narrative data allows us access to complex and multifaceted personal experiences that may not be accessible through quantitative instruments. This small sample size is not meant to produce robust sociometric conclusions, but instead allow this research to examine the dynamic interplay between understandings and meanings constructed through personal accounts. As such, these stories are meant to be understood as lived experiences of menstrual management and cultural influences in order to gain insight previously unstudied on Chinese women's experiences, their conceptualizations of menstruation, and the social taboos and stigma they encounter. Therefore, further research on how Chinese women in Beijing (and in China as a whole) experience menstruation is recommended.

CHAPTER IV: Findings and Discussion

This chapter will present the findings of a qualitative analysis of women's experiences with menstruation and discuss these experiences in relation to management, perceived/internalized stigmas, and perceived/practiced taboos. The intent of this study is to illuminate female experiences of menstruation in Beijing, China. A close analysis of each participant's response uncovered specific themes and trends in which these women experienced menstruation, and the different ways they view and manage menstruation in their private and social life. When studying the coded themes and trends as a whole, it becomes clear that there are many tensions and limitations women experience with menstruation in Beijing, China.

I will first detail the demographic data of the participants in this study. In section 1, demographic details of participants will be listed to articulate the scope of the interviews. In section 2, findings pertaining to the respondent's conceptualization of menstruation and their personal identity in relation to menstruation will be detailed. In section 3, I will detail how women participate (or are limited) in the public realm through communication and management choices, and finally in section 4, I'll discuss the theme of 'civility,' culture, and expectations of contemporary Chinese women.

Demographics of Participants

At the beginning of each interview, all 25 participants were asked to report on basic demographic information such as age, relationship status, and nationality. All participants live in Beijing, China but come from various backgrounds, whether they were work transplants or attending university in Beijing. This demographic information is important, as the choice in Beijing reflects on a decision to be inclusive of the diverse population in China's capital city. The age of

participants ranged from 18 to 52, showcasing the variety of generations that may have different experiences surrounding how they experience and perceive menstruation. The uncapped range was designed to allow women of all ages and backgrounds to share their experiences and stories, which can inform how the narrative of menstruation in China pieces together in the contemporary context. While there are diverse populations of international transplants and ethnic minorities in China, it should be noted that all participants were of Chinese nationality. Demographic questions were only asked to inform how these women *experienced* menstruation and managed their own menstruation. As such, the age of first menses is incredibly relevant as most participants reflected that the occurrence of menarche during their adolescent period had a significant impact in how they conceptualized and viewed menstruation longitudinally.

‘Becoming a Woman’: Impressions of Menarche and Self

In Chandra-Mouli and Patel’s comprehensive mapping of knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs surrounding menarche, they found that adolescent girls typically receive their primary source of information regarding menarche from mothers.⁷³ However, this information often came too-little and too-late, and further distilled generational misconceptions about menstruation.⁷⁴ As such, the experiences that many girls face at the time of their first menarche greatly shapes their meanings of self-care, understandings of menstruation, and further, social attitudes about menstrual processes and women. When the participants in my study were asked about their experiences surrounding their first menses, seventeen out of twenty-five participants discussed negative and unpleasant experiences pertaining to their first menses. These experiences ranged

⁷³ Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli and Sheila Vipul Patel, "Mapping the Knowledge and Understanding of Menarche, Menstrual Hygiene and Menstrual Health among Adolescent Girls in Low- and Middle-income Countries," *Reproductive Health* 14, no. 30 (March 01, 2017): 2, accessed December 19, 2018, doi:10.1186/s12978-017-0293-6.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 2.

from anxiety and fear due to no previous knowledge on menstruation, to embarrassment and apprehension with how one might receive help from their elders. Many explained how their first experience of menses impacted their longitudinal treatment, view, and management of menstruation. The ways menstruation was first communicated to them (or not) and the ways peers and adults treated menstruation often shaped how negatively or positively they viewed menstruation currently as adult women. One respondent recalls: “I think it was just unfamiliar, but I was afraid and anxious. I did know about it, but I wasn’t completely ready, so I guess that’s why I was anxious.”⁷⁵ While another recalls:

I don’t think I knew what my period was... I hadn’t spoken to anyone about it either. When I first started my period, I remember feeling mortified because my mother was away from home and it was only me and my dad. I couldn’t tell my dad because it was too embarrassing so I went to my auntie for help. I thought I was sick, and therefore it made me scared of how I would tell my dad at all that there was blood in my underwear. I thought, what if he thinks I’ve been up to no good?⁷⁶

Almost all seventeen of the participants who experienced negative encounters with their first menses mentioned their embarrassment at seeing menstrual blood on their underwear and fear on how to communicate to authority figures (such as teachers or parents) their ordeal without judgement. A common trend amongst the participants with negative experiences of menses were references to assumptions about menstruation as being negative, harmful, or disgusting. Another common trend amongst participants was their apprehension at communication their menses to their teachers, peers, or parental figures. This echoes the findings of many psychological

⁷⁵ Interview with participant, October 3, 2018.

⁷⁶ Interview with participant, October 10th, 2018.

surveys of menstruation in China: Tang, Yeung, and Lee conducted a psychological study on the psychosocial and cultural factors influencing expectations of menarche and found that 25% of urban adolescent girls in his survey were completely unprepared for menarche and that 54.8% of them experienced emotions of embarrassment and worry.⁷⁷ This demonstrates that outside stigmatization of menstruation can lead to lack of knowledge when encountering menses and self-stratification.

One participant who had previously learned about menstruation from her mother before her first menses still recalled her first experience with menstruation “traumatizing”:

I remember my period had suddenly came when I was at school, and the bottom of my pants were entirely wet. I was so embarrassed and didn't move from my seat the whole day. I remember sitting in the classroom and because I didn't want my teacher or other people to see that I had stained my pants. At lunch time, I wanted to stay at my seat and pretend to study but my teacher made us all leave the classroom to eat. We weren't allowed to go get our normal shoes or jacket from our lockers during school hours, so I went to lunch and carried a textbook behind me to hide my backside so no one could see the stain. I didn't want to tell my teacher and I remember being anxious for the day to be over so I could run home. I felt embarrassed, traumatized, and so very ashamed.⁷⁸

As shown by Roberts and Goldenberg, there is a strong societal stigma that informs women and adolescent girls to not talk about menstruation in public.⁷⁹ But many of these women reported never having knowledge of menstruation prior to their menarche. So why then, do so many of

⁷⁷ Catherine So-Kum Tang, Dannii Yuen-Lan Yeung, and AntyoINETTE Marie Lee, "Psychosocial Correlates of Emotional Responses to Menarche among Chinese Adolescent Girls," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 33, no. 3 (2003): 197-199, accessed September 20, 2018, doi:10.1016/s1054-139x(03)00049-1.

⁷⁸ Interview with participant, October 4th, 2018.

⁷⁹ Roberts and Goldenberg, "Feminine Protection," 135-139.

them respond to menstruation with emotional processes such as shame and embarrassment? A respondent recalled a similar menarche story to the aforementioned and was hesitant to give this story at first due to the “great embarrassment she experiences even when she thinks about.”⁸⁰

The woman recounted:

“When I first got my period, I didn’t know what was happening until my teacher took me aside and told me I had a stain on the back of my pants. My mother had never told me what menstruation was until after I got it, so I didn’t know anything about it. My teacher gave me a sanitary napkin which I kind of scared to use then because I had never opened one and seen what it looked like. I remember walking to the washroom and a few boys in the hallway saying ‘girls are so gross and dirty,’ and remarking that I had soiled my pants. I was so embarrassed and felt so ashamed and scared that they would tell everyone I soiled or wet my pants.”⁸¹

Much of this can be explored through the examination of objectification theory and how we construct a gender normative in society. Socially, bodily functions are often associated with indicators of gender, and as such, the ways we communicate, conceal, or reveal body parts or functions signifies how gender is performed. In terror management research, there has been demonstrative evidence that pinpoints bodily functions and the female natural body as a primary source of anxiety.⁸² Men tend to have greater confidence and less ambivalence when addressing their bodies, and this typically comes from how gender is socialized to children. Women’s bodies are often conditioned to people as a space of control, in which any anxieties that demonstrate

⁸⁰ Interview with participant, October 4th, 2018.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Christina Royslance, Clay Routledge, and Benjamin Balas, "Treating Objects like Women: The Impact of Terror Management and Objectification on the Perception of Women’s Faces," *Sex Roles* 77, no. 9-10 (March 11, 2017): 595-600, accessed June 25, 2018, doi:10.1007/s11199-017-0747-x

mortality and ‘creatureness’ are obscured.⁸³ For example, one respondent recalls the “mortal terror” she associated with menarche:

“My mother passed away when I was very young, so I never had any close female figures in my life growing up. I didn’t know much about menstruation because it was never taught in the curriculum, and I guess because I’m older, my generation was extremely tight lipped about these types of things. When my first period came, I remember feeling...so very scared about the situation. It came one morning before school, and I remember feeling like I wasn’t courageous enough to talk to my dad about it. While me and my father were close, I never spoke to him about female functions or bodies, and I didn’t feel like we had the type of relationship where I could easily talk to him about this. Because there was blood coming out of my vagina, I remember thinking I must have been sick, but being afraid my father would interpret the situation as me having indiscrete affairs with boys, which I did not have.”⁸⁴

This particular respondent did not have the matrilineal transmission of menarche knowledge that most of the other participants did, and therefore, felt fear in association with menstruation due to her lack of knowledge. Furthermore, the leakage of blood from her body was immediately attributed to “sickness” and associated with “indiscrete affairs” with the opposite gender.

Female gender people are typically objectified and managed so that women’s natural bodies and bodily functions are hidden from the view of the public or otherwise categorized as deviance.

Functions such as menstruation, child-birth, and breast-feeding are typically salient indications of female sex bodies, and therefore, are often neutralized in public discussions in the social realm, by menstruators and non-menstruators. These functions are not only emblematic of

⁸³ Ibid, 603

⁸⁴ Interview with participant, October 6th, 2018.

inferiority to males, but also functions that are concealed. Passage into adulthood is therefore indictive of how young women police their own bodies and react to menarche, in which they become self-aware and conceal biological indicators of their femaleness. As the women with negative responses all felt variations in the attributing of their menstrual fluid to “creatureliness” or disgust; the primary way in which they understood the connotations and social understanding surrounding menstruation was through outside influence during menarche. For example, the same respondent whose mother passed away early recalled:

“I spoke to my homeroom teacher who was female when I got to school first thing in the morning....When I pulled my teacher aside, I told her I was really afraid and if there were any clinics she could recommend since I was bleeding down there. She immediately knew that I was referring to menstrual cycles and told me that I was having my bad luck (*literal translation of dao mei, a Chinese euphemism for menstruation*). She was helpful and gave me a pad she had on her, but scolded me for bringing upon problems to school time when I should have spoken to my parents about it instead. She said it was inappropriate and I remember feeling extremely anxious and depressed.”⁸⁵

The primary transmitted message in this interview, as well as many other interviews, is that menstruation is a “problem” for the private realm. The above respondent was scolded by her teacher even though she was young and didn’t understand the circumstances of menstrual bleeding, which indicates that there is an expectation that young women at the time of menarche are expected to start policing their bodies and segmenting certain issues into the private space.

⁸⁵ Interview with participant, October 6th, 2018.

Furthermore, this serves as a starting indicator that menstruation is seen as an emblem of “women’s inferiority,” as these women’s behaviors, remarks, or communication about menstruation are oft scolded and regarded as “problems.”⁸⁶

This can be attributed to how many of these women reflected on their own menses. In fact, most of the interviews from women showed that menarche was an important process woman experience to *become* a woman. The trauma, anxiety, and embarrassment much of the women experienced during their first biological indication of femaleness greatly shape how they espouse social narratives of what women *ought* to be, therefore influencing many of them to perform certain actions, employ specific skills, or self-manage their own bodies in order to *be* a woman.

Being a Woman: Communicating, Managing, and Hiding Menstruation

Communicating

After women described the often-negative conceptualization of their menstruation and the anxiety towards spoiled identities if their menstruation permeated into the public realm, many indicated that it was through peer learning, interaction, and how menstruation was socialized to them from an early age that informed their own internalized stigma. For many of the participants, there was a distinct influence in the social conceptualization of menstruation. Whether it was menarche stories or experiences through how non-menstruators reacted to their menstrual status, participants augmented their appearance, communication, public interaction, and general actions in the public realm when menstruating. A frequent trend was the difficulties women experienced when communicating a perceived inability to perform or participate in

⁸⁶ Goldenberg and Roberts, “Feminine Protection,” 133.

certain activities during menstruation. Most participants reported embarrassment and anxiety around male peers, fathers, and male-coworkers when menstruating, and often changed habits and presentation in order to facilitate “passing.” For example, one respondent spoke at length about her embarrassment regarding menstruation when it came to communication with males:

“I don’t think it’s appropriate for women to speak to men about periods or menstruation. I think when people hear about period problems or that you need to see a gynecologist. It makes them think of different things. Especially men. They don’t really know anything about periods and they don’t get it, so I don’t want people to misconstrue how I’m feeling or think that I’m ‘dirty.’ People see reproductive and menstrual problems as well... Sexual and stuff. I think it’s just a traditional thing, or a cultural thing in China. Also, a lot of people I guess just don’t really study this stuff so they wouldn’t know any better than to see abnormal stuff with menstruation as problems with your reproductive organs or that you have some type of...reproductive or sexual disease. Most people don’t have abnormalities, right? So obviously, people will think weirdly if you aren’t normal. Also, just talking about it I guess seems really uncivil, its airing out a lot of personal stuff and stuff about a part of the woman’s body that’s really embarrassing.”⁸⁷

This respondent’s conceptualization of menstruation points towards a gendered socialization of the menstrual body, and further demonstrates a keen awareness to cultural boundaries, taboos, and limitations. From this respondent’s view that there are levels of topical ‘appropriateness’ for communication, which shows that menstrual stigma may be a manifestation of gender inequality for women. Especially concerning is the respondent’s belief that people construe menstrual problems as “sexual.”⁸⁸ In line with objectification theory, factors such as social identity can

⁸⁷ Interview with participant, October 5th, 2018.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

impact whether we perceive another person as having more or less “uniquely human features.”⁸⁹ Sexualizing menstrual fluid and menstruation is a means to depersonalize the female body. Once objectified, the female body is dehumanized and criticized for human-like traits such as bodily fluids. Roylance and Routledge state that “objectification is ubiquitous and broadly damaging, in terms of health and well-being, cultural landscape in which women live.”⁹⁰ When social situations amount a woman’s worth to her level of “appropriateness” or propriety, it ostensibly marginalizes women disallows them the same social standing as men. Instead, they must tailor their responses, communication, and image to the expectation of males. As such, for many of these participants, menstruation itself is a time of shame and inconvenience for being a woman, and therefore, must utilize specific methods to hide the “creatureliness” and inappropriate nature of menstrual blood.⁹¹ Given menstruation’s characterization as inappropriate, the verbal or symbolic communication of menstruation also functions to blemish these women’s character. Similarly, this aspect fits into Goffman’s archetypes of stigma. Menstrual blood’s aversiveness stigmatizes individuals who menstruate, and as communication of menstruation would alert others of the stigma, silence surrounding menstruation is adopted to prevent the staining of one’s character.

In these peer interactions and conversational settings, women also frequently mentioned their personal embarrassment at utilizing the literal word for menstruation in public settings (*Yue Jing*). Instead, participants typically referred to menstruation in euphemisms such as “不方便” (*bu fang bian*), or inconvenience; and “倒霉” (*dao mei*), or bad luck. These euphemisms serve a purpose – they give women words to talk about things that are culturally taboo. In this instance,

⁸⁹ Roylance, Routledge, and Balas, “Treating Objects like Women,” pg. 594.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 592.

⁹¹ Goldenberg and Roberts, “The Birthmark,” 89-92.

even the word “menstruation” (or *Yue Jing*) or “menstrual blood” caused participants great embarrassment, as they felt the term was too abrupt, inappropriate, and uncouth in the public space. One woman remembers the negative connotations she personally felt towards menstruation due to the frequency it was referred to as “bad luck”:

“From the moment I first saw blood in my underwear, I assumed that it was a sign that I would be starting a cycle of bad luck. I was scared and sad, thinking that my childhood had come to an end and that I would be experiencing a cycle of bad luck forever. This brought upon a lot of anxiety at first, not with management, but with the assumption that menstruation was unlucky and that I would experience bad things during my period. Because I was too embarrassed to ever address this superstition with others, I spent many years worrying about variations and abnormalities in my menstruation – I’d think darker menstrual blood symbolized omens and could be a signifier of hard times to come. It wasn’t until I left home and attended college that I realized bad luck was just a term my mother and other women use to refer to menstruation since it was inconvenient and gross.”⁹²

Similar to the previous example, this respondent adopted certain outlooks on menstruation due to the way knowledge pertaining menstrual cycles were transmitted to her during menarche. The adult figures around her referring to menstruation as “bad luck” distilled a negative conceptualization of menstruation for much of her adolescent and early adult life. This signifies that language, euphemisms, and shared experiences in community and cultural settings can inform newer members of society (younger people) what is inherently negative or positive. In the West, menstruation is often euphemized with “period,” “mother nature,” and “that time of the

⁹² Interview with participant, October 5th, 2018.

month.”⁹³ These euphemisms are often mass produced and accepted through mainstream media and marketing in the West, and advertisements often communicate that menses should be contained unmentioned and further emphasize feelings of freshness and cleanliness.⁹⁴ Although these euphemisms are not used in the Chinese language, many of the euphemisms girls used were sourced from older peers and advertisements. Many sanitary napkins sold in stores had language pertaining to making life more “convenient,” or erasing one’s “bad luck.”⁹⁵ As such, it’s not surprising that many women find the need to censor menstrual related conversations and source euphemisms from the products they use. One respondent noted that she did feel open to discussing menstrual related topics with male peers, but only if they were interested and prompted her:

“I don’t find a problem with informing male friends about periods if they’re interested, but I don’t think I’d go out of the way to talk to any men about it – it’s just a matter of civility, right?”⁹⁶

These participants all noted that the nature of discussing menstruation with peers is rather disruptive to public life, and that unless prompted or forced, they typically were averse to communicating menstruation. The result of society wide stigma is the discrimination and shaming of individuals who supersede expectations of their social group in which discrimination and social rejection functions as agents to ‘correct’ the individual.⁹⁷ Therefore, females and

⁹³ Joan C. Chrisler and Karen B. Levy, "The Media Construct a Menstrual Monster: A Content Analysis of PMS Articles in the Popular Press," *Women & Health* 16, no. 2 (1990): 91, accessed September 12, 2018, doi:10.1300/j013v16n02_07.

⁹⁴ Tampax Australia, “Tampax Tampons Australian Ad with Naomi Watts 1980s,” 0:29, 1 May 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jB_ZCX971aU.

⁹⁵ Yingzhi Yang, "China Made 85 Billion Sanitary Pads Last Year, and Not One Tampon. Here's Why," *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 2016, , accessed November 09, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-china-tampons-20160318-story.html>.

⁹⁶ Interview with participant, October 7th, 2018.

⁹⁷ Goffman, *Stigma*, pg 9.

female bodily functions in general are censored and policed in the public realm, instilling a sense of internalized shame and self-policing for the participants.

Managing

In addition to communication methods, there were various amounts of techniques women adopted due to their belief that there was an “appropriate” behavior surrounding menstruation. How participants developed management skills in relation to their personal conceptualization of menstruation is important, as it informs the justification surrounding certain practices, experiences and taboos. Hygiene was a frequent trend in the interviews, as participants often stated that cleanliness was a major concern during menstruation. One respondent recalled her handling of menstrual hygiene management in public, stating:

“I think Chinese people are really restrained and private, and its especially shocking if you have any leakage because it’s like a personal problem coming into the public eye. This could cause embarrassment onto yourself and shame, and it can also cause other people to feel similar feelings. I think everyone should take precautions to prevent leakages from happening for themselves, and also for others. Plus, I think if you have leakages often, its indictive of the fact that you are immature or lazy and that you aren’t careful about your health and hygiene. You don’t want others to think these things about you and make these judgements.”⁹⁸

Furthermore, participants also expressed embarrassment and disgust at their own menstrual blood, and reported feelings of low-confidences and worries about their image. One respondent said:

⁹⁸ Interview with participant, October 10th, 2018.

“I’m very conscious of how I feel mentally and physically, and if I’m feeling tired or just kind of down, or gross, I usually try to stay in during this time. Obviously, I still go to work, but I don’t go out with friends as much. I think I also kind of feel ickier when I’m on my period. When you’re constantly bleeding you just don’t feel great about yourself. You feel kind of dirty and gross. Plus, the smell is gross so I just feel not as clean as I typically do.”⁹⁹

The positioning of menstrual blood as dirty and gross can espouse the self-stigmatization of the body. In relation to Goffman’s theory on stigma, menstruation and menstrual blood can be considered “abominations” of the female body, as they are presented as uncleanly and often conducted in secrecy. As stigma tends to engender exercises in discrimination, people tend to impute a wide range of “imperfections” or unwanted attributes based on the original stigma. From the time of menarche, the bloodied refuse of the body is positioned as unhygienic and shameful.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, girls are often taught that menstrual blood should be confined to the personal sphere, managed and contained as menstrual blood has the power to pollute and contaminate the fantasy that the human body does not “leak.”¹⁰¹ As such, participants frequently referred to anxiety over their cleanliness when questioned about their connection to menstruation. Most respondents could not concisely find the exact reason over cleanliness, but many did relate menstruation to unappealing body fluids such as excrement.¹⁰² While this is extreme, it may not be too surprising as even the advertisement of sanitary napkins is heavily

⁹⁹ Interview with participant, October 4th, 2018.

¹⁰⁰ Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan C. Chrisler, “The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma,” *Sex Roles* 68, issue 1-2 (31 July 2011): pg. 9-18.

¹⁰¹ Jane Ussher. *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body*. London: Routledge, (2006), pg. 19.

¹⁰² Interview with participants, August 18-21st, 2018.

policed in the public space, as China's media regulator, has banned the advertisements of feminine hygiene products on TV at lunchtime and during prime time, reasoning that commercials, along with ads for hemorrhoid treatments and foot disease remedies, were "disgusting."¹⁰³ This instigates that there are clear social prohibitions of menstruation, or even communication and visualization of menstruation and menstrual related products. Why would the media regulator attribute menstruation to the same category as hemorrhoid and foot disease? In 1960, anthropologist Emily Ahern conducted fieldwork in rural China and Taiwan and found that historically women's menstrual blood often functioned as a source of both power and danger.¹⁰⁴ The pollution of blood often removed women from participating in ancestral rites and implied that men could become sick or infected if they came into contact with menstrual blood. However, conversations about menstruation have been a mixed bag in modern to contemporary China. The Post-1949 government sought to educate young women that menstruation was a normal bodily function, however, lingering effects of old Chinese sexual beliefs stigmatized menstrual blood in the public realm as many journals, magazines, and public media stressed that men must be more careful than women when it came to sex, as elements could lower the male's vital essence. As such, menstrual blood became one of the various 'dangers,' that could not only disrupt the balance of a man, but of society.¹⁰⁵ These historical stigmatizations of menstrual blood has persisted in to the modern realm, with menstrual blood still associated with disease, danger, and disgust. This brings us to the next section on hiding and concealing menstruation, as women went to lengths to cover any indication that they were menstruating.

¹⁰³Ibid

¹⁰⁴ Emily M. Ahern, "The Power and Pollution of Chinese Women," *Studies in Chinese Society*, ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Taipei: Tsung Ching Pub. Ser, 1979), 193-214.

¹⁰⁵ Mann, "The Body in Medicine, Art, and Sport," pg 1010.

Hiding

Concealing menstruation was a subject of much turmoil for many participants, and while menstruation itself was not necessarily vocalized as unwanted by the participants, many responded that they were averse to the sight of their menstrual blood and took caution to prevent their menstruation from disrupting the public realm. Many participants took different approaches to managing their menstruation, but one frequent trend was the precautions women took to prevent their menstrual hygiene product from being seen. For example, one participant recounts:

“I used to get really nervous about hygiene since I didn’t quite know when and how I could go about to changing my pad. I didn’t want my male classmates to see, but I had my mom buy me a small pouch – kind of like a purse – so that when I needed to go to the bathroom to change my pad, I could just take the pouch of my hygiene products and go without letting anyone else see that I was on my period.”¹⁰⁶

Goffman categorized stigma variation by three criteria that can affect the perceived level of deviance or depravity in an individual, with the three criteria being publicity, obtrusiveness, and relevance.¹⁰⁷ These are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and as demonstrated by the participants, often overlapped. While menstruation is a bodily function and can be assigned as a physical stigma, the subtlety of menstruation can also attribute menstruating individuals with stigmatized characters, as the fluid itself can be concealed. This is an important overlap, as it structures menstruating bodies as a physical form of deviance, and also as a blemish of character, as the level of its publicity and obtrusiveness can be controlled and affect how others view the individual. In this situation, the women were concerned with how the visibility of their menstrual napkin would engender negative responses from their peers, going to great lengths to create

¹⁰⁶ Interview with participant, August 21th, 2018.

¹⁰⁷

situations or changes that could hide the potential object of stigma. This mirrors Roberts et al.'s experiment on the hairclip and the tampon, where women who accidentally dropped a tampon was rated significantly lower in competence and likeability.¹⁰⁸ Menstrual hygiene items become the physical object of stigma for the hidden function, as its presence and obtrusiveness in social interaction brought shame onto the interviewed women. If the women occupied a public space with other people, they had to conceal not only their bleeding effectively, but also the objects associated with the bleeding. While some critical menstrual scholars have argued that menstrual pads functioned as an object of emancipation and empowerment for women as more women could leave their homes and participate in public life due to their newfound management,¹⁰⁹ this was not necessarily true for the Chinese women interviewed. While they were all able to leave their home if so chosen, the discourse of menstrual blood as a substance to be managed effectively communicates the repugnant and unwanted nature of the blood – informing a social construction of shame and weakness amongst women who could not manage it properly. Pads in the public space become the new source of embarrassment for women, as it physically symbolizes what cannot be seen. For example, when one respondent was asked about her routine during menstruation, she said:

“I’ve bought a small pouch to put my pads in. I bought it because I think having sanitary items out in the open like pads is similar to the embarrassment felt if you have leakage and stains on your clothes. You just don’t really want people to see it since it’s such a private thing.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Roberts and Goldenberg, “Feminine Protection,” 136-138.

¹⁰⁹ Polona Sitar, “Female Trouble: Menstrual Hygiene, Shame and Socialism,” *Journal of Gender Studies*, 2017, 5-10, doi:10.1080/09589236.2017.1304860.

¹¹⁰ Interview with participant, August 18th, 2018.

This anxiety over the division of the public and private sphere demonstrate a sharp distinction between the women's public and private selves. Goffman, as well as several psychologist and sociologists frequently used the metaphor of the divided (or double) self to describe how individuals cope with stigma.¹¹¹ The discomfort women expect others to experience when they show any sign of menstruation perhaps also alters the structure of their self-concept. This double life can be presented as civilized versus uncivilized, or a dynamic interplay between social and personal structures, which ostensibly becomes an ontological duality of self. One has to make a careful distinction between the interior truth of the stigmatized object, and the constructed, non-stigmatized identity presented in public. For example, one respondent utilized the word 'uncivil' in describing the permeation of menstrual fluids in the public realm, saying:

“I think it's a bit uncivil to have any type of leakage at all so I take extra care to make sure I'm changing my sanitary napkin often to prevent it. I think it really discredits me on a personal level in the eyes of others, especially at work, if I show any signs of menstruation. I do try to also avoid showing sanitary napkins in public – I think showing these things or revealing it to men and other people in public is like having a bit of your private life erupt out. This makes things really uncomfortable for everyone around you and is uncivil and wrong.”¹¹²

In these cases, menstruation is the above mentioned 'eruption' of the private life, a slippage of the stigmatized object of offense into the public. This respondent found slippage uncivilized, and made ameliorations and efforts to in her management routine to effectively conceal any object, association, or discussion surrounding her menstruation. In short, the respondent's efforts are influenced by a worldview that menstruation and associations of

¹¹¹ Goffman, *Stigma*, pg. 121-136.

¹¹² Interview with participant, October 12th, 2018.

menstruation cannot exist in the public realm, and that the only companionable space for menstruation was within the private, where only she could see and interact with her internalized stigma. This trend was not limited to this specific participant, as the need to conceal a trait characterized as stigmatic was also present in another respondent: “For the most part, it was an embarrassing and anxious part of my life; I never wanted others to really know that I was on my period, and leakage and staining was like shouting to the public that you were on your period and that you were immature and stupid.”¹¹³ This respondent’s characterization of her menstrual fluids in the public realm as “immature” and “stupid” is similar to the previous respondent’s classification of “uncivilized.” All three terms characterize menstruation in the public realm as impolite or uncouth. As such, for many of these women, menstrual blood functioned as an oft-unnatural like substance that would blemish their character and denigrate their social standing. In accordance with Goffman’s theory, there exists a need to hide stigmatized blemishes, which is demonstrated from the inclination to manage menstruation in secrecy.¹¹⁴ The emergence of menstrual blood into social intercourse induces the possibility of hostile reactions or repercussions, therefore forcing the individual to engage in self-conscious and calculating behavior to hide the “blemish.”

For these women, the belief that menstruation in the public realm is something that should not be considered socially, culturally, or morally advanced demonstrates a negative internalization process in which they mark themselves as possessing a tarnished identity due to knowledge of their menstrual status. This results in a self-embodied creation of negative attitudes toward menstrual bodies, whether in themselves or other menstruating women. Therefore, management methods are created to conceal the lived experience of shame and anxiety

¹¹³ Interview with participant, October 11th, 2018.

¹¹⁴ Goffman, *Stigma*, 25-28.

surrounding their menstruation, allowing these women to lead a “public”, dual life in which the public eye cannot penetrate or discern what they classify as a stigma.

In conjunction with hiding products, one trend that occurred over the course of the interviews was the care the participants took in choosing their style of dress during menstruation. During menstruation, participants often spoke at length about the tedious nature of their menstrual cycle and how they had to take great care to prevent leakage or staining through certain dress choices. Many participants expressed caution at wearing certain types of clothes, the most often being skirts and dresses, and light-colored pants and shorts. For example, a respondent outlined her sense of confidence and selection in clothing during menstruation:

“I don’t have too intense periods or symptoms, but I sometimes feel limited in the way I dress and the things I participate in. For example, I wouldn’t wear nice clothes or like pretty dresses when I’m on my period. I think wearing dresses and skirts are a lot more risk, and so is wearing light clothing or more revealing clothing, because there is always the anxiety at the back of my mind that I could have some type of a leakage accident which would be extremely embarrassing and horrible to experience in a social situation. I definitely wouldn’t want male peers to see leakage – I’m not sure why, but just blood on that area of clothing seems really bad. It would also really affect my self-confidence and mood, so I try to prevent situations like this from happening by wearing darker clothes and more conservative clothing.”¹¹⁵

Goffman notes that many individuals who consider themselves ‘blemished’ by a stigmatized attribute suffer from devaluation due to their reduced participation in the public world and their reflections on idealized images. Clothing here, can be seen as a coping strategy, or what

¹¹⁵ Interview with participant, October 12th, 2018.

Goffman terms as “passing,” for individuals to create a sense of detachment from their stigmatized attribute and avoid detection by “normal” people.¹¹⁶ While the detection of menstruation to the public eye hugely depends on the communication, verbal cues, or material clues on a woman, the Chinese respondents interviewed outlined intensified anxiety and embarrassment at dressing without consideration of their menstrual blood. The respondent’s disclosed anxiety and limitation was primarily attributed to the fear of staining on light items of clothing, or the permeating of blood through skirts or dresses. Many more respondents noted similar experiences, for example, one respondent said:

“I most definitely wear dark pants always when I’m menstruating. Never shorts, skirts, or dresses. Even when it’s really hot in the summer. Wearing dark pants makes me feel safer – more protected I guess. I think wearing light clothes can be really embarrassing when menstruating. I also wouldn’t wear dresses or skirts because of the problems with smell. I think if you have ... really open clothing the smell can get out and other people will smell it and judge you or make mean comments. Either that or they will gossip. It is really important to be cautious of what you are wearing and how you manage your period.”¹¹⁷

For these women, dark colored long pants function as a shield to prevent menstrual blood from transgressing into the public realm. Furthermore, it’s a technique they have adopted to facilitate “passing” as “normal”, as many women discussed that staining on dark pants was much more difficult to detect, therefore protecting them from the judgement of people considered “normal.” Whilst respondents did not necessarily outright communicate that they felt stigmatized or ashamed of their menstruation, many voiced concerns that they could easily slip through the

¹¹⁶ Goffman, *Stigma*, pg: 92.

¹¹⁷ Interview with participant, October 6th, 2018.

barrier between normal and ‘dirty’ and the consequences would be particularly damaging. A normal identity would become dirtied and spoiled if menstrual blood permeated into the public realm, leaving the respondent open to the gaze and judgement of outsiders. Clothing and dress choice allow these women to construct their identity in public differently. However, the presence of “passing” in the realm of menstruation demonstrates that there is a clear stigmatization of menstrual blood, menstruation, or even its discussion. Making decisions to dress differently draws on social constraint and demonstrates how women feel they must negotiate their identity to position themselves correctly within public life and peer interaction. Clothing choices are as such, limited by a public moral discourse that menstruation may not be allowed in the public realm, thus women may experience their physical appearance as a bodily capital that can be discredited by the physical marker of menstruation. Since this marker is not immediately apparent to observers, strategy in clothing choices masks the visibility of their stigma through the concealment of possible ‘abominations.’

Remaining a Woman: ‘Civility,’ Face, and Expectations of Chinese Women

What do phrases like “appropriateness” and “civility” mean in the context of menstruation? Is there a *proper* or *civil* way to menstruate? In the previous section, I discussed the various manifestations of embarrassment in the public realm and the troubles women faced when communicating, managing, and hiding their menstrual cycles. In the public setting, many of the interviewed women conditioned themselves to internalize stigma and manage menstruation through the lens of male peers. For example, the participants who noted embarrassment at menstrual communication and displaying menstrual indicators such as staining, hygiene products, and speech surrounding menstruation internalized stigmatic identities

and constructed an identity surrounding what ought to be ‘civil’ or ‘feminine’ in social contexts.¹¹⁸ But what does this mean for actively *being* and *remaining* a woman in China? Are things like civility an indicator of how ‘female’ one is – or are they limiting factors for women’s enjoyment of public spaces and equality?

Previously, I’ve dissected much of these interviews through the lens of stigma and objectification theory. However, in order to discuss the marginalization of women through these social stigmas in a *Chinese* context, it’s important to first discuss the concept of *face*, or Mianzi (面子). ‘Face’ is an embedded concept in Chinese society, and deeply articulates how social aspects of stigma and prestige may incorporate moral standing of an individual.¹¹⁹ ‘Face’ then is an important indicator of social exchange and moral positioning in Chinese communities. In China, ‘Face’ represents a person’s reputation and feelings of prestige (or lack of) in multiple levels, including their workplace, family, peers, and society at large.¹²⁰ These levels can be simplified through the individual view, community view, and actions, where the individual refers to the amount of prestige an individual feel based on their personal actions; the community view pertains to the amount of respect an individual garner based on their position (such as within a company, family, or public hierarchy); and actions, which are the variety of activities that can cause individuals to lose and gain face.¹²¹ In the previous discussions regarding stigma and objectification, I applied western theories of moral standing to Chinese contexts, but this can be deeper explored with the concept of ‘face.’ ‘Face’ and civility seem to be interchangeable subject matters for many of these women, and many participants mentioned that the display of menstrual

¹¹⁸ Interview with participant, October 12th, 2018.

¹¹⁹ Yang and Kleinman, "'Face' and the Embodiment of Stigma in China," pg. 400-402.

¹²⁰ A. S. Cua, "Xin and Moral Failure: Reflections on Mencius' Moral Psychology and Moral Failure: Reflections on Mencius' Moral Psychology," *Dao* 1, no. 1 (2001): 31-40, doi:10.1007/bf02857462.

¹²¹ Ibid.

fluids in the public realm would be “losing face.”¹²² Throughout menarche, these participants experienced various outside influences and confluences that demonstrated how to properly behave, and as such, everyday “morality” was transmitted to them during their adolescence through family and social life. In his research on Chinese children, Stafford found that the popular view of children is that they are not yet ‘completed persons’ (the Chinese word for adult is typically *chengren*, or quite literally, completed person).¹²³ In Chinese society, Stafford asserts that children become “full-fledged human beings” once they begin the process of morality socialization and self-cultivation.¹²⁴ Furthermore, failure to integrate social morality and expectations of conduct initiates a breaking of a social taboo. In Chinese society, acts that lead to loss of face equate to the breaking of taboos, therefore devaluing a person’s moral standing in society.¹²⁵ In application to menarche and menstruation, much of the methods women internalized or were taught are manifestations of such socialization and self-cultivation processes. In order for *women* to mature, they must learn to manage and hide their menstruation. This also aligns with the previous mentioned participants who regarded failure to prevent menstrual leakage as “indicative of the fact that you are immature or lazy” and “stupid.”¹²⁶ Inability to internalize established cultural patterns and conform to social roles that organize interpersonal life thus establishes that you are not a “completed” person, therefore immature. This practice can infantilize women and marginalize in social contexts, as women must actively

¹²² Interview with participants, October 2-18th, 2018.

¹²³ P. Steven Sangren and Charles Stafford, "The Roads of Chinese Childhood: Learning and Identification in Angang.," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 3, no. 2 (1997): 430-432, accessed December 20, 2018, doi:10.2307/3035074.

¹²⁴ Ibid

¹²⁵ Yang and Kleinman, “Face and the Embodiment of Stigma in China,” pg. 405.

¹²⁶ Interview with participants, October 10-11th, 2018.

manage menstruation and adhere to these ‘ritualized’ stigmas, as moral character is defined through the cultivating self-restraint and control.¹²⁷

But is creating rules of conduct for interacting in society the basis of all cultures? What makes China’s socialization of menstrual stigma into women any different? This can perhaps be examined through what it means to “remain,” a woman, or uphold classical expectations of femaleness, beauty, and civility. Historically, one identified women as *meiren*, or beautiful human, not necessarily by her visage, but by the order of her room, the neatness of her clothing, her restrained gestures and expressions, and the general grace she exercised when communicating with others.¹²⁸ In contemporary China, media representations and advertisements still draw similarities in representing the ideal female body: women are demonstrated through “secular and mundane pleasures,” affixing standards of beauty such as cleanliness, slimness, articulated speech, yet disciplined and restrained.¹²⁹ While these representations have skewed more towards aesthetic representations, they still mirror the concept of ‘face,’ and moral standing in Chinese culture, in which ideal feminine behavior is demonstrated through the maintenance of a strong moral character, self-cultivation through internalization of social stigmas, and restraining such stigmas from disrupting public life. Femininity and beauty differ from Western sexual representation of women, but instead focuses on how the worth of a woman is directly tied to her moral career. Notions of femininity and *being* a Chinese woman means actively applying the art of social and moral conduct in the minute and mundane reaches of female habits, desires, and interests. A pair of girls I interviewed

¹²⁷ Fei Xiaotong, "From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society. A Translation of Fei Xiaotong’s Xiaotong Zhongguo.," trans. Kate Xiao Zhou, Gary G. Hamilton, and Wang Zeng, *Social Forces* 73, no. 3 (1995): 1156-60, doi:10.2307/2580590.

¹²⁸ Man, "Female Bodies in China," pg. 117-118.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

who insisted on participating together recounted similar thoughts on femininity and menstruation. The women recounted that “I want to stay really slim. Plus, when you are slim, you don’t have any menstrual cycles which is a huge help since you never have to worry about being dirty.”¹³⁰ When I asked them how they felt about menstruation in general, they both answered that it was a “hassle” and “dirty,” demonstrating the lengths they adapt in order to cultivate and curate a life without the hassle of spoiled identity.¹³¹ These manifestations of femininity in Chinese culture are not leftovers of a bygone dynastic age either. From the 1930s and beyond, the *New Life Movement* was launched to instill ideas of self-discipline and moral regulation in young girls.¹³² Modern ideas of hygiene, diet, clothing, and exercise for women were propagated and tied in with liberation fervor during Communist China and subsequently conjoined with ideas of Chinese nationalism.¹³³ Suddenly, clean, healthy, and happy women were not just a standard of beauty, but a standard of being a *Chinese* woman. Many of the participants expressed similar sentiment. They did feel shame and embarrassment towards their menstruation, but when asked about how they felt about societal values and stigma, almost all women answered that Chinese societies have fundamentally different values from Western societies, and that they did not feel restricted, but instead proud to practice *Chinese* social expectations – whether or not it may be limiting. Because face, social expectations, and the distinct order of private/public life were so fundamental to these Chinese women, they all agreed that being “civilized” and “mature” was a performance and celebration of Chinese traditional values. There are conflicting values from many of experiences they shared in a Western view, as the lengths in which they hid menstrual fluids, products, and language signifies a completely

¹³⁰ Interview with participants, August 19th, 2018.

¹³¹ Ibid

¹³² Man, "Female Bodies in China," pg. 117-118.

¹³³ Ibid

negative and stigmatized experience surrounding menstruation. However, the shared ‘pride’ most of the women felt regarding these cultural values on cleanliness and hygiene for females brings light a different dimension to conversations about “stigma.” The celebration of traditional values affirms that perhaps, while experiences of menstruation for Chinese women involve social stigmas, cultural taboos are also an important order. As Buckley and Gottlieb state: “the menstrual taboo as such does not exist.”¹³⁴ Instead, there are a wide range of rules that vary across cultures regarding menstruation that sometimes have conflicting meanings.¹³⁵ In the case of menstruation experiences in China, the traditional value system of ‘face’ is important in demarcating the lines between moral restraint, cultivation, and control.

What About Rights?

It is difficult, as a Western educated Chinese-American woman to determine whether or not these experiences of women are particularly damaging or not. The menstrual experiences of these Chinese women very much outline an image of what Chinese women “ought” to be, which instills a rather marginalized and problematic view of women’s rights in China. While men also actively participate in the ‘face’ system, it seems the level of self-cultivation that women must practice in order to become “completely” human (or adult), is extremely problematic and infantilizing. The social contract that functions in Chinese society is inevitably gendered, as it polices an otherwise basic function of female sex biology, and demonizes the improper care and control of such fluids as uncivil, immature, and not worthwhile of morally sound individuals. Therefore, the cultural environment that fosters these stigmas and polices them is inevitably

¹³⁴ Buckley and Gottlieb, *Blood Magic*, pg. 7.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

denigrating on women's rights, women's enjoyment of public spaces, and women's enjoyment of expression. There are other substantive equality issues that rise from the moral policing of menstrual processes in women, such as health issues, labor market participation, and equality in family life. In many reports regarding menstruation, the majority consensus rests on the fact that menstrual shame and misinformation undermine the well-being of women and girls, making them vulnerable to gender discrimination, child marriage, exclusion, violence, poverty and untreated health problems.¹³⁶ Most of these experiences of blood and menstruation show blood as an inevitably aversive function that taints the female body. The unblemished pure fantasy of femininity and "civility" is shattered upon the revelation of menstrual blood, as the phenomenon serves to break masquerade of 'fantasy' female body and demonstrates the antithesis of what most deem a clean and proper body. For people who menstruate, identity construction and menstrual avoidance is crucial as a way to normalize their lives and negotiate menstrual management in the public sphere.¹³⁷ The re-occurrence of menstruation throughout the majority of one's lifetime delineates the function as a major influence on one's conception of personhood. As such, while many of these women do feel proud to celebrate cultural practices, the stigmatization of menstruation can create ambivalence or negative sense of self for women, and therefore expose them to gender stratification. This is signaled through the abundance of participants who identified prolonged embarrassment and anxiety surrounding their menstruation, especially when they had to manage menstruation around peers. In the realm of human rights and women's rights, a large discourse movement is focused on the idea of cultural

¹³⁶ "Menstrual Health Management in East and Southern Africa: A Review Paper." *UNFPA ESARO / CARMMA* (Campaign on Accelerated Reduction of Maternal Mortality in Africa). May 01, 2018. Accessed December 09, 2019. <https://esaro.unfpa.org/en/publications/menstrual-health-management-east-and-southern-africa-review-paper>.

¹³⁷ Kelland, Sharli Paphitis, and Macleod. "A Contemporary Phenomenology Of Menstruation," 33-41.

relativism superseding universal human rights.¹³⁸ In a sense, this discussion is focused on how cultural rights supersede the occidental view of individual human rights as human rights often function as a vestige of moral imperialism.¹³⁹ While perhaps critics who champion cultural relativism are correct in a sense, there are *prima facie* rights that should be applicable and practicable by all women, regardless of cultural values. In this case, the distinct theories of objectification and stigma serve to showcase the damaging nature of social stigmas, even when they serve to upkeep a ‘moral’ community. ‘Asian Values,’ or ‘Chinese’ tradition, is an increasingly dangerous sentiment in the realm of anthropological, sociological, and gender studies, as it seeks to validate practices that *are* damaging to how women enjoy society. Menstrual stigmas are also not limited to just China, and a variety of cultures de-value women based on their status as menstruators.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, there are societies that *celebrate* menstruating women and menarche openly in public spaces.¹⁴¹ As such, these specific accounts represent how cultural values can attribute to stigma and taboos, and ostracizes female individuals when their private ‘stigmatized’ condition permeates into the public realm.

¹³⁸ Anthony Pagden, "Human Rights, Natural Rights, and Europe's Imperial Legacy," *The Burdens of Empire*, March 5, 2015, 177, accessed May 15, 2018, doi:10.1017/cbo9780511979200.011.

¹³⁹ Jack Donnelly, "Cultural Relativism and Universal Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1984): 402, accessed June 1, 2018, doi:10.2307/762182.

¹⁴⁰ See study by Goldenberg and Roberts, "Feminine Protection."

¹⁴¹ Tan, Haththotuwa, and Fraser, "Cultural Aspects and Mythologies," 124.

CHAPTER V: Conclusion

I want to emphasize that I do not promote this study of menstrual experiences of Chinese women to be understood as an essentialist understanding of Chinese women, or the Chinese in general. There are various ethnic minorities, global transplants, and immigrants living in China; and experiences of menstruation and stigma can vary depending on region and socioeconomic study. This work in a sense, tries to give a voice to women who otherwise, usually do not talk about menstruation. As such, this work is to facilitate further theoretical and sociohistorical understandings of menstruation in the context of China.

In particular, this work did not address the intersection of ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and education which are extremely pertinent variations in how women experience menstruation.

While Chinese nationals have a 98% homogenous population of Han Chinese, there are a variety of different ethnic minorities who have different understandings and practices to the majority.

Furthermore, class and education are critical indicators in how women understand menstruation, as variations in access to sanitation, hygiene products, and education about menstrual cycles can further the stigmatization around menstruation.

While I discussed human rights and women's rights issues, there are many approaches to discussing menstruation in the realm of cultural and human rights that are much more nuanced than the one I took. I have also not adequately examined feminist theories across Chinese feminists and Western feminists in order to discuss heteronormative public spaces and how these can contribute to policing women and further stigmatizing their menstrual functions. These particular flaws in my research and theoretical approach urges for more research to address the various gaps in Chinese menstrual research from a gender, anthropological, and sociological perspective in the contemporary context. Examining the specific ways in which gender has been

situated in the cultural context of China through political history is another entry point that would aid to illuminating various experiences in regard to menstruation through the establishment of the People's Republic of China.

Regardless, this research provided an illuminated understanding how Chinese women in Beijing experience menstruation. Furthermore, it established narratives on how these experiences may be shaped but understandings and celebrations of cultural contexts. As menstrual rights activism breaks new grounds in the West, it is my hope that this research will inspire future studies into menstrual rights, menstrual experiences, and how they may intersect with women's rights in China.

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