

# “To Be a Woman Is Extremely Bothersome!”: How Young Chinese Women Talk About Their Predicaments\*

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## ABSTRACT

Analyzing 24 tape-recorded multi-party conversations among Chinese college students in Taiwan, this study has found that topics related to women's general predicaments (e.g. aging, appearance, and pregnancy) tend to produce the greatest enthusiasm and participation in all-female conversations, and such topics always end with the conclusion: *Dang nuren hao mafan* "To be a woman is extremely bothersome!" These female speakers' strategic choices in discussing these shared problems are marked by a high degree of cooperation. Straightforward agreement with the speaker, elaboration of the speaker's complaint, or confirmation of the validity of the complaint demonstrate a mutual sentiment and thereby forge a common bond among interlocutors. Interestingly, these complaint/commiseration exchanges were only found in the talk of senior female students. This may suggest that the older the women become, the more they are aware of their difficult situations, and the more they are likely to talk about their predicaments as a way of showing solidarity.

**Key Words:** All-female conversation, complaint, commiseration, solidarity

## 1. Introduction

In the past two decades, many studies on speech behavior (e.g., Fishman,

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1983; Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1988, 1989) have shown that women and men exhibit quite different patterns of verbal interactions. Tannen (1990) refers to the "report talk/rapport talk" distinction and proposes that conversation or talk serves different functions for men and women. Whereas men tend to engage in the type of conversation in which they report on events to preserve independence and negotiate or maintain status in a hierarchical social order, for most women, the language of conversation is primarily a language of rapport and a way of establishing connection and reinforcing solidarity. Tannen further observes that "troubles-talk," which is marked by exchanges of complaining and commiserating, is an important aspect of rapport for women. Through this give-and-take of complaints and commiserations, Tannen maintains, a rapport is established that possibly brings the female interlocutors closer to each other by opening up a more personal side to their relationship.

Tannen's assertion that troubles-talk is a heavily female phenomenon has been supported by Boxer's (1993) quantitative study. Analyzing 533 indirect complaint (i.e., the expression of dissatisfaction to an interlocutor about oneself or someone/something that is not present) exchanges within 426 recorded longer troubles-talk sequences, Boxer has found that, regardless of the topic that initiates the sequence, women participate more in indirect complaint exchanges than men and are twice as likely as men to respond to a complaint with a commiseration as a positive strategy for establishing points of commonality.

Most studies on language and gender have been based on data from Western societies, particularly the speech of white middle-class women, and there have been very few from non-Western cultures. In Taiwan, despite the fact that gender studies has been a very popular topic in recent years, there have been very few systematic or comprehensive investigations of the relationship between language and gender, for the central focus of Taiwan's linguistics study has long been language structure rather than language use. Adopting a sociolinguistic approach, Shih (1984) examines male and female Chinese college students' speech in terms of lexicon, sentence structure, diction, conversational topics, and non-verbal languages. She has found that while men's speech is direct, unemotional, and curt, women's speech styles are characterized as indirect, emotional, circumlocutious, garrulous, silly, and soft. Although Shih's analysis is mainly based on data collected from audiotapes made in men's and women's college dormitories, some of her observations are from native speaker's introspection and are therefore not empirical. Her discussion, although broad in scope, is sketchy and by no means exhaustive.

Based on her field work carried out in Taipei, Farris (1991) has studied lan-

guage and peer sex role socialization in a Mandarin Chinese speaking preschool. Her analysis shows that, through verbal and nonverbal interaction, boys create a childish masculine ethos that centers on action, competition, and aggression, punctuated with onomatopoeia and mild vulgarity, and it is organized and expressed discursively through loud, terse, direct forms of speech. Girls, on the other hand, create a feminine ethos that centers on the construction and maintenance of quasi-familial social relations or on authoritarian roles based on teacher models, and it is organized and expressed discursively through coy, affected, and indirect forms of speech.

Based on the same data, Farris's most recent (2000) study focuses on cross-sex peer conflict and has found that conflict occurs as frequently in cross-sex interaction as in same-sex boy-boy interaction. More importantly, in the context of cross-sex conflict, girls, who are generally associated with a feminine sex-typed "mitigated" style, are found to adopt a masculine-associated, direct "aggravated" style. Farris finally contends that these preschool girls "subvert the masculine preferred form of conflict to produce new subject positions in the rapidly changing society of modern Taiwan" (p. 540).

Using tape-recorded data of naturally occurring conversations and adopting the analytic method of "interactional sociolinguistics" developed by Gumperz (1982) and Tannen (1984), my (Kuo 1995, 1996) study has investigated gender differences in speech style and communicative strategy in current Taiwanese society. The linguistic features I have examined include amount of talk, topic and topic development, interruption, joking and laughter, and advice-giving. Contrary to previous studies (e.g. Tannen 1990; Holmes 1992), men in my data are found to talk more than women even in informal, private contexts. Although no significant differences were found with respect to which gender initiates more interruptions and which gender is interrupted more, gender emerges as a very strong variable in respect of both the occurrence of advice-giving as well as the form and style of this speech act.

Analyzing 24 tape-recorded multi-party conversations among Chinese college students in Taiwan, this study aims to examine how young Chinese adults talk about fears and worries in their daily lives. Although the analysis focuses on speakers' strategic choices in expressing and sharing their discontent and troubles, the social and interpersonal implications of this speech event are also explored.

Most studies on gender and discourse have been based on Western sociolinguistic theories, which do not always allow for cultural variation and thus might not be relevant for Chinese circumstances. Similarly, the strictly feminist

approach to women's language popular in the West – which reduces it to a matter of power and status – might not fit Chinese society. It is hoped that the results of this research will also be able to clarify, verify, build on, and/or otherwise contribute to the study of gender differences in language.

In the following, I first describe briefly the database of my analysis in Section 2. The major findings and discussions are presented in Section 3, and Section 4 includes the implications and conclusion of the study.

## 2. The data

This study is part of a larger research project which aims to examine gender differences in speech styles and the communicative strategies of young adult Chinese in current Taiwanese society (Kuo 1995). 24 tape-recorded conversations were collected over a period of two months in 1994. Each of these conversations is 30-minutes long. All participants are undergraduate students at a public university located in northern Taiwan. These 24 conversations are from 8 groups. For each group, all speakers in Conversation A are females, all speakers in Conversation B are males, and Conversation C, which is mixed-sex, consists of at least one speaker from both Conversations A and B. As a result, it is possible for us to examine a speaker's talk in both same- and mixed-sex verbal interactions.<sup>1</sup> In addition to being similar in age and educational background, all participants in each conversation were familiar with one another and in some cases were close friends. Most of these conversations took place where the participants lived (e.g. in school dormitories, in off-campus housing), and a few were recorded in school cafeterias or off-campus restaurants. In general, all these conversations were characterized by spontaneity and group solidarity.

## 3. Analysis

In a study aimed at examining close male/female friendships, Aries (1983) has found that men tend to talk about non-intimate topics centered on activity and public issues, whereas women exchange information more frequently and more in-depth about doubts and fears. Analyzing a total of 227 topics, which are further divided into 8 categories in my data, I have found that although

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1 Students in my Introduction to Sociolinguistics class collected the data. They were told to record a 30-minute conversation with their friends. They were, however, not informed of the purpose of my study.

school-related topics (e.g. courses, exams, teachers) are the most frequently occurring ones in all conversations, men talk about them far more often than women do. Women, on the other hand, are more concerned with interpersonal relationships (e.g. family, friendship, dating/love).

There is another striking difference between men's and women's talk: Topics related to women's general predicaments tend to produce the greatest enthusiasm and participation in all-female conversations. These young women discuss in depth their worries about and discontentment with being women, and their discussions in general are marked by a high degree of cooperation, with speakers frequently agreeing with or elaborating on a prior speaker's talk.

While the female speakers in my data seldom talk about personal problems which may demonstrate an individual speaker's vulnerability, more global issues, such as age, appearance, and health emerge as distinct foci of their concern. More importantly, all these speakers exhibit a consensus when discussing these topics, which tend to end with the conclusion: *Dang nuren hao mafan* "To be a woman is extremely bothersome!" In the following, I analyze these complaint/commiseration exchanges with respect to three categories: age, appearance, and health.

### 3.1 Time ages women

The sad feeling that age is women's toughest enemy emerges early in a conversation among Zhang, Yang, Dai, and Yu, 4 female university juniors. Prior to the following segment, the 4 conversationalists were talking about a womanizer at their school, and how the guy has dumped one girl after another. This topic reminds Zhang of a widespread saying about how the popularity of college girls decreases as they grow older (A key for the transcription notation used is given in the Appendix; an idiomatic English transcription follows the original).

- (1) 32 Zhang: *Zuotian you duo haoxiao, ni zhidao ma?*  
 yesterday have much funny you know PRT  
 33 *tamen shuo sheme dayi ..*  
 they say what freshman  
 34 *nusheng shi dayi .. qiao*  
 girl is freshman in great demand  
 35 *daer ... dayi jiao,*  
 sophomore freshman proud  
 36 *daer qiao,*  
 sophomore in great demand

- 37 [ *dasan meiren yao*,  
junior nobody want
- 38 Yang: [ *dasan la jingbao*,  
junior pull alarm
- 39 *dasan la jingbao*,  
junior pull alarm
- 40 *dasi meiren yao*.  
senior nobody want
- 41 Zhang: *ranhou tamen jiu shuo nage nage shei a?*  
then they just say that that who PRT
- 42 *nage nansheng shi dasi shi |yuclaiyue zhiqian.*  
that boy is senior is more and more valuable
- 43 Yang: [ *jin, yin, tong, tie a!*  
gold silver bronze iron PRT
- 44 Zhang: *Dui a! jin, yin, tong, tie.*  
right PRT gold silver bronze iron
- 45 *nage shei a, Weide ba,*  
that who PRT PRT
- 46 *Weide jiu shuo, ta yao jian mai gui mai (chuckles)*  
then say he want low buy high sell  
(Yu and Dai sigh)
- 47 Yang: *Buguo jin yin tong tie tingqilai zhen shi rang ren*  
but gold silver bronze iron sound really is make people  
*juede ..*  
feel
- 48 *ni xianzai yijing biancheng tong le,*  
you now already become bronze PRT
- 49 *women yijing biancheng tong le.*  
we already become bronze PRT

### Translation

- 32 Zhang: It's so funny yesterday, you know,  
33 they said that .. freshman ..  
34 for female students, a freshman is .. in great demand,  
35 sophomore .. freshman is proud,  
36 sophomore in great demand,  
37 [junior of no interest,  
38 Yang: [junior desperate,

- 39 junior desperate,  
 40 and senior of no interest.  
 41 Zhang: And they also say that .. that .. um ..  
 42 for male students, seniors are | the most valuable.  
 → 43 Yang: [Gold, silver, bronze, and iron!  
 → 44 Zhang: Right! gold, silver, bronze, and iron,  
 45 and that that .. um .. Weide,  
 46 and then Weide said that he'd buy low and sell high. (chuckles)  
 (Yu and Dai sigh)  
 → 47 Yang: But that “gold, silver, bronze, and iron” really makes people  
 feel ..  
 → 48 you've now become bronze.  
 → 49 we've already become bronze.

Zhang in lines 32–37, 41–42 cites a saying which implies that in colleges, while female students become less popular with or less attractive to males as they grow older, it is the opposite for male students; that is, senior male students are the most desirable. Yang not only chimes in to correct Zhang in lines 38–40 (i.e., “junior desperate, and senior of no interest”), but further adds that college girls are also compared to metals: During the first two years, they are like the valuable gold or silver, whereas when they become seniors, they are just like iron, a cheap “metal” few men are interested in. Note how Zhang and Yang collaborate with each other. After Yang interrupts to correct and complete the sentence for Zhang in lines 38–40, Zhang uses the conjunction *ranhou* “and then” to incorporate Yang’s statement into her own in a coherent way. In line 44, Zhang shows her strong agreement with Yang’s cited comparison of female students to metals by both the agreement token “right” and the repetition of “gold, silver, bronze, and iron.” In the same turn, Zhang also includes a personal example, i.e., a guy intends to “buy low and sell high,” to illustrate men’s advantageous position on this age issue, which is followed by deep sighs from Yu and Dai, and a sad comment from Yang: As they are juniors, they have become bronze now.

Although Yu does not participate much in the above interaction, and she just sighs as a response to commiserate with Zhang’s and Yang’s remarks concerning women’s age, later in the conversation, she gives an example from the American movie “Robin Hood: The Prince of Thieves” to support the idea that time is really relentless to women.

- (2) 68 Yu: *Jiu shuo nage “Xiadao Wangzi Luobinghan”*  
 and say that thief prince Robin Hood

- 69        *ta bu shi diyi ci kandao nage nude ma?*  
 he not is first time see that woman PRT
- 70        *ta bu shi yao zhao nage nude?*  
 he not is want look for that woman
- 71        [*ranhou ta kandao*·  
 then he see
- 72    Yang: | *Malian shi bu shi?*  
 Marian is not is
- 73        Yu: = *Ta kandao yige pangpangde nuren zou chudai,*  
 he see one fat woman walk out
- 74        *ranhou jiang yi ju ..*  
 then say one sentence
- 75        *ta jiu xiayitiao, mashang jiang yi ju ..*  
 he then frightened immediately say one sentence
- 76        *"Suiyue cui ren lao"* (laughter)  
 time push people old
- 77        *na hen haoxiao.*  
 that very funny

### Translation

- 68        Yu: In "Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves,"
- 69        when he first saw that woman,
- 70        didn't he go looking for that woman?
- 71        [and then he saw
- 72    Yang: | Wasn't that Marian?
- 73        Yu: =he saw a fat woman coming out,
- 74        and then he said ..
- 75        he's shocked and said immediately,
- 76        "Time ages people" (laughter)
- 77        That's funny.

Yu in the above example describes a comic scene in the movie: How Robin Hood, after being separated from his girlfriend Marian for years, was shocked when he mistook a fat woman for Marian and thought time had changed his beautiful maiden completely. In line 76 *suiyue cui ren lao* "Time ages people," which is quoted from what Robin Hood said in the movie, underscores a shared perception among the four female speakers: the fear of getting old.



### 3.2 Women worry more about their appearance

The “key” (Hymes, 1972) of this conversation so far has been playful and non-serious. Zhang in Example (1) chuckles when she says that a guy wants to “buy low and sell high,” and both Zhang in (1) and Yu in (2) consider the two events they described as *haoxiao* “funny.” Further, the other participants also respond to Yu’s quoted “Time ages people” with laughter. However, when the conversation moves on to topics about skin-care and make-up, the interactive frame changes into a serious one, with speakers explicitly disclosing their worries and fears, particularly their discontent with being women.

Yu is the most active speaker when talking about women’s predicaments. For instance, in Example (3) when Dai is telling Zhang how to cleanse her face, Yu not only says that she has started losing her patience in doing this step-by-step face-cleansing work (line 757), but also explicitly complains that “Oh, to be a woman is extremely bothersome!” (line 755).

- (3) 752 Dai: *Ni zai yong qu jiaozhi de shi bu shi?*  
           you ASP use remove flake NOM is not is  
 753 Zhang: *Dui a!*  
           right PRT  
 754 Dai: *Qu jiaozhi de bu shi yao xi lian ma?*  
           remove flake NOM not is need wash face PRT  
 → 755 Yu: *Oh! wo juede nuren hao mafan!*  
           I feel woman very trouble  
 756 Dai: *Yao ba ta cadiao zai xi lian ye!*  
           need BA it wipe away then wash face PRT  
 → 757 Yu: *Wo juede wo xianzai yijing kaishi mei you naixin le!*  
           I feel I now already start not have patience PRT

#### Translation

- 752 Dai: Are you using that deflaking thing?  
 753 Zhang: Right.  
 754 Dai: Don’t you have to rinse it off?  
 → 755 Yu: Oh, to be a woman is extremely bothersome!  
 756 Dai: You have to wipe it away and rinse your face.  
 → 757 Yu: I think now I have started losing my patience.

As the topic of skin-care continues, Yang also seeks advice from Dai about her own skin problems. After Dai tells Yang what to do, Yu again exclaims

that “To be a woman is extremely bothersome!” and this time, her complaint is responded to by strong commiseration from all the other participants. This is illustrated in Example (4).

- (4) 787 Yu: *Ah, wo juede hao fan o,*  
I feel really trouble PRT  
→ 788 *wo juede dang nuren hao fan o!*  
I feel to be woman really trouble PRT  
→ 789 Yang: *Mei cuo! wo yizhi zheme juede.*  
not wrong I always this feel  
790 Yu: *Wo jiu juede nansheng ye bu yong zhe yangzi tu.*  
I just feel guys also no need this way paint  
791 *youderen pifu hai shi name hao.*  
someone skin still is so good  
792 Zhang: *Aheng mei ci dou shuo “dang nusheng hen hao a!”*  
everytime always say to be gal very good PRT  
→ 793 *keyi sajjiao a, keyi*  
can PRT can  
→ 794 Yang: *-keyi tulaituqu, shi bu shi?*  
can paint is not is  
795 *hai keyi huazhuan, shi bu shi?*  
also can make-up is not is  
→ 796 Yu: *Wo juede henduo nanshengde pifu dou hen hao.*  
I feel many guy's skin all very good  
→ 797 *kan le dou .. wo kan le dou xinli hen bu pingheng.*  
see ASP all I see ASP all mind very not balanced  
→ 798 Dai: *Dui a! wo juede nusheng dou hui zhang doudou,*  
right PRT I feel gal all will grow pimple  
→ 799 *nansheng*  
guy  
→ 800 Zhang: *-bijiao bu hui.*  
more not will  
→ 801 Dai: *Dui a!*  
right PRT

### Translation

- 787 Yu: Ah, I feel it's extremely bothersome,  
→ 788 I feel to be a woman is extremely bothersome!

- 789 Yang: That's right, I've always thought so.  
 790 Yu: I just feel guys don't have to "paint" in this way,  
 791 some of them still have very good skin.  
 792 Zhang: Aheng always says that it's good to be a woman,  
 → 793 they are permitted to *sajiao*, and they can-  
 → 794 Yang: can "paint" their face as they want to?  
 795 and they also can wear make-up, right?  
 → 796 Yu: I feel many guys have very good skin.  
 → 797 When I saw .. I saw that, I felt very upset.  
 → 798 Dai: Right, I think girls tend to have pimples,  
 → 799 but guys  
 → 800 Zhang: are less likely to.  
 801 Dai: Right!

In this segment, the four speakers repeatedly agree with one another to convey shared attitudes and perceptions about women's problems with skin-care. Yu in lines 787-788 complains that, since women have to make so much effort to take care of their skin and appearance, it's really trouble to be a woman. Yang's response in the following turn ("That's right, I've always thought so") shows her strong agreement with Yu's point. Likewise, when Yu in lines 796-797 says that she felt upset when she found that many men have better skin even though they hardly do anything about it, Dai not only agrees, but supports Yu's observation with a specific example: Girls are more likely to have pimples. At this moment, Zhang chimes in to show her agreement by completing the sentence for Dai, and her collaboration is ratified by Dai in the following turn.

The term *sajiao* in line 793 needs further explanation, for it does not have an English equivalent, at least not one which can be realized as a single lexical item. *Sajiao* means "Relying on doting affection to bring forth an indulgent attitude" (Cihui, Taipei, 1984). In her ethnographic study of language and sex roles in a preschool on Taiwan, Farris (1991, 1994) has described *sajiao* as a gender-marked communication style of young women in interaction with husbands or boy-friends. Adopting Peirce's semiotic approach, she not only analyzes the verbal (e.g. use of certain lexical items, nasalized voice quality, and sentence-final particles) and nonverbal (e.g. pouting, eye rolling, and shoulder twisting) features which constitute *sajiao* behavior, but also claims that this feminine communicative style, on the one hand, shows women's indirect and informal power in Chinese society; and on the other hand, it also constructs and reflects their subordinate position. Farris has further pointed out that, although *sajiao* is a strategy

available to young (i.e., preschool age) children of both sexes, boys are said to outgrow the style by early school years, and men consider it emasculating to use this soft manner of self presentation.<sup>2</sup> As men dare not *sajiao*, they resent women who can get away with this babyish ploy. In the above example, when Zhang in lines 792–793 refers to a comment made by a guy about the advantages of being a woman, and *sajiao* is considered one of woman's privileges, Yang in line 794 interrupts and asks, in a sarcastic tone, whether men also envy that women can “paint” their face and wear make-up. Yang's question suggests her challenge and disagreement with some men's condescending attitudes toward women.

Later when they talk about how many women have to wear make-up to improve the way they look, Dai tells a story about a friend's sister. The woman wore make-up and dressed herself up for a job interview. But after she got the job, she gradually became too busy to pay attention to her appearance and her boss almost couldn't recognize her. This story again causes fears and worries among the four speakers.

- (5) 848 Dai: *Dui a, ta jiejie xianzai yijing biancheng zhefu dexing*  
 right PRT his sister now already become this character  
*le.*  
 PRT  
 Yu: um.
- 849 Yang: *Na women yihou shi bu shi ye hui biancheng na yang?*  
 then we later is not is also will become that way
- 850 *hao kepa!*  
 very terrible
- 851 Yu: *Wo juede nuren zhende shi .. hen kelian.*  
 I feel woman really is very miserable
- 852 *xiatian hen re a,*  
 summer very hot PRT
- 853 *wo mei ci kan renjia tude na yangzi,*  
 I every time see others paint that way

2 Farris has also observed that, although men deny that grown men *sajiao*, for to do so implies both femininity and subordination, they are found to use the *sajiao* style in the most intimate circumstances, e.g. when they are with their girlfriends or wives. In addition, this pleading style can be used by both sexes with fathers and father-figures, such as teachers, employers, etc. for short- or long-range goals in which the listener is unwilling to yield.

- 854 *huazhuang a, hao nan!*  
make-up PRT very difficult
- 855 *wo juede hao kelian o,*  
I feel very miserable PRT
- 856 *jiu juede hen re.*  
then feel very hot
- 857 Zhang: *Bu nong bu xing a!*  
not do not right PRT
- 858 Yu: *Dui a! bu nong you bu xing.*  
right PRT not do again not right
- 859 Zhang: *Wo juede yougou beiai.*  
I feel very sad
- 860 Dai: *Wo juede hao kelian!*  
I feel very miserable
- 861 Yu: *Wo yeshi juede.* (sighs)  
I also feel

### Translation

- 848 Dai: Right. His sister now has become like this.  
Yu: mhm
- 849 Yang: Will we become this way in the future?
- 850 How horrible!
- 851 Yu: I think women are really .. very miserable.  
852 It's hot in summer,  
853 whenever I see them paint themselves like that,  
854 wearing make-up, it's really tough!
- 855 I feel it's really miserable,  
856 I just feel very hot.
- 857 Zhang: They have no choice!
- 858 Yu: Right! they have no choice.
- 859 Zhang: I feel it's so sad.

Yang's question in line 849 ("Will we become this way in the future?") shows her anxiety and fear about their future. She seems to be worried that they may become sloppy women, just like the sister of Dai's friend. The exclamation in line 850 ("How horrible!") clearly conveys her fears and worries, which as the following turns illustrate, are shared and understood by her interlocutors. Yu in line 851 repeats the point she has made several times in the previous conversa-

tion, that is, to be a woman is really miserable. She then laments the tough situation for women to wear make-up in hot summer.

Zhang's response to Yu's complaint in line 857 "They have no choice!" points out women's dilemmas and predicaments. After Yu says "right" and repeats "they have no choice" to show her agreement, Zhang emphasizes her sad feeling by saying "I feel it's so sad" as a commiserating statement.

### 3.3 Health problems plague women

In addition to skin-care and make-up, health is also an issue about which female speakers in my data treat with great concern and worry. In the following conversation among three female university seniors, the topic focuses on how pregnancy may cause loss of calcium and therefore threaten women's health. Previous to the segment, Fu has been talking about her height. She thinks she is taller than the average young Chinese woman.

- (6) 55 Ji: *Ni guo ji nian jiu bu hui juede ziji gao.*  
you after several year then not will feel yourself tall
- 56 Fu: *Oh, na shi wo hui lao le,*  
that is I will old PRT
- 57 *hai hui suoshui le.*  
also will shrink PRT
- 58 Zhao: *Wo si ding le,*  
I die definitely PRT
- 59 *wo chang juede ziji ai.*  
I always feel self short
- 60 Ji: *Bu hui la!*  
not will PRT
- 61 *jìnlǎng bǔchōng gāizhǐ.*  
do best supplement calcium
- 62 *rúguo quēfā gāizhǐ dehuà hui suō.*  
if lack calcium in case will shrink
- 63 *gǔe .. wǒ nǎinai .. wǒ nǎinai jiù shì zhè yàng.*  
bone my grandma my grandma just is this way
- 64 *wǒ nǎinai duǎn le hǎoji cùn o!*  
my grandma short ASP several inch PRT  
(laughter)
- 65 *ai hěn duō, zhè yàngzi cǎi yǒu wǒ nǎinai*  
short very much this way only my grandma

(Fu chuckles)

- 66        *na yinwei ta na shihou ..*  
 that because her that time
- 67        *tamen na shihou sheng xiaohaizi sheng henduo ma,*  
 their that time bear child bear many PRT
- 68        [*ranhou sheng xiaohai dou mei you buchong yingyang*]  
 then bear child all not have supplement nutrition
- 69     Fu: [*Dui, sheng xiaohai dou que gai.*  
 right bear child all lack calcium
- 70        Ji: *Ranhou jiu yilao,*  
 then just old
- 71        *yixiazi ai ji cun le.*  
 suddenly short several inch PRT
- 72     Zhao: *Hao kepa!*  
 very horrible
- 73        Ji: *Ta yizhi zai gai ku jiao* (Fu chuckles)  
 she always ASP change pants foot
- 74        *ge yiduan shijian gai yici ku jiao.*  
 after a period time change once pants foot
- 75        *buran jiu tuo di le.*  
 otherwise then drag floor PRT
- 76     Zhao: *Tian na! juede bukesi*  
 god INT feel unbelievable
- 77        Ji: *Zhende, wo .. zhende yao hen zhuyi,*  
 really I really need very careful
- 78        *youqi shi sheng xiaohai shemedu.*  
 especially is bear child stuff like that
- 79        *xianzai hai bukeneng sheng name duoge,*  
 now still impossible bear that many
- 80        *yiqian, wa! dagai dou sheng shilaige*  
 past wow generally all bear more than ten
- 81        Fu: *Zhende o?*  
 really PRT
- 82        Ji: *Ranhou yaozhediao sanfenzhiyi,*  
 then die one third
- 83        *cunhuo sanfenzhier.*  
 survive two thirds

- 84        *zhende jiu zhe yangzi.*  
 really just this way
- 85        *nage niandai jiu shi zhege yangzi.*  
 that era just is this way
- 86 Zhao: *shi yue huaitai.*  
 ten month pregnancy
- 87 Fu: *Suoyi women jiangshuo shenwei nuren hao xinku.*  
 so we say to be woman very hard
- 88        *shujia de shihou,*  
 summer vacation NOM time
- 89        *nage .. yige tongxue a,*  
 that one classmate TOP
- 90        *ta yijing dang mama le,*  
 she already become mother ASP
- 91        *na ta ye zai jiang,*  
 then she also ASP say
- 92        “*Oh, nuren hao xinku!*”  
             woman very hard
- 93        *ranhou you hui sheme bing sheme bing na!*  
 and again will what disease what disease PRT
- 94        *sheng haizi you que gai you sheme sheme na yangzi*  
 bear child again lack Calcium again what what that way  
*a!*  
 PRT
- 95 Zhao: *Dui a! bugongping!*  
 right PRT unfair

### Translation

- 55 Ji: You won't feel you're tall in a few years.
- 56 Fu: Oh, that means when I get old,
- 57 I'll shrink.
- 58 Zhao: I'll be doomed then.
- 59 I always think I'm short.
- 60 Ji: It won't be like that!
- 61 Take as much calcium as you can.
- 62 You'll shrink if you don't have enough calcium.
- 63 Bones ... My grandma .. my grandma is like this.
- 64 My grandma is a few inches shorter (laughter)



- 65 She's much shorter, just about this tall, my grandma.  
(Fu chuckles)
- 66 That's because during her time,  
67 they bore a lot children.  
68 |and they didn't have supplemental nutrition after~  
69 Fu: |Right, giving birth will cause loss of calcium.  
70 Ji: having babies. And when they get old,  
71 they suddenly become a few inches shorter.
- 72 Zhao: It's horrible!
- 73 Ji: She's been cutting her pants shorter (Fu chuckles)  
74 She has to hem-up her pants periodically,  
75 or her pants will drag on the floor.
- 76 Zhao: My God! it's really unbelieva~  
77 Ji: Really .. I .. we really have to be careful,  
78 especially with giving birth and stuff like that.  
79 Now it's impossible to have that many (children).  
80 In the past, wow! they might have more than ten~  
81 Fu: Really?  
82 Ji: And one third died,  
83 two thirds survived.  
84 It's really like this.  
85 That era was just like this.
- 86 Zhao: Ten-month pregnancy.
- 87 Fu: That's why we think it's tough to be a woman.  
88 During the summer vacation,  
89 the .. a friend of mine ..  
90 she's already a mother.  
91 She also said,  
→ 92 "Ah, how tough a woman's life is!"  
93 and they will have this or that disease!  
94 Pregnancy causes loss of calcium and whatnot!
- 95 Zhao: Right, It's unfair!

Ji in this example plays the role of advice-giver. She tells Fu and Zhao to take as much calcium as they can so that when they grow old, they won't shrink. She then uses as an example her grandmother, who is shrinking and has to shorten her pants every year, to illustrate the sad result for those women who did not have enough nutrition during pregnancy and after child-birth. Zhao's responses

in line 72 “It’s horrible!” and line 76 “My God! it’s unbelievable!” show that she feels scared and shocked by Ji’s description of her grandmother.<sup>3</sup> Although Fu seems to be amused by Ji’s example and chuckles twice when Ji talks about her grandmother, in line 87, she concludes Ji’s talk with the comment “That’s why we think it’s tough to be a woman” with a very serious and sad tone. She then supports her point by giving an example about her friend and quoting what the woman said about the health problems they may have to face in the future. Zhao’s “Right, it’s unfair!” again conveys her discontent with being women. The three speakers continue talking about the situation of women in the family and society until the end of the conversation.

In sum, the female participants in the above two conversations repeatedly use such words as *māfan* “trouble,” *xinku* “hard,” *kepa* “horrible,” *kelian* “pitiful,” and *beiai* “sad” to show their lament for and dissatisfaction with being women. A high frequency of commiserations is found in straightforward agreement with the speaker, repetition or elaboration of the speaker’s complaint, or confirmation of the validity of the complaint. The use of these strategies also demonstrates a mutual sentiment and thereby forges a common bond among interlocutors.

#### 4. Implications and conclusion

In this study, I have analyzed complaint/commiseration exchanges in the conversations of young adult Chinese. I have found that the “troubles-talk” in all-female conversations tends to focus on issues of a global rather than personal nature, i.e., aging, skin-care, make-up, and health. The fact that these topics always lead to the conclusion *Dang nuren hao māfan* “To be a woman is extremely bothersome!” shows that young Chinese women feel worried and upset about the problems they have to face in their daily life and they feel togetherness in their plight.

These female speakers’ strategic choices in discussing these shared problems are marked by a high degree of cooperation. Commiserations in response to complaints are displayed by straightforward agreement, joint sentence production, repetition or elaboration of the complaint. The frequent use of these strategies in complaint/commiseration exchanges signals these speakers’ shared atti-

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3 Farris (personal communication) pointed out to me that *tien na* “My god!” and *hao kepa* “It’s horrible!” could be a conventionalized expressions of concern or a stereotypic “feminine” response.

tudes and perceptions of their predicaments, and this leads in turn to a stronger feeling of solidarity.

Interestingly, these griping/troubles-telling encounters, which sometimes can last as long as 15 minutes, were only found in the talk of senior female students. This may suggest that the older the women become, the more they are aware of their difficult situations, and the more they are likely to talk about their predicaments as a way of establishing rapport.

On the other hand, these young Chinese women's complaints are not unrelated to traditional Chinese conceptions of men's and women's places in the social order, which has been characterized by the Chinese proverbs *zhong nan qing nu* "emphasize man; de-emphasize woman" and *nan zun nu bei* "man is respected, woman debased". In the past two decades, enduring ideals of man's and woman's places and roles in Taiwanese society have been in dynamic interaction with the changing roles and identities accompanying modernization processes. Despite the accomplishments made by feminists and supporters of a women's movement that seeks structural changes in the law, employment, education, etc., as well as changes in cultural values that underpin gender inequality, most women remain socially subordinate and culturally devalued relative to men, and hold *xian qi liang mu* "a virtuous wife and good mother" as their highest ideal. In addition, the Confucian precept *nan zhu wai nu zhu nei* "man rules the outside (i.e., the public domain), woman rules the inside (i.e., the domestic domain) still dictates that many Taiwanese women take primary responsibility for housework and child care. Compared with their counterparts on mainland China, Taiwanese college students are found to be more conservative and traditional with respect to their attitudes toward marital roles and behaviors (Hsieh and Burgess 1994). In other words, cultural notions of female inferiority and gender complementarity act to inhibit further structural changes (Ku 1989; Chiang and Ku 1985).

Therefore, the results of my study also illustrate that, although the roles and status of women in Taiwan have clearly been transformed in the modernization process, and that although young Chinese women in 1990's Taiwan have enjoyed better education as well as equal opportunities in many areas and hence become less docile and more independent both emotionally and economically than their predecessors, they still feel worried about and harbor discontent with those inequalities resulting from biological (e.g. pregnancy) or social (e.g., wearing makeup) factors. These results confirm Farris's (2000) observation that "the symbolic aspects of the traditional gender system in modern Taiwan are still robust" (p. 551).

Finally, I suggest that troubles-talk, which characterizes women's conversations in both Western and non-Western societies, is the social reproduction of the existing social relations and structures which devalue women and belittle their sufferings. In this sense, my study supports the "dominance approach," which interprets linguistic differences in women's and men's communicative competence as a reflection of men's dominance and women's subordination. However, the "difference/cultural approach," which emphasizes that women and men belong to different subcultures and that men's conversational style is based on competitiveness whereas women's is based on co-operativeness, also provides plausible explanations for my finding that women are more likely than men to resort to cooperative discourse strategies to talk about their troubles to establish and enhance solidarity. Therefore, explanations involving a power dimension and explanations involving subcultural factors are both needed. This conclusion is in line with Coates's (1988) claim that both approaches seem to yield valuable insights into the nature of gender differences in language use.

## APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION NOTATION

Transcription and translation conventions used for the conversational examples are explained below:

- .. noticeable pause or break in rhythm
- ... half second pause, as measured by stop watch
- . marks sentence-final falling intonation
- ,
- highlights point of analysis
- = indicates that talk attached by an equal sign follows prior talk without any gap whatever
- [ ] indicates overlapping speech
- ASP: aspect marker
- NOM: nominalizer *de*
- PRT: particles (e.g., *a*, *ne*, *ma*, *ba*)
- TOP: topical marker

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## “當女人真麻煩！”： 台灣年輕女性如何談論自身的困境

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### 摘 要

本文以互動社會語言學的研究方法分析二十四段台灣大學生的日常談話，結果發現在參與者全為女性的談話中，凡是有關一般女性常感困擾的話題（例如容貌、老化、健康等）總會引起最熱烈的討論，而此類話題往往以“當女人真麻煩”這樣的怨嘆結束。本文也發現，當女性談話者在分享共有的難題時，她們使用的語言策略也顯示出高度的合作。她們會不時對其他談話者的怨言表示同意、附和、甚至加油添醋，在在顯示出同理心，也更強化了彼此間的緊密關係。更有趣的是，這類訴苦／安慰式的對話只在高年級的女生當中才出現，這點似乎意味著女性年紀越長，越能意識到本身所處的困境，也越加能以分享煩惱的談話來維繫友誼。

**關鍵詞：**互動社會語言學，日常談話，訴苦／安慰式對話

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