Representations of Gender in Photographs from People’s Daily:

How has China’s Rise Affected Women?

By

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Thirty-five years ago, no one could have foreseen the dramatic changes that would transform China and shift the balance of global power. What started as a series of economic reforms in the late 1970s has redefined a nation in the time since. From 1979-2013, China’s gross domestic product (GDP) grew an average of almost 10% annually, dramatically transforming the standard of living in the world’s most populous nation and restructuring systems of inequality (Morrison 2014). This study is a theoretically driven examination of the relationship between photographic representations of gender and observed gender inequality in Chinese society during the transformational period from 1979-2013. Dominant paradigms in the sociology of culture — reflection and production theories — prove inadequate to explain findings that reveal an initially surprising absence of change in portrayals of women and men in a sample of 240 photographs from the front page of People’s Daily (Renmin Ribao), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) newspaper. Moderation theory accounts for this null empirical finding in images published during a time of radical social upheaval, by taking into consideration not only the sociohistoric context of the photographs and the processes of their production, but additionally theorizing an interaction between those two forces. This new theory, the synthesis of two formerly incongruous frameworks of sociological thought, predicts the null finding as the result of a moderation effect such that differential circumstances of production modify the strength of the impact of societal gender inequalities on photographic representations of gender. Deconstructing the relationship between media representations and societal facts explains the novel empirical findings of
this study in a way that illuminates the complex and ambiguous structures of gender inequality, provides unique insight into the role of the state in post-Mao China, and paves the way for the development of contemporary strategies of social change relevant to China’s distinctive context.

The invisible scaffolding of gender inequality is erected between the pillars of culture and society. These two concepts should carry distinct meanings for the social scientist, yet have frequently been conflated. Both are inherently social and necessarily abstract, but they account for very different phenomena. Society is the sum of social relationships and social structures, an intangible system that is not measured directly, but is evidenced through the various elements of its composition. Culture is the symbolic way in which people express their lives as social beings by attributing shared meanings to their humanity. Though technically abstract, culture is, by definition, an expression. While culture itself cannot be measured, it can be examined palpably through the cultural objects — manifest expressions in symbols or behaviors — to which it gives rise (Griswold 2013).

This fundamental relationship between culture and society has been primarily theorized in two ways within the sociology of culture — as reflection and as production. Reflection proponents view cultural objects, operationalized as newspaper photographs in this study, as a reflection of society: a cloudy mirror. Production proponents view the connection between society and cultural objects as mediated through the process of production (Griswold 2013; Peterson 1978; Peterson and Anand 2004). The merit of
these two different theoretical frameworks has occupied the writings of many eminent cultural sociologists since the 1970s, but the debate has yet to be put to rest (Griswold 1981; Griswold 1987; Peterson 1979; Peterson and Anand 2004). Reflection theory has been criticized for ineffectually accounting for processes of change and failing to distinguish the autonomy of society and culture. Production theory, on the other hand, has been criticized for taking too much focus off of the cultural object itself and struggling to account for aspects of cultural objects that do not arise directly from the conditions of their production (Griswold 1987). Well-cited studies have emerged from both theoretical frameworks, which has led to confusion as the two theories are often viewed as oppositional (Bielby and Bielby 1994; Fine 1992; Griswold 1981; Peterson 1978; Peterson and Berger 1975).

Cultural sociology has significantly progressed since these two theories were proposed, and with the development of both lines of theoretical thought, the distance between the two paradigms has gradually decreased. It is necessary for the progression of theory that reflection and production be integrated into a more comprehensive whole capable of addressing both their concerns, and answering each of their weaknesses. This new integrated theory, which I have called moderation theory, accounts for the impact of reflection and production considerations, as well as the effects of the interaction between societal and production forces. In this conception, the circumstances of production moderate the causal influence of society on culture by altering the size or direction of that relationship.
This study tests all three theories based on the empirical results from a content analysis of the representations of women and men in front-page photographs of *People’s Daily (Renmin Ribao)*, the consequential newspaper of the CCP, from 1979 to 2013. This is the first major analysis of images in *People’s Daily*, which has been in existence since 1946, and one of the most substantial longitudinal examinations of gender representations in China’s contemporary era. The study of this 35-year period in China is of great import because of the rapid and remarkable changes that occurred, and the pivotal ways in which those changes shaped, and continue to shape, systems of inequality. This study of Chinese media offers a fuller understanding of how culture, expressed in newspaper photographs, and society, measured by observable facts, interact to shape and influence structures of gender inequality — a topic that has been greatly understudied among one-fifth of the world’s population (Hershatter 2011).

CULTURAL THEORIES

Massive social and cultural dislocations have occurred as China establishes whether economic freedom can prosper while tight political and social controls endure (Griswold 2013). Cultural sociologists theorize the interrelation of culture and society as a means of revealing the realities of people’s experiences that can be neither measured nor painted. The first of these theories, cultural reflection theory, asserts that cultural objects mirror society. This was the dominant metaphor behind most sociological analyses of the society-culture relationship until the late 20th century (Griswold 1986).
Reflection theory allows for the use of cultural objects as social evidence, and offers a testable, directional hypothesis: society causally affects culture. This model is beneficial for unveiling and interpreting an otherwise abstruse correspondence between culture and society. A traditional model of reflection theory where society is the predictor variable and culture is the outcome variable is diagrammed in Figure 1. Sociologists also admit to a reciprocal relationship from culture back to society, but only as a secondary consideration since this complication tends to detract from the practicality and testability of the model (Griswold 2013). In the present study, reflection theory would suggest that changes in observable gender behaviors and attitudes are reflected in representative gender portrayals in newspaper photographs.

The second prominent theory, cultural production theory, emerged from industrial and organization sociology during the 1970s in reaction to reflection theory. It has since become the central theory of an empirically focused cultural sociology (Santoro 2008). Production theorists suggest that the means and processes of production, a complex apparatus connecting creators and consumers, are the greatest determinant of a cultural object’s form. Societal gatekeepers, who control the production of cultural objects, interrupt the direct relationship between society and culture. Cultural objects do not reflect society so much as they convey the views of those who produce them (Peterson and Berger 1975; Peterson 1978). In production theory, the relationship between society and culture is mediated by the circumstances of production: The direct effect of society on culture fades away when production is considered, such that society is expected to
impact culture only indirectly through production. A mediation model of production theory is diagrammed in Figure 2. In terms of this study, cultural production theory would suggest that representations of gender in newspaper photographs are related to observable gender inequality only in so far as gender inequality impacts the gatekeepers and mundane production processes of the newspaper. These production forces fully mediate the effect of observed societal facts of gender inequality on photographic portrayals of gender.

Both reflection and production theories have been subject to critique. Reflection has been criticized for ignoring the possibility of independent or deliberate influences such as creators, consumers, or the constraints of production systems. Without intervention in the relationship between culture and society, reflection theory cannot adequately account for processes and mechanisms of change. It paints a picture of culture as broad and static, when in fact, culture is highly situational and evolves rapidly (Peterson and Anand 2004; Elbourne 1976). In answer to these critiques, reflection scholars have attempted to enhance the basic functionalist model by incorporating some of the concerns of production and reception into the reflection metaphor, observing that a mirror reflects whatever is placed before it. These efforts have tended to obscure the

Figure 1. Model of Reflection Theory.
theory more than they have developed it (Elbourne 1976; Griswold 1981; Ozaki 2002). Each appended factor, while improving the sophistication of the analysis, at the same time serves to erode the fundamental assumption of a close fit between culture and society. This calls into question the very possibility of reflection, unintentionally undermining the theory in an attempt to advance it.

Critics of production theory have observed that the theory has “a relative disregard for cultural objects themselves except insofar as they have been influenced by, and influence, socioeconomic structures and institutions” (Griswold 1987:1080). Production theory discounts any direct effects of society on culture, and fails to fully account for changes that occur beyond the realm of the production apparatus. In this view, unless independent changes affect the processes of production, they cannot affect the cultural object. This leaves no explanation for why a cultural object might change even if the gatekeepers, conditions, and processes of its production remain the same.

Reflection and production theory have frequently been presented as opposing frameworks with irreconcilable differences, most likely because production theory originated as a direct response to reflection theory. The current study is not the first attempt to balance the concerns of reflection and production, but it is the first to propose

Figure 2. Mediation Model of Production Theory.
a comprehensive, testable, reproducible, and widely applicable model. Though a number
scholars have previously attempted to bring the two together, more or less explicitly,
these efforts have tended either to be overly simplistic, or convoluted and poorly
specified. For example, Wendy Griswold’s article (1981) examining whether the content
of American novels reflects American society is too simplistic in its notion of a
“reflection of production.” The essentially additive model of the effects of societal facts
and production forces on the cultural object does not account for any relationship
between the predictor variables. In this conceptualization, the two forces — society and
production — influence culture separately but they have no combined or interactive
effect. On the other hand, Stanley Lieberson and Eleanor O. Bell’s (1992) study of
children’s first names, while presenting a thorough and informative empirical study, is
poorly suited to theoretical application in another context. The processes of name
selection identified are fairly complex, largely specific to the individual research project,
and not specified in a theoretical model. Lieberson and Bell successfully integrated some
of the concerns of both reflection and production theories, but in a largely atheoretical,
and therefore not specifically reproducible, model.

Moderation theory seeks to synthesize both influential cultural theories into one
elegant, harmonious theory. Production does not occur in a vacuum; cultural objects
emerge out of a specific sociohistoric context. In the same way, a cultural object cannot
exist at all unless it is first subjected to some form of production. Moderation theory
explains the relationship between society and culture as a moderation model. Society and
production interact such that the forces of production intervene in the relationship between society and culture to change its total effect. A model of moderation theory is diagrammed in Figure 3. In this model, production forces do not erase the direct effects of observable social facts on news photos but rather have the power to heighten or lessen their impact. Differing production circumstances drive changes in the relationship between society and culture.

The example of the production of a lunch box over the 19th and 20th centuries is a useful illustration of the utility of moderation theory. Before the industrial revolution, people were in possession of the materials and skills needed to produce a lunch box in some form, yet they did not. The societal shift to industrialization was first necessary in order to motivate the need for a lunch box. In this sense, society was directly responsible for the lunch box. The lunch box was a symbol of an increasingly industrialized society in which work was largely separated from home and it become impractical to return home for lunch every day. This symbolic relationship existed independent of the forces of production. The actual form of the lunch box, however, was impacted by the interaction of society and production. In the 19th century, the lunch box was merely a practical tool. By the end of the 20th century, the lunch box had become an important factor in the formation of childhood identity in an increasingly consumerist society. Practically, it was still used to carry lunch; but it was now adorned with beloved cartoon characters or superheroes as a symbol of status and an expression of individuality. This change in the meaning of the lunch box paralleled changes that were taking place in society during the
19th and 20th centuries, and was also dictated by the terms of production such as the way the lunch box was marketed and the places it was sold. This is an example of how the forces of production intervene in the relationship between society and culture, modifying its strength such that under varying circumstances of production, the effect of society on culture is different. Outside of social forces, production also had an independent effect: The forms the lunch box took over time – a utilitarian pail or a box adorned with My Little Pony – were determined by the available technology, the vision of the designer, the market forces of supply and demand, copyright laws, etc. Someone had to invent a machine that could make lunch boxes with cartoon characters on them. Someone had to design the lunch boxes and the lunch boxes had to be marketed in particular ways and had to be profitable for the producers. The lunch box as a cultural object is the result of the interaction between societal and production forces, as well as each of their independent effects.

In terms of the current study, moderation theory suggests that the production
forces of the CCP-driven People’s Daily newspaper specify the conditions for the operation of a causal effect from observed societal gender inequality to representations of gender in newspaper photographs. Societal facts of gender inequality directly shape the portrayals of gender in photographs. In this case, societal impacts are fairly visible in that news photographs, though selective, are quite literal representations of societal events. Production concerns also exert a direct force on newspaper photographs through the process of editorial omission and inclusion, publishing methods, and financial maneuvering, etc. Additionally, production forces interact with societal forces to change the causal relationship between society and photographic portrayals. That is, under differential circumstances of production, such as changes in the CCP’s primary goals related to media strategies, market growth, or journalist autonomy, societal gender inequality will be more or less strongly related to photographic representations. In order to hypothesize the exact nature of these relationships, it is first necessary to gain an understanding of observed gender inequality in Chinese society and the context and means of production inside the one-party state.

SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION

In December 1978, the People’s Republic of China reversed the hermetic policies that had isolated its people from the rest of the world for decades. This “opening” was the beginning of a period of unprecedented economic growth and incredible societal transformation. Deng Xiaoping, the de facto leader after the death of Mao Zedong,
instituted a series of market reforms that transformed China into a “socialist market economy.” In 1980, China accounted for only 2.18% of global gross domestic product (GDP). In 2014, it accounts for 15.4% of global GDP and is the second largest economy in the world behind the United States (See Figure 4) (IMF 2014).

The effects of this economic development rippled through all of China’s major social institutions, and have produced a notably higher standard of living for Chinese citizens, albeit these benefits have been unevenly distributed between rural and urban areas. Nonetheless, for the majority of the country, women included, China is a significantly better place to live and work now than it was in the late 1970s (Edwards 2000). Yet, it is not enough to compare the women of the past to the women of today. Women’s status and lived experience is relative to that of men. In order to get an accurate measure of women’s progress over the last 35 years, it is necessary to continually compare women and men (Gao 1994). The juxtaposition of Chinese women and men in the reform era makes clear that the improvements to women’s status since the economic reforms have been a result of general improvements for all of China’s citizens and have not raised the relative social location of women in the country. Women have made relatively few independent gains since the economic reforms, and in many cases have fallen behind where they were in the Mao era (Edwards 2000). China’s rapid development has advanced the social standing of men in particular, disregarding the desiderata of women’s progress and leaving a gaping gender disparity in its wake. Advancements in many societal arenas have improved women’s situations overall, but
these improvements have not been as strong as those for men (Gao 1994).

Given the Chinese Communist Party’s track record of outspoken commitment to egalitarianism, this is surprising (Howell 2002). China’s constitution, adopted in 1954 after the Communist Revolution, guarantees women equal rights with men in all spheres of life. Since the market reforms of the late 1970s, the CCP has remained committed and proactive in its promotion of egalitarian values and has further codified women’s equal status with men. In 1979, China was among the first to endorse the United Nations Convention on the “Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women” (Edwards 2000). A revised national constitution was passed in 1982 and the Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests was passed in 1992 (Qingshu 2004). Starting in 1995, the state implemented the National Program for the Development of Women that “has incorporated women's development into its overall national economic and social development plan” (Women of China 2014). In the post-Mao era, the CCP’s dedication to gender equality as evidenced in ideology and political policy has not lessened. The observed trend toward equality of opportunity for women, however, has flatlined.

Chinese women represent nearly 20% of the world’s female

![Figure 4. China’s GDP. From Harvard Business Review (Purdy 2013).](image)
population. As such, any change in the status of women in China is significant to women’s global status (Edwards 2000). Yet, research on gender inequality in China over the last 35 years is limited. The issues of employment, education, and fertility each have sizable bodies of literature, but research on many other facets of Chinese gender relations is insubstantial (Shu and Zhu 2012). In particular, historical-longitudinal data on the changes in gender attitudes over this important time period does not exist. Some scholars have attempted to make inferences about over-time trends in gender attitudes by using spacial heterogeneity, cohort effects, or period effects in limited cross-sectional data; but without direct evidence, findings about attitudes are essentially hypothetical and derivative of studies from post-Communist Europe and the U.S. (Pimentel 2006; Shu 2004; Shu and Zhu 2012). This dearth of gender scholarship is the consequence of a general problem of data availability, but is also likely partially caused by the notion among researchers that gender inequality in China cannot be a serious problem since the CCP guarantees women equal rights with men and has put forth significant efforts toward accomplishing that societal end (Gustafsson and Shi 2001).¹

The CCP has always regarded gender equality as an instrument for the greater good of the societal whole and, during the previous era of state intervention and economic planning, acted on this belief by disseminating propaganda and enacting policy. During the Mao era, “women hold up half the sky” was an apposite metaphor for the strong ideological and institutional force behind the CCP’s steering of the nation. However, in the modern context of China’s economic development, competition takes
precedence over egalitarianism (Howell 2002). Inequality of outcome is a compulsory
incentive in a market economy where economic forces that require “winners” and
“losers” constrain the CCP’s ability to intervene on women’s behalf (Hannum and Xie
1994). The reforms have not altered the fundamental egalitarian ideals of the CCP, but
they have transformed the relationship between discourse and the reality of women’s
lives in the Chinese state (Edwards 2000). These economic strategies are justified by the
socialist philosophy that a successful pursuit of the interests of collective society will
naturally result in the improvement of women’s status and the reduction of social
differences (Hannum and Xie 1994). Under new economic principles, the CCP retains a
commitment to the “greater good” of society such that women’s issues fall second to
what the party sees as the current need of the collective – economic development (Woo
1994).

All the central features of China’s modernization – industrialization, urban
migration, family restructuring, commercialization, and market competition – have
created new problems for women (Gao 1994). The agricultural reforms of 1979 launched
a massive migration from rural to urban spaces. The need for urban labor created many
jobs, however, most were given to men, pushing higher numbers of women into the less
desirable and lower paying jobs, and also leaving higher proportions of women behind in
the undeveloped rural regions (Gao 1994; Michelson 2009; Nolan 2010). A rising gender
income gap has been widely documented in the post-reform era. It has been variously
characterized as an effect of women’s human and political capital deficits, employers’
anticipation of reduced productivity around childbearing, women’s unequal share of household labor and the responsibility for child rearing, the feminization of particular occupations and industries, and a more rapid decline in labor market participation among women than among men, compared to the near-total labor market participation of the Mao era (Michelson 2009; Shi and Gustaffson 2008; Shi and Jin 2013; Shu and Bian 2003; Zhang et. al. 2008). Women’s political participation has seen essentially no gains in the 35 years since the reforms. In the National People’s Congress, China’s rubber-stamp legislature whose members have been called ceremonial actors in play, women have constituted between 21 and 23 percent since 1979. Their representation in more powerful political bodies has been far less, and in some cases nonexistent (Guo and Zhao 2009; Yu and Liu 2010).  

Notwithstanding, in order to avoid the error of overgeneralizing the data presented in this section, it is necessary to acknowledge that the unique combinations of women’s various social statuses — class, skill, age, rural or urban origins, job sector, etc. — compound both disadvantage and advantage to result in complex and varied individual outcomes and stratification between and among women (Tong 2011). Not all women have been effected equally by the reforms. There is some evidence that advanced education may mitigate the negative effects of other adverse social statuses and contribute to more egalitarian attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes for Chinese women. Educational opportunities for women and girls in the post-Mao period, have significantly, if unevenly, improved, sowing hope for the future of gender equality in China (Hannum
MEDIA MANAGEMENT

In any society, the portrayal of women in the media can influence women’s opportunities for equality and full societal participation with men. Much research about gender in the media has focused on explicit “gender building” in the pages of lifestyle magazines while ignoring the more subtle and insidious presentations of gender in news media (Stanley 2012). In newspapers, photographs play a particularly important role because images are fixed in the mind more readily than words (Kerns 1980). Those who cannot or who choose not to read, scan the photographs, and it is a reasonable assumption that sometimes those images are the only representation of events to which some people are exposed (Blackwood 1983). As powerful sites of daily information gathering and distribution, newspapers are instrumental in shaping and reproducing gendered attitudes and behaviors (Stanley 2012). In an authoritarian state with a controlled media industry like China’s, one could argue that this effect is heightened. From the beginning of China’s economic reforms, media have been regarded as technologies that can instruct the undereducated masses in the modern ideology of the CCP (Donald and Keane 2002). The development of news media in contemporary China provides unique insight into the political state, socialist market economy, and systems and structures of gender equality (Pan 2000b; Redl and Simons 2002).

The transformation of the media industry from a monolithic propaganda machine
to a refined tool of political education began with the reintroduction of advertising in 1979. The government saw advertising as instrumental to competing in the global economy and so the media industry was thrust into the marketplace (Pollay, Tse, and Wang 1990). Government subsidies were largely eliminated and media outlets were forced to compete for subscribers and advertising revenue. Even media outlets owned and produced directly by the CCP, such as People’s Daily newspaper, received reduced subsidies and were pressured to become financially self-sufficient (He 2000). The market mechanisms that were introduced into news production and media management revolutionized state media without making any change to the political substructure. The CCP, while actively encouraging media outlets to operate on market principles, simultaneously resisted a redefinition of the function of media, retaining the understanding that media serve, first and foremost, as promoters of the party agenda. In media as in no other societal institution are commerce and politics so inextricably combined and manifestly produced in corporeal form (Gang and Bandurski 2011; Pan 2000b; Redl and Simons 2002). As media outlets multiplied and evolved in response to the new economic pressures, the government responded by developing the world’s most sophisticated and multilayered apparatus for controlling the content of publications and broadcasts, as well as for censoring, monitoring, and manipulating online content (Freedom House 2014).

While the difficulties of censorship for the state have gone up considerably since the Mao era, the CCP has more than risen to the challenge by employing approximately
two million people to police the internet, and an untold number more to manage the many other forms of media (Hunt and Xu 2013). The propaganda apparatus remains quite capable of controlling the vast majority of media content available to the Chinese public (Shambaugh 2008). In 2013, China boasted 2,000 newspapers, hundreds of radio and television stations, and an advanced Internet infrastructure, yet its press freedoms were some of the world’s most restricted (Freedom House 2014). A stringent licensing system coupled with the ever-present supervision of the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) keeps a tight rein on the media industry by determining the boundaries of acceptable reporting (Gang and Bandurski 2011). In addition to monitoring any breaches of standing taboo subjects, such as China’s disputed territories, the CPD frequently issues directives on all manner of subjects to traditional press outlets and website administrators (Freedom House 2014). In the limited and fragile space opened up by the reform discourse, journalists must be able to link their activities to official party views or else be subject to sanctions, job loss, detention, or imprisonment for the most serious offenses (Pan 2000b; Freedom House 2014). Control of the media is now primarily achieved indirectly or through self-censorship. The CPD cannot feasibly pre-approve every media transmission, so it proactively sends guidelines to editors and strictly enforces any violations in order to keep publications in line. Censorship mechanisms allow officials to shut out or contain certain news events, and to disseminate approved information and reports from party-organ media through other commercial media and the Internet (Gang and Bandurski 2011).
Some scholarship has shown how media decentralization — the production of media beyond the core CCP outlets — has created substantive changes in media structures that offer an increasingly open space for journalistic reports. The application of this finding, however, is limited to reporting in the social realm — not the political — and is relevant only for non-party-organ media in the periphery of the political press (Pan 2000b; Wu 2000). Party-organ newspapers are under strict surveillance and the direct command of the CCP, and thus have less space than commercial media to innovate and are less subject to change (Pan 2000b). The center of the party press is still heavily guarded, as indicated by senior CCP officials repeatedly emphasizing adherence to party leadership and principles in journalism as well as by frequent sanctions against journalists and media organizations who stray too far from the party line. In a media environment increasingly driven by consumer choice, a credibility gap between party and commercial reporting has developed, with consumers questioning the reliability of party-organ information based on exposed media cover-ups of crises such as the SARS epidemic in 2003. Commercial media are generally perceived to be more credible than party media because they have more leverage to push the boundaries of the government’s liberality (Shirk 2011; Gang and Bandurski 2011). Party-organ newspapers, including People’s Daily, lost subscribers when the market was flooded with commercial newspapers. In response to this decline, party newspapers developed subsidiary newspapers and magazines that were more distant from the center of the political press and better adapted to the mechanisms of a market economy. Because their subject matter was less
scrupulously monitored, these peripheral outlets were more readily equipped to foster
economic success and innovation without challenging the political system (Pan 2000b).
These publications served to diversify the party-organ system, providing economic
support for the more central political newspapers that continue to be influential in setting
the agenda for Chinese journalism even as their circulation dwindles within an
increasingly variegated media marketplace (Wu 2000).

Lack of credibility with the public is reflected in the wide availability but limited
readership of *People’s Daily*, the national mouthpiece of the CCP. Yet party-organ media
hold sway far beyond the limits of their own circulation by printing what the CCP calls
“authoritative” information and taking a stance on controversial issues or events which all
other papers are expected to follow (Brady 2008; Gang and Bandurski 2011; Hoddie and
Lou 2009). *People’s Daily*, with only 3 million subscribers in a country of 1.35 billion, is
still the most influential newspaper in China (Oriprobe Information Services 2014). The
newspaper is central to the inner workings of two major institutions — media and politics
— that hold enormous influence over the rest of society.

Bearing little resemblance to newspapers in the West, *People’s Daily* often
publishes speeches and editorials from CCP leaders and is more inclined to report on the
priorities of the party-state and celebrate its recent accomplishments than to publish
traditional news journalism about current events. CCP leaders and the CPD directly
supervise editors, and consistently appoint CCP loyalists who must act according to
instructions to ensure that *People’s Daily* represents the views of the party first and
foremost (Hoddie and Lou 2009; Wu 1994). The Editorial Board meets daily before preparing copy for publication. In this meeting, the editors decide the layout of the next day’s paper, exchange opinions and information, and, most importantly, listen to instructions from top leaders of the CCP and CPD. Editors then pass on these instructions to journalists, all of whom must undergo required training as “party propagandists” before coming to work at the paper. The command structure of People’s Daily is little different than it has always been (Pan 2000a; Wu 1994). This newspaper, though not representative of the wide range of popular or commercial Chinese media, is vital in communicating the CCP’s political values and policies to the Chinese public. Not only does the information published in its pages set the line for all other news publications, but lower level party officials also look to People’s Daily for guidance about political trends and how they may affect local politics.

PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

In an exploratory analysis of the study sample of People’s Daily front page photographs (n=240), each image was coded into one of five categories. From 1979-2013, the genre of politics, business, or military (PBM) made up approximately 60% of the total sample (n=145). This genre comprises triplicate characterizations — politics, business, and the military — because the three are intertwining areas, especially within a one-party state. In visual analysis, they are practically indistinguishable. The majority of images in this genre depict senior leaders shaking hands, delivering speeches,
or walking alongside other leaders. The predominance of these images should not be surprising, given the political prominence of *People’s Daily*. A second genre, human interest, composed an additional 31% (n=74) of the sample. Photographs classified as human interest are depictions of people in their day-to-day lives. Sports photographs represented only 3% (n=8) of the sample and entertainment photographs represented just 1% (n=2) of the sample. The remaining 5% (n=11) of the photographs were classified as other because they are contrived images, and as such, are not news photographs. The distribution of genre classifications across the 35-year period of the study, presented in increments of five years for the sake of clarity, is represented as a bar graph in Figure 5.

**HYPOTHESES**

Given the observed structures of widening gender inequality and the powerful production forces of the self-proclaimed gender-egalitarian Chinese Communist Party from 1979-2013, how would one expect to see gender represented in photographs on the front page of *People’s Daily*? To answer this question, this study uses the presence and proportion of male and female subjects as its primary outcome measure. Each of the three theories presented in this research offers a different expectation of the empirical results of an image content analysis. Two hypotheses are derived from each theory, one concerning photographs in the politics, business, or military (PBM) genre and one concerning photographs in the human interest genre, which together represent 91% of the total sample.
Reflection Theory

**Hypothesis 1a:** In PBM photographs, mostly men will be shown because women are excluded from many high-status occupations, and have been particularly absent from the upper echelons of politics. Because the real dearth of women in politics is consistent across the time period, portrayals of women’s presence in PBM images will vary little.

**Hypothesis 1b:** In human interest photos, images will become increasingly urban as the population increasingly migrates from rural areas to urban centers. Due to the greater number of males who migrate to cities, when rural images are shown, women will be represented more frequently than men. Women will also appear in increasing proportions

**Figure 5. Genre distribution of People’s Daily photographs from 1979-2013 in five-year increments. N=240**
in images of the lower working class because of the higher proportion of women who are funneled into the least desirable and lowest paying jobs.

*Production Theory*

**Hypothesis 2a:** Given the constraints of production outlined earlier in the paper, it is reasonable to expect official rhetoric in *People’s Daily* to match state policies (Hoddie and Lou 2009). The CCP’s incontrovertible authority as the only power in a one-party state and the newspaper’s relative independence of market forces and consumer desires, should make gatekeepers invulnerable to political attacks and thus more likely to maintain a steady ideological position and produce representations of women and men in similar proportions.³ The CCP directly manages *People’s Daily*, which exists primarily to disseminate the party’s views, so propaganda should increasingly employ images that portray women as equals in order to legitimize the CCP agenda and retain a posture consistent with government views and policies. Forces of globalization should reinforce this push toward positive portrayals of the gender diversity within China’s borders since the CCP’s demonstrated commitment to women’s rights is a valuable signifier of respectability in the global community (Edwards 2000; He 2000; Hoddie and Lou 2009). News conventions, such as putting the most important photographs on the front page, should oppositely serve to decrease the proportion of women in photographs: Because high-ranking Chinese politicians across the study period from 1979-2013 are vastly male, their photos are the most likely to represent important news and make the front page.
Nonetheless, since women’s political representation is consistently high on lower rungs of the political ladder, it is a reasonable expectation that the CCP would try to increase women’s photographic representation to push the party’s agenda of gender equality. If production circumstances are the primary determinate of form, one would expect those forces to lead to more representations of women in *People’s Daily* as the CCP continually builds its ideological platform of women’s equality throughout the period from 1979-2013. Thus, in PBM photos, women will be shown in higher proportions than would be expected relative to their actual political representation, and their presence will gradually increase over time, or at least in the periods immediately following major gender legislation, to grow nearer to equal representation.

**Hypothesis 2b:** In human interest photos, women and men will be shown in roughly equal numbers to emphasize the egalitarian goals of the CCP and its commitment to society as a whole. Because equality for men and women is an ongoing goal of the CCP, this effect will vary little over time. Additionally, images will become increasingly urban as the CCP attempts to show the economic success and upward progress of the nation.

**Moderation Theory**

**Hypothesis 3a:** In moderation theory, the interaction between societal and production forces changes their total effects on gender portrayals in news photographs. Though the CCP would desire to show women in a way that best represents its views and policies, the need for the CCP to continually legitimize its function in post-reform Chinese society
outweighs the commitment to women when the interaction of society and production is added. Because women do not occupy senior political office, they do not take part in many of the most important or high profile political activities. Therefore, PBM photographs on the front page of *People’s Daily* are compelled to show mostly men in order for the CCP to be able to present its most important political actors and actions and emphasize the importance of its role in the progression and development of Chinese society. This effect will vary little across time because of the real, ongoing absence of women in the highest-status occupations and political offices as well as the increasing need for the CCP to maintain its legitimacy as it relinquishes its once-absolute power to the forces of the market.

**Hypothesis 3b:** Even though Chinese society becomes increasingly urbanized across the 35-year period of the study, and both reflection and production as independent theories would expect more images from those urban centers, moderation theory suggests that this will not be the case. Urban industries tend to be hierarchized, with women on the lowest rungs, and gendered, with women funneled into particular feminized industries. In areas of greatest urbanization and among higher class workers, women will be more unequally represented, both in absolute numbers and in the distribution of power. Rural areas have become increasingly feminized and, among low class and rural workers, while women may not have the best overall conditions, they will be more equal to men in their stratum. The less hierarchized societal conditions existing among the rural and working class will interact with the CCP’s need to show egalitarian images and should outweigh the
compulsion to depict urban economic development. This equality of portrayal in images of people’s day-to-day lives is even more important given the skewed presentation of mostly men in PBM images, and the fact that some of the PBM images will capture urban economic development as a focus or by-product of political events. As a result of these pressures to show an equal representation of men and women in the social realm, human interest photographs will contain more images of the rural and working class with men and women appearing in roughly equal proportions. Because these images are deliberately produced, they will remain stable over time rather than following societal trends toward more or less representation.

DATA AND METHODS

This study is the first to look at images in People's Daily (Renmin Ribao) newspaper, the primary organ of the Chinese Communist Party. Additionally, this study is the most comprehensive longitudinal examination of gender in Chinese media over the critical and extended period in China’s history spanning from China’s opening to the West in 1979 through 2013. The data for this research were downloaded from an online database containing JPEG images of each page of every print issue of People's Daily from its genesis in 1946 until now. The sample for this study was limited to the 35-year period between January 1, 1979 and December 31, 2013 in order to measure changes that have taken place since the institution of the economic reforms in December 1978. Only front pages were sampled, a selection choice that is widely practiced in studies of media
and easily defended due the relative importance of the front page to the issue. One issue was selected every 86 days, ensuring diversity across the samples for each year. Selecting issues at intervals of 86 days resulted in four to five issues for each year in the sample, including at least one month from each season, and a variety of days of the week including at least one weekend day.

There were a few instances where no photograph was present on the front page of a selected issue, or the photograph did not contain people identifiable by gender. In this case, the following day was sampled. This sampling adjustment occurred more frequently during the first three years of the sample (8 of 13 issues) when photographs were less ubiquitous, images were smaller, and the image quality was poor. After 1981, this occurred only 8 times in the remainder of the sample. These few, necessary sampling adjustments, do not impact the diversification of the sample. Every year still contains an issue from at least four different months and at least one weekend day. The total sample size is 149 front pages, including 240 individual photographs. Each photograph included in the sample contains at least one person who is gender identifiable. Photographs were coded and analyzed using Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software.

Because this research is the primary analysis of an understudied aspect of gender inequality in China over a lengthy period of time, it was necessary to focus on broad characteristics rather than the intricacies of particular types of photographs (Hoddie and Lou 2009). The focal variable of this study measures change in the presence and proportion of men and women. Each photograph was coded as containing only men,
majority men, equal numbers of men and women, majority women, or only women. This classification was determined by a simple count — if five people were in a photograph and three were men, then that image was coded as majority men; if one person was in a photograph and that person was a woman, then that image was coded as only women; if two men and two women were in a photograph, then that image was coded as containing equal numbers of men and women. Photographs were also coded according to rural and urban contexts based on the appearance of their location. Photographs that could not be definitively coded into either context category were coded as undetermined. Subjects within the photographs were also coded as high or low status. This was established by context and symbols. Working class people were generally coded as low status while men in suits were high status. Statuses that were less clear such as that of a middle class urbanite or a student were determined based on the context of their relation with other subjects in the image or coded as undetermined.

Secondary analysis looked at page design considerations such as the prominence of images in the layout of the newspaper page (size and location on page) and image characteristics (camera angle, distance of shot, body position of subjects). Other aspects of gender representation that were coded include the active or passive involvement of a subject in a photo, the relative size of men and women who appear in the same photograph, as well as apparent demographic characteristics of subjects (race and age). All of these variables were selected based on precedents in the literature of both sociology and media studies that suggest the possibility of variation on gender (Goffman
RESULTS

Despite an era of unprecedented societal transformation in China from 1979-2013, change is not echoed in gender portrayals across the sample of photographs in *People’s Daily* during this time. Though the gender distribution differs between the politics, business, and military (PBM) and human interest genres, the presence and proportion of men and women remains surprisingly stable over time within each genre. In examining the distribution of gender portrayals across the full sample of 240 images, there do not appear to be any logical breaks or jumps in the data, even following major societal events such as the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989 or critical gender legislation in 1982 or 1992, that indicate sustained positive or negative trends within the sample or suggest an organic way to clump years into clusters in order to make the data easier to comprehend.

Within each genre, in addition to examining gender distribution, photographs were coded as either rural, urban or undetermined. Of the 77 photographs in the PBM genre that were coded as either rural or urban, only 6% were rural. Conversely, of the 53 photographs in the human interest genre that were coded as either rural or urban, 64% were rural. Subjects within each photograph were also coded according to their status, which was either high, low, or undetermined. Of the 160 subjects coded on one or the other side of the binary in the PBM genre, 91% were high status. In contrast, only 5% of
the 75 subjects coded in the human interest genre were high status. Across the full sample, men were more frequently coded as high status compared to women, a phenomenon that remained stable over time.

The form of the photographs changed somewhat over time—the quality of the photographs improved, they got slightly bigger, they popped into color—but the content remained fundamentally the same. As an illustration of this, Figure 6 shows two different front-page layouts of People’s Daily from 1979 and 2013 that were included in the study sample. The more recent issue was printed in color using more advanced technologies but, even so, the two pages look strikingly similar. Each layout contains two photographs from the PBM genre: one shows a pair of male political leaders shaking hands; the other is a wider-angle shot of what appears to be a political meeting. Although they were produced almost 35-years apart, the two pages are nearly perfect parallels of each other. Though, admittedly, these particular pages were consciously selected from the study sample as a purposive illustration, the photographs and pages shown are representative of some of the most common types of images in the sample. Figure 7 shows a photograph from an October 2010 cover of People’s Daily that is representative of the most common images in the human interest genre. It portrays a group of people in the midst of strenuous manual labor who seem to be enjoying a laugh together as they are happily at work.

In Figure 8, I have presented the distributions of men and women across the full sample in increments of five years in order to focus the presentation of the data. These
Figure 6. People’s Daily front-page layouts from Tuesday, January 2, 1979 and Saturday, May 18, 2013.

邓小平同志在全国政协座谈会上发表重要讲话

台湾归国祖国提升具体日程

抓紧第一季度

做到均衡生产

习近平会与深港先进

单和先进工作者代表

中希以古老文明为依托做彼此信赖的伙伴

习近平分别会见爱尔兰和沙特客人

张德江会见希腊总理萨马拉斯

俞正声分别会见老挝总统和孟总旅

中央财政355亿元支持棚户区改造

4月内河吞吐量增速54.3% 运输结构加快中部崛起

内河文物保护向历史要滋养

领导干部要当好“风向标”
intervals of time are only arbitrarily significant and are used for the sake of clarity in the absence of natural clusters in the data. Images containing only men never compose less than 50% of all photographs in any 5-year span and images containing at least one man never compose less than 80% of all photographs. Across the sample, men are present in 90% (n=215) of photographs. By contrast, women appear, in any proportion, in only 39% (n=94) of photographs. Just 28% (n=67) of photographs contain at least as many women as men. These proportions are subject to slight positive and negative fluctuations during the time period of the sample, but they do not exhibit a remarkable or lasting trend in any direction. Over the distribution of 35 years, there are no periods in which those slight changes appear to be driven by something other than randomization.

The gender distribution of photographs in the PBM genre, which make up 60% of the total sample (n=145), is broken down specifically in Figure 9. Photographs in this

Figure 7. Human interest photograph from the front page of People’s Daily on Saturday, October 16, 2010.
genre are more likely to feature prominently on the page than photographs from other categories: they are often larger and are more likely to be located above the fold of the newspaper in the layout. Photographs that contain only men make up 75% of the total images in the genre, meaning women appear in just 25% of the images. In only 5% of photographs do women make up the majority of subjects. This distribution did not differ significantly across the time period of the sample.

In contrast with the PBM genre, women and men in photographs in the human interest genre, which make up 31% of the total sample (n=74), appear in roughly equal proportions. This distribution is displayed in Figure 10. Photographs that contain only women or a majority of women make up 41% of the sample. Photographs that contain

**Figure 8. Distribution of gender presence in People’s Daily photos from 1979-2013 in five-year increments. N=240**
only men or a majority of men make up 43% of the sample. Men and women appear in equal numbers in 16% of the sample. Once again, this distribution did not differ meaningfully over time.

Photographs were additionally coded and analyzed according to the active or passive involvement of individual subjects in the scene, the relative size of men and women, and their body positioning (facing the camera, in profile, or facing away from the camera), but no significant differences by gender were found. Gender, controlling for differences along genre lines, did not appear to impact the size of an image, its location on the page, or the angle or distance at which the photograph was taken. Race and age had narrow variability and failed to produce any supporting evidence for nonrandom changes that differed by gender over time. As secondary concerns of the analysis, the null results of these variables are omitted here for the sake of brevity.

DISCUSSION
Evidence shows that representations of gender in *People’s Daily* photographs have not changed significantly over the eventful 35-year period in China between 1979-2013. While this null result appears surprising based on its context, it is anticipated and explained by a moderation theory analysis, which sheds light on the interplay of society and the state in systems of gender inequality. Two hypotheses were generated for each of three theories — reflection and production from the sociology of culture, and the newly developed moderation theory. The first hypothesis predicted the presence and proportion of men and women in images in the politics, business, and military (PBM) genre. Reflection Hypothesis 1a predicted the consistent portrayal of greater proportions of men because of the small numbers of women in the upper echelons of politics.

Production Hypothesis 2a predicted low but growing numbers of women because of the CCP’s drive toward gender egalitarianism leading to the propensity to represent women above and beyond their actual proportions in the male-heavy political field.

Moderation Hypothesis 3a,

![Figure 10. Breakdown of human interest genre of *People’s Daily* photos by gender distribution. N=74](image)
diagrammed in Figure 11, predicted a consistent representation of high proportions of men not only due to the societal fact of few women holding senior political positions but also because of the need for the CCP to legitimate itself by publicizing the most important deeds of the party, which are those performed by top male leaders. Results showed a consistently high representation of men, which could be explained by reflection theory but which is more thoroughly explained by moderation theory. Reflection theory reveals a link between society and culture, but moderation theory more fully develops and explains that link and its complex relationship with production forces — in this case, the Chinese Communist Party.

The second hypotheses predicted the gender distribution of the human interest genre. Reflection Hypothesis 1b predicted (1) more urban images and (2) more women in rural and working class images. Production Hypothesis 2b predicted (1) more urban images and (2) men and women in equal proportions. Moderation Hypothesis 3b, diagrammed in Figure 12, predicted (1) more rural and working class images and (2) men and women in equal proportions. Results showed a relatively high and stable proportion of rural images, and roughly equal representation of men and women. While production theory could explain the egalitarian gender portrayals, only moderation theory accurately hypothesizes the relatively stable representation of rural images as a result of the interaction between societal and production forces.

CONCLUSION
Moderation theory offers a more comprehensive and accurate theoretical framework than the preexisting cultural sociological theories. It does not discredit those theories, nor even always contradict them, but builds upon their legacy to advance toward a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between society and culture.

Moderation theory accounts for multiple variables and different types of effects, compensating for the weaknesses of the earlier models. Reflection theory's difficulty in accounting for change is solved by adding production forces to the model. Production theory's lack of attention to the cultural object and its inability to explain any change that does not take place through production is corrected by redefining the model to include a direct effect from society to culture. The most significant contribution of moderation theory, however, is the postulation of an interaction effect between society and

Figure 11. Hypothesis 3a, a moderation theory model of PBM images.
production. This moderation model explains why both reflection and production theories have been supported in different studies at various times. The interaction between society and production suggests that, under varying circumstances of production, the effects of society on culture will be either be heightened or weakened by those circumstances. Therefore, findings that support reflection or production theories do not indicate a lack of support for moderation theory. Rather, they illustrate how the former theoretical frameworks were accounting for only one part of a more complex causal model. Moderation theory can account for the findings of both reflection and production theories by hypothesizing the total effects of society and production on culture.

As this study concludes, reverberating effects of the economic reforms were

**Figure 12. Hypothesis 3b, a moderation theory model of human interest images.**

- **Forces of Production**: Need to depict egalitarian images by showing men and women of similar status and position
- **Society**: Urbanization favors men who get more desirable, higher status jobs and are able to migrate away from rural areas at faster rates
- **Culture**: Roughly equal representation of men and women, primarily rural and almost entirely low status subjects due to the less hierarchized space
strong enough to catapult China into a position of global power but, for women, the
effects of national development have been disappointing. Despite an official policy of
egalitarianism, inequality persists. This study, the most comprehensive study of gender in
Chinese media in the post-reform era and the first study of photographs in *People’s Daily,*
the most powerful Chinese media outlet, reveals no change in the representation of
gender in newspaper photographs during a period characterized by rapid societal
development and change. This counterintuitive finding, when viewed through the lens of
moderation theory, illuminates the powerful, invisible structures of gender inequality that
exist at the crossroads of culture, society, and the state in modern China, and which have
resisted the progress of women's liberation in China. This theoretical model is able to
distinguish multiple causal mechanisms — the direct effects of society, the direct effects
of production, and the interaction effects of society and production — and hypothesize
their total effects on a cultural object, newspaper photographs. While certain cases of
moderation can be explained by the overpowering effect of either reflection or
production, as in Hypothesis 1a, this explanation also misses some of the subtleties of
interaction between the two forces, which constitute and construct systems of gender
inequality. By disclosing the structure of the problem, and not merely its manifestations,
moderation theory provides an opportunity for the dismantling of gender inequality.
While it would appear that China is very progressive in its official position on gender
equality, bureaucratic efforts to promote this position have proven ineffective in attacking
the roots of inequality. Pronouncements of the Chinese Communists Party since 1979
have had little influence in balancing the scales for women who have been caught in a
perfect storm of globalization and patriarchy. If China’s women hope to move forward, it
will be necessary to better understand and be able to apply more direct pressure to the
institutions and social structures that harbor gender inequality.

This study is limited in some ways by the characteristics of its data source.

*People’s Daily*, as described previously, is considered an increasingly feeble means of
communication with the public as commercial media and the internet gain more and more
ground in China. While *People’s Daily* is still widely influential among media outlets, its
direct readership is very low relative to China’s total population (Hoddie and Lou 2009).

*People’s Daily*, as the mouthpiece of the CCP, is unique in its relationship to the state and
the market, and is not representative of other newspapers in China. The results of this
study emerge from an analysis of this very specific media source with an important, but
particular, role in China’s media and political landscape.

This study has analyzed media images over a relatively long period of time and,
as such, has focused on obtaining an overarching picture of gender representation. Future
research, however, could focus more specifically on the intricacies and nuances of these
portrayals. Future research should seek to refine moderation theory by subjecting it to
further empirical tests. Further development of this theory should also consider and seek
to incorporate the possibility of reciprocal effects between culture and society.

Moderation theory has the potential to explain reciprocal effects but, in the development
of this more complex moderation model, each causal path needs to have a hypothesizable
effect that applies across many studies in order to create a functional, testable model. Hypotheses of a reciprocal relationship between society and culture have occasionally come out of work in reflection theory, but they have been vaguely explained and poorly conceptualized. It is not enough to say that culture and society mutually constitute each other, but one must be able to describe the mechanisms through which this occurs, including the processes of production. Hopefully, future theorizing within the moderation framework can open the door to an even clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the relationship of society, culture, and production forces within a broad range of contexts.
Additionally, the complication of translating original Chinese scholarship into English may delay or preclude the appearance of important gender studies in English-language publications.

Additional effects, tangential to this study, include how the one-child policy that sought to limit China’s population revolutionized the family institution and brought with it unintended consequences for girls such as sex-selective abortion and infanticide (Croll 2000). Furthermore, an analysis of women in the legal profession shows persistent discrimination (Michelson 2009). Consumerism, a side effect of an unequal market economy that has tended to have stronger negative impacts on women compared to men, flourished after media outlets began publishing advertisements and transnational media corporations were allowed to operate within China (Feng and Karan 2010).

Some scholars have argued that the CCP has not put real effort into achieving gender equality and that structural inequalities have remained and even been reinforced by the current political system, despite the CCP’s continual reiteration of an ideological commitment to egalitarianism (Eklund 2011; Honig 1985; Johnson 1985; Zhou 2003). Even if this criticism is justified, party-press publications express an ideological, not actual, commitment to gender equality, so production should portray the ideal of gender equality regardless of the true enacted commitment of the producers.
Activity and passivity are commonly used measures in content analyses of gender portrayals (Smith 1994; Peirce 1989). A subject within a photograph was defined as being active or engaged if she or he was performing an activity or participating in an interaction. This included such things as people performing manual labor, actively speaking to another person, or involved in a physical activity. A subject was defined as passive or removed if she or he was listening to someone else, on the receiving end of an interaction, or watching from the periphery of the photo. Some activities were coded as neither active nor passive, such as politicians shaking hands for the purposes of a photo, people walking beside each other or sitting down next to each other but not engaging in an interaction, or posed group photos. Of the total 235 subjects coded, about 73% of men were coded as active and engaged across the sample, compared to 63% of women. This pattern fluctuated very little over time or by genre. It did not trend in a particular direction and overall remained exceptionally stable.
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