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Abstract

This study examines the association between the Confucian ethic of female subordination and depression among young people, using a community data sample that was collected from rural China. Our findings show a positive relationship between the Confucian ethic of female subordination and depression among women in rural China who committed suicide. We also found that the positive association was more pronounced for the married women among the living controls. However, we did not detect any such association for young Chinese men.

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Sociological research on the relationship between religion and depression has remained meager (Schnittker 2001). To address this understudied topic, some researchers have adopted the Durkheimian approach, focusing on the effect of religious affiliation on aggregate measures of depression. Others have investigated the individual-level influence of religious involvement on psychological disorders. In general, most of the prior findings have consistently pointed to the conclusion that religious involvement is negatively associated with levels of depression (Koenig, King, and Carson, 2011). Under such circumstances, debates on the topic have been largely limited to examining the positive roles of religion in complex stress processes.

Moreover, most previous studies have focused primarily on societies that are dominated by the Abrahamic religions, while little attention has been given to non-Western, non-Christian societies (Elliot and Hayward 2009; Koenig, King, and Carson, 2011; Snoep 2008). Nevertheless, there has been a growing concern that the relationship between religion and psychological well-being may depend on the social and economic functions of churches and the cultural and political circumstances that differ across nations (Elliot and Hayward 2009; Snoep 2008; Suhail and Chaudry 2004). Therefore, achieving a fuller, balanced understanding of the association between religion and mental illness requires extending our research scope beyond the Western, predominantly Christian societies (Liu, Koenig, and Wei 2012). Indeed, a few studies have recently emerged suggesting that religion is related to negative mental health outcomes in certain Asian cultures and societies (Liu, Schieman, and Jang 2011; Roemer 2010). For instance, religious-based supernatural beliefs are associated with more psychological distress in Taiwan's polytheistic society (Liu, Schieman, and Jang 2011).

In this study, we focus on the relationship between the Confucian ethic of female subordination and depression in China, the world's most populous nation, which has been under an atheist Marxist regime since 1949. The founders of contemporary sociology, such as Max Weber, developed some remarkable sociological theories by contrasting and comparing Confucianism with Western religions such as Protestantism. In particular, Weber noted the crucial role of religion in influencing mental health in Asian nations such as imperial China and India under the caste system (see Liu, Koenig, and Wei 2012). During the past several decades, there has been a phenomenal religious awakening, including the revival of Confucianism, in postsocialist China (Stark and Liu 2011). Although scholars from a range of disciplines have expressed a great deal of interest in this momentous religious trend, only a very few studies have scrutinized the role of religion in mental illness in the Chinese population (see Liu 2011; Liu and Mencken 2010), and even fewer have investigated possible connections between specific Confucian ethics and various mental health outcomes (for a rare exception, see Zhang and Liu 2012).

It is widely known that Confucianism imposes strict requirements and heavy burdens on women (Hsu 1967; Yang 1959). In the traditional Confucian family, a young woman assumes the most inferior status, below that of men and senior family members. Her central responsibilities include (but are not limited to) accepting an arranged marriage, bearing a son to continue her husband's family heritage, and serving her husband and the senior family members. Moreover, a woman is encouraged to cultivate virtue by not developing her talents and not receiving a good education. She is also denied opportunities for social participation outside the home. According to Slote (1998), the Confucian ethic of female subordination, along with other Confucian ethics, is characterized by authoritarianism that instills a clear pattern of intrapsychic conflict in young women. Thus the Confucian ethic of female subordination can be seen as an ideological source of social coercion that ultimately causes mental disorders among Chinese women (Ikels 2004; Miller 2004; Slote 1998; Yang 1959). For example, a recent study has claimed that, contrary to the conventional wisdom that marriage is generally beneficial for psychological well-being, marriage in the Confucian family fails to function as a protective factor against suicide (Zhang 2010). Zhang and Liu (2012) have further determined that the Confucian ethic of female subordination is positively associated with completed suicides. Taking into account the fact that depressive symptoms are among the most prevalent mental disorders in China (Lee et al. 2009), the Confucian ethic of female subordination may assume a negative role in stress processes among women. Using our data from rural China, we can test this negative relationship according to the following hypothesis:

The Confucian ethic of female subordination is positively associated with depression among Chinese women, especially married women.

METHOD

Sample

We selected three provinces in China for the study: Liaoning (in the Northeast region), Hunan (in the Central South region), and Shandong (on the East Coast). Sixteen rural counties were randomly selected from the three provinces (six from Liaoning, five from Hunan, and five from Shandong). In each of the sixteen counties, suicides among people aged 15–34 years were consecutively sampled from October 2005 through June 2008. Similar numbers of community living controls were randomly recruited in each county for about the same time periods. The community living control group was a random sample stratified by age range and county. In each province, we used the 2005 census database of the counties in our research. For each suicide, we utilized the database of the county where the deceased had lived to randomly select a living control in the same age range (i.e., 15–34 years). The total sample size was 808, with 385 suicides and 411 commu-

nity living controls. For more information about the sample data, see Zhang and Liu (2012).

Measures

Dependent Variable. The Hamilton Depression Rating Scale (HAM-D) (Hamilton, 1960) has been widely used to assess the degree and variance in depressive symptoms. Although HAM-D was originally designed to measure severity of illness in the clinical setting, previous literature has indicated that the scale can also be used for studying depression in the general population to screen out individuals who do not have severe mentally illnesses (cf. Bulloch and Patten 2007).

Independent Variable. The scale for the Confucian ethic of female subordination consists of eight items: (1) “women should stay at home,” (2) “caring for her husband and children,” (3) “bearing a son,” (4) “keeping marriage without divorce,” (5) “Three Obediences,” (6) “no social activities,” (7) “women working at home only,” and (8) “a woman is less important than a man.” Responses were summed over the items, higher scores indicating stronger agreement with the statements. The scale showed good reliability and validity for the Chinese population (Zhang and Liu 2012).

Control Variables. Our study controlled for age, marital status (currently married versus single), years of education, personal annual income, levels of social support, and negative life events. Values of the age variable ranged from 15 to 34 years for both the suicide cases and the community living controls. Education was measured from 0 to 16 years for the suicide cases and from 2 to 17 years for the community living controls. The personal annual income was measured with Chinese renminbi (RMB); each U.S. dollar was equivalent to about 7.00 RMB. Seven items in the protocol assessed sources of social support (family, friends, professionals, teachers or supervisors, religion, colleagues or schoolmates, and neighbors) that the subjects usually received when under pressure or in life difficulties. Responses were summed over the items, “yes” being coded 1 and “no” being coded 0. The value of the measure of social support ranged from 0 to 7. Paykel’s (1997) Interview for Recent Life Events (IRLE) was used to measure negative life events that happened no more than one month before death or interview. The study asked about a total of sixty-four events. The proxy respondents were also asked whether the mentioned life event was positive or negative for the target person; only the number of negative life events was examined in this study.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1, including the mean and standard deviation and the value range for variables used in this study. Nearly half of the

cases died by suicide (48%). Average levels of depression remained low (7.37). Regarding the Confucian ethic of female subordination, respondents scored modestly (ranging from 2 to 40), with an average of 26. In addition, almost half of the sample was female (48%), and more than half (56%) of them were married. Age averaged 26 years among the respondents. The mean level of received social support was 3, slightly low. Compared with the general population, the socio-economic status of the respondents under examination was also at a relatively low level. For instance, the average personal annual income was 6,216 RMB, and the mean number of years of education was only around 8. On average, about one negative life event was reported to have had occurred recently.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Range	Mean	Percent	Standard Deviation
Depression	0–61	7.37		12.14
Suicide	0–1		48%	
Female	0–1		48%	
Age	15–34	26.17		6.20
Married	0–1		56%	
Education	0–18	8.31		2.71
Personal income	0–200,000	6,215.67		13,353
Negative life events	0–64	0.73		1.42
Social support	0–7	3.29		1.31
Female subordination	2–40	25.59		6.03

N = 796 (after deleting missing cases).

Tables 2a, 2b, and 2c compare the Confucian ethic of female subordination and control variables between the suicide cases and the community living controls for men, women, and the entire sample, respectively. Together, these tables suggest that, regardless of gender, the suicide cases exhibited higher scores on the Confucian ethic of female subordination than did the community living controls. Moreover, we detected differences in levels of depressive symptoms between the suicide cases and the living controls (see Table 2c). Levels of depression were significantly higher for the suicide cases than for the control sample for both men and women (see Tables 2a and 2b).

Table 2a: Comparing Suicide Sample and the Community Living Sample for Men

Variable	Male (N = 414)	
	Case (N = 213) (mean and standard deviation)	Control (N = 201) (mean and standard deviation)
Depression	16.50 (13.96)	0.36 (1.61)***
Female subordination	27.05 (6.28)	24.45 (5.63)***
Female	—	—
Age	26.85 (6.42)	25.42 (6.08)*
Marriage	0.38 (0.49)	0.55 (0.50)***
Education	7.38 (2.61)	9.36 (2.40)***
Personal annual income	7070.10 (18043.20)	8793.90 (15959.90)
Negative life events	2.00 (1.78)	0.71 (1.27)***
Social support	2.73 (1.32)	3.89 (1.12)***

* $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2b: Comparing Suicide Sample and the Community Living Sample for Women

Variable	Female (N = 382)	
	Case (N = 172) (mean and standard deviation)	Control (N = 210) (mean and standard deviation)
Depression	12.98 (13.86)	0.36 (1.51)***
Female subordination	26.24 (5.65)	24.65 (6.09)**
Female	—	—
Age	26.62 (6.04)	25.84 (6.15)
Marriage	0.62 (0.49)	0.72 (0.45)*
Education	7.45 (2.87)	8.94 (2.40)***
Personal annual income	3594.50 (4499.10)	5028.20 (8569.70)*
Negative life events	1.84 (1.70)	0.50 (0.88)***
Social support	2.87 (1.17)	3.65 (1.22)***

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2c: Comparing Suicide Sample and the Community Living Sample for Men and Women

Variable	Total (<i>N</i> = 796)	
	Case (<i>N</i> = 385) (mean and standard deviation)	Control (<i>N</i> = 411) (mean and standard deviation)
Depression	14.93 (14.01)	0.36 (1.56)***
Female subordination	26.69 (6.01)	24.55 (5.86)***
Female	0.45 (0.50)	0.51 (0.50)
Age	26.75 (6.24)	25.64 (6.11)*
Marriage	0.49 (0.50)	0.64 (0.48)***
Education	7.41 (2.73)	9.15 (2.41)***
Personal annual income	5517.30 (13,847.10)	6869.80 (12,854.60)
Negative life events	1.93 (1.74)	0.60 (1.09)***
Social support	2.79 (1.26)	3.77 (1.17)***

* $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Tables 2a, 2b, and 2c further show robust, statistically significant differences in marital status, education, negative life events, and social support between the suicide sample and community living controls ($p < 0.001$). The community living controls tended to be younger, to be married, to be better educated, to have experienced fewer life events, and to receive more social support. There were two exceptions: The age difference between the suicide and control groups was detected only for men (see Table 2a), and the difference in personal annual income was significant only for women (see Table 2b).

Results of the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models are displayed in Table 3. When examined individually (Models 1–4), the Confucian measure of female subordination showed a significant association with higher levels of depression among the female subjects, most notably the female suicides. By contrast, the Confucian ethic of female subordination was not associated with high levels of depression for men. This finding supports our hypothesis that the Confucian ethic of female subordination and depression are linked positively for young women in rural China.

Table 3: OLS Regressions Predicting Depression by the Confucian Ethic and Other Relevant Variables

	Model 1: Female Suicides (b/Standard Error)	Model 2: Female Controls (b/Standard Error)	Model 3: Male Suicides (b/Standard Error)	Model 4: Male Controls (b/Standard Error)
Demographics				
Age	0.72 (0.21)***	0.00 (0.03)	0.75 (0.16)***	0.05 (0.03)*
Married	-5.16 (2.62)*	0.00 (0.36)	-1.00 (2.14)	-0.33 (0.37)
Education	0.10 (0.36)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.23 (0.35)	-0.08 (0.05)
Personal income	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Negative life events	0.56 (0.62)	0.20 (0.12)*	0.00 (0.52)	0.16 (0.09)*
Social support	-1.07 (0.29)***	-0.06 (0.04)	-1.04 (0.27)***	-0.10 (0.05)*
Confucianism				
Female Subordination	0.45 (0.18)**	-0.07 (0.04)*	0.04 (0.15)	-0.02 (0.02)
Interactions				
Female subordination × married		0.11 (0.04)**		
Intercept	-0.39	3.43*	8.30	2.23*
R^2	19.72%	6.63%	19.11%	7.29%

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$.

We also examined interactions between the Confucian ethic of female subordination and the other study variables. A significant interaction term between the Confucian measure and marital status emerged for female living controls, indicating that depression levels were particularly high for the married women in the living control group. This result provides further support for our hypothesis.

Finally, consistent with previous literature, our findings suggested that the stronger the social support, the less likely the subjects, both males and females, were to experience depression, even though the significance level was not lower than 0.05 for the female control group. Age was also associated with more depression for all groups except the female controls. Negative life events increased subjects' depression levels; this was particular true for the control groups. Overall,

the regression model with the Confucian ethic of female subordination predicting depression seemed to work best for the female suicide group, with an R^2 of 0.1972.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to examine the association between the Confucian ethic of female subordination and depression in rural China. Taking the intrapsychic conflict perspective (Slote 1998), we hypothesized a positive linkage of the Confucian ethic of female subordination and depression for women, especially married women. Drawing on the data sample collected from three provinces in China, we tested the hypothesis.

Overall, our empirical analyses of the data indicated that the Confucian ethic regarding the downplayed role of women seemed detrimental to the mental health of Chinese rural women, while the positive impact of this ethic on depression was absent for their male counterparts. This finding is not surprising, since the cultural norms of Confucianism inhibit the externalization of aggression by women, who “learn to turn family discord inward leading to depression” (Ibrahim 1995: 147). For this reason, it is understandable that the positive connection between the Confucian ethic of female subordination and depression seems more pronounced for married Chinese women in families that follow Confucian ethics.

Because of the cross-sectional nature of the study design, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about causal ordering. The cross-sectional data provide little insight into the direction of the association of the Confucian ethic and depression among rural Chinese young people. Nevertheless, our analyses followed a scholarly tradition that generally recognizes that Confucian ethics and practices predict mental disorders (Carlitz 2001; Du and Mann 2003; Ropp 2001; Zhang and Xu 2007). In addition, we acknowledge that this is not a nationally representative sample, and therefore it might not be possible to generalize our research findings to the larger Chinese population. Future research using longitudinal data and/or nationally representative data may lead to further understanding of the role of the Confucian ethic of female subordination, as well as other Confucian ethics, in the mental health domain in China.

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