

Where are the missing girls? Gender inequality, job precarity, and journalism students' career choices in China

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jou**Jingyi Guo**  and **Kecheng Fang** 

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Abstract

This study aims to explain the puzzling discrepancy between the large number of female journalism students and the comparatively fewer female journalists in the workforce in China today. Based on in-depth interviews with 20 graduates in journalism from the same class, we investigate the female students' professional socialization process and analyze the external and internal factors that led most of them to choose a journalism major but not to join the journalism industry. Along the three significant phases in a funnel-shaped model—admission, college education and internship, and job market—we identify the combined influences of structural gender inequality and female students' increasing gender awareness and agency. We further examine female students' situation through the conceptual lens of precarity and discuss how it is manifested in ways that differ from those in the West. Our findings reveal a mixed picture of gender reality in Chinese journalism and in Chinese society.

Keywords

Gender inequality, precarity, journalism education, career choices, China

This study aims to explain the puzzling discrepancy between the large number of female journalism students and the comparatively fewer female journalists in the workforce in China. The growing influx of women enrolled in journalism courses has occurred in many

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countries (Beasley, 1985; Boateng, 2017; Franks, 2013). Consistent with this global trend, journalism has been a popular major among female Chinese students in recent decades (e.g., Wu, 2000). According to admission data released by Chinese universities in 2020, the ratio of females to males in journalism schools was generally ranked among the top three or even first among all majors, ranging from 2.2:1 to 5.6:1.¹ Researchers studying undergraduate journalism students in China also found that the ratio in their samples reached 4:1 or even higher (Tao and Zhang, 2016). However, these ratios have not been reflected in a corresponding predominance of female journalists in the industry. Statistics published by the All-China Journalists Association (2020) showed a persistent pattern of male dominance. Although the percentage of female journalists increased from 44.1% in 2014 to 49.4% in 2020, it is still far from the gender ratio in journalism schools over previous decades. Previous studies also suggested that the journalism industry in China is male-dominated (e.g., Wang, 2016). Such a contrast in numbers brings about the central puzzle examined in the present study: Where are the missing girls who have studied journalism but are not in the industry?

Based on in-depth interviews with 20 graduates in journalism from the same class, our findings revealed a mixed picture of gender reality in Chinese journalism and in Chinese society. On one hand, female students are discouraged by the still pervasive discrimination and sexist culture in the industry. On the other hand, many of them proactively find jobs outside journalism, which are more challenging but a better fit with their personal interests and more rewarding. In other words, female students' choice not to work in the journalism industry is driven by both structural inequality and their individual agency.

We also examine female students' situations through the conceptual lens of precarity, which is a defining feature of contemporary journalistic work worldwide. In Western contexts, job precarity in journalism refers to low wages, long hours, lack of fringe benefits, uncertainty, deprofessionalization, and increasing freelancing (Cohen, 2017; Ornebring, 2018). In connecting precarity and gender inequality, scholars have found that the increasing precarity of journalistic work provides more flexibility and freelancing opportunities, where more women are working in insecure employment situations (Mckercher, 2013; North, 2009). In the present study, however, we find that while the uncertain, unpredictable, and risky working condition also exists in Chinese journalism, precarity is manifested in ways that differ from those in the West. Because of persistent political control over news in parallel with media commercialization reforms, the components of precarity in China include not only low pay and overwork, as in the West, but also limited freelancing positions due to the journalist licensing system and significant political suppression, resulting in *decreased* job opportunities and *increased* discouraging experience for female journalism students.

Literature review

Gender in the journalism industry

The “feminization of journalism” has been a global trend since the 1980s (Dorer, 2008). The term has been used to refer to the increase in the number of women working in this

profession (e.g., North, 2009, 2016; Van Zoonen, 1998). Historically, journalism has been a male-dominated field. For example, according to Djerf-Pierre's (2007) study in Sweden, in 1914, only 11% of journalists at Stockholm newspapers were women. In sharp contrast, the latest report released by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2021) showed that on average, 40% of journalists in 12 markets from multiple continents are women.

It has been speculated that women's increasing participation in journalism could help create gender-neutral newsrooms, challenge sexism in the mainstream media, and promote more humanized and diverse news-reporting styles (Franks, 2013; Van Zoonen, 1998). The hard truth, however, is that gender-based segregation and discrimination remain in the industry: female journalists are more likely to work on less prestigious news beats, they earn less than men, and they rarely rise to the top of the profession (Dorer, 2008). For example, female journalists work more on soft news topics, such as culture and entertainment, while male journalists are stereotypically believed to be more rational and therefore more suitable for covering politics and economics (Liao and Lee, 2014; North, 2016). Everbach and Flournoy (2007) found that women leave full-time news jobs earlier than their male peers because of a lack of opportunity, low salaries, lack of mentors, inflexible work schedules, and differing perspectives on news in male-oriented newsrooms. Moreover, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2021) reported that only 22% of top editors in the 12 markets it investigated were women.

In this study, instead of examining the gender bias in newsrooms, we chose to focus on an understudied aspect regarding gender and journalism—female students' career choices upon graduation from journalism schools. A university education in journalism is of central importance in journalism students' professional socialization process (Hanusch and Mellado, 2014; Splichal and Sparks, 1994). We thus focus on students' enrollment (i.e., entry point) and their first job after college (i.e., exit point), guided by the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: Why do a disproportionately large number of female students choose to major in journalism in China?

RQ2: Why do a disproportionately small number of female students choose to work in journalism after graduation in China?

In addressing these research questions, we can examine factors in the period between entry and exit points: college education and internship. We expect that the answers to the research questions will reveal a unique perspective on gender dynamics in journalism education and in the journalism profession.

Job precarity in contemporary journalism

To understand journalistic work and career choices in the current environment, we pay specific attention to the concept of precarity, a term used to describe the working conditions observed in contemporary journalism (Cohen, 2017; Ornebring, 2018).

Precarious work, defined by Kalleberg (2009) as employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky, has been regarded as at the root of “social malaise” (Masquelier, 2019: 2) in the 21st century (e.g., Butler, 2004; Standing, 2011). Structural economic transformations driven by globalized neoliberalism have led to the flexibilization of the employment market and the increase in the number of temporary contracts, resulting in income instability and the reduction of safety nets such as welfare provisions (Masquelier, 2019). The term precarity also refers to the subjective experience of the lack of “a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle” (Standing, 2011: 16).

Currently, journalism cannot be understood apart from precarity, particularly because “technological advances and media conglomeration are shaping the way news is produced and consumed” (North, 2009: 506). Emerging models of online journalism, heralded as “journalism’s savior” (Cohen, 2017: 2030), continue to outsource work to freelance, part-time, and contract journalists. As a result, flexible but informal and insecure employment has become increasingly common in media and cultural production (de Peuter, 2011; Gill and Pratt, 2008; McKercher, 2013). A growing number of studies have focused on the precarity of the journalistic profession. Central to the precarity of journalism are significant changes to norms of fixed roles and permanent employment (Matthews and Onyemaobi, 2020). The characteristics of precarity in the news industry include: (1) low wages and unpaid work (Bakker, 2012); (2) job insecurity and uncertainty (Ekdale et al., 2015; Obermaier and Koch, 2015); and (3) freelancing and de-professionalization (Mathisen, 2017; Matthews and Onyemaobi, 2020).

Precarity is believed to be a gendered reality that can have a significant and pernicious impact on the lives of women (Federici, 2008; Standing, 1999). Discussions on precarity tend to be based on a male-centric conception of the formal economy, ignoring that women’s unpaid reproductive labor, such as child-raising, is a key source of capitalist accumulation (Federici, 2008). The sexual division of labor requires that women spend more time on domestic and care work, while women’s jobs are devalued and regarded as inferior (Garrido, 2020). Following this logic, because of the increasing precarity of journalistic work, it has become suitable for freelancers, where more women are working flexibly for lower pay in an insecure employment situation (Matthews and Onyemaobi, 2020). North’s (2009) research on gendered experiences of industry change and the effects of neoliberalism in Australian journalism revealed the example of a woman journalist who, because of her childcare responsibilities, did 38 h worth of work in 25 h and was thus underpaid. Many female freelancers in journalism do “atypical work” (Gollmitzer, 2014: 827) for one-off payments. As “pieceworkers” (McKercher, 2013: 227), they have limited economic protection and exploitative contracts.

Recent studies have found that existing research on precarity in journalism is based on the underlying assumption of “full and permanent employment” (Matthews and Onyemaobi, 2020: 1836), which was primarily available to “a relatively privileged group of disproportionately White, male workers in the global North” (de Peuter, 2011: 419). Such critiques provide valuable insights into the overall lack of a gender perspective in investigations of non-Western contexts on the topic of employment precarity in the journalism profession. Moreover, the increasing amount of intern labor is an important

aspect of precarity in journalism (e.g., [Cohen and de Peuter, 2019](#); [Salamon, 2015](#)). To fill the gap in the literature and to provide an important perspective on analyzing female journalism students' career choices in the current media environment, we formulated the following research question:

RQ3: How does the choice of female journalism students not to work in the journalism industry reflect the precarity of journalism in China?

Data and methods

To examine female journalism students' career choices and compare them with their male peers, we focus on a cohort of journalism graduates at a university in southern China. The institution is a large public research university, and its School of Journalism and Communication ranks among the top 10 in the country. Admittedly, the sample was elite, so the findings should be interpreted with caution. However, we believe that students in journalism schools in China to a large extent face similar situations and challenges—at least those at China's 100 or so "national key universities." By focusing on a single cohort, we were able to exclude many other factors (e.g., school locations, job market situation in their graduating years) that shaped the students' career choices, thus focusing on the factor of gender.

There are around 400 students in each undergraduate cohort in this school. Approximately 80 major in journalism; other majors include radio and television, advertising, the Internet and new media, and oral communication. In summer 2020, 73 students graduated in journalism. According to the available data², 51 students in this cohort were female, of whom only seven (14%) were working in news organizations upon graduation. In contrast, five (23%) of the 22 male students were employed as journalists. The small percentages reflect the uneasy situation of the journalism industry in China, and the significant gender gap is consistent with the findings in previous research. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 female students and five male students of this cohort. Two of the female interviewees and four of the male interviewees were employed as journalists. We included males in our sample to better understand the female graduates' perspectives, because males and females may perceive and experience journalism, gender inequality, and changes in the industry differently ([North, 2009](#)). Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research to identify participants who are experienced with a phenomenon of interest ([Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2011](#)) and seeks for general comparative purposes based on researchers' knowledge of a population ([Babbie, 2012](#); [Guest et al., 2006](#)). The diversity of career choices among our female interviewees provided the basis of our purposive sampling process: journalism (two interviewees); Internet company (three interviewees); other private companies (two interviewees); government or public school (two interviewees); graduate study in non-journalism programs (four interviewees); and freelancing (two interviewees). The interviewees were guaranteed anonymity. [Table 1](#) provides their demographic information.

The interviews were conducted online for between 1 and 1.5 h each. We asked questions about their career choices upon graduation, their journalism-related study or

Table 1. Profiles of interviewees.

ID	Gender	Working industry/status	City
F1	Female	Government	Foshan
F2	Female	Internet company	Beijing
F3	Female	Private company	Guangzhou
F4	Female	Freelancing	Guangzhou
F5	Female	Internet company	Guangzhou
F6	Female	Graduate study (non-journalism major)	Beijing
F7	Female	Freelancing	Guangzhou
F8	Female	Journalism	Heyuan
F9	Female	Graduate study (non-journalism major)	Hong Kong
F10	Female	Public middle school	Guangzhou
F11	Female	Graduate study (non-journalism major)	Beijing
F12	Female	Private company	Guangzhou
F13	Female	Internet company	Shenzhen
F14	Female	Journalism	Guangzhou
F15	Female	Graduate study (non-journalism major)	Xishuangbanna
M16	Male	Journalism	Dongguan
M17	Male	Journalism	Haikou
M18	Male	Journalism	Guangzhou
M19	Male	Journalism	Guangzhou
M20	Male	Graduate study (journalism major)	Hong Kong

intern experiences, and their views of gender equality and precarity in the journalistic profession in China. Using a thematic analytical approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006), we manually coded the interview transcripts. The coding process was divided into five stages (Nowell et al., 2017): First, we familiarized ourselves with the transcripts to identify potential themes. Second, we re-visited the data to generate diverse initial codes. The research questions and the external and internal factors that influenced female journalism students' career choices informed this process. Third, we sorted and collated all relevant coded data extracts into themes. Next, we reviewed the themes and considered what they revealed. Finally, we named the themes, which are identified in the following discussion of our findings.

Findings

The analysis was conducted to determine the female students' perceptions and experiences of the journalistic profession in contemporary China, so as to understand why many of them choose not to pursue a career in journalism. It followed a temporal pathway from the female students' choice of journalism major, to their college education and internship experiences, and finally to their career choices. We also examined the female students' experiences of precarity along this pathway.

Choosing majors: “Journalism is for girls” and “I want to be one of them”

The popularity of journalism among female students has been observed worldwide. To understand a similar phenomenon in China, we had to consider the specific socio-cultural context. To answer RQ1, we identified two influential factors: the gender stereotypes surrounding journalism as a liberal arts major for females and the increasing visibility of a few female journalists as role models.

In the Chinese education system, secondary education follows different tracks. In high school, students have to choose either the liberal arts track or the science track. This division is gendered to some extent because boys are believed to outperform girls in the science track, while girls tend to choose the liberal arts track. Journalism majors are usually students of liberal arts; hence, possible explanations for the feminization of journalism education include the gendered structure of post-secondary education. However, although some of our female interviewees followed the science track in high school, they chose journalism as their college major. Our findings showed that because of the gender stereotypes of liberal arts majors in Chinese society, journalism is considered suitable for female students. Feminine traits such as “being communicative” or “being sympathetic” are emphasized when girls are advised to study journalism:

I studied in the science track in high school... When I was filling out the college application form, I asked my teacher whether I should choose a computer science major or journalism. He said, “girls should not learn computer science...the work is very dull and frustrating.” He thought journalism “is quite suitable for girls” because girls are good at writing.... (F1)

This interview excerpt is consistent with previous findings that communication professions, including journalism, were regarded as highly compatible with feminine traits (Fröhlich, 2004). While characteristics such as “empathy” sometimes could be a women’s career advantage, they may also serve to “pigeon-hole” women in limited career options (Volčič, 2008: 9).

Moreover, as Day (2004) noted, women’s presence in the media can encourage female students to join journalism. In China, the emergence of a group of well-known female journalists, such as Chai Jing, Luqiu Luwei, and Hu Shuli, who “promote media professionalism and practice critical journalism” (Wang, 2016: 497), has challenged male-dominated journalism and inspired more women to participate in news work. The visibility of famous female journalists as role models has encouraged girls to enroll in journalism majors, which is reflected in the following interview excerpt:

I wanted to study journalism because I had journalistic aspiration at that time. That has something to do with liberal ideas. I thought that I would definitely be able to participate in a lot of investigative or explanatory reporting... When I read Chai Jing’s *What I Have Seen* and saw her documentary *Under the Dome*, I got quite inspired. (F15)

As journalistic role models, these female journalists are known for their aspiration to do journalism for the social good, including promoting accountability, exposing

corruption, and enhancing mutual understanding. The findings indicated the influence of these role models on most of the female students in our sample, who emphasized that journalistic aspiration was their initial and primary motivation for choosing to study journalism. In contrast, some male students were “simply curious about the broader society” (M16 and M20). One female interviewee said,

I chose to major in journalism with the ideal of becoming an investigative journalist.... It is also probably because I used to read *Southern Weekly* when I was in middle school and high school, so I got influenced by its [liberal and critical] spirit. (F9)

In summary, the findings showed that the major reasons that our female interviewees entered journalism school included gender stereotypes in their educational path and their aspiration to follow the career paths of female journalist role models. While the former showed the influence of patriarchal norms in Chinese society, the latter demonstrated the power of female role models and the agency of female students. The following sections will repeatedly come back to the theme of structural constraints and individual agency.

Getting to know the industry: Encountering inequalities and increased gender awareness

In this and the next section, we address RQ2. This section focuses on gender inequalities that the female interviewees encountered during their media practice in a “real journalism job” (i.e., internship), which revised their assumptions about the industry. In a highly practical subject such as journalism, internships are part of curricula as well as a graduation requirement. The school attended by the interviewees in the present study not only requires each student to complete a 4-month internship before graduation, which is worth eight credits (equivalent to four normal courses), but also provides hundreds of off-campus sites for summer and daily internships.

However, the inherent gender inequalities in journalism, which are apparent in unreasonable arrangements such as gender-based job segregation, also exist in journalism internships. Journalism researchers have found that male journalists are often placed in “hard news” reporting tasks, such as investigative news and political and economic news, which makes them more “powerful” than females, who are usually assigned to report “soft news” (North, 2016). Our female interviewees had encountered similar segregation, which diminished their confidence in “becoming a female journalist”:

In my internship group, there were one male and three females. There was a video reporting project at that time, and the journalist who mentored us—she is also a female—only asked the boy if he wanted to join that project. This made me doubt myself: Was it because I worked not so well? (F11)

F3 also pointed out that female interns were more likely to be required to do fragmented and supportive work rather than formal interviewing and reporting tasks. Thus, their labor was less visible and of marginal status:

I worked with a male intern before. The full-time journalist just assigned interviewing opportunities to the boy. Though I've told the journalist that "girls can do reporting too," he still let me stay in the office and do some typesetting work... (F3)

Interns also witness another manifestation of gender segregation among female journalists who have given birth. China's Labor Law clearly states that women should not be discriminated against in the workplace. However, the Chinese state has been reluctant to intervene in discriminatory practices or to introduce policies that promote gender equality in work and employment. F7 was concerned that motherhood could force female journalists out of their profession (Wang, 2016). In reading the profiles of many female journalists and talking with journalists during her internship, F7 found that when a woman journalist becomes pregnant, it is difficult for her to continue working as a front-line journalist:

Pregnancy is a physical load for women. A female journalist won't be able to go for reporting work [conveniently] when she is pregnant or has a baby... For at least one or two years, she'll be tied to the child... So, if a female journalist goes into the childcare stage before she could become a [senior] editor, it's a really fatal blow to her journalistic career. (F7)

During their internships, female students may also experience sexual harassment or even sexual assault. The alleged rape of a female intern by a male journalist at *Nanfang Daily* in June 2016 caused an instant social sensation.³ The alleged rape could be regarded as a consequence of male dominance in journalism and a microcosmic example of the widespread existence of a sexist newsroom culture that exposes women journalists "to sexist jokes, 'humor,' pornography, and from time to time even direct sexual harassment" (Wang, 2016: 503). The incident was mentioned by our interviewees:

[After the rape happened], there was a male journalist from the news outlet I interned in saying, "I don't dare to have much communication with female interns from now on for fear of being gossiped." Then, other male journalists also echoed his views... [I] felt that journalists' gender awareness was actually very weak. I was disappointed about it. (F9)

Our findings suggest that many journalists do not recognize the importance of protecting women's rights and calling for gender equality. F7 further explained how male dominance in senior executive and creative positions in journalism reduced the number of "female-friendly" news articles and news media in China:

During my internship, the chief editor was a male in his 40s, and the head and deputy head of our department were also male. Most regular journalists, however, were women plus a gay man. The gay journalist was really the most pro-feminist male I've ever met, and he consistently proposed two feminism-related news topics every week. But 80% of these topics were vetoed by the male leaders. (F7)

The findings also revealed that, in contrast to the previous generation, the newly graduated females in our study had high levels of gender awareness and critical attitudes toward patriarchy. Future studies could try to explain the increased gender awareness among Gen-Z female students. Researchers have suggested that in the new generation, the increase in women's agency and sensitivity to gender inequality are a byproduct of China's strict one-child policy over the past few decades. Moreover, digital media have facilitated discussions on gender issues and mobilized engagement in gender conflict (e.g., [Wu and Dong, 2019](#)).

During their internships, female students who were increasingly aware of gender issues experienced disappointment, dissonance, and even resentment in newsrooms dominated by a previous generation of male journalists who lacked gender sensitivity. This generational conflict pushed many of them out of the media industry. They instead chose jobs that fit their "personal interest" or those that were challenging but rewarding to "prove themselves." Only a few females, such as F7, had decided to enter the industry. She expressed, "Because it's about the environment, not just targeted at me. I don't want to escape from a large environment merely because it's like this." F7 also lamented that her personal power was not enough to change the structural gender inequalities; hence, she would "consider pregnancy carefully in her career planning" and "improve [her] professional skills to have the ability to risk resistance."

On the job market: Discrimination and outside opportunities

Not only female students' subjective considerations but also structural factors in the job market prevent them from becoming journalists. Among the best-known commercial media in China, Caixin was founded by the famous female journalist Hu Shuli. More than 50% of journalists in Caixin were women, including the chief correspondent. However, there was no sign that the media had adopted any gender aware newsroom policy ([Svensson and Wang, 2014](#); [Wang, 2016](#)). As a result, even if some female students eventually want to enter journalism, they still may face gender-biased employment, resulting in a much lower percentage of females working in journalism. For example, F11 was enrolled in a master's program in law at the time of the interview. She said that studying law would make herself be "more competitive" when she returned to journalism later.

On the one hand, F11's response suggested that undergraduate education in China has not equipped female journalism students with solid skills and competitiveness when entering the job market. Indeed, other interviewees such as F3, F6, F8 and F9 also pointed out to us the unreasonable and outdated curriculum in college education, such as "course slides unchanged from 2005" and practical courses that were not in line with the rapid development of digitalization in the journalism industry. As a result, internships have become a useful but precarious way for them to learn about the gap between ideals and reality in journalism.

On the other hand, compared to the female students who face competitive recruitment process, four of the five boys interviewed had become journalists by completing only a

bachelor's degree. This difference was explained by an interviewee who was working for a leading commercial news media in southern China:

Gender bias is evident during the recruitment process. Based on what I've seen (in our media) so far, it's true that the admission standards for men would be lower. For one position, if a master's degree is required for a female candidate, a bachelor's degree may be enough for a male one. (F14)

F14 further expressed that there are complex situations of gender bias among party media and commercial media at different levels. This is related to the division of two types of employment relationships in the Chinese media: One is the quota system mainly adopted by legacy party media, in which journalists are guaranteed lifetime employment. The other is the market system adopted by commercial media and some high-level party media, in which journalists sign a contract on a yearly basis (Wang, 2016). As a result, in local party media, the long-term rigidity of the management system can lead to serious gender discrimination. In commercial media and some higher-level party media, however, gender bias in recruitment tends to be relatively mild because of their emphasis on social influence and profit. Applicants with better educational backgrounds and reporting ability are preferred by these media. As evidenced by F8 who was working as a journalist for a local party media, her resume did not pass the initial screening of a higher-level party media. Later she found that the media were recruiting graduates from top universities and those from overseas universities with a master's degree. Although gender is not a primary factor in screening applicants, gender bias is not necessarily absent during the recruitment process.

Even though the female journalists claimed that they would not let marriage, pregnancy, or child-raising interfere with their work, there seems to be an assumption that they would not stay in journalism for long. F8 said that she had been worried that the patriarchal imagination would be a hindrance in her work:

Because my boyfriend is in another city for graduate studies, my leaders and colleagues think I will surely leave for him in the future. They have a preconceived assumption that "She won't work in the newspaper for a long time"... Can't my boyfriend come to my city?... I'm worried that the leaders might not value me as much in future work assignments. (F8)

In short, under such circumstances, because female journalism students are "passively" filtered, they generally had two career directions. Some chose to live a stable life and accept the traditional gender norms regarding women, such as F1, who was working as a civil servant in the publicity department of a local government and could therefore have more time to care for her family:

What I do now is similar to what we have learned. I design multi-media works, write publicity articles on social media platforms such as WeChat, and prepare political documents and reports. It's not busy, so I usually have enough time for myself and my family.... Most women need to take care of their families more than men. (F1)

Many more may choose to work in more challenging but more rewarding jobs outside journalism, such as start-ups (F4), large Internet companies (F2, F5, and F13), and other private companies (F3 and F12). In the latter group, some expressed that they might take up a side business, such as F3 and F12, who were writing social media posts or fan fiction during their spare time. Interestingly, most of the above choices still involved media work. According to F3, nowadays there are more communication-related opportunities outside journalism, which could better meet their interests:

In my spare time, I write articles and video scripts for a blogger who has over 200,000 followers on Weibo.... My day job at a private company secures my material life, and my part-time job at home satisfies my emotional and spiritual needs.... The current situation of Chinese journalism makes it difficult to achieve a sense of accomplishment... Now that “We Media” (*zimeiti*) is so developed, I believe there are many more opportunities to realize my interest [in writing]. (F3)

The female journalism students in our study generally conveyed a strong sense of autonomy and the desire to obtain fulfillment from their work. During our interviews, some female respondents expressed that they chose to stay away from a journalistic career because “if journalistic aspiration cannot be achieved, I at least should follow my personal interest” (F2). Other respondents also confessed that their current work, such as start-ups, could be risky and uncertain, but they still would like to do it because it could “provide (them) a sense of control” (F4) over their lives or “prove themselves.” F13 explained:

Internet companies were a priority choice for me when I was about to graduate... You know, I was a bit rebellious at that time. My parents have been talking about it (i.e., girls should find a stable job) so often... I want to prove something... our life should not be smooth, and we need to challenge ourselves... girls can do anything they want. (F13)

Our findings revealed a recurring theme of structural inequality versus individual agency in the job-hunting process of our interviewees. The female interviewees could not change the environment overnight, but they could choose other jobs that provided a sense of control and accomplishment. Moreover, the female journalism students’ alternative choices also challenge the conventional assumption of “pursuing internships for furthering journalist careers” (e.g., [Gollmitzer, 2021](#)), indicating not only a trend of de-professionalization but also a future impact leading to the continuously unbalanced gender composition in Chinese journalism.

Experiencing gendered precarity

Next, we address RQ3. Precarity has become a dimension of contemporary journalism because of the decline of traditional media and the global growth of informal employment. Moreover, precarious employment environments are created and sustained by media systems that face a diverse political-economic environment and specific forms of media control in non-Western media organizations ([Matthews and Onyemaobi, 2020](#)). In terms

of the development of the Chinese journalism industry, media commercialization pushes journalists to work very hard in order to earn a decent salary, and the loss of life-long welfare services gives them a feeling of uncertainty and “the deep fear of being unemployed” (Wang, 2016: 495). The increasingly precarious working environment in Chinese journalism is also a major factor that influences female journalism students’ career choices. However, in the Chinese context, precarity is manifested differently from that in the West.

This difference is rooted in China’s unique media landscape, which includes both official media that are used as propaganda tools and commercial media that enjoy relatively more autonomy. The financial crisis in journalism particularly affected the latter group, whereas official media were subsidized by the government, but they were under greater political pressure (Bandurski and Fang, 2020). F11 vividly described this difficult situation and her uncertain experience:

I feel that [Chinese journalism] may have entered a state of “push and pull,” in which mainstream [party] media are protected while other [commercial] media gradually get marginalized ... I feel so confused in front of such media landscape... It seems hard to be a journalist... Anytime and anywhere, you may have to resign because of the article you write. (F11)

Our findings showed that in Chinese journalism, precarity is manifested in three main ways, all of which are related to gender. First is the lack of a freelance culture in news organizations, which is due to media regulations. In official media, journalists are generally guaranteed lifetime employment, whereas in commercial media, journalists sign annual contracts (Wang, 2016). However, both media rarely hire freelancing journalists because the government imposes a licensing system on journalists, which does not recognize freelance journalists. As a result, not many freelancing jobs exist in China’s declining journalism industry. Therefore, unlike flexible journalists in the West, female journalists in China do not have many opportunities to freelance.

Second, the loss of jobs has happened mainly in commercial media, due to economic downturn and political censorship, which in general provide more opportunities and a relatively equal environment for women as discussed above. The rapid rise of social media leads to the sharp decline of printed press in China since 2012 (Wang and Sparks, 2019). When Chinese government subsidizes party media to maintain control over ideology and politics, commercial media is struggling in a more repressive political environment and economic crisis, with some titles even having closed (Wang, 2021). As a result, females have experienced much more negative consequences of the decline in journalism in China.

Third, subjective precarity is also deeply related to tightened political control in China. Job precarity is not only associated with informal employment in neoliberal markets, but also describes a subjective experience of uncertainty and insecurity (Standing, 2011). Moreover, as Matthews and Onyemaobi (2020) emphasize, for journalism in the Global South, censorship and corruption have made precarity inherent in journalists’ work and the pursuit of journalistic professionalism a battle. A similar situation exists in China,

where despite the seeming stability of party media jobs, there is more censorship and less investigative journalism, resulting in fewer published works and reduced psychologically rewarding experiences among journalists. As F8 who works in a local party media told us, “becoming a civil servant afterward is a recognition of party media journalists’ abilities.” Consequently, female journalists with the ambition to “make a difference” experienced disappointment because of political repression. F3 also described her experience of precarious journalistic work during her internship as a “double suppression” that was physically and emotionally draining:

I don’t think journalism is a stable job because it’s too tiring, too exhausting, both physically and emotionally.... I used to believe that doing journalism is to “bring light to something dark”.... But gradually I realized that even if you have the light, the electric switch is in others’ hands. (F3)

F6 also questioned the value of the restricted journalistic work, through which she found it difficult to become self-actualized and gain independence:

I feel that Chinese journalism is in a system where journalists need to follow what the managing group says to write. For example, what I wrote during my internship would always go through different journalists’ hands, and they would change some content... Sometimes I had a good (writing) idea, but they changed it... I thought they “used” me only as a tool. (F6)

On a side note, the male interviewees said, “housing prices influence career choices” (M16), and that “after exhausting business trips, men have more energy to keep working and hold on to the last” (M18), and “my father suggested me to be a journalist because I can thereby accumulate social capital in China” (M20). The boys’ responses might be traced back to traditional gendered attitudes that “men are the breadwinners” and “men should not complain about hardship.” They are also socially defined within an unequal structure, which implies that they are also affected by job precarity although they have a gender advantage in becoming journalists.

Concluding remarks: Structural gender inequality and increased agency among female journalism students

In accordance with a global trend, an unprecedented number of women in China have chosen journalism as their college major during recent decades. However, the female-to-male ratio in the Chinese journalism industry is much lower than that in journalism schools. In the present study, we explain this phenomenon. Following the professional socialization process of female journalism students in China, we have analyzed external and internal factors that shaped the female students’ decisions not to join the journalism industry upon graduation. We identify three significant phases in a funnel-shaped model (Figure 1). In each phase, we see the combined influence of structural gender inequality and female students’ increasing gender awareness and agency.

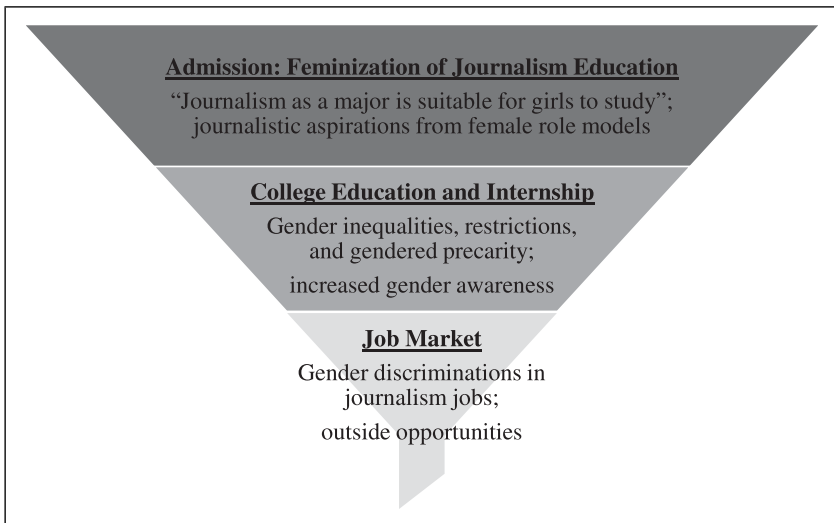


Figure 1. From admission to graduation: how female journalism students experience and leave the industry.

First, the females chose journalism schools because of the gender stereotypes surrounding the job, including the feminine traits of “being communicative and compassionate,” as well as encouragement by the growing number of female journalists as role models. Second, during the professional socialization process of the female journalism students, especially their internships, they encountered gender inequalities in newsrooms; an increasing number of females are well aware that gender issues cause these problems, but most feel bewildered and powerless in the face of unequal arrangements and restrictions. Third, because structural gender inequalities in the job market led to gender-biased employment and the “glass ceiling,” many female students chose to join other industries to gain self-actualization.

Job precarity in the journalistic profession was a further concern in our study. We show that the unstable, uncertain and risky working condition is manifested and experienced differently between Western journalists and Chinese journalists, and between men and women. The persistent political control over news and information in parallel with media commercialization reforms in China has made it more difficult for girls to pursue a fulfilling career in journalism: on the one hand, party media could provide more stable employment, but girls face severe discrimination and lack a sense of development there; on the other hand, commercial media offer more opportunities to girls, but those media organizations have been sharply declining and subject to harsh censorship. Furthermore, freelancing jobs are very limited due to state regulation, adding to the decreased opportunities and emotional frustration experienced by female journalism students.

The findings of our study revealed mixed realities regarding gender and journalism in China. While individual females in the younger generation have become increasingly

gender aware, gender inequality in Chinese journalism is likely to be reproduced and reinforced, as many of the female journalism graduates chose not to join the profession. While the female students in our sample generally had good opportunities outside journalism, their escape from it may also reflect the devaluation of the journalistic profession in China today. Indeed, they expressed that they were worried that it would be difficult to realize meaning and value by doing news work.

Because of the qualitative nature of the study and the limited sample size, caution should be used in generalizing the findings. Future studies could use diverse research methods or focus on specific directions to verify and elaborate the exploratory findings of the present research. The following related questions could also be explored: How profound is the impact of the loss of a young female workforce on the development of Chinese journalism? What are the experiences of females who are doing media-related work in unconventional settings, such as “we media” (*zimeiti*) and digital platforms?

Despite its limitations, this study makes important contributions to the literature on journalism and gender, as it explores an understudied topic and provides a model for examining the experience of gender inequality *before* students join the workforce. It also de-Westernizes the concept of precarity in journalism and complicates its relationship with gender.

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Notes

1. See: <https://new.qq.com/omn/20200918/20200918A01X0I00.html>; <https://xw.qq.com/cmsid/20200917A0JDNQ00>; https://www.sohu.com/a/420465668_372471
2. The data is based on information provided by the student affairs office and our personal connections with the students.
3. On 27 June 2016, a female intern at *Nanfang Daily* was taken to a hotel, forced into a sexual relationship, and later given RMB 2000 by the male journalist who supervised her internship. The newspaper and Public Security Bureau soon announced their involvement in investigating the case after an online post revealing that the incident went viral on Chinese social media the next day. However, the male journalist was freed from prosecution in 2017 on the grounds of

insufficient evidence. See <https://theinitium.com/article/20160626-dailynews-china-sexual-assault/>

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