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# The relationship between desirable and undesirable gender role traits, and their implications for psychological well-being in Chinese culture

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## Abstract

This study examined the relationship between socially desirable and undesirable components of masculinity and femininity, and their effects on psychological well-being among 366 Chinese university students. Results indicated that the undesirable traits of one gender were negatively correlated with the desirable traits of the opposite gender. Desirable masculinity predicted psychological well-being consistently across well-being indices, but undesirable masculinity predicted low acceptance of others only. While desirable femininity predicted self-esteem and low trait anxiety moderately, undesirable femininity strongly predicted low well-being on all indices except acceptance of others.

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## 1. Introduction

Each society has sets of personality traits, attitudes, preferences, and behaviors considered appropriate for males and females. Boys and girls acquire these sex-associated constellations

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of characteristics and form their gender roles through socialization. The male gender traits, or masculinity are often described as instrumental or agentic traits and female gender traits, or femininity are often characterized by expressiveness or communion (Bakan, 1966; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). Gender role is also a culture-bound structure defined and identified by people in different ways according to the cultural framework in which it occurs (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). Although the structure of gender role traits and their psychological implications have received considerable attentions in Western countries, there is little research regarding the nature of masculinity and femininity, and their impacts on people's psychological adjustment in Chinese society, despite the large Chinese population and the specific Chinese culture.

The structure of gender role as a multi-dimensional model was first defined by Bem (1974), in which masculinity and femininity was conceptualized as discriminable dimensions. She proposed that one can have both male and female characteristics referred to as androgyny, and that androgyny individuals have greater psychological well-being than those characterized by one dominant gender trait. However, research based on Bem's model often had inconsistent findings about the relationships between gender traits and psychological functioning. For example, femininity was found to be unrelated to mental health in a meta-analytic review (Bassoff & Glass, 1982), while Whitley (1983) reported a positive relationship between femininity and adjustment. These equivocal findings might be due to the fact that Bem's theory only focused on socially desirable gender traits, as argued by McCreary (1990), and studies based on this model often failed to address the effect of socially undesirable gender traits on psychological well-being. Having recognized this limitation, Spence, Helmreich, and Holahan (1979) proposed that gender role should consist of not only the desirable gender role traits (e.g., ambitious – desirable masculinity; expressive – desirable femininity), but also the undesirable characteristics for each sex, such as aggressiveness and selfishness (undesirable masculinity), or submission and shyness (undesirable femininity).

Masculinity and femininity are essentially two fundamental dimensions of human existence: agency and communion (Bakan, 1966). Agency (masculinity) refers to the desires of self-affirmation and individualization, which focus on self; while communion (femininity) describes the motivation to merge oneself into a large social group, which involves building relationships with others. According to Bakan (1966), agentic orientation (masculine traits) must be mitigated by communion (feminine traits); otherwise it (unmitigated masculinity) will affect people's well-being adversely. Spence et al. (1979) further postulated that femininity (communion) must be mitigated by masculine traits (agency) as well; if not, an overwhelming sense of femininity (unmitigated femininity) will have unfavorable influences on an individual's psychological health.

Helgeson (1994) later theorized that masculinity and femininity are "largely independent constructs but that when one is extremely high, the other is precluded (i.e., the extremely self-focused person loses any sense of other focus, and the extremely other-focused person loses any sense of self-focus)" (p. 416). Undesirable masculinity involves a focus on self to the exclusion of others, and undesirable femininity involves a focus on others to the exclusion of the self. The extreme form of either masculinity or femininity (undesirable traits) qualitatively differs from the non-extreme version (desirable traits). Thus, undesirable masculinity shall be negatively correlated with desirable femininity; undesirable femininity shall be negatively correlated with desirable masculinity, and the undesirable components of masculinity and femininity shall be uncorrelated with their

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