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My Doctoral Journey: A Chinese Woman's Struggles

Zenobia C. Y. Chan

Now that the author has finished her doctoral thesis in social welfare but has not yet taken her oral examination, she wants to share the experience of her struggles in the past 3 years of nonstop studying. The completion of her studies motivated her to reveal her experiences as a Chinese woman who had been a housewife for 6 years before she entered the doctoral program. This was really a critical turning point for her in changing her social identity from a woman who was locked in the family domain to a female elite who could be accepted in the academic domain. However, then as now, she is filled with a strong passion for expressing women's voices, has a commitment to social justice, and is inspired to add to the knowledge base in her field.

Keywords: *Chinese woman; doctoral study; Hong Kong; social work*

I believe that doctoral study is an effective and worthy means of learning about women's experiences, so I began reading the literature intensively with regard to the following aspects of the process of pursuing doctoral studies: the doctoral experience; a comprehensive review of postgraduate studies, doctoral degrees, and careers; the doctorate-supervisor relationship; the impact of this program on marital life; strategies for success; and higher education and women (Backels & Backels, 1995; De Cortazar, De Leon, & Ullate, 1998; Delamont, Atkinson, & Parry, 2000; Ellis, 2001; Fitzpatrick, Secrist, & Wright, 1998; King, 1994; Leonard, 1998; Phillips & Pugh, 1994; Sexias, 1998).

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On the topic of women and higher education, I found that several aspects had already been explored. For example, women have experienced emotional problems in doctoral programs that have caused them to need social services to help them through the process (Miller, 1988). Brannock, Litten, and Smith's (2000) article on the impact of doctoral study on marital satisfaction suggested the need for college counselors to assist graduate students and their spouses through the process. In addition, I read articles on women's studies in higher education in England (Maher, 2001), the difficulties of integrating feminist knowledge into mainstream higher education (Coate, 1999), women's experience in higher education (Luke, 1998; West & Lyon, 1995), mature women who returned to higher education (Pascall & Cox, 1993), and the motivations of Muslim women who entered higher education (Ahmad, 2001).

In "The Storm of a Divorce," Wang (1993, p. 48) quoted the husband of a female doctoral student in China, who said the following about his wife: "You're such a good person. You'd be an excellent wife if you weren't studying for your doctorate." This article revealed that it is difficult for a married woman to study for a doctorate because it could destroy her marriage. But is it a foregone conclusion that a married woman cannot be successful in both her doctoral studies and her marriage? There is little knowledge about the struggles of married women who are pursuing doctoral studies in Hong Kong.

After I reviewed the literature on higher education in Hong Kong, I found that the subject could be basically grouped into the following themes: (a) quality assurance and higher education (Mok, 2000; Tam, 1999), (b) the relationship between college study and life satisfaction (Cheung, 2000), (c) the impact of family background on the critical thinking of university students (Cheung, Rudowicz, Graeme, Xiao, & Kwan, 2001), (d) the roles of beliefs about knowledge in adjusting to higher education (Kember, 2001), and (e) the values of academic research in the development of local universities (Bannister, 1991). None of these studies explored the relationship between gender and doctoral studies or the experience of a married Chinese woman in pursuing her doctoral degree.

To fill the gap in knowledge in this area, I present my experiences of the process of studying for my doctorate and three poems that illustrate my journey through the process. The fundamental reason for doing so is to share with you something of what I learned that went far beyond the process of study. I experienced myself as a human being with compassion for other people's stories, with a mission to help marginalized groups, and, most important, with a need to reflect on the significant events of my learning process. The three poems address unforgettable aspects of this journey, especially during the most challenging and difficult time: the revision of my thesis.

BACKGROUND

I was trained as a general nurse in a hospital setting and became a registered nurse in 1991. In 1994, I began to study for an undergraduate degree in health science in nursing and obtained my degree in 1996. I was married in 1993 and became pregnant the following year. My pregnancy experience was terrible in that I suffered from vomiting throughout the time and was admitted to the hospital for intravenous infusion as I was nearly dehydrated from the frequent vomiting. Consequently, by the time that my son was born, my poor physical condition made it impossible for me to enjoy studying. At that moment, my only goal was to put the greatest effort into completing my degree. Fortunately, I passed all subjects required, but the result was just average.

In 1997, when my son was 3, I enrolled in a master's degree program in primary health care, which I completed in 1999. Because I was now recovered from my physical fragility, I spent every moment and almost exhausted my strength studying extremely hard to prove to myself and my relatives, friends, and neighbors that I was a useful and competent woman. Maintaining self-esteem was important to me at that time because I understood that being a housewife without a paid job would mean that I would be heavily dependent on my husband economically and feel socially isolated and unappreciated for just performing the routine duties of motherhood. Finally, through diligent and industrious study, I achieved my goal by obtaining the first position in the class and earning my master's degree.

In 2000, I enrolled in a doctoral program in social welfare. This was an important turning point in my life because I changed my profession from nursing to social work. The reason for this change was to expand my horizon to human experience and to equip myself with a biopsychosocial lens so as to help solve the problems of clients and their families. Thus, my training in nursing gave me biomedical knowledge about health care, and my social work training inspired me to offer a psychosocial approach to both family treatment and counseling to afflicted families. With these two types of professional training, I could have a new option other than to be a housewife for life. However, the process of acquiring a doctoral degree was fraught with endless struggles, challenges, and difficulties. Fortunately, my husband supported me throughout the entire process of obtaining a doctorate.

The following three poems depict my attitudes toward being a housewife and two important events (the first one was written when I was suffering from many physical symptoms, and the second one was written when my father was ill).

THE POEMS

The Death of All Kitchens

I as a mother do not spend a second in the kitchen, but . . .
 my mother spends four hours daily in the kitchen, cooking soup,
 preparing food,
 washing dishes, and . . .

My mother spends 28 hours weekly in the kitchen,
 thinking her family, disciplining her body,
 scarifying her life, and . . .

My mother spends 1,456 hours yearly in the kitchen,
 performing the maternal role, constructing the woman identity,
 fulfilling the social expectation, and . . .

My mother spends one sixth of her life in the kitchen,
 locked up in the family, isolated from the society,
 becoming a woman as a mother only, because . . .

The birth of a kitchen, the death of my mother;
 the rebirth of my mother, only the death of a kitchen;
 the rebirth of all mothers, the death of all kitchens.

Postthesis Writing Syndrome

I have been writing my doctoral thesis for over 2 years, without a day of
 rest—
 now postthesis writing syndrome has developed.

The signs and symptoms of this syndrome are
 weakened heartbeats, rapid pulse rates, shallow breathing, dry eyes,
 stiff finger joints,
 low back pain, loss of appetite, fatigue, depressed mood, social isolation,
 and

There is no medicine to cure this syndrome.
 It can only be cured by finishing the thesis.
 (Chan, in press)

"Ah Ba"

My father bought me a pink music box when I was 10 with good
 eyesight,
 but he did not buy himself anything as
 he did all for me.

My father bought me a black radio when I was 14 and nearsighted,
 but he did not buy himself anything as
 he did all for me.

My father does not buy me anything now that I am 32 with dry eyes,
and he does not buy himself anything as
he is dying. . . .

The music box and the radio are our shared memory.
My father does not know what "my father" means,
as he does not know English.
My father only knows what "Ah Ba" means,
as I call him
"Ah Ba" in all our memories
as my eyes fill with tears for my "Ah Ba."

My odyssey, which a friend called heroic, was not just to be an independent woman and to work persistently so as to let my father see me graduate but to be a leader in the social work profession. Women all over the world struggle to bridge the two worlds of family and profession. For those of us who have the privilege, courage, and tenacity to stay the course, may our narratives be revealed to inspire and enhance education for women.

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Zenobia C. Y. Chan, RN, MPH, is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Social Work, United College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, New Territories, Hong Kong; e-mail: zenobia@swk.cuhk.edu.hk.