

ADHD as Situated Knowledge: Gender, Difference, and Meaning-Making Among Chinese Women

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Abstract

Discussions about ADHD (attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder) have increased significantly on Chinese digital platforms in recent years, interestingly with female users showing far more interest than males. However, the prevailing perception of ADHD in China remains largely limited to mischievous young boys, and ADHD research continues to focus primarily on the medical aspects. And it doesn't pay extra attention to women. This study addresses this phenomenon, employing the theoretical framework of “situated knowledge” (Haraway) and “everyday practices” (De Certeau) to analyze how contemporary Chinese discourse on ADHD has been formed, and how ADHD as situated knowledge plays a role in Chinese women's negotiation of daily life. This study uses qualitative research methods, analyzing numerous posts on digital platforms by women who claim to have been diagnosed with ADHD, discussing lifestyles related to ADHD. It also incorporates semi-structured interviews and participant observation as qualitative fieldwork case studies to explore how contemporary Chinese cultural traditions, competing medical frameworks, and digital platform regulation intertwine and influence gender expectations. This paper finds that ADHD functions not only as a medical concept within a psychiatric framework but also as a discourse through which some women reinterpret their feelings of fatigue, helplessness, emotional distress, and social expectations. While limited, it also offers possibilities for negotiation in everyday life.

Keywords: ADHD, Chinese women, gender expectations, situated knowledge, everyday negotiation

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Introduction

In China, ADHD is often seen as being associated with naughty little boys, and adult women are rarely mentioned (Ju, 2022). However, it is worth noting that since 2021, there has been a rapid increase in internet searches for the term “ADHD” (Baidu index, 2025). Although there are fewer female Internet users than male in China, they search for “ADHD” much more frequently than men. Considering that this unusual trend may be related to women's traditional role as caregivers in the family, searching for children, but their keen attention to the term “adult ADHD” also goes beyond the explanation of motherhood alone. At the same time, although medical diagnoses remain not easy to gain, women are still increasingly using self-identification with ADHD to express their experiences and resist behavior stigmatizing. They actively share their ADHD experiences online, not only focused on medication but seek to understand themselves through the lens of ADHD and challenge traditional gender roles and social expectations (Lv, 2021). Ignoring these dynamics not only reinforces patriarchal norms but also obscures opportunities to understand the nuanced needs of the female ADHD group. Hence, this study focuses on the real-life experiences of contemporary Chinese women with ADHD, from a feminist perspective, with the aim of contributing to the development of situated knowledge theory by exploring its application in feminist activism. By integrating Chinese medical paradigms and feminist perspectives, the concept of ADHD as a “Western syndrome” is challenged, and the potential of ADHD women's narratives to reconstruct scientific and gender knowledge is emphasized.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

ADHD originated in Western medicine and has been studied for over two centuries. Today, the diagnostic criteria for ADHD follow DSM-5 and are defined through semi-structured interviews and tests. Treatment includes medication and behavioral modification as well as psychological care (Epstein & Loren, 2013). ADHD is characterized by symptoms of hyperactivity-impulsivity and/or inattention during childhood, resulting in significant life challenges (Barkley et al., 2007). Such as compared to typically developing peers, individuals with ADHD often experience higher rates of bullying, suicidal ideation, and are frequently comorbid with ASD, depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, oppositional defiant disorder, etc. (Faraone et al., 2021). The controversy over ADHD mainly comes from social constructivists questioning the validity of ADHD. It is usually focused on the misuse of medication and the overdiagnosis of children in some societies (Hinshaw & Scheffler, 2014). The medicinal industry has been accused of helping to create and promote the concept of ADHD to increase profits and market share. By suppressing the diversity of children, conceptualizing social problems as medical problems, and ultimately providing highly addictive drugs to teach ADHD children how to behave, the possibility of children and families using their own abilities to solve problems is further marginalized (Timimi & Taylor, 2004).

In recent years, research has begun to focus on the gender issue in ADHD. Arcia and Emily's research shows that adult women with ADHD report fewer problems than men, and adult women with ADHD have a relatively poorer self-perception than adult men (Arcia & Connors, 1998). Psychological research shows that women with ADHD are socialized to be silent and suffer in silence or at least be more silent than the typical male image (Solden, 2012). And the pressure of gender roles and the stigma felt by women with ADHD are common, the problems of inattention, disorganization, poor time management and poor task organization in women with ADHD cause stress for many women, in the absence of a better explanation, many women

blame their problems on personal failures, such as laziness and a lack of ability to work hard, which leads to a negative self-image (Holthe & Langvik, 2017).

Currently, the authoritative academic consensus on ADHD in China largely follows the Western medical framework, employing the DSM diagnostic criteria, treatment protocols, and understanding of the disorder (T. Wang et al., 2017). However, Western medicine is not the only approach in China. In contrast, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) offers a different perspective. In ancient TCM theory, ADHD was not specifically identified; symptoms like those of modern ADHD were largely attributed to an imbalance of yin and yang and dysfunction of the five internal organs. Modern Traditional Chinese Medicine has partially adopted the concept of ADHD, while also integrating treatment principles based on the balance of yin and yang (Su & Shao, 2024). In clinical practice, it often emphasizes that individuals should develop a healthy set of values and adjust their mindset toward the world (Xu, 2022), supplemented by therapies such as herbal medicine, acupuncture, or the Eight Brocades Kung Fu routine (Y. Wang & Luo, 2024). However, whether we are talking about Yin-Yang theory or herbal medicine, if we attribute ADHD symptoms solely to some kind of personal flaw or individual responsibility, the explanation mechanism may be different from that of Western medicine, but the gap in the recognition of gender differences in ADHD and the neglect of women's experiences persists.

This study moves beyond the purely biomedical framework and adopts a social science perspective, examining ADHD within the broader contexts of knowledge production, power, and gender. According to Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledge" (Haraway, 1988), knowledge is always partial, situated, localized, and limited, it does not arise nowhere. This concept enables us to recognize how knowledge is shaped by power, collective consciousness, and context. This theoretical framework of situated knowledge provides important support for the study of the topic of contemporary Chinese women's use of ADHD knowledge. ADHD knowledge is a foreign product for Chinese women, compare the situated knowledge from local, it is as well as another kind of situated knowledge. Some women in China learn about it, use it, reinterpret it based on their own personal experiences, expand its definition, and make it work for themselves, providing a brand-new possibility for women to actively participate in knowledge production and change the power structure.

Michel de Certeau's "The Practice of Everyday Life" is more concerned with how people creatively explore and reinterpret their environment within existing structures and systems (Michel de Certeau, 1984). De Certeau's theory emphasizes strategy and tactics. In his view, strategy belongs to the category of strong weapons that can control space, extending and clarifying boundaries, while tactics are weak weapons that depend on time, that have no spatial control, but can observe space and manipulate events piecemeal, subtly transforming them into opportunities and winning victories for the weak against the strong. Many everyday behaviors such as talking, reading, walking, shopping, cooking, etc. Linked to the research on women with ADHD, they are a multifaceted group, they cannot be understood simply from the perspective of victims, nor can they be reduced to consistent rebels. They are neither, yet they are all. They are more like the ordinary citizens of the city in De Certeau's theory. They are aware of their dissatisfaction and the threats they faced, even if they don't direct say No. They use indirect tactics, which sometimes work and sometimes don't.

Methodology

To ensure diversity and representativeness, the study plans to include participants across multiple dimensions such as age, class, educational background, and urban-rural residency. Including 5–6 case studies, divided into 3 age groups: 20–30 years, 30–40 years, and 40–50 years, with 1–2 cases from each group. The ongoing qualitative fieldwork conducted since 2024, including one-on-one semi-structured interviews with women engaging with ADHD discourse, as well as periods of close everyday observation with selected participants. In the case study section of this research, the participants are primarily women from urban areas in China. It is worth noting that the study did not initially set out to specifically select women from urban areas; rather, the investigation revealed that most women currently reporting ADHD reside in urban areas. This finding also highlights, to some extent, the urban-rural and class disparities underlying the ADHD phenomenon.

This study also analyzed lively discussions on social media. This part involved discourse analysis of approximately 100 ADHD-related posts collected between 2023 and 2026, focusing on participants' real-life experiences rather than pathologizing the content. For example, it observed women's attitudes towards their ADHD identity and how they applied their understanding of ADHD in various situations, including family of origin, intimate relationships, career and education, personal development, and societal expectations. Thematic analysis categorized the content and identified recurring themes from the data. This study also examined official statistics and literature on ADHD in women, both domestically and internationally.

Findings and Discussion

This study argues that the application and acceptance of ADHD in the daily lives of contemporary Chinese women does not manifest as purely Western medical knowledge, but rather as situated knowledge. To understand it, it is necessary to examine the cultural frameworks used throughout Chinese history to define female difference.

Since the Han Dynasty, Confucianism has been the dominant ideology in China (Chou, 2013). For women, Confucianism reinforced their subordinate status within the family and society by extolling obedience and self-restraint as virtues (Gao, 2003). The dissemination of idealized concepts such as the “virtuous wife and good mother” standardized and reinforced traditional female roles (Liu, 2014). These idealized concepts confine the standards of “normal” womanhood to an extremely narrow range. In other words, women who fail to embody virtues such as self-restraint, composure, and self-sacrifice are subjected to moral pressure that justifies harsh judgment. These dynamic silences, marginalizes, and even punishes many women who refuse to conform. A notable example is that of Yu Xuanji (鱼玄机), a female poet from the Tang Dynasty. While her literary works are noteworthy, it is her sexual scandals that have gained widespread circulation. Many analyses from Jia's book contend that while Yu Xuanji was undeniably talented and held considerable significance in the annals of Chinese poetry, subsequent critics have selectively portrayed her as a prostitute, relishing the narrative of her perceived moral decline as she vied for the attention of men. Ironically, male poets associated with Yu Xuanji have generally received greater attention for their achievements while avoiding moral scrutiny, even when committing similar offenses, they have faced lighter punishments than Yu Xuanji (Jia, 2022, pp. 207–236). In Chinese folklore and literary narratives, there are lot of examples where women's emotional intensity, autonomy, or nonconformity are repeatedly linked to danger, instability, or moral failings.

However, it is unfair to understand Confucian moral norms as the only cultural framework in ancient China. For example, Taoist thought was also widely circulated among the Chinese people in history. Concepts such as *Zi Ran* (自然, following one's own nature) and *Wu Wei* (无为, non-coercive action) framing individual temperament, rhythms, and differences as integral to the natural order rather than as defects to be corrected (Tzu & Lau, 1981). The well-known Daoist story of the “useless tree” illustrates this perspective: A giant tree called “Chū” (樗) was disliked by carpenters because its wood seemed “useless”—too knotty, twisted, or soft to be suitable for tools. Zhuangzi's student asked him if it was a pity. Zhuangzi countered that this very “uselessness” saved it. Because it was deemed useless, no one cut it down, allowing it to grow undisturbed and live a long life. Zhuangzi's perspective is simple yet incisive: What you deem useless might be the perfect life for me. Through the story of the useless tree, Zhuangzi points out that secular judgments of value often rely solely on usefulness—but useful to whom? From the tree's own perspective, it need not be useful. It can even gain freedom, safety, and the space to be itself precisely through its “uselessness” to humans (Morejón, 2014).

Nevertheless, Since the Han dynasty, Daoist philosophy has never occupied the core of the imperial “court” ideology, it remained outside the primary apparatus of state governance and the Confucian-dominated education system, as a result, its tolerance for individual difference lacked institutional support (Freiberg, 1977). even in folk contexts, Daoist-style acceptance often required women to exit mainstream gender roles. Becoming a female Daoist or shamans generally meant relinquishing the social positions of wife and mother and withdrawing from the family-based networks of authority and economy. In other words, the space for alternative interpretations of “difference” was made available only by relocating women outside the core spheres of social and reproductive labor (Despeux, 2000). Therefore, Daoist acceptance of “difference” also limited and conditional.

Thus, even before the advent of Western modern psychoanalysis and the DSM manual, and before the concept of ADHD emerged, China had its own way of categorizing women as “normal” or “abnormal.” This classification was deeply rooted in a culture that had been passed down for thousands of years, forming its own moral system. The emergence of medical concepts such as ADHD has provided an interpretive framework distinct from traditional Chinese culture.

In recent years, posts and bloggers discussing ADHD have been popping up on major Chinese digital platforms, with many trending hashtags consistently racking up high view counts. For example, some women are open about identifying as having ADHD on their personal profiles, displaying it publicly much like MBTI types as a statement of personal identity. There are also many women who refer to themselves as “an ADHDer,” using this identity to discuss their recent life experiences or challenges. Certain phrases have been identified as recurring themes, such as “Being diagnosed with ADHD has helped me finally stop self-blame,” “So, I have ADHD, it's not my fault; our brains are just differently”, or, “ADHD requires scaffolding help, so stop carrying all the things on your shoulder!” Those women engage with ADHD-related knowledge actively, and they are mostly concentrated in China's first-tier and/or second-tier cities, even though some of their families of origin come from rural areas. These women generally have higher levels of education, and a significant proportion have or have had good professional incomes. However, they all experienced varying degrees of self-doubt and life challenges before their ADHD diagnosis. Some sought a diagnosis after becoming mothers and realizing they could not adequately handle caregiving responsibilities, others considered it under immense work pressure, and still others decided to seek a diagnosis in the face of academic stress. They use the internet to learn more about ADHD, and at the same time, many

are creating new knowledge about ADHD through their own life experiences. For example, on Xiaohongshu (Rednote App), Many posts by women with ADHD also frequently relate to “ADHD study methods”, “ADHD organization”, “lifestyle”, or “relaxation techniques”.

Popular hashtags related to ADHD reflect the visibility and legitimacy of this topic as a subject for open discussion online. But it is important to note that platform algorithms play a key role in determining which ADHD-related narratives gain visibility. As research on the attention economy has pointed out, within the competitive landscape of the attention economy, platforms tend to prioritize content that aligns with the “emotional economy.” Vlogs featuring lighthearted humor, self-deprecating banter, productivity tips, or visually appealing content often receive higher recommendation rates (Dai & Wang, 2023). This trend that aligns with discussions about ADHD: For example, content that is considered to fit the platform's preferences, such as “planting seeds” (种草, promoting consumption) or “being interesting,” will have a high level of engagement, while content that calls for attention to systemic injustice or questions the authenticity of ADHD will have a hard time getting exposure. For example, a short video on Xiaohongshu titled “*ADHD Is a High-Dimensional Brain Trapped in a Low-Dimensional Reality*” received 13,000 likes, while a long-form article titled “*Why Women's ADHD Is Always Overlooked*” risks being buried. It's no wonder that even within the ADHD discourse, some people with severe symptoms condemn this trend of treating ADHD as the latest “fashion item” for taking up space that should belong to people with ADHD who are struggling to seek help, downplaying their suffering, and reducing their chances of getting substantial help.

Under this selective traffic-targeting logic of algorithms, ADHD traits such as inattention, forgetfulness, or disorganization have the potential to be redefined. For example, as quirky, interesting, or unique personal traits rather than medical “pathologies.” This shift from “illness” to “identity” offers women the opportunity to explore reconfiguration their own narratives, In this process of reconstruction, a reexamination of gender issues has effectively unfolded. When women share their experiences with ADHD, they often weave in detail from their daily lives, for example, the exhaustion from meritocracy, the sense of helplessness in the face of the burdens of motherhood...However, if these stories were not discussed within the framework of ADHD, many of these details could easily be dismissed as “advocating for giving up,” “much more individualism,” “complaining,” “laziness,” or “stirring up emotions”—all of which are viewed as “negative energy” on the Chinese internet (Yang & Tang, 2018). It can be said that the ADHD discourse provides women with a space, though this space only exists when their narratives align with the platform's expectations regarding femininity and consumer culture.

Conclusion

The concept of ADHD, which is prevalent among contemporary Chinese women, is by no means merely a biomedical concept. By examining the construction of the “normal/abnormal” cultural framework in traditional Chinese culture, the contemporary context of coexisting traditional and Western medicine, how women use digital platforms to reinterpret ADHD knowledge, and how these platforms construct a localized discourse on ADHD, this study reveals that some contemporary Chinese women selectively employ ADHD discourse as situated knowledge in their daily life negotiations. It is worth emphasizing that This study does not view “female abnormality” as an early or primitive precursor to contemporary diagnostic categories but rather aims to explore how women who deviated from normative expectations were constructed on moral and cultural levels prior to the emergence of the biomedical framework. By examining the continuity of traditional theories and the coexistence of Western

and traditional Chinese medicine in China, we can better understand in contemporary China, biomedical knowledge regarding ADHD has neither fallen into a rootless void nor simply replaced indigenous cognitive frameworks, rather, it has become a hybrid and situated form of knowledge, engage and share via digital platforms, and use as tactics in everyday life negotiation sometimes. Participants in this study were primarily recruited from currently active female internet users, so this study does not attempt to encompass all ADHD-related experiences within China. Future research may further explore associated factors such as regional differences, class dynamics, and family structures.

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