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Open Access Journal

Celebrating Femininity in the Public Sphere: The Workstation Arrangements of Chinese Female White-Collar Workers

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Abstract

This article examines the desk items of female white-collar workers in China, using items as an entry point to explore how they are selected and arranged to construct and convey gendered meanings. The research reveals how gendered significance is materially constructed in micro-spaces within the workplace, highlighting the complex mechanisms by which "the desk" becomes an arena for gender political struggle. Adopting gender performativity theory from a social constructivist perspective and employing qualitative methods that combine multimodal ethnography and in-depth interviews, I posit that desk items function not only as a reflection of compliance or resistance to gender norms but also as a means of reproducing workplace gender orders through spatial practices. This study emphasizes that, despite formal systems professing gender neutrality, material culture subtly perpetuates gender inequality through implicit symbols, compelling women to shoulder additional costs in pursuit of professional legitimacy. Moreover, the embedded resistance present within desk items affords women a micro-narrative space where they can counteract prevailing discourses, thereby facilitating professional breakthroughs. The research also highlights the intersection of traditional and modern disciplinary mechanisms, such as the blending of Confucian ethics with the legacy of socialist women's liberation, and the reinforcement of gender stereotypes by algorithmic recommendation systems, all of which influence the gender order in the workplace. This article offers a novel perspective on understanding gender politics in Chinese workplaces, providing both theoretical support and practical insights to promote gender equality.

Keywords

China; desk items; female white-collar workers; gender performativity; gendered meanings; workplace gender order

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1. Introduction

Contemporary professional women in China face a dual burden: On the one hand, they must undertake family responsibilities within a patriarchal context, and on the other, they strive for gender equality in the workplace. This structural contradiction is manifest in tangible practices within the office environment. The desk, in particular, functions as a microcosmic tool of organizational power and discipline. The objects positioned on the desk act as a distinct lens through which the dynamics of gender politics can be observed. Personal items, including family photographs, baby-related objects, and handmade decorations, are imbued with unique symbolic meanings. These objects are indicative of a form of resistance employed by women in the workplace to construct their own subjectivity, as well as reflecting societal expectations surrounding gender roles. The coexistence of "tamed bodies" and "resistant objects" reveals the survival strategies employed by professional women in China during a period of transformation, as they navigate the tension between institutional discrimination and cultural expectations.

The present study aims to explore the under-researched phenomenon of how Chinese female white-collar workers construct and convey gendered meanings through the selection and arrangement of items in their workplaces. The study focuses on how Chinese female professionals use desk items to engage in gender political negotiations. The objective of the research is to reveal the contradictions presented by personal items and how they serve as material carriers that reconcile professional identities with domestic roles.

In contradistinction to the prevailing Western studies on the materiality of the workplace, this article focuses on two specific scenarios faced by professional women in the Chinese context. Firstly, from the perspective of symbolic violence, the Confucian notion of "female virtue" and the legacy of socialist women's liberation intertwine to create a complex disciplinary framework. Women are expected to demonstrate "gentle and attentive" professional capabilities with gendered traits, while simultaneously avoiding being perceived as "too feminine" to prevent obstacles to career advancement. This contradiction is reflected in the careful balance of desk decorations. Secondly, female workers utilize the configuration of their workspaces to concurrently exhibit dual identities. For instance, maternal items not only indicate the fulfillment of their maternal responsibilities but also suggest that parenting may affect work efficiency.

The political significance of these material practices is predicated on the fact that, in circumstances where formal organizational regulations are inadequate for ensuring gender equality, the desk assumes the role of a tactical space for women's daily resistance. A meticulously curated succulent plant has been shown to serve as a source of emotional solace, mitigating feelings of alienation within a hierarchical structure. Moreover, it functions as a strategic instrument in managing the perception of evading the "career woman" stereotype. Furthermore, the strategic placement of family photographs frequently serves as a means to address shifts in career status prior to and following maternity leave. These practices, though seemingly subtle, play a crucial role in perpetuating established gender dynamics and accumulating cultural capital that can potentially facilitate the overcoming of barriers to advancement in professional settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Current Research on Chinese White-Collar or Career Women

Research on professional women in China has undergone three major shifts in academic discourse, forming a distinct theoretical dialogue trajectory. During the period of socialist feminist heritage (1990–2000), studies continued the framework established during the planned economy era, which emphasised the idea that "women can hold up half the sky." The primary focus of these studies was on the manner in which national policies facilitated women's participation in the workforce. For instance, the employment rate of urban women increased from 7.5% in 1949 to 37.7% in 1990 (Min, 2006, p. 46, Figures 3–2). However, research in this phase has frequently overlooked the gradual disappearance of gender equality dividends during market transformation and paid little attention to the impact of the material work environment on gender relations.

In the 21st century, research began to incorporate Western intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), combined with China's urban-rural binary structure, and with a focus on the dual discrimination faced by female migrant workers in terms of household registration and employment. Research has identified a significant concentration of female migrant workers within the service industry, with the study by Li et al. (2016) reporting that these professionals constituted 82% of the sector. Furthermore, the phenomenon of children being left behind by migrant workers was prevalent, with the retention rate for female migrant workers being approximately 46% (Zhilei & Taoli, 2024). While these studies revealed the spatial segregation between urban and rural areas, as well as between family and workplace, they focused less on the gendered coding of workplace power fields, such as how "standardized workstations for female assembly line workers serve as both production tools and devices for disciplining women's bodies" (Jie & Xia, 2023, p. 253).

Following 2016, research underwent a paradigm shift towards a critique of technology, with a particular focus on the impact of digital capitalism on professional women. For instance, female delivery riders displayed notable emotional labor characteristics in the context of algorithmic management (Ping et al., 2021), and their electric bike GPS positioning and delivery box identification constituted a novel surveillance system. In the context of home-office environments, technological devices such as cameras and virtual background walls have emerged as dual mediators, both facilitating discipline and fostering resistance.

Recent studies have highlighted the challenges women have faced regarding career advancement, the balancing of professional and familial obligations, and within the context of the platform economy. For instance, although the percentage of women in Chinese boardrooms has gradually increased, reaching 16.57% in 2021, 83% of them still occupy human resources and administrative positions (China Corporate Governance Research Center, 2021), indicating the existence of a "glass maze." Previous industry case studies suggest that spatial and social exclusions—such as smoking lounges and golf networking—operate as an implicit promotion barrier for women in male-dominated workplaces (see, e.g., Hathway & Manfredi, 2017). Intersectional discrimination based on age and gender is a significant phenomenon. The 2022 China Women's Workplace Survey by Zhaopin revealed that 61.2% of women were asked about their marital and childbearing status during job interviews, compared to only one-third of men. Concerning fertility and career balance, the proportion of maternity insurance coverage among urban employed women reached roughly 90 percent by 2010 (National People's Congress of China, 2010) and further approached universal coverage in 2021, with 103 million women insured (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). However, the impact of

childbirth on women's career development remains significant. According to research from the McKinsey Global Institute (2023), the decision to have one child is associated with a 7% wage decrease for Chinese women (see also Jankowiak & Li, 2014). It has been demonstrated that companies utilize the practice of "soft layoffs" as a means of circumventing policy-related costs. This phenomenon, however, has the unintended consequence of engendering difficulties in the enforcement of policy.

In dual-income households, greater father involvement in childcare is positively associated with family well-being and higher fertility intentions (see, e.g., Duvander & Jans, 2009; Huerta et al., 2013). This has led to the development of "fragmented time management skills" among professional women, such as the utilization of commuting time for the management of school-related messages (Jian et al., 2024). This phenomenon can be interpreted as the encroachment of mobile workstations, such as smartphones and tablets, into the realm of personal time management.

Empirical studies have revealed the micro-level experiences of professional women in terms of both their physical and emotional states. For instance, women have been found to use emoticons more frequently in workplace communication, a phenomenon that may be related to emotional labor. The employment platform 51Job discovered that female users exhibit a higher level of acceptance and utilization of emoticons in comparison to their male counterparts. Furthermore, female users are more inclined to convey positive emotions through the use of emoticons (Qi, 2016). In summary, research on professional women in China is at a critical juncture for theoretical innovation. It is imperative to deconstruct the institutional paradoxes left by the planned economy while addressing the emergent forms of oppression arising from digital capitalism. This requires the establishment of locally pertinent analytical frameworks by the academic community to address societal transformation, in addition to the utilization of these frameworks as efficacious instruments to promote gender justice.

2.2. The Sociological Study of Objects: State of Current Research

The sociological study of objects has a rich history. From Marcel Mauss's 1925 analysis of gift-giving in *The Gift* to Jean Baudrillard's critique of the symbolic meaning of objects, along with more recent advancements in the field, including the study of cultural heritage and digital items (Appadurai, 1986; Baudrillard, 1996, pp. 185–220; Mauss, 1925/2002), studies have demonstrated that objects are not passive entities. That being said, research has usually focused on documenting how objects influence and change social relationships, how culture and politics interact through them, and their key role in the process of individual identity formation.

While consumerism reduces objects to their symbolic representation, sociology examines the underlying power structures. In the context of globalization, local knowledge is susceptible to marginalization. However, the field of micro-archaeology and cultural heritage studies is predicated on the premise that objects possess a narrative sovereignty of their own, and that it is the responsibility of scholars to elucidate the unique stories and meanings with which these objects are imbued.

In general, sociological research on objects can be divided into four categories: (a) objects as material carriers of social relations (Miller, 1998, 2005); (b) objects as symbols in a consumer society (Baudrillard, 1996; Douglas & Isherwood 1979); (c) objects as part of cultural heritage and locality (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; UNESCO,

2003); and (d) objects as elements in circulation and cross-cultural exchange (Appadurai, 1986). Our initial premise concerns the notion of objects serving as conduits for social relations—the first type of object.

The present research explores the manner in which objects facilitate relationships between people and society. The genesis of this theoretical framework can be traced back to classical sociology, from which it has since evolved into a multifaceted conceptual model. Mauss's seminal work *The Gift* offers a comprehensive analysis of the concept of gift exchange, demonstrating its intricate interweaving of economic and moral dimensions (Mauss, 1925/2002). The act of bestowing gifts is imbued with the giver's sentiments and social obligations, thereby fostering robust social connections (Jiandong & Weiwei, 2019). This notion constitutes the fundamental principle underlying the comprehension of objects' signification within the context of social networks.

Contemporary studies have expanded upon this perspective through the utilization of micro-ethnography, thereby illuminating the social dimensions of objects in everyday life. For instance, in Taiwanese families, thermos flasks are imbued with a significance that extends beyond mere utilitarian functionality, being intricately interwoven with health beliefs and emotional bonds. The young may use them as gifts received from friends or relatives, thus serving as a medium for reproducing social relations. Within the context of family units, the collective display of these elements serves as a symbol of the prevailing consensus on health and the maintenance of order (Zheng, 2018). Similarly, the material journey of food reflects the power structures inherent within family units. "Spatial technologies," such as refrigerators, have been instrumental in regulating the freshness of food, thereby assisting housewives in the effective management of their household rhythms and resources. Furthermore, in social life, certain objects gradually acquire a sacredness that transcends their practical utility value as they become intricately bound to the subjective perceptions of individuals or groups, such as history, identity, and emotions, through prolonged interaction or intergenerational transmission (Laiyou, 2019).

The role of objects is emphasized in the context of collecting behaviors. For instance, in Zheng's (2018) research, a research participant—Aunt Xiao An—is known to amass a collection of domestic artifacts and travel souvenirs, which she subsequently exhibits in a transparent cabinet, thereby creating a material narrative that reflects her life (pp. 71–78). Another one—David—an enthusiast of model trains, retains the packaging containers of his models, and the patterns and inscriptions on these boxes serve as a symbol index of the collection's integrity (Graham, pp. 124–125). These behaviors demonstrate the dual role of objects as both a medium for self-expression and a material carrier of memory.

The concept of "micro-artifacts" proposed by Laiyou (2019) serves to reinforce this logic. It posits that, when objects of quotidian usage become imbued with emotional significance through prolonged utilization, they are elevated from the status of mere ordinary objects to that of sacred "micro-artifacts." The sacredness attributed to these objects is rooted in metonymy, signifying their role as tangible testimonies to both personal and collective histories. These artifacts, in their heterogeneity, act as islands of resistance, defying the forces of monetary homogenization. The fundamental attribute of micro-artifacts is their inalienability. These elements cannot be reduced to market value and remain closely tied to the life history of specific individuals.

In summary, the meaning of objects is derived from specific social networks. The emotional ties associated with their social life in daily use are complex. Objects play a key role in constructing identity, turning them

into a material narrative of personal history. Consequently, objects serve as a medium of self-expression and a memory anchor.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this article, I adopt Judith Butler's gender performativity theory in two senses: I suggest that gender is "performed" through repetitive social practices and cultural coding, and acknowledge that gender identity seems "natural" because individuals conform to gender behaviors through repeated ritualistic practices (Butler, 1990, 1993).

Butler (also as cited in Jing, 2022) contests the notion of gender as being determined biologically, instead proposing that it is "performed" through repetitive social practices and cultural coding. She critiques the binary division between biological sex and gender, asserting that both are products of power discourses. The concept of gender as "natural" is, in fact, a "cultural fiction" constructed by institutions through discourse. From infancy, gender norms have been shown to influence the individual. Following the assignment of the labels "male" or "female" to newborns, parents select attire and playthings, and indeed nurture personalities under these labels, thereby aligning children with societal gender expectations. This approach to discipline establishes the "naturalness" of gender as the foundation for social norms.

Butler emphasizes that gender norms are not explicit regulations, but rather a standard of "intelligibility," which permeates everyday life through institutions such as family, education, and media. Individuals engage in gendered behaviors through repeated, ritualized practices, thereby giving the impression of a "natural" gender identity. This performativity not only serves to solidify gender identities but also imbues gender with meaning through bodily practices. For instance, the wearing of high heels is predicated on "feminine" norms, whilst concomitantly reinforcing their very existence (Xiaoli & Yang, 2016). Gender norms are characterized by a dual nature, exhibiting both constraining qualities and a reliance on the consistent demonstration of their validity. This contradiction gives rise to possibilities for resistance.

Within the context of the workplace, the concept of gender performativity is intricately intertwined with labor practices. For instance, the dress codes for female executives are frequently regarded as emblems of professionalism; nevertheless, they perpetuate the subjugation of feminine characteristics. However, some women have been observed to challenge established gender norms in the workplace through strategies such as the donning of conspicuous jewelry or the maintenance of long hair, thereby establishing a micro-resistance. Such behaviors may give rise to alterations in the evaluation process, thereby serving to reinforce the entrenched nature of gender norms. From a material perspective, "the desk," as a micro-space in the workplace, often carries implicit gender norms through the arrangement and use of its items. For instance, pink sticky notes or cartoon figurines might be regarded as "feminine" symbols, while minimalist styles correspond to a "gender-neutral" professional image. This material performativity is indicative not only of an individual's compliance with or resistance to gender norms but also of the reproduction of gendered workplace order through spatial practices (Jingru, 2022).

Butler's theory underscores the importance of examining how these seemingly trivial practices either serve to reinforce or challenge established gender power structures, thereby providing a critical framework for the study of gender issues in the workplace.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study examines how gender roles are constructed among Chinese female white-collar workers in the workplace, with a particular focus on how gendered meanings are conveyed through the arrangement of workplace objects. Against the backdrop of persistent gender inequality in contemporary Chinese society, where women face multifaceted challenges in professional settings, this research aims to analyze the underlying factors contributing to these difficulties. Specifically, our aim is to (a) analyze the gendered significance of workplace objects, (b) explore how women negotiate identity through object arrangement, and (c) uncover how gender power dynamics manifest in workplace spaces through such practices. I thus propose the following research questions: How do workplace objects convey gendered meanings? How do women negotiate their identities through object arrangement? How are gender power relations in the workplace reflected through these spatial practices?

The central hypothesis posits that female workers strategically use the arrangement of objects in the workplace to communicate gendered identities and negotiate gender power dynamics in professional environments.

Adopting a qualitative approach, this study combines ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews. Fifteen female white-collar workers were recruited for online data collection over the period August–September 2024. The participants' average age was 34.7 years, ranging from 23 to 47, and they came from diverse organizational contexts (state-owned enterprises, private companies, and multinational corporations). Through photographic documentation of workspace arrangements and semi-structured interviews, the study captures the material configurations of objects and participants' narratives about their symbolic significance.

4.2. In-Depth Interviews and Interview Protocol Design

This study relies primarily on semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interview protocol is designed to examine the interplay between workstation materiality and gendered meaning-making, incorporating the analytical lenses of spatial politics and symbolic violence. The protocol is structured as per the following six thematic dimensions:

1. Spatial configuration and power topology
2. Gendered coding of material symbols
3. Bodily discipline and spatial resistance
4. Gender scripts in organizational culture
5. Cross-scalar gender politics
6. Gender negotiation in time-space compression

4.2.1. Spatial Configuration and Power Topology

Under this thematic category, our questions were as follows: Was your workstation assigned to its current location, or did you choose it yourself? If self-selected, what motivated your choice? What symbolic meaning does your workstation hold for you? How would you characterize the spatial features of your workstation's location? How does this spatial positioning influence your workplace interactions? If your workstation were a theater, would you describe its position as closer to the "center stage" or the "audience seating"? Use three metaphors to describe your workstation and explain their significance. If your workstation were a map of power, which objects mark your "strategic strongholds"?

4.2.2. Gendered Coding of Material Symbols

Under this thematic category, our questions were as follows: Which items on your workstation were self-purchased? What motivated these purchases? Which objects are intentionally displayed versus concealed—and why? When placing family photos, do you anticipate colleagues' interpretations of them? Categorize your workstation items by "gendered attributes" (masculine, feminine, gender-neutral, other). Have you reconfigured your workstation layout? What prompted your most recent adjustment? Select three items that best define your professional identity and complete the sentence: "While [blank] appears stereotypically feminine, it enables my breakthrough in [blank]."

4.2.3. Bodily Discipline and Spatial Resistance

Under this thematic category, our questions were as follows: Describe your first three ritualized actions upon arriving at your workstation daily—why these? As a follow-up to gendered practices such as organizing cosmetics, brewing herbal tea, etc., I asked: Do you consider these "feminine-coded" behaviors? Have they elicited commentary from colleagues or superiors? How do you respond?

4.2.4. Gender Scripts in Organizational Culture

Under this thematic category, our questions were as follows: Do you consciously perform masculinity, femininity, or a hybrid in the workplace? What gendered expectations of female employees prevail among your colleagues? How do you navigate these? Describe the "ideal workstation" in your organization. Have you received formal/informal praise for your workstation design—why? For parents: How are childcare photos on your workstation typically perceived? Do such perceptions influence task assignments? For non-parents: Does future parenthood factor into your workstation decisions—why?

4.2.5. Cross-Scalar Gender Politics

Under this thematic category, our questions were as follows: Have you purchased workstation items recommended by platform algorithms such as Taobao? Do you deliberately subvert algorithmic gender biases in online shopping, such as searching "masculine workstation accessories"? Which existing items would you retain as essential—and why? What object would you add to reshape perceptions of your professional competence? Counterfactual: How would your workstation differ if you occupied an opposite-gender role?

4.2.6. Gender Negotiation in Time-Space Compression

Under this thematic category, our questions were as follows: During remote work, do you strategically design video conference backdrops to reconstruct professional identity? Which technologies could help transcend gendered spatial constraints? What emerging technologies concern you as potential amplifiers of gendered surveillance?

4.3. Data Sources

This study used semi-structured in-depth interviews as its main method of collecting data. Using the researcher's professional network and snowball sampling via the WeChat platform, online interviews were conducted with female white-collar workers from a variety of institutional backgrounds. Data were collected in two stages: first, participants were asked to photograph two to three images of their workspaces during working hours and send them via WeChat; second, follow-up one-to-one interviews were conducted using these images alongside the predefined interview protocol, at a time convenient for both parties. When selecting the sample, the study prioritized qualitative depth over quantitative breadth, in line with the principle of theoretical saturation, to ensure comprehensive and precise responses to the research questions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To enhance representativeness, the purposive sample included employees from state and non-state organizations, as well as freelancers and individuals at different career stages: early career ($\leq$5 years), mid-career (5–15 years), and senior professionals ($\geq$15 years). Each interview lasted approximately 1–1.5 hours.

All 15 participants held bachelor's degrees or higher. Nine participants (60%) had master's degrees, and three participants (20%) had doctoral degrees. Participants' marital and parental statuses varied: nine were unmarried and childless, while four married participants had one child each. Institutional affiliations included nine state-sector employees and six non-state-sector employees. The sample spanned the full career trajectory, encompassing early-career professionals (with less than five years' experience), mid-career practitioners (with five to 15 years' experience), and senior experts (with more than 15 years' experience).

4.4. Data Analysis

I employed two methods in the data processing and analysis phase. The first method involved an in-depth reading of interview transcripts to extract and summarize key content in conjunction with relevant theories. According to Foucault (1969/1972, pp. 49, 70, 126–140), discourse is not merely symbolic, but intricately connected to social culture and institutions, reflecting people's thoughts and ways of life. Therefore, when analyzing interview texts, researchers must comprehend not only the literal meaning of the discourse but also contextualize it by exploring its impact on the construction of feminine gender traits.

The second method used multimodal ethnography, combining the analysis of desk photos with the observation of work-related images on social media. This approach integrates various media forms, overcoming the text-centered limitations commonly found in traditional gender studies. It enables a more comprehensive understanding of the gendered meanings and performances underlying desk items. Multimodal ethnography is a research method that has emerged gradually in anthropology, sociology, and other fields since the 21st century. It emphasizes the integration of multiple media to document, analyze,

and present cultural phenomena (Jianmin & Jing, 2020). It is particularly useful for decoding unspoken gender politics in workplace settings.

4.5. Research Ethics

As any narratives concerning individuals' objective conditions and subjective experiences (such as working environments and workplace culture) may potentially harm participants, this article elaborates on the themes, purposes, and general overview of the interviews when inviting participants to engage in them. It also specifically emphasizes the principle of information confidentiality. Participants were assured that all information and feedback provided would be treated with strict confidentiality and not disclosed to third parties. Furthermore, the researcher respected the participants' wishes, allowing them to remain silent during the interview about any content they were unwilling or uncomfortable discussing, and granting them the right to terminate the interview at any time.

To ensure the privacy rights of participants were fully protected, this article rigorously anonymized all participants' identity information.

5. Research Findings

5.1. Workspace as a Spatial Manifestation of Power Allocation

In the workplace, the desk serves as both a workspace and a reflection of power distribution and spatial practices. From a physical perspective, most interviewees reported that their desks were assigned and typically located in open spaces near corridors or walkways. Some respondents mentioned that their desks were in non-central areas with poor lighting, to the extent that they often needed to turn on the lights, even during the day (interviewee 14). This spatial arrangement aligns with Foucault's (1977) concept of the Panopticon, where visibility is used to monitor behavior, while poor lighting serves as a perceptual marker of spatial hierarchy. Some new starters indicated that they were initially assigned desks near corridors, which they did not like, but later requested a move when a preferred desk became available (interviewee 11). A few newcomers chose desks near corridors or doorways, believing that these positions would facilitate work and social interactions (interviewees 1 and 8). In contrast, managerial positions tend to be located near windows or in relatively enclosed spaces. However, even in these areas, managers tend to keep their doors open to facilitate communication (interviewee 12).

From a psychological perspective, many people consider the desk to be "half a home," since they spend more time at their desk during working hours than they do at home while awake (interviewee 2). Even in professions where desk attendance is not mandatory, such as university teaching, some people choose to rest at their desks. The desk becomes a "safe house" and "sanctuary," a place that is "both accessible and retreatable." This psychological perception reflects Lefebvre's (1974/1991, pp. 39, 143, 317, 408) concept of spatial occupation, positioning the desk as both a "micro-panoptic prison" of organizational discipline (Foucault, 1975) and a "threshold space" of intimacy, akin to a "second living room" (Turner, 1969). This duality is reflected in discourse through contradictory rhetoric, such as the metaphors of "battlefield" and "safe house."

5.2. Desk Objects as a Material-Semiotic System

In the modern workplace, desks serve as a richly symbolic system of signs. Through observations of desk items and interviews with respondents, this study has identified four sub-systems of items, each of which represents a distinct symbolic function. The first category reflects the standardized configuration of hierarchical systems. Organizations enforce spatial discipline through standardized office equipment, such as uniform computers and filing cabinets, which are centrally purchased. This "depersonalized" design (Hancock, 2005) is a material manifestation of Foucault's concept of "panoptic surveillance." Although employees have some choice regarding these items, the neutral nature of the objects consistently reinforces the organization's power and disciplinary demands.

The second category of items serves as a symbol of professional identity. The arrangement of professional books follows Bourdieu's (1984, pp. 18–27) logic of displaying cultural capital, whereby placing canonical works in a specific field establishes professional authority. The placement of work IDs aligns with Goffman's (1959, pp. 22–24) concept of front-stage performance, serving as a marker of occupational identity. These items are often deliberately arranged, for example, by placing professional books near computers. As work experience increases, these books become a "standard configuration" of career development, reflecting the individual's negotiated position within the organizational hierarchy.

The third category encompasses the emotional expression of privatization. Micro-practices such as displaying family photographs or tending to plants manifest Lefebvre's theory of the production of space. The choice of stress-relieving toys also reflects gendered emotional regulation techniques. These seemingly private items serve as an "emotional shield" against organizational alienation (Hochschild, 1983, pp. 7, 118–189, 162–185).

The fourth category presents covert symbols of resistance. Screensavers bearing anti-motivational slogans employ Bakhtin's (1984, pp. 88–89) theory of the carnivalesque by using mockery to subvert mainstream discourse. The deliberate display of feminine products, such as soft lighting for live streaming or easily accessible cosmetics, reflects de Certeau's (2002) theory of everyday practices by employing organizational space to reconstruct gender discourse.

These four sub-systems form a dynamic and balanced material-symbolic system together. Standardized desk items account for around half of the overall setup. Items representing identity, emotional expression, and resistance are displayed differently by newcomers, mid-level employees, and senior staff. Senior employees generally focus on establishing professional authority through identity markers, whereas newcomers tend to demonstrate professionalism by arranging professional books. Emotional items, such as collectible toys and plants, are more commonly found on newcomers' desks and serve to provide self-comfort and stress relief rather than to demonstrate sociability. Resistance symbols, on the other hand, are expressed in different ways by various female employees.

5.3. Disciplinary Logic of Management

Although most organizations lack formal regulations on workstation standards, tacit disciplinary norms persist through unwritten conventions. Notably, these norms are transmitted intergenerationally as experiential knowledge among colleagues. As one interviewee recounted: "My senior colleague often

reminds me during lunch breaks to minimize decorative items like figurines, warning that excessive personalization might signal a lack of seriousness to supervisors" (interviewee 4). Another interviewee noted managerial criticism of cluttered workstations: "Leaders occasionally reprimand employees for disorganized spaces, particularly those with visible rubbish" (interviewee 5). Such informal mentorship constitutes what Foucault (1975) termed "normalizing judgment," which is passed on through the generations. These practices covertly facilitate organizational socialization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), transforming individual cautionary tales such as "my superior might perceive…" into a collective disciplinary memory.

Material hierarchies further reinforce power structures. A junior employee observed: "Our manager's workstation is similar in layout to ours, but the desk is wooden instead of plastic" (interviewee 9). This "wooden desk politics" is consistent with Baudrillard's (1996) critique of symbolic political economy. Despite standardized office designs, material distinctions, such as wood versus engineered plastic, function as Latour's (2005, pp. 10–12, 71–82) non-human actors, embodying power through tactile and acoustic differentiation. Such micro-variations exemplify Elias's (1939/2000, pp. 193–212) theory of ritualized control, whereby perceptible yet unspoken symbolic gradients maintain hierarchical order.

This disciplinary logic is less pronounced in private and multinational enterprises. One private-sector employee noted: "Our leaders prioritize skill development over workstation policing. I utilize my free time for up-skilling rather than ensuring spatial compliance" (interviewee 5). This highlights how organizational culture mediates disciplinary intensity, with neoliberal workplaces emphasizing productivity over spatial conformity.

5.4. Normative Performances of Gendered Visual Coding

The normative performance of gendered visual coding in office spaces represents an ongoing citation and negotiation of gender norms within the workplace. For female white-collar workers, their workstations serve as spaces for labor and as theatres for gender norms, with the arrangement of objects influenced by dual disciplinary mechanisms. Women's desks often display an "emotional aesthetic," featuring items such as potted plants, family photographs, and soft desk lamps. These items subtly allude to a care ethic and the extension of motherhood, reflecting societal expectations of women as "gentle coordinators." New employees often adhere to these social norms by purchasing workstation items in pastel colors. This color coding normalizes "soft aesthetics" as an embodiment of femininity. In Japanese "office lady" culture, for example, lace coasters and Hello Kitty stationery reflect how *kawaii* (cute) economics positions women within the framework of the harmless role (Kinsella, 1995). Among the interviewees, pink was not only favored by newcomers but also by mid-career professionals and senior employees, who incorporated pink elements into their workstations. When asked about this, most respondents stated that they did so either for "self-pleasure" or because "pink is pleasant to the eye and has a friendly feel."

By contrast, when comparing respondents of different seniority levels, newcomers to the workplace complied with the pink norm but also incorporated slogan-based props as a form of limited resistance. For example, one participant displayed a sign saying "Do not get angry" or a self-comforting slogan on her computer screen saying "Keep going, and you'll be off work soon" (interviewee 4). This dual coding strategy reveals the constructive nature of gender norms through exaggerated performance. Interestingly, when visual discipline intensifies, the body seeks new channels of resistance through other sensory modalities, such as smell and touch. Interviewee 12, for example, juxtaposed dried plants with cedar essential oil

to create a "de-gendered natural aesthetic," successfully avoiding the cognitive stereotype of "women are emotional."

Placing family photographs on workstations is a form of self-expression. Married women in the workplace often display photographs of their families or children on their desks, signaling their ability to "balance work and family" while also implying their responsibilities as mothers. One interviewee remarked that colleagues perceive such individuals as responsible family members with a happy life (interviewee 8). However, this placement may influence task assignments for superiors (interviewee 6). Although the phenomenon of maternal penalties was not widely observed among the respondents, having family photographs on one's desk could imply: "I have children and cannot work overtime regularly" (interviewee 1). This could potentially lead to working mothers being discriminated against in terms of promotion (Budig & England, 2001). Family symbols may act as visual markers of motherhood, potentially triggering employer bias. In response to this, senior professionals have developed more sophisticated symbolic transformation strategies. Rather than placing family photographs directly on their desks, these women turn children's photographs into paintings (interviewee 2) or display items made by their children, such as a LEGO cactus (interviewee 12). This strategy meets the need to demonstrate responsibility while avoiding direct visual associations with motherhood. Essentially, this strategy serves as a pre-emptive defense against maternal penalties, partially mitigating gender disadvantages through symbolic conversion.

5.5. Strategic Evolution Across the Career Lifecycle

Throughout the different stages of their careers, women face the challenge of balancing the need to break traditional gender roles with the desire to advance professionally. Research has shown that, regardless of whether they are in the career exploration phase (one to five years), the stable development phase (six to 15 years), or the breakthrough transformation phase (over 15 years), female participants exhibit diverse career development aspirations. These aspirations are reflected in the professional books, study materials, and motivational quotes displayed on their desks. Their gender strategies evolve in accordance with their career stage.

In the early stages of their careers, women often use strategies that make gender capital explicit, such as "ritualized morning preparations" (interviewees 3, 12, and 7), to establish their presence in the workplace. However, these strategies may reinforce gender stereotypes. Once they reach the stable phase, however, their strategies shift towards minimizing gender identification and reconstructing their professional image through workstation aesthetics. This includes using black leather notebooks (interviewee 7) and having minimalist office layouts (interviewee 12). This shift reflects the influence of male-centric aesthetic standards in professional environments, forcing women to adopt a "gender-silencing" strategy to gain recognition.

During the breakthrough phase of their careers, women employ contradictory strategies. On the one hand, they use strategies of technological empowerment, such as multi-screen collaborative operations, to build technological capital (interviewees 13 and 15). Conversely, they cultivate implicit gender cultural capital by incorporating symbols such as niche green plants and salon perfumes, thereby forming an elite female aesthetic community. This dual strategy avoids the stigmatization of traditional feminine symbols while simultaneously breaking through gender limitations in technology, creating a unique career development path.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Workstations: A Stage Woven by Power, Space, and Material Symbolic Systems

The interwoven and mutually reinforcing nature of power, space, and material symbolic systems collectively influences the construction of gender roles and the perpetuation of social inequality. Power is not merely a tool of domination, but rather it permeates all aspects of society. According to Foucault (1977), power infiltrates every corner of social life through mechanisms such as discipline and biopower, shaping individual behavior and thought patterns. The operation of power is not confined to coercive rules, but also occurs through symbolic normative systems, such as knowledge and law, which subtly influence individuals. However, individuals within these power structures are not entirely passive, as they can resist and alter the influence of power through acts of rebellion and self-care. Power is intricately linked with knowledge, and the production and dissemination of knowledge are significant mechanisms of power.

Space is not merely a physical entity; it is a dynamic product of social relations. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre (1974/1991) presents his dialectic of space, which emphasizes the interaction between the material, symbolic, and social aspects of space. The workstation is a prime example of this. It is not just a workplace, but also a micro-stage for the gender power struggle. The placement of each object and the selection of each sticker play a part in either challenging or perpetuating existing gender hierarchies. Material symbolic systems play a crucial role in this process. Bourdieu's (1984) theory of symbolic violence illustrates how power maintains social inequality through symbols and cultural practices. Material symbolic systems in consumer culture convey gender meanings and realize their value through the consumption of these meanings. For example, advertisements and the media often depict women as symbols of beauty and family, and men as symbols of power and career. This symbolic division of labor reinforces traditional stereotypes and, through symbolic violence, these roles become widely accepted by society.

Women's consumer behaviors, such as buying cosmetics and fashion items, are not just about beauty, but also about confirming gender identity. At the same time, consumer culture redefines gender roles through symbolic systems. The term "career woman," for example, reflects society's double standards regarding female power. More broadly, power operates covertly through symbolic systems and spatial practices, which are reproduced and reinforced through power relations. The interplay between power, space, and material symbolic systems collectively shapes gender roles and structures of inequality within society.

6.2. The Specificity of Gender Order in China's Workplace

The gender order in the Chinese workplace is a complex, interlocking system formed by historical and cultural factors, socio-economic transformation, and the logic of technological capital. This specificity is reflected not only in the tension between concepts and systems but also in the profound shaping of career development paths through daily practices.

The overlap of cultural influences leads to a conflict of gender roles. Chinese white-collar women are caught between traditional and modern discourses. Despite national policies advocating "equality between men and women" and market economy discourse emphasizing that "women can hold up half the sky," the Confucian ethic of "male domination of the outside world and female domination of the inside world" can still

potentially influence career choices. According to the McKinsey Global Institute (2023), women in China perform approximately 2.4 times more unpaid domestic labor than men, turning "double responsibility" into a moral burden. This conflict of values has significant structural consequences: women prioritize stability over growth, and the "motherhood penalty" phenomenon characterizes their careers in terms of loss of income and stalled promotion.

Intergenerational ethics can change gender roles in the workplace. The culture of filial piety exacerbates gender inequality by transferring intergenerational responsibilities. In the workplace, women are forced to choose between their professional roles and their roles as family caregivers. Some practitioners strive for professional recognition by "de-familiarizing" their workstations through tactics such as removing photos of parents and children, and concealing maternal identifiers. This behavior essentially reflects institutional acquiescence to gender stereotypes within organizational culture and exposes implicit discrimination based on reproductive expectations within workplace promotion mechanisms.

Corporate strategies ignore the benefits of gender equality. There is a clear governance deficit at the organizational system level. Most enterprises fail to incorporate gender equality into their strategic assessment systems, focusing solely on maternity costs such as the cost of replacing staff during pregnancy and childbirth, while ignoring the benefits of gender diversity, as revealed by empirical research from the McKinsey Global Institute (2023). Enterprises with gender-balanced executive teams are 21% more likely to exceed industry averages in terms of profitability. This cognitive bias leads to a lack of inclusive policies, creating a closed loop of institutional inhibition.

The specificity of the gender order in the Chinese workplace lies not only in the explicit barriers to promotion but also in complicit mechanisms such as cultural unconsciousness, intergenerational responsibility, and corporate short-sightedness.

6.3. The Gender Politics of Workstations: Informal Discipline in Material Culture

As a microcosmic field of gender politics, the female white-collar workplace constitutes an informal institutional arrangement of material practices that continuously reproduce gender order through symbolic networks. It is a space for implementing disciplinary techniques and reconfiguring power relations, where everyday objects, such as teacups, dolls, and professional books, become key texts for understanding gender politics in transitional societies.

Material symbols enact compensatory discipline. When the formal system asserts gender neutrality, workplace objects fill the institutional vacuum through symbolic encoding. "Gendered symbols" such as pink stationery and maternity items reinforce expectations of the division of labor by tying breastfeeding equipment to "motherhood," forcing women to bear the dual burden of the explicit economic expense of acquiring gender-conforming objects and the implicit symbolic labor of maintaining the image of their managerial careers. These material practices normalize gender inequality at an everyday level.

Spatial practices can generate vicarious empowerment. Workspaces can be transformed into spaces of resistance. Some white-collar workers resist more subtly, for example, by subverting the meaning of objects—reconfiguring "feminine" artifacts as "symbols of creativity," or adding specialist books to give them

an emotive reading. Those who adopt such covert strategies are more likely to be promoted, and this material resistance acts as a micropolitical hedge against structural exclusion.

Consumerism enables the parasitism of cultural genes. Traditional gender scripts have been modernized through consumerism. Algorithmic lists of "workplace goddess essentials," such as beauty products and high heels, enforce neo-patriarchal discipline under the guise of free choice. This "flexible authoritarianism" makes women complicit, resulting in the family photo being put away to avoid the "punishment of motherhood" and subjugation to tradition.

The material practices of the workplace provide a space in which the gender order can be transformed: the structural flaws of the formal system are exposed (e.g., the institutionalization of the motherhood penalty), and alternative systems of meaning are created through micro-resistance (e.g., strategies for the reconstruction of objects). This silent carnival signals the potential for change: the put-away picture frame becomes a manifesto of institutional critique, and the everyday object is transformed into a material fulcrum for achieving gender equality.

7. Research Limitations and Future Work

Although this study reveals the gendered political mechanisms embedded in workstation practices, several limitations require further exploration to inform future research. Firstly, the current study focuses on gender and has yet to incorporate an intersectional analysis of race, class, and sexual orientation. All of the interviewees in this study are urban white-collar workers, most of whom are only children who have received a higher education. This means that the experiences of women from rural backgrounds in the workplace are not addressed. For instance, factory workers in urban villages in Shenzhen and financial elites in Lujiazui, Shanghai, may both be categorized as working women, but their pathways to accumulating symbolic capital through workstation items differ significantly. Would women from rural backgrounds experience cultural adaptation issues in their workstation arrangements? Do they experience de-ruralized anxiety in the workplace? These questions merit further investigation within the Chinese context.

Secondly, the ongoing development of intelligent technologies, particularly the widespread use of smart office equipment, may be changing the operational logic of gendered power networks. Could algorithmic recommendation systems become a new form of symbolic violence? Could the individual data collected by smart office chairs help promote female employees? Do women working remotely build digital substitutes to gain flexibility in maternal labor? As some interviewees mentioned, during remote work, especially when participating in less important meetings, they might turn off their video due to slow internet speeds, while keeping their audio and accounts active in order to attend to household chores.

Ultimately, workspace design guidelines based on spatial justice must transcend formal equality and address the inherent contradictions of institutional culture. Can modular workstation designs empower users with autonomy, breaking management's monopoly over the meaning of space? Should material narratives be incorporated into promotion assessments to acknowledge the hidden leadership capital that women accumulate through resistant symbolism?

In conclusion, the workstation, as a folded map of power, continues to witness the generation and subversion of gender identities within small spaces. Only by deconstructing its seemingly neutral material appearance can we uncover the hidden gendered labor politics within it. As AI learns to interpret the power metaphors embedded in figurines and metaverse workstations replicate real-world symbolic violence, the battle for control of these micro-spaces becomes a foreshadowing of the genetic blueprint for future societal transformation. Perhaps the answer does not lie in eliminating discipline, but in teaching technology to behave in non-compliant ways. A participant's dual-screen working method is an example of this, and through its transgressed quality, it writes the gender poetics of the digital age.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks all the interviewees for providing data for this article. She also acknowledges the volunteers who participated in data collection.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data cannot be shared publicly due to a confidential agreement with all the interviewees. Access requests must be sent to the author.

LLMs Disclosure

The author used DeepseekR1 for polishing English grammar. All content was verified by the author.

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