



Credit: Xiaoyu Hu

Stereotyping in East and West: live with it or deal with it?

As a female faculty member with experience at academic institutions in the United States and in China, I reflect on the challenges encountered along the way.

When asked by *Nature Immunology* to compose an essay on my experience of working in both the United States and China as a female immunologist, I immediately took on the task without hesitation, as there is so much to be said about my five years in New York City and subsequent six years in Beijing as a faculty member. To gain inspiration, I read a stack of articles written by esteemed women scientists in which many talked about excelling in science while being a good wife, mother and daughter, all at the same time. While inspired by their achievements, I was a bit distressed by how such achievements appeared effortless and straightforward for these overachievers. Upon digesting these success stories, I often fall into the trap of shaming myself for my inability to multitask on scientific projects as well as in life in general. This uneasy feeling gave me a clue toward writing about the imperfect world of female scientists like myself and the real-life challenges that we face every day. Realistically, to-your-face gender discrimination is nearly nonexistent in the United States and in China in 2020, but that does not mean that unpleasant incidents related to gender issues are rare. By scientifically characterizing and categorizing these events, I arrived at the hypothesis that most such incidents stem from people stereotyping me as a genetically Asian female individual. The major differences between the United States and China, from my personal experiences ($n = 1$ — that is, without statistical significance), are the distinct types of stereotyping. Comparing and contrasting Eastern and Western ways of stereotyping is analogous to asking: to get autoimmunity, is it better to break central tolerance or peripheral tolerance? Unfortunately, the truth is that they come in different flavors but are equally disturbing.

In the United States, uncomfortable incidents are typically reflections of the stereotypical Asian woman images that the society envisions — submissive, gentle and

obedient. When I, as an outlier data point, depart from the perceived ‘norm’, there arise interesting interpersonal interactions. Once, at a hospital fundraising event, I sat at the dinner table next to a wealthy senior individual. He attempted to engage me in conversation and politely asked, “How many beds are you in charge of?” I was deeply confused by the question, and it took several rounds of back and forth to understand that he assumed I worked at the medical center as a nurse. (Disclaimer: I have full respect for nurses.) When I mentioned that I was a scientist conducting immunological research, the conversation stopped and never resumed for the rest of the evening. At another academic event, I arrived at the conference room before the session started and was stopped by a speaker who started to talk with me about his specific travel arrangements. I was confused again and politely answered, “I wish I could help, but unfortunately I am not in charge here.” It took both of us a while to figure out that I was not the administrative assistant with the Asian last name who helped to organize his trip. (Disclaimer again: I have full respect for administrative assistants. Usually, they are the bosses!). These are just examples of countless occasions that I encountered on a daily basis. One might regard these as trivial cases that I should easily shrug off with a graceful sense of humor. The reality is that I am a human being capable of sensing the collective signals of disbelief and doubt regarding whether someone with my ethnic and gender profile belongs in the serious business of science.

In China there was a whole new set of stereotypes that I was not prepared for. When I moved to Beijing from New York City in 2014, I was forced to deal with this question more often than I have wished: “Have you brought your kids back to Beijing with you?” This question could be logically dissected into multiple layers of assumptions: first, that one is married; second, that the married couple is willing to produce offspring; third, that the couple

is reproductively competent. The unusually high frequency of this particular question reveals to me that the vast majority of the Chinese population, even within the academic environment, still believes that women should follow the singular path in life of being a wife and subsequently a mother, with little room for embracing a diverse range of lifestyles. Any deviations from this family-oriented norm are inspected with suspicion and distrust. The strong tradition of a family-centric role for females in East Asian societies has clearly put a hold on the career development of women scientists in China. Oftentimes, ironically, women who have been tamed by this tradition choose to retreat to this position of safety, sheltering themselves from the fierce competition (and fun) of the international scientific arena.

For female trainees in my lab at the Institute for Immunology at Tsinghua University — or anywhere around the globe — who happen to read this piece, you may have already come to the realization that it is not easy to be a female scientist, but by no means are you alone. Many of us have experienced setbacks, big or small, in our careers and in life. Many of us face tremendous challenges along the way, as PhD students, postdocs, junior faculty members or department chairs. Nevertheless, we will survive and thrive because of untamed ambitions and maximum devotion. I hope that one day I will not be labeled by anything other than my work, so that I can proudly say that I am an immunologist, period. □

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