

## **Rethinking the ‘aspirations’ of Chinese girls within and beyond Health and Physical Education and Physical Activity in Greater Western Sydney**

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## **Abstract**

This paper aims to explore young Chinese girls' aspirations and ideal environments for engagement in Health and Physical Education (HPE) and physical activity (PA) in Greater Western Sydney (GWS). Interviews are used to elicit these girls' perceptions of their future and ideal environments in relation to HPEPA. Their data offers insights into key influences regarding what is thinkable, desirable and achievable in their HPEPA environments. Results showed dimensions of environments, such as social and pedagogical aspects, that are conducive to these girls' aspirations in HPEPA (e.g. social support from parents, and functional built environment for HPE). This paper aligns with a strengths-based approach to understanding and recognizing young Chinese girls' perceived aspirations within their socio-cultural environment. In doing so, we discuss how feminism and femininity are positioned from a Chinese perspective that may provide alternative views to a post-feminist panorama in promoting advancement of *all* young girls in HPEPA. Results invite us to take into account some of the girls' ambivalence towards being an 'autonomous' and 'dependent' modern Chinese young girl. This paper calls for a rethinking of how aspirations that shape young people's future in HPEPA in much of the contemporary Western world are conceptualised in academic research.

## **Key words**

Chinese girls, aspirations, feminism and femininity, Bourdieu, Health and Physical Education, Physical Activity, Greater Western Sydney, strengths-based approach

## **Introduction**

Young people are builders of society and their aspirations about the future have significant implications for their personal development, and for the structural development of Health and Physical Education and physical activity (HPEPA). Dominant neoliberal forces currently shape discourses of aspiration for young people as competitive, economic and status-based (Stahl, 2012). As a result, young people are compared against this yardstick of ‘aspiration’ as prescribed by society. However, this paper follows a strengths-based approach (Pang & Macdonald, 2015a) in exploring young Chinese girls’ aspirations including their capacities, hopes and actions for the future. In using a strengths-based approach, this paper aims to understand and recognise Chinese girls’ perceived aspirations within their socio-cultural environment (Pang & Macdonald, 2015a). The strengths-based approach represents a paradigm shift that is a movement away from deficit-based approach. A deficit-based approach focuses on what a person cannot do or has done ‘wrong’. On the other hand, a strengths-based approach consists of identifying what works for the person and in assisting the person to continue building on those strategies in the future. In doing so, we draw on Chinese girls’ meanings of aspirations and move beyond negative emotions such as inciting shame and guilt for (dis)engagement in health and physical activity (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013). Using the Chinese girls’ data on what is thinkable, desirable and achievable in HPEPA, this paper puts forward the notion of ‘autonomous’ and ‘dependent’ modern Chinese young girls. This notion will have implications for research and pedagogy that moves beyond a Western view of exclusive opposites, and in rethinking and redefining neoliberal notions of aspirations in relation to an Anglo-Celtic centred HPEPA (Pang & Macdonald, 2015b).

Research has explored student aspirations in schools (e.g. Archer & DeWitt, 2013), but generally little is found regarding the aspirations of minority ethnic students or girls within a HPEPA context, although there are a few studies that could be considered as understanding students' aspirations in HPEPA (e.g. Oliver, Hamzeh, & McCaughtry, 2009; Pang & Macdonald, 2015a). Other studies have examined the value of student-centred inquiry or curriculum negotiation in promoting girls' engagement in HPEPA (e.g. Oliver and Oesterreich, 2013). Overall, the voices of young girls from a Chinese background are often underrepresented in research in the global north (Connell, 2007). While there is a high student population in Australian schools comprising of cultural 'minorities' (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2011), little is understood about the aspirations of Chinese girls in relation to their broader lives and HPEPA more specifically. To address this gap, this paper considers the following two questions:

- (1) What are the aspirations of Chinese young girls in relation to their broader lives and in HPEPA?
- (2) What are their aspirations for ideal environments for their engagement in HPEPA?

### **Research on aspirations and young people's lives and HPEPA**

Research suggests that minority students may develop low educational and occupational aspirations as a result of their marginal status in society (Khattab, 2015). Moreover, the discourses of aspiration have often been used politically in ways that might be damaging to young people and their trajectories. For example, aspiration has been co-opted by neoliberal ideology such that subjects must take self-responsibility and create their own value in a competitive environment (Allen & Hollingworth, 2013). Macdonald (2012) notes that the impact of neoliberalism in HPE has been an

emphasis on individual choices (e.g. of school, lifestyles). Should individuals not make the ‘right’ choices and achieve, the inference is that they must have low aspiration, be disengaged, and lack desire for ‘success’. Hence, the discourses of aspiration have often been linked to a reported deficit in disadvantaged groups, families and socio-economic environments when accessing (or attempting to access) fields such as education and sport. This view ignores young people’s own cultural meanings and agency, and structural inequalities in terms of access to and the availability of educational resources (Stahl, 2015).

Young people from Chinese and other minority ethnic communities are often described as at ‘risk’ in terms of health and physical activity (Pang & Macdonald, 2015b; Pang, Alfrey & Varea, 2015). Statistical data tends to narrowly report minority ethnic groups, such as ‘Asians’<sup>1</sup> living in Western contexts as inactive (Nazroo, 2003). These results often show that girls from Asian backgrounds have the lowest physical activity participation among all ethnic and sex groups (NSW Ministry of Health, 2010). These statistics are used to defend approaches to public health whereby ethnic minority groups are either under-represented or represented as ‘bodies-at-risk’ because they do not conform to the Western parameters of physical activity and health regimes. The ‘body at risk’ discourse, as exemplified in popular media and education research, promotes ideas that Asians are ‘passive’, ‘high achievers’ and ‘uninterested in sport’ (Malik, 2004). Furthermore, the way of understanding Chinese girls as a ‘group’ (Brubaker, 2002) is often taken-for-granted in statistical research and assumes they are ‘internally homogeneous’ and ‘externally bounded’ (Brubaker, 2002, p. 164). The effect of this ethnicized and racialised ‘groupism’ on Chinese girls in health and

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<sup>1</sup> In Australia, the term Asia denotes three regions: Southeast Asia (e.g. Cambodia and Singapore), East Asia (e.g. China and Japan) and South Asia (e.g. India and Pakistan) (ABS 2008).

physical activity is to influence ways of seeing (or ignoring), of understanding (or not understanding), or representing (or not representing), and of remembering (or forgetting) who they are, what they ‘can do’ and who they ‘can be’ (Pang & Macdonald, 2015b) in HPEPA. We argue that these statistical ways of knowing and the language of deficit in popular media and education research are committing a form of ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu, 1999) that may sit in opposition to Chinese girls’ self-identifications and aspirations. This ‘othering’ and homogenising overlooks socio-economic status, ethnicity and family structure differences that might affect access to health and physical activity (Dagkas 2014). The current knowledge reminds us of the way in which minorities are positioned as ‘other’ to a White Western norm; their social conditions feed into neoliberal aspiration discourses of performativity and responsibility.

Prompted by the knowledge on homogenisation and marginalisation, we turn to theoretical frameworks that can help illustrate how culture and structure affect Chinese girls. In doing so, we critique some of the assumptions of Western feminisms and argue for the use of Chinese feminism in this paper. Specifically we will highlight how Chinese feminism provides powerful conceptual tools in shaping possibilities for a desirable future in these Chinese girls’ lives within and beyond HPEPA.

### **White Western feminisms’ theoretical propositions**

As ethnic minority communities are often homogenised in HPEPA (as discussed above), so too are they in feminist theory that originates from White women’s experiences in the West. Moreton-Robinson (2000) reminds us that feminism needs to be aware of the impact of White feminism on ‘others’ which may lead to the empowerment of White, middle-class women only. Different White feminist theories

argue gender inequality in various ways. Yet, all of them have neglected the lived experience of ethnic minority women from different classes, and overlooked how White women derive power from their race privilege (Weedon, 2002). As a result, the lived experiences of non-White women are under-acknowledged, such as the Chinese girls' aspirations in HPEPA in this study.

Four major types of feminist thought have been examined for their notions of gender inequality to understand how they include or exclude some women (Lorber, 2005). Liberal feminists argued that sex and gender are separate (biological and cultural, respectively) and that women's biological difference has warranted unequal treatment. As a result of these constructed myths, women receive fewer opportunities to fulfil their potential. Liberal feminism was a middle class women's movement; differently, socialist/Marxist feminism was a working class women's movement, acknowledging that demands for access to paid work by liberal feminists ignored the fact that working class women were already working. Unlike liberal feminism, socialist/Marxist feminism sees oppression as the outcome of class exploitation. The reason why women are treated unequally in relation to men is a result of patriarchy and capitalism affording more status to men's occupations. Economic independence will then increase women's life choices. Radical feminists' goal is to dissolve patriarchy in society and liberate women from rigid gender roles. Radical feminists emphasise that there are both sex and gender differences between men and women and that gender inequality exists because men exert control on women's bodies and reproductive capacities. Poststructural feminists have rejected an identity politics based on women as a collective, in order to concentrate on situated experiences and identities (Haraway, 1988). Poststructural feminism has been used to reconsider the

idea of gender as a unitary category by expanding analysis of the intersections of gender with race and class. This resonates with postcolonial and Black feminisms.

The work of postcolonial and Black feminisms has challenged White Western feminist theory to pay more attention to diversity and difference (e.g. Collins, 1990; hooks, 1981). It also focuses on the structural social conditions that have produced historically and culturally specific positions and experiences (Weedon, 2002). Examining intersecting aspects of oppression and privilege gives opportunity to examine lived experiences more fully (Gunaratnam, 2003). Many of these feminists are interested in the development and working of power and knowledge: the question of whose knowledge becomes dominant.

Feminists' struggle against gender inequality may seem obsolete in the contemporary neoliberal society. Postfeminism celebrates girls' achievements and empowerment and a type of girlhood that represents girls who are successful, confident, self-invented, cosmopolitan and versatile in education and sport (Azzarito, 2012). That said, as highlighted by Azzarito (2012), there is a need to examine 'other' conceptualisations of femininities that may provide alternative views to a postfeminist panorama in promoting advancement of *all* young girls in HPEPA, in order to confront neoliberalism.

In advocating for global South feminisms, Connell (2014) notes challenges to Western colonialism and universality by poststructural, postcolonial and Black feminist thought. However, she expresses concern that Western theory, concepts and methods remain the basis of this work, with the South seen as a source of data but not of knowledge. Connell (2014) calls instead for recognition that feminist thought is embedded in a global economy of knowledge wherein the South is a producer of theory.



### **Chinese feminism in understanding students' aspirations**

Prompted by Connell's (2014) calls for theory from the South, and the criticisms of White feminist approaches, we take an opportunity to employ a Chinese feminist perspective for analysing the lived experiences of young Chinese Australian girls. This form of cultural imaginary will enable a process of critical syncretism that allows us to actively stand in the subject position of the 'others' in order to transcend the 'colonial gaze' (Chen, 2010). This transcendence means to move beyond the theoretical perspective of White Western feminism, and structural representations of Chinese students in HPEPA in statistical data and media representations.

Different from Western feminism which originated from middle-class White women, the earliest Chinese feminism was developed by Chinese revolutionists who appropriated Western knowledge in order to modernise China (Chen, 2011). Chen (2011) notes that Chinese feminism is complex, with meanings that differ across historical periods (e.g. late Qing Dynasty, the early Republican era, and People's Republic of China (PRC) feminism) and cultural realms (e.g. PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao). At the birth of feminism in China in the 1800s, He-Yin Zhen, intellectual figure, coined the term *nannu* (literally meaning man and woman) and argued that this term is relevant to an understanding of China's feminist theory making. He-Yin believed that *nannu* as a Chinese category is strongly related to the construction of patriarchy in China. That is, this ontological dualism has created a worldview and practice that is inherently gendered. This is further conveyed through the term *nannui youbie* (i.e. the 'natural' differentiation between man and woman).

Traditional Chinese feminist scholars believe that gender inequality is socially constructed by an unequal distribution of resources, educational opportunities and the positioning of women as objects (Liu, Karl & Ko, 2013). This position is different

from a liberal Western tradition based on differentiation between sex and gender, but is aligned with the radical, Marxist and socialist approaches in Western feminism. Liu (2014) discusses how the traditional Confucian gender ethics of ‘three obediences’ and ‘four virtues’ was the social cement in families, and which structured how an ideal man and woman should behave. In short, a woman’s role was confined to being a good mother who assisted her sons and husband at home. Based on these practices, He-Yin constructed her feminist critique against the construction of women and femininity in Confucian culture. Traditional ideal femininity has somewhat changed since the Maoist revolution and the founding of the PRC in 1949. Gender equality was valued and women’s education and participation in production was necessary for national rapid economic development. In the 1980s, a range of femininities emerged as a result of the proliferation of the consumer market and the mass media. Yet, Liu (2014) notes that the contemporary woman must still be ‘gentle, hard-working, caring, modest, decorous and undemanding’ (p. 21). While a woman can be successful and modern, she should not lose her femininity. This attempt to balance ‘modern’ and traditional Chinese ideals is understood as the ‘dual’ approach to modernity in the post-Mao era (Liu, 2014). Prompted by Chen (2011), this paper focuses on China’s feminism as an example, and how its concept of an ‘autonomous’ and ‘dependent’ modern female could illuminate Chinese young girls’ meanings of aspirations in HPEPA.

### **Drawing on Bourdieu’s habitus and capital to explore Chinese young girls’ aspirations**

Connell (2014) acknowledges that feminist knowledge from the global South cannot avoid engaging with Western knowledge. We draw on Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus

and capital to explain the Chinese young girls' meanings of aspirations, given how closely aspiration has been aligned to the family and socio-economic status. Bourdieu (1996) made particular reference to the influence of families on the nature of one's habitus and the accumulation of capital for cultural (re)production. By the inculcation of the dispositions within the family, habitus consists of 'structured structures'. By this, Bourdieu meant that one's habitus is fairly resistant to change due to one's primary socialisation in life (Pang, Macdonald & Hay, 2013). Bourdieu identified four key forms of capital, namely, economic, symbolic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) (see Pang et al., 2013 for details). Stirrup, Duncombe and Sandford (2015) note the significance of parents in children's development of physical capital and a physically active habitus. Subjects from a working-class background might be disposed to internalise that *people like me* or *people from round here* do not have opportunities or would not fit in to the established structural practice (Allen & Hollingworth, 2013). In discussing Chinese students' familial investment strategies, Pang et al. (2013) has drawn upon Bourdieu's concept of habitus and capital to explain how the students make choices and how their lifestyles have been (re)produced by their home and schooling environments. In the context of this research, Bourdieu's concepts assist in making sense of how the habitus of these Chinese young girls have been shaped at home (including how Chinese femininity is inculcated) and how capital are exercised in their socio-cultural contexts that influenced the ways they talk about aspirations in HPEPA.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Context*

This paper focuses on a state-owned, secular and coeducational secondary school in GWS. Across Sydney, more than half (52 per cent) of public school students have English as an additional language (EAL/D). Schools with the highest proportions of students from EAL/D are all located in the suburbs of Western Sydney where migrants are concentrated. GWS has more than 160 nations represented in its population, and almost one third of residents are born overseas with 50% being first or second generation Australians (Western Sydney University, 2015).

The participants are eleven girls (Years 7-10, aged between 12 and 15 years), who self-identified with Chinese and Vietnamese or Cambodian backgrounds and volunteered to participate in the study. Ten students were born in Australia, and one was born in Cambodia and moved to Sydney in 2004. All of their parents were born overseas in Hong Kong, China, Cambodia and Vietnam. All of the participants are of a middle class background. Reference to the girls' socioeconomic status and family is important to contextualise their meanings of aspirations. Ethical clearance for the research was gained through the university and participating school principal, teachers and students. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

### *Methods*

The data in this paper were taken from one interview set which was underpinned by a critical and interpretive methodology (Crotty, 1998; Macdonald et al., 2002).

Interpretivism aims to understand and explain people and social reality. The critical perspective focuses on power relationships and exposes the forces of hegemony. Each girl was interviewed for approximately an hour, and emails were used with them to gain further data about the study.

All the interviews were conducted by the first author, self-identified as a

young Hong Kong Chinese female Australian who has several years of experience teaching in higher education and researching with young people in Australia and Hong Kong. The interviews created spaces for dialogues between the interviewer and the girls, allow them to discuss their aspirations, as part of making sense and meaning of the world and their lives. Many of these girls were eagerly interested in knowing the reasons behind why the interviewer, as a Chinese young woman, chose to study HPE; her parents' expectations when compared to her brothers; and how her parents accepted her choices. We believe the conversations served as a powerful alternative perspective for the interviewees as they navigated their ambivalence in being 'autonomous' and 'dependent' young girls in their complex socio-cultural environments. The involvement of the second author was post-data generation. She is a White European researcher with experience of researching gendered and racialised experiences and identity in physical activity and physical education. Her role was as a critical friend during the analysis and writing process, enabling conversations about the theoretical perspectives and data and to interrogate the categories/themes. Ethical clearance for the research was gained through the university and participating school principal and students. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

### *Data Analysis*

Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim for analysis (Patton, 2002) and were organized and coded using NVivo N10. The interview data were analysed according to commonalities as well as points of difference in the girls' interviews. Following the structure of the interview guide, two themes were developed around their overall aspirations in life and in HPEPA, and their ideal environments for their engagement in HPEPA. Next, data in the form of quotes were

analysed and discussed by drawing on relevant theoretical concepts (i.e. Bourdieu's habitus and capital) throughout the literature review process. Further reading was undertaken to uncover discourses that demonstrate the girls' experiences in being an 'autonomous' and 'dependent' modern girl.

### **Aspirations in life and HPEPA: Why not a career in sport?**

In constructing their futures, a number of the girls discussed pursuing academic studies in medicine, law, autopsy, and psychology. The importance of their academic studies and careers relates to broader discourses around the preferred roles for girls in a Chinese family. Specifically, the girls' interview data demonstrate how they consume and contest their parents', relatives' and friends' expectations on them, and what represents success for the girls. For example, Cathy's aspiration to become a medical professional seems to be conforming to her parents' expectations:

Cathy: Probably around the medical area...I guess I could say it's influenced from my parents. I've always been looking through the pharmacy section. They're driving instructors. They'll say it's a good subject, like good money and it's a good cause to help people.

Cathy's quote suggests that aspirations are not simply individual (Appadurai, 2004) but are influenced by the wider contexts that these young girls are situated within. This is a poignant illumination of the way in which some of the Chinese students' 'objective possibilities', as defined by their parental expectations, are internalised as subjective hopes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and projected into their career aspirations.

There are also one or both parent(s) who are unsupportive of their girls' aspirations in their everyday lives. For example, Joan talks about how her mum is very open-minded while her dad often disapproves her decisions, and says 'No to everything'. Cindy's mother seems to invoke despair to her by reinforcing that she does not possess the necessary capital (she is really bad at it) to excel in music and music is not regarded as a 'good' job:

Cindy: My mum doesn't let me do music at school because she said 'You won't get a really good job in the future' or something like that or 'You're like really bad at it and you can't do anything'.

Cindy's mother appears to make her career aspirations in music undesirable. As Cathy expresses her mother believes that music learning in school does not play an important role for the family as a potential career path. This could be understood as an implicit way for parents to instil the expectation of the 'dependent' girlhood that traditional Chinese culture espouses on the girls. That said, in another study, Pang et al. (2013) found that Chinese students' parents regard music learning during leisure time as legitimate and important for their child's upward social mobility. In a few cases, girls face oppressive discourses from their parents, in positioning them as being young and therefore not able to make sensible decisions.

Alison: My mum really wants me to do cosmetics because she's a beautician and she wants me to take over her shop but I don't want to be a beautician. However she was like no, you're becoming one – and I'm just like no, I want

to be a psychologist...because I'm still young and therefore she doesn't take it seriously.

Alison tries to resist the cultural norm by engaging in non-traditional Chinese femininities, such as expressing her own aspirations. Her case demonstrates how girls' agency and the gendered expectations within the family are in tension as they construct their own aspirations. In this case, Alison was subjected to acquire the 'right' cultural capital in becoming a beautician in the family.

On the contrary, some girls believe they have the support from their parents and also agency to make their own choices, and to define aspirations and success for themselves. For example, there are some who envision themselves entering the workforce with roles in modelling and fashion design, singing or acting, interior design, or tattoo artistry. The girls' agency in choosing a diverse range of careers is in contrast to the popular understandings of highly prized traditional careers such as doctor and lawyer among Chinese families (Pang et al., 2013). Their choice also exemplifies divergence from the dependent woman's role as a mother or a housewife in traditional Chinese culture.

Daisy: They would support anything. They don't force us, me and my brother, they ask us to do our best but not force us to have the highest grades or be the top students. They would like us to actually have a job to be able to do happily, my Dad's a lot about responsibility and being able to take care of yourself.



Daisy's father seems to espouse the notion of an 'autonomous' modern female in which he expects Daisy to be self-reliant. This is also in line with the neoliberal notion of individual self-responsibility. Instead of stepping into a predetermined destiny set by their parents, some of these Chinese girls are freer to choose their pathways in a world of possibilities.

Almost none of the girls aspire to enter a profession related to sport or physical education. Cindy, despite having won sport awards in netball, basketball and soccer and seeming to be aware of her potential success and capacity to accumulate physical and symbolic capital, has never imagined a career in sport. This suggests that sport as a career is more 'unthinkable' rather than undesirable for her.

Cindy: No, I never thought about being a sport player or like doing PE and stuff like that as a career. I don't really know why I don't want to choose it. If I do want to have a career in sport, I could keep those awards and if I go in interviews, I could show them what I got in the past few years and they could see what I'm good at and what I got it for and then probably they will hire me, maybe.

Others talk about the lack of economic capital or not being interested in sport culture which demonstrates that sport as a career is 'not achievable' or 'undesirable'.

Vicky: I want to become a netballer, like playing for clubs and everything. I've been trying to apply for one but, like my mum doesn't let me. I think it's too expensive or something.

Joan: I'm very, very good at table tennis. I never really saw myself as becoming a sport star. I guess it's got to do with the culture and pretty much just the fact that I'm not a massive fan of sport. I don't watch TV for sport.

Joan's quote highlights that being good at sport is not relevant to 'the culture', in which she meant her cultural practice derived from her familial context. Her quote resonates with Natalie's quote.

Natalie: I'd probably play volleyball for, like, leisure. Yeah. But I wouldn't think of it as a profession...I think mainly because of, I know it's a stereotype, but Asians wouldn't want to be in that field or something like that. I do feel in that way too, I feel like I can do something better rather than playing for a particular team for a long period of time.

I: When you say, the stereotype is an Asian thing, can you explain a little bit more.

N: I don't think it's necessarily true because some of my friends, they're Asians too, and they're really good at it. But I feel like I just don't do it as well as other subjects. I can play and I can do pretty well in sport but I don't think I'm capable of getting to that high level as others in Australia.

For Natalie, sport as a career is related to a lower social class in Asian cultures. She also expresses the stereotype that Asians lack the physical capital to perform as well as others. This rejection demonstrates the powerful effect of an intersection of race/ethnicity and social class on Natalie's career aspirations and her exclusion of sport as a career. It also suggests the difficulties in forging an autonomous path that

might deviate from an assemblage of power inequalities constructed by mainstream Chinese cultural expectations and the western gaze.

This section points to reasons why sport as a career is ‘unthinkable’ (some possess the ‘right’ capital but have never thought about it); ‘unachievable’ (some lack economic capital); or ‘undesirable’ (some lack interest in sporting culture and their perceptions related to gender, social class and race) for these young girls. As these young girls reflexively construct their own aspirations in life and HPEPA, the familial habitus (e.g. parental own expectations, through discourses of despair, age hierarchy, and self-responsibility) also plays an influential role on the girls’ imagined future. Similar to research that explores families and young people’s physical activity (Pang et al. 2013; Quarmby, Dagkas, & Bridge, 2011), familial capital is important to some girls, especially when they are figuring ways to navigate the gendered terrain in pursuing their HPEPA interests. For others, their diverse choices for their career suggest that their aspirations are not simply a reflection of parental habitus but rather show how it is continually evolving. It further illustrates Chinese girls’ agency in their reflexive resistance of particular career types in light of family experiences and Chinese cultural expectations.

### **Ideal environments for HPEPA**

We now focus on Chinese girls’ aspirations regarding their ideal environments and consider which aspects contribute to their health and wellbeing in HPEPA within and beyond schooling. Social and pedagogical aspects of environment were identified as important from these girls’ interviews.

*Social environment.* The girls talk about the types of recognition and support they have and aspire to have from their families and teachers in order to promote their

engagement in HPEPA. This includes the social capital they receive from parents and relatives, and the economic capital their family could/could not provide in pursuing their interests in sport. Despite having familial support in pursuing their sport interests, many of these girls do not seek to gain awards (symbolic capital) in sport as they just want to do sport for fun. For example, Joan notes ‘for me, it’s (table-tennis) just for fun. I do it every Saturday night and Sunday night if I’m lucky. I know they have competitions but I don’t do them’.

Some girls report their parents as not doing any exercise with them. For some, this relates to expecting the girls to behave in a certain way as a traditional ‘dependent’ Chinese young girl. Alison talks about how her parents discouraged her sport participation.

Alison: I would probably want more support from my parents because knowing like Cantonese people I come home and they’ll yell at me for why are you playing so much sport and stuff and I’d be, oh but it’s good for me and everything. I reckon it’s because honestly they’re trying to protect me from spraining your ankle, breaking a leg because my cousin, he always came home with bruises. I guess they’re just more cautious about it...It’s probably because I’m a girl.

Alison further notes in the interview that her parents believe men and women are ‘naturally different’, arguing that men are born to be tougher than women, resonating with the traditional Chinese construction of *nannui youbie* in gender relations. This essentialist view about gender difference yields different expectations of boys and girls. As reflected in Alison’s quote, she was discouraged from playing too much

sport for her own 'good'. In Alison's case, the gender-specific roles and expectations indicate her Chinese parents pay more importance to safety issues than her agency in sport. Her quote also suggests how she negotiates and navigates her 'autonomous' (i.e. agency in sport) and 'dependent' (i.e. safety) girls' identity within the gendered terrain in her family. Conversely, there are also supportive parents and relatives who encourage these girls to lead an active lifestyle.

Cindy: ...like I play with my uncle and aunty and stuff. Like we'll have a barbeque we'll set up the volleyball court and then we'll play it after we eat and we eat and play, we do that probably twice a month, we'll just celebrate all our families together.

The girls' familial capital is important to mobilise their active lifestyles. Some girls talk about the lack of economic capital (e.g. Alison mentions that she does not want to be pushy about doing self-defence because she is already doing volleyball which requires money for trainings).

Alongside familial social support, teachers also emerge as an important social support to their ideal environment in HPE. The girls talk about their ideal HPE teacher as being intelligent, easy going, humorous, empathetic, encouraging, and kind. The girls also discuss whether a HPE teacher's gender, ethnicity and physicality matter to them. Some girls prefer having a same-sex teacher for sexuality education in HPE. Others want to have an Asian HPE teacher because they either have not experienced it before or due to their perceptions of how they would teach.

Ellen: Well I guess a White teacher is more active and Asian teachers, they talk more about theory. I also think Asian teachers are more strict and White people are more easy going and easy to talk to and Asians you have to like kind of be formal to them or they could get offended in any way. Yeah, I don't mind any – Japanese, Korean... just Asian.

Ellen has essentialised Asian and White teachers as having distinct pedagogical approaches in HPE. The ways she views Asian teachers as stricter and less active than White teachers may be read as the consequence of internalising the Western gaze. As Singh (2009, 2013) argues, non-Western people have often been positioned as incapable of critique and being teacher-centred. Despite a high Asian population in GWS (Western Sydney University, 2015), the students seem to have a lack of experiences and interactions with HPE teachers from various Asian backgrounds. We argue that this can limit opportunities for students to learn from teachers from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and to better understand their lived HPEPA experiences and aspirations. More importantly, this situation can reproduce Euro-America knowledge and stereotypes about Asian teachers that are represented in academic literatures and media in the West.

*Pedagogical environments:* Some of the girls aspire to having more HPE class time, for example, ‘a double period so that we'll actually have time to get into the game and actually get tired from playing the game’ (Joan). Others would like more aesthetically pleasing and functional HPE environments, including better surfaced sport grounds, more outdoor lessons and activities including those they have experienced outside school (such as rock climbing), fitness equipment, motivational posters inside classrooms, more relaxed classroom environments, better PE uniforms,

and having girls-only PE classes. These comments resonate with previous research that aims to promote culturally relevant curriculum for girls and those from ethnic minority backgrounds. For example, Pang and Macdonald (2015) show that young Chinese girls believed they are empowered through experiential activities in a single-sex schooling environment. Oliver and Kirk (2015) report that girls are more engaged when they are given an opportunity to co-construct a PE curriculum. Therefore, knowing what these Chinese girls' experiences and needs are in HPE can have the potential to support gender sensitivity and inclusion.

One of the relatively absent discourses around an ideal pedagogical environment is the importance of aesthetics in HPEPA settings. The traditional classroom is not a space in which children can learn effectively but a space in which they can listen. In moving beyond the traditional classroom environment, girls demonstrate creativity in imagining ideal layouts for a classroom.

Karen: I want more sports outside school. I love being active so maybe rock climbing. Also, swimming would be great, really outdoor type of activities. I love being outdoor.

Ellen talks about an ideal HPE learning environment as one where all students can see and talk to each other because 'this way, you're interacting with everyone around you'.

Ellen: I think to learn is through a community of people that come together. The fact that they're sitting in a rectangular or square shape is the best

way...you're interacting with everyone around you and the teacher can see everything.

We believe this suggests some girls enjoy the peer interactions and social connections that are meaningful for their learning process (Azzarito and Ennis, 2003). However, a few have strong negative feelings about changing for sport and also doing the 'beep test': 'I like sport. I just don't like changing. It's really annoying... I know I'll fail it (beep test) anyway or I'll stuff up really bad' (Joan). As indicated by Flintoff and Scraton (2001), comments such as the dislike of PE clothing are remarkably common. It is also clear that the 'beep test' that resonates with the health and fitness discourse can create unnecessary anxiety and influence how young girls construct their femininities in physical activities (Walseth, Aartun and Engeisrud, 2015).

Interestingly, Natalie's quote suggests that her perception of HPE is only related to being physically active, and thus she does not find the theory classes meaningful.

Natalie: I don't dislike it (theory lessons) as much as I do maths or anything like that, but I find that since it's HPE, you'd expect it to be, active, or outside, rather than classroom theory work.

We believe Natalie's quote highlights the meanings that some Chinese girls may have about HPE. That is, HPE to them is mainly about the 'physical' and 'psychomotor' aspects rather than holistic (e.g. embodiment, empowerment, relationships with others, and meanings in HPE) (Pang, et al. 2013).



The girls also talk about their learning experiences in using technology in HPE. Lupton (2014) reminds us that our identities, learning experiences and social interactions have been significantly structured by digital technologies. Despite many young people choosing to use social media and draw on digital data for self-surveillance (Best, 2010), Joan points out that they do not need more technology in HPE lessons as their peers are always online and therefore sedentary.

Joan: Having fun, just enjoying yourself. Don't just sit there like a potato if you ... everyone in my table tennis table, they sit there like potatoes. I'm the only non-potato female there. All the rest of them are like phone potatoes. We should hang out more often because I don't really hang out with my friends anymore.

The results provided insights into what kinds of ideal social and pedagogical environment these girls aspire to have and how they may be conducive to instilling aspirations and promoting engagements in HPEPA. Some girls choose not to accumulate symbolic capital for their physical activity experience, while having the required cultural capital and economic capital for potential success. Economic capital seems to be the catalyst to promote some girls' physical activity, especially in those sports that are provided beyond schooling. Yet, within school, some girls show their desire to learn in open contexts and places around the school building. These contexts may include having HPE theory lessons in an outdoor environment, and wanting more outdoor recreational sport activities. The girls' ideas about the environments demonstrate their capability to imagine different approaches and spaces in and for HPEPA that would draw more deeply on their own interests and needs for a

physically active life in and out of school. Results also highlighted the need to examine further the aesthetics of HPEPA environments and relevance to students' learning.

## **Conclusion**

This paper aims to move beyond the lens of a White, Western way of knowing and concludes by discussing the implications for understanding the aspirations of Chinese girls in HPEPA in GWS. The results provide evidence that contests the popular discourse and statistical results of Chinese/ 'Asian' girls being at risk in Australian society by focusing on their meanings for being active (or not active).

### *Implications for researchers in researching with young girls in HPEPA*

We highlight the notion of an 'autonomous' and 'dependent' modern Chinese girl, the idea that a dual approach to femininity is a critical aspect of the education of the body, health and physical activity, and in understanding 'difference' (see Pang & Macdonald 2015b; Pang & Soong, 2016) and promoting HPEPA to Chinese young girls in Australia. This notion of autonomy and dependence provides an alternative lens that argues against the neoliberal discourses of aspirations, individualism and personal responsibility. The 'dual' approach to femininity (i.e. being autonomous and dependent) is evident when the girls attempt to reconcile their intentions to pursue less traditional careers with parental desire for more orthodox routes to social and economic success. It is also evident when some girls attempt to negotiate their 'autonomous' (i.e. agency in doing sport) and 'dependent' (i.e. safety valued by parents) girls' identity within the gendered terrain in the family. This points to the importance of taking into account traditional Chinese familial habitus in shaping

young girls' discourses of aspirations, their construction of femininity, and thereby engagement in HPEPA.

*Implications for HPE educators in teaching young girls in HPEPA*

Although researchers have attempted to understand why so few Chinese girls participate in physical activity, these attempts need to take into account what is thinkable, desirable and achievable in the girls' HPEPA experience. Therefore it has been central to the aim of this paper to make visible how the girls' meanings of aspirations relate to their engagement in HPEPA. The first theme on understanding young girls' aspirations in life and HPEPA points out the need for educators to accept, provide support to, and increase their awareness in HPEPA. This includes: accepting that some girls and their families do not value sport as a career as is related to a lower social class, providing support to some girls who want to engage in more after-school sport but lack the economic resources, and increasing some girls' awareness in forging a more autonomous pathway in HPEPA that transcends traditional cultural expectations from families and popular discourse.

The second theme on understanding the girls' ideal social and built environment reminds educators to create spaces for the girls to explore ideas about their desired HPE teaching and learning environments and work towards implementing the change they aspire. The changes that educators can implement in HPE include: not doing the beep test, negotiating the need to changing into PE uniforms, not over-relying on technologies in HPE, providing more opportunities for social connections with and among students in HPE, and having HPE in aesthetic pleasing environments.

As researchers and educators, what we also learned in this research is that we need to promote a holistic perspective of pedagogical HPE environment. Although researchers have made an effort in promoting the physical and the mental aspects of HPE, it seems that some girls still do not value or understand the concept of embodiment and the lived body in relation to HPE. There is a need for educators to create productive discourse that encourages meaning making in HPE. This includes raising girls' consciousness of why gender, familial culture, embodiment, empowerment, relationships with others and the environment, are important for a holistic HPEPA experience.

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