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Becoming Herself on the Road: Chinese Women's Self-Awareness through Solo Travel

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Abstract

This study examines how solo travel facilitates the development of self-awareness among Chinese women. Applying constructivist grounded theory, it analyzes in-depth interviews with 16 participants and proposes a four-stage process model: Disembedding → Self-awareness → Self-construction → Integration. The findings show that self-awareness does not emerge spontaneously, but unfolds through a gradual process that begins with emotional tension and disconnection from prescribed roles. As women navigate unfamiliar environments, they engage in solitude, boundary testing, and relational reflection, leading to a clearer sense of self and agency. These internal shifts continue after travel, influencing personal choices and subtly challenging cultural and gender norms. The study highlights how solo travel can function as a situated and reflexive cultural practice. The study recommends enhanced institutional and social support for women's autonomous travel—such as safer environments, public recognition, and culturally sensitive discourse—especially in contexts where gender norms remain deeply embedded.

Keywords: solo female travel, self-awareness, agency, gender norms, Chinese women,, constructivist grounded theory

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1. Introduction

Solo female travel has garnered increasing global attention in recent years as both a cultural and social phenomenon. It is often framed as a symbol of independence, self-empowerment, and personal freedom (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Laing & Frost, 2017). In China, this trend has shown a steady upward trajectory. According to data released by Qunar (2024), the proportion of Chinese women opting for solo travel rose from 6% in 2019 to 11% in 2024. Meanwhile, hashtags such as “female solo travel” and “traveling alone” have frequently appeared on social media platforms, indicating that this mode of travel is gradually being embraced as both a legitimate lifestyle choice and a form of identity expression.

Prior research has shown that solo travel often entails shifts in spatial perception and a reordering of personal value systems, with the potential to prompt self-reflection and psychological transformation (Laing & Frost, 2017; Noy, 2004; Wilson & Harris, 2006). When removed from familiar social relationships and everyday rhythms, individuals are often prompted to reflect on their social identities, cultural boundaries, and positionalities (Wearing & Wearing, 2001). However, compared to existing studies on women’s empowerment, travel motivations, or risk negotiation, there remains limited scholarly attention to the development of self-awareness during the process of solo travel. In particular, how women come to re-recognize, evaluate, and reconstruct their self-perception through travel experiences remains underexplored.

This question is especially salient in the context of Chinese society. Although women in China have made significant advances in education, professional achievement, and economic independence in recent decades, the formation of self-awareness continues to be shaped by entrenched cultural values, familial structures, and normative gender roles (Xie, 2013; Li et al., 2020; Fincher, 2016). For decades, Confucian ethics, collectivist orientations, and gendered socialization that emphasizes “other-orientation” have encouraged women to prioritize fulfilling social and familial expectations over attending to their own needs, emotional boundaries, and value judgments (Rosenlee, 2012; Tang & Tang, 2001). This

structural invisibility of the female self is not a result of individual deficiency, but a consequence of enduring cultural mechanisms that marginalize women's subjectivity.

Against the backdrop of this insufficient attention to the self, this study takes self-awareness as the central focus of both theoretical reflection and empirical investigation. Using qualitative in-depth interviews, it aims to capture how this psychological and cultural process unfolds and transforms within the context of solo travel. Distinct from approaches that focus on travel destinations or behavioral patterns, this research centers on how women initiate processes of self-understanding through the experience of traveling alone and develop new interpretive frameworks and orientations for action. In this regard, solo travel serves as an analytical lens through which to observe how individuals temporarily released from external gazes and normative structures gradually develop self-awareness and reconfigure their relationship with society.

Accordingly, this study seeks to explore the following core question: How does solo travel facilitate the development of self-awareness among Chinese women?

To gain a deeper understanding of this process, the study further explores the following sub-questions:

1. What key experiences do Chinese women encounter during solo travel, and how do these experiences foster self-awareness?
2. How does solo travel influence their perception of self and personal growth?
3. How do cultural and social contexts (e.g., collectivism and gender norms) shape their process of self-awareness during solo travel?
4. How do they integrate changes in self-perception gained from travel into their daily lives and social relationships to achieve psychological adjustment and long-term growth?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Development of Self-Awareness and the Formation of Female Subjectivity

Self-awareness is commonly understood as the conscious process through which individuals recognize and reflect on their own thoughts, emotions, and behavioral states (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Silvia and Duval (2001) further describe self-awareness as the ability to view oneself as an object of attention and to evaluate one's behavior against internal standards. In such a state of "objective self-focus," individuals become more aware of the discrepancies between themselves and social norms, which in turn motivates cognitive and behavioral adjustments. From a cognitive neuroscience perspective, Morin (2006) emphasizes that self-awareness is a reflective capacity dependent on attentional control and inner speech. This capacity allows individuals to momentarily step outside of their immediate state and engage with questions such as "Who am I?" and "Who do I want to become?"

While psychological research often treats self-awareness as a form of individual cognition, it can also be viewed as a foundational step in the emergence of subjectivity. As McNay (2000) argues, subjectivity truly begins when individuals reflect on the tensions between themselves and social norms, and reconstruct their self-perception accordingly. In this view, self-awareness is not only inward observation, but also a reflective process situated between the individual and society—a process that involves action and interpretation.

From a feminist perspective, the development of self-awareness is deeply shaped by gendered socialization. Gilligan (1982) points out that women's ethical consciousness is often rooted in a relational logic of "the ethics of care." While this orientation offers a unique moral lens grounded in emotional responsibility and responsiveness to others, it may also limit women's ability to reflect from a self-centered perspective, particularly within collectivist cultural contexts. Butler (1990) further asserts that "woman" is not a natural category, but rather a product of ongoing repetition of gender norms. This "regulatory repetition" means that female subjectivity is often formed under structural constraint, with institutional forces limiting opportunities for reflection and redefinition.

McNay (2000) cautions against reducing subjectivity to a mere product of discourse or structure. Instead, she emphasizes the importance of social practices and individual agency.

According to her, female subjectivity is generated through ongoing interactions with gender norms and is inherently dynamic, relational, and practice-oriented.

These insights indicate that the development of agency is often contingent on an initial phase of self-awareness. Recognizing dissonance between internal desires and societal expectations may act as a catalyst for individuals to begin reflecting on their identities and asserting their agency.

Therefore, this study positions self-awareness as a critical precondition for the formation of agency. It represents an initial rupture from imposed subjectivity and serves as the foundational mechanism through which individual agency takes shape.

2.2 The Influence of Collectivist Culture and Gender Norms on the Female Self in Chinese Society

Collectivism, as a deep-rooted structural and cultural logic in Chinese society, positions individuals within group-centered systems. In traditional contexts, the family and lineage served as primary ethical units, embedding individuals in a patriarchal order where decisions were expected to align with the authority of elders and the collective interests of the household (Fei et al., 1992).

Under Maoist rule, while the state dismantled the authority of the extended family, it re-integrated individuals into state-led collective structures through mechanisms such as the work-unit system and organizational life (Yan, 2010). Since the 1980s, the state has promoted individualization, but this process has remained constrained by family-based moral expectations (Yan, 2010). In the context of rising market risks and welfare retrenchment, individuals have become increasingly dependent on family resources. This has resulted in a form of embedded individualization, in which autonomy exists but remains shaped by familial obligations (Yan, 2010).

At the cultural level, collectivism continues to operate through *guanxi* (关系)—interpersonal networks built on reciprocal obligation and moral expectations. As Hwang

(1987) argues, social behavior is embedded in relational networks structured by favor, hierarchy, and mutual responsibility. Individuals must navigate these moral expectations not only within broader society but also in everyday family life. Together, institutional and cultural mechanisms reinforce an other-oriented behavioral logic, narrowing the space for self-awareness grounded in individual needs and subjectivity.

Within this structure, Confucian gender norms and filial piety together shape the ethical responsibilities expected of women. Traditional Confucianism upholds a gendered division of labor—*nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei* (男主外, 女主内, men are responsible for external affairs, women for domestic ones)—which has constructed the ideal image of women as *xian qi liang mu* (贤妻良母, virtuous wives and devoted mothers) (Yinhe, 1998). Women's social value is defined through obedience, restraint, and family dedication (Yinhe, 1998). Tang and Tang (2001) also point out that this cultural framework encourages women to sacrifice the self to maintain family harmony, reinforcing their moral obligation and role conformity within the household.

Xiao dao (孝道, Filial piety)—a deeply rooted Confucian value—further imposes gendered moral expectations on women. Ho (1995) defines filial piety as children's obedience, gratitude, and reciprocal care toward their parents. Ho et al. (2012) emphasize that filial piety is not only a behavioral norm but also a deeply internalized moral and emotional force, often accompanied by feelings of guilt or shame. Although in principle it applies to all children, the practice of filial piety is heavily gendered: men are generally expected to provide financial support, while women take on emotional care and daily devotion. Even in modern society, where gender equality has gained traction, traditional divisions of labor remain deeply entrenched. Xie (2013) found that although younger generations express more egalitarian gender attitudes, family practices often continue to reflect traditional roles. Li et al. (2020), in their study of dual-income families, observed that even when both spouses share equal responsibilities in the workplace, women are still expected to perform most of the care and emotional labor at home. This “default responsibility” operates as a widely accepted cultural norm, naturalizing an other-oriented

orientation in women's lives and forming a persistent cultural barrier to the development of self-awareness.

In sum, collectivism, filial piety, and gender regulation together form a powerful cultural backdrop that shapes the development of women's self-awareness in China. Understanding how these cultural logics are internalized in women's cognitive structures is crucial for analyzing how contemporary Chinese women negotiate, struggle with, and reconstruct their subjectivity in the tension between selfhood and social obligation.

At the same time, contemporary women are not merely passive recipients of the structural forces of gender norms and cultural ethics. Rather, they actively negotiate and resist these forces across diverse social arenas, seeking to redefine the relationship between the self and society. As Leung (2003) argues, Chinese women have long been situated within the dual discursive regimes of traditional Confucian culture and socialist gender ideology. Yet they continue to pursue autonomy and self-worth through education, career development, and public participation. Fincher (2016) further demonstrates that, in response to the societal pressures produced by the "leftover women" label and pro-marriage propaganda, a new generation of women is using social media, informal communities, and cultural production as platforms to challenge dominant gender norms. This form of resistance, grounded in everyday expression and cultural practice has not only expanded the discursive boundaries available to women, but also opened up new possibilities for reconstructing the self. Moreover, as Sun and Yin (2024) observe, even under a tightly censored and speech-restrictive environment, feminist activists in China have developed grassroots data-driven forms of digital activism to continue advocating for gender justice from the margins. These developments suggest that the self is not entirely erased within systems of regulation, but is instead continually reinterpreted, expressed, and enacted through ongoing tension and negotiation.

2.3 Solo Travel as a Site of Reflection and the Activation of Self-Awareness

2.3.1 The Activation Mechanism and Theoretical Foundations of Self-Awareness.

The activation of self-awareness is a foundational process for understanding psychological transformation. Duval and Wicklund (1972) define it as a state of sustained attention to oneself as an actor, often triggered by specific situations—such as solitude, seeing oneself in a mirror, or receiving significant social feedback. In contrast, Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning emphasizes how disorienting experiences prompt critical reflection, leading individuals to reconstruct their worldview and self-understanding. These two perspectives—situational triggers and cognitive shifts—provide complementary frameworks for understanding how travel, especially solo travel, may activate self-awareness.

2.3.2 Reflective Dimensions of Travel and the Solo Travel Context. Travel is often seen as a reflective practice, as it allows individuals to temporarily disengage from the structures, roles, and responsibilities of everyday life. It provides an opportunity to re-examine one's self and identity. Cohen (1979), for instance, classifies tourists into different types based on their motivations and levels of involvement. Among these, existential tourism—where travel is experienced as a search for meaning or spiritual alignment—is most associated with identity reflection. Wearing and Wearing (2001) introduce the notion of liminal space, viewing tourism as a transitional phase where social identities are suspended. This liminality enables individuals to step out of routine life and renegotiate their sense of self.

Solo travel, as a more unconventional and detached form of tourism, often amplifies these psychological effects. Bianchi (2016) notes that solo travelers must independently plan, make decisions, and respond to unexpected situations. This high degree of individualization not only enhances travel satisfaction but also fosters self-efficacy. Elsrud (2001) observes that backpackers often seek out risk and challenge as a way to escape social routines and test their limits. These experiences—facing the unknown, stepping beyond one's comfort zone—provide fertile ground for self-awareness and the rearticulation of subjectivity.

Wilson and Harris (2006) highlight the role of critical incidents—such as coping with risk, encountering cultural differences, or managing emotional responses to solitude—as key moments when female solo travelers reflect on their social identities and cultural positioning. Although most of these studies are based in Western contexts, their insights into reflection and transformation in tourism offer valuable reference points for understanding the psychological dynamics of solo travel in non-Western settings.

2.3.3 Gender Negotiation and Cultural Tension in Female Solo Travel. For women, solo travel is not only an act of personal choice but also a cultural practice of negotiating and challenging gender norms. Jordan and Gibson (2005) argue that women, by traveling alone, contest traditional assumptions that women should remain dependent on family or others. This represents a form of gender resistance. Wilson and Harris (2006) further suggest that through escaping daily gendered roles, female solo travelers gain a sense of agency and reshape their self-understanding in liminal spaces.

In the Chinese context, the cultural tension surrounding solo travel is more complex. Zhang and Hitchcock (2017) note that Chinese women often engage in strategic adjustment between self-expression and social expectations. On one hand, they construct a modern female image through practices such as selfies, food sharing, and fashion display. On the other hand, they frequently frame their journeys using narratives of “safety,” “family permission,” or “relaxation rather than rebellion” to mitigate the cultural risks associated with transgressive behavior. Yang et al. (2019) point out that Asian women, when confronted with cultural risks or moral judgment, often develop new self-understandings through solitude and decision-making during travel—challenging traditional gender norms of submission, dependency, and obedience. Chen et al. (2024) further find that Chinese female solo travelers generally gain confidence and courage during their journeys, but also face internal challenges such as loneliness, self-doubt, and moral pressure.

Current research consistently shows that solo travel offers women a space to step away from everyday roles, develop agency, and engage in self-identification. However, in East Asia and particularly in China, solo travel is often embedded in a more complex web of

cultural structures and gendered discipline. It is not merely about freedom and independence, but also about navigating strategic self-expression and ongoing negotiation with social roles.

2.4 The Continuity of Travel Experience and Post-Travel Integration

Reisinger (2013) argues that the significance of travel experiences often extends beyond the trip itself, continuing to influence individuals' identity and daily practices. Building on transformative learning theory, Phillips (2019) further explains that a perspective transformation during travel requires post-travel reflection and intentional choices in order to be fully integrated into stable life structures, such as shifts in values, reshaped social relationships, and behavioral changes.

In the context of solo travel, Mani and Jose (2020), through research on female travelers, found that many participants translated enhanced self agency during travel into actionable strategies in their everyday lives. This included redefining their roles within family and social relationships. These findings suggest that the emergence of subjectivity during solo travel is not limited to short-term experiences but may be deepened through post-travel practice.

Although these studies highlight the extended impact of travel experiences, Nandasena et al. (2022) point out that most research on transformative tourism still focuses on subjective experiences during the trip itself. There remains a lack of theoretical and empirical attention to how transformation is sustained, enacted, and institutionalized in everyday life. This area calls for further exploration.

2.5 Research Gaps

Despite the growing body of research on female solo travel, several important gaps remain—particularly regarding how self-awareness is generated and how cultural structures shape this process.

2.5.1 Geographical Limitations in Research Perspectives. Existing studies on female solo travel are largely grounded in Western contexts, where the focus tends to be on empowerment and identity construction. However, in non-Western societies especially those shaped by collectivist cultures such as China, women's travel experiences are deeply embedded in distinct social norms and ethical frameworks. These culturally specific experiences remain underexplored.

2.5.2 Insufficient Attention to the Process of Self-Awareness. Most research has concentrated on travel motivations, perceived risks, and empowerment outcomes, while paying less attention to how self-awareness is activated during solo travel and how it interacts with gender norms. Yang et al. (2019) suggest that solo travel facilitates women's self-discovery, yet the pathways through which this occurs—along with its cultural embeddedness and reflective mechanisms—require deeper analysis.

2.5.3 Lack of Empirical Research on Post-Travel Transformation. While the long-term impact of tourism on self-perception has attracted some scholarly attention, most studies focus on subjective experiences during the journey itself. As Nandasena et al. (2022) note, the ways in which transformation continues and is practiced in daily life remain theoretically and empirically underdeveloped. In the Chinese context in particular, little is known about how women integrate their travel-related self-awareness into everyday life and social relationships.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach: Constructivist Grounded Theory

This qualitative study adopts Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) as its core methodological framework (Charmaz, 2006). Rather than viewing theory as something “discovered” from data, CGT emphasizes the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants, with a particular focus on how individuals construct the significance of their experiences within specific sociocultural contexts. Compared to the

positivist orientation of classical grounded theory, CGT places greater emphasis on subjectivity, reflexivity, and contextuality in the research process, stressing how meanings are shaped through interactive and situated processes (Mills et al., 2006).

Given that this study seeks to explore how solo travel fosters the development of self-awareness among Chinese women, a question that involves the intersection of psychological, cultural, and structural dimensions, CGT provides an appropriate methodological fit. By highlighting the multiplicity and dynamism of experiential meanings, this study aims to trace the pathways and logic of self-awareness formation from the perspectives of female travelers themselves.

3.2 Sample and Participant

The study involved in-depth interviews with 16 Chinese women who had experience with solo travel. Participants were recruited primarily through online calls and personal referrals, with the former being the main channel. Their ages ranged from 20 to 55, with relatively balanced representation across age groups, allowing the research to capture differences in identity, lived experience, and self-perception across life stages. The sample was diverse in terms of marital status (single, married, divorced), educational background (bachelor's to doctoral degrees), and professional roles (students, teachers, designers, freelancers, etc.). Participants also came from various geographical backgrounds, including both small towns and major cities. Most participants were residing in mainland China at the time of the interview, while a few were living, studying, or working abroad. While location may influence cultural exposure, all participants reflected primarily on solo travel experiences undertaken from the perspective of Chinese cultural and gender norms.

Their solo travel frequency ranged from once to over a dozen times, offering a wide spectrum of experiences—from first-time travelers to long-term practitioners. Table 1 presents a profile of the interview participants, including age, marital status, solo travel frequency, residence, and educational level. To protect participant anonymity, other personal details are not disclosed.

Table 1. Profile of the interview participants.

No.	Pseudonym	Age Range	Marital Status	Solo Travel Frequency	Residence	Education Level
1	Yu	20~25	Single	2 ~ 5 times	Mainland China	Student(Undergraduate)
2	Lu	20~25	Single	2 ~ 5 times	Mainland China	Student(Master's)
3	Wang	20~25	Single	6~10 times	Overseas	Bachelor's
4	Zhang	20~25	Single	6~10 times	Mainland China	Bachelor's
5	Xu	26~30	In a relationship	2 ~ 5 times	Mainland China	Master's
6	Xing	26~30	In a relationship	6~10 times	Mainland China	Doctoral
7	Wu	26~30	Single	2 ~ 5 times	Mainland China	Bachelor's
8	Zou	31~35	Married, one child	2 ~ 5 times	Mainland China	Bachelor's
9	Dan	31~35	Single	10+ times	Mainland China	Bachelor's
10	Wen	31~35	Divorced	1 time	Overseas	Master's
11	Li	36~40	In a relationship	10+ times	Overseas	Master's
12	You	36~40	Single	10+ times	Mainland China	Bachelor's
13	Ai	36~40	Single	2 ~ 5 times	Mainland China	Bachelor's
14	Joy	40+	Single	10+ times	Mainland China	Bachelor's
15	Jie	40+	Single	10+ times	Mainland China	Bachelor's
16	Qin	40+	Married, one child	6~10 times	Overseas	Master's

This sampling strategy follows the principle of maximum variation in qualitative research (Ritchie et al., 2013), aiming to include a broad range of social backgrounds and experience types to better reflect the complexity of the research phenomenon. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured, in-depth format, with some held face-to-face and others via online platforms. The interview guide was designed to explore how participants made sense of their solo travel experiences in relation to self-awareness and personal change. Key questions included: “Why did you choose to travel alone? Was there a specific trigger?”, “How did your family or friends react to your decision? Did their opinions affect you?”, “In what ways, if any, did solo travel affect how you understand yourself?” The interviews started with accessible questions on motivations and social reactions. Based on participants’ responses, follow-up prompts were used to gradually explore deeper aspects of self-awareness. This conversational strategy helped elicit personal reflections while maintaining a natural flow. Each interview session lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. The extended duration facilitated the development of trust and contextual resonance, enabling

participants to articulate their travel experiences, emotional shifts, and self-awareness transformations more fully (Seidman, 2006). Dialogic engagement and responsive interaction also helped generate emotionally rich and nuanced data (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Participants were selected based on purposive sampling, with a focus on information-rich individuals who not only had solo travel experience but could also critically reflect on and articulate their experiences (Patton, 2002).

3.3 Data Analysis

Following the procedures of Constructivist Grounded Theory, the data analysis unfolded in three phases: initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006). In the initial phase, five interviews—selected for their diversity and representativeness—were coded line by line, using action-oriented language to stay close to participants' narratives. This phase emphasized careful listening and linguistic sensitivity to surface potential experiential structures.

In the focused coding phase, the remaining 11 interviews were incorporated into the preliminary coding framework to refine and compare existing concepts. Toward the final interviews, core categories appeared consistently across cases, and no new conceptual insights emerged, indicating theoretical saturation—a point at which no new categories are identified and the existing ones are well-developed in terms of properties and relationships (Birks & Mills, 2015; Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

Theoretical coding followed, during which key categories were integrated to construct a conceptual trajectory that traced the transformation from self-awareness to subjective expression, directly addressing the research question: How does solo travel facilitate the development of self-awareness among Chinese women? Throughout the process, the researcher continuously wrote memos to track the evolution of concepts and maintain reflexivity regarding theoretical assumptions (Charmaz, 2006).

3.4 Researcher Positionality and Ethical Considerations

The researcher is a Chinese woman who, although having limited solo travel experience herself, shares cultural, gendered, and social affinities with the participants—positioning her as a partial insider (Mullings, 1999). This positionality facilitated trust-building and emotional attunement during interviews but also carried the risk of interpretive bias due to experiential resonance. However, CGT explicitly acknowledges the situated and participatory nature of knowledge construction, recognizing the researcher not as a neutral observer but as an integral part of meaning-making (Charmaz, 2006).

Throughout the study, the researcher engaged in ongoing positional reflection, acknowledging how her own gendered experiences, values, and cultural understanding could simultaneously enrich and obscure interpretation. To navigate this duality, the researcher employed reflexive memos and explicit positional statements to balance understanding and critical distance, maintaining both methodological rigor and ethical awareness (Berger, 2015). This reflexivity extended beyond data analysis to encompass research design, data collection, and theory construction.

All participants received detailed written information about the study and provided informed consent prior to their interviews. Each interview was audio recorded with explicit permission. To protect anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and identifying details were removed during transcription and data presentation. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored on an encrypted, password-protected device accessible only to the researcher. Audio files will be deleted after the study, while anonymized transcripts will be retained solely for academic use.

While the risks were minimal, participants discussed personal experiences that could evoke emotional discomfort. Interviews were conducted in a sensitive and respectful manner, with participants free to skip questions or end the interview at any time. This ethical protocol ensured the research was conducted with full respect for participant autonomy and well-being.

With the methodological foundation established, the following section presents the empirical insights gathered through the interview data.

4.Findings

4.1 Structural Constraints and the Obscuration of Self-Awareness

Many participants recalled that during their upbringing, they rarely engaged in active reflection on questions such as “Who am I?” or “What do I want?”. Their self-perception was often vague—not due to a lack of personal ability, but shaped by their social environments. These environments were filled with normative expectations about how women should behave, fostering a habitual orientation toward external norms rather than internal desires.

In the interviews, phrases such as “obedient,” “well-behaved,” and “considerate of others” emerged repeatedly, reflecting the early gendered disciplining of female roles. Some participants recalled being taught from a young age that girls should be quiet, gentle, and dependent on others. Even those who saw themselves as relatively independent often admitted that key life decisions were still influenced by family opinions. Others reflected on patterns of self-suppression in intimate relationships. As one participant recalled, “He didn’t like my dress, so I changed it.” In such experiences, individuals gradually learned to align their behavior with others’ evaluations, while their own desires were often sidelined or ignored.

Several participants noted that this sensitivity to external expectations continued to shape their later life trajectories. Some described making life decisions—such as education, career, or marriage—by following the expected path rather than acting on deeply felt desires. One described this as “just moving along a pre-laid track,” while another admitted to marrying due to pressure from parents and colleagues. Although such feelings of being “pushed along” are not exclusive to women, participants often linked them to early

experiences of reproductive anxiety and more frequent social prompting, which further diminished their sense of personal agency.

Family structures and gendered roles also influenced participants' self-perception. Some described taking on emotional caretaking responsibilities from a young age. One eldest daughter was often seen as a "second mother," while another shared: "I learned to be compliant and take care of my mother's emotions, like a little adult." One participant said she didn't begin traveling alone earlier because "my family wouldn't allow it." These patterns reflect the structure of gendered emotional labor and the ethical values of familial responsibility rooted in familism.

It is worth noting, however, that these disciplining experiences were not homogeneous. A few participants described more open-minded family environments where they were given greater autonomy and space for self-expression. "In my upbringing, there was hardly any of that kind of messaging... so I've always been asking myself, 'What do I want?'" Nevertheless, even among those who emphasized their independence, some reported feeling implicit pressure around marriage and childbirth in their thirties. This suggests that social disciplining is not always conveyed through explicit language but often works through psychological stages, societal expectations, and family ethics—quietly permeating everyday life.

Overall, these gendered experiences of socialization reflect a disciplining mechanism shaped by multiple structural forces. It is not solely derived from gender itself but is embedded within broader sociocultural systems—particularly family ethics and collectivist values. These mechanisms reinforce other-oriented behavioral patterns, making it more difficult for some women to develop a clear and autonomous sense of self-awareness. They also establish the cognitive backdrop that must be recognized and challenged in order to enable the emergence of agency and the reconstruction of subjectivity.

4.2 Taking the First Step: Motivations, Concerns, and Negotiations in Women's Decisions to Travel Alone

Under the structural obscuration described above, solo travel emerged for many women as a turning point that disrupted the inertia of their life trajectories. While the paths to departure varied, most participants experienced a decision-making process marked by a dynamic interplay of motivations, anxieties, and negotiations. This process involved both active intentions and emotional tensions, shaped by personal desire and social constraints.

4.2.1 Voluntary Departure: Interest-Driven Travel Motivation. Some participants expressed a clear preference for traveling alone, seeing it as a natural way to explore the world and connect with themselves. “I read human geography books as a child, so I always wanted to see the world,” one participant said. Another noted, “I enjoy my own pace—I don’t need others to make it fun.” For these individuals, solo travel was not a retreat from social interaction, but a means of establishing a personal connection with the world.

4.2.2 A Substitute Choice: From Failed Group Plans to Solo Travel. Other participants turned to solo travel as a backup plan after original group arrangements fell through. “My friend canceled, so I just decided to go on my own.” Although their initial departure was unplanned, the freedom and self-paced rhythm of solo travel often awakened a deep appreciation for it. Interestingly, two participants found that they actually preferred companionship over solitude—suggesting that solo travel can also serve as a way to clarify one’s authentic needs.

4.2.3 Escaping Tension: Impulsive Travel Triggered by Emotional Crisis. One of the most prominent decision-making patterns in this study was what we term “escape from tension.” Emotional crises such as breakups, family conflict, strained relationships, or workplace stress, frequently triggered immediate departures. “After my dog died, I booked a ticket right away.” Another participant shared, “I had a fight with my husband and just wanted to escape that housewife identity.”, “I felt so stressed at everything I just want to get away.” In these cases, travel became a way to exit entrenched structures—a practice of reclaiming personal feeling through action and disruption.

4.2.4 Safety Anxiety and the Gendered Discourse of Danger. While taking this step, women were simultaneously surrounded by gendered risk narratives. Family members, friends, and social media repeatedly emphasized risks such as theft, assault, and abduction, reinforcing a discourse of female vulnerability. “My parents always said, ‘It’s not safe for a girl to go alone.’” These discourses of danger functioned as an extension of gendered disciplining, creating fear and hesitation that restricted women’s mobility.

4.2.5 Family Negotiation and Trust-Building Strategies. Caught between external suspicion and familial concern, many women developed practical strategies for negotiation. Some chose to withhold information to reduce the pressure to explain; others gradually gained trust through ongoing communication and tangible outcomes, such as sharing detailed itineraries and post-trip reflections. “They saw that I was becoming more experienced, so eventually they felt reassured.” These negotiation strategies reflect the limited but real space for agency within structural constraints and paved the way for future solo travel.

Overall, although participants cited diverse motivations for embarking on solo travel, the majority (11 out of 16) had at least one experience initiated by internal or external tensions. However, they rarely described these decisions as acts of resistance, nor did they perceive them as significant turning points at the time. It was only during the course of the journey that many began to recognize the deeper meanings embedded in their solo travel. This tendency—to act without framing it as resistance or recognizing it as a turning point—will be further explored in the discussion section in relation to the underlying cultural and structural mechanisms.

4.3 Self-Awareness and Boundary Formation during Solo Travel

Solo travel offers women a space to step outside familiar social structures and daily identity roles, allowing them to temporarily disengage from “the self defined by others” and re-encounter a self yet to be defined. This awareness does not emerge instantaneously. Rather, it unfolds gradually within a context of de-roling, temporal freedom, and diminished social expectations. Most participants did not anticipate a shift in self-awareness before their

journey, but many reported experiencing a profound “moment of seeing oneself” during the trip—often triggered by multiple pathways of personal engagement.

This process typically begins with a sense of detachment from social identity and proceeds through solitude, behavioral experimentation, cultural contrast, and relational reflexivity. These elements together stimulate heightened self-awareness and emotional insight.

4.3.1 Detaching from Social Roles and the Awakening of Self-Awareness. Nearly all participants described a feeling of lightness as they distanced themselves from socially defined roles. During their travels, they were no longer required to fulfill roles like “someone’s daughter,” “someone’s wife,” or “someone’s employee.” Nor were they constrained by the social image management often required in familiar networks. As one participant put it, “When I travel, it feels like I’m not anyone’s someone.” Rather than creating anxiety, this temporary suspension of identity brought a rare sense of inner stability and control: “I can follow my own rhythm completely, there’s no one I need to take care of.” For most, this became the starting point for self-awareness: they began to attune to their inner rhythms and observe their own reactions.

4.3.2 Inner Resonance in Solitude. For some women, solitude itself was the main path to heightened self-awareness. Away from the gaze and expectations of others, participants experienced a psychological recentring during quiet moments and self-directed activities. “Most of the time I was just with myself... thinking about what kind of life I really want,” one shared. This solitude was not defined by loneliness, but by a rare clarity: “Only when no one is speaking can I really hear my own voice.” As another participant explained, “When I’m alone in a quiet place, I can feel my thoughts much more clearly.” Such moments offered a rare chance for inner clarity—shifting from passively reacting to the pace of society to actively listening to their own.

4.3.3 Exploring Behavioral Boundaries and Noticing Personality Flexibility. Behavioral experimentation served as another method of self-exploration. Participants

engaged in actions they had previously avoided—from changes in travel style to emotional expression. “I’m usually very planned, but when I travel, I let go.” “I rode a motorbike 150 kilometers in Cambodia.” “In China I barely drink, but in Europe, I tried wine with almost every meal.”

These acts not only expanded behavioral boundaries but also destabilized fixed notions of personality. Participants began to realize, “I don’t have to be just one version of me,” which opened up a more fluid, multidimensional understanding of the self.

4.3.4 Seeing Through Others: Cultural Mirroring and Life Reflection. Encounters with other cultures and people provided crucial mirrors for participants to reflect on their own values. Many were deeply struck by how people abroad approached age, relationships, and lifestyle. “A man in his 70s was still scuba diving,” one said. “An elegant German grandmother completely changed my image of what a grandma could be.” Another observed, “Maybe the way Asian people live so hard isn’t the only way.”

These comparisons prompted participants to question the normative logic behind their own lives. “When she talked about money and relationships, I started thinking—if it were me, could I live that way?” “I don’t want to follow society’s boring script anymore.” This form of cultural mirroring helped them identify internalized norms and reshape their expectations for themselves.

4.3.5 Moments of Relational Reflexivity: Rethinking Boundaries and Responsibility. For some participants, the most powerful triggers of self-awareness were not personal choices or cultural contrast, but sudden shifts in interpersonal dynamics. These moments of relational reflexivity—often involving strangers or cross-cultural interactions—disrupted habitual patterns of compliance and led to a redefinition of boundaries and responsibility.

One participant recalled apologizing to a foreign woman for “bothering her” while sharing a personal story, only to be met with a gentle response: “You don’t need to take responsibility for my decisions, I chose to stay.” She later reflected, “That sentence changed my life... I realized I had been carrying emotional responsibility that wasn’t mine.” This

encounter allowed her to see that relationships could be built on mutual respect and clear boundaries, not self-sacrifice.

Another participant described a moment when a man approached her during her trip. “I should have said no earlier,” she admitted. “I didn’t say no right away, and I ended up feeling really uncomfortable.” The experience prompted her to realize the extent of her internalized compliance and helped her affirm the legitimacy of saying no. “Setting boundaries isn’t rude—it’s a way of protecting myself.”

These moments—though not experienced by everyone—often served as critical thresholds of self-awareness. They enabled participants to identify behavioral scripts shaped by cultural conditioning and to reclaim a sense of agency in defining their role in relationships. More importantly, they strengthened their boundary consciousness, marking a shift from other-oriented behavior to a self-prioritizing logic.

4.4 From Awareness to Construction: The Inner Forces of Female Agency

The self-awareness triggered through solo travel does not end with merely “seeing the self.” Rather, it extends inward and gradually develops into deeper self-recognition, increased self-efficacy, and active self-expression. Women begin to form their own standards for answering questions such as “Who am I?”, “What am I capable of?”, and “Am I worthy?”. This process reflects not only a redefinition of self-positioning but also the emergence of agency. This section explores three key inner dimensions—refinement of self-perception, accumulation of self-efficacy, and expression of self-awareness—to illustrate how women begin to construct a sense of subjectivity and agency during solo travel.

4.4.1 Refining Self-Perception: Rediscovering Authentic Preferences. After turning their attention inward, many women began reassessing and correcting misperceptions they had about themselves. “I met so many people while traveling... I used to think I was introverted, but solo travel helped me realize I’m actually a people person.” These revised

understandings were not abstract reflections, but responses to real experiences that challenged internalized labels.

Participants also began distinguishing between preferences that genuinely originated from within and those shaped by social expectations. “Sometimes we think we like something, but actually it's what others like or what we think we're supposed to like.” Some stopped rejecting traits like sensitivity or quietness and instead recognized their value. “I used to think these traits didn’t deserve recognition, but now I see how they help me notice subtle emotions and atmospheres.” Others discovered that solitude was not threatening but empowering: “I realized I’m actually fine being alone.”

Through such dialogues with themselves, they clarified the motivations behind their choices and constructed a more coherent and authentic self-view. This refinement of self-perception laid the foundation for later actions and emotional clarity, anchoring the internal basis of agency.

4.4.2 Building Self-Efficacy through Experience. In addition to cognitive shifts, participants built trust in their own abilities through concrete actions during travel. Unpredictable situations—such as language barriers, logistical failures, or physical setbacks—offered practical arenas for problem-solving. “I realized I actually have the ability to handle things... it boosted my confidence a lot.” Another said, “I became braver, like when I completed the scuba certification.”

Their sense of security began to shift from external protection to internal control: “Feeling safe doesn’t mean the environment is safe—it means I know I can handle it.” These accumulative experiences strengthened their belief in their own coping capacities and cultivated a lasting sense of self-efficacy.

4.4.3 Expressing Self-Awareness: From Complying with Others to Listening to the Self. As women grew more confident in their own judgments, emotions, and values, their agency extended from internal realization to outward expression. They increasingly placed their authentic feelings at the center of decision-making, instead of defaulting to external

validation. “Solo travel turned me from someone who followed others into someone who takes control.”

Many participants reported that after traveling, they became more able to say no and less willing to accept choices that didn’t align with their true desires. “I used to make so many choices just to avoid disappointing others or being judged... now I’ve learned to only ask myself: do I want this? Do I like it?”

This shift was not merely about changing how they expressed themselves, but about transforming their decision-making logic—from one based on relationships and external expectations to one anchored in internal standards. The expression of self-awareness served both as a practice of self-affirmation and as a foundation for setting new criteria in everyday decision-making.

4.5 The Continuity of Agency: Integrating Transformative Experiences into Everyday Life.

For most participants, solo travel was not a one-off event, but a sustainable starting point for long-term transformation. The shift in awareness it initiated did not remain confined to the journey itself but gradually extended into various aspects of daily life. Over time, women demonstrated greater emotional stability, made more authentic relationship choices, and redefined what gives meaning to life. This continuity of impact highlights a key contribution of the present study, as it goes beyond previous research by tracing how solo travel facilitates enduring changes in women's everyday lives.

4.5.1 Transforming Self-Efficacy and Embracing Uncertainty. During their solo travels, women developed problem-solving skills and emotional resilience as they navigated uncertainty and unfamiliar environments. These capabilities, rather than fading after the trip, became recurring psychological resources for managing stress and decision-making in everyday life. Several participants noted that recalling their solo travel experiences often reignited a sense of confidence: “Every time I think back to my solo trip, I regain that sense of confidence.” “It helps me cope with difficulties in daily life.” This accumulated

self-efficacy also encouraged a greater willingness to take risks and try new things: “Now I sometimes ask myself—why not just go for it?”

The training in tolerating uncertainty during travel also led to an attitudinal shift—from a need for control toward an acceptance of the uncontrollable: “I no longer feel the need to control everything.” “I’ve become much calmer... This kind of patience is something I never had before.” These internal resources, gained through action and reflection, provided a strong foundation for maintaining self-awareness and navigating future fluctuations in life.

4.5.2 Reconstructing Relationships and Decision-Making: Toward Relational Autonomy. The clarity achieved through solo travel also led many participants to adjust their personal relationships and life paths. Some ended emotionally repressive relationships after reflecting on their desires and writing down the kind of life they truly wanted: “After the trip, I decided to break up.” Others resigned from jobs, pursued overseas study, or relocated to new environments in order to break free from their old routines.

Their decision-making began to shift from external validation to internal alignment: “I’m no longer willing to maintain relationships that make me uncomfortable.” “I’d rather be with people I actually enjoy being around.”

This reconstruction was not a retreat from relationships but a recalibration based on authentic needs. Some even recognized the value of companionship and actively nurtured supportive relationships—organizing gatherings and sustaining social bonds.

Such relational autonomy reflects an extension of agency into social life: rather than severing ties, women redefined their relational boundaries based on what they genuinely needed and valued.

4.5.3 Reorienting Values: From Achievement to Meaning and Emotional Fulfillment. One of the most profound long-term effects of solo travel was a shift in how participants defined a life worth living. Many no longer measured life value in terms of professional titles or social status. Instead, they turned toward standards grounded in

emotional resonance and personal satisfaction: “I used to care so much about being ‘successful’ or having a title... now I don’t care at all. That’s not my goal anymore.” The immersive nature of travel also helped participants become more attuned to the present moment: “Now I approach everyday life thinking—‘Am I enjoying this?’”

This shift in attitude reflected a broader reinterpretation of life’s purpose: “Now I think life is about seeing, appreciating, and experiencing the world.”

This value reorientation was not merely cognitive but translated into real-life practice. Some participants stopped obsessing over fixed goals and allowed themselves to find meaning through experience. Others began to focus more on whether their current state felt right to them, rather than whether it was socially approved.

They gradually developed an internal compass for evaluating life—treating happiness not as an external reward, but as a processual and adaptable emotional state.

4.6 Challenging Cultural Scripts and Reframing Gender Norms

Beyond adjusting their lifestyles, some participants developed a reflective stance toward dominant gender norms and cultural discourses during their solo travel experiences.

4.6.1 Rethinking Cultural Scripts: Disrupting Normative Life Trajectories. Several participants observed life patterns abroad that sharply contrasted with the cultural norms they were familiar with. Seeing women in their 70s and 80s traveling alone, sunbathing, wearing bikinis, or dancing disrupted their internalized assumptions about age and behavior: “I realized that even when I’m 70 or 80, I can still travel, drink, dance on my own.”

These moments prompted them to question whether conventional paths like “settling down” or “getting married and having children” are truly inevitable life scripts. Many came to recognize that their previously internalized anxieties and limitations were not fully rooted in reality, but rather shaped by cultural narratives and normative imaginaries. “You start to

realize that the voice saying, ‘You’re not young anymore,’ is actually just a label imposed by others.”

This cognitive rupture—from accepting discipline to recognizing discipline—marked a critical step in gender consciousness. It enabled participants to imagine more open-ended and self-directed life possibilities.

4.6.2 Reframing Risk Perception: From Fear Narratives to Empowered Trust. Prior to travel, many women were influenced by messages from social media, family, and broader cultural discourse that framed solo travel as inherently “dangerous.” Yet their real-life experiences often stood in stark contrast to these fears. They encountered not threats, but instead kindness and unsolicited help from strangers: “Most people I met were genuinely kind.” “Many people helped me along the way.”

This dissonance led participants to critically examine the cultural basis of the danger narrative: “The idea that ‘I’m a woman so I’ll face danger’—that wasn’t my experience. That’s something others instilled in me.” “Society keeps spreading fear to women instead of teaching us how to respond.”

Rather than denying the existence of risk, these women gained clarity in distinguishing between real-world risks and culturally manufactured fear. As a result, a more empowered form of risk perception began to emerge—one based on trust in the world and confidence in one’s own ability to cope. This de-dramatization of danger removed a significant psychological barrier to the development of agency.

4.6.3 Influencing Others through Individual Action: Feedback Loops. Some participants noticed that their decisions and behaviors gradually influenced the views of people around them. “I quit my job, raised my child alone, traveled solo... At first, they thought it was irresponsible, but over time, they accepted it.” “They no longer pressure me to get married or have children.” “I think I influenced my grandmother.”

This form of reverse impact did not result from direct confrontation or persuasion, but from the silent persuasiveness of lived action. By stepping outside of prescribed roles, these women created ripple effects—prompting those around them to reconsider what constitutes an appropriate life for women.

Their everyday practices became a subtle form of social education, gradually softening rigid life scripts and expanding the perceived legitimacy of diverse female subjectivities.

4.7 Theoretical Integration: A Four-Stage Model of Subjectivity Formation from Disembedding to Reintegration

The psychological and behavioral changes experienced by women during solo travel are not isolated or fragmented moments. Rather, as the six categories in previous sections reveal, these changes constitute a gradual, phased, and nested transformation of self-awareness and agency.

This process begins with a blurred sense of self under gendered disciplining, initiated by the opportunity of solo travel, and unfolds through the emergence of self-awareness, the construction of a more coherent self, and eventually the reintegration of these changes into everyday life and cultural negotiation. The path—from “seeing the self,” to “becoming the self,” to “returning with change to relationships and society”—highlights the dynamic and recursive nature of subjectivity formation. It also illustrates the liminal nature of solo travel, in which old roles are suspended and new perspectives begin to form. This is not a linear progression, but one shaped by the intersection of structural forces and active individual responses.

This trajectory is reflected across the six analytical dimensions presented above:

- Section 4.1 illustrates the vague and externally defined self-perceptions shaped by structural constraints, such as familial ethics, collectivist values, and gender norms. These forces form a foundational layer of “structural obscuration.”

- Section 4.2 explores how certain women, driven by emotional tension, personal interest, or relational rupture, begin to express an intention to deviate from normative life paths. Through strategic negotiation with family and safety discourses, they create the conditions for disembedding.
- Section 4.3 demonstrates how, through solitude, cultural contrast, and relational reflection, women gradually detach from familiar identity roles and develop an emergent self-awareness and boundary consciousness.
- Section 4.4 depicts how this awareness is deepened through concrete experiences, leading to enhanced self-understanding, the development of self-efficacy, and authentic self-expression—marking the formation of agency.
- Section 4.5 shows that these internal shifts do not end with the journey itself. They are translated into everyday practices, including more autonomous decision-making, changes in relational patterns, and reorientation of life values.
- Section 4.6 further reveals how participants begin to critically reflect on dominant gender norms and cultural scripts. In some cases, their actions generate a subtle but meaningful influence on others, contributing to cultural renegotiation.

By comparing these six dimensions both horizontally and vertically, a four-stage model of subjectivity development emerges:

(1) Disembedding → (2) Self-awareness → (3) Self-construction → (4)
Reintegration

This model not only represents the psychological progression from constraint to agency, but also illustrates how female subjectivity is activated under structural tension, validated through personal experience, and extended through cultural reflexivity. The structure of this model is shown below (Figure 1), outlining a core trajectory: from structural constraints and role detachment, to boundary awareness formed in solitude and reflection, to deeper understanding and self-efficacy developed through action, and finally to the reintegration of these changes into daily life, cultural feedback, and social negotiation.

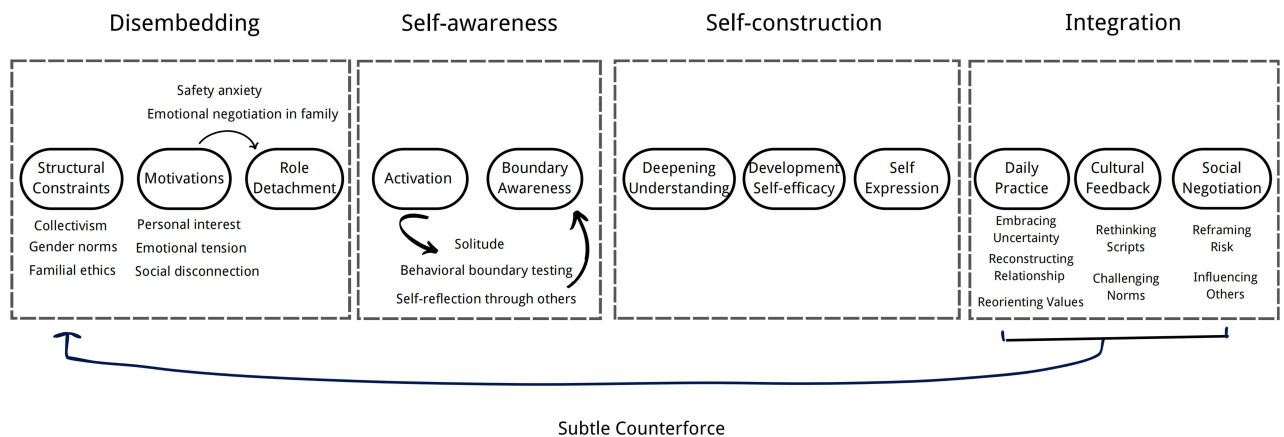


Figure 1 A Processual Model of the Development of Women's Agency: From Disembedding to Reintegration

Importantly, this model is not a pre-imposed theoretical frame, but an emergent analytical construction grounded in participants' lived experiences. It aims to map the mechanisms of subjectivity formation under conditions of gendered regulation and cultural constraint. Solo travel here is not merely an expression of individual freedom, but a micro-practice of social reflexivity that takes place in the interstices of structural control.

Although the model is presented in discrete phases, the actual process often involves overlaps, as individuals may simultaneously navigate multiple stages or revisit earlier ones in response to new experiences. The subtle counterforce visualized in the diagram reflects how individual practices in the later phases can ripple backward, subtly responding to and contesting the structural constraints that shaped the initial departure.

In the next chapter, we will further examine the theoretical implications of this model, especially in terms of how it contributes to understanding the generative conditions of female agency, the reconfiguration of gender norms, and the socio-cultural potential of travel practices.

5. Discussion

5.1 Unnoticed Resistance: The Unspoken Politics of Solo Travel

This study set out to explore how solo travel facilitates the development of self-awareness among Chinese women. A key insight is that although many participants began their journeys in response to emotional or relational tension, they rarely identified solo travel as a form of resistance. Their choices were often framed in neutral terms "I just needed a break" rather than as intentional defiance.

This gap between behavior and interpretation reveals two interrelated cultural dynamics. First, the act of traveling alone often constituted a quiet disruption of gendered life scripts centered on domesticity and relational duty (Fei et al., 1992; Tang & Tang, 2001), yet participants lacked the conceptual tools to frame it as resistance. This reflects structural obscuration: due to deeply embedded values of filial piety and collectivist morality, Chinese women may feel discomfort with prescribed roles without articulating this as resistance (Ho et al., 2012; Yan, 2010). Second, the avoidance of overtly oppositional language may reflect a cultural preference for discretion and harmony. Women framed their actions in moderate, non-confrontational terms, which aligns with Zhang and Hitchcock's (2017) observation that Chinese women often employ "non-confrontational deviation." This discursive strategy may also be shaped by broader sociopolitical sensitivities, in which feminist language and critique are constrained or discouraged (Fincher, 2016; Sun & Yin, 2024).

In this light, solo travel emerges as a form of quiet resistance—not because it loudly rejects gender norms, but because it gently steps aside from them. It enables withdrawal from normative pressures while maintaining social legibility.

5.2 Gendered Discipline in Cultural Contexts: Revealing “Non-Gendered” Gender Regulation

Previous studies have examined how Western women challenge gender roles and domestic expectations through solo travel, often positioning it as an act of conscious resistance or feminist self-assertion (Bianchi, 2016; Elsrud, 2001). However, this study finds that among Chinese women, the transformation associated with solo travel is rarely

articulated as resistance. Instead, the disconnect between transformative experience and political language can be traced to the distinct cultural logic of gender regulation in China.

In Chinese society, gender roles are often naturalized not through overt gender discourse, but through morally coded norms such as familial duty, filial piety, and emotional caregiving (Ho et al., 2012; Yan, 2010). These expectations are embedded within a broader framework of familism and collectivism (Hwang, 1987), which position women as emotional anchors and relational stabilizers. Because these norms are framed through ethical or relational language rather than explicitly gendered terms, women may struggle to perceive them as gender constraints. The disciplinary power of gender is thus concealed beneath seemingly neutral values such as harmony or responsibility.

As discussed in Section 5.2, this helps explain why participants rarely used terms like “resistance” or “defiance”—even when their actions clearly deviated from dominant gender scripts. The gender norms they quietly challenged were not always legible as such, having been disguised as naturalized moral obligations (Yan, 2010; Fincher, 2016).

This study further argues that Chinese women’s limited “aware of self” is not a result of personal deficiency, but a product of sustained structural ambiguity around subjectivity. On the one hand, women are socialized to be emotionally available and accommodating; on the other, their life choices are morally framed by imperatives like “being a good daughter” or “not letting the family down.” These expectations blur the boundary between ethical virtue and gender regulation, making resistance difficult to formulate and even harder to express.

This disciplinary mechanism parallels Butler’s (1990) notion of regulatory repetition, where femininity is reproduced through habitual performance. However, the Chinese case reveals an even more covert form: gendered regulation disguised in de-gendered ethical language. Here, normative femininity is not enforced through explicit instruction but through tacit moral imperatives that gain strength from their invisibility.

This analysis also aligns with McNay’s (2000) view that subjectivity is not simply a discursive product but emerges relationally through one’s embeddedness in cultural practices.

In this sense, solo travel offers a temporary but vital space of disembedding, where women can step outside relational obligations, observe the socio-cultural roots of their internal logics, and begin to ask: Who am I, and how do I want to live? As Wearing and Wearing (2001) suggest, travel as a liminal experience suspends normative roles and allows for reflection.

In the Chinese context, this reflective suspension becomes especially meaningful, as it opens a space where the unseen mechanisms of gender discipline may finally come into view.

5.3 Challenging the Script: Self-Awareness and Cultural Disobedience

During travel, however, a different language began to emerge. Participants frequently described a "moment of realization" or "clarity" in which they expressed rejection of mainstream life expectations. Phrases like "I don't want to follow this life script anymore" should be understood not as vague dissatisfaction but as culturally defiant declarations. In a society where marriage, childbearing, and career stability are framed as moral imperatives tied to collective harmony (Fei et al., 1992; Tang & Tang, 2001; Ho et al., 2012), such statements mark a symbolic rupture from institutionalized gender expectations. They do not merely signal quiet withdrawal, but rather a bold reclamation of self-determination and legitimacy on one's own terms.

These realizations often emerged in solitude or through encounters with alternative lifestyles, especially in contrast with more fluid gender norms abroad. As Wearing and Wearing (2001) argue, tourism offers a liminal space that suspends social roles and fosters self-reflection. In these moments, participants began to question deeply internalized values surrounding marriage, motherhood, and achievement—values continuously reinforced by both cultural tradition and state discourse (Fincher, 2016).

Solo travel, then, becomes a site of value dissociation: a moment of perceptual rupture that enables women to detach self-worth from dominant cultural scripts and imagine new forms of being.

5.4 From Personal Experience to Social Feedback: Micro-Practices with Reflexive Potential

Beyond internal transformation, this study also identifies the reflexive and socially generative potential of women's solo travel experiences. Some participants made life choices that diverged from traditional expectations—such as ending unequal relationships, reconfiguring career paths, or rejecting marriage and motherhood. Although initially met with skepticism, these decisions eventually gained acceptance as participants demonstrated emotional stability and long-term consistency in their chosen paths.

These shifts were not achieved through direct confrontation or critique, but rather through the lived demonstration of alternative possibilities. The participants' actions acted as a proof of viability, subtly destabilizing dominant social norms. In contrast to Butler's (1990) emphasis on normative power being maintained through repetition, participants in this study enacted non-repetition: they consistently chose life paths that deviated from mainstream scripts, gradually transforming what was once considered "exceptional" into something conceivable, even acceptable.

These findings complement work by Reisinger (2013) and Nandasena et al. (2022) on the continuity of travel experiences, which argue that travel can initiate lasting adjustments to meaning-making, value orientation, and everyday behavior. This study goes a step further by showing how some women's post-travel choices not only reflect personal integration, but also produce a spillover effect in their relational and cultural environments. These micro-practices of living differently thus function as nodes of social negotiation, revealing the reflexive power of solo travel in non-Western gendered contexts.

5.5 From Outcome to Process: Revealing the Mechanism of Self-Awareness Formation

This section directly responds to the main research question: How does solo travel facilitate the development of self-awareness among Chinese women?

Existing research have demonstrated how independent travel enhances self-efficacy and allows women to challenge gendered constraints in both symbolic and practical ways (Wilson & Harris, 2006; Jordan & Gibson, 2005). However, few studies have examined how self-awareness is activated during travel. As Yang et al. (2019) note, solo travel holds potential for “self-discovery,” but the specific mechanisms through which this occurs remain underexplored.

Drawing on in-depth interviews and a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), this study identifies a four-stage process—Disembedding → Self-awareness → Self-construction → Integration—that captures how self-awareness takes shape over time. First, women disembed from routine social roles through emotionally charged decisions, often without framing these actions as resistance. Second, in the liminal and de-structured space of solo travel, they begin to observe themselves, test behavioral and emotional boundaries, and experience value dissonance—what Mezirow (1991) would call “disorienting dilemmas,” prompting critical self-reflection. Third, through ongoing self-dialogue, women engage in self-construction, reshaping internalized norms and articulating personal priorities. Finally, these changes are brought back into everyday life, gradually reshaping relationships and influencing others—what McNay (2000) emphasizes as the relational and practice-based nature of subjectivity.

In this model, self-awareness is not a static realization but a dynamic process shaped by structural constraints, personal tensions, and reflective encounters. In the Chinese context, where gender norms are internalized through moral discourses such as filial piety and relational harmony (Ho et al., 2012; Yan, 2010), and where overt gender critique is politically sensitive (Fincher, 2016; Sun & Yin, 2024), solo travel becomes a rare yet meaningful site for disembedding and introspection. These embodied moments of dislocation—though quietly enacted—create critical openings for subjective awakening and value realignment.

5.6 Theoretical Contributions and Cultural Implications

This study contributes to feminist tourism scholarship by building on prior research that identifies solo travel as a site of self-empowerment and gendered resistance (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Wilson & Harris, 2006). Focusing on the Chinese context, it shifts attention to how such transformation unfolds through quieter, morally negotiated practices shaped by socio-cultural constraints.

Culturally, the findings offer insights into how Chinese women navigate social scripts not by open rebellion, but through a combination of non-confrontational action and strategic self-framing. These practices challenge dominant binaries of resistance versus compliance and call for greater attention to the politics of discretion.

Practically, the study highlights the need for social and institutional support for women's self-exploration—through safer travel conditions, public recognition of alternative female trajectories, and discourse that legitimizes reflective withdrawal as a form of growth. Supporting women's right to disengage is not apolitical: it is a necessary condition for self-becoming in restrictive environments.

In sum, solo travel for Chinese women is not merely a means of leisure or exploration. It is a culturally meaningful act that enables them to see themselves differently, live more deliberately, and—quietly but firmly—shift the social imagination of what women can be.

6. Limitations and Methodological Reflections

This study adopts a constructivist grounded theory approach, emphasizing the co-construction of meaning between researcher and data (Charmaz, 2006). This methodology is particularly suitable for exploring the development of self-awareness among Chinese women in the context of solo travel, allowing for the analysis of dynamic interactions between personal experience and cultural structures. However, it also implies that the resulting theoretical model is context-bound and interpretive, rather than universally generalizable (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, the findings should be understood as a theoretical exploration specific to this sample and setting.

Regarding sampling, the study involved 16 Chinese women with solo travel experience, covering a range of ages, occupations, and travel histories. However, participants were mostly from highly educated, articulate, and culturally sensitive backgrounds, which may limit the model's applicability to women from more marginalized or resource-constrained groups.

Furthermore, as the participants voluntarily shared personal and reflective narratives, there may be a narrative bias toward coherent, positive, and growth-oriented accounts. This could obscure more ambiguous, contradictory, or unresolved aspects of their experiences (Riessman, 2008), thus influencing the completeness of the data.

From an analytical standpoint, the researcher—being part of the knowledge production process—is inevitably influenced by their own gender identity, cultural background, and travel experiences. Although measures such as iterative reading, cross-comparison, and theoretical memoing were employed to enhance credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the process of category naming and model building may still reflect the researcher's interpretive frameworks. While constructivism acknowledges subjectivity as a source of value (Finlay, 2002), this position also demands a sustained reflexive awareness throughout the research to guard against projective assumptions or overextension of meaning.

In summary, while this study provides in-depth theoretical insights and experiential interpretations, its explanatory power is best understood within its specific sociocultural and sample boundaries. Future research should extend to other social classes, generational cohorts, or cultural contexts to further examine the similarities and differences in how women's self-awareness develops across varied structural landscapes.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined the central question: How does solo travel facilitate the development of self-awareness among Chinese women? Drawing on the methodological framework of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), it analyzes the solo travel

experiences of 16 Chinese women and proposes a four-stage developmental model of self-awareness: Disembedding → Self-awareness → Self-construction → Integration. Findings reveal that self-awareness does not emerge automatically. Rather, it is gradually activated in the liminal space created by detachment from daily roles—through solitude, relational reflection, and cultural mirroring — and is subsequently deepened through behavioral practices and the restructuring of everyday life. This demonstrates that female subjectivity is not a fixed essence but a reflexive and agentic practice generated through ongoing cultural discipline and social interaction (McNay, 2000).

In the Chinese context, where gender norms are embedded in moral obligations and explicit critique is often discouraged, such transformations are especially significant. This study thus contributes to feminist tourism scholarship by illustrating that in contexts where direct resistance is discouraged, self-awareness can be cultivated through reflective, culturally attuned practices.

“After coming back from my trip, I returned to the same life—but somehow that life no longer felt the same.” As one participant reflected, the shift in self-awareness triggered by solo travel does not necessarily remove women from their everyday lives, but it subtly transforms their position and perspective within it. This, ultimately, is the distinctive power of solo travel as a cultural practice: it allows one to walk away—and then to return, facing the same world with different eyes.

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