

From Public Perception to Professional Practice: A Study of Occupational Stereotypes of Forensic Practitioners in Contemporary Chinese Society

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Abstract. In recent years, the TV series and variety shows about forensic medicine have grown increasingly popular. This once relatively niche profession has thus come into the public eye. However, the public still has misconceptions about their actual job details, working environments, and professional significance. From an anthropological perspective, this study examines stereotypes surrounding forensic practitioners in the Chinese cultural context and considers how these perceptions are formed. Using qualitative research methods, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with three practitioners specializing in forensic pathology and forensic psychiatry from different regions in China. Based on the analysis of their career trajectories, professional practices, and social interactions, it can be proved that contemporary forensic practitioners are influenced by both external social stereotypes and internal structural biases. This research contributes to the ongoing discussion about forensic stereotypes by presenting the lived experiences and personal narratives of female forensic practitioners in a neglected Chinese cultural context. It aims to offer an objective portrayal of forensic work, fostering a more rational and respectful public understanding of the profession and those who work in it.

Keywords: Forensic Science Professionals, Occupational Stereotypes, Anthropology, Gender Equality

1. Introduction

In recent years, the popularity of TV dramas and variety shows such as *Medical Examiner Dr. Qin* and *Workplace Newcomers: Forensic Season* has spread wider in China, bringing the once relatively niche profession of forensic practitioners into the public spotlight. To some extent, artistic portrayals of forensic work in popular culture have led to distorted public perceptions of the job. Forensic pathologists are often labeled as "gory", "creepy" and "unlucky", creating stereotypes that are detached from reality. Furthermore, dramatized storytelling has also severely obscured the true nature of their work, their daily lives and their professional value.

Current academic research on the image of forensic practitioners in China has largely focused on film and television criticism and media studies. Relatively few studies have adopted an anthropological perspective and listened to the voices of the practitioners themselves [1]. Moreover,

existing research has not given enough attention to the Chinese cultural context, particularly the taboos and traditional conceptions surrounding death. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the stereotypes within the contemporary Chinese forensic profession. It addresses the following questions: What specific stereotypes exist? Where do these perceptions originate? What are the differences between these stereotypes and actual forensic practices?

Through interviews with three forensic pathologists and psychiatrists from different regions of China, the study presents the firsthand experiences and concrete occupational narratives of forensic professionals. The paper aims to reveal the true nature of their work from a nuanced insider perspective. In addition, it supplements research on stereotypes surrounding forensic professionals by offering a long-neglected, Chinese cultural perspective.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research paradigm and data collection method

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm, with semi-structured interviews serving as the primary data collection method. The choice of this method is based primarily on two considerations: First, the central research question of this study is to explore the stereotypes the public have on forensic profession and where these stereotypes originate. These questions essentially concern people's subjective experiences, perceptions, and understandings of forensic work, making them highly suitable with qualitative research methods. Second, compared to structured questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews allow researchers to ask questions base on pre-designed interview outline while keeping open during the conversation with participants, offering greater flexibility in accessing their experimental world [2].

2.2. Interviewees

The interviewees in this study consist of two groups: The first group comprises forensic science students who have already received academic and practical training in forensic field. They have already developed a preliminary understanding of and reflections on the career they will pursue in the future. The second group includes practicing forensic professionals who can provide more specific and detailed narratives about their routine work and social perception of forensic profession.

At the initial stage of searching for interviewees, the researcher actually tried a more formal approach by sending interview invitation on behalf of the research project to faculty members listed on the official websites of university departments of forensic medicine, as well as to publicly available contacts of local forensic institutions. However, most of the invitations were politely refused or ignored. This situation forced the researcher to shift attention from official channels to social media platforms where forensic practitioners may share content about their work. Searching for keywords such as "forensic pathologist" "daily life of forensic practitioners" "sharing of forensic practitioners" on RedNote, I identified eight relatively active forensic professionals' account that consistently shared relative content about their career. After initially identifying potential participants, researcher sent invitations through direct message on the platform, claiming the purpose of the study, interview format, expected duration and confidentiality and anonymity assurances, and asking their willingness to participate. The entire recruitment process therefore combined purposive sampling, guided by the research question, with convenience sampling based on practical accessibility. Data collection continued until information saturation was reached. In

other words, when the new respondents' narratives no longer challenged or significantly expanded the existing analytical framework, the recruitment of new samples was stopped.

Ultimately, this study included a total of three participants: two practicing forensic professionals and one student in forensic field; the region covered Sichuan, Chongqing and Shanghai. It is worth noticing that all the participants are female. This sample composition was not predetermined but an unintended outcome resulting from the recruitment mechanism introduced above. Given that the forensic profession has long been regarded by public as a career more suited to men, the experiences of female forensic professionals may not be fully representative in a statistical sense. However, the stereotypes they face often combine both occupational bias and gender roles, providing a more special analytical value on the research topic addressed in this study.

2.3. Data collection process

All interviews were conducted between February and April 2026. Due to the wide geographic distribution of the participants, the interviews were conducted one-on-one through online platforms such as WeChat, RedNote in audio form. Before each interview began, the purpose of this study, confidentiality policies and how the data would be used have been introduced clearly to the participants. The conversations were recorded after obtaining verbal or written informed consent, and the duration for each interview ranged from 39 to 63 minutes.

Table 1. Basic information of interviewees

Nr.	Identity	Gender	Region	Specialization	Years of Experience/Educational Level	Duration of the Interview
1	Student	Female	Sichuan	Forensic Pathology	Senior Year of College	49: 00
2	Employee	Female	Shanghai	Forensic Psychiatry	1 year of work experience	34: 46
3	Employee	Female	Chongqing	Forensic Pathology	5 years of work experience	01: 03: 07

The semi-structured interview outline used for the interviews includes the following four modules: examination of work settings; personal perspectives; experiences related to stereotypes; social support systems and future prospects. In total, the outline comprised 16 questions. During the actual interviews, the order and depth of follow-up questions were adjusted flexibly based on the participants' responses, encouraging them to elaborate through storytelling. The audio recordings were then transcribed into written transcripts [3]. The transcription process not only preserved the verbal content but also included observation notes for annotation to retain as much information from the interview setting as possible. Subsequently, the thematic analysis is employed to systematically organize and code the transcribed texts.

3. Findings and discussion

After conducting the thematic coding of the interview material, my research found that the forensic doctors and students in current Chinese society are not only faced with the externally imposed stereotypes, but also influenced by the structural biases within the profession. These two kinds of biases have distinctive differences in manifestations and underlying mechanisms.

Externally imposed stereotypes refer to the one-sided or even distorted perceptions formed by non-practitioners through limited information like media reports, indirect experiences or cultural assumptions. These perceptions are usually disconnected from the actual working conditions but are constantly reinforced during social communication. Many TV shows dramatize and exaggerate the

image of forensic pathologists for enhancing dramatic appeal and attracting audiences. They amplify the most sensational aspects of this career and downplay the day-to-day work and complexity of forensic pathology. For example, one of the interviewee mentioned that "the reconstruction of crime scenes, speculation of injury mechanisms and instrument, and the analysis of the causes of death in TV shows are finished too quickly and easily. But, in forensic pathology, we will find that the autopsy is actually the easiest step. We have to examine slides under a microscope and conduct pathophysiological analyses then. Reactive pathology is relatively harder. Over time, people develop an impression of the forensic profession that deviates from reality. Furthermore, about occupational stereotypes, what people understand about forensic pathologies is overly simplified. Most of them ignore the diversity of specialties and the detailed division of labor, resulting in an incomplete perception of the profession. As interviewee No.1 mentioned "I think the general public basically knows very little about we forensic pathologies. Apart from TV shows, not all of us perform autopsies, some people also choose to conduct psychiatric evaluations."(Interviewee 1, interviewed on 12 February 2026)

The limited understanding from the outside world negatively affected the social lives of practitioners to some degree. Interviewee No.2 mentioned that she once received judgmental reactions from others because of her career: "Someone messaged me on RedNote and said, 'Hey, beautiful girl, I do not care what you do for a living, and I would like to get to know you. Would you like to date with me?'" She felt offended by this, and recognized the underlying implication: "Oh my god, there are some guys who think their wife might be doing this kind of work, or they will imagine their wife is doing this, and they will say, 'I cannot marry a woman like that.'"(Interviewee 2, interviewed on 28 March 2026) Although she has not experienced direct discrimination yet, she has encountered subtle and implicit comments on social media that stem from stereotypes and prejudices against the forensic profession.

The main reasons for this phenomenon include: TV shows and social media are more likely to highlight and exaggerate the sensational and eye-catching aspects of forensic work, which further increase the cognitive fragmentation. At the same time, forensic pathology itself has high professional barriers, and the channels for public to obtain information are minimal. It is difficult for people to gain access to learn about the real working environment. In media reports, devotion of forensic pathologists are hardly recognized or emphasized, which undermines people's deep understanding of the nature and value of their work. As Interviewee No.1 said, "the public tends to focus more on criminal investigators solving cases, while the significance of forensic scientists is often overlooked. In our day-to-day work, we provide a scientific basis for determining the nature of a case through professional analysis."(Interviewee 1, interviewed on 12 February 2026) More importantly, for the group work as forensic pathologist in China, traditional Chinese cultural views on death affects people's perception of this career. In folk beliefs of many cultures, corpses and blood are seen as impure substances, and they tend to avoid discussing death as well [4]. Confucian ethics emphasizes that dead bodies can not be broken. The integrity of dead people shows respect toward ancestors. Thus, even in modern times, some families also reject to learn medical or forensic autopsies, believing that dead people should remain physically intact to rest in peace. Interviewee No.3 shared her experience: "Actually, many people do not think being a forensic doctor is unsanitary because of contact with the dead, but they simply hold a traditional belief that contact with the dead brings bad luck, just like the jobs of undertakers or funeral home workers. They simply believe that contact with the dead is already bad luck in itself."(Interviewee 3, interviewed on 18 April 2026) There are many euphemisms for death in Chinese language, which is also a reflection of cultural taboos. Examples include "passed away," "departed to the West," and "eternal sleep,"

among others [5]. Traditional Chinese customs require people to keep silent about death. Therefore, people avoid saying things about "death" or "kill" during the Chinese New Year. In modern daily life, people tend to avoid using the number 4 as it sounds like the word for "death" in Mandarin in certain contexts. For instance, many buildings omit the fourth floor in their elevators, replacing it with "3A". These behavioral patterns demonstrate the connotations associated with death in Chinese culture. These cultural factors indirectly contribute to the marginalization of professions related to death, making them difficult for the general public to understand.

In addition to stereotypes in forensic pathology, structural biases also exist within the forensic field itself. These biases are not resulted from subjective attitudes of the general public or individuals, but the systemic inequalities embedded in recruitment mechanisms and the operational logic of the profession. Structural biases usually exist in form of rules and certain practical conditions, placing certain groups at a disadvantage and affecting practitioner's opportunities for promotion. For example, during recruitment, some jobs set explicit or implicit standards, barriers for certain groups. Individual differences are generalized to group features, and "work efficiency" and "job requirements" are used as justifications, leading to unequal opportunities. During the interview, all three female interviewees mentioned that they experienced systemic exclusion and unfair treatment due to their sexuality. One interviewee said, "I think it is a form of gender discrimination. From what I understand and from discussions with my classmates, women face significant limitations in employment. For example, when you apply to the public security, procuratorial, and judicial systems, gender requirements are explicitly specified. In fact, many places only recruit men." (Interviewee 2, interviewed on 28 March 2026) As we can see, physiological differences between females and males are exaggerated into occupational restrictions that affect the career development of female forensic pathologists. Additionally, forensic pathologists are now facing the unequal resource allocation within the field. The current social system pays insufficient attention to occupational risks, and relevant protective measures are relatively lacking as well. This reflects the marginalized status within the overall system further. When asked whether occupational protections in forensic practice were sufficient, the interviewee who had performed an autopsy on an HIV-positive deceased person, stated: "I think there is one aspect of protection that is not quite adequate. Forensic professionals, after all, have to deal with different people and various bodies every day. I believe we should be protected against nosocomial infections. Bacteria are not a big issue, but infectious diseases are something I am really afraid of. However, I often feel that this protection should not just be about us wearing layers and layers of protective gear. I think the autopsy environment should also be thoroughly disinfected as much as possible. Unfortunately, this simply is not being done in our country right now. There just is not enough budget. Building an autopsy room is very expensive, and when you build something like that, you cannot do it for free and have to make a profit. Hospitals can recoup their costs, but we certainly cannot make a profit from performing autopsies, so even bodies with infectious diseases are not given special treatment. It is just really unfriendly toward us workers." (Interviewee 2, interviewed on 28 March 2026) Although sometimes forensic pathologists are required to operate in environments with certain risks, the actual level of support from the job, like disinfection, is even significantly lower than the professional standards achieved in regular hospitals.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that forensic science is a highly specialized discipline, characterized by a clear division of labor. However, the significance of the forensic profession within the judicial system has long been underappreciated. The media representations in China significantly simplified

the actual operations of the forensic work, which further brings about the limited public understanding of the job. Meanwhile, these stereotypes are intertwined with structural issues within the profession, including gender inequality and unequal resource distribution. Therefore, this paper provides a comprehensive anthropological observation of the forensic profession in contemporary Chinese society, in order to correct public misconceptions and encourage society to recognize this specialized work. The more we acknowledge the value of forensic work in safeguarding human dignity and ensuring justice, the more we can contribute to the development of a society governed by the rule of law.

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