

Improving Gender Equality in China Through Education: Redistribution and Recognition

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Abstract

This paper focus on China's development in education and its relationship with gender equality within the nation from the 1940s to current years, examining its progress and challenges, as well as attempts made through the challenges and underestimated aspects.

Keywords: education, relationship, gender equality, challenge

1. Introduction

This essay will focus on China's development in education and its relationship with gender equality within the nation from the 1940s to current years, examining its progress and challenges, as well as attempts made through the challenges and underestimated aspects.

In the first part, the essay is structured in chronological order and divided into different historical periods according to the development of education, and the relation of education to gender equality is investigated. Secondly, it will critically analyse China's gender equality dilemma, referring to Nancy Fraser's recognition theory. In the last part, the importance of addressing recognition through education is discussed, supported by relevant chinses studies.

2. Historical Development

Taking China's reform and opening up as the dividing point, this section will examine the situation of education and gender equality in China from the founding of the country to the 1970s -1980s and that after the reform and opening up respectively, given that the ten-years Cultural Revolution from1966 has played a complicated role with regards to the nation's educational development and gender equality issue, which would be stressed in more details in the following part.

During China's feudal monarchy, influenced by Confucianism and agrarian culture, the concept of "male superiority over female" dominated all aspects of social life, and access to education was the privilege of men, while women were excluded from schooling for a long time. In the modern period, influenced by Western ideas of gender equality, women became dissatisfied with the status quo and began fighting for equal education rights (Guo, G., 1995). According to statistics (Guo, G., 1995), before the foundation of the People's Republic of China, females only made up roughly 20% in primary, secondary and tertiary education, and 90% of women were illiterate.

As the ruling party of the People's Republic of China, the Communist Party of China (CPC) had already begun to emphasise education among the population before the founding of New China. Rather than fitting the contemporary definition of education, at that time, both man and women workers and peasants were educated with the aim to achieve an update in their values and thoughts through improving their literacy, thus paving the way for the acceptance of the new ideology and social imaginary for a socialist nation and in the end mobilised in the torrent of communist revolution (Zhang, X. J., 2021). After the foundation of the People's Republic of China, the first constitution file Common Program of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference has stated that the goal of education at the very moment was for national rejuvenation and nation- building. Under the guidance of the constitutional file, the new education system was established, including compulsory, secondary, tertiary as well as vocational education (Su, W. C., Vol. 1). Besides, All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) was set up in 1949, formerly known as the Women's Department of the CPC, which aimed at uniting women of all backgrounds to

participate in national building, and the abolition of traditional discriminative customs against women, protecting the rights and welfare of women and finally achieving gender equality and women's emancipation (Ren, J., 2018). In terms of access of women to education, to stimulate the development of the national economy, China launched a ten-year literacy education campaign specifically for rural women, which increased women's labour participation in production and their sense of patriotism, while the knowledge of maternal and child health disseminated through campaign also ensured the health of the majority of rural women (Asai, K., 1997). To some extent, women's participation in work and production has raised their social-economic status because with paid work; they were not as dependent on the men in the family as before.

Then the subversive Cultural Revolution started in the 60s; this sociopolitical movement, to purge the capitalist and outdated traditions at the national scale, has severely hindered the development of education career. Schools were closed, college entrance exams were halted, and the educated youths were sent to rural areas in the name of re-education to understand better the value of agrarian work (Andreas, J., 1st ed.). According to Jin (Jin, Y. H., 2006), all issues at that time were politically constructed, thus rarely men-women distinction was taken into account of the mission of revolution, but only capitalist-working class opposition mattered, and the work of ACWF was suspended (Ren, J., 2018). Both men and women were mobilised through propaganda to participate in national building. Women entered into many fields for physical labour, such as oil extraction, well drilling and bridge-building. One famous statement of Mao Zedong, the leader of CPC, saying that things have changed with time and women could be as capable as men nowadays, entails the new perception of females' role in society (Jin, Y. H., 2006). It seems that during this period of education halt and chaos, gender equality moved a big step forward. However, it is not the case. Women in work were called 'iron women' and were praised because of their strength and willingness as strong as the man, under which hides the implication of male as standard criterion and female were divided as 'iron' or not with reference to men. This kind of discourse reveals the gender construction that still privileges males in society. Therefore, entering working place seems not enough to achieve real gender equality, the related values and norms rooted deeply in this society hindered the progress.

The nation's education development restarted after the Cultural Revolution and with reform and opening up, with the ruling Party placing education as a priority of national revitalisation (Su, W. C., Vol. 1). The lawmakers have become more aware of girls' education and women's equal rights with men in terms of access to schooling, further education and employment as stipulated in the Education Law of the People's Republic of China in 1985 (Zhen, L., & Li, J., 2012). It could be inferred that the focus draws mainly on the accessibility of women to schooling, showing the government's limited understanding concerning the promotion of gender equality in education. It is worth mentioning that under the leading of ACWF, the long-term funding program, namely Springbok Project, was launched in 1989 to provide financial aid for improving education, safety and health condition of girls from pre-school to higher education years (China Children and Teenager's Fund).

Regardless of the limitation, women's right to education has been guaranteed. The gender gap in education has been reduced, as statistics show that in 2011 the average years of women's schooling have risen 45% compared to 2000, and the gender gap of average schooling years has decreased from 1.5 to 0.3 in ten years (Zhen, L., & Li, J., 2012). Progress has been made in Conductive Document for Women's development in 2011, where the rights to access education were emphasised again. There were new focuses on equality within education and through education. The progress identified China's interest in and alignment with international gender equality processes, as substantial equality has been brought up in UNESCO's human rights and gender equality report in 2003 with utilising the rights framework that stressed the rights to, within and through education (Wilson, D., 2003).

3. The Dilemma of the Progress of Gender Equality

Despite the progress in promoting gender equality in education made during the years, gender equality in China seems to be stuck in a bottleneck, and there are some unintended conditions. According to the data (UNESCO., 2019), the gender rate of China's primary and secondary education enrollment is around 47.7%, which stands for a relatively good performance, while contrastingly, the nation ranks very high in Gender Inequality Index. Moreover, China is grouped as good performers in both Gender Development Index (GDI) and Gender Inequality Index (GII) in 2018, but ranks at rather a low place in 2019's Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) and is classified as middle discriminatory level by Social Institution and Gender Index (SIGI) in 2014 (Wu, F., & Liu, L., 2020). This divergence could be explained by looking into their evaluation scopes and criteria. China's well performance in both GDI and GII could be justified by their focuses on average schooling years, life expectancy, health and participation in the labour market, in which fields the nation has placed importance

on from the 80s and even before, like women's participation in work during early nation-building years, mentioned above. Meanwhile, GGGI shows concern for gender equality in terms of economic and political status, health and survival, and SIGI examines the structural inequality within the countries and cultural stereotypes as well as discrimination in family and society (Wu, F., & Liu, L., 2020). Poor performance in these indexes reflects the

country's lack of attention in the relevant field. More specifically, the main factor that negatively impacts China's GGI ranking is the gender ratio at birth (Wu, F., & Liu, L., 2020), which is rooted long in traditional Chinese values that privilege the boy. Along with the SIGI criteria, this essay argues that recognition has been neglected in promoting substantial gender equality in this country.

The country's inadequate attention on addressing recognition issues could be related to the preference of relying on the channel of redistribution. The philosophical paradigm that the CPC values is Marxian materialism, which conceptualises the nature of injustice as capitalist exploitation. And ontologically, it perceives the world of consciousness as the product of the world of substantial material, therefore any cultural injustice concerning the recognition can be explained by its economic root (Fraser, N.). Starting from this belief, the country hardly sees the gender equality issue different from addressing poverty, and this could be identified by looking at the attempts made through the years, such as encouraging women to enter in labour, ensuring their access to education and funding programs, not surprisingly are mainly concerning the redistribution approach. And scholars in China tend to conduct research that primarily focuses on the relationship between gender equality and economic development, as there are more than 1,000 related papers in China national knowledge infrastructure database. At the same time, there are only around 300 articles about gender equality and education; less is the theme on gender equality and cultural valuation structure. To some extent, this entails an insufficient understanding of the importance of recognition of the whole society.

4. Redistribution Through Education

Redistribution, however, is not enough to address the gender equality issues. As Fraser (Fraser, N.) identifies, gender is a bivalent conception that could "suffer both socioeconomic maldistribution and cultural misrecognition in forms where neither of these injustices is an indirect effect of the other, but where both are primary and co-original"(Fraser, N., 2000) and demands for cultural change intertwined with the need for economic redistribution, neither could be reduced to another. The gender injustice in China derives not only from economic factors but also roots in social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication, exemplified by the dominant Confucianism culture that privileges man over woman, the unjust culture valuation and stereotypes of which exist in the family, schools and working place (Wu, F., & Liu, L., 2020). Drawing on the Capability approach, norms and values can constitute barriers to disadvantaged groups accessing resources and converting them into capabilities and functionings, which hindered the real progress of gender equality (Tikly, L., & Barrett, A. M., 2011). Education, under this situation, could just be the institution for the social reproduction of unjust norms, values and economic injustice rather than the channel for improving gender equality, if without cautious attention.

Therefore, China's education needs to be considered more guardedly to achieve the acceptability of the schooling content and gender-based adaptability beyond accessibility (Global Campaign for Education and RESULTS Educational Fund, 2011, July). One key factor that hindered the progress of women's equality in education is hidden gender bias and discrimination in textbooks (Blumberg, R. L., 2008). There are some relevant studies conducted in China, and gender stereotypes are identified in secondary school textbooks of the Chinese language, mathematics and English language curriculum (Sun, Q. K., 2017; Cui, C., & Wu, D. S., 2019; Hu, Y. J.). Some common gender bias could be drawn from these studies, including various forms of exclusion and underrepresentation of females in textbooks, with the male illustrations and roles far outnumbering females. And while the male characters are often linked to successful, intelligent, accomplished political activists, scientific experts, and industry leaders,

female roles are restricted to certain professional roles and characteristics. Moreover, updating teachers' gender equality awareness is another crucial need, as teachers are the immediate 'medium' of schooling. Through the interaction with students, their unintended gender-biased languages and behaviours will reproduce and reinforce the cultural injustice (Detre, C., & Zhang, D., 2018). This injustice of culture, as argued by Taylor (Landesman, B. M., 1994), could be a form of oppression for women in a reduced mode of being, which is far from the real spirit of gender equality.

5. Conclusion

China has made efforts in promoting gender equality in education. Despite challenges that existed, progress has been made from the foundation of the state to the Cultural Revolution, till the reform and opening up in the 1980s, among which equal access to education is a crucial concern. However, for the last ten years, China has seemed to be stuck in promoting gender equality. While China performs well in GII and GDI, SIGI and GGI evaluate the country as a poor performer, revealing China's lack of attention in addressing equal recognition through education. To achieve substantial gender equality, textbooks development and teacher training should be considered more cautiously so that the education could become the channel for adequate recognition rather than the institution of

reproduction of gender-bias culture and social structure.

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