

# Education of Females in China: Trends and Issues

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An overview of the status of Chinese female education is presented. The education received by males and females is compared in terms of geographic location and economic development. Although many changes have taken place in Chinese female education, there is still a great discrepancy existing between the two genders. Based on research and personal experiences, the author discusses the disparity. Pressure through traditional customs, combined effect of family and local financial dilemmas, irregular geographic location, the individual's self-commitment to upward social mobility, and the emerging educational and economic systems are some possible reasons for the disparity. In conclusion, possible approaches for the alleviation of this discrepancy are explored.

Une vue générale du statut des femmes chinoises est présentée. L'éducation reçue par les hommes et les femmes est comparée en termes de localisation géographique et de développement économique. Bien que de grands changements aient pris place dans l'éducation des femmes chinoises, une grande différence perdure entre les deux sexes. En s'appuyant sur la recherche et ses expériences personnelles, l'auteur examine cette disparité. La pression des coutumes traditionnelles, l'effet combiné de la famille et des dilemmes financiers, les localisations géographiques diverses, l'engagement personnel de l'individu envers la mobilité sociale ascendante et l'émergence des systèmes éducatifs et économiques constituent des raisons possibles de cette disparité. En conclusion, des approches possibles visant la réduction de cette différence sont explorées.

Gender discrimination is a prevailing social phenomenon all over the world, including China. As a country with a history of more than 2,000 years of feudal ideology and a current population of 1.2 billion people, gender disparity in education is so pervasive that it is difficult for a person to understand unless one has experienced it.

Economically, China is attempting to surface to the top in the world arena, competing with other developing countries or regions in the world market. Economic development will benefit the entire country. Hopefully,

The 1.2% of females with college education represents 7.1 million females. Liberal females who explore the opportunity to study abroad comprise a large percentage of Chinese graduate students, the second largest group of international students in the United States ("The status of Chinese students," 1995). However, in remote and isolated areas of China, the picture is totally reversed – girls are not allowed to go to school because they would be studying with boys, a custom which does not conform with local traditions (Zang, 1994).

The pace of economic development in a particular area affects the levels of schooling. Differences in the speed of economic development and social change have led to a widened gap in China. Equal rights and equal access to education for girls in cities have been reinforced by the implementation of the Law of Compulsory Education and General Principles of the Civil Law of the People's Republic of China as well as the implementation of the "one child policy." In Beijing, nearly 99% of school-age girls receive nine years of compulsory education. In the regions where the economy has developed more rapidly, females receive more education than those in remote areas (see Table 5). In some poverty stricken areas, female students do not attend school after the third grade (Yu, 1995).

Table 5. Rural Female Education Level Distribution in Terms of Geographic Areas

Region	Average No. of Years of Schooling
Beijing	5.36
TianJin and surrounding 11 provinces	4-4.97
Henan and surrounding 8 provinces	3.15-3.83
Jiangxi and surrounding 6 provinces	2.02-2.92
Tibet	1.01

Source: Tan (1993). *Female Education and Population Quality*.

### *Analysis of the Disparity*

Public exposure to the gloomy realities of educational disparities would awaken the entire nation's sense of responsibility toward improving the status of female education. A realistic recognition, specific identification, and appropriate analysis of the cause and effect of the gap would be important steps in alleviating it and accomplishing the goal of a full realization of equal rights for women in every aspect of life.

The variables that contribute to the issues of female education include pressure of traditional customs, poverty, geographic location, and an individual's motivation for social upward mobility. These variables work independently and interdependently for the advancement or deterioration of the education of Chinese women. Family and local financial dilemmas double the burden of education for females. The sharp contrast in education between males and females residing in different geographic regions highlights the correlation between economy and education. In addition, the undergoing economic reform, which has helped to fuel the growing demand for education has created some new issues for education.

#### *Pressure of Traditional Customs*

Many of the deeply embedded Chinese traditions still dominate a large number of under-educated families. The custom of "patrilocal exogamous" marriage (Hsu, 1992, p.16) in which a bride moves in with a groom's household has been preserved in a majority of rural areas. The expense of rearing a girl in a family is considered a loss to the family and parents are reluctant to invest in a daughter's education, which will be of greater benefit to the future husband's family.

When poverty attacks an area, human survival is always the first priority for people. For many Chinese, education is regarded as merely a luxury, although it is commonly stated that "the ability to read and write is considered a basic human right" (Summers, 1993, p.16). In order to survive poverty, girls, shadowed by their mothers' traditional, socially accepted discriminatory roles, are usually the most vulnerable and often sacrifice their individual interests for the welfare of the family male members – first for their brothers, then for their husband after marriage, and last, for their son(s) after being widowed. Among children, daughters are the first to quit school and help the family with household chores and even fieldwork. After marriage, a wife would be submissive to her husband's dominance regardless of her own welfare. Parish and Willis (1993) describe experiences in Taiwan where a policy environment provides no public welfare benefits to peasants. The same exists in

mainland China. In the majority of rural areas, reliance on the male-dominated extended family remains strong and the social value of males is emphasized due to a lack of retirement benefits available from the government. Females have to depend on their sons or son's families for support in their elder years.

*Combined Effect of Family and Local Financial Dilemmas*

Although some parents desire an education for their daughters, the fact remains that they cannot afford it. Due to the cost of education, many parents are prohibited from offering their daughters an opportunity for further education. One hundred yuan (equal to about \$15 US) a year for tuition and books is extremely expensive for those who barely make enough for living expenses. During an extended stay in China, the author witnessed living conditions for many peasants in the poor regions during the late 1960s and 1970s (living conditions as described continue today in many remote regions according to this author's reading). Some examples are described: The money from the sale of eggs was used to buy salt; electricity was not available – kerosene lamps were used to provide light and many peasants could not afford to have their children read and study after dark; one set of clothing was used all year round – during winter, it was a heavy coat with cotton stuffed in between the two pieces of cloth, in the seasons of spring and autumn, the cotton was taken out and it became a two-layer jacket, and in summer, it became a single layer shirt. A family of three generations lived together in a one-room house with one big long bed. Adolescent females were married after 16 years of age, as this type of physical environment was inappropriate and inconvenient for a female teenager.

School organization and administration also suffer from poverty. The teacher in impoverished rural area teaches in inadequate facilities with meager sources of materials. Many teachers teach multi-level grades in one-room schools. There are only a few chairs – not enough for each student to have one; desks are limited or not available. The teaching supplies include a box of chalk, a bottle of red ink, a bottle of blue ink, and six gallons of kerosene for one semester. There is no resource center or school library. A teacher's individual reading materials are used as supplementary resources for the school. A disturbing fact is that some teachers' salaries were not even paid for a six year period (Zhuang, 1993). Teaching could become nonexistent in these areas unless the teacher is heartily devoted to his or her profession and has a supportive family. Such teachers deserve respect as well as a salary. Societal support for teachers

would be an effective way to help keep them in the teaching profession. It also could have a great impact upon improving education in these areas.

### *Irregular Geographic Structure*

The geographic structure in China's remote, rural areas contributes to the physiological and psychological difficulties for females in their pursuit of an education. For example, in the countryside of the northwestern China where the author stayed for almost six years, the students in the surrounding villages were known to climb two mountains within ten miles, six days a week to attend a school for fifth and sixth grades. Many children, especially girls, were weak due to lack of adequate nutrition. Walking this distance every day was a test of physical endurance. To continue on to junior high school (7th to 9th grades) and/or senior high school (10th to 12th grades) they would be required to attend the only one or two town boarding high schools, often several miles from the home village. Many could return home only once during a semester (Yu, 1995). Pursuing an education under these conditions calls for a strong will and an independent spirit!

### *Self-Commitment to Education*

The lack of female teachers in the poor rural areas impairs the female students' motivation for more education. Role models of the same gender are limited for the younger girls. In a vicious cycle, underrepresentation of girls in school results in a disproportionate distribution of male and female graduates from high school. The disproportionate ratio results in fewer female teachers. Young girls and female adolescents grow up in an environment where traditional views of gender-roles predominate and consequently have limited or no exposure to the world outside of their mothers' life. The mother's role is reproduced. Thus, the prevailing, traditional female roles continue. They have little or no access to nonsexist viewpoints, attitudes, or behaviors. They can hardly portray an image of their own as well-educated, independent females. In addition, traditional separation of men and women, and an insensitivity or lack of concern for the mental and psychological development of females by male teachers discourages many girls from continuing their education.

Ideally, the female's self-commitment to education is the determining factor in emancipation from gender discrimination. Enhancing self-commitment entails much courage and conscientiousness by females. This is especially important for the females in the poor rural areas who need to break the vicious cycle they find themselves caught in.

*Emerging Issues in the System*

In the current educational system, some policies restrict the advancement of female education. First, Chinese people have few opportunities to return to school after a certain age and/or after marriage. The demand for higher education cannot be met due to the limited number of postsecondary institutions. As a result, age is used to reduce the competition for higher levels of education.

Opportunities to enroll for a bachelor's degree are not available to anyone over 25 years of age; a person over 40 years has no possibility of earning a graduate degree. The current evening schools, open to everyone, are not sufficient in number to meet the demand of the people who want to continue their education. Thus, the gap developed at the elementary and/or secondary level continues to widen as the level of education becomes higher. The lack of opportunities for social advancement often makes females identify solely with family life. Influenced by social norms and values, they devote themselves to the welfare of family members. Many, even those with college degrees, continue the traditional role of a faithful wife and virtuous mother at the expense of her own social identity.

Second, the salary system does not encourage pursuit of further education. This is a critical emerging issue in the current system. A college graduate earns much less than a barber. A university professor earns less than a taxi driver does. The competition for college enrollment is traumatic for many youngsters. After such an arduous journey, many cannot justify the economic return. Although the admission to college is generally free of gender bias, the culmination is usually tougher for girls than for boys. The classroom practices that shortchanged girls and the traditional stereotyped biases against girls can be seen everywhere from the family to the entire society, especially in rural areas. The "snow-plus frost" phenomenon is the side effect of prosperity in privately owned small businesses where the concept of "money worship" attracts girls more than the competing test scores on the National College Entrance Examination. The operation of the small privately owned businesses does not require a high level of academic learning, nor a college degree. Although the employees tend to work more than eight hours a day, the salary is more than that of a professional with a college degree. The desire for more money influences many adolescents, including females, not to pursue further education even though intellectual potential may be present.

In spite of the stipulation and implementation of the Law of the Compulsory Education in 1986, attendance of females in secondary school lags in comparison with male students as shown in Table six, according

to a survey conducted in the city of Jinhai on the impact of the economic reform upon female adolescents (Tan, 1993).

Among the dropouts, 55% of male students claimed a medical problem compared to 75.5% of females. Dropout for business reasons is a sensitive topic and an unacceptable excuse. So a medical problem was used by many dropouts as a legitimate excuse (Tan, 1993). Lack of education causes many people, including females, to view the material aspect a priority in life regardless of exploited social status. Many do not realize that economic strength does not necessarily bring empowerment to their lives (Spencer, 1993).

Table 6. Attendance of 13 - 18 year old students at Jinhai Secondary School

Year	Male (%)	Female (%)
1980	77	48
1990	93.7	80.7

Based on Tan (1993).

### *Conclusion*

The problems facing Chinese female education have received attention from the central government as well as from domestic and international educators. The economic theory ("Closing the gap," 1995) that suggests an educated human capital, including both male and female, may spur a country's growth has been accepted by the central government. A "Hope Project" has been instituted nation wide to promote equality in China's education. The purpose of the project is to build more elementary schools in the impoverished areas. Donations are encouraged. At the end of the third quarter of 1995, the donations had helped build more than 1,000 schools. One million school-age children are being assisted through this project ("Donations reached," 1995). The most encouraging hope for the accelerated improvement of female education in the poverty-stricken areas is the commitment and dedication of an increasing number of officials and educators including the United Nation's Education and Science Council Organization as well as concerns at all other levels (Zang, 1994).

The "one child per family" policy offers girls more opportunities to receive quality education. The reduced number of children in a family with no choice of gender enables parents to provide the best for the only child, including a girl. In this sense, girls, mainly those in big cities and

economically developed areas can receive full attention from their parents and benefit in developing their full potential.

Teacher education in China should infuse the element of gender equity in the curriculum. Many dedicated teachers in the impoverished areas could be used as examples for preservice teachers. It is through the formal education process, teachers being a key element, that young people will come to recognize the social oppression of women and to encourage all, men and women, to work toward gender equity.

In summary, there is a disparity in the education of females and males, in elementary levels through college and university levels in China. The differences in the education of girls and boys are evident, especially in the remote rural areas of the vast country. Disproportionate rates of illiteracy and uneven levels of education between males and females restrict females from working in partnership with men at all levels and structures of society. It will be a long term task to get rid of the confinement of the stereotyped tradition upon females and foster positive social identity of females. Its accomplishment entails a joint effort by women and men. The local economic deprivation is a deeply rooted cause for gender disparity in education. Investment is essential to lift the economic barriers to female education, and to trigger economic development for certain poor areas. From the synergistic interaction between the improvement of female education and the development of the Chinese economy comes a brighter future for China.

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