Literature Review on China's gender equality

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HS4008 Literature Review

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Introduction

In an effort to curb an over exploding population, China implemented the one child policy in 1979. While it succeeded in negating the over population growth issues, it has led to a multitude of far reaching social and economic impacts on its citizens as a whole. There are a number of implications of the one child policy on the negotiation of gender roles in the family that I will be looking at in the main body of the literature review. In a largely patriarchal state, women are taking up roles in the family normally reserved for men in contemporary China. While various literatures have talked about the empowerment of women and gender equality, there is a surprising lack of literature that discusses the acceptance of women adopting these roles by the older generation given that this is a relatively recent phenomenon. Furthermore the concept of gender equality is called into question here. While women are adopting men roles, the same cannot be said of men adopting female roles.

Body

I will first analyze the social institutions behind the reasons for China as a patriarchal state. Fairbanks(1994) traces the history of China from its roots to contemporary times after contact with the western world. He points to the family as the single most important unit in Chinese society. Such units were ideally large with the patriarchal father as the center of authority. Within the household, women were subjected to the authority of the patriarchal head with no decision making power of their own. He notes that this tradition would change greatly with China’s modern revolution. Whyte(2005) agrees with the points made above in his paper. He elaborates on three social change mechanisms that promote family change namely economic force, cultural diffusion and state social engineering. Due to a combination of these three factors,
Whyte’s case study in Baoding shows that daughters are playing an increasingly central roles in the provision of financial and physical support for the elderly. The same cannot be said for Taiwan.

Hamilton (1990) argued and quotes from several authors that the concept of filial piety is not exclusive to China. It existed in European states as well. He quotes Weber’s argument in that it is merely China who had carried out the concept of filial piety to a higher and purer degree. He further quotes Jamieson in that Chinese filial piety and western patria poestas are simply different point of views with the former being obedience and the latter being power. Unlike western states where patriarchal power decreased as state power increased, patriarchal power in China increased as state power increased. He concludes that that is because while western patriarchy rests upon personal authority of the father and his link to a higher power, eastern patriarchal power is highly dependent upon the identification of necessary family roles and each member’s obedience to the specified role. He further notes that filial piety is not limited to a child’s duty to his parents but also a generalized term to all individuals in relation to any role that they might legitimacy occupy.

Xiao (2001) confirms with these points on obedience. Conformity appeals more to Chinese of older generation but in contrast, autonomy appeals more to Chinese of the younger generation. In general it was found that more educated personnel would prefer autonomy values in their children. She mentions that the single child policy adopted by the government in the 1970s could lead to the preference in autonomy values by younger Chinese. As previous generations of families were larger previously, parents may have preferred strong conformity values to maintain obedience in children. In smaller families there is a lesser need for conformity values as parents can devote more time and effort to the nurturing of each child. Furthermore as
China was a socialist state, it was suggested that social mobility in China was due to a combination of education and political obedience to the state. Her methodology revolved around the use of data and statistics to compute these irrefutable statistics. Her statistics show that gender and parental status have no direct impact on the preferred values. In the paper’s conclusion, the author mentions that the differences in preferred values between the older and younger generation may be due to social and cultural changes in China over the past few decades. While Confucianism still plays a role in contemporary china in shaping value and behavior patterns, it now takes a lesser role as most aspects of its teaching were denounced during the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, the economic reforms had promoted activities that promoted capitalism and individualism.

Fong (2002) builds upon these points by analyzing the effects of the one child policy and how it empowers urban daughters. Girls born after the implementation of the one child policy have more power to challenge gender norms due the decline of patriarchy and the absence of brothers for the parents to favor. A high correlation was documented between low fertility and women’s empowerment which agrees with Whyte’s points discussed above. Due to the one child policy, women were empowered. But in contrast to Taiwan where no such policy exists, sons are still more favored then daughters. As daughters in China are the sole recipient of their parent’s investments, they have the freedom to pursue higher paying jobs which at the same time contributes to low fertility rate. This has enabled urban daughters to receive parental investment and endorse the values of filial piety an ideal which has been valued by both genders but usually only attainable by males. The readings of Fairbanks and Hamilton have shown that filial piety is a value pursed by everyone but usually women are not able to attain it due to the traditional Confucianism values of China. Thus it can be argued that the one child policy is actually
beneficial to China in promoting filial piety as state social engineering mentioned by Whyte. When women have only one child, they actually had the time and resources to pursue their careers and financially support their families as opposed to previous generations of mothers who were unable to do so despite given the opportunities due to the need to care for multiple children. However Fong’s studies are limited in that it does not encompass urban daughters from all socioeconomic spectrums but hover around the middle class spectrum. It also does not include rural daughters where a defacto two child policy is practiced especially as she notes an interview given by a grandmother talking about how frequent childbearing led to health issues caused her to eventually quit her job. Hence there was no contrast between daughters with one or two children and whether it had a lasting impact on their careers. If Fong was to make a truly unbiased argument, she would need to expand her study field to urban daughters from all scopes of socioeconomic class.

Another issue that Fong raised is the lack of gender norms despite the increase in opportunities given to women. This is due to glass ceilings face by women due to their extra domestic responsibilities and the preference of men in certain elite professions. While feminists seek gender equality, there are families too who do not wish to eradicate gender norms entirely as in the case of parents with academically unsuccessful daughters who can make use of marriage as a means to upward social mobility. Parents with daughters also face a monetary advantage as they can invest all their resources into daughters because they do not need to invest in a house when their daughter comes of marrying age. Fong ends off by saying that there is a greater shift towards equality at least in the domestic sphere. While women are still expected to take a greater role in housework, there has been an increasing number of males who are willing
to split the housework and in some cases even do more than the women especially when the women is earning more for income as in the case of one example highlighted in the paper.

Fang (2005) critiques the one child policy stating that other factors may have contributed more to the decline in fertility rate. Various policies have removed the economic security that once encouraged higher childbirth via dissolution of collective farming and employment benefits. Higher income, new opportunities and the need to invest more in children’s education also led more people to direct their energy away from marriage and child raising. One consequence of the one child policy is an ageing population which puts more strain on the younger generation who has to support their parents. This suggests that rather than empowerment faced by urban females in Fong’s article, women are still trapped in a new gendered role in the domestic sphere. While the grandmother in Fong’s article had to take care of multiple children, the females resulting from the one child policy are trapped in a reverse situation of having to care for two sets of parents especially if their spouse earns more income and one is required to remain in the domestic sphere at all times. Even if urban women are still empowered as in Fong’s reading, Fong neglects the ‘missing’ women who are not recorded in official censure indicating that these women have no government rights and hence are not empowered. The sex ratio imbalance has also caused a resurgence of male marriage as an indicator of social privilege. Therefore women are once again delegated as a means to ends of social upward mobility. Fang posits that the conditions are now ideal for the phasing out a one child policy, but in doing so it is highly possible that it may regress strides made in gender equality over the past decades as seen in Fong’s reading where women were empowered due to the lack of brothers. Fang notes that every policy that the government has made has been fraught with negative consequences even if these issues were unintentional.
One last consideration in this literature review essay is Cheng and Selden (1994) paper on the origins and social consequences of China’s Hukou system. Due to the Hukou system whereby everyone is registered and classified, it was easy to implement the one child policy. With the removal of employment benefits, people were forced to work harder and this places a financial burden on them and their family. The paper itself was only useful for understanding the historical context of China’s hukou system and how the one child policy could have been implemented so successfully. While Fang did note in her paper later on that the system would collapse eventually as people hid their child births, it is not central to Cheng and Selden paper due to contextual timeframe of the writing. Dittmer and Lu (1996) reading builds upon Cheng and Selden paper in that danwei came after hukou chronologically. Due to economic reforms, the functions of danwei are changing over time with a greater emphasis on economic sustainability. This hints that danwei is now based on a stronger leaning to results rather than connections. Therefore gender is not important in danwei. A woman who is better qualified than a male would excel more in the danwei system. The growing phenomenon of qundai guanxi also has some form of gender equality and security. Incoming personnel usually expects their work unit to give job assignments for their spouses and the official sanction of dingti would ensure that any offspring would always be secured with a job due to the nature of one child policy. This corresponds nicely with the conclusion of Fang’s paper in which she analyses the dissolution of a one child policy. Women could still be assured of a job in the workplace due to policies in place. CAI’s (2006) reading however is a contradiction against the need to dissolve the one child policy. The main aim of the reforms was to cut down companies’ sizes and make them more cost efficient. Even in a state where the one child policy was put into place, workers are rioting due to
lack of jobs and security. It could be argued that the removal of the one child policy would only further worsen this issue.

**Conclusion**

The literature review I have done over the past few paragraphs have shown that even though China has been subjected to outside economic force, cultural diffusion and state social engineering, on the whole it has retained its traditional and cultural roots at its core. Even in contemporary china where due to the one child policy, women have greater autonomy to pursue a career and care for their parents, it can be explained through the traditional lens of Confucianism and filial piety. With various policies in place apart from the one child policy, it remains to be seen whether women can still thrive in a gender equal environment even if the one child policy was dissolved.

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References


