Socialist Market Economy in China: A Movement Towards Liberation or Limitation for Women?

Jianing Ho, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
Socialist Market Economy in China: A Movement Towards Liberation or Limitation for Women?

A Literature Review Essay

Ho Jianing
U1030132B
INTRODUCTION

With 22 provinces, 4 direct-controlled municipalities and 2 primarily self-governing special administrative regions (namely Macau and Hong Kong), totaling to a population of approximately 1.367 billion people, according to the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations, China is no easy country to study. From the urban society to the rural society, there also includes internal migrants who wish to migrate, mostly from rural settlements to the urban cities. With such a large and quickly growing population, China has taken measures to slow its population growth rate.

One of the most controversial policies in China is the one-child policy. In a bid to slow its population growth, the one-child policy was established in 1979, despite strong protests by the citizens. According to population data from the United Nations, the total population at 1979 was approximately 975.6 million, which is almost a 90% increase in population since 1950, a mere 30 years ago. After the implementation of the policy, population at 2010 stood at 1.367 billion. This shows that despite the people’s protests, the policy has definitely been successful in slowly population growth within the same 30 years where population boomed to twice its size.

It is a very effective policy from a macro perspective – China was able to attain its goal of reducing population growth, but with it has come with a lot of repercussions. China is now experiencing a “female deficit” (Attane, 2006), due to parents’ wishes for their only child to be a son. In a strongly patriarchal society like China that still prefers sons to daughters, parents have used all sorts of “gender-choosing methods” to ensure that their only child is a son, be it through child abandonment, abortion, or through bribery to government officials to
allow them to have a second child, and more (Attane, 2006). With a decrease in the female population, marriage also decreases and subsequent childbirths also decrease, leading also to a slower rate of male population growth (Attane, 2006).

In this literature review paper, I aim to study the roles of women under various socioeconomic circumstances, and how it affects the educational and employment opportunities presented to these women that could assist in their upward mobility. There are two main points that I will be studying: firstly how gender roles within the family reiterate a patriarchal society, and secondly, how women’s socioeconomic statuses play a role in defining their futures.

GENDER ROLES WITHIN THE FAMILY

According to Hamilton (1990), patriarchy has been a dominant framework in Chinese society, where in comparison to Western society, where patriarchy gradually diminished over time, Chinese society “embraced patriarchalism as the organizing principle of society” more than ever, as compared to the past. Hamilton argues that “domination was legitimized in terms of a theory of rules”, where collective entity in Chinese culture creates a subordinate and obedient society, using the notion of Hsiao, which means filial piety in Chinese. Regardless of gender, the notion of Hsiao and being subordinate towards your father, and in greater society being subordinate to the government, the larger father, is at the centre of society. In a society where sons are preferred to daughters (Attane, 2006), is it still possible for Chinese daughters to be on level ground as their male counterparts and achieve greater gender equity?
In terms of gender roles in the family, the one-child policy and the subsequent change in population demographics has led to a phenomena where men and women’s roles are always changing, although men still continue to play a more dominant role in society. Women have begun to take on a greater role within the family, going out to work and helping to contribute to the household income. Following traditional Confucian values, women’s virtues lie in being obedient and lacking talent\(^1\) (Chia, Allred and Jerzak, 1997). Based on these values, the work that women are assigned to is usually service-oriented, as “nurses, maids, and cooks” (Chia et. al, 1997). These were the gender norms expected of women then, and although it may now be of decreasing significance for more women in urban areas, these values still hold true for the large traditional populations in the rural areas. Hence, the types of opportunities and jobs that women are exposed to differ depending on the open-mindedness of their families, employers, as well as the areas in which they live in.

Fong (2002) argues that the one-child policy and its subsequent cause for low fertility “can only empower daughters in areas where opportunities for employment and education area available to women”, and that for women in rural areas, “compulsory low fertility tends to frustrate more than it empowers them”. Considering the types of jobs that are available in the rural (factory and agricultural work) and urban areas (office work, service sector work) we can see that there is little chance of upward mobility for women living in rural areas compared to their female counterparts living in urban areas, who have more resources to equip themselves with skills and knowledge to allow for easier upward mobility. As we will discuss further in the next point, women of urban hukou statuses have access to much more public goods than women of rural hukou statuses (Bian, 2002). According to Fong, she

\(^1\)“The virtue of a woman lies in three obediences: obedience to the father, husband and son”; “The virtue of a woman lies in the lack of talent”; “Only women and petty men are hard to deal with”.
argues that gender norms of women could work either in favour of or against them, depending on how they use their norms – by doing away with norms that may make them appear less desirable than their male counterparts (e.g. being physically weak, less intelligent etc.) while, at the same time, keeping their feminine characteristics which make them more desirable for jobs in light industries and service sectors (e.g. submissive, gentle etc.). However, this is not the case for all women, and Fong argues that this ‘formula’ works well for “young and academically unsuccessful women”, unlike their elite, older counterparts.

Elite women who have more chance at attaining office jobs and managerial positions get this chance jeopardized once again because of their gender – as per Confucian values mentioned above, women are seen to have a “second shift” of housework which makes them less efficient than their male counterparts, hence restricting them from access to more prestigious, managerial roles, despite having the same skill level as their male counterparts (Fong, 2002). They are thus restricted to a certain level of work, while their male counterparts go ahead and get promoted, once again having a lead and dominating over them.

Gender roles are quickly changing in China, where females increasingly have to take on certain more ‘masculine’ roles and vice versa, where males sometimes have to take on more ‘feminine’ roles as well, but for the older generation, which believes more strongly in a patriarchal, masochistic system where women should remain submissive to men, it seems that there will always be a employment ceiling where women cannot break through, that is much easier for men to obtain and surpass even with the same skill sets and quality.
SOCIOECONOMIC STATUSES & EXPECTED BEHAVIOURS OF WOMEN

Social stratification and socioeconomic status plays an important role in deciding women’s fates. Gender aside, the *hukou* system, a sort of internal passport that ties people to their places of birth, easily creates a social class system where it is clear people of a certain *hukou* status are more well-to-do compared to those from others (Bian, 2002). Generally speaking, citizens from urban areas have a higher *hukou* status compared to those from rural areas. There, a “rural-urban divide in residential status” also led to uneven resources being distributed within the society – rural peasants were completely cut off from most urban privileges, which include “compulsory education, quality schools, health care, public housing, varieties of foodstuff” and “largely lived in poverty” (Bian, 2002).

There were only very few ways in which rural citizens were able to change their *hukou* statuses to cities or towns, through “military mobilization, marriage, or attainment of higher education and subsequent job assignments” (Bian, 2002). Looking at these ways for upward mobility, women were further cut off from certain methods – the easiest way for women to attain upward mobility was through marriage into another family with higher *hukou* status. Peasant women then saw marriage as a strategic alternative to improve their limited social and economic mobility (Fan & Huang, 1998). Rather than attempting to migrate to urban areas, where they would be lacking skills to compete anyway, rural peasant women married into more affluent rural areas that offered higher *hukou* statuses than their own, giving them better socioeconomic standings (Fan & Huang, 1998). Marrying into rural areas with better socioeconomic statuses as *wailainu* gave women more resources and land, and they were more beneficial in that way for their families, as well as to their husband’s family, as ‘cheaper labour’ than women from their own villages and thus of equal *hukou* statuses (Fan
& Huang, 1998). Is this then, a newfound agency for women to free themselves from poverty and gain a better status and lifestyle for themselves? Or is it the only way they can contribute to their family and provide for their parents who can only depend on their daughter, their only child?

Mao’s era played a huge role in freeing women – or could also otherwise be termed as ‘forced employment’, depending on the perspective of the women themselves – for in his Communist ideology “everyone (regardless of gender) had to work side by side in communes, factories, and other workplaces” (Chia et. al, 1997). This increased employment opportunities for women outside of the home and agriculture, decreased the gender gap in terms of household income contributions, and on the whole improved women’s socioeconomic statuses relative to men’s (Bian, 2002). However, Bian (2002) argued that during the reform period in the 1980s, where Chinese society moved towards a socialist market economy, state power began to be eroded and women’s rights also declined. Women were increasingly limited to gender-specific industries, which were mostly in the service sector or in factories, and had even more limited upward mobility as patriarchal notions of male domination kept women suppressed in their positions while their male counterparts moved up the occupational ladder (Bian, 2002).

The socioeconomic status and the role of the father in the family also played an enormous role in determining how much exposure his daughter would get for educational and employment opportunities (Baur, Wang, Riley & Zhao, 1992). In families where the daughter was the only child, she had more opportunities for education, especially if the child’s father had received education himself (Baur et. al, 1992). However, if the family had both a son and a daughter, the daughter had less opportunity and exposure to educational resources and
facilities as compared to her brother, likely because of traditional Confucian values which valued sons over daughters (Chia et. al, 1997).

On family and childrearing values, Xiao (2001) argued that higher-class elites for both urban and rural populations tended to value conformity rather than autonomy, because in China, status advancement was highly dependent on political conformity as well as party membership. Bian (2002) supports this argument, stating that income distribution was highly dependent on “party membership, cadre position and jobs with redistributive power”. Families with political loyalty, that were not likely to question authority and just follow as instructed, were more likely to be favoured by the government and thus preferentially treated (Bian, 2002). Higher-class elites with this knowledge and understanding are thus more inclined to value conformity in their children to prepare them for upward mobility in the future (Xiao, 2001).

On the other hand, parents in the younger generation are more likely to value autonomy in their children, probably due to change and influences of the West, and declining significance of Confucian teachings, especially in the urban population (Xiao, 2001). Large shifts in the economy are likely to occur in the near future, but for the purposes of this research, let us focus on the current status of women.
CONCLUSION

In a vast economy like China’s, it is difficult and almost impossible to conduct research of adequate depth that covers all of China’s differences. From the points that I have mentioned above, I would thus like to narrow my research to focus on women living in urban areas of China, who are either the first generation of migrants from rural areas, or second generation of migrants from rural areas, meaning that their parents were successful in improving their hukou statuses from rural to urban areas. Why I choose such a specific group is because these women and/or their families are more likely to have a more traditional mindset and stronger Confucian beliefs, and are more likely to subscribe to traditional notions of the Confucian’s values of women’s “three obediences”.

It is also important to note, that as we discuss the notion of female empowerment and discrimination in further detail, that we need to take into account that work, education and employment may not necessarily be the preferred route for women, but instead be a necessity put in place due to the one-child policy, which has led to a burden on the single child, whether son or daughter, to be able to provide for his or her aged parents. There may be women whom, given the choice, may still choose to be in the home as they believe they perform best there. Who are we, then, to judge if their choice is one because of oppression from others or of individual decision? Is the new socialist market economy in China, then, a movement towards the liberation or limitation of urban Chinese women?
REFERENCES


