A literature review on the empowerment of women in urban China (2015)

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Introduction

The empowerment of women in contemporary China has been widely discussed by scholars within and out of China. As noted by many scholars of contemporary China, drastic changes in the political, cultural and economic spheres has played a significant impact on the changes of the status of women in China (Fong, 2002; Yunxiang, 2006; Wang, 2005) although specificity of recent research done on different groups of the female population seem to suggest that the impact of the changes are often uneven and differs across the different groups of female population in Contemporary China due to different factors. I would further elaborate on these different factors in the later part of this essay. In general, research on gender inequality can generally be categorised into two categories, rural and urban (Deutsch, 2006). The different structural conditions, or the base, as Marx would call it, of the rural and urban females seem to have resulted in different forms of the empowerment of women in the different areas. Due to the space constraint in this essay, I would be focusing my literature review on the empowerment of women in urban China.

As seen above, structural conditions can play a significant role in the empowerment of women. In earlier studies on gender inequality in contemporary China, Stockman (1994) lamented that there was a lack of sociological attention given to the structural conditions and transformations and how it might have resulted in patterns in gender inequality. Although differing in views on whether the changing social structure results in the decline or continuation of gender inequality, structural conditions and its changes seem to have taken the centre stage in more recent studies on the position of women in modern China (Liu, 2011; Liu, 2007; Fong, 2002). For instance, Fong (2002), focusing on the one-child policy, argued that the policy’s impact on urban daughters has been largely beneficial as it gave urban daughters more opportunities in life. Liu (2011) and Liu (2007) on the other hand, argued that there is still gender inequality as the burden of the reforms are shouldered by the females in
varying degrees across different age groups with older females bearing most of the brunt. These varying views show that it is essential to review the current literature on the position of women in contemporary urban China to obtain a more holistic perspective on the research that has been done.

In essence, the purpose of this essay is to attempt to conceptualise the current literature and identify the gaps in the current research with a focus on the empowerment of women in urban China. I will do this by providing a brief overview of how the empowerment of women is framed in contemporary research, then tease out the underlying facets and assumptions for discussion.

**Overview on proponents of the empowerment of women in urban China**

In this section, I would be conceptualising how the empowerment of women born after the one-child policy would manifest itself within one’s life span in urban China. For the purposes of this review, I would be focusing on the women born after the one-child policy as that period of time also marks a crucial time in the Chinese history where major changes in the society also took place (Wang, 2005).

There are various methods in which scholars used to analyse if women in urban China has been empowered and this can be seen different approaches of scholars who discuss the empowerment of women in different stages of their lives. Born under the one-child policy, the status of daughters have been elevated through the removal of the structural prerequisite for gender discrimination (Tsui and Rich, 2002). This allowed for the increase in investment of education on daughters (Fong, 2002; Tsui and Rich, 2002), which enabled the women to find better employment in the future, increasing their chances of social upward mobility. As the girls grow older, they are empowered by the agency they are able to exercise when it comes to marriage and choosing their life partners (Fan and Huang, 1998; Yunxiang, 2011;
Fong, 2002). According to Shen (2011) and Fong (2002), this empowerment continues even after their marriage until they become older, as seen in the roles they play within the family, doing less of the domestic chores either through a more egalitarian distribution of housework amongst the married couple or having these chores done by someone else. Fong (2002) argues that a more egalitarian distribution of the housework can be attributed to the increased ability of women to take on paid work and play a part in supporting the family due to lower fertility rates and other changes in the structural conditions of women. On the other hand, Shen (2011) posits that this empowerment of women within the household was possible only at the disempowerment of older females in the family as they take on the household chores and caregiving responsibilities within the family, leaving the younger women free to take up paid work. The women will only start to experience a loss in power within the family as they grow older and their status within the family change (Shen, 2011).

**Empowerment of women in rural vs urban China**

It is important to note that the empowerment for the female population is not just exclusive to females in urban China. There has also been literature on the empowerment of rural women in contemporary research (Fan and Huang, 1998; Yunxiang, 2011) and I have included them here to draw a comparisons between similarly forms of empowerment between females in rural China and those in urban China and explain the need to distinguish them.

Although the manner in which the manifestation of the empowerment of women in the rural and urban china may be similar especially in terms of the increase in agency when it comes to decisions surrounding marriage and mate-choice, the mechanism through which the empowerment was attained can be varied due to the differences in the structural conditions (Fan and Huang, 1998; Yunxiang, 2011; Fong, 2002). For instance, although girls in rural China have also been said to be empowered due to greater freedom they have been granted in
terms of mate-choice and marriage negotiation (Yunxiang, 2011), their road to empowerment was vastly different from that of the urban females as it started with the land reforms in the rural areas that started from the 1950s, which gave them greater sense of individuality and self-importance and subsequently, the opening up of opportunities for internal migration from rural to urban China in the 1980s, which led to a decline in parental authority and allowed the girls a more active participation in decision-making in the lives of these young rural women. Unlike the urban females, who are empowered due to the one-child policy as they would be granted more resources and opportunity due to the lack of competition with siblings (Tsiu and Rich, 2005), females in rural China were not as affected by the policy after amendments were made in the 1980s due to resistance from the rural population. Rural families with a first born daughter would now be entitled to have a second child (Wang, 2005). This meant that daughters in the rural areas may not enjoy the benefits of being the only child and discrimination may still take place within the family with regards to resource allocation.

Taking in the vast differences in the structural conditions of women in urban and rural China and how it would affect the road to empowerment of women in the different areas, it is important to distinguish the differences between the two and conceptualise the structural conditions young women of urban China have to live within. So far, this essay has discussed how the empowerment of urban Chinese females have been affected by the policy changes and changes in the family structure. The following segment will focus on the other group of structural changes which scholars have used to argue results in the continuation of gender inequality instead of the empowerment of women in urban China.

**Empowerment of urban Chinese females, or not really?**

As much as there are scholar who viewed the changes in structural conditions of urban Chinese females as contributing factors to their empowerment, there are also scholars
who have opposed this view with their own. Stockman (1994), in earlier works on gender inequality in urban China, argued that urban China was closer to achieving gender equality when the danwei took on “responsibility for many functions which in capitalist societies would be left to private affairs of the family”. The more recent economic reform seem to have taken a step backwards in terms of gender equality as the females now have to resume their responsibilities in the domestic sphere as the kind of welfare for the members of the danwei shrinks (Stockman, 1994). Liu (2007) also held similar views when he posited that the older women who lost their chance at obtaining education during the cultural revolution were the most disadvantaged when structural adjustment policies such as the economic reform usually cut back on social services which in turn increased the burden for these women. Compounded with their lack of education, these women faced double the burden of finding a job after being laid-off due to the “redundancy” of their labour and having to take on more responsibilities at home (Liu 2007). Liu (2011) also found that women shouldered more of the burden of economic reform in urban areas in the forms of unequal pay in the earlier periods of reform and then in the form of unequal employment probability in the later period.

The reasons for the non-empowerment of women, as these scholars suggest, seem to stem from an initial gender bias in the danwei before the economic sphere (Stockman, 1994) and again during the economic reform when they are unable to hold on to the higher level jobs that would empower them nor shrink away from the traditional gender roles of caregiving at home due to the retraction of many welfare services that the danwei used to provide before the economic reform. Fong (2002) attempts to challenge this view as she contended that although females in contemporary China still experience a “glass ceiling perpetuated by the symbolic structures of male domination”, they are still able to make best use of the glass floor to their own benefits, and that is a form of empowerment in itself. The
glass floor, in this case, is mostly made out of jobs in the service industry that the women can fall back on due to the gendered expectations of those jobs (Liu, 2007).

In summary, literature surrounding the empowerment of women tend to focus on certain indicators such as increase in educational levels, role within the family and marriage to illustrate the empowerment of women while literature arguing for the continuation of gender inequality tend to pull their empirical evidence from the economic sphere. This suggests that the empowerment of women in urban China is not an even one that may not necessarily spread evenly in the different spheres in society.

Intersectionality of the empowerment of women

As examined in the earlier parts of this essay, there are different aspects of structural conditions that can influence the empowerment of women differently. As Crenshaw (1989), one of the pioneer scholars on the intersectionality noted, inequality cannot be examined independently separated from other factors such as age, race and social class. Therefore, there is a need to acknowledge that the empowerment of women should not be solely seen from the lens of gender. In this section, I would attempt to use the current research on the empowerment of women and unlock the underlying assumptions by bringing to light the intersectionality of the research papers, especially those that are more applicable to the urban Chinese society.

When discussing about the empowerment of women in their research papers, a significant number of the scholars (Shen, 2011; Fong, 2002; Stockman, 1994) brought up the issue of age and how it affects the empowerment of women. Age can illustrate the uneven empowerment of women through time in two ways. Firstly, as Shen (2011), Fong (2002) and Yunxiang (2011) posits, the empowerment of women is, to a significant extent, attributed to their youth. The social changes in China in the recent years have resulted in changes in the
power relationship where power is transferred to the younger generation and the empowerment of women as also be seen as an inversion of intergenerational inequality, where “entering old age only means loss of rights, whether in the household, or in society” (Shen, 2011) Also, the differences in the empowerment of women across age can also be an indicator how social change has affected the different cohorts of the female population differently. This difference can be seen in the longitudinal study on the position of girls in rural China, where more recent field work revealed the increasing autonomy girls had over their lives (Yunxiang, 2011) as well as cross-sectional studies done by Shen (2011) and Fong (2002), when they interviewed women across different generations who have lived through the different eras of social change.

One significant factor that has played a huge part in the studies of intersectionality of gender not been widely studied in Chinese studies, that is the relationship between gender inequality and race. None of the research materials that I found mentioned much about the role ethnicity plays in the empowerment of women in urban China. However, that being said, ethnicity and inequality has been studied in urban China (Tiezhi, 2007; Myers et al, 2013), just not in the context of gender. This is interesting because of the implementation of affirmative discrimination in some Chinese policies, especially in terms of education and natal policies (Tiezhi, 2007)

Other factors that are usually discussed in the intersectionality of gender such as social class is also hardly seen in the more recent literature, and it is usually in the form of consumption patterns amongst the younger Chinese generation (Ngai, 2003; Li, 2012), not through the lens of gender.
In summary, in the theme of intersectionality, recent works by the scholars seen to suggest that age is one of the most important and significant factors that influences the empowerment of women.

**Conclusion**

In this essay, I attempted to find the gaps in the research of women in urban China by covering the different ways their empowerment can manifest itself in their lifetime. My review showed that there has been extensive literature of the empowerment of young women during a certain period of their lives, in particular, the period when they reached the age of choosing their life partners and marriage (Fan and Huang, 1998; Fong, 2002; Yunxiang, 2011). The review also showed some research on the decline of power for the older women (Shen, 2011). However, this essay also revealed some of the gaps within this field of research, in particular, the empowerment of women after marriage, when they have passed the stage in their life when marriage and the choice of the life partner would play a significant part of their pursuit for social upward mobility. Although Shen (2011) and Fong (2002) did have some findings on the different ways urban Chinese females cope with the pressures from the public and domestic sphere, their findings only skimmed through the different ways these females cope because they focused on other factors. Therefore, I feel that more can be done to find out about how women can be empowered or not, after marriage.

In addition, as the section above on intersectionality showed, there is a divergence in way intersectionality is framed and discussed in China as compared to studies in American or Europe. This can also be a potential area of study as the perpetual social changes that happen in China can shine more spotlight on these areas in time to come, just like the increase in attention on structural conditions in China after the 1990s.
References


