How gender relations in imperial/traditional China led to higher social mobility for females in contemporary China

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HS4008 LITERATURE REVIEW

HOW GENDER RELATIONS IN IMPERIAL/TRADITIONAL CHINA LED TO HIGHER SOCIAL MOBILITY FOR FEMALES IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

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Introduction

In this literature review, the main area of focus will be on gender relations in imperial/traditional China, and how these gender relations led to women having more social mobility than men, which is a reversal of their gender roles mere decades ago.

I have included a literature review on Fong’s paper published in 2002 on how urban women are empowered due to past government policies. However, the focus of my research will be broader and less specific. Throughout the following literature reviews, I shall attempt to trace gender inequality from imperial China, followed by how this inequality led to decision making and reactions to the China Communist’s Party (CCPs) policies, and finally, how those policies have inevitably cemented women’s ability to improve their socioeconomic status.

Gender relations in imperial/traditional china

When looking at imperial China, it is clear why sons are preferred over daughters most of the time, and also why large families are the norm. “China’s economic life has been labor-intensive, that is, strongly dependent upon human muscle-power.” (Fairbank, 1994) Hence, sons were more useful to families in the sense that they could work the fields more efficiently and for longer periods of time. Because of this, people in China treated sons as an investment, due to sons being able to take care of his elderly parents in their old age, instead of daughters, as China’s society saw daughters as having to marry out and will not carry the responsibility of supporting her own parents in their old age.

Attane agrees with this sentiment, and in her article written in 2006, she wrote, “In China, where son preference is the product of a patriarchal Confucian system that subordinates women to men, girls and women still occupy a marginal place in society, while sons bring
many advantages”. (Attane, 2006) Fairbanks also touched upon the Attane’s point. He shows how the ‘family’ was seen as the most significant unit in Chinese society and talks about the patriarchal system in China, in which land is passed down to only male descendants.

“Women traditionally obeyed their fathers in youth, their husbands in middle life, and their sons in old age.” (Fairbank, 1994) Hamilton agrees with Fairbank’s statement, that “Patriarchy, patromonialism, and filial piety are indispensable concepts in the analysis of imperial China, because they refer to important features of Chinese society.” (Hamilton, 1990) All these allows us to reach a conclusion, which is that females are seen as the weaker sex, and have virtually no say in what they can do with their own lives, and are expected to listen to the head of the household, who is a male.

When the Communist Party of China (CPC) took over the government in 1949, after defeating the Kuomintang in a 10 year civil war, they tried to introduce social change, and also tried to improve the social standings of females. However, in Stockman’s book, he noted that “Hooper herself originally shared a tendency to assume that the Communist regime had made enormous changes to gender relations, but after living in China for a while it became clear to her that she had ‘seriously overestimated the extent of change and seriously underestimated the continuities from the past”’ (Stockman, 2000). This meant that even as the CPC tried to make social changes, deeply rooted traditions and mind-sets were still highly prevalent.

**Consequences of gender inequality**

This attitude towards gender relations started in imperial China and lasted past the Qing dynasty. Girls were not given equal education opportunities as their male counterparts and parents preferred male off springs. When the one-child policy was mandated in 1979, there
was a rise in female infanticide as parents wanted sons instead of daughters. This caused an unbalance in the sex ratio throughout China.

Based on statistics from Index Mundi, at all ages of China’s population from birth to 64 years of age, there is more than 1.03 male(s) for every female. The number drops to 0.92 male(s) for every female in the 65 years and over category. This can be explained by the fact that females have higher life expectancy than males. By the 2013 estimate, in the total population of China, there are 1.06 male(s) per female. This may seem like a small number but when extrapolated to China’s population of more than 1.3 billion people, the numbers are worrying. There will be males who are unable to get married due to lack of females in China. “China’s population will therefore have to find ways of adjusting to the shortage of marriageable females, which will be a defining feature of the next two decades.” (Attane, 2006)

Wang’s article in 2005 agrees with Attane on the problem China faces with the one-child policy. “With the adoption of the one-child policy, an imbalance in the sex ratio at birth began a rise that has become increasingly lopsided over the past two decades… reported a sex ratio at birth of 119.2 boys to every 100 girls in 2000, suggesting over 10 percent excess male births in the population.” (Wang, 2005)

Many females in China are also illiterate, due to families preferring to educate sons instead of daughters. In the 2010 estimate from Index Mundi, China has the 2nd highest number of illiterate adults, behind only India. In China, 88.6% of males and 79.7% of females are literate, meaning that 8.9% more males than females are literate.

Rural-urban migration and economic equality

Post-1949, the CCP came up with many policies to try to increase economic growth. Some of the policies had negative effects instead of improving the economy. “In the 1960s and 1970s
a strict system of household registration and food rationing tied peasants to their villages and urban residents to their neighborhoods (Parish & Whyte 1978, Whyte & Parish 1984).

This system effectively restricted migration to cities and allowed the authorities to enforce the relocation of 16 million youths to rural areas.” (Walder, 1989). This resulted in peasants being unable to strive for better living through migration and limits their social mobility. Studies showed that “while income equality within cities and villages was quite pronounced, differences between rural regions and between city and countryside grew markedly, rather than shrinking”. (Walder, 1989) Coupled with the hukou system, it made it extremely difficult for rural citizens to move to the cities. Males had next to no chance to change their hukou statuses unless they join the military or obtain higher education. Females, on the other hand, have the chance to change their hukou status through marriage.

**Females and social mobility**

The paper by Fan and Huang focuses on the explanation of the “prevalence of female marriage migration and the relatively new phenomenon of long-distance marriage migration.” The paper argues that “marriage if a strategy by which peasant women in disadvantaged positions move to more desirable locations where they may achieve social and economic mobility.” (Fan and Huang, 1998)

The Hukou system defines an individual’s socioeconomic status in China. The paper talks about how it is “extremely difficult to change one’s hukou classification or location, especially from agricultural to non-agricultural hukou (classification), or from a rural hukou to one in an urban area (location)”. Even so, “changing one’s hukou location… is possible with marriage”. Through marriage, women are able to achieve the same hukou statuses as their husbands and enjoy the benefits. The author explains how and why women treat marriage as a solution to improving socioeconomic statuses. “Peasant women who have
agricultural hukou, have low education, and are unskilled are at a particular disadvantage in non-agricultural work and in the urban labor market. For them, there are very few means to achieve social and economic mobility outside of marriage, which may be the only chance for them to exert some control over their future. Since the daughter “married out” is not expected to have full responsibility for her natal family, she may be motivated to see marriage even if it entails long-distance migration, and especially if it promises to being about significant improvement in economic well-being.” (Fan and Huang, 1998)

According to data in Fan and Huang’s article, higher percentages of males than females migrate for every reason except joining friends/relatives, family, or marriage. This is in line with the fact that it is hard for males to migrate or change their hukou status unless they join the military, which most of them do, in order to leave their rural villages. In the case of females, “peasant women in disadvantaged positions are motivated to interpret marriage as not simply a life event, but as an alternative to their limited social and economic mobility. Without the skills necessary to compete in the urban labor market, they aim at moving to rural areas in well-developed regions and provinces.” (Fan and Huang, 1998) Females do not need to join the military or even achieve better education or have more skillsets. They can use marriage as a stepping stone for a better life. “Though the female migrant may be distant from the natal family and married to a man whose personal attributes may be “less attractive,” in exchange, she obtains a more desirable location and likely improves her economic well-being.” (Fan and Huang, 1998)

Contrary to Wang and Attane’s writings, Fan and Huang brings up the point that “to many peasant women, marrying “into” larger cities is not a viable option since they are considered the least desirable women in the urban marriage market.” (Fan and Huang, 1998) However, due to significantly more men than women because of the one-child policy, famine in late 1950s and early 1960s, more men are unable to find a wife. Wang brings up the fact that “as
brides now grow scarce, male marriage once again becomes an indicator of social privilege” (Wang, 2005), which means that even the least desirable peasant women will be sought after by males of a higher social standings than themselves.

This is undeniably one of the ways that females are more empowered in contemporary China. Even without education or economic capital, traditionally main indicators of social mobility, they are able to improve their economic well-being and social mobility by marrying up. This is only possible due to the lack of females in China’s society now, which can be attributed to the traditional mentality of “sons over daughters” and the implementation of the one-child policy.

There are other ways in which females gain empowerment. Fong wrote about how although “China’s social structure is still characterized by gender inequality, particularly at the upper levels of the academic and socioeconomic hierarchies” (Fong, 2002), singleton daughters receive as much parental support as singleton sons do.

Fong argues that because of the one-child policy, families that only have a single daughter will place their hopes and dreams upon the daughter and as a result, these daughters have equal education opportunities compared to their male counter parts. Fong attributes the “benefits enjoyed by singleton daughters result from the demographic pattern produced by China’s one-child policy”.

Conclusion

Based on the literature present in this field of study, there is a direct link to be drawn between how attitudes in imperial China inevitably led to increase of social mobility in females, even to the extent that rural females have higher social mobility than their male counter parts due to government policies like the one-child policy that created an unbalanced sex ratio and the
hukou system that limited regional migration. Although urban females are still treated as inferior to urban males at the upper levels of the socioeconomical hierarchies, their social standings have improved since imperial times, where they are subservient to males.

Further studies can be done by tracing a particular region’s history and attitudes towards gender relations and using the data to either prove or disprove this direct linkage. With no empirical studies to support this theory, it is hard to justify that the main contributor to increased female social mobility is the amalgamation of gender relations and government policies decades ago.
Bibliography


Index Mundi, http://www.indexmundi.com/china/demographics_profile.html


