

An Ethnographic Case Study of China and Gender Role Expectations

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Abstract-

The relationship between gender roles and the Confucian influenced patriarchal hegemony in China has been very dynamic. This ethnography incorporates one native Chinese's view on the present society and compares those statements with current research with the goal of exploring the participating factors. The main focus of this paper is to focus on the areas of gender, employment, and employment expectations. Through a series of interviews, this author hopes to present to the reader the salient themes of gender and employment that are currently pervasive throughout this great country. By identifying the factors that may be eliciting this discriminatory attitude, these causes could then be adapted to promote true equality while still maintaining the cultural and societal values.

Introduction-

With a population now over 1.3 billion, China is the world's most populous country as well as the second largest country by land area. With a country so vast in size and population, it is no wonder that its history matches in depth and breadth. The following introduction to this paper will briefly summarize China's modern history, demographics, politics, and culture. Although these brief attempts cannot encompass every facet within each area of focus, the introduced themes and features are designed to better introduce the reader to the necessary background knowledge so that they may have a better grasp of modern China and will have a more in-depth understanding of those factors contributing to the present attitude on employment.

History and politics-

Rather than focus on the long history that contributed to the origins of China, this summary will instead focus on the origins of the modern Republic of China. The Republic of China was established on January 1st, in the year 1912(Wright, D. 2011). As its leader, now considered the father of modern China, Sun Yat-sen briefly ruled China following the 1911 Revolution and Boxer Indemnity. Though ending quickly and followed by years of chaos and division, Sun's brief rule, lasting only 4 years, ended over 250 years of Manchurian imperialism. Despite this, Sun's dream of

a united republican China was very influential and contributed to later movements such as the May 4th movement of 1919. Furthermore, these events particularly greatly influenced the creator of the Republic of China, Mao Zedong. Introducing 'Confucian patriarchal hegemony' (Leung 2003), the Maoist ideology focused on reducing discrimination at all levels. Although counter-cultural at its time of implementation, and according to some, leading to further social-economical discrimination (Meng and Zhang, 2001), this ideology reduced the power of the State concerning wage-setting systems already in place. Though directly and indirectly killing tens of millions of people through his governmental reforms such as the "Great Leap Forward" and the "Cultural Revolution" Mao Zedong is credited with the economic reformation of China. After the Maoist reform, China's next leader, Deng Xianoping, embarked China on the road to Economic Reforms and Openness. These policies began with reforming the centralized government and allowed for foreign investment and developing without strict government restraint. Though this did contribute to considerable growth economically, it also contributed to much disparity of wealth and introduced the institution of the one child policy.

China, like many other patriarchal societies, continues the family name through their sons. Due to many families being limited to only one child, selective birth through legal means or otherwise has become a serious economic problem. According to Wright, currently in China there are approximately 30 million more males than females. This policy has also indirectly contributed to gender discrimination in society by simply adding more males to the total population, further imparting to the overall male domination of the workforce.

Though the controversial one child policy has been relaxed, the population of China is still growing at a considerable rate. In order to compensate for this, many public projects such as the Three Gorges Dam have been carried out to adapt to this growth. Within the past few decades, China has evolved itself to have the 2nd highest GDP, overtaking Japan according to the United Nations department of economic and social affairs (2012). This relatively recent sudden growth in the economy has allowed for much of the newer generations to have considerably more expendable income than previous generations had been able to earn. In turn, this has allowed its citizens to pursue fields otherwise previously impossible or difficult to attain due to limited income.

Demographics-

Despite the massive total area that China maintains, slightly over 90 percent of all Chinese are considered to be from the same ethnicity. These Han Chinese are all considered to be descendants of ancient tribes that lived along the yellow river. All peoples that attend school in China, receive their education in the only official language, that being Mandarin based on the Beijing dialect. This

is considered to be the lingua franca that allows all Chinese to communicate and be understood by others despite the many dialects that can be found throughout the country, many of which are not mutually intelligible. Although many of the Chinese consider themselves of the Han ethnicity for social-economical reasons, there are as many as 56 officially recognized ethnic groups, as well as more that are not officially recognized by the state. (People Republic of China 2010 population census).

The current education system in China provides all students with at least nine years of compulsory education from ages 6-15. As of 2007, 93 percent of the population was reported to be literate. (CIA,2007).

Goals-

Other than to provide the reader with a quite brief background of China, the information provided in this introduction is designed to also promote an understanding of the culture and of the subject that was interviewed. Through this ethnography, each of the areas introduced will be examined more fully in order to show how each of these factors do indeed elicit continuing disparities between males and females and particular focus will be given to the areas of employment and societal expectations. These disparities have been shown to affect all areas of a person's life including verbal discourse and ideology (Pichler and Preece, 2011) as will be later developed from the dialog gathered from the participating interviews.

Interview-

As previously stated, this ethnography will focus on the factors that are presently eliciting disparities toward females in the area of employment and employment expectations. In order to present a more thorough accurate portrayal of the current conditions in China, several interviews were conducted with an individual who recently arrived in America after having been born and raised in China for the first 20 years of her life.

The individual participating in the interviews, for the sake of anonymity, shall be referred to as Xihe. Xihe moved to Michigan with her family a year and half ago. The move was decided by her family due to economic reasons. Although a college graduate, having received a degree in art design and despite having received a job working as a secretary for a local government, Xihe was encouraged by her family to immigrate with them to Michigan. Currently, she is attending university, majoring in

art design and plans on attending graduate school upon receiving her undergraduate degree. Due to her parents and other relatives living there, Xihe does plan on living in America permanently. Having been raised in Southern China in a city somewhat close to Shanghai, Xihe speaks the lingua franca as well as a local dialect

Throughout this ethnography, segments of the various interviews taken will be inserted for reference. The questions were designed to allow for open and free feedback concerning the focused areas of employment and gender without disclosing the selected topic to the interviewee.

Gender roles in China-

The effect of gender roles in society is both deep and wide. Accepted gender roles depend on many various contributors such as culture, language, history, religion, to name a few. For China, this resulted in a male dominated society. China, like most other places, is a patriarchal society naturally placing more importance on its males citizens. This male dominance can be seen in a variety of ways but the areas of language and interaction was the center of a famous study performed in the 1970's by West and Zimmerman. Their "dominance" theory argues that spoken language reflects and perpetuates social gender inequality. This social inequality appears to be perpetuated by not only language but also, by the workplace according to Woodhams, Lupton, and Xian (2009) from their study of gender discrimination. Based on the evidence found in recruitment advertisements, there are three main factors that assist in determining the traditional attitudes in regards to the role of women. Their study was based on various online job advertisements and the contents of each ad and if there was any evident gender distinction or bias.

The first main factor is based on "Confucian patriarchal hegemony" which regards women as lower than men and have little or no place in public society. Confucianism has played a major role in determining the view on Chinese society as a whole. From 500 BC to the establishment of the Republic of China, Confucianism was the official ideology of China. Confucianism eventually gave way to the Three Principles of the People but much of the ideology was taken directly from Confucianism. Women's roles, as based on Confucianism, was to maintain the household, including raising a family. Much of this ideology carried over in present China. This is supported by Cooke (2001) when he states that women are less likely than men to receive an education, especially in rural areas. Due to the emphasis on domestic work rather than that work outside of the house, education is as necessary as it is for men, ultimately affecting the number of women working and the quality of their job.

The second factor is despite the decades of state commitment to equality, the emphasis has been on encouraging women to work, rather than on improving the quality of employment. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China expresses that "women...enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life...The state protects the rights and interests of women, and applies the principle of equal pay for equal work for men and women..." As was pointed out by Cooke, the emphasis is on equal rights and not on ensuring women's employment prospects.

The third factor, according to the study, is that employers do not wish to fully utilize women in the workplace often resulting in a lower view of women's capabilities. These findings seem to be supported again by Cooke when he stated that "There is a long-standing recognition that women hold a subordinate position in employment, arising from deeply entrenched values in Chinese society that have remained influential through the communist era and into the period of market-led reforms." According to Cooke, much of these views again can be dated back to the influence of Confucianism and its heavy impact on society.

During my interviews with Xihe, it became apparent that there were two general but reoccurring themes: 1) The current generation of children are not necessarily expected to fulfill their parents' gender roles and 2) these social inequalities still continue, despite a lack of a more traditional gender role expectations. The next 3 sections will expand on the areas of education, societal expectations, and employment. These factors combined will help identify the general opinion and expectation of women's role in society particularly in the area of the workplace. As shown by the research by Woodhams, Lupton, Xian and Cooke, these factors heavily affect the ways in which society in China views women in general and their view and expected roles in the workplace.

Education-

As previously mentioned, Xihe received a bachelor's degree in art design from a Chinese university. She first started studying art while in high school. According to Xihe, most women nowadays get an undergraduate degree and then start working. When asked what majors men and women choose, her response was, "*that is depends on the person, it doesn't really matter if you a boy or a girl.*" (see Day 2) She did state that more men than women go on to receive graduate degrees, and the ratio is even higher for doctoral degrees. When asked why this is, she responded with, "*People think that women who get a doctorate degree won't have a family because they are so busy working outside of the home, so they don't get married.*" (see Day 1) This thought is not unique to Xihe. Whereas their male counterparts are praised for having received their doctoral degrees allowing them to possess higher positions and making more money for their family (i.e. wife and children), female doctors

are regarded as “spinsters” (Leung, A.S.M., 2003). Although this may very well be a stereotype, the stigma that women who possess a doctoral degree don’t marry seems to pervade most of China as explained by several other mainland Chinese exchange students from vastly different parts of the country. Unfortunately, the answers received from Xihe, didn’t seem to either support or deny the progression of women. When posed with the question, “Were your parents okay with your decision to major in art?” *“They were okay, they said I could do what I like, there were no expectations for me to major in something like math or science”* (see Day 2). Cynics would state the very fact that Xihe is a female would naturally allow for a bit more leeway in terms of an “ideal” major. But she insisted that had she been born a boy, her parents would feel no different. Again suggesting a curve from the long lasting traditional Confucian thought, following toward equality in all “spheres of life”. In their study, Gustafsson, Bjorn, and Shi (2000) surveyed, among other areas, education and employment. The following (see Table 1) is from two surveys, one performed in 1988 involving 9,354 male and 8,533 female workers and the second involving 5,603 male workers and 5,011 female workers.

Table 1

Education	1988		1995	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
4-year college	8.7	3.2	10.3	5.2
2-year college	8.2	4.9	18.1	12.6
Professional school	10.8	11.2	16.2	17.2
Upper-middle-school	24.1	25.4	22.7	26.1
Lower-middle-school	37.1	40.0	28.1	32.3
Primary-school	9.0	11.8	4.3	6.0
Less than primary-school	2.0	3.4	0.3	0.7

According to this study, the percentage of people receiving higher education has increased over the seven years but the total percentage of women has not increased proportionately to that of men. As there are many factors beyond those that have been introduced so far in this ethnography that have contributed to these statistics, nevertheless, the numbers do correspond to the reality that lends itself to gender discrimination.

Expectations-

Since the fall of the Maoist regime, previously taboo topics such as love, divorce, sex became common themes in public media. New concepts of self-fulfillment and family replaced the long standing stern Maoist ideologies. Evans (2010) researched on the expectations of mothers and their

daughters in urban China. They explained that at the end of the Maoist regime, the government issued a number of measures to improve the well-being of females including the protection of girls' rights, a ban on sex selective abortions, and measures to ensure equality in education but the efforts were confronted by much public disinterest in gender quality on a whole. Society at this time showed itself simply not interested in the equality of women. Given this attitude, it is no wonder the number of families that, due to pressures of wanting to have a son, decided to have an abortion based on the sex their one allowed child. Findings by Townly, B. (1994) support these findings. According to Townly, similarly to the Western labor market, the Eastern markets have shown that gender inequalities are deeply attached and embedded with underlying values in the given society and are very resilient to change regardless of the introduction anti-discrimination laws. It appears that this attitude still exists according to the participant, Xihe. When asked about the qualities of a "good woman" in Chinese society, Xihe responded by stating, *"I agree with this, you should be first a wife and mother. If the husband has a good job, the wife should stay home and take care of the children."* (see Day 2) Whether this opinion is shared by the general populace is unknown but as shown by Townly and Evans the traditional opinion is still alive in modern China.

Employment-

All the points introduced until now have been provided to show the current inhibitions causing the progression of gender based discrimination in the workplace. As previously mentioned, before her family immigrated to the United States, Xihe was hired as a secretary for a local government. She described this position as a good job, stating that the pay was above average. When asked about her friends Xihe stated that,

They always go to the big cities to work. They go there and find a job. My best friend (female) works for a big website in China. She talks to the customer (customer sales/phone representative). My other friend (female) is working at a bank (office worker). One of my males friends, he is in Shanghai and he is a photographer. The other friend is working for a small company, he is a ceramic designer. (see Day 3)

Based on these statements, a clear pattern of differentiation appears. While not blatantly discriminatory, the fact that Xihe and her female friends all possess jobs that are secretarial in essence where as her male friends possess jobs that are not, proves to be a correlation. Despite the fact that the Chinese constitution guarantees woman's right to labor market earnings equal to those of men for the same kind of work women, it has been reported that women earn less than men in urban China (Gustafsson, Bjorn, and Shi). Published in 2000, the focus of their study was the size and development of the gender earnings gap in urban China from the 80s to the 90's. In the study, the earning-gap was referred to as "earnings-discrimination" to distinguish from a wider concept of

gender discrimination including different treatment in education and occupational attainment. Some of the results from that study concerning employment have been attached below (see Table 2).

Table 2

Education	1988		1995	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Owner of private firm	1.3	1.3	1.7	1.6
Professional or technician	15.6	15.8	21.2	22.2
Responsible officer or manager	7.5	1.5	5.5	1.5
Ordinary officer or manager	3.0	0.5	10.9	4.1
Office worker	25.5	20.9	18.7	21.7

As shown in the table above, those positions included in the study that are non-managerial namely, office worker, professional/technician or owner seem to have a proportionate percentage between males and females. However, the managerial positions listed seem to have a highly disproportionate ratio between the sexes. This study of job disparity seems supported by the participant, Xihe and the previously stated comments concerning her friends' employment. When presented with this data Xihe agree with the findings stating, *"Honestly, I think men work more management jobs in china than women."* However, followed up this statement with, *"For the women that is married, their lives will depend strongly on men. But women can work harder than men."* (see Day 2) Even within Xihe's family this same disparity seems to present itself. According to her, of her four aunts, 3 of the 4 work in some kind of secretarial or (telephone) customer representative positions, whereas her uncle, the only male relative she reported is a professor at a university. These statements from both the study and Xihe help provide an image of the present juxtaposition that is between the current employment disparity and societal opinion.

Beyond the jobs themselves, Gustafsson, Björn, and Shi Li showed the even when possessing the same job; women consistently make less than men. Although this disparity is addressed in the study by the fact that women "spend two hours longer a day than men it is natural that women therefore devote less efforts on a career, which would show up in their earnings". While it is true that women consistently spend more time doing housework than men, Gustafsson, Björn, and Shi Li go on to state that such time and interruptions in their working career, such as childbirth, are generally limited and therefore the economic disparity should not be as evident as their research shows it to be. When compared to other countries, the average gender earnings gap in urban China appears to be small. According to a study, In 1988, average female earnings were 15.6% lower than for average males. Surprisingly, this earning-gap seemed to increase over time to 17.5% lower than males. According to Gustafsson, Björn, and Shi Li, these differences in the average earning-gap between males and females can be attributed to the regarded value of attributes across genders. Again, this perceived

difference in gender roles and role expectations continues to impact and pervade the social-economical position for women.

Conclusion-

The true impact that cultural expectations and education has on gender discrimination may truly never be known, but the opposing forces at work are still affecting change, be it positive or negative. On one side, the Maoist ideology designed to reduce discrimination may have negative economic impacts on Chinese culture, creating a desire for a more traditional patriarchal Confusion society. Then again, the increase number of skilled workers introduced to the job market (women) may have encouraged more profitable behaviors reversely decreasing the discriminatory attitudes that have so heavily influenced Chinese culture. Meng, and Zhang (2001) talk about the difficulty of assessing the role of economic reforms on the relative position of women in China. Regardless of the impact that these reforms have in either way, the reality is that women consistently are expected to perform lower than their male counter-parts resulting in lower perceived roles in business, lower education, lower pay, and overall lower status in society. The dynamic perceptions and attitudes are fluid in nature and constantly changing. As expressed by the participant Xihe, although the traditional thought is still very much felt and alive, the decided gender roles of her parents and grandparents do not necessarily fit the present culture and generation. Although this fluid relationship between societal values and gender expectation can be found anywhere in the world, the country of focus in this paper, China, is losing potential skilled labor to other countries as these residents feel moving elsewhere is more beneficial. Xihe and her family are such examples of this. Whether the countries that these citizens are moving to are that much more socially-economically better is arguable. In the case of Xihe, her family left their current state in China for America and as a result, when asked if she had any plans to return to China, as stated by Xihe *“Not right now, no. Do you know why? Cause, I think it was not that easy to come here so it makes difficult to go back for me. It took years for my family to get the visa.”* (see Day 3) This is the impact of these opposing forces, the result of any society that continues to allow disparities based on gender or any other physiological issue for that matter. Though change has been attempted and has dramatically affected the past roles of women and thus promoted their escape from the household and into the workplace, true equality is not only the number of women in a company or at a job but a society where women can truly “enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life”

Appendix

Collected spoken data

Day 1:

Why did you come to America?

I came America with my family because my family decided to live here. My uncle was living here before my family arrived. In China I was hired to work at a museum and also as a secretary for the government but before decided what I wanted to do, I had to move here.

Do you plan on going back to China?

No, not right now. I want to graduate with a degree in art design and then go to graduate school as soon as possible.

Do most women in China go to college?

It depends on the family but most women get a degree and then start working after graduation.

Do many women get their doctoral degree?

No, people think that women who get a doctorate degree don't have families because they are so busy working.

What about jobs? Can women work any kind of job?

Yeah, engineers are mainly men, nurses are mainly women. Older generations think that men and work and study better than women.

Day 2:

Where your parents okay with your majoring in art?

They were okay, they said I could do what I like, there were no expectations for me to major in something like math or science.

Because in different families, because my parents work for the government they aren't allowed to have more children in their family, if different parents work at different companies they can have more than 1 child.

What's your opinion on that?

When I was young, I wanted a sister or brother to stay at home with.

In china the government wont' pay money for children after they first child. Some families

aren't that rich but they still have a traditional family and they think we should have more than 1 child.

Do your parents expect you to marry a Chinese person?

No, they don't care.

For you friends, is there a lot of pressure for girls to get married quickly, or were you expected to go out and get a job by yourself, in your area?

Parents want their children to marry with a good family, if you are rich you want your child to marry into a rich family. You have to have a job, a car, and a house before you are able to get married. It really depends on the family, for me if I stay in China, and I have a boyfriend, my family has a house so maybe all he has to do is buy a car or something.

In China, when a girl gets married, she leaves her family and joins her husband's family.

What sports did you do in school?

Ice-skating, I did it often with my friends in elementary school through high school. Both girls and guys were there.

In order to be a good female, your first priority is as a wife and as a mother in China, does this still exist?

I agree with this, you should be first a wife and mother. If the husband has a good job, the wife should stay home and take care of the children.

Is it common for both parents to work, what about your friends?

No, many of my classmates only have one parent working, most work at a police station in my area.

Both guys and girls work jobs like a secretary in my area.

What kinds of jobs do males and females have?

It's basically the same, there are no jobs that are set aside for men or for women.

What about management positions?

Honestly, men work more management jobs in China than women.

For the women that is married, their lives will depend strongly on men. But women can work harder than men.

Do you get a sense that society is trying to define a gender role in China?

I think in China, most men don't like cooking or to wash dishes. It depends on the family. If the wife's job is not that hard, they can stay at home. If the men don't work they can stay at home.

If the man doesn't work, is he expected to do housework?

Men always want women to do work.

Women can take up to one year off for maternity leave but there is no maternity leave for men.

If a woman is pregnant, is there pressure to have a son?

Yeah, from grandparents especially. The hospital won't tell you the sex of a child. The doctor knows if some family only wants a son. If they have a daughter, maybe they don't want her.

How do people try to have a son?

I heard someone say that there is some traditional medicine that people take to have a son but I don't know much about it.

Day 3:

What kinds of jobs do your family members have both here and in China?

I have four aunts. The older aunt is retired but she used to work middle management at a bank. The second oldest aunt works in an office for the government, she's not a secretary, she makes the documents and puts them together, she's an office worker. The third aunt works at selling at an electric company. The fourth aunt, my youngest aunt, she has two jobs. One is to sell air conditioning, the other is she has her own company with her friend. The company is to make silica gel.

My uncle here, he just work in the U of M, he teaches biology. His wife she works in research about microbiology.

As far as friends, both here and China, what do your female friends do?

They always go to the big cities to work. They go there and find a job.

My best friend (female) works for a big website in China. She talks to the customer (customer sales/phone representative). My other friend (female) is working at a bank.

What about some of your male friends?

One of my males friends, he is in Shanghai and he is a photographer.

The other friend is working for a small company, he is a ceramic designer.

So do you still have no intentions of going back?

Not right now, no. Do you know why? Cause, I think it was not that easy to come here so it makes difficult to go back for me. It took years for my family to get the visa.

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