

China's Progress Toward Gender Equity: From Bound Feet to Boundless Possibilities

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“One generation plants the trees, and another gets the shade”
Chinese Proverb

Introduction

Throughout the world, gender defines an omnipresent and personal identity. Historically gender effects have ventured far beyond the biological aspects of reproduction and deep into societal constraints of action, appearance, freedom, and destiny. Gender provides convenient labels, descriptions, and expectations. Unfortunately history provides many examples where gender has been used as a tool of oppression.

The history of the world's most populous nation, China, provides a long and interesting tale of gendered outcomes. We argue that across three generations China has progressed from the gendered atrocity of female footbinding to a somewhat genderless college admissions process. The current generation of China's young women is not only able to run on unfettered feet but also have unprecedented personal options, opportunities, and responsibilities denied to previous generations. This study addresses generational change specifically through the eyes and perspectives of the contemporary women of China. Our study focuses on three generations of women; each formed by very unique cultural and political situations within their natal country. China's contemporary young adult women, born between 1979 and 1985, are typically “only daughters” of a generation of one-child families resulting from China's one-child family policy¹. This unique generation has grown up without the competition of other siblings. Their mothers grew up in much different era, shortly after the People's Republic of China (1949) was established. These women's lives were affected by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). On average, these women were born to large families with clear preferences for sons. Finally, we extend back another generation to the grandmothers of our seed sample who typically were in the first generation of Chinese women to be free from footbinding.

The manuscript begins with a description and history of three historical milestones; each relevant to one of the contemporary generations included in this study. We then provide data showing the speed and direction of gendered outcomes. Finally, we provide a qualitative oral history study of these three generations of women in China through interviews with the young adult women, their mothers, and their grandmothers. The use of oral histories as primary sources has been promoted through several respected historical works (S. Wang 2006).

¹ The one-child family policy was enforced through China's central government. The policy allowed for one child in urban areas, unless the first child is disabled and two in rural areas. No restrictions were imposed upon ethnic minorities such as Tibetans or Mongolians. Despite the policy a minority of families have opted to have more than one child. Having a second child invokes significant monetary and other repercussions.

Milestone One: Footbinding

There is only limited and contradictory documentation regarding the origins of the practice of female footbinding in China. Equally daunting are the reasons the practice spread and became common for generations. Legends surrounding footbinding can be traced as far back as the Shang dynasty (16th to 11th centuries B.C.). It was said that the Emperor of Zhou was enticed by a concubine, Da Ji, who appeared as a beautiful woman with small feet clad in cloth. According to the legend, other women were willing to bear pain and disfigurement in an attempt to emulate Da Ji's tiny feet and thus catch the eye of the Emperor (P. Wang 2000).

Another legend of the beauty of small pointed feet is illustrated by Yang Yuhuan a famous concubine of the Emperor Xuan Zong in the Tang Dynasty (685-762) who is said to have feet no longer than three-inches. Some researchers (Ebrey 1990; Levy 1996; P. Wang 2000) have claimed that footbinding was first introduced by Yao Niang, a talented dancer and favorite concubine of the Later Tang dynasty emperor (reign, 961-75).

Paintings and books from the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127) provide evidence that female footbinding was a popular practice. Furthermore, the relocation of the capital city from North to South China also spurred the spread the practice of footbinding throughout the country. By the end of the Song Dynasty, bound feet became a synonym for women. By the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), footbinding prevailed throughout the entire empire with up to 80% of Chinese women impacted by the practice. As the practice spread, it became more exaggerated. The size of the foot was associated with socioeconomic status: the smaller the feet the higher the social ranking (Mackie 1996). For upper-class women, footbinding symbolized their social placement. For lower class women, footbinding opened the possibility of upward social mobility through marriage or the service market (P. Wang 2000).

Although Man² People, conquerors and the ruling class of Qing Dynasty, opposed footbinding, their efforts to abolish the practice failed in 1668 (Gao 1995). Actual anti-footbinding activities did not appear until late 19th century. The first recorded anti-footbinding organization was founded in 1874 by Protestant missionaries. The Natural Foot Society was initiated by western women in Shanghai in 1895 and was intended to help non-Christian elite women. By 1908, the majority of Chinese opposed footbinding and thus the Nationalist Revolution prohibited the practice in 1912 (Drucker 1981). By the 1920's footbinding began to wither and die in the majority of China (Gamble 1943). Natural feet started to be recognized as a sign of beauty along with good health, high intelligence, liberation, and equalization (P. Wang 2000).

The prohibition of footbinding provided the future generations of Chinese women with freedom from forced physical disfigurement. Of course the women born after 1912 still had to contend with the generational constraints of culture and biology. Large families, multiple pregnancies, plus gendered discrimination continued to keep women from exploring possibilities beyond their domestic confines.

Milestone Two: Founding of the People's Republic of China and the Cultural Revolution

Around the time of the birth of the "mothers" in our study, the Chinese culture was influenced by Confucius' beliefs that women were naturally subordinate to men thus placing young women at the lowest strata of the social hierarchy. The advent of new laws granting women equal rights with men occurred with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Since women

² Man people are one of the 56 ethnic groups in China. They arose from the Jurchen tribes and established the Jin (1115-1234) and Qing (1644-1911) Dynasties.

were allowed to work outside of the home, female employment gradually became common and accepted. In fact, because so many women began working in public sectors they were praised and viewed as founders of the new China. "Equal pay for equal work," was adopted as an important approach to employment equality and was widely implemented in state-run companies. Although this policy did not guarantee that women would have equal chances for promotions, it was successful in decreasing the gap between men's and women's salaries (Jiang 2004).

Although women were guaranteed by law to have the same right to work, the weak industrial base of the 1950s could not satisfy the employment demands of urban women. By 1952, only 11.7% of the workers in state-owned units were female (State Statistics Bureau 1987). The time between 1958 and 1960 was termed *The Great Leap Forward*. The movement, born from the apparent failure of the Soviet influence, was designed to transform China from its agrarian state to a nation of the stature of the USA (Peng 1987). During this time the vast majority of urban workers and housewives were assigned to state-run working units or collective enterprises. But rather than truly propel China forward, the result of the programs was economic breakdown (Luo 1985). However, the movement did increase the number of women in the workforce. In 1960, the total number of employed women nationwide increased to over 10 million, almost three times as many as the number of employed women just three years earlier (Rong 2001).

Following on the heels of *The Great Leap Forward* came the second political model to end unsuccessfully: the "*Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*." Today's generation of middle aged Chinese women also lived through this period that occurred from 1966 to 1976. These ten years represented a significant backward step for both men and women and has been labeled a catastrophe for the entire Chinese nation (Joseph 2001). In an attempt to create a classless society where both peasants and China's elite could work side by side, the Red Guards under the leadership of Mao Zedong closed schools and colleges thereby robbing an entire generation of educational opportunity. From 1960 to 1972, most senior high schools no longer functioned. As a result, in 1968 more than 6 million secondary students waited to be assigned a job (Shi 1996).

Mao encouraged young people in secondary and higher education institutions to enter the labor force in rural areas and to be re-educated by farmers. Mao stated,

"It is necessary for the educated youth to go to the countryside and to be re-educated by the poor peasants. We need to persuade parents and others in urban areas to send their children who graduated from junior high, senior high, and college to rural areas. Let us have a mobilization. Comrades in rural areas should welcome them." (Translated by Zhou and Hou, China Daily, Dec. 11, 1968,)

As a result of the "send-down" policy, 17 million urban youth were forced to live and work in rural areas during the Cultural Revolution period (Zhou and Hou 1999).

Gender equity was simply defined as "equal work, equal pay," without consideration of the physical and psychological differences between men and women. "Women can hold up half of the sky" became a well-known slogan and it was widely used to encourage women to be involved in social and economic activities (Pan 2002).

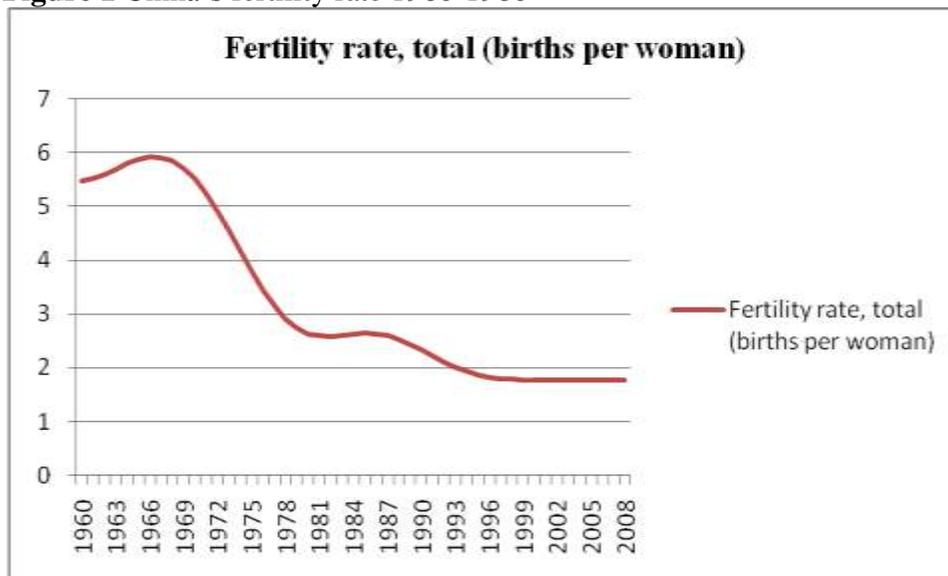
Despite the negatives connected to this era, woman made substantial gains. The Cultural Revolution re-examined the notion of female inferiority and challenged patriarchal female oppression.

Milestone Three: The One-Child Family Policy

By the mid 20th century, the Chinese government showed signs of recognition that uncontrolled population growth could seriously affect not only the personal welfare of the Chinese people but also provide impenetrable barriers to the country's economic and global progress. Without significant and dramatic action, resources such as food, education, and the overall well-being of its citizenry would likely not improve thus preventing China from reaching its economic and other status goals. In 1970 Premier Zhou Enlai challenged China's voluntary family planning practices and initiated a population control campaign encouraging families to have no more than two children. Although Zhou Enlai's campaign was not strictly enforced it led the way to a subsequent unprecedented and strictly enforced country-wide law. In 1978 the one child per Chinese couple policy was announced (Fong 2002). Favoring sons as labor resources and old-age insurance, however, rural families were especially resistant to the policy which prompted a two-child policy in the farming areas (Greenhalgh 1994). The policy was both bold and globally unprecedented with its focus on promoting modernization by reducing the population and decreasing competition between the number of people and resources, both in the family and the nation. Because the policy has been enforced at the discretion of local officials, penalties for non-conformity varied. However, typically noncompliance resulted in substantial fines, confiscation of personal property or even dismissal from work (Hesketh, Lu, and Xing 2005). The policy's long-term goal was that by 2000 the total population of China would not exceed 1.2 billion (Peng 1991).

According to a nationwide census the policy was successful; China slowed down the rate of population increase leaving the total population at 1.27 billion in 2000 (Greenhalgh 1994). The fertility rate dropped from six births per woman in 1970 to two births per woman in 1980 (Coale and Chen 1987). Figure 1 provides a graph of the decline in average births per woman in China. The majority of women in urban areas who married after 1978 had only one child. The policy remained strict in cities.

Figure 1 China's fertility rate 1960-1980



Data source: World Bank

Since its inception the one-child family policy has been critiqued by the West, often for its negative consequences, including sex-selective abortion and abandonment of baby girls. In truth, the success of the policy depended on universal access to contraception and abortion (Yin 2003). Estimates are that 87% of all married women used some form of contraception with 90% of them in the genre of long-term such as intrauterine devices and sterilization (Yang 1994). Included among the outcomes of the one-child family policy, was the release of women from the expectation and norm of rearing large numbers of children. Thus the policy allowed women to have gainful employment, empowered female status in the family, and weakened the overall preference for sons.

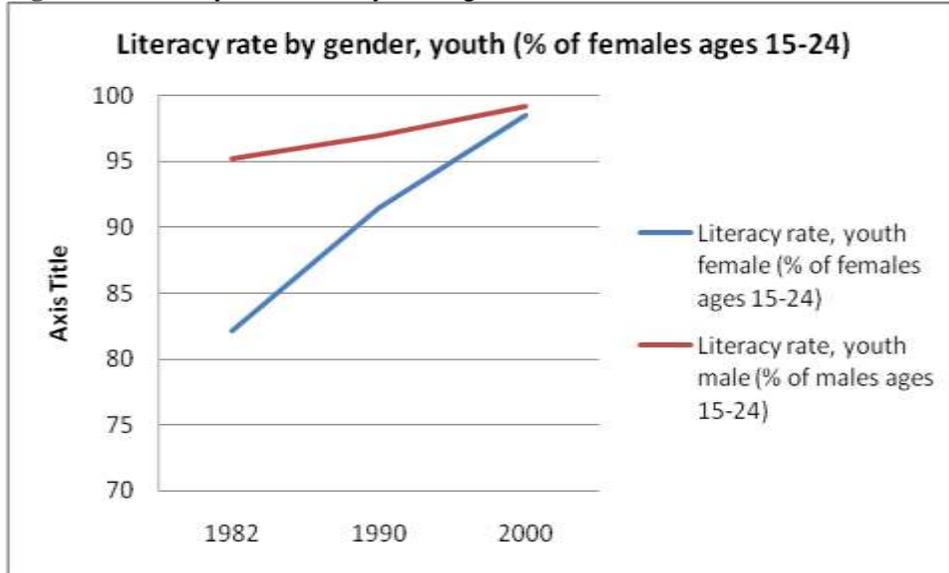
The generation of Chinese born during the one-child family policy have been dubbed “little emperors and empresses” because of the unprecedented level of attention and nurturance provided (Falbo and Poston 1993).

Gender and Education in China across the Generations

An important indicator of gender social equity is educational opportunities and outcomes. Similar to many other countries, past generations of girls in China were not only less likely to attend school but also to be exposed to only rudimentary education as compared to Chinese boys. For example, according to the 1982 nationwide census, the majority of women (83%) who were born between 1928 and 1932 were illiterate; twice as high as the percentage of illiterate men who were born in the same time period (Zhongguo renkou nianjian 1986).

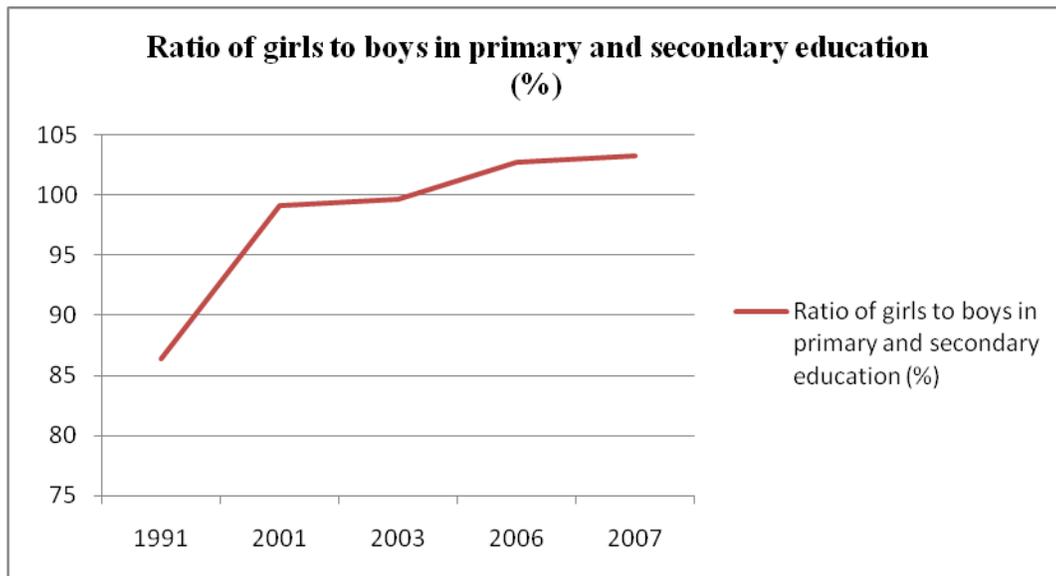
After the Communist Party came into power in 1949, women's education remarkably improved, particularly in urban areas. By the late 1960's the percentage of both illiterate men and women had drastically decreased. Based on the results of a 1990 national survey, urban residents who were born after 1949 had an average length of schooling of 10.4 years for men and 9.4 years for women (Sampling Survey of Chinese Women 1994). Figure 2 provides a comparison of the literacy rates of Chinese youth by gender. The slope of the female literacy line indicates the drastic improvement in educational outcomes for girls. Figure 3 provides the ratio of enrollments in primary and secondary schools by gender from 1991 to 2007. Note that girls have not only reached parity with boys, but are now educated in slightly greater proportions. However, female enrollment in higher education has not reached parity as only one third of the college graduates by 1990 were women (1990 census). Figure 4 provides the gendered ratio in tertiary education noting women slightly lagging men.

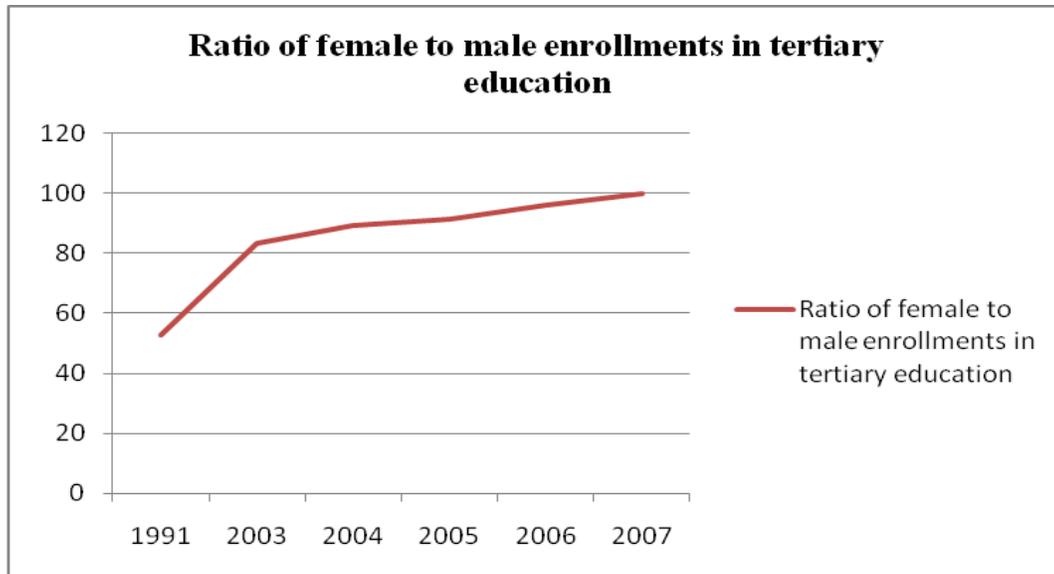
Figure 2 Literacy rates of boys and girls in China 1982-2000



Data source: World Bank

Figure 3 Ratio of female to male in primary and secondary education and tertiary education 1991 to 2007





Data source: World Bank

Methodology

Participant Selection

A purposive sample of five young women who were born after implementation of the one-child policy in Central China was interviewed. Each of the participants had obtained a bachelor's degree from a four year institution in China and had at least five-year working experience. They all lived in urban areas at the time of the interview.

When the young women were approached, they were also asked if their mothers and maternal grandmothers were able and willing to participate in the study. Only the young women whose mother and maternal grandmothers were accessible were included in the study. A total of 15 women in three generations were interviewed. All interviews were conducted in Chinese by a native speaker of the language.

Design and Data Collection

All of the semi-constructed interviews were conducted by telephone. Each of the selected women in the initial sample obtained initial consent from their mother and grandmother prior to supplying contact information to the researchers.

The interview guide was developed and revised through expert reviews and a pilot study of two respondents. Each interview spanned an average of 40 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed in Chinese, and later translated into English for analyses.

Data Analyses

In order to protect the participants' identity, each of the daughters was assigned an English pseudonym and their mothers and grandmothers were referred by the daughters' names (e.g., Ann, Ann's mother, and Ann's grandmother). Data were open coded through multiple rounds of review. Initial topics or subjects were identified after the first review and thematic findings were created by following inductive analyses of categories and the coded data. The thematic findings were discussed and refined through interactive discussions of the researchers.

Each participant was contacted by the researchers two weeks after they were first interviewed. They were given an opportunity to review, verify, or provide more information to their first responses. No conflicting information was collected through the second round interview but the participants took advantage of the second opportunity to provide more personal stories and to clarify the information that they provided earlier.

Participants: General Observations

Five daughters (Ann, Beth, Cathy, Dana, and Ella), their mothers, and their grandmothers were interviewed in this study. Table 1 provides summary information for participants in the three generations. The sample seed consisted of 5 young women, aged 27 to 31 years. Each of the women was college educated and employed. Culturally, they would be counted among China’s growing middle class; neither elite nor members of the lower-class. Born during the era of the one-child policy, these young women were either the only child in their families or had only one sibling³.

TABLE 1 Demographic Characteristic of Participants

	Age	Age when Married	Number of Children	Number of Siblings	Education	Work
Daughters	27-31	27-31	Plan to have one	0-1	Bachelor’s degree or higher	Full time
Mothers	55-59	23-28	1-2	2-6	Junior or senior high school graduates	Full time
Grandmothers	76-83	17-20	3-7	5-7	No school education or night classes	Housewives or full time

In all cases, the mothers were in their middle or late fifties at the time of being interviewed and reported being sent "up to the mountains, down to the villages" during the Cultural Revolution that occurred in their generation. In other words, as secondary school graduates and students, they were sent to rural areas and to frontier settlements with millions of other educated urban youth to receive re-education from the poor and lower-middle peasants in the 1970s. They worked in villages or farms in a range of time from 13 months to five years

³ One-child policy in general requires one child for one family, but certain exceptions exist. For example, couples in rural areas could have a second child if their first-born is a girl. Ethnic minorities can also have more than one child. In this study, two of the daughters have a sibling and their cases fell into the exceptions (Larsen 1990). Additionally, in the early phase of the policy implementation, there have been frequent shifts in the strictness of enforcement, which may enable some couples to have two children (Greenhalgh 1986).

before they were able to return to their home city. These mothers did obtain some training and received certificates of work, but none of them received a formal college education.

The grandmothers who participated in the study ranged in age from mid 70s to early 80s. Without exception, they were born to large families with multiple siblings, raised their own family with three to seven children, and witnessed their mothers confined at home with bound feet. Compared to their daughters and granddaughters, the lives of the grandmothers were very diverse. In all cases, they received little to no formal education.

Findings

We explored generational differences in three areas; education, work, and family. In each of these areas, clear differences emerged. The influence of the political milestones was evident in the interviews.

Education

A prominent theme of the research was the evolution of educational beliefs, access, and outcomes. The daughters believe that education is critical to their life and is a key to their future success. They anticipate that education will lead them to their dream careers, give them power to make their own decisions, and enable them to live an independent life. Education is seen as important to all, but especially important for women. One of the participants responded:

Education enables women to live independently in this world in the aspects of both finance and spirit. By receiving higher education, women can live a life that they desire, rather than depending on their husbands or somebody else. Educated women are much more capable of changing their lives. Without education, women are limited in their choices. They can only choose the traditional lifestyle: being a stay-at-home mom and doing housework. (Beth)

The women see education as an entitlement. While acknowledging that the quality of education may not be equal across China, the women understand the need for an educated populace regardless of gender. Moreover, the women could not imagine parents who did not seek educational opportunities for their offspring, whether male or female.

Similar to their daughters, the mothers also expressed their belief that education is important and can lead to a better future. However, the mothers shared a much stronger desire of learning coupled with an acute admiration for those who earned a degree or a diploma. This difference might be due to the fact that they were not able to make their own decisions regarding entering a college when they were at the traditional college student age. Ann's mother repeated "very important" three times when asked about her attitude toward receiving college education. She still regretted that she did not have the opportunity to go to college, but she vehemently encouraged her daughter to make full use of her academic talents and education opportunity.

I was chosen from hundreds of "the educated youth" to go to a university when I was working at a farm, but at the same time I had an opportunity to work at a factory. I chose to go to work directly because I believed I could offer more help financially to my parents and my younger brothers. It is hard to say how different my life could be, but I am sure that I would have had a better career and life....I always urged my daughter to study hard and go as far as she can, since I know how it feels when you are not well educated. (Ann's Mother)

Ella's mother went to a factory after she was confined in a remote village for five years. She worked as a welder for almost 30 years and retired about five years ago. She highly values knowledge and a college education.

My daughter is very talented with singing, dancing, and painting, but I did not allow her to participate in these activities as much as she'd like to when she was at school. I always thought going to college is much more important than any other thing. A college degree is a guarantee for a better career and a better life. I might have been too restrictive with my daughter, but I have learned enough lessons in my life. (Ella's Mother)

The daughters reported full parental support of their choice of enrolling in college or pursuing an advanced degree. For example, Cathy said,

My parents always supported my study. They encouraged me to go as far as I could go. When I was preparing for China's National College Entrance Examination in high school, my parents would do anything for me as long as it could improve my scores. They hired a tutor for me...it cost them a large amount of money. (Cathy)

The daughters who participated in the study do not yet have children, but they all affirmed that they will give full support to their children's education. More than obtaining a degree, the daughters indicated that they would like to have their children receive a holistic education.

I will definitely support my son's or daughter's education, but it is not just to study for examinations. I'd like him or her to have a healthy and a happy life, a broad range of interests...and a good personality. (Dana)

When specifically asked, none of the daughters could recall instances from elementary school to college when they felt they were being treated differently due to their gender. Despite their responses, however, the daughters did recall instances of gender stereotyping that cast girls and women as inferior.

I personally didn't feel any prejudice against girls when I was at school, but I often heard that boys are smarter than girls and they do particularly better than girls in math, physics, and chemistry. People always say that boys can easily surpass girls in high school although girls could do much better in middle school and elementary school. When I was in high school, I tried hard not to believe what I heard, but sometimes I felt it was real especially when I had low scores in science courses. (Ann)

The mothers in our sample were united in their report that as girls they were encouraged to go to school. However, their formal education was abruptly ended due to the political movement during their generation. Mothers all reported that they were provided equal education opportunities with their brothers and sisters. Beth's mother actually received the most education compared to both of her younger and older brothers.

I always outperformed my brothers at school and received the highest level of education. My parents in fact expected me to be the first college graduate in my extended family before the Cultural Revolution started. (Beth's Mother)

None of the mothers remembered any experiences that they were treated differently due to their gender when they were at school. They strongly believe that women are equal to men and women are capable of achieving the same success as men. "Women can hold up half of the sky" was mentioned by four out of the five mothers during the interview. Clearly the communist training received by the mothers that promoted equality had an effect on these women.

The grandmothers, on the other hand, had very different responses regarding their education experiences. No matter where they lived (rural or urban areas), the grandmothers

reported two major barriers for girls to receive education: limited resources and the prevailing favor of sons over daughters. Girls with the opportunity to attend school were usually from very wealthy or highly educated families. When the resources were not enough to support every child in the family, sons were the chosen ones to receive family resources. The grandmothers did not have the opportunity to go to school and had to forgo education opportunities offered to their brothers. For instance, Dana's grandmother reported that she did not receive any formal education but two of her brothers were able to finish elementary school, enabling them to find decent jobs.

Girls in my family were not allowed to go to school mainly because my parents couldn't afford it. You may see some girls at school, but they were all from rich families. My parents only supported my two brothers. (Dana's Grandmother)

Ann's grandmother did not receive any formal education and did not learn to read and write until she was 17 years old and attended free night classes offered by the Communist government.

My mother was against me going to school and disapproved of me attending night classes. She thought it was useless. I only took reading and writing classes for a couple of years at the night school in 1951 or 1952 and then I was married. (Ann's Grandmother)

Ann's grandmother regretted that she was not able to finish elementary school. She said that her friend, a girl of the same age, was chosen to work for the Communist government mainly because she had a diploma from an elementary school.

Before I was married I learned how to read and write, but it was very basic. I had a job at a coal mine, but it was not anything that I would dream of doing. If I had more education, I could definitely have had a better job. (Ann's Grandmother)

Ella's grandmother has not been gainfully employed since she was married. When asked if she had ever went to school, she responded,

No school at all! My parents were not able to afford our education and only my brother went to school. It was funded by my aunt (father's sister), because she didn't have boys of her own and really wanted to have one. (Ella's Grandmother)

Work

Although the daughters did not report any instances in which they felt disparate treatment due to gender while in school, they all acknowledged a biased male preference at work. Different from being at schools, males appeared to have more advantages and were often favored by employers.

I can feel the differences at work...like when physical strength or travel is required. Men do have more advantages than women especially when it comes to promotion... Don't you see the majority of administrative positions are occupied by men? (Cathy)

The women blamed some of the differences on their less competitive nature. They did not feel the differences were due to intellectual differences. The women felt that males occupy a more advantageous position even when their female competitors are equally qualified. Ella, acknowledged capable women at work, but still, "men generally feel they are superior to women and are more likely to be promoted."

Interestingly, while the daughters were expressing their concerns of gender inequality at work, they and/or their parents had a different expectation for women regarding career choices.

Cathy described her ideal job as one that would "not keep me too busy; does not demand too much effort; and doesn't need too many business trips."

Dana's father suggested that as a girl she should find a teaching job in a college, which will give her a stable position and a flexible schedule with summer and winter vacations. Beth also said that her parents preferred a "female-friendly" career for her.

They don't want me to be too busy with my job. They want me to have a stable position, which does not demand too much from me...they also want me to work in a relaxing and comfortable environment. (Beth)

The mothers worked in different industries, but they all shared a similar experience working in state-owned companies or factories. They were aware of the gender inequality at work or had personal experiences. Beth's mother worked at a heavy industrial plant and her position required physical strength and rotating at other plants. She felt that men were more likely to outperform women and have higher levels of income.

In theory, it is the same pay for the same position, but in reality men usually earned more because they received a higher bonus at the end of each month. (Beth's Mother)

Ann's mother encountered some difficulties of changing a position at work while she was pregnant.

It [changing to another office] was officially approved, but the new office refused to accept me...their excuse was that I wouldn't be able to work for too long before I was on a maternity leave. So I had to work in my old position and they did not file the paperwork until I came back from my leave. (Ann's Mother)

The mothers emphasized that women had to work longer hours or dedicate more efforts in order to receive the same level of respect with their male colleagues. Beth's mother mentioned that she had to have better performance than males in order to keep her position when her company was regrouping.

Women cannot just perform as well as men; they have to be better. Women will be laid off first. Women have to sacrifice more for their success. (Beth's Mother)

Although the mothers experienced gender inequity, they demonstrated their confidence that women and men can enjoy the same level of achievement at work or in other aspects of life, and they are capable of performing as well as men—if not better. The mothers were not in favor of young women being a "stay-at-home mom." They believed that a career was a guarantee to an independent life and women needed to have a job outside of the home. A mother said,

As a woman you have to have your own career, no matter what it is, in order to be independent. A woman has the option of relying on her husband's income, but she would be better off if she has her own career. (Ella's Mother)

Three out of the five grandmothers were full-time housewives for their entire adult life since marriage due to the traditional belief of women's role and their limited education. For them, their full-time job is housework and taking care of the family. They felt neither equipped nor expected to work outside the home. Beth's grandmother responded when she was asked why she chose to not be gainfully employed,

I cannot read or write...how can I find a job? I could only stay at home doing housework and taking care of my family. (Beth's Grandmother)

Dana's grandmother shared her experiences,

Married women should stay at home...this was what people believed when I was young. Nobody told me to find a job outside the home and I didn't think that I needed to do so, either. Back then, the expectation for women was "never step out of your house" and being a good house wife was a virtue. (Dana's Grandmother)

The other two grandmothers who learned how to read and write worked outside the home even after they were married. However, because of their limited education, they had few choices of work. Cathy's grandmother displayed dismay about her three decades of work at a textile factory as a spinner; but other opportunities were absent due to her limited education.

My girl friend who worked in the same [Communist] Youth League Committee was selected to work for the city government when the Cultural Revolution ended. I was also a leader [of the committee] but I wasn't selected only because she had more education than I did. (Cathy's Grandmother)

Family

Domestic Roles

The daughters staunchly believe that both husbands and wives should be equal contributors to the family. They claimed that the division of domestic work in their own family was egalitarian and that neither partner shouldered all of the responsibilities. They reported that they and their spouses shared housework and both were willing to do more when the other was not available. Ella provided an example when asked to illustrate how she and her husband share the work.

We both understand that if he cooks I will wash dishes and vice versa. If one of us is too busy with work or other responsibilities, the other one will definitely make a sacrifice. We will continue share the work after we have a baby. (Ella)

Although the mothers also reported that they and their husbands participated in housework, in general husbands in this generation did less at home than wives. In order to keep the family functional, the mothers had to make a greater contribution and perform the lion's share of the household chores. In terms of their children's education, however, the mothers indicated that their spouses took more responsibilities because they received more education or had advanced knowledge.

We both have jobs so both of us do housework as long as we have time. I usually do more cleaning and cooking. My husband spent more time with my daughter. He was a better teacher than I was. (Ella's Mother)

The grandmothers who have been housewives performed almost all of the domestic tasks in the family. The grandmothers who had worked outside the home also reported that they took the primary responsibility of taking care of the family. Although Ann's grandmother believed that women should have more responsibilities at home, she complained that her husband did no housework at all.

My husband did not do anything after he came back from work. He never cooked a meal for me or our children. I had to take care of everything at home in addition to going to work. (Ann's Grandmother)

Roles in Taking Care of Old-Age Parents and Parents-in-Law

Although two of the daughters implied that they were “married out”⁴ to their husbands’ family, none of them lived with their parents-in-law. All of the daughters expressed that they planned to take care of both their parents and their parents-in-law in old age. When faced with a conflict, the daughters responded that they would work with both sides and find the best solution.

I am the only child in my family. Surely I will be fully responsible to take care of my parents when they are getting old. (Beth)

The mothers responded similarly to their daughters. They reported that they took equal responsibilities of taking care of elderly parents on both sides. However, all of the mothers indicated that after they were married they lived with their parents-in-law, at least for a couple of years. None of the mothers reported moving in with her own parents after marriage.

It can be very stressful to take care of your own parents and parents-in-law when you have a full time job and a child who needs your care as well...I spent more time with my husband’s parents because I had lived with them since I was married, but I provided more financial help to my own parents. (Cathy’s Mother)

The grandmothers clearly stated that their parents were taken care of by their brothers. None of the grandmothers reported an expectation of assisting her own parents in old age. Although they did not need to give up their family name, the grandmothers were considered members of their husbands’ families and took primary responsibility of taking care of their parents-in-law.

Married girls were like “water poured out of the family”. I didn’t hear much from my parents after I was married. My brothers and their wives took care of them. (Ella’s Grandmother)

Preference for Sons over Daughters

All of the daughters indicated that they were not treated differently because they were a girl or suffered any strained relationships with their parents, grandparents, or other relatives. However, they did express that, to some degree, their parents, specifically their fathers, had sometimes stated a preference for a son.

Ann was an only child in her family but was given a boy's name⁵ by her father.

I have always felt that my dad wanted a boy and was a little disappointed that I wasn't one. I am a girl but he still gave me a boy's name. When he is happy, he calls me 'good son'...I know he is proud of me, but deep down in his heart, I think, he wishes I were a son. (Ann)

Beth shared a similar feeling,

I think my parents wanted a boy when I was born...they still believe in relying on a son in old age. They think that a daughter eventually will "marry out" to somebody and become a member of another family. If I were a boy, I would have a girl "marry in" to my family. Also, a son can do more heavy work if needed. (Beth)

⁴ “Married out” is a term implying that a woman has left her natal family and is now a full member of the husband’s family. Their first allegiance is expected to be focused on the husband’s family.

⁵ In China, there is less distinction between male and female names. Often gender can be more easily determined by the Chinese characters rather than the name’s pronunciation.

While their fathers desired a son, the daughters did not report any mistreatments by their fathers. Ella was aware of her father's disappointment in her gender but also of his love and care.

My dad expected to have a boy and was very disappointed when he first learned that he had a girl. While, I don't think his disappointment lasted long; he loves me and would sacrifice his life for me if needed! (Ella)

When asked about their own preference, none of the daughters expressed a strong partiality for either a boy or a girl. They reported that they would be happy regardless of their baby's gender and they would be happier if they could have both a son and a daughter. A couple of the women characterized how Chinese culture has changed by clearly stating that they and their spouses would favor a girl, because they believe that girls were more filial and obedient than most sons, especially when it comes to taking care of elderly parents. For example, Dana said,

I will be happy no matter if my baby is a girl or a boy. If we really have to choose one, we'd like to have a daughter, because girls usually take better care of their parents. (Dana)

The *mothers* indicated that, when they were young, the prevailing belief was that sons were much more valuable than daughters. They provided examples where girls were treated differently. The mothers also believed that their parents were more or less inclined to sons, but none of them reported specific instances that they felt undervalued by their parents.

My parents were from a rural area and surely thought sons were more valuable...they are better field workers and they are believed to carry on the family name. But, to be honest with you, I didn't feel my parents treated us in a very different way. (Dana's Mother)

Ann's mother also acknowledged that a preference for sons was common among people of her parents' generation. She reported cases where women in her neighborhood inherited little or nothing from their parents.

I never experienced any gender biases from my parents at home, but I know girls like me in the neighborhood had different stories. Sons are definitely favored over daughters when it comes to inheritance. For example, my parent's neighbor who has four daughters and a son gave a half of the family possessions to the son and the other half to be divided among the four daughters. (Ann's Mother)

The mothers all agreed that daughters and sons are equally important to them and they had no preference for sons. Those who only have daughters did not regret that they did not have a son. Interestingly, the mothers indicated that their husbands or their parents-in-law favored a boy over a girl and hoped that they could get around the one-child-policy to have a son.

My husband wanted a son badly and kept telling me that he wanted a boy. He was very disappointed when he first learned that we had a baby girl. His parents even wanted us to keep having babies until we have a son. I am very happy with my daughter and I told them "no!"(Ella's Mother)

The grandmothers clearly stated that boys were definitely superior to girls in those days, but they insisted that sons and daughters were the same in their eyes and that they did not have any preferences.

Every family wanted boys. What can girls do? Boys are good helpers and they can herd sheep or raise pigs. But I am not biased towards girls. We can do a lot that men cannot do. (Dana's Grandmother)

Summary and Discussion

Five groups of daughters, mothers, and grandmothers (in total 15 women) participated in the study. We found common themes among each generation.

Grandmothers

The grandmothers were witnesses of the previous generation of women that were bound to their homes due to the crippling effects of foot-binding. Although the grandmothers were able to escape physical disfigurement, for the most part they also were confined to their homes due to multiple pregnancies, child-rearing tasks, and illiteracy. In their generation, the ability to pursue education and work were privileges held by men.

All of the grandmothers reported five to seven siblings. They viewed their childhood families as temporary. They “married out” and became members in full standing of the family of their husbands. Their brothers, conversely, received great attention from parents and were provided with educational opportunities. The grandmother either did not receive any education or only learned the basics of reading and writing. Their little to no education did not equip them for careers. They either became full-time housewives or worked within limited career choices.

In all cases these grandmothers were married and left their natal home by age 20. After marriage they were considered as members of their husbands' families and the responsibilities of taking care of their own parents were left to their brothers. For the grandmothers, raising children and doing domestic chores were still considered their major responsibilities. These grandmothers had at least three children and had as many as seven. None of them reported preference for boys, but they did indicate such preference was common among people in those days and their husbands did value sons more than daughters.

Mothers

The mothers were born after Communist China was established and grew up in cities or suburbs in central China. All of them reported that they were provided equal opportunities and encouraged by the government to go to school, although their formal education abruptly ceased after the Cultural Revolution was launched. They all received some type of secondary education and were sent to rural farms to be “reeducated” during the political movement. In the late 1970's, colleges and universities reopened for admission, but unfortunately none of the mothers went to college. Probably because they were not able to attend colleges or did not realize the importance of receiving a college degree until later in their life, the mothers all expressed a great eagerness of learning and admiration for knowledge.

The mothers were assigned to work for state-owned factories or companies after working in villages and farms for as many as five years. They all reported that they had been working for the same company until they were retired and some chose to work in private sectors after retirement. The mothers acknowledged challenges faced by women in particular and gender inequity at work, but they all expressed that women are as capable as men and can achieve the same level of success, if not higher. They also believed that a career was significant to an independent life for women.

The family-plan policy decreased the centrality of the traditional housewife-mother role, and made it possible for the mothers to have a full-time job outside of home. Under the policy,

the mothers had at the most two children and all continued working full-time in their post-marriage life. However, the mothers still took major responsibilities for household chores and the extent of their responsibilities was greatly dependent on their husbands' willingness to help out in the home. The mothers reported that as wives and mothers at home, they did more cooking, cleaning, and had the major responsibilities regarding child rearing, although some of them reported their husbands contributed more to their children's education. Different from the grandmothers, none of the mothers reported that they were exempt from taking care of their own parents after they were married. The mothers confirmed that they shared the responsibilities with other siblings. None of the mothers reported preference for sons and believed sons and daughters were equally important to them. Interestingly, they did mention that their husbands were inclined to have a son and think boys were superior to girls.

Daughters

All of the daughters were born after the implementation of the family-plan policy. Their life experiences were very different from their mothers' and vastly different from the lives led by their grandmothers.

The daughters participating in the study obtained at least a bachelors' degree from a four-year college or university in Central China. At the time of being interviewed, two were working on a master's and one on a doctoral degree. These young women were either an only child or had only one sibling. Compared to their mothers and grandmothers, the daughters were given considerable attention and received the best their parents could provide for their education and growth. With the continuous encouragement and full support from their parents, the daughters were able to make use of their academic talents and education opportunities. With college education, the daughters had much more career opportunities. The daughters also highly valued college education and pointed out that they would fully support their children's education. When asked whether they preferred for a boy or a girl, the daughters all expressed a neutral attitude and none of them had a strong statement for either boys or girls. The daughters confirmed that they would take full responsibility of taking care of their parents in an old age or split the responsibilities with their siblings.

In addition to the similarities within each generation group, we also found some common themes within the daughter-mother-grandmother groups, although they are not as prevalent as similarities within generations.

Mothers' attitude towards education had a great impact on the daughters' effort of pursuing an advanced degree. The daughters who received extended support from their parents or whose mothers highly valued education expressed stronger desire of learning and were pursuing an advanced degree when interviewed. For example, Cathy, who was working on her master's degree, reported that her parents have been encouraging her and supporting her since the first day she was in school.

We also found that the daughters who were more confident of being a woman tend to have mothers and/or grandmothers who had stronger beliefs of gender equity. Beth, for instance, whose mother emphasized that women should not be dependent on men and were capable of achieving the same level of success with men, also was confident in her own ability and was competing for an high level administrative position.

Final Thoughts

China presents a unique case in tracing the lives of women through generations. The political movements present easily distinctive stages. It cannot be denied that today's generation of Chinese women enjoy unprecedented favor and opportunity. Indeed, the One-Child policy has been effective in achieving its goal of slowing China's population crisis and has contributed to China's emerging economical success. However, effective the rule has violated the human rights of many. There is no shortage of evidence of forced sterilization, abortions, and the abandonment of baby girls. There are even reports of infanticide. But for the current generation of women, the future is bright. They have the full attention of parents and grandparents. As daughters and granddaughters, they never knew the feeling of being secondary to brothers. Of course they must go through life without the support of siblings. They will never be an aunt or celebrate life with nieces or nephews. They are also vulnerable to what has been called the "four-two-one" problem. As only children they may be left with the responsibilities of caring for two elderly parents and four elderly grandparents.

As of 2009, when the only sons and daughters of the one-child generation marry they are able to have two children. Thus the generation of "only children" has been short lived but will have left its mark on gendered outcomes in China.

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