Chapter 73
Challenges and Changing Attitudes for Chinese Women Seeking PhDs

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ABSTRACT

Despite ongoing challenges that hinder educational improvement and professional promotion, highly educated women are making significant contributions in China. Chinese women often experience discrimination and pressures during their educations and within university settings. They are sometimes overlooked for training opportunities and promotion, and they are frequently denied the same funding allocations as their male counterparts. The purpose of this discussion is to explore enduring attitudes that have historically led to these challenges and to enlighten those who are interested in the struggles, successes, and contributions of highly educated Chinese women.

INTRODUCTION

Changing attitudes and challenges towards women seeking higher education begins with acknowledging the patriarchy still exists. Patriarchy refers to a social system in which adult males hold primary power and predominance in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property. Feminist theory defines patriarchy as an unjust social system that enforces gender roles and is oppressive to both men and women (Richard, 2014). It usually includes social mechanisms that evoke male dominance over women.

Being influenced deeply by the traditional Confucian patriarchy has a prevalent effect on many systems of society in China. Besides family systems, which are considered as "without doubt one of the most brutally patriarchal in the world" (Greenhalgh, 1985, p. 267), women's determination of pursing higher education is suppressed, especially regarding those who intend to or who are pursing doctoral degrees.

A popular Chinese joke says, "There are three genders in the world: male, female, and female PhDs." Highly educated women are often mocked in China as a sexless third gender that is not feminine, not marriageable, and seemingly asexual. They are frequently referred to as leftovers and "yellow pearls."

Often the patriarchy leads to the "pyramid problem" in academia (Mason, 2011). In other words, the number of women at the top of the academic hierarchy is far less than that of men, and those women are paid less than men as well. Additionally, since fewer women participate in decision-making committees, fewer women are hired and promoted. Thus leading to fewer women achieving the highest administrative appointments (Baker & Bobrowski, 2016). Baker and Bobrowski (2016) also note that this result is cyclical. Since so few women reach the highest echelons of authority, respect, and decision-making power, fewer women are chosen for committees or advanced into administrative positions regardless of their dossiers. This circular pattern also reflects the current situation of highly educated women in Chinese academics. Nonetheless, this impressive group of women continues to gain in number and strengths that allow them to significantly contribute to 21st Century China.

This chapter investigates attitudes and challenges Chinese female PhDs have faced by first exploring the reasons behind the growth of the number of women in higher education. Second, it illustrates changing attitudes towards women pursing higher education through analyzing Confucianism and patriarchy in China. Finally, this chapter comments on the benefits of educating women and strategies for increasing their numbers in doctoral programs. This discussion is intended to enlighten and encourage those who are interested in the contributions these women are poised to make and the possibilities that their example sets for women around the world.

THE INCREASING NUMBER OF WOMEN IN EDUCATION IN CHINA

Chinese women have long experienced discrimination and educational neglect (Du, 2004). In ancient times, women were allowed education only as related to family service. Family service education was intended to instruct women to become well-behaved citizens who would qualify as good wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law. They were not encouraged, and in some cases were forbidden, to gain knowledge in other fields that men were required to study. In the late Qing dynasty, women were granted a basic education through which they learned to recognize words and read common letters. However, it was not until the Industrial Revolution that Chinese women's education significantly improved. After the eruption of the Industrial Revolution, early feminist ideas and social movements emerged in Europe, Great Britain, and the United States. These movements then gradually influenced China, where many began to fight for equal rights, especially in education. Then in the early 1900s, the number of private schools for women's education increased rapidly, forcing the government to acknowledge the legality of the establishment of women's schools (Wu, 2010).

Once the Republic of China (ROC) took administrative control (1912-1949) advances in education for women rapidly expanded. With the support from then president Sun Yat-sen, local governments in every province established primary and secondary schools, as well as higher learning institutions for women. Free compulsory education became prevalent for K-12, and tuition fee waiver systems were employed in educator-preparatory institutions. During the Second Sino-Japanese War (1931-1937), the number of faculty and staff increased by 3,623, while the number of college students increased by 41,575, and 33 more institutions were built (Hou, 2008.) Thus, a diversified female education system was born, which included primary and secondary education, vocational education, and educator-preparatory programs.

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