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**Swinging open or slamming shut? The implications of China's open-door
policy for women, educational choice and work**

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Swinging open or slamming shut? The implications of China's open-door policy for women, educational choice and work

Abstract:

This paper explores the link between international tertiary education and evolving attitudes about women and work in China. The paper reviews literature about gender and education in China, commenting on the late twentieth century post-reform environment. It goes on to presents illustrative primary research material from two studies carried out between 1999 and 2004 with students studying for UK Business degrees in China and the UK. The research data is presented as extracts from oral histories, where participants discuss education and attitudes about work, gender and identity. The main conclusions are that women in post-reform China have been educationally and socially disadvantaged compared to men; traditional gender attitudes about women, work and education persist in contemporary China; women are seeking opportunities in international higher education to overcome domestic prejudices; and degree-educated professional women may be developing as a new social class in contemporary Chinese society.

Keywords

China, Equality, Higher Education, Women, Work.

Swinging open or slamming shut? The implications of China's open-door policy for women, educational choice and work

Introduction

This paper explores the link between international tertiary education and evolving attitudes about women and work in China. It begins with a brief review of the literature about gender, education and work in China, commenting on post-reform education and work-place dynamics. It goes on to present illustrative primary research material from two longitudinal studies carried out between 1999 and 2004 with university graduates who studied for UK Business degrees in China and Britain. The research data is presented as extracts from oral histories, in which participants discussed their education and attitudes about work, gender and identity.

Women, education and work in China: the context

Education has traditionally been highly prized in Chinese society. Civil and social organisation evolved around the tenets of Confucian ethics from the 1st century AD (Hawkins, 1983; Pepper, 1991). Confucianism places a central value on learning and meritocratic ideals of social mobility achieved through intellectual development. Such beliefs reinforced the vocational utility of education in feudal China, enshrined in the Imperial examination system which enabled men to secure official posts. Though education has always held an aspirational power over Chinese people, however, and Confucianism remains highly influential in many ethnic Chinese societies, it is also characterized by values which deny access to education and work for women (Leung, 2003). Confucius' *Analects* (Confucius,

2000 translation) asserts that uneducated women are desirable as wives and daughters to ensure the safety and sanctity of household and society, that educated women should be spurned and exhorts men to marry women who are their inferior in education and social status.

These philosophical tenets created a culture of female dependency that characterized Chinese society for hundreds of years (Chen, 1994). A further factor inhibiting women's educational emancipation was the historical, and still practised, system of patrilocal residence after marriage. Women, when married, moved to their husband's home -- thus depriving the woman's family of any of the material or spiritual benefits of her education or skilled employment. Families have historically viewed the opportunity-cost of a woman's education as excessive, therefore, since little possibility existed of a direct return. As a result, access for women to educational activities outside the home was very restricted. Young women who could read and write were regarded as less socially-desirable wives, with their future work lives accruing benefit to their husband's family rather than their own who had borne the up-front cost of educating them (Zhao, 1995; Kipnis, 1997; Hannum, 1999).

Women, education and work in the PRC

Such traditional values have remained influential in Modern China. During the early twentieth century, education opened up for a few women, mainly in the Eastern Treaty-Port cities, where international influence was strongest. The education programmes that were available focused on basic skills and vocational training to equip women for domestic, service or teaching posts in elementary and rural schools (Lu and Zheng, 1995). Women's participation in China's newly-

developing universities remained problematic. After the establishment of the socialist People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, following more than two decades of war and political turbulence, women achieved notional equality with men for the first time. Practically, however, Maoist reforms continued to discriminate against them, instituting educational standards that imposed numerous practical and academic obstacles in the way of their obtaining access to secondary and higher education (Henze, 1984; Hayhoe, 1989, 1996).

Mirroring the educational picture in the first half of the twentieth century, women's access to work did not progress far from the feudal realities which had governed gendered society in Imperial China. During the early years of the PRC, women were universally brought into the workplace as an economic resource to contribute to national modernization and industrialization programmes. Practical constraints and traditional sex-relations continued to mitigate against their full assimilation into the workforce as equal partners with men, however (Leung, 2003). Able to labour in fields and factories, during this period it remained particularly difficult for women to enter more highly-skilled or professional employment arenas. Instead they were confined to work as technicians or industrial and manufacturing operatives, supported by male supervisors and managers. To some extent the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) attempted to over-turn the character of Chinese workplace life and politically radicalize women, socially enfranchising them to a greater extent than before. "Whatever a man can do, a woman can do" became a governing idea throughout the Cultural Revolution period and women were encouraged, and sometimes even thrust as "iron girls", into a wide range of work previously denied them (Honig and

Hershatter, 1988). However, the bloody political dynamics and factional infighting characterizing those years undermined the more radical political potential of the Cultural Revolution and effectively prevented changes in gender-relations from becoming embedded in Chinese Society.

China opens up: the door begins to close for women

In the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping's market reforms - which aimed to "Open Up" China's door to the rest of the world and continue its modernization - dramatically reversed many of the Cultural Revolution's achievements in promoting access for women to the mainstream professional workforce (Leung, 2003). Both work and educational quotas ensuring access for women were successively abandoned during the 1980s (Pepper, 1991). General educational opportunity eroded significantly during the first 15 years of the reform process (Hayhoe, 1996; Pepper, 1996; Cleverley, 1994). Women were routinely discriminated against in admissions processes to higher levels of education, for example, and needed to achieve higher scores in university entrance tests than men -- a pattern that was repeated when standard tests were used for employment purposes (Henze, 1984; Honig and Hershatter, 1988). Indeed, a significant problem for women in contemporary education remains a strong prejudice attaching to vocational education (Matsul et al, 1988; Su, 1995). China's key educational gaps lie in the area of vocational skills. Nonetheless, the mainstream education system remains elitist, firmly geared up to university entrance examinations -- where opportunity exists for a tiny minority of eligible age cohort, in spite of recent expansion and reforms (UNDP, 1999; Turner and Acker, 2002). The greatest participation of

women in education in contemporary China remains in the urban South-Eastern parts of the country, the old Treaty-Ports.

In addition to the educational set-backs caused by the 1980s political reforms, infrastructural upheavals initiated by marketisation also reversed women's access to jobs as male unemployment levels rose (Gittings, 1996; Starr, 1998; Leung, 2003). Increasingly women found it difficult to obtain work in domestic companies, a problem more acute for women who were highly-educated. At this time, official policy encouraged women out of paid work and back into the home, ending for many more than 40 years of work opportunity in industry and manufacturing. Active national debate about women's role in society, focusing on women as housewives and mothers, featured in both the academic and popular press throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Honig and Hershatter, 1988). With the doors of reform swinging open to the rest of the world, therefore, Chinese women saw it tangibly begin to close as both educational and work opportunities disappeared.

The contemporary scene

Drawing on the contextual evidence provided above, it is clear that, in spite of official political rhetoric that they participate on an equal basis with men, Chinese women have struggled to achieve recognition as key participants within the contemporary national workforce. Women's roles in Chinese society are becoming re-gendered and feminized according to traditional norms far away from Maoist revolutionary ideals (Clegg, 2003; Leung, 2003). As the country's economy continues to open up to international influences, including W.T.O. membership in 2001, gender dynamics within Chinese education and work

environments remain turbulent and contradictory. On the one hand, many international companies operate with different Human Resource Management practices to domestic firms and provide enhanced opportunities for some women (Child, 2000; Clegg, 2003; Warner, 2004). Private education has also flourished in the deregulated education environment of the late 1990s and early 2000s, providing increased educational opportunity for women than within the State-run system (Turner and Acker, 2002). In addition, more Chinese students - including many women - are studying overseas, especially in vocational subjects in the hope that they might enhance their employment opportunities. To a large extent, therefore, increasing international openness linked to economic development has tended to encourage conditions in which Chinese women are able to find work and become more economically productive than in the past. These factors together have contributed to the rise of individualism in Chinese society which is further challenging traditional sex-based socialization and opening up opportunities for younger, educated women (Inkeles, Brooded and Cao, 1997; Leung, 2003).

Nonetheless, access remains limited for the majority of women, both to mainstream education - especially in the countryside - and into work in domestic enterprises (Hannum, 1999; UNDP, 1999; Chen, 1995). A significant majority of illiterates in China remain women (Tsui, 1998; UNDP, 1999; Ministry of Education, 2003). An important urban-rural divide also governs women's access to employment (Meissner, 1995; Huang and Feng, 1995; World Bank, 1997; Hannum, 1999; Zhang, Huang and Rozelle, 2002). The majority of investors into China come from Asian neighbours, such as Japan and Taiwan, whose Neo-

Confucian societies are characterized by gender-relations that favour women even less than those in China (Chen, 2002). Patriarchal management still dominates private domestic firms, enabling women limited scope for professional development (Chan, 1998; Farh and Cheng, 2000). Women also find it hard to be promoted because of attitudes towards their sexual identity in work (Rosen, 1993; Huang and Feng, 1995; Snell, and Tseng, 2003). Moreover, particular challenges exist for women with children, imposing specific difficulties because of still-intact traditional expectations that women marry before they leave their twenties (Honig and Hershatter, 1988). Services and supports for mothers, either state- or employer-provided tend to be few and offer low-levels of benefits (Leung, 2003; Shen and Edwards, 2004). Throughout the 1990s, therefore, women constituted the majority of low-paid, unskilled workers, both in cities and countryside, and more women than men were laid-off from domestic State-owned firms (Maurer-Fazio, Rawski and Zhang, 1999). Much of this 'ghettoizing' of women in the workforce stems from the lack of educational opportunity that women receive, especially in rural locations (Zhang, Huang and Rozelle, 2002). Indeed, a clear link exists between levels of education, work opportunity, and salary in China, particularly because of the premium attaching to work with international companies, most of whom employ high numbers of English-speaking graduates (Turner and Acker, 2002).

Private education

One factor, briefly noted above, which appears to be facilitating changes in the discriminatory educational and employment environment is the fast-growing private education sector. Money is a key variable acting as a force for improving

gender equality in China and is a factor in breaking down intellectual elitism within Chinese education (Acker, 1991). In the state system, this is mainly achieved through *zifei* or self-pay classes, which by-pass traditional, competitive entry routes which have discriminated against women. Certainly the private sector has significantly changed the face of education in China since 1980 when it was first formally recognized (Wang, 2000). Now, across the country, there are many private and international institutions, offering courses in a multitude of disciplines. Since these institutions lie outside the admissions systems governing the state sector, it is possible for women to participate in private education more freely and fully than in the mainstream.

Given the absence of free education, even within the state sector, a market already existed for self-pay programmes in China before the large-scale development of tertiary private education. In particular, though most women in the countryside find it difficult to gain access to education, for some, the *minban* -- government-sponsored, privately-funded schools forming the traditional mainstay of rural education - do provide limited opportunities. Moreover, women frequently staff these schools, especially in outlying areas -- since they are so unpopular with male teachers, are relatively poorly paid and lacking opportunities for professional advancement (Tsui, 1998). In areas where local communities are becoming increasingly wealthy, this is a route enabling women to gain access to at least basic education. Nonetheless, such opportunities remain haphazard, largely dependant on the goodwill of family and the progressiveness of local custom. The patrilocal emphasis of rural life practically mitigates against education for rural girls, whether private or state-run. Equally, the relative ease of

access to private vocational and tertiary institutions is attractive to a range of mature students with the financial means and especially to women (Turner and Acker, 2002). This is the sector in which international education providers are also most active. In an environment where many women lack more legitimate opportunities to study, private programmes are increasingly attractive, especially since they offer a variety of modes of open-learning which fit into the realities of their professional and personal lives.

A force for equality?

It seems clear that the ability to buy a place in a private sector college is one way to circumvent the historical difficulties for women's access to education and thence to professional, high-value work. In addition, the vocational nature of much private tertiary education gives women who study there an opportunity to develop workplace skills which are in demand. For many women, exposure to international education and progression to work in a foreign-invested company - effectively moving out of the domestic work environment altogether - may be one of few legitimate avenues open to them to work in a professional, non-traditional role. The social implications for these women may be serious, however. In a society which places an extraordinarily high value on family life and where strong class and gender prejudices still cause men to prefer to marry women of lower educational and/or social status, it seems difficult for educated, professional women to find husbands and to continue living in the accepted mainstream of Chinese society. As noted above, particular challenges confront women who have children. In effect, therefore, single professional women may be emerging as a new class in contemporary China, one which is potentially marginalized from

many aspects of family life (Goodman, 1996). Such women also feel the burden of family pressure to conform to traditional expectations. In this context, it is unsurprising that a significant number of students and professional emigrants from China are women (Yan, 1998; Bai, 2000; Turner, 2000).

Which way next?

Within this shifting pattern, a contradictory picture of the working environment and opportunities for women in contemporary Chinese society. Numbers of women graduates are rapidly increasing, fed by private and overseas education, and more women are employed in non-farm work than ever before in China's history (Ngai, 1999). Nonetheless, significant obstacles exist to women's full access to employment across a range of sectors and to their employment mobility and career development where they do have work. Moreover, China's recent market-opening and reform process have encouraged reversals in earlier progress in women's participation in employment. Questions exist, therefore, about the effects of increasing numbers of young, educated women working in employment environments that retain many characteristics which make it difficult for them to develop professional careers.

To explore some of these issues more intimately, this paper draws on a series of insider accounts taken from two longitudinal studies, involving Chinese women and men, who participated in Higher Education during the 1990s and early 2000s to illustrate their attitudes towards women in education and work. Within the wider debate about the place of women in Chinese society, their accounts illuminate a range of the challenges confronting women who are currently living

in the counter-intuitive and rapidly-changing environment of contemporary China.

The research projects: a brief introduction

The data for this paper draws from two small-scale qualitative research projects. Both studies employed oral-history methods and were longitudinal. The first project employs a two-person research team. It began in China in 1998/99 and is ongoing (with a projected ten-year duration). It involves thirty-one Business-studies graduates (graduating between 1997 and 2000), who participated in a UK BA degree delivered in China. It aims to follow their lives and careers and to explore the ongoing influence of international education on their personal and professional development. Collectively, the study group represents the first contemporary generation of Chinese people who participated in such a distinctive type of private higher education in the Chinese mainland. Coming from all over the country, either children of early post-reform entrepreneurs or self-made entrepreneurs themselves, they also symbolize a new class of people emerging in contemporary China, and are active participants in the country's rapid urbanized economic development. The results of the first tranche of data collection were reported in Turner and Acker (2002).

The second project, undertaken as a sole researcher, was conducted in the UK. It was also longitudinal but with a more focussed data-collection period: 2001-2002 and was smaller-scale. It involved nine Chinese postgraduate Business students studying on UK Master's degree programmes. This project aimed to investigate

participants' implicit theories of learning and their personal development during a year of study in the UK. The data collected also included information about gender relations as participants experienced their studies, together with general accounts about their previous work experience, including specific discussions about men and women in work.

Methodology

As noted above, each of the projects adopted life-history-type methods. For the purposes of the gender-based aspects of the studies, the key research questions were:

- Did participants' personal values or experiences reveal sex-based constructions or the existence of discrimination in education and/or work in contemporary China?
- Did the accounts and life-experiences of women participants, especially from study one, resonate with the contextual literature about education, work and access for women in contemporary China?

Research strategies and design

As noted above, the epistemological perspective from which the projects stemmed was broadly within the interpretative tradition. They operated within the context of narrative research, through its assertion that social realities are not objectively given but consciously and unconsciously constructed by participants (Schwandt, 2000; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Data within the narrative accounts was treated at face-value, therefore, in order to obtain a window on participants' personal life-worlds and provide rich illustration of the phenomena of interest, rather than to make substantive generalizations. Partly

this approach was encouraged by the small sample sizes for each project. It was also encouraged because the nature of the data required the development of long-term trusting relationships between participants and researchers to ensure the continuation of both projects and open disclosure of sometimes personally-intimate information. Such considerations were consistent with the narrative / life-history research frame, with a focus on insider stories as valuable sources of insight about more general phenomena (Winter, 1989, Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The data was collected in regular one-to-one, lightly-structured conversations, taking place either in China or the UK. The projects were also governed less by a sense of methodological structure and particulars of routine research interventions and more by a focus on agency, the roles and influences of the players involved. This is a characteristic hallmark of data-collection approaches within phenomenological and other insider-oriented traditions (Tierney, 2000; Denscombe, 2003).

Specific issues affected the style of data-gathering involved in the projects stemming from the cross-cultural nature of the research. Historically, within Chinese culture, the development of conditions of trust have been an important prerequisite for achieving openness in social interactions (Tsui, Farh and Xin, 2000). In addition, China's recent political history has sensitized personal information-disclosure and its uses. Such issues increased already-present sensitivities about confidentiality and trust affecting much cross-cultural research (Hantrais and Mangen, 1996) and made it particularly important for the researchers to develop close and trusting relationships with participants. It also placed a strong emphasis on the confidentiality of the data.

Data collection

As noted above, the projects' interpretative epistemological orientations led them inevitably towards qualitative data-collection frameworks, essentially based around loosely-structured interviews taking place periodically. Project one involved data collection in 1998/99, April 2000, December 2002, and April 2004. No data were collected in 2003, owing to access restrictions to China caused by the SARS outbreak in Asia. The second project lasted from September 2001 until June 2002 and involved interviews on an approximately monthly schedule. Interviews were carried out mainly in English, supplemented with Mandarin Chinese for clarification or to probe specific cultural constructs more deeply. Data from both projects was transcribed, thematically encoded and analyzed to generate individual and collective accounts. For the purposes of this paper, aspects of transcript data which referred to gender topics were collated and information about participants' working lives and careers to date was collected to illuminate the practical and attitudinal aspects of themes in the literature.

Results and discussion

The data obtained from the two studies was wide-ranging, covering topics that resonated with the contextual literature in a number of ways. For the purposes of the current discussion, the data is organized into two basic themes, responding to the two primary research questions: views expressed by both men and women about gender-relations in China and accounts from women of their experiences of work in the contemporary Chinese environment.

Headline results

In tracing the general life patterns and development of participants in the two projects, a number of themes resonating with the literature emerged. In total, twenty-four women participated and sixteen men. The women participants in study one were aged between eighteen and thirty-six at the commencement of the project in 1998/99, in study two between twenty-three and twenty-six in September 2001. Of the total number of women participants, three were married at the beginning of the project and twenty-one were single. Two had children. Over the ensuing course of data collection for study one, two of those who were unmarried became married and none had children. Participants in study two remained unmarried at completion of the project.

Within education, after the completion of the initial degrees that provided the first impetus for the projects, eight women and four men went on to pursue additional postgraduate degrees or diplomas, all in the UK, in Business Management related areas. For those in study one, the most common programme of study was a general Master's degree in Business (either MBA or MA International Business).

One woman proceeded onwards to Ph.D. study. In study two, one female participant undertook training in English-Chinese translating and one an additional general Master's degree in Business. Women participants in both studies showed a higher level of interest in postgraduate degrees than their male counterparts, with more women than men undertaking postgraduate study.

In terms of work, eleven women participants had work experience before participating in their degree studies and thirteen had not. Of total working experience both before and after the commencement of data collection, women worked predominantly in international companies in China, though five had

experience in domestic organizations at some time in their working lives, especially the older participants. For the younger women, work duration in domestic firms was very short, less than 6 months. Working culture and difficulties with male managers were the reasons the women gave for not being able to continue working in this environment. Overall, women changed employment frequently - more frequently than male participants, on average at least three times over 5 years, with half the women changing jobs annually or more often. At the data collection period in 2004, no women participants were working in domestic firms but exclusively in international companies and joint-ventures. Job roles for women were predominantly in real-estate/ sales, administrative or support / secretarial functions within their organizations. For those under 30 - the majority - a common job title was as 'personal assistant' to a manager, usually a non-Chinese Asian or an overseas-Chinese representative of an Asian firm. None of the women were themselves employed in managerial work, though one woman worked in a company with the title 'office manager' with job responsibilities similar to that of the 'personal assistant' jobs of others in the project. None of the women showed any expectation that they would be able to undertake managerial roles in companies in China unless they began their own company. To do so was an ambition of a number of the participants in year one of study one and in study two (ten discussed entrepreneurship at some time in their interviews), but none had begun their own company to date. The main reason women gave for this hesitancy was the distinctively male character of networking required to get established as a business person,

Everyone is always drinking and smoking and eating at night. I do not like that, so it is hard for me. (YY, 2004)

In general, male participants worked in a more diverse range of occupations than their female counterparts. For example as software engineers, in management in the family firm, as a hotel manager, an officer for an international aid organization, in education, consultancy or financial management. In general terms, therefore, male participants enjoyed greater freedom of access to a broad range of jobs than female and undertook work offering more perceived social status and power. One partial exception to this was the oldest of the women participants, who was also a long-standing Chinese Communist Party member. She undertook work as a project team-leader within various consultancy organizations, supported, she felt, by the access to clients her Party network provided.

As can be seen from the above, the project groups' life-patterns resonated with a number of the discussion points drawn out in the contextual literature. Initially, the women participants showed themselves to be highly motivated towards international tertiary education as a way of improving their access to high quality work, particularly in international companies. Universally, they chose to study outside indigenous HE because: 'they want to change their life' (ZW, 2004) and improve their job prospects. Part of this process of emancipation and change was found in language. For example, women's post-graduation work experience utilized their English language skills extensively, whereas the majority of male participants remained in Mandarin-dominant organizations. Nonetheless, male participants enjoyed work with higher status overall than the women and changed

jobs less frequently. In study one, when reflecting back on the contribution to their lives of their UK degree studies, few men credited the experience as life-changing. In contrast, the majority of women in both studies noted its power in shaping their sense of individualism and ambition, a theme which is developed in more detail below.

Education, work and access for women: participants' basic values

In developing more detailed interpretation of the narrative accounts, education provided the starting point for discussions about work, reinforcing participants' strong utilitarian notions of its vocational role within Chinese society.

Nonetheless, the accounts also revealed the emancipatory potential of education for women. Twenty-one out of twenty-four women said that they had chosen to study in international HE because of a lack of opportunity in the Chinese system and, by doing so, to improve their employment prospects in the light of fierce competition:

In China because of a lot of people, a large population, so very, very big competition. (YB)

This view was endorsed by a general commentary in both male and female accounts, reflecting perceptions of a lack of workplace equality. Of the total population of forty, only two participants said that it was possible for men and women to find equal opportunity at work in China, one man and one woman. Most expressed specific views about women's lower status in society, and specifically concerning job opportunities:

China is like Japan, a male-dominated society...The real case for [women] is that it is difficult for them to find a real good job, more difficult than for men. They

have to make an effort to adapt to this society. Maybe they have to start from a very low position, maybe a secretary. (TJH, a man)

They always hire male employees and prefer men...I think we cannot get rid of our culture. They think men can do better than women. I think this is related to the culture and history, long history. You just cannot get rid of it, so that's why I want to do better in a career, not family. I think females always can, also can do a better job. (PT, a woman)

When you apply for a job, some positions are for men and some are for women. ... Maybe it is how Chinese culture perceives the position. If they want a secretary, they think, "Oh, it should be a girl." If it is a manager or senior manager, it must be most of the time a man. Probably they don't need to write it down, but people think this way.(ZKM, a man)

These data illuminate the central questions about gender contained with the projects' research designs. It is clear that men and women do perceive an uneven working environment for men and women in China and some also themselves hold discriminatory attitudes.

Participants went on to describe an employment climate where not only was it difficult for educated women to find work but one in which managers actively discriminated against women for promotion:

You can see that most of the company's managers are men, not women. Women can only get promotion to a certain level. Above that, a woman cannot go...Most Chinese women just think that they are not good, they are not better than men, they are not as good as a man. So, they just accept the level they are in. I think they lost confidence in that. (XH, a woman)

In China, it's different to be engaged in business for a man and a woman, I think. For example, in the state-owned company, my boss, the president would tend to promote males rather than females to high-ranking positions, even though the male and the female have the same ability, even if sometimes the female possesses more skills than the male. (WXG, a man)

This emergent picture of everyday discrimination against even educated women resonates strongly with the literature and reinforces the structural assertion that basic social values in post-reform China are progressively re-gendering workplace norms and reintroducing traditional sex-based obstacles to women's career development. Unsurprisingly, for the participants this issue centred on a prejudice about a woman's ability to juggle the responsibilities of both marriage and career:

If I get married early, then maybe the company will not accept me...Here there is nothing but relationships, which guide work. If you are a good drinker or dancer or something like this, especially if you are female, then you can establish good relationships between your company and another company and do a good job. Otherwise there is no future for you. And when you apply to a company, if you are a woman and just married, they will ask you when you are planning to have a child, so you have to be honest with them. If you will have a baby in the near future, I don't think you will get a job. (LMM, a woman)

When women get married and have children, they cannot concentrate on their jobs. (DY, a woman)

Educational choices

As noted above, it was against such a context of basic values that the women's decisions to seek educational alternatives outside of the Chinese system were set. This again emphasized attitudes about the vocational utility of education, highlighting the degree to which women participants constructed education as personally emancipatory. In particular, the pedagogical differences in Chinese and British HE experienced by women participants reflected different cultural gender dynamics. These experiences seemed a key influence on women's expressed attitudes later in the study, giving them opportunities to experiment with new, assertive behaviours towards male peers. For example:

I had many conflicts with [my male colleague]. We really argued. He never consulted with us. He always decided and then said, "You must follow. I am correct and you are absolutely wrong. What you think is rubbish." Like that. Someone just said to tell him his English was rubbish, and he really didn't understand. (Laughs). I did it. He was very angry with me. But I talked directly to him and it was very useful. Finally, I thought it was good, quite good, much better than at the beginning. (LW)

As a group, the women also attached importance to education as a passport to a 'freer' life which would allow them a greater say and higher levels of self-determination in the context of family relationships:

When I was young, I thought my father was a hero in my heart and wanted to be like that. But now I think he is not perfect and also has shortcomings. But he is my father and has more experience than me, but sometimes this does not equal to his always being correct. Yes, I should listen to his advice, but it doesn't mean I must obey his order. (LW)

I feel sometimes, I really feel it is difficult to fit. You know, families are big and I have a lot of relatives or whatever and I don't like to spend too much time with them. I went home [for a visit] because of my parents, my sister and brother. Maybe with some other relatives, I just say some normal words, or greetings to make them happy but actually I didn't enjoy myself. They find it difficult because I am a woman and I should pay attention to their words. (SS)

Certainly, this force for individualism included some male participants, but was a more pronounced, explicit sentiment in women, and figured more frequently in their accounts. It seemed intimately connected with concepts of self-identity and linked to attitudes towards the conventional roles of women in child-rearing and motherhood:

Marriage and children are not important for me...I think the most important thing is that I can do whatever I like in my career. But get married? I don't think so, probably after 30- or so, I don't know. I really don't want to even...I don't want to have a child or children. I don't like that." (WHY)

I think marriage is quite a natural thing, but I don't want to force myself because other people say, "it is time for you to get married", so I will try to find a person to marry. I do not think that is a good way. ... You know, Chinese people always say if you don't become a wife and a mother, then your life isn't so complete, so people are always telling me. Sometimes even now I feel very bad because all my good friends have already married and I am the only one that is left. This gives me a bad feeling. It seems that no-one wants to select me. (WLJ)

To a large degree, the women's accounts revealed something of the difficult and paradoxical position in which they found themselves. On the one hand, their families financially and emotionally supported their international degree studies

and endorsed their career ambitions during their early twenties. Nonetheless, the women also felt themselves pressured to conform to traditional feminine roles in family and society, while grappling with the realities of discrimination at work against married women and mothers. Attempting to resolve these tensions during the five years following graduation, was a recurrent theme that emerged from a number of the women's accounts in study one and which remain unhappily resolved or simply held at bay for the majority who are unmarried and/or without children in 2004.

Education, freedom and individual identity

In spite of the evolving tensions highlighted above, the cumulative picture emerging from the data is that participation in the overseas / private HE system, to some extent gave women *permission* to begin negotiating different life choices for themselves in respect of family relationships, professional opportunities and self-identity. Indeed, for a small group of the women, the tendency to identify themselves as self-determining individuals progressed further, into a fundamental questioning of their social and cultural identity. Three women in particular discussed the ways in which they felt they were fundamentally changed as a result of their educational experiences, even to the point that they were no longer “Chinese”. For example:

I felt I had not enough time to let me think of the way [to do things] in Chinese.

[I am] less Chinese and more English! (WHY)

...I am changed. ... Before, I was very pure, maybe 100% [Chinese] and now I'm not. That makes it very difficult to work in the government companies or

work in the traditional Chinese [company] because you are fed up with their attitude. (SS)

This potential erosion of cultural identity posed significant challenges to the women, especially in a society such as China where conformity, sense of family, patriotism, and national identity are positively constructed and where one of the purposes of conventional education is to augment levels of civic identity and social responsibility among the intellectual classes. One implication seems to be that those who have studied outside the Chinese mainstream may become socially marked out from their peers. Indeed, for most participants in the two studies, a palpable sense existed of something indefinably important about the cross-cultural nature of their experience, the movement between international and local cultures of living, thinking and learning. These factors applied equally to students in the UK and those studying and working in the UK/ international system in China. Continued iterations of cultural interpretation and sense-making seem to have wrought powerful effects over those women aware of them. For this group, there was a direct correlation between participating in foreign HE and moving away from a Chinese identity as a woman, both as an individual and in their everyday workplace orientation. Indeed, all of the women at some stage in the interviews explored questions about these basic identities, as they touched their intimate relationships or their cultural and personal life-orientation. Such preoccupations tended to reinforce the historical correlation between education and gender and cultural dynamics in the Chinese context. They also pose some profound ethical questions for institutions involved in sino-international exchange.

Work experience

In terms of the general contextual themes about women and employment identified in the literature, the study group's accounts resonated in a number of ways. In particular, the practical tensions existing between personal life, family relationships and work emerged strongly from the women in study one over time. By 2004, the youngest participants had reached mid-late twenties. In some respects they conformed to fairly traditional norms for Chinese women. For example, all except one of the single women's primary residence remained the parental home. The one exception was a woman originally from rural Inner Mongolia who was living and working in Beijing and who perforce was unable to live with her parents. In spite of this pattern, the women universally reported experiencing increasing pressure from family and in the workplace to conform to traditional expectations of women as they aged, particularly in respect of marriage:

I think, if I didn't do my degree, at 22 years [old] I should be married...My education makes it very hard to find a real man, a nice man...Maybe I am quite independent. I have friends. If I couldn't find some boy who's quite smart, I just give up. A waste of my time...the pressure is high. You know in the office everybody asks me, 'do you have a boyfriend?' I said, 'no.' They are all surprised because other girls, even younger than me, they are already married. They have a son. They say, 'what is the matter with you?' They think I have very high standards...But I do not regret. (WHY, 2004, aged 28)

I don't want to get married soon. But there is pressure, always pressure. My parents introduce many, many men to me and I just don't want to make them

angry, so I go to see them, just see them and make friends and then finish. (YY, 2004, aged 29)

Nonetheless, they expressed views of independence and a desire to build careers and professional futures, recognizing the difficulties confronting women in the workplace. Education played an important part in this picture, and a number of women noted the importance of obtaining or having obtained higher degrees from recognized institutions in order to increase their attractiveness to employers compared to men:

Women have to be very quick, very intelligent, or has you know, they would like you to have quite good education in terms of the school or something because it is... when people mention you they can introduce you like, "hi, this is [name deleted] from Harvard University or from Cornell. (SS, 2001)

Nonetheless, the experiences of the women in both studies identified a generally discriminatory environment in terms of their access to employment and the persistence of traditional gender-based constructions of work for women and men:

Because I am a girl, [I do] something like the admin. It is good for a lady to do because it is ... how to say? Because it is very easy to control. Because the female must have work that is easier to control, because it is easier to do like the housework. The usual style is this way because Chinese always think the company is just like the family, so the female should do the house work of the family, so admin is better for a girl to do this. So many of the salesmen should be a man. If you are a lady, you did your job like a salesman they will think, 'oh, you are a powerful woman,' and they don't like. In China, some people think that to study business is only good for a man. (PT, 2001)

Within this broad picture of the tensions to which the women were exposed, their work choices also reflected the wider volatility of the Chinese employment market and the need to achieve upward mobility by moving from one company to another owing to the obstacles of being promoted within an organization:

You stay in one place and learn as much as you can from that job or something. Then you change to another place and you are learning a completely different thing. It is very helpful for personal development.... Well, like some of my friends who are married and settled with kids or something, you know...they won't change jobs very easily even if they... there is a different thing between a man and a woman...(PTE, 2001)

Difficulties of job advancement and mobility was expressed as a particular issue by the older women in the group:

I have to keep changing, just go from one company to another to get the money. It's just for the money. For my daughter and for her education. If I stay in one company, I cannot get better position, so I must go to another place to earn more money. (ZW, 2004)

What is clear from the group as a whole is that both work and personal lives are characterized by struggle and contradiction as the women respond to both the old and newly-emerging values of Chinese society. All of the women showed a high level of sensitivity to context linked to a pragmatism driven by the consistently difficult realities that characterize the turbulence of China today. The women in the studies are united in a strong sense of self and self-identity which asserts them as modern, powerful women, enfranchised in ways that were unthinkable just a few generations ago. Nonetheless their frustration and the complexity of

the choices confronting them in their daily and intimate lives is also palpable in their stories and illuminates the difficulties that remain for them to negotiate.

Conclusion

What emerges from the stories in the projects are intimate illustrations of more general descriptive gender patterns within large-scale sectoral research, highlighting the difficulties confronting women in China. At the same time, however, the women in the studies also seem strongly motivated to participate in China's economic development and regard the environment as equally full of opportunity as obstacles. They assert that their education confers a new legitimacy enabling them to participate not only in prosperity but in the changing power-dynamic emerging in China today. Nonetheless, they are also moving away from traditionally-accepted social and family roles. Many of the women are ambivalent about marriage and child-rearing. A number discussed the difficulties of managing career and family and talked about parental pressure encouraging them to become wives and mothers. Necessarily, these family pressures do not affect women exclusively. The degree to which women appear to be eschewing traditional responsibilities instead of struggling with them, however, is significant. As part of this process, the women appear mainly motivated towards work outside of the domestically-owned sector and the majority are seeking further education and/or work outside of China. Perhaps the fundamental commentary that their stories provide on gender dynamics in contemporary China, therefore, is that the forces moving against equality are marshalled so strongly, that women can only find professional opportunities by moving into external environments, perhaps to return on more equal terms later in their lives. What that implies for the future

balance of Chinese society is difficult to foresee, but seems to stand in contradiction to the vision of an integrated and equal society that the government articulates as at the heart of its current education and employment policy.

Weaving together the strands of the literature and the illustrations from the two projects, the history of education and work for women in China appears to be fraught and can make depressing reading. Very few women in China today have the opportunity to participate in education beyond the most basic level. For those women lucky enough to live in the city or to come from a wealthy family, however, access to "modern" - especially private - education and its emancipatory opportunities is a real possibility. For women in the rural environment or whose family lack the funds to provide education, chances of making a change to their situation remain remote. What is clear is that while the government's reforms from the late 1970s have opened the door of opportunity for many foreign investors, entrepreneurs and educators, it has slammed shut against increased educational opportunity for many women and social mobility for most. In work, few women function in senior positions and most are sidelined into "traditional" roles in the caring and service professions. Women and men in both studies noted active gender discrimination in favour of men in recruitment and promotion in all kinds of professional areas. The re-entry of the Chinese diaspora as a factor in both business and education provision may also prove to be an ambivalent force when it comes to emancipation and equality for women. Certainly the stronger thrust of traditional Confucian attitudes to women that is evident in Hong Kong and Taiwanese societies, for example, may be compounding the resurgence of

discrimination against women. This difficult environment makes it especially challenging for ambitious professionals to thrive.

Balancing this bleak perspective, however, responses emerging from women in the face of continued absence of opportunity seem to support the development of the independent / international education sector. What is clear from the data collected in the two projects is that the women involved regarded their experience in international HE in a very positive light, not only in terms of knowledge gained but also as a result of their personal development. They talk optimistically about real opportunity for themselves and for the country more generally, though this is strongly linked with an insistence that opening-up and effective reform must develop if its potential is to be realized. It is also important to remember that the women in the studies are already winners, possessed as they and their families were of the financial capability to pay for their education. The wider social consequences of their ongoing decision-making, however, seem likely to continue to take them outside of the mainstream of Chinese society. While liberating them personally, their education and working lives may also be perpetuating a society of division and stratification, where opportunity remains the exclusive province of intellectual or economic elites and women in deprived areas of China remain both socially and intellectually disenfranchised.

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