

Women's Education in China: Past and Present

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Abstract. With the rapid development of China's economy, the level of female education in China has developed rapidly. Based on data collected, this study presented the historical development process of Chinese women's education, the proportion of women who received higher education, and the proportion of women who obtained university degrees. After comparing with the situation of some developed countries, the author anticipated the future situation of Chinese female education. A brief analysis is done to the problems and deficiencies of Chinese female education and the corresponding countermeasures are proposed.

1 Introduction

Ancient China experienced a long period of patriarchal society, emphasizing "Ignorance is a woman's virtue", when women basically did not receive education, thus most are illiterate. In the 19th century when links between East and West increased and more women were educated in schools or missionary girls' schools. It was not until the 20th century that girls' schools were established, mainly in Jiangsu, Shanghai and other economically, culturally and transportation-developed areas, but the number of schools was still not large ^{[1][2]}. After the 1911 Revolution, women's education had great progress due to the legal confirmation of women's right to education and the progress of social concepts, as well as the strong demand of women's right on equal education. During that period, social unrest and unbalanced development impeded the development of women's education. By 1949, the female illiteracy rate was as high as 90% ^{[3][4]}. Since the founding of new China, women's education has been on the right track and developed rapidly. In particular, over the past 40 years of reform and development, women's education has been fully developed, especially in higher education. At present, it can be said that Chinese women have completely equal rights with men in education, reaching a new height. The development of Chinese women's education has also led to the corresponding development of women's employment and the increase of women's income, thus promoting the improvement of women's social status. Chinese women have been fully involved in all aspects of society, politics, economy and science, and profoundly changed the Chinese society. The development course of Chinese women's education will be shown below by detailed statistical data. Used in this article are based on data from the Chinese women's social status report ^{[5][6][7][8]}, the Chinese women's development report ^[9], the Chinese women's development outline ^[10], news reports and a

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variety of research materials [11] [12] [13] [14] [15] [16] [17] [18] [19] [20]. As data sources at different stages may come from multiple literatures and some statistics are done on demographic data, so the source of data will not be specified in the following data analysis. When different statistical data appear, official release data will be used.

2 Chinese women's education: History and development

Development of female education can be reflected by indicators such as female illiteracy rate, girls' enrolment rate, the number of girls in school and the average number of female education years. The proportion of female students in each educational stage reflects the situation that female students receive education, compared with male students, and to some extent represents the importance that a society attaches to female students.

In the early years of the People's Republic of China, only a limited number of Chinese women were receiving education. In 1949, 90% of Chinese women were illiterate. It decreased to 32% by 1990. Figure 1 shows the proportion of illiterate women over the age of 15 in China. As can be seen, the illiteracy rate among Chinese women had been reduced to 4.1 percent by 2020. This is a great achievement, showing that more than 95 percent of Chinese women can read and write, completely changing the situation from ancient China where women in the patriarchal society almost did not receive much formal education.

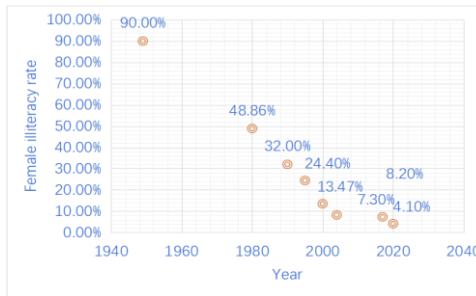


Fig. 1. Female illiteracy rate in China

The reduction of illiteracy rate among women is mainly the result of vigorously increasing girls' school enrollment rate since 1949. Figure 2 shows the change of the rate of school-age girls in China. As can be seen from the figure, the enrollment rate of girls rocketed in the first 30 years after 1949. By 1986, girl enrollment rate had reached 93.6%. This fundamentally changed the situation that women were discriminated against, and it became a social consensus that women should receive formal education. By 2017, 99.9% of girls were able to attend school and receive proper education, completely changing the traditional perception.

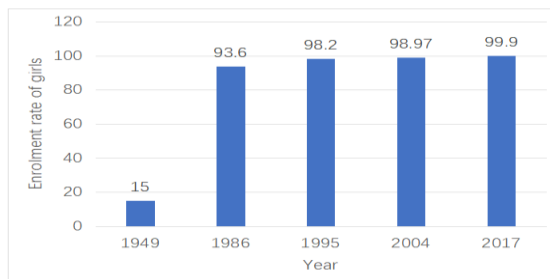


Fig. 2. Enrolment rate of school-age girls in China (unit: %)

The proportion of girls in primary school reflects the degree of women's access to basic education compared with that of men. Figure 3 shows the historical change of the proportion of girls in primary schools in China in the past 70 years. As can be seen from the figure, the proportion of girls in primary schools in the early years after 1949 was only 23%, indicating the existence of serious gender discrimination in education. By the 1980s, girls accounted for more than 45 percent of primary school students, indicating that women's education level has been greatly improved. Since 2000, the proportion has been more than 46%, indicating that girls' access to primary education is basically the same as that of men. The little difference of a few percentages here may due to the difference in the gender ratio between boys and girls.

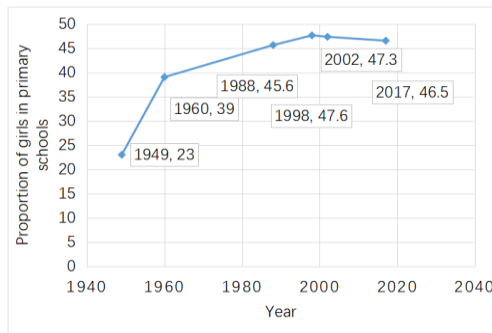


Fig. 3. Proportion of girls in Primary Schools in China (unit: %)

Whether girls continue higher levels of education after primary education can be reflected in the proportion of girls in general secondary schools and the proportion of girls in tertiary institutions. In 2002, the proportion of girls in regular middle schools in China reached 46.7%, while by 2020, it is 50.4%. Figure 4 shows the change of the proportion of female students in universities and colleges in China. As can be seen from the figure, the proportion was only 19.8% in the early years of the People's Republic of China, and 24.1% in 1978. During this period, the number of female students receiving education was relatively small, accounting for less than a quarter of that of male students. Since China's reform and opening up, especially since 2000, the level of Chinese women higher education has increased significantly, accounting for more than 52% of the total in 2015. This fully shows that "women hold up half of the sky" has become a fact. Chinese women have completely changed their destiny and came to the era of intellectual women.

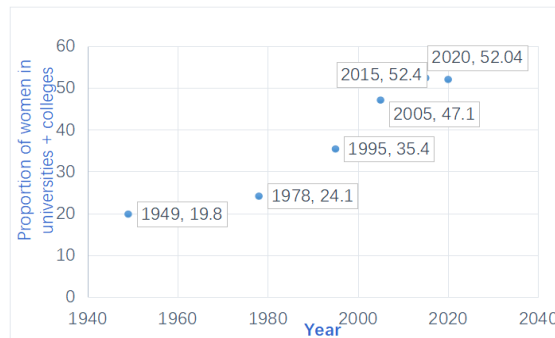


Fig. 4. Proportion of female students in Chinese universities and colleges (unit: %)

Figure 5 shows the change on the average years of Chinese women education, which depicts the education level of women in a country as a whole. In 1980, the average length

of schooling for Chinese women was 4.2 years, indicating that most of them had only primary school education at that time. In 2000, the average length of schooling was 7.07 years, which means most girls receive junior secondary education. By 2020, it is 9.59 years (9.66 years for males), indicating that the majority of females complete high school. By 2020, the average number of years of schooling for women aged 18-24 was 12.81. Such improvement of the average education level of Chinese women has promoted the overall level of the labor force and promoted the overall economic and social development.

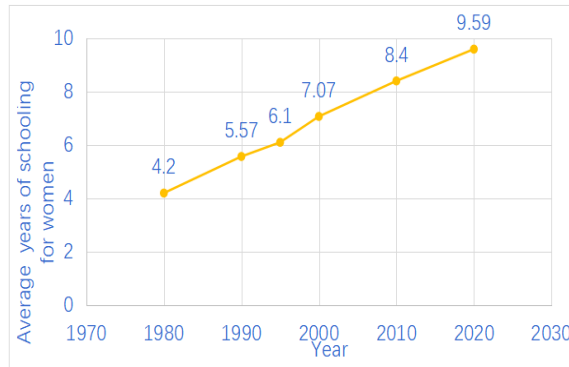


Fig. 5. Average years of education for Chinese women (unit: years)

As the number of Chinese women receiving higher education increases, so does the number of Chinese women enrolled in advanced degree studies. Figure 6 shows the change of the proportion of female students in master's degree programs in China. As can be seen from the graph, the proportion of female postgraduate students has increased from 26% in 1993 to 54.98% in 2020. After the reform and opening up, the number of girls receiving high-level education has taken a substantive leap, and has surpassed the number of men. While we can say girls are more diligent than boys in their studies, the jump is also a reflection of society's recognition and inclusiveness. Chinese women have come to the era of receiving higher and high quality education.

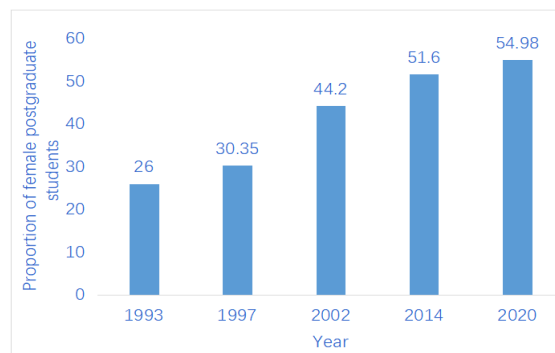


Fig. 6. Proportion of female postgraduate students in China (unit: %)

3 Female education in China: Future prospects

The rising of Chinese women's education promoted Chinese women's participation in society. Figure 7 shows the change of female employment in China. As can be seen from it, the number of women employed was about 170 million in 1978, 290 million in 1990 and

340 million in 2010. This is the result of social and economic development since 1978, which has increased the employment opportunities, and the result of the increase of female education level to obtain more employment opportunities. Figure 8 shows urban female employment in China, which can better reflect the situation of female employment in urban areas. While there is urban employment reduction caused by the restructuring of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s, the number of female urban employment grew rapidly after 2000, which also proves that the improvement of female education increases female employment opportunities.

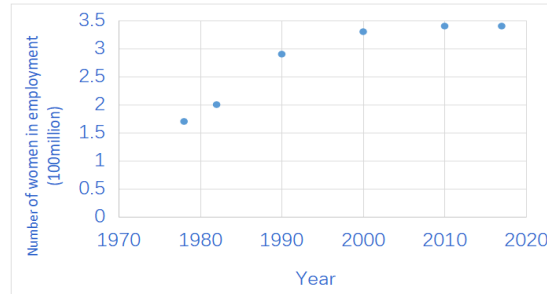


Fig. 7. Number of women employed in China (unit: 100 million)

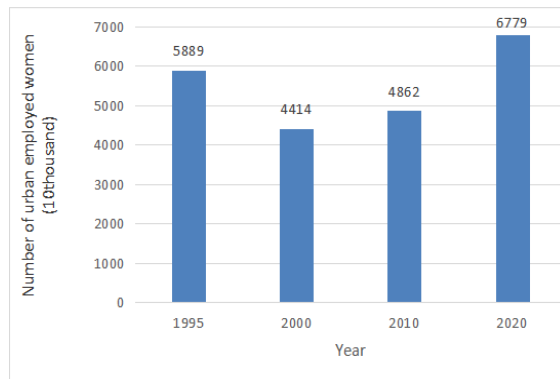


Fig. 8. Number of women employed in urban areas in China

The number of female professionals in public economic enterprises and institutions can reflect the high quality of female employment. The number of female skilled workers in the public sector was 12.7 million in 2010, 14.58 million in 2015 and 15.29 million in 2017. This shows that with the increase in the number of women receiving higher education, female professional and technical personnel are also increasing rapidly. By 2017, women accounted for 48.6% of professionals, indicating that women are on a par with men in the field of technology.

Although the proportion of women among Chinese college students has increased from 24.1% in 1978 to 52.04% in 2020 (Figure 4), the proportion of Chinese women receiving higher education is still low. By 2020, 18.0% of Chinese women had received college education or higher, only 1.6% higher than that of men. Among women aged 18-24, the proportion was 50.9%. Compared with the US higher education rate of 35% (2018), there is still a lot of room for growth. In the United States, 72% of high school girls enrolled in college in 2008, and in Sweden, more than 50% of women enrolled in higher education in

2020. The comparison shows that the proportion of women receiving higher education in China is still not high, and there is still large space for development.

Compared with developed countries in Europe and the United States, the overall proportion of female students in higher education in China is relatively low, so female college students in China will have a large increase in the future. Figure 9 shows the change of the number of female college students in China from 2004 to 2020. The data being basically conform to linear growth. Linear estimation is done to predict the number of female college students in the next 13 years, as is shown in Table 1. It is predicted that the number of female college students in China will reach 26.197 million in 2033.

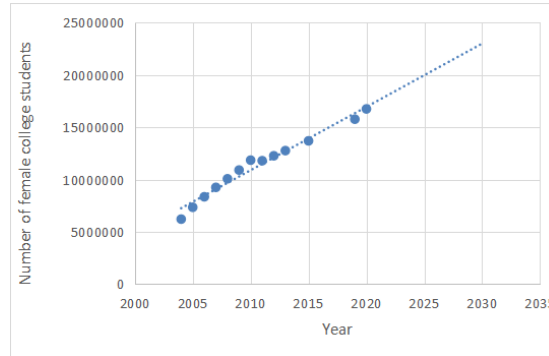


Fig. 9. Number of female college students

Table 1. Number and forecast of female college students in China (Unit: person)

Year	Number of female college students	Year	Prediction of the number of female college students
2004	6220763.04	2021	16799639.45
2005	7352844.70	2022	17582804.48
2006	8356884.75	2023	18365969.50
2007	9258606.21	2024	19149134.53
2008	10076830.15	2025	19932299.55
2009	10914159.47	2026	20715464.58
2010	11859498.69	2027	21498629.61
2011	11805708.89	2028	22281794.63
2012	12277013.78	2029	23064959.66
2013	12769807.63	2030	23848124.69
2015	13704066.00	2031	24631289.71
2019	15776082.12	2032	25414454.74
2020	16755030.00	2033	26197619.77

Presently 13.1% of U.S. adults have a master's degree, or doctoral degree. To narrow the gap, there is plenty room for Chinese women to receive high-level higher education and achieve rapid development in the future.

4 Women education in China: Problems and countermeasures

Since 1949, women's education in China has made great progress and remarkable achievements, but there are still problems.

The traditional preference for sons over daughters leads to the lower average number of years of schooling for women than for men (9.59 years for women while 9.66 years for men in 2020), and the illiteracy rate for women higher than the average (4.10% for women and 2.9% for the total). The average length of schooling for women in rural western China is only 7.44 years which shows that in rural areas of China, the traditional preference for boys leads to lack of attention to female education when parents are willing to spend more

resources on boys. But in Chinese cities, especially big ones, that problem no longer exists. Social economy development and parents' education level improvement will change this situation in the near future.

There is still a gap in higher education and high-level degree education between Chinese female education and developed countries. Although women make up more than 52% of college students in China, the number of women who have received higher education is still low, accounting for 18% of the female population, far lower than the rate of more than 50% in developed countries. This shows that China's higher education, especially female higher education, still need development. In 2020, the proportion of female postgraduate students in China was 50.9%, more than that of male students, but the total number was only 1,599,000, which is relatively small compared with the whole female population and has large room for development. At present, the number of female doctoral students in China accounts for 43.23% of doctoral students, there is large space as well, considering the total number of female population.

With the increase of years of education and the improvement of education level for women, problems have arisen accordingly. As women's education age increases, age of marriage is delayed and fewer children are born. It also delays the age of employment, marriage and childbearing. Rising levels of education have also changed the concept of Chinese women's child-rearing, seeking fewer but better child-rearing strategies. What happened in the early developed countries, especially in east Asian cultural circle, where the concept of marriage and child-rearing is more traditional, where children born out of wedlock and children raised by single parents are not recognized by the society, is happening in China at present. The phenomenon of fewer children caused by the extension of education is more serious. Solution to this problem is likely to be a long-term process, requiring cooperation at all levels of society. Adjusting the education stage of college students and graduate students to implement supporting measures for marriage, such as flexible academic system, change in centralized dormitory management and other measures can be used as improvement strategies. Legislation and social recognition of the legality of children out of wedlock, increased living allowances and maternity care for women in university and postgraduate education may help to ameliorate the situation.

As women become more educated, another problem is the rural-urban gender imbalance. At present, men in rural areas find it difficult to find a wife, while women in big cities find it difficult to find a husband. Female rural college graduates tend to seek jobs and homes in big cities, resulting in rural young men facing the mentioned challenge. This is a temporary problem in the urbanization development to be solved gradually with social economy development.

5 Conclusion

In short, Chinese female education has experienced the embryonic stage after 1911, the vigorous development after 1949 and achieved remarkable achievements. Chinese women have gone through the rapid elimination of illiteracy in the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the universal primary education before and after the Cultural Revolution, the universal middle school education after the reform and opening-up, and the vigorous development of higher education in the 21st century. Women's education in China has achieved gender equality and moved towards "half the sky" in a real sense.

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