

Persisting Shadows: Examining the Legacy of Gender Inequality in Chinese Family Dynamics and Resource Allocation

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Abstract:

This study examines the persistent gender inequality in Chinese family dynamics, particularly focusing on the traditional preference for sons over daughters in resource allocation. It highlights the “Fu Di Mo” phenomenon, where women disproportionately support their brothers, reflecting deep-rooted patriarchal norms. The paper explores how these practices, rooted in historical cultural values, are perpetuated by economic and educational disparities. It argues for a multifaceted approach to address this inequality, involving policy reform, educational restructuring, and shifts in societal attitudes. The study emphasizes the need for comprehensive strategies to achieve gender equality in modern Chinese society.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Chinese Families, Resource Allocation, Cultural Norms, Educational Disparities, Societal Change.

Introduction: The Impact of Family on Child Development

The influence of the family environment on child development is a subject of critical importance in educational and psychological research. Rooted in the insights of Ellen Key, a distinguished Swedish educator, the concept that a nurturing and positive environment is fundamental to forming correct thought processes and admirable personality traits in children is widely acknowledged. Extensive research supports the notion that various aspects of the family environment have profound implications on children’s internal psyche and external behavior (Cooper G.C.R.,1985). As the cornerstone of a child’s developmental journey, the family crafts the immediate growth environment and equips the child with resources for long-term development.

The intricate interplay of parental behavior, cognitive approaches, and the dynamics of family relationships plays a crucial role in shaping a child’s personality. Extensive research substantiates the profound impact of various facets of the family environment on children’s psychological and behavioral development. As the primary milieu for a child’s growth, the family shapes the immediate environment and provides resources for long-term development. It is well-documented that children raised in families with high parental investment are more likely to develop a sense of security, independent decision-making skills, a broad knowledge base, diverse talents, and superior social skills, displaying confidence in social interactions(Lee, V.W.P., Ling, H.W.H., Cheung, J.C.S., Tung, S.Y.C., Leung, C.M.Y., &Wong, Y.C.,2021).

Historical Context: Gender Roles in Traditional Chinese Families

The extent of parental investment in child-rearing is influenced by many factors, including economic conditions, social status, family structure, resource allocation, parental cultural literacy, behavioral habits, life attitudes, philosophical perspectives, marital relationships, and parenting styles. A notable phenomenon, observed globally but especially pronounced in East Asia, is the substantial investment in child-rearing(Marginson, S.,2011). Using China as a case study, this paper examines how the millennia-old imperial examination system, unique to traditional Chinese society, fostered a tendency for excessive educational investment. The imperial exams offered families of all economic and social statuses the hope of a brighter future for their children. This system ingrained a deep-rooted responsibility in Chinese examinees to bring honor to their families, highlighting the concept of family in the Chinese tradition of valuing education(Zheng,1999). This vividly reflects the collectivist culture shaped by China’s historical context. While the significance of collectivist thought in the Chinese social system is well-established, there is a gap in understanding how this collectivist culture has influenced parental investment in child development. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the impact of collectivist cultural shaping on the investment in child development.

Marital Dynamics and Gender Inequality in Traditional Chinese

Families

The fabric of traditional Chinese culture, woven with threads of collectivism and holistic principles, starkly contrasts the individualistic ethos prevalent in Western societies. This cultural paradigm, deeply embedded in the Chinese psyche, is intricately linked to the concepts of “public versus private” and “individual versus society” (Wang,2005). These concepts are not mere philosophical abstractions but lived realities that have historically shaped China’s social and familial structures (Zhao,2019). The agricultural roots of Chinese civilization, with its profound dependence on water management and land cultivation, cultivated a collective consciousness among its people. This reliance on shared resources and communal labor fostered unity and interdependence, binding individuals to their community and land. Fei Xiaotong’s depiction of “rural China” captures the essence of this societal structure, where life is inextricably tied to one’s native soil, and social mobility is minimal. In such a society, relationships are predominantly based on familiarity and kinship, governed more by customary practices and moral obligations than formal legal systems. The aim was always to strengthen the social fabric and maintain cohesion rather than to encourage individual autonomy(Fei,2019).

The teachings of Mencius, advocating for communal farming practices, exemplify this ethos. By promoting shared wells and fields, these practices were practical regarding resource management and instrumental in reinforcing social bonds and collective moral values. The emphasis was always on the greater good, the welfare of the community, and the moral duties of the individual towards the collective. Such values of loyalty, duty, and collective harmony have been the bedrock of traditional Chinese culture.

The imperial examination system emerged as a pivotal institution within this cultural framework. 7 It functioned as a means of academic assessment and, more significantly, as a vehicle for perpetuating family legacy and reinforcing social roles. This system underpinned the pooling of resources to elevate a single member in large Chinese families, reflecting the high value placed on family honor and societal achievement(Liu,2005). However, it is critical to recognize that in a patriarchal society, these achievements and honors were predominantly reserved for males, a reflection of the deep-rooted patrilineal traditions.

The status of women in ancient Chinese society, particularly in the context of agricultural labor, was markedly different. Limited by physical strength and the economic realities of peasant life, women were often

viewed as less capable contributors to family labor. This perception was further entrenched by patriarchal doctrines that emerged during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, which sought to consolidate male dominance and control over women. The primogeniture inheritance system, a cornerstone of these doctrines, ensured that family wealth and titles were passed down to the eldest son, further marginalizing women’s roles in the family(Zou, J.,2009). Women’s subjugation extended beyond the economic sphere into the realm of political and social exclusion. In a society where men were the creators of history and the wielders of power, women were often relegated to passive roles, their contributions and capabilities overshadowed and undervalued. This marginalization was perpetuated through traditional female education, steeped in feudal ethics, and focused more on instilling subservience and moral rectitude than intellectual development. Such education reinforced that a woman’s primary role was to be a dutiful wife and mother, obedient to the patriarchal order (Gates, H.,1989). The adage “a woman without talent is virtuous” encapsulated this perspective, effectively denying women opportunities for intellectual and personal growth and cementing their subordinate status in society.

Devoid of rights to paternal inheritance and property ownership, women’s economic status was inextricably tied to their relationships with men - first as daughters, then as wives, and finally as mothers. The proverb “A married daughter is like spilled water” encapsulates the transient role of women in their natal families, predestined to be married off and serve another household. From a young age, girls were indoctrinated with the duty of continuing the family lineage, not of their own, but of their future husbands, reducing their identity to mere vessels of progeny and domestic servitude.

This societal construct reduced women to commodities within the marriage market, valued primarily for their obedience and domestic virtues rather than their thoughts or aspirations. The feudal era’s tax and land allocation systems, which counted only male members of the family, further marginalized women, often relegating them to the status of chattel, to be traded as slaves, concubines, or even prostitutes in the most tragic of circumstances(Littlejohn, L.J.,2017). Fathers wielded absolute authority over their daughters, including life and death decisions, epitomizing the extreme patriarchal dominance in familial structures.

The economic impotence imposed on women by the patriarchal system relegated them to the roles of sexual and reproductive subordinates, effectively weaponizing feudal laws and customs against them (Gao, X.,2003). Politically and socially, women were excluded from the

spheres of power and decision-making. As men engaged in fierce societal competition, accruing ‘talent’ and creating their ‘history,’ women were confined to subservient roles, their capabilities and contributions undervalued and overlooked. This systemic marginalization of women was further perpetuated through traditional female education, deeply imbued with feudal ethics (Kristeva, J. & Kennedy, E.C., 1975).

Traditional female education, as chronicled in texts like Liu Xiang’s “Biographies of Exemplary Women” and Ban Zhao’s “Lessons for Women,” was not about empowering women with knowledge but about indoctrinating them into a life of servitude and moral subservience. The curriculum, steeped in the doctrine of “three obediences and four virtues,” was designed to reinforce the patriarchal order. (Gao, X., 2003). The prevailing belief that “a woman’s ignorance is her virtue” denied women access to intellectual development, effectively stifling their potential for personal growth and autonomy. This form of education was not about enlightenment but about entrenching women’s subjugation, ensuring their compliance with feudal moral codes, and perpetuating their oppressed and enslaved status within society.

In the patriarchal hierarchy of traditional Chinese society, males were inherently privileged from birth, enjoying superior status and rights. This gender-based disparity was deeply ingrained in the family structure, as vividly depicted in ancient texts and practices. The Zhou Dynasty, for instance, exemplified this bias. The “Book of Songs · Xiaoya · Si Gan” illustrates the stark contrast in the treatment of male and female offspring: a newborn boy was celebrated and provided with a cradle, fine clothes, and jade playthings, symbolizing his future role as the head of the family. In contrast, a girl was relegated to the ground, her attire and toys indicative of her future in domestic labor. From an early age, girls were conditioned to accept their subordinate role, cautioned to adhere to etiquette and not bring dishonor to their families.

The “Book of Rites · Neize” further highlights the educational disparity between genders. Boys, as young as three days old, were assigned caretakers who embodied virtues of generosity, kindness, gentleness, respectfulness, and reticence, preparing them for a life of learning and leadership. By age six, they were introduced to a curriculum of classics, poetry, rituals, and music, laying the foundation for their future societal roles. In stark contrast, girls were largely excluded from formal education, their learning confined to domestic skills and moral teachings reinforcing their subservient status (Guisso, R.W., 1981).

In this patrilineal and patriarchal system, societal roles

and expectations were demarcated along gender lines. Men were groomed for public life, leadership, and the continuation of the family lineage. They were the creators of history, the bearers of family honor, and the custodians of cultural and intellectual heritage. On the other hand, women were largely invisible in these narratives, their roles and contributions confined to the domestic sphere, and their identities defined by the men in their lives.

Reassessment of Value and Resource Allocation in Traditional Chinese Families

Over the centuries, the values and roles of men and women in society were distinctly different. Men’s worth was often determined by their success in the imperial examinations, inheritance, and ability to navigate the world, securing a stable and honorable life. Women, in contrast, were relegated to the role of dependents, their worth tied to their service to men. This dynamic led to a long-standing imbalance in parental investment in children: girls were often raised to be sacrificial for their birth families. At the same time, boys were groomed to achieve honor and continue the family lineage.

The value assigned to males and females translated directly into allocating family resources, heavily skewed toward boys. From birth, boys were seen as carriers of the family name and future custodians of family heritage, justifying greater investment in their upbringing and education. The education of boys was comprehensive, including academic learning and training in social and administrative skills, preparing them for future roles as leaders and decision-makers. In contrast, girls were often relegated to learning domestic skills, with their education centered around preparing them for marriage and motherhood.

This gender-based resource allocation was rooted in the family’s long-term economic and social strategy. Investing in sons was seen as investing in the future of the family lineage, with the expectation that sons would eventually bring wealth, honor, and stability to the family. On the other hand, daughters were often viewed as temporary members of their birth family, destined to become part of their husband’s family upon marriage. This perspective led to a lesser focus on their long-term development in terms of education and emotional investment (Chu C.Y. Cyrus, YuXie, and Ruoh-rong Yu, 2007).

In the context of traditional Chinese culture and familial resource constraints, parents exhibited a marked preference for resource allocation between sons and daughters. This preference not only represented a bidirectional intergenerational transfer of resources

but also resulted in an asymmetrical intra-generational transfer among siblings. Historically, women, viewed as commodities in the marriage market, were often unable to contribute back to their natal families. In modern times, while gender equality has made significant strides, the remnants of these traditional practices persist. Women, to some extent, can now contribute back to their birth families. Still, this support is often channeled into assisting their brothers in establishing their own families, thereby perpetuating the patrilineal lineage. This cycle reinforces the deep-rooted patriarchal culture, creating a vicious cycle of gender inequality(Tao,2011).

Contemporary Reflections on Traditional Gender Roles in Chinese Society

Persistent Inequality: The Phenomenon of ‘Fu Di Mo’

In modern Chinese society, the enduring legacy of traditional gender roles and resource allocation is exemplified by the phenomenon of “Fu Di Mo” or “Brother-Supporting Demon.” This term describes women who, often at great personal and financial sacrifice, provide substantial support to their brothers, encompassing everything from daily needs to significant life events like marriage and child-rearing. This phenomenon directly results from the long-standing preference for sons in family resource allocation, leading to unequal intergenerational relationships(Lei, X., Shen, Y., Smith, J.P., &Zhou, G.,2017).

The “Fu Di Mo” phenomenon highlights the plight of women who, in their efforts to support their birth families and particularly their brothers, sacrifice their well-being and that of their nuclear families(Ostrom E. et al.,1999). This situation underscores the persistent internal exploitation of women within patriarchal family structures. The tension between a daughter’s self-advocacy and self-interest versus the altruistic sacrifice expected within the family reflects the ongoing struggle against gender inequality in familial contexts. The preference for sons in family resource allocation is not only a manifestation of gender inequality in the social and cultural fabric but also a reflection of the moral and ethical responsibilities imposed on women.

Economic and Educational Disparities: The Legacy of Traditional Practices

This gender bias in resource allocation is particularly pronounced in families facing resource constraints. Studies have shown that in economically disadvantaged areas in China, traditional gender notions such as “raising sons for old age” and “preferring sons to daughters”

significantly influence parental expectations and investments. Parents often prioritize educational resources for sons, especially when resources are limited(Parish, William L. and Robert J. Willis, 1993). Gary Becker and others have explored this through the lens of the welfare model, finding that daughters tend to be at a disadvantage in family human capital investment when resources are scarce, with families favoring sons’ education(Blake J., 1981).

This preference stems partly from cultural factors, including direct gender discrimination and the subordinate status of women in patriarchal cultures. Women’s roles as family caretakers are often emphasized, leading them to voluntarily forego educational opportunities. The economic considerations of parents play a crucial role in perpetuating this inequality. (Smith, P.C.,1969) The expected return on educational investment is typically higher for sons than daughters, as women’s wages are generally lower than men’s in developed and developing countries. Additionally, the opportunity cost of education differs between genders; girls are often expected to contribute to household chores or care for younger siblings, limiting their ability to pursue education(Lei, X., Shen, Y., Smith, J.P., &Zhou, G.,2017).

In a patriarchal culture, parents rely primarily on sons for support in old age, making the education of sons a long-term investment. In contrast, once daughters marry, they are often considered “spilled water,” with their educational investment bringing little return to their birth family(Wang W.,2005). This disparity in investment and expectations is a significant factor in the gender differences observed in higher education. The societal employment environment, often unfavorable to women, reinforces parents’ preference for investing in sons’ education, expecting better economic returns and social status.

In traditional family environments, women bear the brunt of household responsibilities, leaving them with less time and energy for professional development. This dynamic leads to lower market returns for women, further perpetuating the cycle of gender inequality. The strong influence of the “raising sons for old age” mentality and the preference for sons directly impacts parental investment in children, often leaving the educational needs of daughters unmet. Despite implementing compulsory education, which has eased the financial burden on families for girls’ education, higher education still requires significant investment, often lacking for girls in less developed areas(Tao,2011).

Gender stereotypes and biases in the education system, such as the belief that “boys are better at math and science, while girls excel in humanities,” and the hidden

gender discrimination that “it’s natural for girls to be poor at math,” are closely linked to the unequal treatment of women in family education support (Chuan, A., List, J.A., Samek, A., & Samujjwala, S., 2022). Men are often nurtured to acquire aggressive production skills, while women are taught to please and adhere to etiquette. In gender socialization, males are shaped to be active, intelligent, capable, and rational. At the same time, females are molded to be submissive, lacking competitive spirit, diligent, caring, and self-sacrificing. In education, teachers often exhibit traditional gender-biased teaching tendencies, setting higher expectations and more lenient requirements for boys while having lower expectations and stricter requirements for girls. Teachers perceive boys as more intelligent and playful, while girls are seen as more serious, concerned about face, and having strong self-esteem, making them less approachable for jokes.

Research has shown that higher education systems are often male-centric, meaning that even when women enter higher education institutions, the education they receive is heavily influenced by male culture (Zhou, 2007). Their perspectives, thinking, and interests are often overlooked. In university English-speaking textbooks, studies have found that male characters outnumber female characters and are assigned more diverse professions and higher social status. The textbooks often portray men as brave, independent, and ambitious, while women, when they appear, are typically depicted as weak, introverted, and in need of protection. Even when independent female characters are presented, they are often closely tied to male characters, reflecting male traits (Cheng, 2004). This indicates that gender equality has not been fully integrated into the mainstream discourse of textbook editing, with a single male perspective still subtly present in educational content.

Discussion

Contemporary Reflections: Gender Roles in Modern Chinese Society

The exploration of gender roles and resource allocation within Chinese families, both historically and in contemporary society, reveals a deeply entrenched system of gender inequality perpetuated by cultural norms, economic considerations, and educational practices. This complex interplay of factors has sustained a patriarchal structure where the preference for sons over daughters continues to influence family dynamics significantly. The phenomenon of “Fu Di Mo” is a contemporary manifestation of this deep-rooted bias, illustrating how traditional practices have adapted to modern contexts but still adversely affect women’s roles within the family and

society.

Central to this issue is the economic rationale that underpins family decisions regarding resource allocation. The preference for investing in sons, seen as a pragmatic approach based on perceived returns, highlights a broader societal issue where economic benefits are often placed above gender equality. This bias is not just a cultural relic but a reflection of current economic realities, suggesting that achieving gender parity requires cultural and social shifts and economic restructuring. Equal employment opportunities, wage parity, and policies supporting women’s career development are essential to counteract these ingrained biases.

Moreover, the historical emphasis on different educational paths for boys and girls has had long-term implications for societal gender roles. While strides have been made toward providing equal educational opportunities, the remnants of these disparities are evident in societal attitudes and expectations. Overcoming these disparities necessitates reform in educational content and teaching methods, emphasizing gender equality and challenging traditional stereotypes.

Addressing the deep-rooted gender biases in Chinese society requires a multifaceted approach. Policy interventions are crucial but must be complemented by social campaigns that challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes. This combined effort can help reshape societal attitudes and perceptions, paving the way for a more equitable society.

Strategies for Change: Towards Gender Equality

In conclusion, the persistence of gender inequality in Chinese families, influenced by historical, cultural, and economic factors, poses significant challenges to achieving gender equality. Tackling these issues requires comprehensive strategies encompassing policy reform, educational changes, and shifts in societal attitudes. Only through such concerted efforts can true gender equality in Chinese society be fully realized, ensuring that the same constraints and biases do not bind future generations.

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