

Influence of Confucianism on Gender Inequality in Chinese Education and Employment

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality exists in many fields of society and makes people hard to grasp the point. But one particular approach to look at this issue is the education system and its relation to employment. For this purpose, it is necessary to understand the role of Confucianism on the mechanism in education and work. This paper analyzes possible tracks of gender bias in women's positioning inherent within Confucianism ideals of natural order and filial piety, shows its manifestation within the performance metrics, textbooks, and learning environment of Chinese classrooms, and how the formation of these stereotypes in students may propagate into the workforce with a focus on females in managerial positions. Then, this paper sheds light on feminist conversations that attempt to mitigate these biases and their success in doing so. Finally, based on the culmination of research findings, a set of recommendations is proposed to mitigate these biases within the context of modern China.

Keywords: Gender Biases, Chinese Education, Workforce

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality is still prevalent in many societies today, including China. According to World Bank's 2012 World Development Report, gender equality in the broader sense contains smart economics, productivity, prospects for next generation, and for the quality of societal policies and institutions [1]. Indeed, the Chinese Constitution stipulates that men and women have equal political rights, inherently ensuring women's place in the country's decision-making. Nonetheless, United Nation's Human Development Reports indicate a significant gap between women's and men's in secondary education completion (58.7 percent and 71.9 percent respectively, for ages 25 and older) and labor power participation (63.9 percent and 78.9 percent respectively) ("Gender" 2). Resolving the gender inequities underpinning these statistics are often convoluted, as its formation is often difficult to pinpoint. Therefore, the first steps to understanding and resolving systematic issues reside in studying the overall belief system, education system, and workplaces of that society. For China, much of the belief system is rooted in Confucianism, an integration of tradition, philosophy, and religion, which instructs not only the people's ways of living but also the meanings of life. While many Confucian ideals are still applicable today, the changes to society since ancient times suggest no perfect transfer between ideals created so long ago and now. In fact, gender biases inherent in Confucianist ideals and their

entrenchment in the education system propagate gender inequality in Chinese education, promoting stereotypical opinions that seep such inequities into the workplace and later life. Transformative ideas of Chinese feminism are needed to reduce inequities while not violating the stability of Confucianism-based society.

Hence, the purpose of this article is to illuminate gender biases within Chinese education and workforce as influenced by biases within Confucianism. The article will give a brief introduction of the implicit gender biases within Confucianism before diving into three aspects of Chinese education system and their biases – examination, curriculum, and learning environment. Then, the article will consider how biases formed within Chinese education propagate to the Chinese workforce and the emerging Chinese feminism schools of thought to mitigate these gender biases. Finally, this article will provide recommendations for mitigating the discussed gender inequality scenarios and suggest future pathways to better understand gender bias within a Chinese context.

1.1. Confucianism and Implicit Biases

Confucianism contains implicit biases towards women that may lead to gender inequality. On the surface, Analects, the classics Confucian, uses "he" much more frequently than "she", revealing the disproportion wordings based on gender. Fundamentally, Confucianism places emphasis on the ideas of filial piety and natural order. Filial piety refers to the "attitude of

obedience, devotion, and care towards one's parents and elderly family members that is the basis of individual moral conduct and social harmony" [2]. To uphold the natural order, one must follow filial piety. For the women, this means to take a domestic role and is often the one to sacrifice for the family, and such roots are still upheld today. Since Confucianism can be thought of to "be human," this subservience of women is made naturally, even as it is what modern times would consider as a source of gender inequity. However, precisely because Confucianism is thought to be the natural order, this seems to suggest that it would be unnecessary to study Confucian ideologies within a modern context. Nonetheless, the core values of filial piety and natural order, while they are crucial ideologies for a stable society, have exerted the influence of implicit biases on women's place, especially in the modern world.

1.2. Gender Biases in Chinese Education

Chinese education's singular emphasis on exams as the ultimate performance benchmark may be inherently biased against women, leading to negative consequences of women's participation in higher education and, therefore their participation in the workforce. This emphasis is partially rooted in historical precedents to select educated people to hold court offices in Imperial China – and the conception behind the exam relates to the Confucian ideal that the civil service exam allows social mobility, implying that everyone has equal opportunity in passing this prestigious test. However, the exam itself is biased in favor of men and those with access to resources that can help them study for the test. An analogous analysis can be made for modern Chinese exams.

As a case study, the Gaokao in China is the most important and competitive exam that decides the university a high school senior would go to after they graduate based on the scores they get on the test. Cai *et al.* find that difference in performance between males and females is "significantly larger in the high-stakes Gaokao relative to the mock examination" for the test [3]. In a similar study on Gaokao and gender differences, Lu *et al.* illuminate that these effects may be caused by "schooling environment rather than inherent gender traits," as stress may stem from different schooling environments [4]. Furthermore, Lu *et al.* also cite recent studies to show that while there is an empirical difference in stress (and thereby performance) levels between females and males, the difference in stress response between each gender biologically cannot account for the difference in willingness to compete [4]. This gendered mismatch between stress levels, performance, and competitiveness inherent within the Gaokao system mirrors that of the civil examination exam. Cai *et al.* suggest two potential ways of interpreting the empirical result – one following the gendered difference stress framework of Lu *et al.*, which directly pinpoints the exam format as the source, the other "being lower expectations and lower returns in the labor market for

women" [3], suggesting that attitudes in the workplace may have negative feedback loops in the education system in terms of gender biases. In other words, these studies imply that the gendered difference visible in Gaokao performances may be caused by not only exam format and scoring that adapts better to men's response to stress over women, but also by differential treatment between the genders may be attributed to within the classroom, which this essay will explore later.

Curriculum and school materials also involve implicit biases toward female, limiting the ways people imagine possible positions within the society where women's places in those positions are "natural." To illustrate this, Wu and Liu have taken studies on primary English textbooks used in China by several different authors along the axis of women's visibility, occupational roles, and domestic roles in illustrations and stories. Visibility refers to the appearance of women in textbooks. Wu and Liu preface that invisibility, especially in foreign language subjects such as English textbooks, "implies that women are not important enough" and that female students' capability to understand the foreign language and culture may be impaired because of their underrepresentation [5]. Overall, Wu and Liu's survey of studies show that men outnumber women in illustrations, and one study also shows this occurring with leading roles within stories as well. **Occupational roles** refer to jobs considered to be of higher economic or social value, like managerial roles or engineers, while **domestic roles** refer to jobs pertaining to the family environment, like cooks and housekeepers. Wu and Liu's survey also shows that there are more diverse occupation roles given to men than women, while there are more domestic roles given to leading women. Furthermore, men tend to be associated with jobs of a higher social or economic status while women are mainly service workers [5].

These three axes, in combination, limit the ways women can be envisioned in positions other than those in the domestic space, propagating implicit biases of women's positioning within society. The causes may be that these texts use examples that are culturally relevant. Since Chinese culture is heavily rooted in Confucianism, which, as described earlier, contains implicit biases, the texts propagate these biases more visibly. The differential in women representation within texts has the opportunity to shape perspective in what is expected for people of different genders, and for students themselves to realize what are the possible roles they may play in the future. Limiting female roles in texts to domestic duties propagates these biases. Women may internalize these ideas, making it more difficult to close gender disparities within different fields of higher education and in the workforce.

Finally, Chinese classroom environments are heavily influenced by Confucian ideas of face (as in to retain respect and prevent humiliation of oneself), harmony, and conformity, creating classrooms that are not ideal for discussion and change, especially regarding problems of gender bias. Kumaran Rajaram describes that Chinese

students are “quiet in classroom situations. The students are taught not to question their teachers or challenge their judgments” [6], following the idea of conformity – the teacher has the ultimate right to what is being taught, and the information is implied to be correct. Additionally, Rajaram claims that “the social norms severely limit the expression of criticism in order to avoid the individual losing face,” linking to the idea of face in Confucianism [6]. This unwillingness to challenge existing ideas and to discuss with large groups of peers ultimately lead to many classes being lectures with limited questioning segments. This unwillingness is also a product of harmony – instead of questioning possibly outdated ideals, Confucianism tends to prompt individuals to conform to the overarching opinions of society. This Confucian-heavy classroom atmosphere allows for very little opportunity for students to reflect on what they learned, leading to a framework of “repetitive learning.” While Rajaram mentions later that students are comfortable conversing in small groups, the lack and discomfort for discussion in-class take away opportunities for students to give feedback to their educators, thereby propagating possibly biased information to later generations of educators and students.

Through performance benchmarks, learning materials, and learning environment, the Confucianism-based Chinese education system is vulnerable to propagating implicit biases against women with very few strategies within the system to mitigate these biases. The formation of these biases fit women into domestic roles and an aura of subservience, limiting the careers where women can be seen as normal and the positions where the women themselves feel natural despite their aptitude for that role.

1.3. Gender Biases in Chinese Workforce

Many studies suggest the prevalence of these biases manifest themselves in the job market – and the Chinese workforce is no exception. Xingqiang Du takes a statistical approach to show that “the proportion of women directors in the boardroom is significantly lower for firms surrounded by strong Confucianism atmosphere than for firms located in regions with weak Confucianism atmosphere” [7]. Du also shows that in addition to gender disparities within these higher-ranked roles, “GDP per capita... attenuates the negative association between Confucianism and board gender diversity”. While it may not have been clear from the classroom contexts the pitfalls of gender inequality, the ideas that propagate from the classroom into the workplace have important economic consequences. To qualify the causes of this underrepresentation, Tatli *et al.* conduct 30 interviews with female managers to show that gender inequality persists because the “responsibility to promote gender equality is marketized and individualized” [8]. In other words, the differential is explained away as a consequence of prioritizing for maximizing profit in a company or as women’s choices, in general, to tend not to follow the career progression

towards management-level roles. However, both ideas are rooted in an implicit understanding that women’s positioning in the domestic sphere – that they are more suited for roles at home than roles with high social or economic value, mirroring the representation in the case study of Chinese English textbooks. Furthermore, Tatli reports that “female disadvantage in accessing management echelons is maintained through an implicit acceptance for gendered norms by organizational members. Subscribing to taken-for-granted views of differential roles and capabilities of men and women, female managers often limit their own capacity to dispute the gendered organizational codes, beliefs, and activities that undervalue their work and contributions” [8]. This self-censoring and self-evaluation by females in these roles can be partially attributed to the lack of women’s positioning in these roles as in the case study of the English textbooks and attributed to the silent environment of the classroom. These situations do not give the opportunity for female students to imagine themselves in these managerial positions, making them feel that it is unnatural for them to be in these positions even if their capabilities match the role. Again, the biases entrenched within the Chinese education system lend themselves to visible and complex gender disparity problems within the workforce.

1.4. Chinese Feminism and Gender Inequality Paradoxes

Nonetheless, feminist spaces have begun to emerge as a result of these issues caused by gender bias. Angela Xiao Wu and Yige Dong describe two versions of what they called “made-in-China feminism,” yet these frameworks themselves also propagate aspects of gender biases in an attempt to mitigate them. The first is the “entrepreneurial C-fem,” which encourages women “to abandon traditional wifely duties such as submissiveness and self-sacrifice so they may exercise their autonomy on the marriage market to maximize their personal returns” [9]. To do this, women capitalize on “their own sexual attraction, including traditional femininity and domesticity, all of which are in the hands of women to cultivate and enhance” [9]. In other words, entrepreneurial C-fem repositions the domestic role as one controlled by the women themselves and not as a result of Confucian culture. However, this repositioning is done by aspects of traditional femininity, therefore still defining the spaces women can be in by the traditional feminine position and unable to reimagine women in diverse roles without this feminine quality. The second feminism framework is the “non-cooperative C-fem,” which empowers women by “denouncing the prevalent marketization of the marital institution” [9], which is the complete opposite of the entrepreneurial framework. However, Wu and Dong also mention that this framework often may exacerbate gender bias in that its arguments display attitudes related to social class. This relation to social class then can lead to workplace biases, as described earlier with the case study of females in

managerial positions. Additionally, despite their seemingly complete opposition against the Confucian ideas of conformity and harmony, these frameworks follow the ideal of face – of retaining respect for oneself – in that these women are relatively successful in empowering themselves against these gendered biases; the existence of internet platforms and celebrities conversant in this subject is only one indicator of so. Furthermore, these frameworks empower women by making them part of the collective of the wise that Confucianism dictates that others should follow, thereby repositioning women within the ideals of Confucianism.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite these issues, the emergence of Chinese-specific feminine frameworks and research on gender biases and stereotypes within a Chinese context opens up the necessary discussion to mitigate these biases within Chinese culture. Educators may attempt to adopt a more discussion-based class or encourage small-group discussions within the classroom environment to establish the feedback loop between educators and students. Performance benchmarks can also be widened so that non-exam-based tests are used to assess student capability, like making student projects and presentations have the same weight as traditional tests. Larger education system changes may involve changing the Gaokao format to even out stress levels and/or providing extra pathways to getting into prestigious colleges in China. Companies can establish diversity objectives in the workplace and apply them to their hiring screen processes and instigate gender bias training for their employees. This not only makes diversity a priority amidst commercial profit goals but also shows the women in the organization that the organization recognizes their disadvantages in cultural norms, potentially giving the female workers more confidence in their roles. However, further research will be needed for creating and evaluating effective solutions in both the classroom and the workplace.

3. CONCLUSION

The influence of Confucianism, which inherently contains gender biases and stereotypes, in the Chinese education system and workplace propagates gender inequality in Chinese society. However, new ideas of Chinese feminism can provide a framework to reduce these inequities while following core values of Confucianism that are essential to Chinese life. The lack of discussion in Chinese classrooms, emphasis on exams as a signal of performance, and implicit biases within materials being taught all serve to propagate existing biases within Confucian ideals. These biases seep into the workplace, as seen with the case study of females in managerial positions, and persist as a result of legitimizing the symptoms of gender bias with the priority to maximize profit and the internalization of being unnatural for the females in those positions.

However, new ideas on Chinese feminism, such as the entrepreneurial and non-cooperative C-fem, open up discussions between females. Past and future research also indicate hopeful recommendations to mitigate gender bias and its manifestations.

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