

Women Rising as Half of the Sky? An Empirical Study on Women from the 'One-Child' Generation and Their Higher Education Participation in Contemporary China (0073)

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Introduction

The People's Republic of China is committed rhetorically and ideologically to gender equality at every level of society. Following Mao Zedong's famous slogan, "Women Holding up Half of the Sky", women in China, especially since the Cultural Revolution, have been encouraged to play a full part in helping to create a genuinely socialist political economy, which can be argued as a process of political, economic and status empowerment. The state's intervention in gender equality was consistent with the Socialist egalitarianism and empowerment of women; however, the market reform since 1978 fundamentally altered the dynamics of the role of the state in gender equality. The particular focus of this article will be tracing the birth cohort whose life course coincides with the introduction of the 'One-Child' policy and the expansion of higher education opportunities.

This article, which is strongly empirical in character, will address two main questions: how have recent changes in social policy (regarding demographics and education in particular) affected women's participation in higher education? And what effects have socioeconomic, cultural and demographic characteristics had on women's academic and career aspirations? This article provides new evidence on gendered participation in higher education in contemporary China. This analysis seeks to shed light on women's academic achievements, career aspirations and political engagement and their implications for social stratification and life chances in a transitional economy, such as is found in China today.

Cultural capital, habitus and gender in China

Social reproduction through education attainment has enduring sociological interest. In particular, Bourdieuan theory has highlighted the role of cultural capital in translating an individual's class background into educational achievement (Bourdieu

and Passeron, 1990). This article extends Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to the context of contemporary China. It is therefore necessary to consider contextual features and include a wide range of stratifying factors such as gender, geography and demography in addition to socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Gender is of particular importance due to China's complicated process of political and economic transformation from a Socialist society to a market economy. China's Socialist past, which celebrates the idea of 'women holding up half the sky', has relatedly had great implications for gender equality. However, gender equality has suffered an unavoidable twist during China's transition to a market economy since 1978, as the state has withdrawn substantially from its intervention in gendered equal opportunities.

The introduction of the 'One-Child' policy since 1979 has resulted in a dramatic decline in fertility rates among women. The total birth rate reduced from 2.9 in 1979 to 1.7 in 2004, with a rate of 1.3 in urban areas and under 2.0 in rural regions (Hesketh et al. 2005). It has been estimated that the 'One-Child' policy curbed the population growth by more than 400 million since 1979 (Yang 2007). The relationship between fertility rates and women's employment rates vary from country to country. Evidence suggests that a lower fertility rate is correlated strongly with higher female labour force participation in both developing and developed countries between 1980s and 1990s¹ (Lim 2000) and with higher level of education (OECD 2012). In this sense, it could be said that the 'One-Child' policy has reduced women's reproduction burden, entailing fewer responsibilities in childcare, and indirectly providing the possibility for women to pursue more employment and education opportunities. Moreover, the 'One-Child' policy substantially changed individual family's investment plans for their children (Tsui and Rich 2003: 90). It used to be the case that large families invested little in each child or prioritized their resources in favor of sons rather than daughters. Today, this pattern has been replaced with small families investing heavily in their only child (Hannum et. al 2009; Tan 2012). The following section moves on to investigate the implication of these developments on gendered participation in higher education.

Methodology

At the empirical level, I draw on the fieldwork conducted in eight universities across two provinces in East China in 2007. My research design aims to obtain first-hand data on the birth cohort whose life course coincides with the introduction of the 'One-Child' policy and the expansion of higher education opportunities. The surveyed and interviewed students were born between 1987 and 1989, a period when the 'One-Child' reform was enforced substantially both in rural and urban areas. Two types of data will be used in this article to support my analysis: the survey data obtained from about one-thousand first-year undergraduate students and 24 semi-structured interviews of female students from single-child families. The survey data will allow me to assess the extent to which the 'one-child' status affects women's chances in higher education in particular regard to elite opportunities alongside other socioeconomic and cultural factors. The interview dataset will permit me to explore in-depth the strategies employed by singleton female students from different backgrounds and the implications on their academic and career aspirations in contemporary China.

Findings: Cultural Capital, habitus and higher education participation by women

Several important findings arise from the analysis of empirical data. First, there was a clear pattern of increasing participation by women, particularly after the introduction of the 'One-Child' policy. The latter was associated with rising aspirations amongst girls in one-child families, who took the opportunity of an expanding higher education system, to gain entry to higher education, and particularly to elite institutions, thus changing the gender balance amongst students more in favour of females. Second, the statistical analysis provides some new evidence on the impact of social class and cultural capital on students' educational success in the context of China. Singleton status dramatically mediated the impact of socioeconomic status and cultural capital on students' academic performance. Third, this article provides empirical evidence on singleton female students' academic performance and participation in higher education. Singleton female students accounted for around a third of the surveyed population, two-thirds of the total female population in achieving highest thresholds in the *Gaokao* and 16.1 per cent of the total students in the top performance group. Singleton female students had relatively higher

representation in elite universities with 17.3 per cent compared to 9.8 per cent by non-singleton female students. They were also more likely to choose arts, humanities and social sciences with a fifth representation in the whole surveyed population. Last, qualitative interview data provided further evidence on how singleton women's aspirations were related to their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds and what strategies they employed to navigate the higher education competition. The interview data suggested that singleton girls generally had high aspirations regardless of their class and cultural backgrounds. They tended to aspire to 'direct' role models or empowering female figures, contrary to studies elsewhere that showed family members or parents as the main source of aspirations (for example, Archer et al. 2014). This might be explained by a relatively egalitarian education tradition in the schooling in China. This finding invites further investigation on the topic. The most significant finding is concerned with singleton girls' strategies in university. The girls used Chinese Communist Party membership to minimize their social and gender disadvantages, enhance their academic and social skills, extend their contacts and networks and prepare for further academic and career pursuit.

Conclusion and Discussion

At the theoretical level, the evidence from the study contests the cultural capital argument on the rigid correspondence between social class, cultural capital and students' academic performance. The 'one-child' generation was a particular social phenomenon that mediated socioeconomic, cultural impact on students' academic attainment and aspirations in this Chinese context. Linking habitus to singleton girls' aspirations suggests that contextual factors, such as Party membership, also mediate the influence of families' class and cultural backgrounds. Altogether, the analysis shows a complex array of contextual factors mediating the effects of cultural capital on student progression through education and into work, which need to be taken into account, alongside the traditional socioeconomic and cultural characteristics, in researching transitions in education sociology.

1 In Lim's study, the trends in developing countries vary in terms of fertility rates and female labour force participation (Lim, 2000). In Latin American and African countries, the correlation between low fertility rates and rising female labour force participation was very strong during the 1980s and the 1990s.

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