

***Reducing Inequalities in East Asia:  
Challenge and Solution of Women in Modern China***

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The Asian Conference on Education & International Development 2023  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

In this essay, the effects of patriarchy on gender inequities are examined, along with methods for alleviating them in contemporary East Asian society. This study examines how gender equality has evolved in contemporary China, the social and political movements that have influenced it, as well as the developments in female education and economic reform that have helped to lessen gender disparities there. It does so by using a historical qualitative research methodology. The case study seeks to lessen inequality in China by examining the problems and solutions faced by Chinese women from the time the Communist Party came to power in 1949 to the present. According to the study, patriarchy, a set of interpersonal norms, values, and beliefs that established a society dominated by men and was ingrained in political and socioeconomic structures, once prevailed in East Asian civilization. Man and woman experience gender inequality because of it. Yet, compared to other East Asian nations, particularly South Korea, China currently has superior conditions for women's rights. According to the report, one of the key elements in lowering patriarchy is the social revolution of the Chinese Communist Party. Importantly, the Party promoted gender equality during Mao Zedong's rule by abolishing traditional patriarchal social norms and expanding the role of women in the nation's development. The Chinese government's reform policies, which support economic and social reforms, particularly those that support education, are the second major element in lowering gender inequality in China.

Keywords: Inequalities, Women, East Asia, China

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## Introduction

More than a century ago, East Asian society was still under norms of Confucianism which were roots of people's way of life, culture and values, and marriage and family values. These contributed to the society of patriarchy which is a system from five human relationships in Confucianism, emphasized on social and family hierarchy in which male centered and controlled. The role of patriarchy's social values has still seriously controlled in countries as Korea and Japan. On the other hand, in China, an origin place of Confucianism, the role of patriarchy had gradually decreased. Chinese women today have more rights than Korean and Japanese women, despite the fact that the Chinese society still upholds the idea that the man is the family's head and the primary decision-maker.

This work examines the development and factors that impact on reducing inequalities in East Asia, taking China as a case study. Although in the 21<sup>st</sup> century women's status in terms of occupation, education and income are still lower than men, there are many changes that support reducing gender inequality in China. This study thus analyzes factors that support the reducing inequality of Chinese women through the processes of educational development and social revolution of China since the rule of the Chinese Communist Party. Also, challenge and solution of women in modern China will be stated. The qualitative research methodology in history was used through a study of document. Historical approaches on socio-cultural history and microhistory are applied in the study. Statistics dealing with women and education in China and women's movement and change of women's status are main sources in analyzing the process and progress of reducing gender inequality in contemporary China. The finding of the study may contribute to solution for unequal society or stimulate people to realize more on social justice and gender equality.

## Discussion

### 1. Gender Inequalities in East Asia: Past and Present

In traditional East Asian countries, China, Korea, and Japan, through Confucian thought, the society and people's relationship were formed through a system of five human relationships in Confucianism, emphasized on social and family hierarchy. Confucian influences led to a strongly hierarchical social structure and a stress on the family as the basic social unit.<sup>1</sup> The family contains the most significant relationships for individuals and forms the roots of all social organization. Moreover, this principle contributed to the society of patriarchy, where male is a center in all socio-political organizations. By incorporating Confucianism into traditional society, the roles of the ruler and the ruled, husband and wife, parent and kid, and older brother and younger brother were all clearly defined. A father or husband is required to treat his wife with dominance and kindness in exchange for her love and obedience, to provide his children with safety and guidance, and to respect and obey their parents and elders. Filial piety is the society's core virtue.

The traditional family structure was ruled by patriarchy. The father or oldest son was the family breadwinner. Traditionally, the mother's job was to handle domestic duties including caring for kids or elderly relatives, cleaning, and cooking. Usually, the immediate family and

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<sup>1</sup> Insook H. and L.J.Cho. (1995). Confucianism and the Korean Family. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 26: 117-118.

the extended family lived together. Only very remote cities still make use of this form of construction nowadays. As a result, gender equality has gained acceptance. The guy was the head of the family and had the responsibility of supporting his family according to the hierarchical structure of the traditional Chinese family. This responsibility gave him unlimited control and the final say in all family problems. Women could only work and exercise as a result of family obligations.

Yet, modern East Asian civilization has seen certain changes. Modernization, which began in East Asian countries in the 19th century, brought new practices and evolving customs. The 20th century did, however, see a number of developments brought about by political and social revolutions, economic expansion, and educational reforms, all of which helped movements for women's rights advance.

Confucianism is still a powerfully significant religion in modern East Asia. Yet, women may be more in charge of the home than males in some urban regions, like as Beijing and Shanghai.<sup>2</sup> Also, a lot of women who live in big cities will work to ease their husband's financial load. Nonetheless, there is still a gender imbalance in both industry and politics. Women are also expected to take care of the household chores and the children.

## **2. China and Reducing Gender Inequalities**

### **2.1 The Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and a Chance of Women's Rights in China**

In the 1910s and 1920s, Chinese scholars launched a campaign that was both an intellectual revolution and a socio-political reform to rebuild society and change old Chinese cultures. There were numerous activities and movements during these times that attempted to rebuild Chinese society and culture from the ground up.<sup>3</sup> Criticism of China's traditions was widely published, and the movement called "New Thought" was launched. One is advocating for greater gender equality. The development of educational opportunities for women and female liberation were instituted. As Mitter Rana, a historian and political scientist who specializes in the history of modern China, said, this time was more open and helpful to women's rights.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout these times, reformers and activists sought to elevate the dignity of the country and change the fundamental makeup of Chinese society. They promoted a new Chinese culture based on contemporary and Western scientific and democratic viewpoints while simultaneously criticizing traditional Chinese beliefs and practices. Also, these male reformers attacked patriarchal norms and gender disparities in society. Despite the fact that the movement only had a small impact on some women who resided in metropolitan areas and large cities like Beijing and Shanghai, women had greater access to university education and employment opportunities in the 1910s than ever before. Hence, the May Fourth Movement, often known as the first feminist movement, took place in 1919 on May 4th, when female students and women protested in Beijing. Public awareness of gender equality and women's liberation issues increased.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Paul J. Treutel. 2011. Confucianism and the Modern East Asian, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Rana Mitter. (2004). *A Bitter Revolution*. p.147.

<sup>5</sup> Li Changli. (2010). The Social Consequences of the May Fourth Movement: The Establishment of Women's Property Rights. *Chinese Studies in History*, 43(4): 20.

Nonetheless, women continued to strive for their freedom from maternal desires and forced parenthood as well as their rights to vote, receive a divorce, work, and refuse having blind marriages.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.2 The Communist Social Revolution and Reducing Gender Inequalities

Since 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power, China's society has seen significant change. Traditional standards were being eradicated in an effort to shift logical knowledge to social practice. Examples of this include outlawing outdated and feudal conventions and forbidding religious practices.<sup>7</sup> The CCP also aimed to advance women's freedom and gender equality.<sup>8</sup>

There were attempts to enhance women's status throughout social movements and law revision, for instance. As a Chinese scholar, Lin Chun, said:

*Women's liberation had been highlighted in the communist agenda from the outset and, in that sense, the Chinese revolution was simultaneously a women's revolution, and Chinese socialism a women's cause.*<sup>9</sup>

To liberate women, the Communist Party launched a radical, extreme agenda. The 1950 Marriage Law, which was passed within the first year of the new government's administration, provided the first hint of this reform. The Chinese Communists' experience with marriage reform in the "red areas" and the manifestation of their concept of gender equality peaked with the promulgation of the 1950 Marriage Law. The first article ended the archaic practice of "supremacy of man over woman" and established one of the most pro-feminist marriage laws ever. The People's Republic of China's Marriage Law was officially adopted on May 1 of that year. The "feudal marriage system" was attacked. According to the law, "marriages should be based on the free choice of the partners, on monogamy, equal rights for both sexes and on the protection of the lawful interests of women and children." It also addresses child marriage, concubine use, polygamy prohibition, and divorce freedom.<sup>10</sup> This law affected how women and girls were viewed in society.

Under Mao Zedong's direction, the CCP started the "Cultural Revolution" in 1966 with the goal of eradicating the "impure" components of Chinese society, such as antiquated beliefs and customs. The Four Cleanups Movement persisted in criticizing the "Four Olds" aspects of Chinese society—old concepts, old traditions, old ways of life, and old culture—during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>11</sup> The goal of this movement was to eliminate "the old," such as patriarchal family ideals and family hierarchy. Chinese society has incorporated both old Confucian values and "the modern," such as individualism, individual rights, nationalism, liberalism, women's rights, and belief in "science."

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<sup>6</sup> Sybilla G. Dorros. (1978). The Status of Women in The People's Republic of China. p.2. online.

<sup>7</sup> Mao Zedong. (1968). *Four Essays on Philosophy*. Online.

<sup>8</sup> Li Yuhui. (2013). Women's Movement and Changes of Women's Status in China. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 1(1): 30.

<sup>9</sup> Lin Chun. (2006). *The Transformation of Chinese Socialism*. p.113.

<sup>10</sup> Ilaria Storelli. (2021, 28 June). Marriage in Contemporary China and its Complexities. *European Guanxi*. online

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan D. Spence. (2013). *The Search for Modern China*. p. 545.

### **2.3 Economic Reforms and the Improvement of Women's Status**

The Chinese government has started a variety of initiatives and campaigns since the implementation of reform measures in China in 1978 with the goal of making China a middle-income nation and boosting its gross national product (GNP) by the year 2000. The family was abandoned as a unit of production as the Chinese economy changed. The transition from arranged to free-choice marriages was facilitated by the industrialization and growth of education during those years. Communist officials in China had argued for giving young people more leeway when it came to dating. But they opposed fostering a culture of dating and trying out premarital sex.<sup>12</sup> The 1980 Marriage Law backed the 1979 one-child policy, strengthened the Law of 1950, and stressed the significance of giving women and children preference when dividing property in the event of a divorce.

China has rapidly advanced from being a developing country to a country with a middle income. The Chinese economy grew swiftly. Foreign commerce and investment were primarily to blame for the high growth rates. The GDP increased from 7.6% in 1979 to 13.5% in 1985. In the 1980s, the growth rate of agricultural goods increased by a factor of 2.5. Between 1983 and 1985, China had a huge wave of foreign investment that fueled the expansion of non-state businesses. 40,000 projects were sponsored between 1979 and 1991 by collaborative investments from Chinese and foreign partners.<sup>13</sup>

Between the 1990s and the 2000s, the Chinese economy and living standards both increased steadily. China has become the "world's factory" since its economy has continued to expand quickly. In 2012, China's GDP overtook that of the United States to claim second position. Chinese women were also impacted by the economic growth. The second-largest economy in the world right now is China's. China is making the transition from being a developing country to one with a high income and an upper middle-income status. China will successfully eradicate its extreme poverty in 2022, according to the World Bank.<sup>14</sup>

### **2.4 Educational Equality and Female Education as a Chance of Reducing Gender Inequalities**

The rise of Communist rule in 1949 and the implementation of economic reform in 1978 were two crucial turning points in the history of Chinese women. In Chinese traditional society, there used to be a proverb that declared, "Too much learning does not make a virtuous woman." Women at this time made major sacrifices for their families and gave domestic work and reproduction a high priority. As a result, they had restricted access to schooling. The Communist Party then, as previously mentioned, attempted to enhance the status of women by the legislation passed in 1950 and 1980. In addition to lowering income inequality and improving living conditions, the national economic reform programs sought to increase people's levels of education.

To reduce inequality, government funds and private investment were relocated to rural cities. Social welfare and service improvements were undertaken to boost peoples' levels of living.

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<sup>12</sup> Xu Xiaohe & Martin K. Whyte (1990). Love Matches and Arranged Marriages: A Chinese Replication. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 52(3): 714.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 417.

<sup>14</sup> World Bank. (2022, 1 April). Lifting 800 Million People Out of Poverty – New Report Looks at Lessons from China's Experience. Online.

The opening of schools and colleges as well as the distribution of scholarships to students across the country increased the number of graduate students enrolled in higher education, which in turn increased their employability and opportunities.

To lessen inequality in urban and rural China, foster economic sustainability, and enhance people's well-being, a number of strategies were developed and put into practice. In an effort to end poverty, raise living standards, and develop human resources, the government has focused on closing the economic gap as well as the need to provide basic assistance. Building and funding for colleges and universities. To raise the quality of education in the nation, educational officials were dispatched to numerous rural locations to assist in creating local curricula and train local academic staff. Supporting female education is a crucial step.

To improve the nation's food supply when the PRC was founded in 1949, the Communist Party mandated that women participate in social production. Figure 1 illustrates the proverb "Women hold up half the sky," which gained popularity.<sup>15</sup> When more women start voting in their communities, socioeconomic changes will result from the increased representation of women in the workforce in agricultural production and economic diversification. Chinese women have been freed from "the shackles of tradition" during Communist control.<sup>16</sup>

After that, the Chinese government supported equal education by giving girls access to education and starting a literacy program. Only 20% of Chinese citizens could read and write in 1949.<sup>17</sup> As a result, many teachers have been dispatched throughout China, significantly lowering rural illiteracy.<sup>18</sup> As a result, from less than 30% in the 1940s to 66% in 1978, the literacy rate significantly increased. In accordance with an education law passed in 1986, all children must attend school for a minimum of nine years. All around China, compulsory schools have been established. The general literacy rate has also steadily increased, from 20% in 1950 to more than 85% in 2001, according to the Ministry of Education. The number of illiterate Chinese decreased by 40 million between 1990 and 2000.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Louise Edwards. (2000). Women in the People's Republic of China: new challenges to the grand gender narrative. In L. Edwards & M. Roces (Eds). *Women in Asia: Tradition, Modernity and Globalisation*. p.59.

<sup>17</sup> Xinhuanet.com. (2019, 25 September). How China Can improve its literacy rate to nearly 100 pct. Online.

<sup>18</sup> Ted Plafker. (2001, 12 February). China's Long-but Uneven- March to Literacy. *The New York Times*. online.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 1: Propaganda posters “Women Hold Up Half the Sky”

Source: <https://expandedanimation.net/2015/03/15/women-hold-up-half-the-sky/>

Industrialization and the shift to a market economy have given competent female workers exceptional opportunities. Rural populations moved into urban areas in significant numbers as a result of the high demand for inexpensive labor in coastal areas. Women with educations benefited from landing a job. Young women from rural cities flocked to urban areas to work in factories because they made more money than people in other occupations, which allowed them to become independent from their families.

Then, in the 1980s, the One Child Policy of 1980 and the Compulsory Educational Law of 1986 were put into effect, having an impact on Chinese women. The one-child rule frequently altered the mentality of parents. Children, whether girls or boys, were equally nurtured and treasured because each household only had one child. Moreover, girls received more attention. The Compulsory Educational Law boosted literacy rates and continued to balance out educational disparity. 150 million pupils attended the more than 210,000 compulsory schools that existed in 2018. With 291 million students registered, China had 529,300 educational institutions of various sizes and levels in 2021. There were 18,443,700 full-time teachers employed. In 2021, there were 207,200 compulsory schools nationwide, with 158 million registered students, 34,880,200 new pupils enrolled, and 10,571,900 full-time teachers.<sup>20</sup> China and Chinese women will therefore change as a result of these gains in educational development and educational equality.

Figure 2 demonstrates a consistent rise in the proportion of girls enrolled in pre-primary education. In basic and primary education, the gender pay gap has been gradually closing. Elementary school enrolment reached 100% in 2018, while the gender gap between boys and girls narrowed. 46.5% of kids enrolled in obligatory school were female. Indicator ranged between 46.4% and 46.6% in 2019-2020, showing consistency.

<sup>20</sup> Xinhuanet.com. (2019, 25 September). *op.cit.*

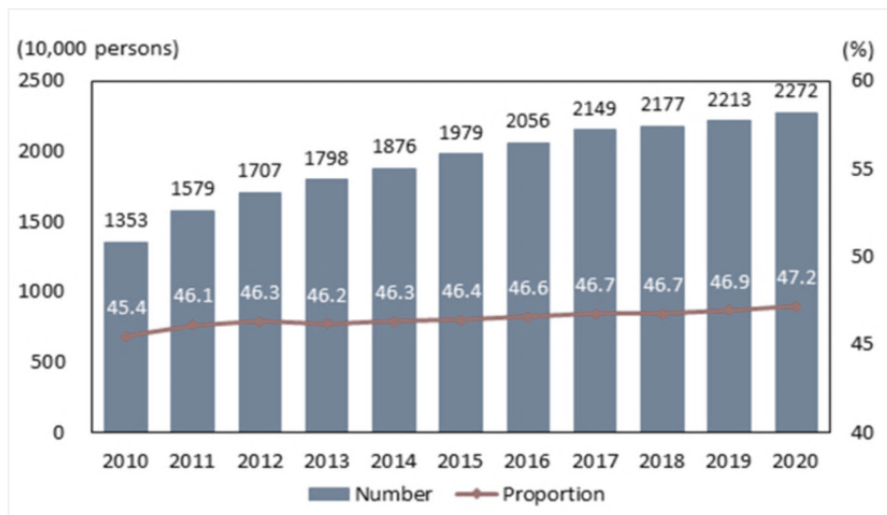


Figure 2: Number and Proportion of Girls in Pre-primary Education, 2010-2020  
 Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021, *Final Statistical Monitoring Report on the Implementation of China National Program for Women's Development (2011-2020)*, online



Figure 3: Proportion of Girls in Regular Senior Secondary Education, 2010-2018  
 Source: [http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202001/t20200103\\_1721237.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202001/t20200103_1721237.html)X

In addition, there are more girls enrolling in senior secondary schools. 18.65 million girls were enrolled in senior secondary education in 2018, making up 47.4% of all enrolled pupils, an increase of 0.3 percentage points from 2010. The senior secondary enrollment ratio increased by 6.3 percentage points from 82.5% in 2010 to 88.8% in 2018. In ordinary senior secondary school, the percentage of female students has increased by more than half since 2015. According to Figure 3, it increased by 2.2 points from 2010 to 50.8% in 2018.

In China, "the National Program for Women's Development" (NPA) was continuously carried out between 1995 and 2000, 2001 and 2010, and 2011 and 2020. The primary goals of the NPAs are to advance women's position and rights in six different spheres: the economics, participation in management and decision-making, education, health, law, and environment.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> All-China Women's Federation. (2011). "2NPAS", *Women in China*. online.



The program's two most significant goals are to advance women's development and to promote gender equality.

Increasing gender equality is an aim of the process of women's educational growth since it is a symbol of social development and civilization. The ongoing effort to educate women has contributed to more women having access to higher education. The effort has made a significantly above-average contribution to the quick advancement and achievement of women's education in China and elsewhere. Since 2010, more students have enrolled in higher education than ever before, from 26.5% in 2010 to 48.1% in 2018, and since 2015, the NPA target of 40% has been achieved earlier than anticipated before the 2020 deadline.

In 2018, 1.36 million female graduate students, or 49.6% of all graduate students, were enrolled in higher education. In colleges and universities, there were 14.87 million female students, accounting for 52.5% of total students, up 1.6 percentage points from 2010. Additionally, from 2010 to 2015, the proportion of female students in adult programs at colleges and universities rose by 6.2 percentage points, reaching 3.51 million, or 59.4% of all students enrolled.<sup>22</sup> The growing number of female undergraduate and graduate students in China's compulsory and higher education systems reflects the expanding social and economic prospects for women in the country.

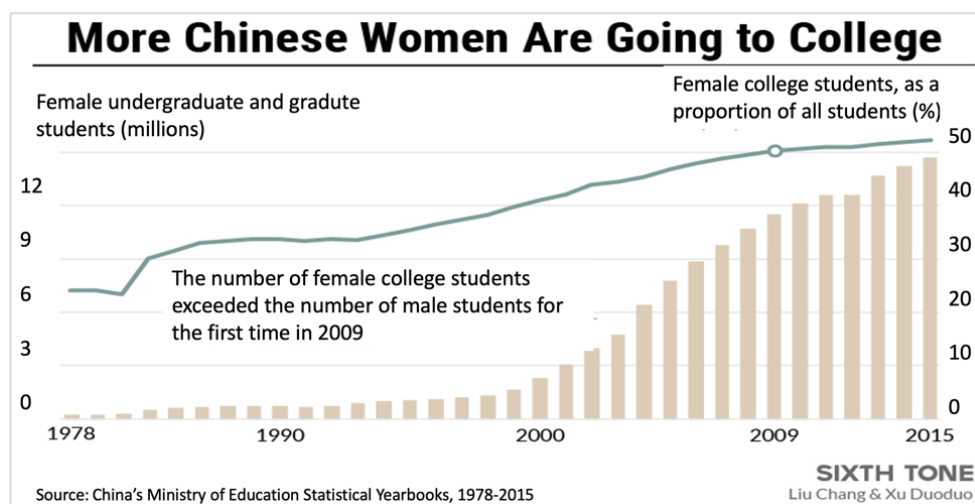


Figure 4: Proportion of female students entering higher education level 1978-2015  
 Source: <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1002051/is-gender-equality-at-chinese-colleges-a-sham%3F>

In metropolitan regions, it appears that Chinese men and women can now access school on an equal footing. Yet inequality still exists in rural regions. After elementary school, the enrolment rate for girls is still low in rural areas, highlighting the divide between these places and urban areas in China.<sup>23</sup> This disparity has been fully acknowledged by the Chinese government, which has been working to close it in accordance with its policy on income and wealth inequality.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Siriporn Dabphet. (2016). China's Economic Development: Income Inequality and Ethnicity. *Proceedings of the 2016 ICBTS International Social Sciences Humanities and Education Research Conference*. pp. 87 - 94.

## **Conclusion**

Gender equality has benefited from the PRC's processes for economic and educational growth. Women who are educated are more aware of the importance of gender equality, and more educated women are questioning established conventions. China implements rules and regulations to grant men and women equal rights to education. People gain from the government's strategy of putting education first and developing it, and it contributes to closing the educational gap between urban and rural areas. Women's educational situation increased, greatly boosting their educational level, with the support of balanced development of compulsory education and other educational measures. It is incredible how well the goal of eradicating female illiteracy has been achieved. When the PRC was established in 1949, the illiteracy rate for women was significantly greater than it was for men. China has succeeded in increasing literacy and eliminating illiteracy nationally as a result of numerous efforts, including the first national education conference held in 1949, the 1956 Resolution to Eradicate Illiteracy, the Law of Compulsory Education, and the NPAs between 1990 and 2020. As education has advanced, women's social status and equality have improved.

## **Acknowledgements**

As part of the research on “Reducing Inequalities in East Asia: Challenge and Solution of Chinese Women in Modern China” supported by Faculty of Social Sciences, Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand. I am thankful to the Faculty of Social Sciences for funding.

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