Incorporating Affect and Governmentality in Understanding Gender Inequalities in Chinese Higher Education

Luqian Huang, Durham University, United Kingdom

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Abstract

Equality, inclusivity, and the promotion of wider participation remain core objectives within the global higher education sector. Despite the apparent progress, exemplified by the increasing number of female students surpassing their male counterparts in many universities, gender inequality continues to persist and warrants sustained attention. Like many other Asian countries, there is little gender disparity during the nine-year compulsory education (primary and secondary education) in China, but gender disparities become starkly pronounced when it comes to higher education. Such inequality against women can be reflected in many folds, particularly in terms of more obstacles for female students to enter prestigious institutions and obtaining master's and doctoral degrees. The increasing access of female students to universities and degree-granting institutions in China indicates that it may not be the overt policies, laws, or sovereign barriers explicitly preventing women from pursuing higher education. It might be those subtle, non-coercive mechanisms through which gender inequalities continue to manifest in higher education and beyond that require more scrutiny. This paper will draw on the Foucauldian framework of governmentality to understand how power, knowledge, and discourse contribute to form the social norms according to which the constructions of the subject, like gender, are realized and normalized in Chinese higher education context. Through unravelling the link between affective governmentality as gendered apparatus and gender inequalities in education, this paper can help identify affective governance from both individual and social agencies and therefore inform educational practitioners to take actions.

Keywords: gender inequalities, governmentality, affect, higher education

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Introduction

To this day, even though female students in universities have outnumbered their male counterparts in various countries and regions (Al Masroori, 2022; Guo et al., 2010; Saadat et al., 2022), the issue of gender inequality persists. Such inequality against women can be reflected in many folds, including less female representation in STEM subjects (Guo et al., 2010), lower chances of entering prestigious institutions and obtaining master's and doctoral degrees (King, 2023). These unequal differences across the higher education sector have raised heightened global concerns (UNICEF, 2017) and China is particularly worth investigating. Like many other Asian countries, there is little gender disparity during the nine-year compulsory education (primary and secondary education) in China, but gender disparities become starkly pronounced when it comes to higher education (Olson-Strom & Rao, 2020). For instance, males are around 1.15 times more likely to pursue higher education than females (Liu, 2016), and the motivations of students for pursuing postgraduate courses are significantly influenced by gender (Liu & Morgan, 2018).

To understand how techniques of governing populations are implemented by power to normalize such gendered inequalities, this study draws on the Foucauldian concept of *governmentality*. Governmentality refers to governmental technologies that have the potential to result in a system of domination rather than the actual forms of domination (Foucault, 1982). Foucault (1975) argues that in modern institutions, power is often exercised most effectively through normalisation and surveillance, such as dominant norms and self-regulations. While this does not completely preclude the coexistence of coercive power such as overt institutional policies, it highlights that gender inequalities may persist through many subtle, non-coercive everyday practices. Governmentality theory suggests how power operates through discursive practices. However, it often overlooks the visceral, lived dimensions of how these norms are produced and sustained by individuals. Affect, which flows in bodies, can act as invisible channels of power, acting as a potential site of resistance and a tool for governance. Hence, this study aims to incorporate governmentality with affect theory to examine how discourses mobilise affect to reinforce power. *Affect* is defined as non-linguistic forces that operate beyond conscious emotion (Deleuze, 1988; Deleuze & Guattari, 1994), which in performing gender, experiences could be understood as a visceral internalization of external values and norms in families and societies. Conceptualizing affective governmentality to understand gender inequality, I pursue an analysis of cultural and societal factors. For example, in the East Asian context, Confucianism values are broadcast through discursive practices, the locus where the subject is personalised, defined, classified, hierarchised, normalised, surveilled, and prompted to self-surveillance (Foucault, 1975). Filial piety, requesting unconditional reverence and faithfulness towards one's parents (Gao, 2003; Ikels, 2004), has been regarded as the prime virtue for everyone in a society reigned by Confucianism (Zhou, 2006) and those who do not uphold such moralities are considered outlier and subjected to guilt and shame (Bedford & Hwang, 2003). This affective aspect of filial piety encourages individuals to act not solely from obligation but from affects of guilt and shame if they disobey, thereby strengthening a domestic hierarchy. Meanwhile, against the backdrop of China adapting neoliberal practices such as marketisation since the 1970s (So & Chu, 2012), female students are posed a dual expectation to be both accomplished in their future job market (marketable academically) and in their private life (marketable romantically) to be able to get married. In the Chinese context, women who are single and unmarried in their late 20s are labelled as "leftover women" (Ji, 2015). The potential failure to achieve socio-cultural benchmarks of success in both their vocational and private life triggers anxiety, fear and shame (Zheng et al., 2025). The affective pressure to

meet the “dual expectation” may steer female student away from doing a postgraduate degree or choosing subjects that align with traditional views of femininity or the image of the “care-giver” (e.g., education and nursing). In science/technology, representation is 57.5% male and 42.5% female, while engineering shows a wider gap (77.3% male vs. 22.7% female) (Guo et al., 2010). Through not mandating the unconditional obedience to parent and societal expectations, but shifting towards the affective response towards them instead, the system establishes a discursive domain wherein the utilisation of power is “rationalised” (Ball, 2012) for maintaining patriarchal hierarchies under the guise of familial relations.

The constant decline of birth rate in China (Li et al., 2024) has given rise to stronger societal penalties for more educated women as higher education correlates with lower fertility intentions among Chinese women (Lao, 2025). China’s two-child policy which was introduced in 2016 reduced female labour participation by 1.4%, and women with higher educational levels face the steepest penalties (Zhao et al., 2023). Employers openly discriminate against women of childbearing age to avoid maternity costs (Schneider et al., 2025), reinforcing domestic expectations on women and the message that higher education may not translate into career stability. Since the Chinese #Metoo movement in 2018, numerous Chinese women have utilised social media as a platform to express their critiques of patriarchal norms and their experiences as victims of gender-based discrimination (Chang & Jin, 2018). These platforms have become a vital space for articulating lived experiences of gender inequality, offering rich narratives that might otherwise remain undocumented. Research by Wolf (2000) also indicates that compared with men, women tend to include additional dimensions to online emotional expressions, encompassing solidarity and mutual support. Given this tendency, social media not only captures a wider range of affective responses but also serves as an ideal site for examining gendered experiences and collective resistance.

Given China’s rapidly declining birth rate (Li et al., 2024), the relationship between higher education and gender equality has become critically intertwined with social development. This study will offer timely insights for policymakers and educational practitioners seeking to align educational access with broader societal goals. As one of the most populous countries globally, the discussion on gender inequalities in Chinese higher education will provide meaning implications for future educational trajectories as equality, inclusivity and widening participation are the mutual goals of the global higher education sector.

Aims

The goal of this essay is to use Foucauldian theories to explore how a nexus of predominant cultural and societal discursive practices, which are rules and norms that produce and maintain knowledge of power (Foucault, 1972) subject women to gendered expectations. Examining discursive practices will reveal how they navigate, resist or internalise gender inequalities, helping to understand their lived realities. I will explore how affects of fear, anxiety, shame and guilt circulate through Chinese societal and cultural discourses to uphold power and in which ways these affects are pervasively embodied and articulated.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The overarching theoretical framework of this proposed research draws on Foucauldian (Foucault, 1991) lens of power – governmentality and dispositif - and the Deleuzian (Deleuze, 1988; Massumi, 2002) conceptualisation of affect. Governmentality is defined by Foucault as the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault, 1991, p. 102), which is a form of power exercised through discourses and knowledge regimes that construct "truth" and normalise social behaviour (Foucault, 2007). Central to this process are discursive practices, which establish the conditions for how knowledge is formed and legitimized (Foucault, 1972). Foucault (1972) defines discursive practices as the rules, norms, and institutional frameworks that govern the production, maintenance, and legitimisation of knowledge within a specific society (pp. 45-47). While discourse refers to the broader systems of meaning, discursive practices are the actions that determine what can be stated, who is permitted to speak, and what is recognized as truth within a specific historical and social context. They produce social norms, including gendered subjectivities, by classifying, hierarchizing, and surveilling individuals (Foucault, 1991, 1994).

Foucault (1980) also introduced the idea of Apparatus/Dispositif, which is a heterogeneous ensemble of practices, institutions, laws, regulations, and discourses that organise and regulate social behavior. Foucault (1975) suggests that it is through apparatuses that power and knowledge are enmeshed together, and certain behaviours are normalised and regulated. In addition, Foucault (1980) contends that Apparatus/Dispositif is beyond institutional scope as it is "…in short, the said as much as the unsaid" (p. 194). Apart from explicit discourses, apparatus also entails implicit norms and practices such as bodily disciplines and cultural expectations. Scholars like Ahmed (2004) expanded on the idea of extra-institutional apparatus, stating that through extra-institutional repetition, families and media can use affective tactics as apparatus to place subjects into gendered and/or racialised hierarchies. Hence, focusing on extra-institutional factors helps to explain why gender inequalities still persist in Chinese society (Shen, 2022; Zeng et al., 2014) that claim to have ensured equalities from institutional entities.

While Foucault (1975) introduces the concept of disciplinary power, Deleuze (1992) draws upon Foucault by arguing that late capitalism shifted from disciplinary societies to societies of control where power operates through modulation, which is a fluid, ever-changing deforming system. While he agrees with Foucault's preposition that power shapes subjectivity, he further argues that in the society of control, power is intensified by internalising discipline through modulation (Deleuze, 1992), one representation being the modulation of affect. *Affect* is elaborated by Deleuze (1988) in his writings on Spinoza as the ability to affect and be affected. He further elaborates on it as taking on the dynamic and kinetic features, in that affects are "no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 164). To put it succinctly, affect transcends mere feeling or emotion; it constitutes a force or energy that impacts a body's modes of existence (Zembylas, 2006). Massumi (1995) argues that "affect", as an automatic intensive response which is regarded as unbound by meaning and signification, differs from "emotion", which is a subjective qualified intensity that involves narrative and interpretative understanding. Affects, which involves automative, bodily response, are nonsignifying and noncategorical, while emotions, which entail social and linguistic interpretations, occur subsequent to these automatic affects.

Incorporating discourse and power with affective studies provides the necessary instruments for conducting dynamic, nuanced study on embodied social action and the complex processes that shape social existence (Wetherell, 2013), such as gender inequalities. As Wetherell adds:

> …. How are practices clumped, who gets to do what when, and what relations does an affective practice make, enact, disrupt and reinforce? Who is emotionally privileged, who is emotionally disadvantaged and what does this privilege and disadvantage look like? …remains to be explored. (Wetherell, 2012, p. 20)

Gender (In)equalities in Modern-Day China

Gender is institutionalised through social and cultural structures that reproduce bias and inequality. UNICEF (2017) defines gender equality as the equal valuing by society of the similarities and differences between men and women, ensuring rights and opportunities are not determined by whether they are born male or female. In China, these inequalities intersect with a stark urban-rural divide: despite national progress in education, rural women face disproportionate exclusion due to poverty, patriarchal norms, and male-dominated household hierarchies (Liu & Wang, 2009; Mu, 2021). When resources are limited, families often prioritize sons' education over daughters' (Gromkowska-Melosik & Boron, 2023), reinforcing systemic disparities.

In recent years, the development of the Internet Era has given rise to a new discursive space on social media, providing a platform for "the powerless" to challenge entrenched cultural norms (Lu & Chu, 2012). Within this context, Chinese women, who continue to face systemic gender inequalities, have increasingly turned to social media as a means of self-expression, articulating their empowerment in ways that are subtle yet assertive (Chang et al., 2018). However, while social media offers opportunities for resistance, it also reinforces existing gender disparities. Deep-seated patriarchal structures persist even within digital spaces, as evidenced by women's continued adherence to traditional gender roles, particularly in domains such as family and career (Liu, 2023). Thus, women's voices of resistance are amplified yet still remain embedded in the very power structures that reproduce gender inequality.

Confucianism

Confucianism, rooted in the teachings of Confucius and his followers (Zufferey & Oldstone-Moore, 2023), has profoundly shaped gender hierarchies in China. Though some scholars contend that Confucianism has been misunderstood as one of the root causes of sexism in China (Koh, 2008; Rosenlee, 2006), many still believe culturally it is responsible for positioning women as subservient to male-dominated hierarchies and prescribed gender roles. Despite the fact that the term "gender" is non-existent in Chinese language, a highly complex and rigorously enforced gender system based on the concept of different gender role still existed in premodern China (Chan & Oldstone-Moore, 2023). Such differentiation is mainly represented with the inner-outer (*nei-wai*) dichotomy (Chan & Oldstone-Moore, 2023) and filial piety.

Nei-wai

The didactic *nei-wai* binary on gender stipulated that men occupy the wider domain of *wai*, which is the expansive field of the outer, whilst women are confined to the limited realm of

nei, which is the inner part (Rosenlee, 2006). This binary renders women only functional and complementary in terms of inter-gender roles as the *nei* is for serving the *wai*. The education of Confucianism for women connotates humbleness, inferiority and a lower family status. Principles to be learned include serving one's mother-in-law, honoring one's husband, bringing glory to one's name and humble chastity (Zhou, 2006). In other words, women's intellectual capacities are agencies to serve for others in the family, not themselves. Rosenlee (2006) argues that this gender difference denies women an entitlement to full humanity because it is only in the *wai* that a person is not only filial and respectable, but also completely educated and cultured.

Filial Piety

Filial piety, requesting unconditional reverence and faithfulness towards one's parents (Gao, 2003; Ikels, 2004), has been regarded as the prime virtue for everyone in a society reigned by Confucianism (Zhou, 2006). It is considered a severe accusation if one does not manifest filial piety, the most serious disconformity being not bearing a son. From a practical side, sons are expected to take care of their parents when they get older, thus leading to a preference on sons over daughters. Since the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127) when people became zealous about official posts like civil servants, a son's educational achievement has been identified as one way of providing care for parents. This might have shifted some domestic filial duties to daughters and daughters-in-law (Zhang, 2020) and laid the foundation for the long-serving inner-outer gender roles.

Market Discipline

Even though Chinese society has not been fully aligned with Western neoliberalism (Nonini, 2008), it has introduced a unique hybrid model called "state neoliberalism" (So & Chu, 2012), which displays many neoliberal tendencies such as market-oriented policies. Although such market-driven society seemingly creates a fair arena for individual competition, it obscures how structural barriers such as pre-existing inequalities and predetermines individual's success. Foucault (2008) contends that neoliberalism constitutes a principle of rearranging the society by establishing a particular type of governmentality and a new regime of truth for the governance of individuals. Neoliberal governance reframes higher education as a private investment through reducing education to an individualistic market transaction (Lakes & Carter, 2011), aligning institutional practices and student behaviors with market-driven logics. Individuals are expected to practice "self-care and self-optimization" (Foucault, 2008, p. 226), and the focus shifts from state control to the promotion of individual autonomy and self-management. This transition entrenches inequalities by naturalizing disparities as matters of personal responsibility rather than systemic injustice. The background of neoliberalism reproduces and legitimizes inequalities through normalizing discourses such as self-optimization and self-care.

Synergies of Confucian-Neoliberal Affective Governmentality

Production of Shame and Guilt

Confucian scholars have argued that both shame and guilt are considered essential moral affects, even though interpretations of their nature diverge. Traditional thoughts position guilt as an internal affect tied to autonomy and individual accountability (Bellah, 1970; Kohlberg, 1987), while shame is framed as an external reaction to social judgment which is often linked

to “losing face” (Scheinin, 1998). However, contemporary scholars like Berkson (2021) challenge this dichotomy, arguing that shame is instead inner-directed (related to one’s character) and guilt outer-directed (focused on actions and consequences). This tension reflects broader cultural differences: Bedford and Hwang’s (2003) ethnographic work highlights how Confucian Rationalism grounds shame and guilt in obligations to others whereas Western Individualism roots them in the autonomous self. Thus, in Chinese contexts, these affects emerge not from individual introspection but from interconnected social obligations.

Such affects are embodied in cultural apparatuses for gendered governance. The tradition’s filial imperative demands lifelong reciprocity from children, with rigid *nei/wai* roles: sons fulfill duty through public achievement, daughters through domestic service (Rosenlee, 2006). Women who transgress by pursuing higher education or delaying marriage face affective punishment: they are branded “leftover” (Ji, 2015), deemed unfilial (Tsai & Choo, 2025), and stigmatized as social “disrupters” (Gu, 2021). For men, filial piety prompts educational ambition; for women, it generates shame for “selfish” aspirations and guilt for neglecting household duties. This affective discipline exemplifies Foucault’s governmentality where power operates not through coercion, but through the internalization of affective responses.

Mobilisation of Anxiety and Fear

Extending on Foucault’s (2008) idea of neoliberal governmentality, scholars have argued that the anchorage point of power is affects of fear and anxiety. Wrenn (2014) suggests the neoliberal focus on self-optimization and comparison of worth with others stirs the fear of inadequacy and anxiety of uncertainties. Krce-Ivančić (2018) claims that widespread prevalence of anxiety is what facilitates the entrenchment of neoliberalism in modern subjectivity. For women, especially, the societal expectation of their participation in the workforce whilst still maintaining their domestic roles amidst a transforming neoliberal labour market, exacerbates the pressure on them to fulfill multiple responsibilities and to “have it all” (Zhou, 2020). Previous research has shown that the impact of anxiety is most severe when women are considering postgraduate studies, as it is challenging to balance their studies with other domestic responsibilities (Bosch, 2013).

Even though a plethora of previous studies have drawn on governmentality studies and discourses of power to explain representations of gender inequalities such as the disciplining women through discourses (Balbus, 1985), unequal gendered labor (Oksala, 2013) and biopolitical control through gender (Repo, 2016), most have neglected the role of affect in naturalising inequality. Those that have incorporated affect with governmentality examined how care constitute subjectivities in education (Pereira, 2019) and the use of affective governance to maintain gratitude among school graduates (Shoshana, 2021). However, affective governmentality has not been explored to examine gender inequalities while considering certain cultural and societal contexts.

Conclusion

Chinese female students are exposed to both cultural (e.g. Confucius values) and societal (e.g. neoliberal market principles) apparatus with discourses that discourage them from pursuing higher education or lucrative fields (e.g. STEM). These include discursive practices from family and kin groups that portray women pursuing higher education as impractical and

obstructive to finishing the filial duty of getting married, traditional discourses permeating in modern day society that reinforce females' domestic duties, educational resource prioritisation of sons over daughters; gendered societal discourses on social media that stigmatize unmarried, highly educated women and market-oriented narratives prescribing that women should "have it all" before a certain age. These apparatuses are embodied through discourses of affect such as shame, fear and anxiety which take part in the governing of the subjects.

In terms of pedagogical praxis, educational practitioners may expose how traditional and neoliberal discourses co-construct gendered expectations and remind students how to identify and resist this affective governance, as has been mentioned, affect can act as a site of resistance. As for the institutions, current initiatives are not sufficient to address the discursive roots of gender inequalities. Educational policies have to consider the cultural and societal narratives that might devalue women's higher education trajectories. Meanwhile, against the backdrop of the modern era and young women being its mainstream users, the impact of social media platforms can also be mobilised to for reproducing and perpetuating anti-stigmatising discourses. For example, the state can intervene and regulate stigmatizing narratives such as "leftover women" through algorithm.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Deepseek, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Deepseek, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the work.

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Contact email: luqian.huang@durham.ac.uk