

Differences in Chinese Women's Understanding of Feminism: The Influence of Socioeconomic Status, Family and Education (Take Henan Province as an Example)

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Abstract

Although gender equality is a fundamental policy in China. However, gender inequality is still prevalent in daily life and work where women always suffer from gender discrimination. With the rapid development of the Internet in recent years, the issue of gender inequality has received more attention and has been more widely discussed. In order to safeguard the equal rights of Chinese women, feminists have consciously made their voices heard through the Internet and other channels. However, due to the fact that Chinese women's individual life circumstances are clearly differentiated and differently influenced by their own socio-economic status, family environment and education, it is necessary to understand the extent of Chinese women's recognition of feminism. This study will target women in H province and collect data through online questionnaires and interviews, including socioeconomic status, family background, education level, and understanding of feminism. This article uses a Likert scale for the research, Chi-square test, t-test and multiple regression analysis to analyze the quantitative data to determine the influence of SES, family and education on feminist awareness awakening among women in H region. As the third largest province in China in terms of resident population and the largest province in terms of household registration, the development potential of women in H region is evident to all. This study will systematically investigate H region women in H region understanding of feminism and explore the factors that influence Chinese women to have different levels of recognition of feminism, which can help unite women in their struggle to protect women's common rights. The study will improve our understanding of women's affirmative action and suggest more effective guidelines for women's affirmative action strategies.

Keywords

Feminism; China; SES; Education Level.

1. Introduction

With the popularization of the concept of equality, gender equality has become a recurring theme in China's political, economic, and social discourse (Tatli, Ozturk, & Woo, 2017). Although gender equality is a fundamental policy in China, a great deal of inequality still exists in its implementation (Riley, 2019). In recent years there has been a proliferation of news about the differential treatment of gender resulting in a growing call for the development of feminism in the media. Currently, feminists emphasize that gender inequality is not an individual problem, but a deeply rooted social construct (Stromquist, 2022). Gender inequality is based on marriage and family organization, on work and economic, political, religious, artistic and other cultural products, and on the language we speak (Wood, 2019). Achieving gender equality therefore requires the combined efforts of all sectors of society. Within feminism, there are many different perspectives. Some feminists criticize sexism, sexism, and masculinity, arguing

that gender differences are the basis for women's subordination to men and advocating for their elimination (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 2018). Some feminists assert that women have their own gender advantages and should be recognized and respected as women (Ostry, Alvarez, Espinoza, & Papageorgiou, 2018). Socioeconomic status (SES), family, and education may influence women's understanding of feminism, leading to different considerations of gender issues by different people. The inconsistency of perceptions and goals confuses the direction of feminism and is not conducive to better fighting for equal rights for the vast majority of women (Siegel & Calogero, 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to study different women's understanding of feminism in China in order to better unite the female community and achieve gender equality.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition and Goal of Feminism

Feminism refers to creating social theories and political movements to end sexism, sexual exploitation, sexual discrimination and oppression and promote sexual class equality (Delmar, 2018). The themes explored by feminism mainly include discrimination, stereotype, materialization, body, oppression and patriarchy (Walby, 2011). The theoretical research of feminism aims to understand the essence of gender inequality, mainly focusing on sexual politics, power relations and sexual consciousness (Connell, 2013). The feminist political movement aims to safeguard women's equal rights in childbirth, education, domestic violence, salary and voting and eliminate gender discrimination and sexual violence against women (Jackson & Jones, 1998).

2.2. The Development of Feminism

As early as the 15th century, some sporadic feminist thoughts appeared in western society, and women's rights gradually began to receive attention (Becchio, 2019). With the change of gender division of labor and the influence of the thought of freedom and equality in the French Revolution, women began to pursue equal rights systematically, and women's clubs demanding the right to education and employment appeared (Stanton, 2020). Although the feminist movement has lasted for several centuries and women have gradually gained some rights in the struggle, there are still many gender inequalities to be solved (White, 2016). China actively takes "gender equality" as a basic national policy (Li, 2018). In social reality, Chinese women still do not have the same rights as men in personal choice, education, employment and political participation (Riley, 2019).

Therefore, it is still necessary to enrich feminist theory and practice, promote gender equality in China, and protect women's rights. With the deepening of feminist research, academics advocate that women should be organized to fight against patriarchal domination for the common good of women (Kanai, 2020). At the same time, it is necessary to pay attention to the differences among women, advocate listening to the voices of women from different classes and races, and protect more women's rights.

2.3. Classification of Feminism

There is not only one understanding of feminism. Feminism has developed many factions based on insights into gender inequality and solutions. Currently, the mainstream factions include liberal feminism, radical feminism, social feminism, development feminism, and postmodern feminism (Branaman, 2019). Liberal feminism believes that gender differences are not based on biology and that the common humanity of women and men has replaced their reproductive differences. They regard the lack of opportunities for women to compete fairly with men as the main reason for inequality. They pursue the equal right to education and labor remuneration and create a fair society that only discusses personal ability regardless of gender differences (Omwami, 2021). Radical feminism believes that women's natural reproductive and sexual

roles lead to women's tragic situation. They oppose patriarchy to subvert the male-dominated culture. Radical feminists hope to pursue a male-free reproductive mode and liberate women from childbirth. At the same time, they hope to resist the violence and inequality against women in a patriarchal society by forming a non-hierarchical space to support women (Mackay, 2015). Socialist feminism believes that family labor is not classified as social labor, and is outside the monetary economy, which is the root of women's oppression and exploitation. They hope to establish legislation to protect women so that family work can be recognized by society (Armstrong, 2020). Developmental feminism believes that the mode of production and kinship rules that control surplus distribution are the determinants of the relative status of men and women. They hope to make women economically independent through education and work to ensure their equal status (Meehan, 2017). Postmodern feminism believes that sex and gender are changing, mobile and multiple categories. At the same time, they believe that no kind of woman can represent all women, and the differences among women should be paid attention to.

They respect the choices about work, marriage and childbirth recognized by individuals to pursue happiness and equality understood by individuals (Benhabib, 2020). There is continuity, convergence, and sharp debate between feminism of different factions. Any feminist can fuse perspectives from multiple perspectives (Mustafa, 2015). Therefore, investigating and integrating women's understanding of feminism at different levels will help unite the feminist camp and formulate strategies more conducive to achieving equality for most women.

2.4. SES, Family and Education in Feminism

SES reflects the social, economic and status of an individual (Truyts, 2010). Those with higher SES have more resources to cope with gender inequality and minor exploitation under patriarchy (Liss & Erchull, 2012). People of different SES enjoy significant differences in power, prestige, resources, and material well-being, which may lead to differences in their understanding and pursuit of feminism (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010).

For much of Chinese history, Chinese women have lived within the masculine and patriarchal ethos of Confucianism (Valutanu, 2012). Even today, women in patriarchal families are more likely to be belittled and have parents who instill unequal gender theories, which may influence women's sexual attitudes (Peng, 2021).

Education can greatly influence one's perception of things and how one relates to the outside world. At the same time, evidence suggests that women with less education are more likely to experience sexual discrimination (Shelton, Flynn, & Grosland, 2018). Women with higher education are less likely to be sexually exploited by men and have more independent life choices (Sang, 2018). Therefore, investigating the perceptions of feminism among women from different educational backgrounds is beneficial to a comprehensive understanding of women's perceptions.

3. Research Design

3.1. Data Sources

My data are mainly from questionnaires and post-sampling interviews. In this study, an online questionnaire was used to survey adult women in 17 prefecture-level cities, 21 county-level cities, 54 municipal districts, and 82 counties in Region H. The demographic distribution of the number of respondents is shown in Figure 1. Some of the missing data were filled by consulting the official websites of localities and universities and using the average interpolation method. Due to the variable attitudes of some respondents, their responses cannot be used as a reference. Only when our analysis results are consistent with the participants' choices, the questionnaire will be included in further analysis. Otherwise, the results of the questionnaire

will be excluded. The invalidation rate of the sample was taken into account to ensure that a sufficient usable sample could be collected, and we set the starting time of the sample to May 2023. Finally, after comparing the same type of data and multiple considerations, we obtained a total of 3820 valid samples and 245 interview samples.



Figure 1. Distribution of interviewees

3.2. Dependent and Independent Variables

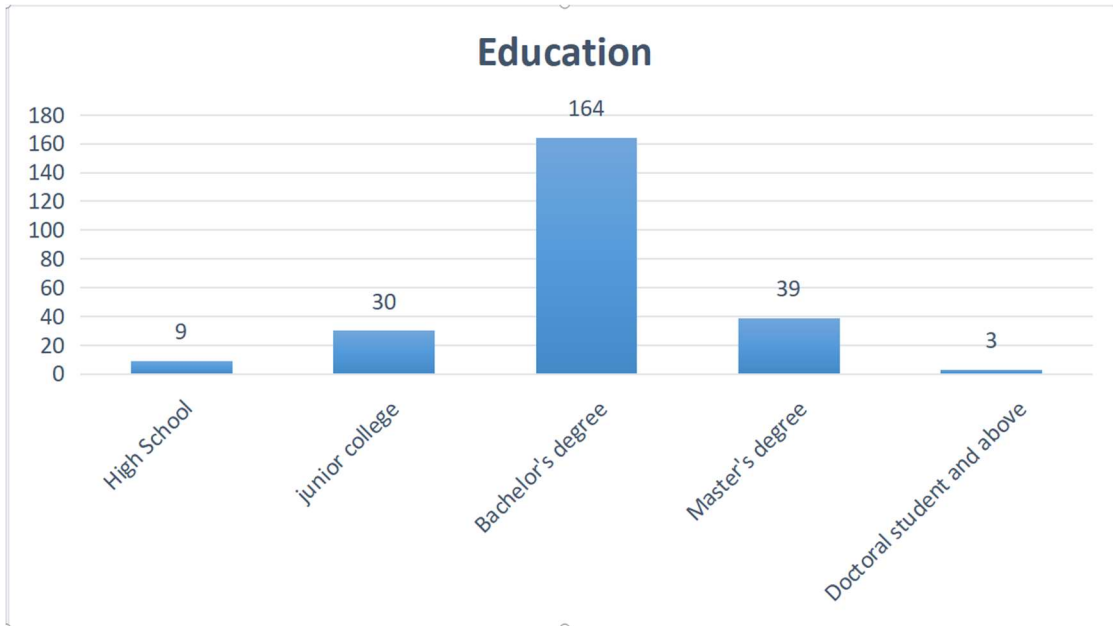
Our independent variable is the basic personal information of the interviewed women. This variable can be divided into personal SES, educational level and family background. We will measure individual SES by variables such as annual income, occupation, position, household registration and residence area and divide them into high-SES, medium-SES and low-SES according to previous research standards (Wong, Zhang, Kwan, & Wright, 2019).

In the second half of the questionnaire, we compose questions from three representative views on the topic selected from the classical theories of liberal feminism, radical feminism, social feminism, developmental feminism and postmodern feminism. The dependent variables are the different views held by respondents on each issue. All the questions about dependent variables are scored on the 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

3.3. Descriptive Statistic and Frequency Calculation

Among the 245 interview samples, we calculated the educational level of females who completed the questionnaire. Education level, as the independent variable in this study, can influence the subjects' knowledge and understanding of feminism. We divided the education level into five levels: high school, junior college, bachelor's degree, master's degree, doctoral degree and above. The lowest percentage was doctoral degree and above, with 3 people, accounting for only 1.22% of the total. The highest percentages are Bachelor's degrees and Master's degrees, accounting for 66.94% and 15.92% respectively. According to the data, the total number of subjects with university education and above is 206, accounting for 84.1%, which is the main group of respondents in this experiment.

Table 1. Subjects' Education Level



The independent variable SES, social, economic and status of an individual, is reflected by the monthly income of women. Since most students do not have income and the proportion of students in the sampled group is 50.61% of the total, we only included in this section subjects who already have full-time jobs.

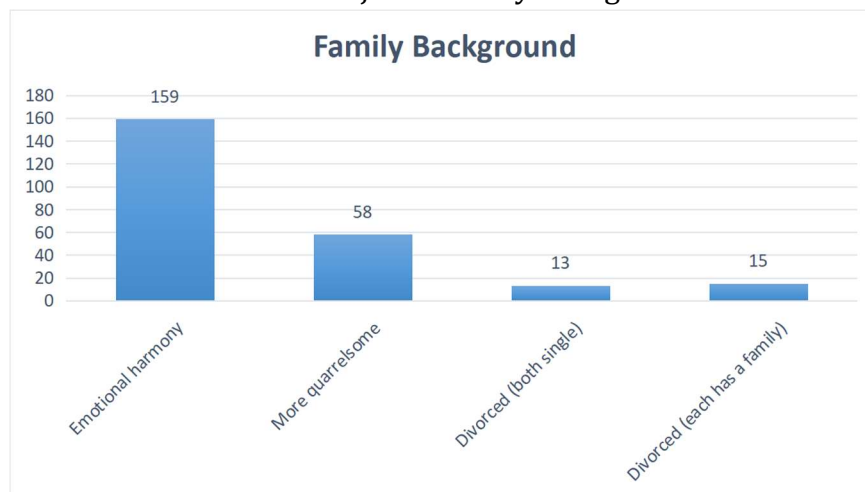
Since the respondent group was concentrated in region H, combining the local economic development level and average salary in region H, we divided the monthly income of the subjects into three classes: low-income group, middle-income group and high-income group. The low-income group was defined as those with a monthly income of \$3,000 and below, having a low SES level; the middle-income group had a monthly wage distribution between \$3,000 and \$20,000, having a medium SES level; and those earning more than \$20,000 were defined as the high-income group, having a high SES level. Among the 121 subjects, the middle-income group accounted for the majority, 84.3%. Both the low-income group and the high-income group were in the minority with 8.26% and 7.44%, respectively.

Table 2. Subjects' SES Level



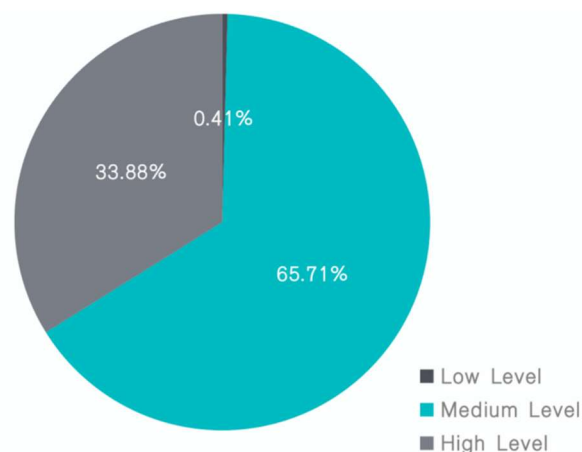
Family background is also one of the variables that may influence female perceptions of femininity. The emotional status of parents also inevitably affects children's perceptions of marital status. We divided the family background status into four categories: emotional harmony, more quarrelsome, divorced (both single) and divorced (each has a family). The data shows that most of the subjects have relatively harmonious family backgrounds, even though 23.67% of the parents have quarrels and conflicts in their marriages, nearly 64.90% of the families are able to maintain emotional harmony. And the total percentage of divorced families is only 11.43%, inferring the stability of most subjects' families.

Table 3. Subjects' Family Background



By analyzing and calculating the different responses of the respondents to the 15 interview questions, we will use this to analyze the level of understanding of feminism among the women who participated in the experiment. With a minimum score of 15 and a total score of 75, scores of 15-30 are low, meaning that the subjects have a poor understanding of feminism; scores of 31-60 are moderately high, indicating a moderate understanding of feminism; and scores of 60 or more are high, indicating a deep understanding of feminism. From the data, it can be concluded that most of the women who participated in the survey have a general understanding of feminism, about 65.71%, but not extremely deep. And those who have very little understanding of feminism are a minority, 0.41% of the total, with only one person. This indicates that most women have some understanding and their own opinions about feminism.

Table 4. Questionnaire Result Distribution



In addition to analyzing the subjects' overall scores and thus their knowledge of feminism, we divided the student and non-student subjects into two groups for statistical analysis of the data. The main focus will be on the mean, standard deviation, and min and max of the scores of the answers to questions 16-30 in the questionnaire. The mean, min, and max for the non-student subjects were lower than the student subjects, with a 4.5 difference in mean and an 11 difference in the lowest score. This indicates that student subjects have a clearer and more explicit perception of feminism in general. The lower standard deviation of the student subjects also indicates that the overall data is less discrete and relatively consistent on many issues related to feminism.

Table 5. Two Group Result Comparison

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Non-Student	121	30	71	54.31	8.547
Student	124	41	75	58.81	7.312

3.4. Regression Analysis

3.4.1. T-test

Table 6. Low Income Subjects' Score and Medium Income Subjects' Score

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	
Low Income	10	55.1	9.85	t=.101
Medium Income	102	54.77	8.31	Sig.(2-tailed)=.921

Sig. (2-tailed)<.05 indicates the result is significant. $0.921 > 0.05$, therefore, we can conclude that the result is not significant.

Table 7. Low Income Subjects' Score and High Income Subjects' Score

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	
Low Income	10	55.1	9.85	t=1.648
High Income	9	48.2	8.33	Sig.(2-tailed)=.118

Sig. (2-tailed)<.05 indicates the result is significant. $0.118 > 0.05$, therefore, we can conclude that the result is not significant.

Table 8. Medium Income Subjects' Score and High Income Subjects' Score

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	
Medium	102	54.8	8.31	t=2.262
High Income	9	48.2	8.33	Sig.(2-tailed)=.049

Sig. (2-tailed)<.05 indicates the result is significant. $0.049 > 0.05$, therefore, we can conclude that the result is significant.

Because student subjects are still in school and have no income, this data analysis only investigates the relationship between the wage income level of non-student subjects and the results(score) of this questionnaire. Overall, by analyzing the test results of subjects with different level income, we found that the results could not pass the t-test, indicating that the results were not significant.

The reason for this situation is speculated to be that the majority of women who have a deeper understanding of feminism at this stage are millennials, the majority of whom are still students and have little social income due to their age. While this results in lower ses among these groups, it is also indirect evidence of the changing mindset of China's new generation of women. Since they are still on campus and have not been exposed to social pressure, they have a high level of interest in social issues and understand feminism more. Due to the limitation of economic development in region H, most of the women with higher ses degree are also older, and their high degree of ses comes from the accumulation of their own social wealth. This also leads them to devote most of their time in life to work and family and pay less attention to social topics, and lack exposure to and understanding of feminism.

4. Results and Discussion

The results show that the level of understanding of feminism varies significantly with age.

Among the respondent group, most young women (18-30 years old) have a higher level of understanding and acceptance of feminism. Some respondents who have just turned 18 may still be more influenced by their family environment, and their own values are not fully formed, so their understanding of feminism maybe not deep or a little bit too radical. Older female respondents generally have a lower level of understanding of feminism than Millennials. There are some historical reasons. In the environment they grew up in, awareness of "Feminism" in China was not widely known by the general public, and the limited exposure to social media also led to the fact that the ideas they received generally came from the official media and the people around them.

Secondly, the survey found that among the older group of women, some respondents also had a higher level of understanding and acceptance of feminism. In the post-survey interviews, we learned that was because they were generally highly educated and had a positive attitude toward learning in their own fields or in new fields that they were expanding into. Or they are mothers who are open-minded to listen to their children's ideas and understand and reflect on them.

In addition, among the group of respondents with higher acceptance of feminism, even if some women have similar educational experience and SES degree, they hold different ideas about marriage issues, and even some respondents' ideas have irreconcilable contradiction points at present. This is very much related to personal emotional experiences, parents' relationship patterns and sexual orientation.

From the survey, it can be concluded that regardless of the influence of family atmosphere on women's view of marriage, women with higher education and higher SES are more capable of understanding and accepting feminism. The lack of equal access to education can lead to the compression of women's space for upward progress and reduced opportunities for fair competition with men, thus making women more vulnerable to exploitation and oppression. Therefore, the first priority is to ensure that women in China have equal access to education with men.

5. Conclusion

The problem of gender inequality is essentially an inequality of power. What we can do now is to promote the policy of guaranteeing women's rights and interests to be continuously implemented, so that women can share power equally with men in every institution at every stage. Because if all decisions are made without people challenging or fighting for their rights, and it is will always be the underprivileged who struggle through the mud of misery, who are scrutinized, who are decided, and who are vulnerable.

All in all, the distorted gender culture of today has been created through more than half a century of policy guidance. Since patriarchal rights became dominant the main role of women was to reproduce offspring and take care of the family. After the founding of New China, a new view of gender equality was put forward and more of women's value was tapped and they began to contribute more to the social economy, but the various rights protection for women has not been able to keep pace. With today's social system and culture, women are more likely to face structural dilemmas. When fight for women's rights, we must stand firmly together.

We should break the invisible barriers, get rid of the unwarranted restraints, and be wary of objectification and self-objectification. I hope that all women: have their feet in all corners of the human intellect and reclaim their rightful place in the realm of male domination. To not be objectified, dwarfed, subordinated, petted, and to be loved and respected as true equals, both in popular culture and in intimate relationships.

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