

# Causes of the Growing Concern about Gender Parity in China in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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**Abstract.** In recent years, gender has become a hot topic, and the frequency and intensity of discussions on gender topics on the Internet have increased significantly. The authors attempt to analyze, classify, and enumerate the causes of such phenomena through an interdisciplinary approach from the perspectives of economics, politics, psychology, science and technology, and history, with the goal of explaining the impact of social presence on social consciousness regarding gender matters. First, the authors state that the worsening living conditions of Chinese women and the growing gender gap since the outbreak of Covid-19 have led many to realize that our society is far from equal. Yet in the longer term, the fast-growing living conditions of the Chinese people have also granted people more leisure to think about things other than sustenance, indirectly leading to growing concerns about gender parity. Next, in addition to economic development, the advancement in media technology and popularization also had effects on concern for gender matters, providing a large root for discussion, accelerating the exchange of information, weakening the national discourse homogeneity, yet at the same time creating information cocoons, leading to the formation of echo-chambers, the polarization of opinion, balkanization of online spaces and more hostile tones. Finally, with an explanation regarding policy and education, and the accompanying changes in the social and political atmosphere, the author concludes that the increasing concern about gender matters in China in recent years is a result of a variety of factors, providing us with a reference and a way to view gender parity in China and other social issues.

**Keywords:** Gender Parity; China; Social Presence; Social Consciousness.

## 1. Introduction

Research on gender parity has been a hot topic in recent years, both socially and academically. On a daily basis, many people are aware of the surge in the number of news articles and publications devoted to feminism and gender equity in recent years. And more and more people are getting used to analyze social issues in terms of gender. Chinese scholars have been working on these matters for years, and their conclusions are diverse. However, little research has been done on why people are now more concerned about gender parity and what shapes the minds and tones of modern Chinese people. Therefore, the main focus of this paper is to enumerate and analyze possible reasons why gender issues have become a subject of widespread concern in the social life of Chinese citizens today, providing a meaningful complement to research. By analyzing, classifying, and enumerating the causes of such phenomena, this essay provides scope for this entirely new topic through an interdisciplinary approach involving economics, politics, psychology, science and technology, and history, with the ultimate goal of explaining the impact of social presence on social consciousness regarding gender matters.

## 2. A Growing Concern for Gender Parity

Before getting down to the nitty-gritty of the causes, it remains to be clarified whether there has been a growing discussion of gender parity among Chinese people over the past few decades. There have been no official statistics on the subject to date, so the sole way of attesting to the claim is to employ circumstantial evidence and inferences. According to the Annual Top 10 Chinese Movie List announced by Dou ban [1], an authoritative and long-accepted movie review website, in the past decade, the number of films directly referring to gender issues included in the List has experienced a slight increase, with zero from 2010 to 2019 and one for both 2020 and 2021. Evaluating movies based on criteria including box office returns, social discussion, and audience ratings, The List

indicates that gender issues have received increased social attention over the past two years compared to the previous decade. In addition, from 1981 to 2022, the annual number of Chinese articles published on CNKI with themes of “gender equality”, “feminism” and “liberation of women” showed a general increasing trend, peaking in 2014 with 2,929 learned periodicals and remaining at a relatively high level in the following years, indicating an increasing academic interest of Chinese scholars in gender issues. [2] From all the evidence listed previously, we may conclude that gender parity has become a heated topic in China in recent years, with a major outburst during the COVID-19 period, a time when all kinds of social conflicts are rapidly accumulating.

### **3. Changes in Living Conditions of Chinese Women**

Changes in social consciousness are usually caused by changes in the conditions of social material life, which means that changes in objective conditions in recent years may have played a significant role in the rise of gender issues.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, China has suffered from declining GDP growth and increasing wealth inequality, with a Gini coefficient of 0.47 in 2020. [3] Hard time may have intensified many once hidden or ignored social conflicts and brought them to the surface, including gender inequity. Generally, according to WEF Gender Gap reports, China’s overall rank has fallen from 57th in 2008 to 107th in 2021, and returned to 102nd in 2022, which is still not commendable.[4] The drop in the rankings may indicate the diminishing benefits of China's efforts to promote gender equality, perhaps a reduction in the intensity of China's efforts to promote gender equality, or perhaps even a reversal in China's gender parity. Female participation in the workforce fell from 68.6 percent in 2018 to 61.61 percent in 2022, and the female-to-male ratio of the workforce fell from 0.83 in 2018 to 0.45 in 2020 and 2022. And according to UNDP’s report on GNI per capita in China, the gap between males and females has constantly grown from \$1,530 in 2000 to \$6242 in 2017, 22% less than the male workers, indicating a potential larger gap in the future. [5] The worsening overall economic situation of women and the increasing economic inequality may have led many to reconsider the progress of gender equality in China and question China’s gender parity both at present time and in the past.

On the other hand, the overall rapid growth in the living conditions of Chinese women over a larger time horizon may also have influenced the increasing discussion on gender parity. Since 2000, China’s GNI per capita has rocketed from \$940 to \$11890 in 2021(current US\$), meaning that most Chinese are having a better life. [6] In 2000, Engel’s coefficient for China was 42.2%, and since then it has been constantly decreasing, reaching the trough in 2019 of 29.8%, which means for most Chinese people, food and clothing were no longer a problem. [7] And according to Pew Research Center’s statistics in 2021, 52.67% of Chinese are sized up to the daily wage standard of the middle class and higher, ranging from \$10 to \$50 per day, or even higher. [8] According to Maslow’s hierarchy, once the physiological and safety needs are met, people would try to pursue the needs of higher levels such as love, belonging, and esteem. Among them are social equity, respect, recognition, and freedom, which could have led to increased demand for gender parity and increased concern about gender issues in recent years. In the 1980s, concerns about gender equality took a back seat to economic development and issues of sustenance, but as the Chinese enjoy an increasingly affluent life, gender issues are once again on the agenda. In that case, the growing focus on gender parity in China is an outcome of constant economic development and social progress.

### **4. Technological Advancement in Social Media**

#### **4.1 Popularization of the Internet Extends the Roots of Discussion**

New media technologies have ensured the rapid exchange of information, bridging people of different cultural groups and broadening the roots of discussions on gender issues. According to the China Digital Trade Development Report 2020 released by MIIT, China's cross-border data traffic in 2019 was about 111 million Mbps, accounting for 23 percent of the global cross-border data traffic,

indicating increasing connectivity with the globe. [9] The domestic data flow reached 33.31 billion GBs in 2019, with over 80% of 4G permeability in 2020 and 52.68% of 5G permeability in June 2022.

The popularization of the Internet and the rapid development of various social software in recent years not only made it easier and faster for Chinese people to obtain information but also increased the attention and social impact of various malignant events, bringing many events that may be neglected or suppressed in the past into people's view, introducing events to more citizens, and extending the roots for the discussion of social issues. Among them are numerous vicious incidents involving gender and violence, such as the Tangshan restaurant attack, the Xuzhou chained woman incident, and the Lamu murder case. At the same time, the decentralization promoted by the popularization of the Internet grants everyone the chance to be the source of news, pose articles, express their thoughts and stories, and lead people to pay attention to "big elephants in the room". In that way, people are constantly questioning the authorities for the truth, prompting the government to look deeper and make clearer and more acceptable statements. The anonymity of the internet and the infinity of online space also ensure that those who reveal the truth are not directly harmed and those who question the truth may not be directly threatened. These factors have made it a lot easier for news and incidents to be spotted and spread, and eventually, lead to the increasing exposure of incidents about gender issues to the public, constantly provoking reflection and discussion, and resulting in a more transparent society and the weakening of national discourse hegemony.

In addition to making our society more transparent, the spread of the internet has provided grounds for more frequent and intense discussions, and at the same time introduced new perceptions of the definition of true liberation of women different from the Marxist view China had held in the past. Prior to the mass employment of the internet and advances in media technology in the 2000s, discussion of gender issues in China was limited to in-person discussions or academic debates. Learning foreign theories mainly depended on expensive print books and monographs limited to university libraries, which are largely inaccessible to the masses. Yet when it comes to the 2000s, when Bulletin Board Systems enjoyed increasing popularity and the Internet became more accessible, the opportunities for discussion increased significantly, bringing people of different cultural backgrounds and opinions together and providing a venue for more constructive and insightful discussions.

Yet through recent events on gender issues, we have also seen polarized opinions and irrational rhetoric from some netizens, with sometimes abusive and rude comments emerging in heated discussions. More and more people seem to be concerned with overwhelming the opposition, rather than trying to persuade them with reason and evidence. This means that, in addition to merit, there are some flaws in advanced media technology that affect the discussion of gender parity.

#### **4.2 Tone and Mind Reshaped by Media and the Internet**

Advances in technology and the consequent changes in our lives have been causing great turmoil in people's minds, covertly influencing our choices and perspectives. China is a leading country in the fourth industrial revolution, ushering in an era of artificial intelligence, cloud computing, big data, and the internet of things. The leading position of China in new technologies has granted Chinese app designers and Internet companies enormous advantages, allowing them to process a large amount of data within a short time and provide more comprehensive and personalized services, known as "My Daily News", introduced by Nicholas Negroponte, the founder and chairman of MIT's Media Lab, in 1996. But flaws in more personalized services also exist, including the emergence of information cocoons, an epoch-making concept introduced in 2008 by Cass R. Sunstein, the author of "Infotopia," which helped bring home the shortcomings of mass employment in modern media technology.

In the old days of traditional media, media organizations that produced news for the public relied heavily on human editors and had no clear sense of audience segmentation. However, when the fourth industrial revolution arrived, content distribution based on algorithm recommendations emerged, taking the user's personal characteristics as the standard to screen the information and recommend it to the user, so as to provide a "most pleasant and charming experience" in an era with overwhelming

information and fragmented time. This leads to a flattening of information distribution and more diverse services, but may also lead to group polarization, information barriers, echo chambers, and Balkanization of online spaces, as also mentioned in Infotopia.[10] Based on Carl Iver Hovland and M.L.Defleur's theory of individual differences, the algorithm recommends content to users according to their own interests, social inclination, experiences, and mindsets, making it easy for users to constantly accept the information they are willing to accept, constantly in contact with the viewpoints they agree with, and eventually have a preconceived view of social issues. While they are highly satisfied with the recommendation algorithm, it is difficult for them to discover that the information they receive is very limited and their perspective is narrowed. In that case, users are always in the information barrier, and at the same time, they are exposed to repeated opinions, as if they are in an echo chamber, constantly cementing their opinions, ultimately leading to polarization and flattening of thinking. Online spaces also gradually became isolated, with fierce conflicts among various user groups and a lack of reflection and rational thinking on the part of most users, which eventually led to complex conflicts and constant hostility, as in the Balkans, making it difficult to reach consensus on issues.

In that case, the rising concern about gender issues in China could be perceived as an outcome of the shortcomings of modern media technology. It could be that not only has gender inequality intensified in China over the past few years, but so has separation and hostility between people.

## 5. The Change in Tolerance of Diversified Opinions

Beyond living conditions and technology, the growing tolerance of diverse opinions has shed light on the discussion of gender issues as well. Since 1999, when the Chinese government announced the Self-Funded Study Abroad Agency Regulations, the number of students studying abroad has continued to skyrocket, reaching 80,000 in 2020 and a total of 5.8571 million. [11] According to the Ministry of Education, women constituted 52.5 percent of undergraduate students in China's colleges and universities in 2017. [12] The WEF ranks China first in gender balance for tertiary education. And female students are more likely to study abroad. [13] The increasing interaction between the foreign world and China as well as the high education rate had leveled the average thinking ability of Chinese people and made Chinese society more tolerant of diversified opinions, shedding light and novel views on gender issues. As more people become cultured and influenced by foreign views of what a good society should be, social awareness of inequities and injustices may also rise, and tolerance of impropriety and sin may decrease, affecting general attitudes towards gender parity and issues.

In addition to the change in the Chinese people, the Chinese government has also changed its policies in recent years. Since Xi became the leader of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012, the government has emphasized its Rule by Law ideology, which standardizes government actions, clarifies the boundaries of public power, and respects human rights and basic civil rights. These actions have covertly and positively affected the social atmosphere, making it more relaxed and lenient, allowing for diverse opinions and discussions on social issues such as gender parity. During the Covid-19 period, however, the constant expansion of public power upset many people and gradually created a depressed and tense social atmosphere. At the same time, the concentrated outbursts of various social problems also helped people to see through allusions to a harmonious society and heightened anxiety about the over-extending power of government. The frequent outbursts of social conflict and negative events have shaped a negative-induced mood and a tendency among the Chinese to believe conspiracy theories, slander any opposition, and irrational thinking, ultimately leading to an increasingly heated debate about sexual matters.

## 6. Conclusion

The growing concern about gender issues in China in recent years is a result of a variety of factors, including material conditions, economic development, education, social atmosphere, technological advancement, and other lurking factors that remain to be mentioned. Social existence does have a big impact on how people think and act about gender matters.

Given that little research has been done on the reasons for the increased discussion and attention on gender issues, this paper aims to provide only a rough and preliminary analysis with a social and historical perspective. It is undeniable that China has done a great deal for gender parity, addressing many gender issues and constantly promoting equity. Yet there are definitely still gaps and shortfalls, and the task of achieving gender parity is still far from complete for us.

In the future, perhaps more research should be done from a philosophical and psychological point of view, allowing us to perceive gender matters from a more scientific and fascinating perspective. The role of males in promoting gender equity in China should also be examined. At the same time, we should be genuinely pleased with the growing concern for gender parity among Chinese people, which means our society is gradually becoming more tolerant and aware of injustice and inequity, approaching a utopian society where all needs are taken into consideration and no one is suffering from the anguish caused by inequities.

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