THE MOST DISADVANTAGED: AN EXAMINATION AND ANALYSIS OF RURAL GIRLS’ ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHINA

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This paper examines the current disadvantaged status of rural Chinese girls’ access to higher education and analyzes their and their parents’ mentality. The worldwide progress made in girls’ access to basic education and China’s higher education development promoted by preferential state policies in the late 1990s have hardly affected rural girls. In a recent study examining the gender and regional origin inequality at six universities in southwest China, rural girls constituted only 22% of the female student body. The thesis examines the current disadvantaged situation of rural girls as compared to rural boys and their urban counterparts in the social economic background of a sliding rural economy; and then proceeds to probe into the economic contributing factors to their disadvantaged status and analyze this phenomenon within the theories of Image of Limited Good in peasant society and Patriarchy by socialist feminism. The research relies on both quantitative and qualitative data. I conclude that rural girls are the most disadvantaged group in accessing higher education, which is caused by a sliding economy, high tuition fees, and a gloomy job market. The theories of Limited Good and Patriarchy provide a sound and plausible explanation to rural girls’ and their parents’ decision-making process in higher education.
Chapter I: Introduction

Problem Statement

Throughout the Chinese history, education has always held a high value and taken a core position in civilization. The recent years have witnessed tremendous development in education at all levels: the Chinese government has made remarkable progress providing basic education to its 1.3 billion people, expanding education to remote areas and hard-to-reach populations, lowering the cost of primary education, and universalizing nine-year compulsory education. Higher education in particular has grown in size and quality with an increasing public awareness of its importance, which reflects worldwide development after World War II. However, there is a group that is hardly affected by state preferential policies and public awareness when it comes to higher education: rural girls. Despite all the achievement made in women’s education, e.g., official figures show the illiteracy rate for women between 18 and 64 years old dropped from 30.1% in 1990 to 11.1% in 2000; the illiteracy rate of young women dropped to 4.9%; and women who received an education higher than primary school level increased from 37.0% to 50.7% (Women of China, 2006), yet rural girls’ access to higher education has hardly improved.
When compared to urban boys, urban girls, and rural boys, rural girls constitute a most underrepresented portion of enrollment (see the findings section); rural girls receive the largest part of funding from government departments and international projects; yet higher education still remains largely “forbidden” to them. In a recent study examining the gender and regional origin inequality at six universities in southwest China, rural girls constituted only 22% of all the female students (Huang, 2005).

Research Questions

One can’t help but wonder, as is my first research question: with all the progress made in equalizing access by gender and urban/rural family origin at the mass education level; and in light of the expansion and development of higher education in recent years (especially since 1999), are rural girls still a particular disadvantaged group in accessing higher education compared to rural boys and their urban counterparts?

My second question asks, what are the economic contributing factors to rural girls’ disadvantaged status?

My third question is: can the theories of Limited Good and patriarchy explain the phenomenon of rural girls’ disadvantaged status?

I look for an explanation to the phenomenon within the theoretical framework of the peasant concept “Image of Limited Good” and patriarchy. As a country whose population largely resides in the countryside, rural Chinese culture is still characterized by the peasant mentality of Limited Good, which views the social environment as limited and unexpandable. Also, women are considered as peripheral to production and thus less
suitable for educational investment than men. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, most part of rural China has experienced a stagnant economy and a growing gap between the rural and urban areas (Wen, 2005). Although rural China has seen some industrialization, it is still largely a culture where peasant mentality prevails. It is my hypothesis that the theory of Limited Good combined with patriarchy can provide a plausible explanation to the persistent, or even worsening, inequality faced by rural girls and in greater measure than rural boys.

Previous research on girls’ education and development in higher education provides little insight into rural girls’ access to higher education. For the first time, this thesis distinguishes them from other disadvantaged groups and tries to analyze their mentality by the theories of Limited Good and patriarchy. The purpose of the study is to examine the phenomenon within the context of a broad social economic change in rural China so that we can better understand the problem and raise the awareness of scholars and policy-makers. In the long run, this thesis will hopefully provide a foundation for future research that is more detailed, geographic and ethnically specific; and promote the accessibility of higher education to rural girls.

**Definitions of Terms**

*Rural girls.* The definition of rural girls is a question of what rural population means in China. Rural population, which varies in name (rural, agricultural, and countryside population) in different yearbooks for distinctive purposes, is generally decided by residence and engagement in agriculture, despite the changes in
administrative areas. According to the 1982 Chinese *Statistical Yearbook*,

The total urban population and total rural population are classified in accordance with their usual residence. The urban population is the total population which includes those administered at city or town level; the rural population is the total population which is administered at the county level (excluding towns).

“Cities” are cities which are officially administered at the national level as cities.

“Towns” are towns within provinces, autonomous regions and cities designated as towns. Prior to 1964, the term has included areas with a regular population of over 3,000 and non-agricultural population of over 70 per cent, or an area with a population over 2,500 and less than 3,000 with a non-agricultural population of over 85 per cent.

The Regulations for 1987 Rural Economic Statistical Reports issued by the General Office of Management of the Ministry of Agriculture defines rural population as: Those peasants engaging in household operations, centralized collective operations, new integrated economic entities and two-level village enterprise labor, plus the population dependent for their livelihood on those peasants’ income.
Officially then, rural girls should be defined as girls residing in county-level administrative areas, engaging in (or whose parents are engaging in) household operations, centralized collective operations, new integrated economic entities and two-level village enterprise labor as peasants. *Rural girls* in this thesis refer to girls who receive all their pre-tertiary education in rural areas. Those girls with a rural residence who receive only part of their education in rural areas are not included in this thesis, such as migrant workers’ children.

*Higher education.* According to *China Statistical Year Book* (2005), higher education in the PRC is divided into regular institutions of higher learning and institution of higher learning of adults. This thesis deals exclusively with regular institutions of higher education, which refers to “educational establishments set up according to the government evaluation and approval procedures, enrolling graduates from senior secondary schools and providing higher education courses and training for senior professionals. They include full-time universities, colleges, high professional schools and short-term professional universities”.

Worldwide, university is referred to as the carrier of higher education, and it has “become the essential vehicle for the transmission of culture and knowledge from one generation to the next. The democratization of society, and the breaking down of historical elites, has been paralleled by, and some would argue driven by, the extension of higher education to an ever-larger proportion of society. “The university of today... is in its greatest moment a vehicle for the transformation of culture and knowledge down
through the ages, and a critical element of the continuity and survival of civil society… It is also a complex business with a range of intertwined functions and responsibilities that come together to create educational products and services” (Keller, 1983:107).

In a post industrial world higher education is valued more than at any other times previously, although its purposes vary from country to country. Generally, higher education serves the following purposes: to prepare the nation with an effective workforce, to build and strengthen national identity while preserving cultural continuity, to advance knowledge and understanding, and to develop an individual’s autonomy and integrity (Law, 1996; Watty, 2006).

**Limitations of the Study**

This thesis relies on both quantitative and qualitative data, which comes from two sources: primary data from the interviews I conducted with five rural Chinese girls; and secondary data from texts that include statistics and opinions. When analyzing data, I kept my role as an objective observer and tried to make my analysis as accurate as I can. However, there are still limitations of the design: First, the interviews were conducted over the phone, and each of them lasted about 45 minutes. No observation was conducted. The limitedness of my fieldwork is likely to affect the validity of my study.

Second, the sample was too small for a study that intended to theorize the whole rural female population. Also, the sample was chosen through personal connections, so they cannot represent the whole population.
Third, there are usually several procedures to establish validity of a qualitative study, of which I only applied three: member check, triangulation—“the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon” (Denzin, 1978: 291), and researcher reflexivity. I tried to achieve authenticity by bringing my transcription back to my participants and checking the validity of my analyses. I also relied on previous literature on rural girls’ access to higher education and compared the conclusions from them with my own. I reduced my possible bias that comes from my own identity as an urban female who had finished higher education by constantly reflecting critically on my own stance and on the possibility of forcing my opinion on others. However, I did not go to the field. No thick description or peer review was done. So the data could be incomplete and might lead to prejudiced conclusions.

Fourth, there is controversy over the validity of the research paradigm, post-positivist, itself. Advocates of other paradigms, e.g., critical theory, promote an interactive relationship between the researchers and the participants. To them the detached position of post-positivist scholars is considered possibly misleading. Existentialists argue that knowledge is difficult to gain when the researchers’ is an outsider (Ambert, Adler, Adler and Detzner, 1995). Postmodernists claim that reality is fragmented thus cannot be generalized.

Therefore, The data provided in my thesis might be incomplete and inaccurate. The conclusion cannot be generalized to the entire population and could be subject to further scrutinizing.
The next chapters of the thesis will present the literature on girls’ education and higher education expansion in China, and a review of the theoretical framework of *Limited Good* and patriarchy. Chapter III will introduce the design of study, followed by Chapter IV, which presents the findings and argues the fit of the theories of *Limited Good* and patriarchy offers as an explanation of the phenomenon. The final chapter presents the conclusion of rural girls’ disadvantaged status and the economic factors that contribute to their condition; and confirm that the theories of *Limited Good* and patriarchy offer an adequate explanation to this phenomenon.
Chapter II: Literature Review

In this chapter, I review the literature on two subjects: the development of girls’ education in China, and the expansion of higher education, followed by a review of the literature on the theoretical framework and the chosen methodology. The issue of rural girls’ access to higher education is covered but not scrutinized in those two topics. The literature was retrieved from peer-reviewed journals, e.g. *American Anthropology*, *Chinese Education and Society*, *Comparative Education*, and etc. Also, I made reference to published dissertations; newspapers; research reports from governments, NGOs, and research centers affiliated to universities; book chapters; conference presentations; and yearbooks.

*Girls’ Education in China*

Although recent years have seen more and more scholarly attention paid to girls’ education and the development of higher education in China, there are still very few works on rural girls’ access to higher education. Most of the research focuses on these three areas: girls’/women’s access to basic education in China and worldwide, expansion of higher education, and equality and access issues in higher education.

Access to basic education for girls/women has been a concern of governments, NGOs, and the United Nations since World War II based on a simple practical
philosophy of its long-term effects: educating girls not only improves their lives, enhances their independence, and benefits their community, but also it means educating the future mothers who would pass on their education to the next generation. Ever since the launching of Education For All (EFA), girls’ education has been of particular importance to the achieving of gender equality and other goals of this worldwide movement. The *Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All: Meeting Our Collective Commitments*, which was adopted by the World Education Forum in Dakar, 2000, “reaffirms the goal of education for all as laid out by the World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien, Thailand, 1990) and other international conferences. It commits governments to achieving quality basic education for all by 2015 or earlier, with particular emphasis on girls’ education, and includes a pledge from donor countries and institutions that "no country seriously committed to basic education will be thwarted in the achievement of this goal by lack of resources” (Dakar Framework for Action, 2000).

Specifically about rural China, individual researchers have made great efforts on deepening our understanding of girls’ education too, though from different perspectives and with various conclusions, e.g., Lavely, Xiao, Li, Freedman’s *The Rise in Female Education in China: National and Regional Patterns* (1990); Ross’s *Female Education and Development in Asia* (1999); Klasen and Wink’s “Missing Women”: Revisiting the Debate (2003); Hannum’s *Poverty and Basic Education in Rural China: Villages, Households, and Girls’ and Boys’ Enrollment* (2003), and *Market Transition, Educational Disparities, and Family Strategies in Rural China: New Evidence on Gender Stratification and Development* and *Poverty* (2005); Liu and Carpenter’s *Trends and*
Issues of Women’s Education in China (2005); Seeberg’s The Case For Prioritizing Education For Girls Left-Behind In Remote Rural China (2007); just to name a few.

Interestingly, another trend in the research on Chinese girls’ education uncovered urban girls’ rising equality in education made possible by the one-child policy. Fong’s China’s One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters (2002); Tsui and Rich’s The One Child and Educational Opportunity for Girls in Urban China (2002); Veeck, Flurry and Jiang’s Equal Dreams: The One Child Policy and the Consumption of Education in Urban China (2003) all deal with how the one child policy helps urban girls get equal access to education and achieving gender parity in education.

The Expansion of Higher Education

Continuities and Economic Change: Higher Education in Mainland China and Taiwan (1996) constitutes a very important historical and cultural account of higher education. However, the literature mentioned above sheds very little light on rural girls’ access to higher education in China. As a group, rural girls are usually lumped with other populations as the “disadvantaged”. Their family origin was rarely singled out as an important contributing factor to their access to higher education. The thesis tries to examine and analyze thoroughly rural girls’ disadvantaged status incurred by their residence in the context of the current economic and social changes in China; and hopefully, raise the awareness of this issue to researchers and policy makers.

Theoretical Framework of Limited Good

As I started on this project, it was my thought that patriarchy and peasant mentality were overriding cultural frameworks operating in families in rural China. As a by-and-large peasant country, China still sees the mentality of patriarchy prevail in the mainstream society, especially in the countryside. It greatly affects people’s choice of schooling--their own and their children’s--when the limitedness of resources restrains their choice to the gender with the most potential return: the male.

The theory of Limited Good provides an adequate and accurate explanation to the phenomenon in rural China: in the vast land of the countryside where resources and opportunities are rare, parents make the best choice out of their knowledge to enable the male descendants’ privilege, thus leaving the girls behind, most of whom agree with their parents that only few years of education is good enough.
The theory of *Limited Good* was first proposed by George M. Foster. Foster (1965) published "Peasant Society and the Image of *Limited Good*” in the *American Anthropologist*, arguing that the dominant theme in the cognitive orientation of a peasant society, though most of the time implicit and unarticulated, is the image of *Limited Good*.

By ‘Image of *Limited Good*’ I mean that broad areas of peasant behavior are patterned in such fashion as to suggest that peasants view their social, economic, and natural universes—their total environment—as one in which all of the desired things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety, *exist in finite quantity* and *are always in short supply*, as far as the peasant is concerned. Not only do these and all other ‘good things’ *exist in finite and limited quantities*, but in addition *there is no way directly within peasant power to increase the available quantities*. It is as if the obvious fact of land shortage in a densely populated area applied to all other desired things: not enough to go around. ‘Good,’ like land, is seen as inherent in nature, there to be divided and re-divided, if necessary, but not to be augmented. (p. 296)

Foster considers a peasant community as a closed system, which means “an individual or a family can improve a position only at the expense of others” (1965: 297). He supports his argument by analyzing four aspects of peasant behavior: economic behavior, friendship, health, manliness and honor.

Peasants are individualistic, and it logically follows from the Image of *Limited Good* that minimal social unit (often the nuclear family and, in
many situations, a single individual) sees itself in perpetual, unrelenting struggle with its fellows for possession of or control over what it considers to be its share of scarce values. This is a position that calls for extreme caution and reserve, a reluctance to reveal true strength or position. It encourages suspicion and mutual distrust… The agreed-upon norm that promotes maximum community stability is behavior that tends to maintain the status quo in relationships. (p. 302)

A peasant, according to G. Foster, believes he is supposed to maintain the status quo and guard the community balance by keeping himself/herself in the same position with other peasants, or conceal material or other improvements, or neutralize the consequences. As a result, economic contentment and an acceptance of a low standard of material comfort and a set social role is widely adopted in a peasant society.

Controversy aroused right after the publication of Foster’s theory. Some scholars believed that image of Limited Good was not exclusive to peasant society (Bennett, 1966; Kearny, 1969), and some believed that “the major assumptions of the argument are in error and lead to misinterpretations of the data” (Kennedy, 1966:1212). In a later publication, in response to the critiques, Foster agreed that “Limited Good behavior is not exclusive to peasant societies.” He explained his theory further by stating that Limited Good behavior is present in every society and it should be viewed as “a continuum the poles of which are More Limited and Less Limited.” He also refined his theory and narrowed its applicability to “classic”, not modernizing, peasant society.
(Foster, 1972). Finally, as the case with most other theories, he admitted there were exceptions to the rule.

Although the theory aroused much controversy since its publication, it is still considered as the most convincing and accurate common behavior model of a peasant society. “Foster’s description of peasant thinking and behavior is very valuable, and no doubt will become a standard source” as Bennett comments (1966:206).

**Theoretical Framework of Patriarchy**

The theory of patriarchy as a structure of society has been well recognized and documented by scholars in Europe. In 1861, Sir Henry Main wrote in the introduction of his work *Ancient Law*: “The eldest male parent is absolutely supreme in his household. His dominion extends to life and death, and is as unqualified over his children as over his slaves. The flocks and herds of the children are the flocks and herds of the father. These he holds in a representative rather than in a proprietary character.” Patriarchy sets the oldest male as the final and highest authority in family and state affairs. According to Walby (1990), “If patriarchy is defined as a ‘system of social structures in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women…’, then the assumption is that relationships between men and women are inherently unequal and hierarchical--even though this may be a matter of degree” (20).

As a regulatory system, patriarchy shows in history in different forms, which were distinguished by Pateman: the classical, traditional, and modern (1991). This thesis is based on the patriarchy theory within the paradigm of feminism, especially socialist
feminism, which has borrowed the concept of patriarchy from its classical form: “paternal and political rule were not merely analogous but identical” (1997:56). The argument of patriarchy establishes men as the ultimate power of society, as the embodiment of progress, rationality, and modernity. It is a discourse that subsumes women into the system of governance and submission, locks women mainly into the realm of family and reproduction, and renders them peripheral to modern, industrial, and public production.

According to Crompton (1998), “Patriarchy is a sociological structure that has become globally imbedded in all of our institutions in society. It has its greatest effect in the private lives of men and women” (129).

Walby (1990, 1994, 1997) believes that patriarchy is made up of six major structures: patriarchal relations in work, patriarchal relations in the state, patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in cultural institution, male violence, and patriarchal relations in sexuality.

Geographically speaking, the most salient cases of patriarchy exist in “North America, the Muslim Middle East (including Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran), and South and East Asia (specifically, India and China)” (Kandiyoti, 1988: 278). China, as a country largely composed of a peasantry, is still considered by many national and western scholars as a patriarchal society (Fei, 1965; Johnson, 1983).

The clearest form of patriarchy in the Chinese society is the split of public and private spheres, as proposed by the socialist feminists: the public sphere is for men; for social, economic and institutional production; while the private sphere is for women; for
family reproduction (Jaggar, 1983). Women’s labor, domestic largely, provides only a necessary subsidy to the male wage and remains unpaid and underappreciated. There is a binarism of the home and the world. The sexual division of labor denies “women and men the same access to self-determination” (Grosz, 1990).

Socialist feminists explanation that the public sphere is less open to women because of the overemphasis on the function of sexuality and procreation fits the cultural ideal held by many Chinese rural people: women are only valued for their reproduction abilities. This persistent discourse of patriarchy seeps into rural girls: they internalize the culturally constructed proper behavioral code of women and thus feel guilty for asking too much from the family. Unwittingly, they become complicit with patriarchy in their own oppression and subordination.

“For hundreds of years, Chinese social practices prevented females from participating in any political, social, or academic public event. For example, the written imperial examination was conducted to aid the selection of government officials between AD 600 and 1905. Exclusion of females from this examination was taken for granted and was never questioned for the thirteen hundred years of its administration” (Liu&Carpenter, 2005: 278). Schooling is given to girls as a bonus.
Chapter III: Design of the Study

The study is a micro-analysis backed by personal interviews with five rural Chinese girls from Hebei Province, China.

I approach the question by first presenting and summarizing the phenomenon, and then I proceed to provide an explanation within the theoretical framework of Limited Good and patriarchy, which was discussed above.

Data Collection

The thesis is constructed on both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data is mostly from yearbooks, statistical publications, and newspapers. Qualitative data comes from two sources: primary data is obtained from interviews with five rural Chinese girls (age 17-23); and secondary data is retrieved from publicized research papers on accredited journals in the areas of higher education, rural education, and China’s reform and development in the last thirty years.

Participants in the Study

I conducted five long-distance phone interviews with rural Chinese girls who faced or were facing a choice between higher education and work. All of the participants have siblings in their families. The interviews were simultaneously written down, translated into English and the answers grouped. The participants were selected from personal contacts because of convenience. I kept notes of the interviews, which were
later stored in my computer.

I try to keep my role of a researcher as detached and objective as I can. However, as a female born and raised in a Northern Chinese city, I have a background that affects my standpoint. My identity as an urban girl who had completed college and came to the United States for a graduate education is likely to make me favor higher education and consider those who don’t go to college and/or who don’t have the opportunity as deprived and disenfranchised. Since very early in life, I have had the impression that people living in the countryside are not entitled to the same rights and opportunities as urban residents. Rural girls are typically the victim of poverty circle and ignorance. To me, rural girls were more likely to drop out of school; and seemed less ambitious when it came to their education and future life. The impression came from our relatives and friends from the countryside, rather than from textbooks. It came from the talks I had with my family and our family friends from rural areas, to whom my family always showed sympathy.

After I came to America, I gained more access to media coverage and research on rural girls, most of which were on the disadvantages of girls. There are more projects, affirmative actions and government interventions designed to help girls, rather than boys. Girls are portrayed as the victims of an unequal educational system and the sufferers that we need to focus our help to.

So when it comes to schooling of rural girls, I have the assumption of a pre-existing inequality, which makes me more prone to the data and previous literature that support the same viewpoint; and overlook rural girls resilience and resistance. It was my goal to be a silent observer and raise non-biased questions. I evaluate my own
non-intervening role as successful.
Analysis of findings is divided into two parts. Section A deals with key statistics concerning rural girls’ access to higher education. It looks at rural girls’ enrollment number and rate as compared to rural boys and urban students, which indicate that they are a particular disadvantaged group in accessing higher education. Section B offers an analysis of the contributing economic factors to this phenomenon and an explanation of rural girls’ disadvantaged status by theories of Limited Good and patriarchy.

Key Statistics

The Chinese government has been working to expand education in every level since 1949. Higher education and lower levels of education are competitors for state allocated resources. Since the summer of 1999, the expansion of higher education has been massive in both absolute student numbers and enrollment rate. The number of students in regular colleges increased from 6,430,000 in 1998 to 12,140,000 in 2001; the college student body doubled in those three years. The enrollment rate increased too: 9.1% in 1997, 9.8% in 1998, 10.5% in 1999, 11.3% in 2000 (He, 2003:N/A), and jumped to 19% in 2004 (Table 1).
Table 1

*Enrollment Rate and College Student Number, 1998-2002*

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<th>Year</th>
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<td>Enrollment rate of Examinees (%)</td>
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<td>10.5</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College student number (thousand)</td>
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<td>7422</td>
<td>9399</td>
<td>12144</td>
<td>14000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. From Higher Education Admission Yearbook of China, p. N/A. Copyright 2004 by the China Data Online. Adapted with permission.*

At the same time, the female student body doubled from 1998 to 2002. Its proportion of the total student body increased from 33.7% in 1991, 38.31% in 1998 to 43.95% in 2002 (*Educational Yearbook of China, 2005*).

However, the gap between the urban and rural enrollment rates has been increasing since 1990. Not only is the urban enrollment rate always higher than the rural rate, but it is growing at a faster pace than the latter (Table 2).

As seen in Table 2, urban college students’ number remains roughly more than 3 times the rural number. Over the eight years, the trend of inequality deepened. In 1998, there are 135,600 more urban college students than rural college students.
Table 2

*Number of Students in Higher Education*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Urban Students (10,000)</th>
<th>Rural Students (10,000)</th>
<th>Urban Rural Difference (10,000)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>13.75</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>10.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>9.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>17.85</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>12.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>17.78</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>11.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>19.63</td>
<td>6.07</td>
<td>13.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. From* Statistical Yearbook of China and Educational Yearbook of China, p. N/A. Copyright 1998 by the China Data Online. Adapted with permission.

Higher education has historically been less accessible to rural girls than rural boys and their urban counterparts. “In contrast to the general trend of a diminishing gender gap in education, in rural areas, the gender gap in higher education is deteriorating. Gender inequality in terms of access to higher education in rural students is more serious than in urban students” (ScienceNet, 2006).

A survey by Lihong Huang (2005) examined the socio-economic background of 1156 higher education students at six universities in Southwest China (Guizhou, Sichuan and Yunan provinces). In the study, “sample data that describe student characteristics are compared with population estimates from both the Southwest region and the whole country.” The gender disparity in this study is shown in Table 3.
The following table shows the proportion of rural male to urban male and rural female to urban female students in southwest China: rural girls make up only 22% of all the female students, while rural male students take up 44% of all the male students.

Table 3

*Gender Distribution by Rural/Urban Origin (Percent)*

![Bar chart showing gender distribution by rural/urban origin.]


This shows that rural girls are hindered in terms of access because of both gender and family origin in higher education (Huang, 2005). On the one hand, they are outnumbered by rural boys (rural female: 104; rural male: 300); on the other hand, they are unable to claim equal educational opportunities with their urban counterparts. It must be remembered that the rural population as a whole constitutes almost 70% of the
population. The small proportion of rural girls in higher education despite their greater proportion of the total population points out the enormity of the disadvantage rural girls experience in access to higher education.

Examination of Contributing Factors and Explanation

In this section, I try to examine the contributing factors to the disadvantaged status of rural girls and analyze phenomenon within the theoretical frameworks of Limited Good and patriarchy. The section is divided into the following parts:

*Rural economy in transformation.* Transformation of China’s rural economy started in 1978, when the household responsibility system was introduced and replaced the commune system. The system gives the right to use lands to individual families while at the same time claiming ownership for the country or the community. The village is entitled to rent out the land for any kind of use other than farming. This policy was later seen as a de facto privatization and capitalization of rural economy by many scholars (Wen, 2005; Li and Rozelle, 2003), and it divided the commune back into individual households, which are held responsible for their own work and well-being. In the first decade, farmers were greatly motivated to control their own production on their land. However, the reform was incomplete in that “ownership remains collective and peasants do not have secure rights over the land they are working. This keeps peasant investment in and enthusiasm for agriculture low” (Oi, 1999: 618). More specifically, “this prohibited peasant from selling their land, but more disturbing, it left the collective—either the village or in some cases the village small group—with the right to take that
land and redistribute it to someone else. The original land contracts provided no commitment that those who invested to improve the land would be the long-term beneficiaries of such investments” (Oi, 1999: 618).

With a fixed price regulated by the central government, the agricultural products were one of the least profitable goods. Peasants were thus stuck in an awkward position of quasi-privatization and a state-controlled market. It not only resulted in a stagnant rural economy, but also let the peasants bear the brunt of an unsuccessful reform: First, the peasants gradually lost their motivation over land because of no ownership. The land became unable to support the rural population. The deterioration of the environment, rising price of fertilizer, and illegal expropriation of land all added to the crisis in agriculture. Rural residents’ income stagnated between late 1980s and early 1990s, a period when the central government retreated from its role in public service in many sectors, including education, medical care, and retirement. Post-commune agricultural production based on households turned out to be not only inefficient, but continued to bond the farmer to the land and limited his/her activity to within the family. More and more villages were sliding into poverty. Families struggled to make a living, not to mention providing financial support for higher education. Even though rural residents’ income kept an average annual growth rate of 7.06% from 1978 to 2003, and the net per capita income rose from 133.6 Yuan to 2,622.2 Yuan, their relative poverty had been increasing because urban residents’ income was growing at a much faster pace. Taking disposable income into consideration, the gap was even larger, not to mention the different welfare amenities urban and rural residents enjoy (Zhang and Hu, 2006). An
independently designed household income survey in China that compared income
distribution in 2002 and 1995 (Khan and Riskin, 2005) showed that rural income was
growing at a much slower pace than urban income, and that “urban per capita income was
nominally 3.01 times the rural per capita income (2002), up from an already very high
ratio of 2.47 in 1995” (Khan and Riskin, 2005:380). (See table 4)

Table 4

*Comparison of Gini Ratio, Per Capita Income and Real Annual Per Capita Income*

*Growth Rate from 1995 to 2002 between Rural and Urban Residents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2002</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rural residents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gini ratio</td>
<td>0.416</td>
<td>0.375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita income (current yuan per year)</td>
<td>2,309</td>
<td>3,302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real annual per capita income growth rate in the preceding seven years (%)</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Urban residents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gini ratio</td>
<td>0.332</td>
<td>0.318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita income (current yuan per year)</td>
<td>5,706</td>
<td>9,766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real annual per capita income growth rate in the preceding seven years (%)</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>6.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Second, the household contract system locked people in families and divided rather
than links individual and small-scale production. The sense of community of the
commune era was gone. Instead farmers were turned back to the separate household
production units. With less than industrialized production tools and land as their primary
source of income, Chinese peasants are what Firth says “a system of small-scale producers, with a simple technology and equipment, often relying primarily for their subsistence on what they themselves produce” (1956: 87). This was quoted by Foster to support and define his own argument of peasant society, characterized by Limited Good. Limited Good, as Foster defined, is an area of peasant behavior that suggests “peasants view their social, economic, and natural universes—their total environment—as one in which all of the desired things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety, exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply” (1965: 296). It includes not only tangible material accumulations, but also intangible investments, educational opportunity as a perfect example.

In the vast land of rural China and in the times of a deteriorating rural economy, education is one of the Limited Goods and historically seen as non-expandable, not in a sense that available educational resources exist in finite quantity in the long run. It rather means that educational opportunities are limited and non-expandable. Higher education is especially a privilege, short in supply, and only available to certain groups in society. When it comes to a large family with both sons and daughters, the latter usually fall victim to the short supply of the Limited Good.

Wang Lin (pseudonym) told me in our interview: “I have two brothers at home. Our family raises pigs for a living. We don’t have much money. My two brothers, one older than me, the other younger, are both in school. I nearly dropped out of school in 9th grade because we were so tight on money. My father didn’t think it was a good idea to
continue high school. But somehow, he changed his mind and sent me to high school. So when the subject came up again as I was finishing up 12th grade, my father was certain that I should not go to college.” When asked if she agreed that higher education was a luxury that is usually granted to the male, she said, “Yes. It’s a rare opportunity that you probably have once in a lifetime. But unfortunately, it was not me.”

The limitedness of education is even exacerbated by another factor--the presence of siblings. Siblings, especially brothers, substantially diminishes rural girls’ opportunity of getting an education of high quality and lessens parents’ engagement and interaction with their school. Research by Vanessa Fong (2003) indicates that urban daughters have benefited from the demographic pattern produced by China’s one-child policy. A resulting low fertility rate gives parents’ higher incentive to invest in their singleton daughters. However, this is a case only true in urban China where industrialization and modernization took place well before it inched into some areas of rural China and has affected people’s lives in more profound ways. The one-child policy is never strictly implemented in rural China: the peasant production pattern is a force strong enough to resist a resolute central government. Rural girls get their schooling in a competitive environment where priorities are always given to their brothers. Newspaper stories of girls becoming migrant workers to support their brothers’ education were often spotlighted.
Rising cost of higher education and a gloomy job market. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Chinese government retreated from its role in providing many forms of social welfare, including a complete stoppage of free higher education in 1997. From then on, college students were charged tuition and boarding fee. From 1998 to 2002, the average college tuition increased from 800 Yuan to 5000 Yuan, an increase of 525%. If boarding and living expenses are included, in 2002 a college student cost 40,000 Yuan for his/her four-year college studies. However, the average rural income in 2005 was only 2,936 Yuan. Sun Jiye, a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), told the press “in 2003, the higher education charge in China surged to 40 billion Yuan. At the same time, the government’s investment in higher education was 70 billion Yuan. The family shares 36% of the total cost of higher education, exceeding the original 25% the policy was designed for.... The student shares 44% of the day-to-day running costs of higher education, while in most other countries the percentage is usually 15%” (Xinhua News, 2006).

The China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA) carried out a research project on college entrance examinees in 12 cities and counties in 2005. The report showed that in 2004, the average annual incomes for an urban and a rural resident were 9,422 Yuan and 2,936 Yuan respectively. On average, a college student spent 28,000 Yuan a year, which equated to a rural resident’s 35-year income in a typical rural area. However, only 19.8% of all the rural residents involved in the research had an annual income above the average in 2004 (Xinhua News, 2005).

Feminists believe that due to the existence of patriarchy, there is a public/private
sphere split constituting women’s oppression. Public area is for economic and political production and is men’s sphere, while private area includes sexuality and procreation and is women’s realm. The split blocks women’s participation in social and economic production and consumption, leaving them isolated and fixed in the vicious circle of little education--little participation.

“The Chinese family has been described as patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal…The patriarchy and mutual interdependence of the Chinese family survived the policies of the Maoist Chinese state between 1949 and 1976 and continued through the reform era” (Deutsch, 2006: 367-8). In present China, the “social” and “public” spheres of production include not only engagement in production but also consumption of products, including education. In rural China, where women are still restricted to the private sphere of life, rural parents see higher education as a highly public and elite area that is formidable or even forbidding to girls. The public area of education hadn’t been accessible to women in a large scale until the early 1900s. Therefore, when the cost of education goes up, girls are usually the first to be affected. To those girls from not-so-well-to-do families, they are immediately shut down from entering the originally “forbidden area”.

“There was absolutely no way I could afford college. I’m the only child in the family but I have grandparents who are sick. So the money my parents make pays for their medical bills. I discussed the possibility with my parents in May and then decided to discontinue my school. The tuition and fees for college are ridiculously astronomical. I can’t bring myself asking my parents for that kind of money, especially when I see they
have so much financial burden on their shoulders.” Wu Xiaoli (pseudonym) said. She dropped out of high school in May, 2003, a semester before the College Entrance Examination. “I didn’t want to take the exam. Either way, I thought it would do me no good. If I got a good grade, my parents would feel very guilty not to let me go to college. So I just didn’t take it.” When asked if it would make any difference if she were a boy, Wu said, “Maybe. My parents would probably try harder to figure out a way to send me to school. But I’m not sure. It’s a huge amount of money anyway.”

Female housework, which is generally unpaid and unrecognized in rural China, has not only taken time and respect away from girl students, but also isolate them “in what has become an increasingly privatized family existence (even when they work outside the home too)”. “It is, in many key instances, women's skills (productive skills, healing, midwifery, etc.) which have been discredited or banned to make way for commodities. It is, above all, women who are encouraged to be utterly passive/uncritical/dependent (i.e. "feminine") in the face of the pervasive capitalist penetration of private life” (Ehrenreich, 1976: 76).

With no awareness of the positive meaning of rural girls’ household contribution, rural parents, fathers in particular, are very reluctant to invest in their daughters’ education. The mentality of female’s unworthiness and inferiority to male even seeps into the girls’ minds, making them a part of their own oppression and subordination. “College? I think college is for boys. I’m not smart enough. Boys need a college degree to find jobs. But I’m just a girl. My grades weren’t good enough for college. I didn’t want to go to college either… I now stay at home and help my mother--we knit and sell
sweaters to a company.” Liu Na (pseudonym) said, a girl who didn’t finish middle school and was content with her current life.

Recent trends in the employment market also worked as a great discouragement for rural girls and their parents: university graduate unemployment was at a record high. “In 2001 alone, there were 340,000 unemployed graduates, accounting for 30 percent of the total. The numbers climbed quickly to 370,000 and 34.5 percent in 2002. In 2005, about 790,000 university graduates failed to find work. This year (2006), the number of job-hunting graduates was a staggering 5 million, a report called Should New Graduates Lower Job Expectation says (Xinhua News, 2006).

Also, the National Development and Reform Commission (2006) wrote “some 4.1 million students will graduate from universities in 2006, up 750,000 from a year earlier. Meanwhile, new job opportunities are down 22 percent from last year, to just 1.6 million, which means that 60 percent of new graduates will not find work. It is estimated that 25 percent of last year's graduates still have not found employment.”

Let’s look at another report: China Youth Research Center has recently released a report Chinese Youth Development in the Tenth Five Year Plan (2001-2005) and Trends of Chinese Youth Development in the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2006-2010). The report showed that from 2003 to 2005, the numbers of college graduates who were unemployed stood at 750,000, 990,000 and 1,200,000. The report said in recent years the pressure of finding employment has been increasing for college graduates. The job market was getting more and more competitive (Li, 2007).

In the gloomy job market, rural female college graduates have the biggest
difficulties finding a job (Xu, 2006). Being female and having a family background from
the countryside, rural girls face double discrimination by the employers, who don’t want
to take female because of the possible maternity leave. Neither do they want rural
employees, who need sponsorship for an urban residence. As a college advisor told a
newspaper (Xinhua News, 2006), rural college graduates have more restrictions for
employment than any other graduates.

Facing the harsh job market, many rural girls even chose to give up the opportunity
of higher education and merge into the wave of migrant workers. As a rural college
student Zhang (pseudonym) told me, “I do see lots of high school graduates give up the
opportunity to go to college and become migrant workers. Some of my friends and
neighbors did so. Many years ago, things like that wouldn’t happen. But now people
like them just can’t finance their higher education. Another important factor affecting
their decision is that they see and hear about the job market. Young college graduates
can’t find a job anymore. If you can’t make it to the elite schools, chances are you’ll be
unemployed the moment you graduate. So they’d rather find and secure a decent-paying
job right now instead of risking money invested in higher education and finding
themselves undesirable in the job market.”

The financial pressure for college, combined with the unpromising job market,
constitute a power that pushes rural girls and their parents for something near and secure-
home or the wave of migrant workers. Taught to be dependable, tame and introverted
since childhood, rural girls are supposed to listen to their fathers, who portrayed by
Margaret Mead as “the leaders in public affairs and the final authorities at home" (1973:
They are involuntarily locked up in the vicious circle of little education--little participation in socio-economical production.

“My father always says that I already have an education. It’s good enough. I have a good job now. I make good money that I can send home. I’m also saving for my own dowry.” Lily (pseudonym) said, who dropped out of school at 11th grade and became a migrant worker in the city. “Most of my friends dropped out and came to work in this factory. That’s why I’m here. Those who continued school are now out of work. So I think I’m very lucky and I made the right decision… I know very few girls with the same family background as me made it into college. My mother never went to school and her life isn’t too bad.”

Lily is one of the two daughters from a rural family. “My sister just got married. My father said he was glad that I didn’t go for college because it wouldn’t help you get a better life than my sister.”

According to Bai (2006), “the price rise definitely deprived poor students of the opportunity to receive higher education. Although there are no statistics available to show the negative impact on rural education, reports about increased drop-outs in some rural junior high schools, and of students who passed the university entrance examinations but did not enroll, indicate that the tuition fee hike and the gloomy graduate employment opportunities have caused concern among rural families and students” (140).

In summary, with scarce resources and exposure, rural girls are vulnerable to the awareness of Limited Good and patriarchy. Though we see cases of rural girls trying to
make their lives better, it’s rarely through higher education—most costly and risky of all means to change a socio-economic status.
Chapter V: Conclusion

The thesis examined the current disadvantaged status of rural Chinese girls’ access to higher education by comparing their college enrollment number and rate with rural boys and their urban counterparts.

It has found that, despite the progress made in equalizing access by gender and urban/rural family origin at the mass education level and in the expansion and development of higher education in China, rural girls remain the most disadvantaged group in accessing higher education, as compared to rural boys and their urban counterpart. They constitute a disproportionate part of the student body in higher institutions. Their access to higher education has not improved.

The transformation of rural economy not only poses financing college as the biggest difficulty for rural girls, but also perpetuates the mentalities of patriarchy and Limited Good by restraining female production within the family and thus assigning the female a limited role in educational consumption and investment. The worsening rural economy compounded by the skyrocketing tuition fees and a gloomy job market great discourage rural parents from the possibility of sending their daughters to school.

The theories of patriarchy and Limited Good in a peasant society were tested in the thesis to be able to provide a plausible explanation to the continuing disadvantaged status of rural girls. Socialist feminists’ view on patriarchy; specifically, the argument on the
split of a public and a private realm in production, offers an adequate interpretation of why women are constrained in the private realm of life and production, and why they are particularly vulnerable to the rising cost and the bleak prospect of higher education. The typical mentality of Limited Good in a peasant society sees education as limited and unexpandable. Combined with the theory of patriarchy, it gives a full account of the rationality of rural parents and also of rural girls themselves, who give up higher education easily.

A reformed educational policy is needed to change the current interrelationship between access to higher education and gender and family origin, and to increase the proportion of rural girls in higher education. This needs to be done within an overall improvement of the social and economical environment for rural girls: the development in rural economy, the better financing and job placement policies in higher education, and an educational program targeting the patriarchal mentality in the countryside.

It would be helpful in future research to examine rural girls’ collective and/or individual resistance and to see them as active agents of change instead of as simply passive receivers of environmental forces. Also helpful would be a more detailed, geography-specific study, for examples, girls in western China and minority population.
APPENDIX

Interview questions:

- **Basic facts:**
  
  Name/DOB/Grade/Siblings/Status of School or Profession/Education of Parents

- **Questions for those who continued higher education:**

  1. Why did you continue to go to school? What was your parents’ attitude when they heard of your decision?
  2. Who paid for your college?
  3. What is the situation of your female friends/classmates? Did they mostly make a choice like yours?
  4. What do you think of your own choice and life situation now? Do you think you had made a right decision?
  5. Have you heard of any cases that a girl gave up college for a job? What do you think of this?
  6. As a rural female student in college, do you experience discrimination or different treatment in any form, overt or covert?
  7. What is your plan after college?
  8. Have you been looking for jobs? If so, do you experience more difficulty as compared to rural boys and urban students?
9. Do you think your ability to continue college is related to having few or no siblings?

10. Do you think educational opportunities are very limited in rural China?

• *Questions for those who didn’t continue higher education:*

1. Why did you discontinue higher education/drop out of high school? What was your parents’ attitude when they heard of your decision?

2. How did you choose your profession? Why did you decide to work at this place?

3. What is the situation of your female friends/classmates? Did they mostly make a choice like yours?

4. What do you think of your female friends/classmates who made it to college? Do you wish you could have the same opportunity?

5. What do you think of your own choice and life situation now? Do you think you had made a right decision?

6. Did you give up the opportunity of college because of this job? Were you able to make to college with your grades?

7. Do you send part of your salary home to support your family?

8. What is your plan of the future?

9. Do you think your inability to continue college is related to having many siblings?

10. Do you think educational opportunities are very limited in rural China?
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