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Are the present beliefs held in Chinese society sexist towards women?

Introduction

The premiership under Mao sought to influence and change the beliefs and views Chinese society had regarding women, as traditionally women were seen as subordinate and less valuable as compared to men. Yet, Mao introduced societal reforms such as inviting women into male dominated spheres of society such as political parties or even industrial and manufacturing jobs¹. While also he famously claimed, “women hold up half the sky”² and so it is clear to see Mao was arguably trying to make Chinese society less sexist towards women. However, it is also arguable whether Mao’s intended reforms on gender truly materialized as the CCP’s goal was never to “empower women”, but instead it was to include them within their propaganda of creating an image of a “nation of...unity”³. Thus, Orozco argues Mao’s gender reforms were only to “purposely reinforce” the Government’s “own power”⁴ and so Mao crucially failed to empower women and their status within society itself. Hence, there is conflicting views on whether Mao’s reforms indeed changed Chinese society to the extent they metaphorically believe “women hold up half the sky”. This blogpost can however answer whether Mao’s reforms regarding gender were indeed successful by exploring a research question of whether “the present beliefs held in Chinese society are still sexist towards women?”. It is important to explore this research question as sexism, and its subsequent degradation/discrimination of women, can cause a significant negative effect upon the country. As seen by a 2015 McKinsey report which shows that a “gender gap” in China can cause a loss of between \$2.5 to \$4.2 trillion in lost GDP by 2025⁵.

Summarizing and reacting to the documentary

The documentary “Sparrow Village” can be summarized as providing an insight into the problems girls face in trying to achieve an education in a poor rural village in China. The documentary firstly touches upon the idea of males being favored over females by showcasing how society has a preference in sending boys to school, in the first place, as compared to an equally or even more capable female. This is because, as the villagers quoted, “boys are treated as being more important than girls”⁶. Thus, the girl in Sparrow Village had to drop out of school in order for her brother to continue studying when her father

¹ Dina Orozco, ‘Confucius vs. The Women of China: A Feminist Struggle’ (Thesis, California State University 2017) 14.

² Module 7.4

³ Dina Orozco, ‘Confucius vs. The Women of China: A Feminist Struggle’ (Thesis, California State University 2017) 15.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Eva Zhang and Tianlei Huang, ‘Gender discrimination at work is dragging China’s growth’ (*China Economic Watch*, 16 June 2020) < <https://www.piie.com/blogs/china-economic-watch/gender-discrimination-work-dragging-chinas-growth>> accessed 01 May 2023

⁶ Christine Choy, ‘Sparrow Village’ (12/10/2003) < <https://video-alexanderstreet-com.manchester.idm.oclc.org/watch/sparrow-village/details?context=channel:asian-studies>> accessed 30 April 2023

did not have enough income to support both of them simultaneously studying. What is particularly saddening is the fact the villagers being interviewed noted the female is a “better student than her brother”⁷ but continued to insist she must be the one to drop out. Therefore, suggesting despite her intelligence and success at education being greater, the mere fact she is a female ensures she is preferred less for an education as compared to her brother. Thus, this documentary highlighted to me that there is a sexist belief in China that men are seen as more “important” to society.

The documentary also showcased to me the effects Confucianism and its hierarchical set of social roles have in creating a sexist society against women. This is because Confucianism judges a woman’s success in satisfying her social role based upon her performance as a daughter, wife and mother. This therefore means a female believes her role on earth can only ever be for these three purposes, and so, crucially nothing else.⁸ This is precisely shown in the documentary as the teacher gloomily remarks how she is the only one female teacher in the whole of Sparrow Village and how she wishes to act as a “role model to the girls”⁹ so they can become inspired to achieve anything aside from being just a daughter, wife or mother. This part of the documentary is particularly saddening, as the aspiration and goals that females have are effectively being cut off by society’s beliefs in Confucianism.

While also, the documentary touches upon the belief of the virtue of “Xiao” / “filial piety” and how this causes sexism towards females. This is because Chinese society deems a married female as one who will “support their in laws” rather than “their own parents”¹⁰ and so the documentary highlights how this causes society to treat males as “more important” because they will stay with the parents to supposedly fulfil the virtue of “Xiao”. This is both confusing and saddening to see how marriage is seen as an event which cuts a female off from her natal family, as the West instead rightfully sees a marriage as an actual union between two families.

Overall, this documentary has certainly showcased how Chinese society has beliefs which are sexist towards women and so the documentary has been influential in swaying myself towards agreeing with the research question.

Answering the research question

Chinese society places great emphasis in the moral philosophy of Confucianism, yet this philosophy is problematic because it promotes ideas which are sexist towards women. This is because Confucianism morally evaluates an individual according to how they adhere to “social roles”¹¹, yet crucially these social

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Xiaorong Li, ‘Gender Inequality in China and Cultural Relativism’ in Nussbaum, Martha C., and Jonathan Glover (eds), *Women, Culture, and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities* (OUP 1995)

⁹ Christine Choy, ‘Sparrow Village’ (12/10/2003) < <https://video-alexanderstreet-com.manchester.idm.oclc.org/watch/sparrow-village/details?context=channel:asian-studies>> accessed 30 April 2023

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Xiaorong Li, ‘Gender Inequality in China and Cultural Relativism’ in Nussbaum, Martha C., and Jonathan Glover (eds), *Women, Culture, and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities* (OUP 1995) 412.

roles ascribed to women cause them to become victims of sexism by society. As women are judged based upon their performance as a daughter, wife and mother, but crucially these roles carry “specific moral codes” which can include “obedience” to the husband or “behind the scenes greatness” which states a woman pride and greatness is behind her husband’s achievement, fame and success¹². Li argues, this crucially showcases sexism because women are not seen as “equally worthy human beings”, but rather they are seen and judged based upon how they handle their “inferior role” of being a submissive and supportive companion to their male counterpart¹³. Therefore, the success of a female is “defined in terms of men’s success”, and so Li argues, this creates a “psychological complex” in which women believe they are inferior to men and so are “comfortable with the idea that woman are not expected” or capable of doing “the same things as men”¹⁴. This “psychological complex” caused by Chinese society’s belief in Confucianism may also explain why the girl in Sparrow Village, despite her young age, was submissive and accepting of the fact she will find an “husband” and have to do the household “chores” for him. Therefore, the belief in Confucianism, which is deeply entrenched in China, causes women to develop a “psychological complex” which crucially allows society to be sexist towards them, as women occupy inferior roles with little chance of speaking out or standing up to the inferiority placed upon them.

Furthermore, there is a belief in a virtue known as “Xiao”/filial piety which is deeply entrenched in China which can showcase how society is still sexist towards Women. This virtue refers to the idea that taking care of one’s elderly family is a virtue which every Chinese individual should follow¹⁵, however what’s crucial is the fact women in Chinese society cannot ascribe to this virtue. Therefore, Chinese society deems them as less valuable compared to men. This is because when women in China marry, they are leaving “their natal family...to...go live with their husband’s family” and so Dr Barabantseva concludes women are seen by society as cutting “all the links with their natal family”¹⁶. Yet, as the man will stay behind at their parental house and so not be married off to elsewhere, they will be able to look after their elderly parents, thus men are crucially seen by society to satisfy this virtue of “Xiao”. This was also showcased in the documentary as the parents argued that the boy was more “important” and more valued because only he would be able to truly “support his parents” as the girl would instead “marry into another family and support they’re in laws” and so “not their own parents”¹⁷. Therefore, Dr Barabantseva argues this virtue of filial piety causes society to have a “preference”¹⁸ for men and so causes women to be seen as less valuable therefore showcasing how Chinese society can be seen as

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid 416.

¹⁵ Hektor K. T. Yan, ‘Is filial piety a virtue? A reading of the Xiao Jing (Classic of Filial Piety) from the perspective of ideology critique’ (2017) 49 Educational Philosophy and Theory 1184.

¹⁶ Module 7.4

¹⁷ Christine Choy, ‘Sparrow Village’ (12/10/2003) < <https://video-alexanderstreet-com.manchester.idm.oclc.org/watch/sparrow-village/details?context=channel:asian-studies>> accessed 30 April 2023

¹⁸ Module 7.4

sexist. This was also argued by Wang, for he argues this virtue in society creates a sexist “gender bias”¹⁹ in which women are believed to be less valuable than men. This may also explain why in the documentary the boy was seen as being more valuable to be sent to school, as compared to his sister, despite his family acknowledging the sister is a “a better student than her brother”. Thus, this virtue of “Xiao” (filial piety) entrenched in Chinese society highlights how China believes women are less valuable than men and so society can be showcased as sexist towards women.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this blogpost ultimately agrees with the research question that “the present beliefs held in Chinese society are still sexist towards women”. Though, in getting to this conclusion this blogpost was influenced by the documentary because it showcased how young girls were prevented from an education and how they were deemed less “important”, by society, solely because of their gender. Thus, this blogpost will agree with the suggestion that Chinese society is still sexist despite the reforms attempted by Mao. Though, the implications for sexism against women in Chinese society is catastrophic especially when, as discussed earlier, China can experience a loss of \$2.5 to \$4.2 trillion to their GDP by 2025²⁰. Therefore, a potential solution regarding Confucianism and its sexist “social roles” for females may be for Chinese society to abandon this moral philosophy. However, that is truly wishful thinking especially when it is known the CCP under Premier Xi are using Confucianism in order to legitimize his one-man rule and encourage broader obedience to the CCP²¹.

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¹⁹ Weidong Wang et al, ‘Son Preference, Eldest Son Preference, and Educational Attainment: Evidence From Chinese Families’ (2019) 41 Journal of Family Issues 636.

²⁰ Eva Zhang and Tianlei Huang, ‘Gender discrimination at work is dragging China's growth’ (China Economic Watch, 16 June 2020) < <https://www.piie.com/blogs/china-economic-watch/gender-discrimination-work-dragging-chinas-growth>> accessed 01 May 2023

²¹ Module 8.3

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