

Breaking Barriers: Navigating Gender Roles and Aspirations

What Obstacles do Rural Chinese Girls Face in Achieving their Dreams?

Introduction

In a globalising world where gender equality is increasingly recognised as a vital factor in achieving sustainable development, the continued struggles of rural Chinese women to realise their full potential has significant implications for China's rise as a global power. The traditional beliefs prevalent in rural areas, which often hinder progress and growth, challenge China's modernisation and innovation goals. This blog post will examine the root causes of these challenges



Figure 1: Young Chinese girl working for her family by caring dried grass in the fields of Guilin, China (Stephens, 2001)

and analyse their impact on young rural women, drawing on the docu-film 'Sparrow Village' directed by Christine Choy (2003).

Some of the key challenges these Chinese girls face include the lack of support from family and community members, societal pressures to conform to age-old traditions and limited access to education. Economic constraints further compound these issues, restricting opportunities and ensuring that financial independence remains out of reach for many.

Addressing the challenges facing rural Chinese women is essential to achieving China's goal of becoming a modern, innovative, and equitable global power. Therefore, raising awareness of the challenges faced by rural Chinese women is critical to addressing these issues and promoting gender equality. Films like 'Sparrow Village' can be a powerful tool for this purpose, highlighting the obstacles these women face and encouraging greater support from the community and policymakers alike.

Sparrow Village by Chritina Choy (2003)

Overview

The film Sparrow Village sheds light on the challenges faced by rural girls living in rural communities in Southwestern China who aspire to obtain an education and escape the poverty of their home villages. The film explores parents' financial difficulties in sending their daughters to school, including the high cost of tuition, books and lodging, compounded by losing a significant member of the family's labour force. In this context, education is entirely disconnected from the livelihood of the scattered Miao communities, where poverty is rampant and illiteracy is particularly prevalent among women. Despite these challenges, the film captures the childrens' tenacity and perseverance in pursuing their dreams of becoming doctors, singers, teachers and athletes.

The personal narratives in the film also reveals contrasting views regarding the value of education between parents and their daughters. While parents recognise the importance of education, they voice the financial hardships of coping with school expenses and the traditional preference for investing in their sons' education based on the expectation that their sons will support them while their daughters, once married, will be part of their husbands' households. The daughters, on the other hand, recognise the sacrifices of their parents and express their desire to attend high school and pursue education and future careers, all whilst dealing with the pain of separation from their parents and the guilt of the burden their education pursuits bring weighing heavily on them.

Overall, Sparrow Village highlights the complex gender roles and aspirations in rural China while parents struggle to balance their financial limitations with their traditional expectations.

Personal Reflections



I was deeply moved by the film 'Sparrow Village'. It made me aware of the many challenges that Miao women face in pursuing their dreams. It was heart-wrenching to learn that they must travel three hours every week to attend the nearest school, whilst carrying all their food and belongings. Despite the hurdles they face, seeing how determined these girls are to learn and improve their lives was inspiring.



Figure 2: Traditional Clothing worn by a family at a Miao Dancing festival in Danjiang.

"I love to to learn year-old

This festival has been part of Miao culture for nearly 2000 years (China and Asia Cultural Travel, 2016)

study because I want many things"- (14-girl from 'Sparrow

Village')

Choy vividly portrays Guizhou's natural beauty and the Miao people's colourful culture. The film showcases stunning landscapes and traditional practices such as embroidery and dances. However, it also highlights China's harsh realities of economic and social disparities, especially in underprivileged rural communities. It was distressing to see how difficult it is for many families to provide necessities for their daughters, let alone education. These girls' sacrifices to achieve their dreams are truly remarkable. They have to overcome financial barriers and cultural norms that discourage females' education. Despite all these obstacles, they remain optimistic and resolute about their future. Watching "Sparrow Village" made me realize the value of education and working towards a more equitable future.

Obstacles Faced by Rural Chinese Girls in Achieving Their Aspirations: Insights from 'Sparrow Village'

The film "Sparrow Village" provides a poignant and insightful representation of the numerous obstacles that girls from rural areas encounter when seeking access to education. Education is an essential component of achieving their aspirations and goals. Nevertheless, the film helped me gain insight into the financial barriers, such as exorbitant tuition fees, costly textbooks, and gender biases that pose significant challenges, particularly for economically disadvantaged families.

In summary, "Sparrow Village" offers a touching and thought-provoking portrayal of rural Chinese women's challenges when striving to achieve their aspirations. The film emphasizes

the critical need for increased investment in education, the empowerment of young women, and the importance of challenging traditional gender roles and expectations.

Exploration of the Obstacles which Rural Chinese Girls Face

Confucian Traditionalism

One of the most pronounced obstacles the film sheds light upon is rural Chinese girls' struggles as they strive to achieve their dreams in a society shaped by Confucian traditions. For centuries, Confucianism has influenced cultural norms and values that profoundly impact the lives of rural women. These traditional beliefs highly value gender roles and prioritize family and community over individualism, creating significant obstacles for women pursuing careers beyond farming or household chores. The film reveals how Confucian traditions and gender stereotypes perpetuate poverty and a lack of opportunities for rural Chinese females. Girls are often denied access to education, with families prioritizing their sons' education over their daughters' because of the traditional structure of 'filial piety', which reinforces patriarchal norms in Chinese society (Barabantseva, 2023). Figure 3, a clip from 'Sparrow Village' provides a raw example of the injustice that these traditional gender biases result in:



Figure 3: Giving up her education to afford for her brother. 'Sparrow Village' 19:51-22:02 min (2 min 11 secs)

<https://video.alexanderstreet.com/p/qQMgGApmk>

Li (2000) highlights how this issue has significant implications for China's future as a globalising power. She notes that as China seeks to position itself as a leader in the global economy, it must confront the limitations imposed by Confucian traditions and the resulting inequality for women. Failure to address these obstacles will only perpetuate gender inequality and limit economic growth and development potential. Preserving traditional gender roles and limiting opportunities disguised by a political 'glass ceiling' for women reinforces negative perceptions of China's progress towards gender equality, hindering its efforts to become a more respected and accepted country (Wang, 2020). These practices

also reinforce the Western Dragon Claw perspective, which views China's rise as a global power marked by authoritarianism, lack of individual freedoms, and suppression of human rights (Tianjie & Baxter, 2023). Efforts should be made to promote gender equality within Confucian beliefs in China. This will pave the way for young women to pursue their aspirations without any unfair hurdles. 'Sparrow Village' serves as a stark reminder of the pressing need to tackle the age-old systemic barriers that hold females back.

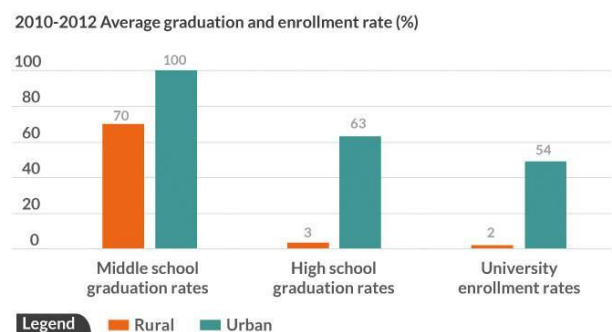
Economic Mobility

In rural China, economic challenges hinder young girls' ability to achieve their aspirations. 'Sparrow Village' highlights the limitations imposed on impoverished children, including limited access to education and a lack of financial resources. This is a widespread problem identified by Wang (2021), perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage and limiting the potential of young girls. He highlights that the detachment of rural areas from urban areas has resulted in a significant lack of capital inflow in these communities. Rozelle (2021) writes that this stagnant rural economy is the leading cause of restricted social and professional mobility. It results in limited access to higher education for children to gain better-paying job opportunities outside of disconnected rural areas, as illustrated in Graph 1 (above). In 'Sparrow Village,' one father quotes:

"I think the economy of our village is stuck...

There are no roads, so nothing can be developed. The only thing we can do is go elsewhere for work so our girls can go to school" (17.36 min-18.00)

Rural Education Falls Far Behind in China



Source: Zhang Dandan, Li Xin, and Xue Jinjun, "Education Inequality between Rural and Urban Areas of the People's Republic of China, Migrants' Children Education, and Some Implications."

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Chang Chen

Figure 4: "Education Inequality between Rural and Urban Areas of the People's Republic of China" Dandan, et al (2017)

China's economy is rapidly expanding, and the country has ambitious plans to become a high-income nation by 2025 (Tanzi & Lu, 2020). However, the country's growth could be limited if a significant portion of the population, particularly rural women, estimated to be nearly 250 million (Statistica, 2023), cannot participate in this growth. Yang (2020) argues that the lack of opportunities for rural Chinese women undermines their potential. This can negatively impact the country's development and stability, leading to social, economic, and political issues in the long run (Li, 2000).

The obstacle of restricted economic mobility faced by these girls is a significant challenge that undermines their potential to achieve their aspirations. I feel that one father surmises this issue well in the film when he quotes:

"No money, no way...This is going to ruin her future"

Conclusion

The obstacles young rural women face in achieving their dreams are numerous and complex. Gender discrimination, cultural norms and expectations, limited access to education and job opportunities, and economic constraints all perpetuate inequality and reinforce outdated societal beliefs. The film Sparrow Village sheds light on some of the challenges faced by girls from impoverished agricultural areas, and inspired me to examine the issues and their manifestations.

The implications of understanding these obstacles are significant, especially for China's future as a globalising power. The country's success will depend on its ability to empower all its citizens, regardless of gender identity, socio-economic background, or geographic location. By creating an environment that fosters equal access to education and job opportunities for rural women, China can unlock the potential of millions of individuals and promote gender equality. This will benefit women and contribute to China's economic growth and social progress (Yang, 2020). The government must enact effective policies aimed at eliminating discriminatory practices against women and creating an environment conducive to professional development, thereby paving the way for a brighter future for all

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Assignment 2: Blog Post

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Figure 1:

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Figure 2:

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