

# ***Exploring the Root Causes of Inequality and Gender Issues in Current China Based on Existence Theory***

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**Abstract:** Much of gender inequality has its roots in differences between men and women in society. In addition to the difference in the sexual division of labour, the difference is rooted in the roles and relations constructed by society. Inspired by Chizuko Ueno's writing, the author intends to explore the inequality and gender issues that could not be ignored. This article takes advantage of the existence theory, a new sociological theory, to explore the root causes of gender inequality in current China. This article also compares the existential milestones of men and women and uses contradictory milestones to explain gender inequality and inequality in different social classes. In addition, the article discusses why the common perception that taking care of families is women's natural responsibility exists in modern society. Finally, the article points out some legislation approaches to address gender inequality and compares the progress of feminist awareness in China and abroad, hoping to push the development of gender equality.

**Keywords:** Existence Theory, Gender Inequality, Contradictory Milestones, Existential Milestones

## **1. Introduction**

Chizuko Ueno and her writings enabled the public to learn more about misogyny, sexual double standards, the eroticization of power, etc., which reshaped people's perception of the world and society. In particular, she put forward Marxist feminism in her book *Patriarchy & Capitalism* [1], which argues that in the modern capitalist society, women are oppressed not only by capitalism but also by patriarchy, facing the double dilemma in the family and the labour market. Even though Chizuko Ueno put forward these thoughts in Japan 30 years ago, the thoughts and theories she mentioned are still not outdated even today and explain the challenges women have in real life very well. Among the ideas put forward in the book, the "unpaid house chores" could be an example that could explain the relationship between existence theory and inequalities.

The phenomenon of unpaid house chores and reflections on its underlying reasons also applies to current China. With rapid growth, China(mainland) has gained great economic development and has become more internationalized. The economic background in China (Mainland) is close to capitalism, and China's current economic and population status is similar to that of Japan 30 years ago. Also, China experiences the same pressure from female independence and awakening of female consciousness since more women have access to high education and job opportunities. Inspired by

the feminist studies conducted by Chizuko Ueno, this article will explore the inequality and gender issues that could not be ignored in China.

## 2. The Root Causes of Gender Inequality in China

When it comes to Existence Theory [2], it starts from the assumption that people organize their lives around a limited set of existential milestones. The theory explains that there are certain existential milestones that help formulate and define individual development. Since existence theory is a new sociological theory, it can provide a unique perspective on contemporary modernity in China and well accounts for the reasons that lead to gender inequality issues in China. When it comes to Existence Theory, it starts from the assumption that people organize their lives around a limited set of existential milestones. The theory explains that there are certain existential milestones that help formulate and define individual development. Existential milestones refer to events considered so essential that without them, life is experienced as incomplete, such as attainment of formal education, marriage, professional attainment, child-rearing, etc. The existential ladder refers to the fact that, on the whole, the milestones need to be completed in a certain sequence. Although everyone experienced existential milestones in China, women and men seemed to have different existential ladders. Men are always expected to develop their careers before starting their own families, while women need to put marriage as their priority from a social perspective. Marriage (or building up their families) is more important than stepping further in career or education paths for women's lives. Most women are taught from an early age the fixed roles of being good helpers/wives/partners/mothers, doing work such as cleaning, cooking, childcare, and caring for the elderly, and that reproductive labor is unpaid. Women's house chores in the family are given the name of "love" and are described as a dedication to the family and sacrifice for the family. Women are not compensated for this work, legally or financially, and are placed in a situation where they have no rights. This work amounts to unjustified and "unpaid work." There was news about a wife who got divorced after ten years of marriage and was awarded 50,000 yuan for her household work, far less than what she should have received in the labor market if she had worked for ten years.

The inequality could also connect with contradictory milestones. Contradictory milestones refer to individual events in relation to social expectations, and these milestones lead to contradictions for failure to satisfy both social expectations and individual development. Contradictory milestones usually appear in women's lives in different forms, for instance, maintaining a good family relationship while having a successful career and advancing in careers while giving birth to a child. These are examples that could be usually heard about. The domestic job market has deepened the contradictory milestone for women, as most domestic recruitment requires applicants under 35 years old. According to The Lancet, 35 years old is defined as the threshold of advanced maternal age, since Advanced maternal age ( $\geq 35$  years) is associated with increased stillbirths, preterm births, intrauterine growth restriction, as well as young maternal age, and chromosomal abnormalities [3] than younger age groups. So, for women, focusing on the workplace or family and childbirth is a difficult problem, while men are often less troubled by this issue. Because society rarely requires the best age for men to have children, men are more concerned about having a successful career before age 35.

Reproductive technologies could be a way to mitigate women's contradictory milestones, but the technologies also have the following limitations. Economically, many women choose egg freezing with the help of technology as a solution to the age cutoff, and this option often means a cost of around 70,000 to 100,000 RMB, which is more than the annual income of many families in Mainland China. Legally, egg freezing is generally not allowed in mainland China except under certain circumstances- women with malignant tumors can save their eggs before undergoing radiotherapy, and infertile couples can apply for egg freezing. In most cases, people who want to use this technology

often have to go to Hong Kong or abroad for help. From a practical point of view, egg freezing can also cause some damage to a woman's body during ovulation and it is not suitable for all women.

Inequalities also exist in the difference of the way lower/middle/upper social classes dealing with these contradictory milestones. Regarding giving birth to a child, the middle or upper classes have more financial resources, for instance, they can take advantage of reproductive technology or go abroad to find a surrogate (surrogacy is illegal in China). But for those in the lower classes, having a child cannot be achieved with these additional resources, and it is something that has to be done in person. Also, The childbirth has an extremely high opportunity cost, which usually means that the mother ends up sacrificing her work hours as well as potential opportunities for career advancement because childbirth is something that a father cannot replace. When raising children, the lower classes usually have to raise children independently with weaker economic foundations and less external support. As for the middle and upper classes, they have ample financial resources to afford more childcare services or external support, such as babysitters/nannies/ other professionals, to overcome contradictory milestones, such as taking care of child and the family and career advancement.

But even so, the estrogen such as oxytocin that women keep producing when they have children and their mother nature drives them to devote to child-rearing [4]. External forces such as social status and money could have limited effects on relieving these maternal instincts.

### **3. Reasons for the Existence of Social Consensus in China**

Today, more and more women have the right to work. At the same time, the social norms or most people in society still agree that taking care of families is the natural responsibility of women. The fundamental reasons for this common perception in modern society in China or East Asia deserve to be explored in depth.

One of the reasons lies in the social expectations of traditional societies. A large part of the historical background and social-cultural changes regarding social expectations is due to the profound influence of Confucianism in ancient China [5], where male superiority over females was the dominant view in society at that time and still has a continuing influence on society today as well. From the social expectation perspective, women are seen as primarily responsible for the family, caring for the home and children. At the same time, men are responsible for earning money to support the family. At the same time, because the energy women invest in household activities is not measured by substantial income and does not generate more visible income for the family, partners and family members will always take women's input for granted. The gender inequalities come along in families. In addition, prejudice and stereotypes may also be a cause. There is discrimination and prejudice against women in society, and social perceptions that women are weak and need protection. Such perceptions place disproportionate responsibility on women in domestic work, putting them under tremendous pressure at home and in the workplace and limiting the time they can devote to education, training, or gainful employment [6]. For example, in the workplace, given that women would spend more time and energy caring for their families and children, opportunities for advancement and positions will be more favorable to men, resulting in women encountering invisible ceilings in the workplace or a smaller proportion of women in the middle and upper levels.

Moreover, the current inadequacy of domestic legal regulations provides room for gender inequality to exist to some extent. In contrast, the Nordic countries can be a very good reference because these developed countries have a very sound legal system, especially its gender equality ranking and related legislation are among the top within the whole world. Domestic legislation protects women's legal rights and interests during childbirth to a certain extent, but compared to the developed Nordic countries, legislation in China gives men little legal support to share the burden of childcare with their partners in the family. In terms of maternity leave, according to Article 7 of the Special Provisions on Labor Protection for Female Workers in China, female workers are entitled to

98 days of maternity leave, including 15 days of prenatal leave; in the case of a difficult birth, 15 days of additional maternity leave; and in the case of multiple births, 15 days of additional maternity leave for each additional baby born. At present, there is no uniform provision in China's laws regarding paternity leave for men, and it depends on the actual provisions of each province and place. In most provinces, the Regulations on the Administration of Population and Family Planning stipulate that paternity leave for men is generally 7 days, which can be extended to 10 days for late marriage and childbirth, or up to about 30 days for paternity leave. Even with these provisions, the number of men who actually take paternity leave is still limited in Mainland China. However, in Nordic countries, such as Sweden, all working parents are entitled to 16 months (480 days) of paid maternity leave for each child born, with the cost shared between the state and the employer. The first 390 days are paid at 77.6% of the original salary, and the second 90 days are paid at a fixed rate. Also, Swedish law requires the father to take two of the 16 months, which greatly encourages fathers to participate in parenting and relieves the gender inequalities.

China should also pass legislation to encourage more women to enter and advance in the workplace. Because too many women choose family between family and career actively or passively, some negative cycle is formed in the workplace. Women who go to give birth and then return to the workplace can easily be replaced. These circumstances finally led to fewer women in high positions. If legislation could require the percentage of women at the management level to be no less than a certain percentage, it would encourage more women to participate in the workplace and change the inequality between men and women in the workplace. In turn, women in high positions may be more concerned about women's rights and interests, which men may ignore. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2022[7], the Political Empowerment part measures the gap between men and women at the highest level of political decision-making through the ratio of women to men in ministerial positions and the ratio of women to men in parliamentary positions. Political Empowerment consists of three indexes, ranking separately among the 146 countries. According to the report, the percentage of women in parliament ranks 80th out of 146 countries, women in ministerial positions gets the ranking of 139th, and year with female/male head of state (last 50) ranks 71st. In contrast, gender equality in enrollment in tertiary education in China achieved the 1st ranking among the countries being investigated. The low percentage of female management could reflect the fact that gender equality in enrollment has not helped women to improve their position or overcome the 35-year-old cutoff contradictory milestone. Having access to higher education but failing to reach a higher political/management level has always been a problem for women in China. The lack of women's roles at the top of the ruling hierarchy may also contribute to gender inequality to some degree, as it is difficult for male rulers to put themselves in women's shoes in formulating policies and regulations. In the long term, the disproportion between men and women at the managerial level might further contribute to gender inequality.

#### 4. Conclusion

Ultimately, China is a unique example worth discussing partly because feminist awareness has been rising in recent years. In comparison, when second-wave feminism developed in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, China was in the stage of the Cultural Revolution and had not yet reformed and opened to the outside world. Therefore, China has just begun to figure out the topics discussed in developed countries. Currently, China is influenced by the fourth-wave feminism. The fourth-wave feminism is a phase of feminism that began around 2012 and is characterized by a focus on the empowerment of women and the use of technology and internet tools to collaborate and amplify women's voices. For example, the #MeToo event mainly relies on the Internet to spread. However, the public's awareness of gender equality is not well-developed on domestic social network platforms. The male-female dichotomy is still the dominant sentiment that transcends gender equality in Weibo,

the largest social platform in China. The application of existential theory may provide some feasible solutions to address gender inequality: 1) More emphasis on equality between men and women in legislation and national publicity to raise public awareness of the importance of men's participation in childcare; 2) Recognition of the value of women's household work, and increasing the proportion of women's participation in higher levels of management and other levels of responsibility; 3) Provision of more financial subsidies for women's childbirth at the national level. In addition, legal support should be provided to protect women from discrimination when they return to the workplace after giving birth. By exploring the root causes of inequality between men and women, we can find more appropriate ways to make more people realize the importance of gender equality in China. In this way, the domestic society can promote the development of social equality, which is the original intention in writing this paper.

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