

Chinese Women in Transition: From the "Class and Gender" Perspective

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Abstract During Chinese “socio-economic transition period” from 1978 to the present day, with the reform and rapid growth of the economy, the Chinese social structure underwent enormous changes. In addition to this, the situation of Chinese women has also changed. Contemporary Chinese women are in a quite different position from their “pre-communist,” “traditional” counterparts. Over the past several decades, more equalitarian policies have made a great deal of difference, not only to women's own self-identification, but also to their social milieu. This paper studies the Chinese women transition from class and gender perspective, not only reviewing the social class transition and women's socio-economic role changes, but also putting forward the method issues how to study the gender issues and gender social stratification. This perspective innovation offers an important contribution to the understanding of current woman issues in China.

Keywords Chinese Women, Class, Gender, Transition

1. Introduction: Class and Gender

During the “socio-economic transition period,” from 1978 to the present day, China followed the policies of “economic reform” and “opening up to the outside world” (Nolan[1] 2005, p20). With the reform and rapid growth of the economy, the Chinese social structure underwent enormous changes. One of the most significant changes was the economic restructuring—from a centrally-planned economy to a market-oriented economy—where the market began to play an increasingly important role in resource distribution and economic development (Oi[2] 1995). This change, in conjunction with the retreat of the state administrative sphere from the labour market, has gradually transformed the mechanisms of resource allocation and led to changes in social stratification (Wu[3]

2004). The enlarging gaps between different social groups have led to an escalation in tensions between the higher and lower social strata (Whyte[4] 2010). Ever more severe social problems will occur if this trend in polarization increases. What is the social structure of contemporary China? How are resources distributed among the different social strata? How have the social strata transformed with the economic reforms?

In addition to the transformation of the social structure, the situation of Chinese women has also changed. Contemporary Chinese women are in a quite different position from their pre-communist “traditional” counterparts. Over the past several decades, more equalitarian policies towards the genders have made a great deal of difference, not only to their own self-identification of women, but also to their social milieu. Moreover, women are also in a different position from where they were before the economic reforms, when China was a centrally-planned economy. According to Meng[5] (2000), the female employment rate has gradually declined since the economic reforms began. This phenomenon has heralded further changes in women's social status and conditions.

Therefore, the current socio-economic circumstances of women have come into question again, especially since many female workers were laid off (*xiagang*) by state owned enterprises (SOEs) and collectively owned enterprises (COEs) during the “industrial restructuring” (Chen[6] 1991, p345). In confronting a more and more competitive market environment, has the situation of women degraded or progressed? Do all women face a similar situation or are there discrepancies that exist amongst them? What are the factors contributing to these divisions? These questions are valuable because they highlight key problems which currently face China.

As discussed, Chinese society has experienced enormous social transformation and alongside these changes, the socio-economic status of women also altered. Why put these two issues of class and gender together?

This is because class and gender are highly related topics and the connections between the two can be established from various standpoints. Firstly, class relationships express a discourse of inequality and hierarchy, which is also the basis of research on gender issues (Skeggs[7] 1997). For example, research on gender issues emphasises “gender inequality” and has tried to explore the reasons behind the patriarchy (ibid). Secondly, the formation of social class can be seen as a process of socialization in which resources are allocated and a corresponding hierarchical social position and status are produced (Bourdieu [8] 1984; Fiske [9] 2013). Gender issues and gender inequality are constructed in similar ways. Gender roles are regarded as being formed by various socializing agents (Eagly[10] 2013). Through the socialization process, resources are allocated discrepantly thus resulting in gender inequalities.

Thirdly and most importantly, linking gender and social class together is fundamental to an understanding of the social reality in China. Gender issues in China have never been purely an issue of a relationship between the two genders. On the contrary, these issues have always been connected with societal transformation and development, and even national emancipation (Mouhamad [11] 1992). This issue is apparent from an historical overview of the development of women in China. Similarly, social change cannot be fully understood without taking into account the situation of Chinese women. Changes in women's socio-economic position are not only a significant component of societal transformation, but also impact on it. These combined issues can be described as “Chinese women in an era of Chinese social transformation” or “Chinese social stratification and the transformation of women.” It can be understood as an interactive process: on the one hand, the changes in the social stratification of Chinese women follows the overall changes in social stratification and this have its own characteristics. On the other hand, changes among Chinese women impact on the overall social stratification.

Therefore, the Chinese women in transition can be divided into two main parts. The first section is concerned with the realities of “class and gender” in China and reviews the history of social stratification and the development of women from pre-communist China until the initial stages of the economic reforms. A historical overview of “class and gender” is necessary because it provides a basic understanding of how Chinese social structure and the socio-economic position of women have evolved. The second section briefly discusses the theories of “class and gender”—the traditional Marxist and Weberian class analysis approach, the gender analysis and the debates concerned with them. After this, the overall conclusion is drawn about the transformation of social class and Chinese women.

2. The Development of Social Class in China

2.1. Social Stratification in Pre-Communist China

How did the word “class,” enter the Chinese social sphere? “Class,” like some other social or political concepts was first taken over and given new meaning by the Japanese and then reintroduced into China (Guthrie[12] 2012). Currently, the word “class” is translated as “social class” (*jieji*) or “social stratum” (*jieceng*). The term “*jieji*” in Chinese consists of two separate words. The first ideograph “*jie*” means steps, like rungs on a ladder; and the second “*ji*” is the order of threads in a fabric (Liang[13] 1999, p179). As Kuhn[14] (2010, p18) suggests, both “*jieji*” and “*jieceng*” connote hierarchical degrees on a continuum, linked to a system of social ranks.

In the earliest period of China, society was mainly divided into four large occupational groups by Guanzi—a thinker and politician who lived in the “Spring and Autumn” period (719 B.C.—645 B.C.) of China (Fu[15] 1996). These four large occupational status groups were called “*simin*” and consisted of scholars (*shi*), peasants (*nong*), artisans (*gong*) and merchants (*shang*), ranked in a hierarchical manner from high to low (ibid). Peasants were thought to be superior to artisans and merchants because agriculture was considered the root of society, as it provides food and enhances a state's economic potential. In contrast, the merchants were despised and ranked the lowest because trade was considered a subsidiary branch. In addition, this negative bias towards merchants in Chinese history was also a disadvantage as they were regarded as being corrupt and untrustworthy, and concerned only with money-making (Lin[16] 1999).

These four occupational groups were thought to cover the entirety of human occupations and form a complete and interrelated system (Kuhn[14] 2010). However, in contrast to occupation and economic status in modern society, wealth and poverty in ancient China had nothing to do with a person's occupational status. Within every occupational group, there were huge economic disparities (ibid). There were those who were wealthy and of high status. There were those who were wealthy and of a mean status. For instance, peasants (*nong*) would include both the rich land owners and the poor tenants and the ancient Chinese social structure consisted of a broad and poor base and a very narrow elite top.

This occupational classification remained for millennia until the end of the Qing dynasty in the nineteenth century. During the Republican period from 1912 to 1949, China underwent incessant fighting between the warlords as well as during the anti-Japanese war and the Chinese civil war (Sheridan[17] 2008). People became destitute and homeless. Chinese society in the Republican era was turbulent and the original social structure and social order was transformed. In 1949, with the establishment of the

People's Republic of China (PRC), China began to move along a road of socio-economic restoration and a new social stratification emerged (Whyte et al.[18] 2009).

2.2. Social Stratification in Maoist China

During the Maoist era, although “class struggle” was much emphasised, “class” was more a political perception rather than a socio-economic concept. In addition, class stratification was based more on one's family background, political attitude and ideological stance, rather than one's own private ownership of production assets (Nee[19] 1989; Pow[20] 2009). In 1956, the “three major reconstructions” were completed—the socialist transformation of Chinese agriculture, the handicrafts industry and the capitalist industry. After that, and until 1978, Chinese social stratification is commonly believed to have consisted of two social classes (*jieji*)—peasants and workers, and one social stratum (*jieceng*)—intellectuals (Lu[21] 2003).

However, some researchers observed a new privileged class emerging (Bian et al.[22] 1996). These were the cadres and officials (*ganbu*), who were in possession of great political and administrative power (Lee[23] 1991). The division between the state cadres and rank-and-file workers could be detected in the “labour personnel system” or “cadre management system” (Edin[24] 2003; Manion[25] 1985). State cadres were designated and allocated by the government and were kept in reserve for preparation and promotion into upper leadership positions (Bian[26] 2002). In addition to their greater career opportunities, the cadres were offered better rewards and living conditions etc. (Djilas[27] 1957; Zhou et al.[28] 1995). By contrast, most rank-and-file workers lived an ordinary life and stayed in the same work position for their whole lifetime (Bian[29] 1994).

The distinctions between state cadres and rank-and-file workers were subordinate to another notable structural division—the rural and urban division—through the household registration (*hukou*) system (Naughton[30] 2007; Wu et al.[31] 2004). People were firstly divided artificially into two main social groups—the agricultural or the non-agricultural due to their geographical location (Chan et al.[32] 1999; Yang et al.[33] 1999). Although the living standard of rank-and-file workers could not be compared to that of state cadres, they were much better off than the peasants who were constrained to the countryside (Chan[34] 2010; Mallee[35] 1995). Under the “*hukou*” system, the rural population—the majority—were not allowed to the rights and benefits conferred on urban residents.

The sharp differences between peasants and urban residents were expressed in almost every aspect of life, such as employment, housing, and social security including medical insurance, pensions, and educational opportunities for the next generation (Seeborg et al.[36] 2000). As Li[37] (2004) and Logan et al.[38] (2011) conclude, the “*hukou*”

system—combined with migrant controls—made rural-urban disparities actually serve as a form of social stratification. Therefore, according to the divisions between the urban and the rural, and between the cadre and the rank-and-file worker, the pre-reform Chinese social structure was defined by the following three social groups: the economic and social status of cadre was the highest; the worker in the middle, lower than the cadre, but much higher than the peasant (Parkin[39] 1974; Solinger[40] 1999).

Generally speaking, the social structure during the Maoist period was relatively simple, sealed off and egalitarian (Schram[41] 2010). For example, the identities of these three groups were almost fixed. Once a person was born as a peasant, he/she might retain their peasant identity for their whole life, unless he/she joined the military or passed the university entrance examinations, which consisted of a very low percentage of people (Li[42] 2005). Similarly, in order for a rank-and-file worker to change their status to a cadre, long bureaucratic procedures would be involved (Bian[29] 1994; Wu et al.[31] 2004). In addition, society during the Maoist era was egalitarian with a Gini coefficient of 0.18 in the 1970s, below the absolute equalitarianism line of 0.2 (Schram[41] 2010). However, this absolute egalitarianism was at the cost of extensive poverty.

With the implementation of policies of opening up and economic reform, many concrete systematic and institutional reforms were carried forward, which made this simple and closed social structure differentiate and polarize rapidly (Fan[43] 1997; Lu[44] 2012; So[45] 2003). Later sections discuss how social stratification changed in the initial period of the economic reforms.

2.3. Social Stratification in the Initial Period of the Economic Reforms

During the initial period of economic reform, the Chinese economy gradually diversified by allowing the private sector to grow and foreign investment to enter. The market mechanism was officially recognized which changed the original single central planning model into a dualist model of state and market (Lin[46] 2001; Nee et al.[47] 1996). With the economic reforms and market development, social changes and the differentiation of the social stratification began. Some new social groups emerged and the old social order was transformed. The egalitarianism that underpinned the planned economy diminished and the disparities between different social groups enlarged enormously (Brandt et al.[48] 2008).

In addition, it is worth mentioning that the term “*jieji*” was infrequently utilised after 1978 because the priorities of the CCP government were reoriented from “class struggle” (*jieji douzheng*) to economic development. The term “*jieji*” has a highly political connotation, which reminded people of the violent class struggle during the

Maoist regime. Therefore, the term “*jiēcēng*,” replacing “*jiēji*,” was increasingly adopted. Furthermore, “*jiēcēng*” carries connotations of socioeconomic differentiation, and meanings which conform more to the new era of reform and opening up (Anagnost[49] 2008; Guo[50] 2013). The social differentiation of the initial economic reform period can be summarized in five trends as below:

The first trend encompasses the capitalization of the official and state manager stratum. In the government-led economic reform process, the central and local governor's role has been crucial. In the process of the restructuring and privatization of SOEs and COEs, a large amount of state capital has been transferred into the hands of officials and governors or their relatives and families through informal and unregulated channels (Sun[51] 2005). This process is somewhat comparable to the differentiation of the old bureaucrats and the formation of new business elites in Russia (Kryshtanovskaya et al.[52] 1996). High-level state officials in China have seized a large number of economic benefits by virtue of their political power and organizational resources and thus their leadership has extended from the Party-State administrative sphere to the economic sphere. Many offspring and relatives of these high-level state officials have become monopoly tycoons in industry (Lin[16] 1999).

The second trend is the admittance of the private entrepreneur stratum into the political and legal sphere. During the 80th anniversary of the CCP on 1st July 2001, General Secretary Jiang Zemin gave a speech in which he emphasised that it was essential to absorb the excellent private entrepreneurs into the CCP (Dickson[53] 2003). This was an important recognition of their political status. Consequently, in 2004, the “legalisation of private property” was incorporated into a “Constitutional Amendment” and the “Property Law of China” passed the National People Congress (NPC) in 2007 (Zhang[54] 2008, p346). These events confirmed property ownership rights for private proprietors and indicated that the period of the boycotting and exclusion of capitalists had ended. Currently, private entrepreneurs not only enjoy economic success as the “economic elite,” but also have become an important part of “the people,” some of them even elected as representatives of National People's Congress (NPC) or members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) (Yan[55] 2012, p338).

The third trend highlights the improvement in the social status of intellectuals (*zhishi fēnzi*). Intellectuals, cultural elites and technological experts experienced uncertain circumstances and a fluctuating status after 1949. In the 1950s, intellectuals were not trusted by the CCP and they were restricted in terms of participation in political and party work (Eddy[56] 2009). In addition, they were often forced to accept the “socialist transformation” to cultivate the appropriate “proletarian attributes” (ibid, p611). Since the economic reforms, however, this situation has changed. Their technological skill and knowledge have been valued

and have helped them to achieve material benefits. In addition, China's political leaders have recruited and welcomed them into the political establishment (Wright[57] 2010). The intellectuals have gradually changed into a “professional elite” or a “cultural elite” (Walder[58] 1995).

These three trends represent obviously those who have benefited from the economic reforms. They have become successful and prosperous because they have resorted to using their political, economic and cultural capital (Li[59] 2013; Li et al.[60] 2008; Liu[61] 2003; Lu[62] 2002; Raymo et al.[63] 2000). These resources are evidently of vital importance and can be interchangeable for each other. For example, officials achieve their Master's or PhD degrees, which symbolise cultural capital, much more easily from top universities in China if they do their degree part-time. Moreover, it is easier for them to acquire a degree if they are promoted within the officialdom. In contrast, those who did not own these resources have been gradually marginalized. The following two trends delineate the changes in their socio-economic position of these increasingly marginal groups.

The fourth trend is the fast descent of the working class. The working class was named as the leading class in Mao's regime, but after the economic reforms, especially the restructuring of SOEs, they were rapidly marginalized (Lin[64] 2009; Weil[65] 2006). For example, in 1997, eleven to twelve million urban workers were laid off and massive cuts continued over the next several years (Benson et al.[66] 1999). The income of retained workers dropped and those who were laid off lived only on a small pension and support from their family members. Although some workers were reemployed in private enterprises later, they had to endure very long working hours and humble working environments. In addition, amongst these, women have been severely disadvantaged (Dependence[67] 2002). Women were the first to be asked to leave and comprised the majority of those who were laid off. Furthermore, these women have been disadvantaged in terms of finding new jobs because they lack certain skills and are old.

The fifth trend is the differentiation of peasants and the inferior condition of the “peasant worker” (*nong min gong*) in cities. Before 1978, peasants not only lived in the countryside, but made a living on agriculture. When the policy that allowed peasants to find jobs and to live in cities was enacted, hundreds of millions of peasants poured into cities. However, most of them gathered in low skilled and labour intensive industries, which urban workers were reluctant to do (Wong et al.[68] 2007). Peasants took jobs with low pay, low prestige, and worked in unpleasant condition. Moreover, they were not able to benefit from any kinds of national and local insurance because of household registration (*hukou*) system (Chan et al.[69] 2008; Ngai et al.[70] 2010). As Tomba[71] (2011, p317) remarks, out-migration is often deemed as a way to escape the “peasant” identity and to garner better living standards, but the identity of “peasant worker” becomes another

signifier once they have migrated to the cities.

In conclusion, confronting the social upheavals of the economic reforms, the formerly simple and relatively egalitarian social structure experienced rapid polarization (Lin[16] 1999). Some groups got rich fast, such as the sub-groups, who owned political and social resources. The socio-economic status of some groups has improved, such as the entrepreneurs and intellectuals. In contrast, some other groups have to cope with greater uncertainty, such as the workers and peasants. They have split respectively. The laid off workers who once worked in the state and collectively-owned enterprises have had very difficult lives during the Chinese industrial transformation. In addition, numerous peasants have migrated to cities, participating in low level jobs and they constituted a new group, the “peasant worker.” Corresponding to these drastic social transformations, the circumstances of Chinese women have also changed. What follows is a historical overview and discussion of the evolution of Chinese women's socio-economic role, especially the changes after the economic reforms.

3. The Development of Chinese Women's Changing Socio-Economic Role

Generally speaking, the historical evolution of Chinese women has been a continuous process. It is hard to divide the development of Chinese women into certain phases according to particular ideological implications or a great significant event. In addition, Chinese women's development has to a great extent been intertwined with Chinese national emancipation and socialist construction (Croll[72] 2013; Wang[73] 1999). Therefore, in this section, the changes in the socioeconomic role of Chinese women are divided roughly into three stages according to the Chinese social development process. Elaboration on this begins with a discussion of the transformation of the traditional Confucian women in the late Qing dynasty.

3.1. The Change in Women's Role from the Confucian Status

For two thousand years before the end of the nineteenth century, Chinese girls and women abided by Confucian family doctrine, which linked feminine virtue with being a faithful wife and devoted mother (Chang[74] 2007). The requirements of Chinese women—such as the three obediences and the four virtues (*san cong si de*)—bore the imprint of feudal imperial values. Women had to be dutiful—obeying their fathers when they were children, obeying their husbands after they got married, and obeying their sons after their husbands died (Hong[75] 2013; Li[76] 1995).

However, the patriarchal system in which these feminine

norms were embodied began to be challenged when China confronted the “great western powers” in the mid to late nineteenth century (Hong[75] 2013, p195). With the Chinese national crisis and western invasion in the late Qing dynasty, Western thoughts on rights—from notions of natural rights to awareness of women's rights—began to infiltrate Chinese society. The advocacy of equality between the genders and liberation of women became the banners raised by Chinese intellectuals in their pursuit of national emancipation, progress and civilization (Li[77] 2013).

The de-Confucian cultural movement combated old Confucian institutions and changed the traditional role of Chinese women. In the period of the early Republic of China, women who opposed feudal ethics and left home to seek a western education and a new life in society were a beacon of change. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, the gender issue or women's liberation in China has never purely been solely an issue of the relationship between the genders. Rather it was a fundamental part of overall Chinese national emancipation and modernization. These ideological and social changes surrounding Chinese women's development built a fundamental basis for their progress in a new historical era after the establishment of the PRC. Subsequent paragraphs elaborate how circumstances of women changed after the PRC was established.

3.2. “Women Hold Up Half the Sky”: Women in Maoist China

After the PRC was established in 1949, there were various political mobilisation movements launched under the Maoist regime—the land reform (*tudi gaige*), the great leap forward (*da yue jin*), and the Cultural Revolution (*wenhua dageming*) etc. (Granrose[78] 2007). These mobilisation movements brought millions of women from the household sphere to the public sphere (Croll[72] 2013). This was because women, as a productive force, were much needed by the state. They were an essential and irreplaceable part of Chinese socialist construction, and they were referred to as “holding up half the sky” (Leung[79] 2003, p367). The CCP government not only encouraged and recruited Chinese women to participate in work on a large scale, but also laid emphasis on the fact that women were equal to men (Hong[75] 2013). The CCP undertook many actions to improve Chinese woman's social status and protect their rights.

To begin with, the principle of gender equality was written into State legislation. For example, the “Constitution” stipulated equal entitlement to voting and to work, as well as equal pay for equal work, equal property inheritance and other rights (Croll[80] 1983; Jordan[81] 1994). Furthermore, the CCP government was active in promoting continuous struggles to break down male supremacy and woman-repressive customs or traditions.

For instance, the marriage law, adopted in the 1950s, outlawed child brides and mercenary and forced marriages, which once were common phenomena in traditional Chinese society (Chun[82] 1996).

In addition, many protective policies in favour of women were enacted, which included paid leave for childbirth and adjusted labour conditions during menstruation, pregnancy and nursing etc. In the meantime, civil courts were instructed to side with women more than men in divorce disputes (Jordan[81] 1994). Moreover, the State Federation of Women had local branches in every factory, street and village to ensure that women had an organization of their own to turn to when gender-related problems arose (Howell[83] 1996).

These policies, regulations and protective countermeasures for the rights of women represent the determination of the CCP government to improve women's social status. However, there were serious flaws in the justifications for claiming that women were equal to men in China at that time. Analysing the position of women in Maoist China, Stacey [84](1983, p261) argues that the revolution of Chinese women "reached backward to move forward." She points out that in the process of the social revolution, the CCP prioritized class struggle over gender equality and made compromises with the patriarchal system to gain the support of peasants at the expense of women (ibid). Johnson[85] (2009) makes a similar point in her study of the family in socialist China. She believes that construction of a socialist society was based on a traditional family economy and this family solidarity further inhibited prospects for the development of an independent consciousness of woman (ibid).

Furthermore, on the one hand, women were forced to take the same low-level and heavy work as men. The compulsion of women to work as equal as men not giving them the right to refuse this "sexless" or "degendered" way of living was deemed as another type of oppression (Yang[33] 1999). This kind of "gender equality" reached highest point during the Cultural Revolution. During that time, even the clothing and apparel of people with indication of gender have been removed (Chun[82] 1996). On the other hand, gender discrimination existed in job assignments, as Zheng[86] (2000) proposes the allocation of jobs followed gendered lines. Some service and auxiliary work was regarded as suitable for women, while some technical jobs were seen as male work (ibid).

Possibly, the constant and unchanged concept of son preference can be used to verify that the status of women is not as high as people suppose. Especially after the policy of "one-child family" carried out, the female infant death increased rapidly because many parents choose to miscarry or abandon the girl babies under the pressure that they can only have one child (Johansson et al.[87] 1991). In order to change this female infanticide circumstance, an extensive campaign has been embarked to upgrade the value of daughters in China's history. This is an open recognition of

discrimination suffered by women, which was impossible to acknowledge since discrimination against women was largely and officially prohibited (Zheng[88] 1994, p142).

In summary, the development of women in the Maoist period was mainly pushed forward by intentioned activities and policies of government, and by the way of slogans, catchwords and broadcasts. From this point of view, the awakening of female self-awareness and consciousness (in comparison to the early period of the Republic of China) was set back. In addition, the ideological cultivation of gender equality to some extent lacked a necessary economic basis to support it. The 1978 economic reforms and the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented economy gave rise to complex socio-economic surroundings. Following these changes, the status and conditions of women in society also transformed. The later paragraphs discuss the changes in the circumstances of Chinese women with the economic reforms.

3.3. The Change in Women's Circumstances with the Economic Reforms

With the rise of the market economy and economic growth, the initial assumption was that gender inequalities would decline (Zhang et al.[89] 2008). This explanation was supported by "discrimination theory," which suggests that gender discrimination entails extra costs, which eventually will be punished by the market (Becker[90] 1957; Polachek et al.[91] 1993). Or alternatively, as the "classical modernization theory" argues, the gender gap may initially expand, but ultimately will diminish when the gender gap reaches a peak (Jaquette[92] 1982, p274). This theory attributes the persisting gender inequalities to the existing "socially conditioned structure" and the differences of "social nature" between genders (Stainback et al.[93] 2011). This theory suggests that with the decline of gender disparities in "conditioned structure" and "social nature," the gender inequalities will also decline.

The theories discussed above are optimistic and suggest that the gender gap in China would have decreased, even if, only eventually. However, the enlarged gender gap after the economic reforms has been verified by many studies. For women in cities, gender segregation in the labour market is more severe and their employment positions are more marginalized (Zhang et al.[89] 2008). As mentioned earlier, women have been disproportionately selected for redundancy and have constituted a high proportion of the laid-off workers since the reconstruction of SOEs (Granrose[94] 2005; Naughton[30] 2007). Women were often pushed into in the private enterprises, informal employment with reduced income, less job security and worse work environment. Furthermore, women endured longer unemployment durations than men even if they had the same willingness to find a job (Du et al.[95] 2009). As Shu [96] (2005) concludes, the market transition has

diversified employment opportunities and choices for women, but it produced new marginalization and exclusions for them as well.

In contrast, men are in a better position to benefit from the new economic opportunities and tend to experience improvement in their economic circumstances (Shu et al.[97] 2003). The enlarged gap between the genders in the initial period of economic reform can partly be attributed to the gender differences in human capital. As Liu et al' [98] (2000) suggest, male workers had a higher level of education and more work experience than female workers at the beginning of the reforms. The gender gap in education was also verified by the data in the CHIP set in 2002, especially for those of middle age (Knight et al.[99] 2003). However, with the reduction of gender differences in human capital, the gender gap in terms of employment and wages did not diminish correspondingly, but instead enlarged (Gustafsson et al.[100] 2000; Shu et al.[97] 2003). Thus, the conclusion is drawn that the work circumstances for female workers have deteriorated since the reforms, in terms of earnings, employment and promotion opportunities etc. This phenomenon is even more severe for less-educated women (ibid).

The worsened working environment for female workers comes partly from the conventional gender discrimination against women by their employers (Bishop et al.[101] 2005; Wang[102] 2005; Wang et al.[103] 2008). In addition, the removed and abandoned central planning mechanism encouraged this gender discrimination. It was found that the gender earnings gap was larger in the market sector than in the state sector (Maurer-Fazio et al.[104] 2002). Furthermore, some protective policies and provisions for women did not help female workers in reality. Instead, they turned out to damage their work opportunities, if there was no related state regulations cooperation and funding support (Cooke [105] 2001). For example, as Weichselbaumer et al.[106] (2007) suggest the effect of the labour laws on women's labour conditions and rights increased the cost to corporations of employing women. In the condition of lacking subsidies from the government and state to corporations, these plausible women-protection policies, such as maternal leave, actually reinforced the inequitable practices in employment.

With increasing urban unemployment in the late 1990s, the reassertion that the private household sphere was women's domain began to be deployed to legitimize arguments that women should withdraw from the public labour force to free-up employment opportunities (Zheng[88] 1994). In addition, there are voices appealing for a gentle and soft wife and mother who can put the interests of her family before her career. The absence of the forceful and widespread promotion of gender equality by the states and governments results in the re-emergence of the traditional gender role requirements and the gender discrimination in labour market. Many female graduates, who are qualified, are turned away by employers and the

prospect of promotion for women is not as promising as that for men (Granrose[94] 2005). Therefore, women began to retreat from the work place. Meng[5] (2000) found woman's participation in the labour market decreased gradually.

To conclude, the growth of the market and the economy may have benefited a few urban educated women, but the majority has been impoverished relatively by the economic reforms. Against a background of social structural separation, Chinese women experienced severe polarization and slid further down in terms of socio-economic status. Women constituted the majority of the laid-off workers during the reconstruction of the SOEs and COEs, and have had to participate in informal employment with reduced incomes and less job security. Some traditional gender role requirements have resurged and have impacted on the employment and promotion prospects of women.

These descriptions provide a picture of Chinese urban women's transformation after the economic reforms. In addition, the class and gender issues are also reflected in the stratification approaches. Therefore, in the next section, the classical social classification approaches of Marx and Weber and gender analysis are discussed.

4. Classical Social Stratification Analysis and Gender Analysis

As Crompton[107] (1989) suggests, within sociology there is a permanent debate over terms such as social class or equivalent expressions—the social stratum. The term “stratum” has been borrowed from the science of geology where it refers to a layer of sedimentary rock or soil with internally consistent characteristics that distinguish it from other layers (Saunders[108] 1989, p87). After being translated into sociological terminology, the concept of “stratum” refers to “layers” or “social groups” that are arranged sequentially, one on top of the other (ibid). In social stratification analysis, one important issue is how to allocate individuals within the social structure. This issue poses the question: which criteria should be deployed to differentiate the population? Two prominent theories applied in social stratification studies to answer this question are those of Marx and Weber.

4.1. Marxist and Weberian Class Analysis

In the Marxist social stratification framework, class relationships are embedded in production relationships. Marxian theorists emphasise different kinds of rights and powers, and the deployment of a range of assets, resources and factors of production: machines, land, labour power and so on. These different kinds of rights and powers and their output determine social class relationships. If

ownership of the means of production is taken as the basis for social stratification, two great classes are formed in the “capitalist society”: bourgeoisie and proletariat. The former are the owners and controllers of the material means of production, while the latter own only their labour power, which they are forced to sell to the bourgeoisie in order to maintain a livelihood (Marx et al.[109] 1906).

The pivotal concept of “exploitation” and “domination” makes Marxist class analysis distinctively different from other class analysis theories, such as the class analysis of Weber. In Marxist class analysis, capitalists exploit workers by virtue of their ownership of the means of production under the capitalist regime. Although Marxist social classification deems the bourgeoisie and proletariat as the major historic roles in a capitalist epoch, it does not deny that society is composed of a multiplicity of other classes (Wright et al.[110] 1985). A variety of social groupings are identified, such as the landed aristocracy, the industrial bourgeoisie, the middle class, the petty bourgeoisie, the industrial proletariat, the lumpenproletariat and the peasantry (ibid).

As far as Weberian class analysis is concerned, the rights and powers that individuals have which extend from productive materials are not significant in determining class relationships. For Weber, right and power are not caused by exploitation and material domination, but because of the role they play in shaping one's life chances against a backdrop of market exchanges (Weber[111]r 1946). In addition, Weber believed that only in the market can all these assets have values. In this sense, one's class circumstance is equal to one's market circumstance and is determined by multidimensional factors, such as property, particular skills, and other assets. One's control over different resources affects one's bargaining capacity in the market and this in turn affects the results of the exchanges. According to their market bargaining capacity and their controlled resources, the population are divided. Weber identified social classes as: the working class; petty bourgeoisie; technicians, specialists and lower-level management, and the classes at the top of the hierarchy of occupation and ownership.

Both of Marxist and Weberian class analysis begin with the issues that determine the access of people to economic resources. From this perspective, Marxist and Weberian definitions of class relations in capitalist society share the same basic operational criteria. However, how they differ lies in the theoretical explanations and specification of the implications of this set of norms (Wright[112] 2002). The Marxist model understands social stratification in two causative paths: one operating through market exchanges and the other through the process of production. In contrast, the Weberian model traces one—the market exchanges. Furthermore, Marx explains the causal mechanism of these two paths.

In addition, at the level of class analysis, both class theories of Marx and Weber are gender-blind. Marx

pointed out that capitalism is indifferent to what kind of labour it exploits (Crompton[107] 1989). Capitalism, no matter whether or not it lacks gender exploitation, can still be capitalism. However, if the gender exploitation is admitted, it actually acknowledges gender inequality and admits that men and women have different access to economic resources. Social stratification is a study about the difference in distribution of various kinds of resources. If gender makes a difference in access to these economic resources, the factor of gender should be added as an important aspect in any social stratification study. The paragraphs below discuss issues of female status in the study of social stratification and the gender debate on class analysis.

4.2. Gender Analysis and the Gender and Class Debate

The word “gender” and its distinction from “sex” should be firstly discussed. “Gender” is often used to refer to the socially given attributes, roles, activities, and responsibilities which are connected with being a male or a female (March et al.[113] 1999). In contrast, “sex” is a biological human distinction between male and female, which is defined by the gametes the organism produces. There are only two categories of sex all over the world—male and female, whereas the gender experience of being male or female can be very different from one culture to another. People's gender identity determines how they are perceived, and how they are expected to think and act in the role of women or men.

The analysis on gender in sociology explores and highlights the relationship between men as a sex and women as another sex, how these relationships and gendered positions have been created and reproduced in a society, and the reasons behind those relationships (Lorber[114] 1994). Gender relations are simultaneously relations of cooperation, connection, and mutual support, and of conflict, separation, and competition, of difference and inequality (Connell[115] 1990). It is concerned with how power and rights are distributed between the sexes in the household, in the market, and at the community and the state level. In addition, to choose a suitable measure to study gender issues is also important. In this section, the gender analysis mainly focuses on the inferior condition of women, the gender disparities in terms of social stratification, as well as the criticisms made by feminists about the methods of social stratification.

To begin with, women's inferior position in comparison to men is ubiquitous and easily identifiable. This phenomenon is deeply rooted the patriarchal culture, history and traditions (Friedan [116] 2013; Sperling[117] 1991). In patriarchal societies, the inferior situation of women was taken for granted because women were seen as physically inferior to men. Rituals and customs reinforced and defended this mind-set. For example, gender inequality has a long history in China. Even when individual rights

and equalities were advocated and propagated, the rights and equalities of the half of the population—women—were not widely acknowledged or were negated outright. However, women have never stopped challenging those traditional gendered concepts and attitudes, especially in the last two centuries.

In the past centuries, in the main western countries, numerous efforts have been made to reduce the structural gender inequalities. For example, in the first wave of feminism during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, suffrage was claimed and some legal obstacles to gender equality were removed (Lorber[118] 2005). The second wave of feminism began in the 1960s, in the background that many women entered into the workforce. The central focus of the second wave was on total gender equality, and much more activities associated with the women's liberation and fights for women's legal and social equality etc. ensued (Connel[115] 1990). In addition, political elites and state power entered into the battle through court decisions, legislations and mass movements (Ryan [119] 2013).

While social and political movements took up the fight against the gender inequality in reality, the academic research of social science in universities was also impacted by feminism. As early as the 1960s, feminist researchers raised fundamental challenges to the ways that social science has analysed women, men and society. Feminists argue that modern scientific understanding—specifically information about sociology and politics—is produced by patriarchal institutions which favours men and ultimately reflects a “masculine world view” (Keller [120] 1985, p110). In the particular instance of class analysis, as discussed before, classical class theory did not consider the stand of women (Acker[121] 1973). As both Crompton [107] (1989) and Lockwood (1989) have argued, class theory is about class, not gender.

Social class theories, such as that of John Goldthorpe's, which was the most arguable one in Europe, regarded the female as largely peripheral to the class system (Goldthorpe[122] 1983). In Goldthorpe's work, women were conventionally perceived to have the same class position as that of their husbands. This approach is reflected in the gendered labour divisions within household, in which the male is characterized as the “breadwinner,” whilst the woman retained the primary responsibility for the domestic sphere. However, this method was subject to extensive criticism. This was because more and more women have participated in the labour market and the proportion of women in professional, administrative and managerial occupations has largely increased. In responding to this criticism, Goldthorpe and Erikson stated no matter whether it is a man or a woman, social stratification analysis could be based on the “the head of the household strategy” (ibid).

Unfortunately, this alternative did not settle the debate because of cross-class marriage within households

(Blackburn et al.[123] 2006; Roberts[124] 2011). On the contrary, it revealed the vertical and horizontal gender segregation in the labour market and pointed out the difficulties in the application of occupational-class schemas in discussing social stratification. As Lockwood (1983, p178) argued, it is the position of occupation, rather than the sex of the individual, which determines the status of the incumbent. However, the status of the occupation has often been decisively influenced by genders. In addition, the class position of women remains a highly contentious issue.

Eventually, feminists gave further evidence and arguments to support the necessity of rebuilding class theory to correspond to the changes in both the public and private spheres of individual's social lives (Stanworth[125] 1984; Sorensen[126] 1994). Marshall et al.[127] (1995) tended to combine class and gender, and suggested that social classes comprise neither families nor individuals, but individuals in families. For this reason, the study of class is properly conducted at different levels of analysis. Duke et al.[128] (1987) proposed that individual level investigations into production-based behaviour should include both men and women as individuals, whilst empirical studies of consumption behaviour and attitudes should use a measure of household class which is a product of the class situation of the household members.

These critiques and debates represent the complexities of “class and gender” analysis and verify the necessity of connecting both spheres together. The development of a gender perspective in class theory offers an important contribution to social stratification knowledge.

5. Conclusions

During the Chinese transition period, with the reform and rapid growth of the economy, the Chinese social structure underwent enormous changes. In addition to this, the situation of Chinese women has also changed. Contemporary Chinese women are in a quite different position from their “pre-communist”, “traditional” counterparts. Over the past several decades, more equalitarian policies have made a great deal of difference, not only to women's own self-identification, but also to their social milieu. Moreover, women are also in a different position from where they were before the economic reforms, when China was a centrally-planned economy. According to Meng[5] (2000), the female employment rate has gradually declined since the economic reforms began. This phenomenon heralded further changes in the social status and conditions of Chinese women.

The Chinese women in transition can be understood through the perspective as class and gender. Class and gender are highly related topics and the connections between the two can be established from various

standpoints. Class relationships express a discourse of inequality and hierarchy, which is also the basis of research on gender issues. The formation of social class can be seen as a process of socialization in which resources are allocated and a corresponding hierarchical social position and status are produced (Bourdieu[8] 1984; Fiske[9] 2013). Gender issues and gender inequality are constructed in similar ways. Gender roles are regarded as being formed by various socializing agents (Eagly[10] 2013). Through the socialization process, resources are allocated discrepantly thus resulting in gender inequalities. Additionally, linking gender and social class together is also important to an understanding of the social reality in China. Gender issues in China have never been purely an issue of a relationship between the two genders. On the contrary, these issues have always been connected with societal transformation and development, and even national emancipation (Moghadam[11] 1992).

Most importantly, the issue of "class and gender" poses a methodological problem, which is how to measure social stratification, especially gender social stratification. On the one hand, there are vertical and horizontal segregations between the genders in the labour market, thus the disparities in social stratification between men and women. On the other hand, the impact of the spouses on the individuals in terms of social stratification cannot be denied. The study of a gender perspective in class theory offers an important contribution to social stratification knowledge, as well as to the reality of Chinese social structure. It is also helpful to analyse the gender issues from the perspective of social stratification.

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