

Popularization of Higher Education in China and the Increasing Gap between Women: Who can enter the prestigious Peking University?

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Enjoying a period of unprecedented economic development, China is now experiencing a wave of popularization of higher education, the scale and speed of which has surpassed that of Japan during its own period of high economic growth. In 2002, the Chinese gross enrollment rate reached 15%, indicating that the country had entered the so-called “mass” access phase described by Martin Trow, followed by 27% in 2011. The number of students going on to ordinary higher educational institutions increased by more than four times from 1.597 million in 1999 to 6.815 million in 2011, while the number of ordinary higher educational institutions also grew tremendously from 1,071 to 2,409. The advent of a society that stresses academic backgrounds has intensified the severity of the education practices in preparation for entrance examinations even more than before. However, there is good news for women. In 2009, the number of female students enrolled at ordinary higher educational institutions in China reached 10.826 million, amounting to 50.5% of the total. This was the first time that the number of female students had exceeded that of male students, reversing the gender ratios that had been seen since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. Even in the severe *gao kao* (National Higher Education Entrance Examination), in many provinces, the top successful applicants are now female students. Called *nu zhuang yuan*, such female students outnumber the top successful male applicants. As *yin sheng yang shuai* (women dominant over men), this phenomenon related to universities is now attracting wide attention. Experts insist that the beneficiaries of the popularization of universities are women. Many *nu zhuang yuan* go on to the prestigious Peking University or Tsinghua University. I would now like to discuss the backgrounds of students enrolled at such universities.

As to this issue, LIU Yunshan and WANG Zhiming collected an enormous amount of data regarding new students who entered Peking University after the Chinese Economic Reform (1978 - 2005), and presented very interesting research results.ⁱ LIU et al. categorized the new students’ attributes by region, classification of urban/rural areas, and social class, and conducted scrupulous gender analyses in a multifaceted and time-series manner. The results were beyond expectations. After commencement of the Chinese Economic Reform, especially in and after 1990, a distinct gap emerged between urban and rural areas. As for opportunities to enter Peking University, urban male students consistently recorded a high percentage of more than 40% after 1978. On the

other hand, rural female students hovered around a low level of just a few percentage points. No change was observed in these two groups after the launch of the Chinese Economic Reform. However, there was a change in the groups of rural male students and urban female students. Although it was said that students from the rural labor class made up more than 70% of the students at Peking University during the Cultural Revolution, the number of such students drastically declined right after the beginning of the Chinese Economic Reform. In the 1980s and 1990s, the percentages of rural male students and urban female students were almost the same at around 20%, suggesting that the groups competed with each other for a limited number of opportunities to enter the university. For the two years from 1994, however, the percentage of urban female students surged by approximately 10 points, even considerably narrowing the gap with urban male students. Conversely, the percentage of rural male students continued to decline, even approaching that of rural female students. A set of national statistics also reveals that in the mid-1990s, the ratio of female university students skyrocketed. What are behind these changes? The following combined factors may be the cause.

The combination of the Socialist Market Economy Policy launched in 1992 and the global economy has intensified the polarization between urban and rural areas. Based on this polarization, a new social class and rank have emerged, which affects and is reflected in university education. Another factor is the country's family planning policy generally known as the one-child policy. In the mid-1990s, the first generation under the one-child policy entered university. The policy has changed the family composition in urban areas, also changing the country's traditional male-oriented family perspective. In urban areas, children, regardless of gender, are expected to achieve a high-level education. On the other hand, in rural areas, where there are still many children, the idea of the priority given to boys still firmly exists. Additionally, in 1997, it became obligatory to pay tuition fees at all universities, even though the fees had been free until that time. There is a year-by-year rise in such tuition fees and a wider rich-poor gap between urban areas and rural areas. Even from an economic aspect, students from rural areas have disadvantages. For example, there are often girls who are forced to work to earn the tuition fees for their brothers.

The gender ratio of students enrolled at Peking University (and also other higher educational institutions in China) has been approximately equal in recent years. This is a result of the upward mobility by advantaged female students in urban areas who have obtained many entrance opportunities, as well as downward mobility by male students in rural areas. LIU et al. asserts that the current gender equality being realized in this way limits progress. There is no overlooking the existence of girls in rural areas placed

in an even worse environment than that of boys in rural areas.

The number of female students enrolled in higher educational institutions in China now exceeds that of male students, and this number is continuing to grow spectacularly. At the same time, the gap between female students from urban and rural areas has been growing silently. While the former point is

recognized, the latter is not. This issue presents the two aspects of light and shadow in the country's social development, and, in a way, also reveals a condition brought about by development throughout the world.



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ⁱ Liu Yunshan and Wang Zhiming. 2008 〈NuxingJinru Jingying Jiti: Youxian de Jinbu〉 《Gaocheng Jiaoyu Yanjiu》 Vol.29 No.2