

Gender and Cohort Changes in Gender Role Attitudes in China

Abstract

Based on an analysis of 70 birth cohorts of the Chinese General Social Survey ($N=45,949$), the study uses a series of multilevel models to (1) explore the general cohort patterns of gender attitudes in four dimensions (ability and work dimensions for the public sphere, and division and marriage dimensions for the private sphere) and (2) examine how cohort replacement effects and socioeconomic status (SES), including an individual's educational and income level, are associated with the gender norms of men and women to different extents. The results indicate a clearly different pattern of gender norms for men and women: cohort replacement effects and SES have a much larger positive effect for women than for men. In addition, this study reveals a small, negligible gender gap in all the gender norm dimensions for the pre-Reform era cohorts and an increasingly widening gender gap for the Reform era cohorts, a gap that is largely attributable to men's laggard status in terms of advancing egalitarian gender ideologies. This study highlights the importance and urgency of further improving women's educational level and increasing women's bargaining power.

Key Words: Gender equality, gender norms, essentialism, traditionalism

Introduction

The period from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s represents a “lost decade” in the history of gender revolution when gender egalitarianism appears to have been much lower than it would have been had it continued the previous upward trend that emerged in the 1960s in the United States. During this period, for one thing, the specific indicators that reflected the conservative turn in the public sphere included the stalled gender pay gap, a slower decline in occupational sex segregation, a slower increase in the female labor force participation rate, and a slower convergence of less gender-segregated college majors (Blau and Kahn 2017; Charles 2011; England 2010); for another, in the private sphere, gender egalitarianism indeed advanced at a much slower pace; there was little change in dyadic heterosexual dating behaviors (England 2010), only minor improvement in terms of men’s participation in domestic tasks, and the lion’s share of housework and childcare was still being done by women (Coltrane 2000; Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010).

Gender essentialism refers to the deeply embedded and widely shared cultural beliefs that men and women are innately and fundamentally different in interests and skills. Once blended with the feminist principles of gender equity, it turns to *egalitarian essentialism* and gains momentum. Indeed, the rising *egalitarian essentialism*—the separate but equal gender ideology that states that men and women are innately and fundamentally different in terms of interests and skills (Charles 2011; Charles and Bradley 2002; England 2010)—is viewed as one possible factor that may have contributed to the stagnating progress toward gender equality that started in the mid-1990s and continued into the early 2000s (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011).

The rising gender egalitarianism before the mid-1990s now seems to be a bygone era in European countries and Australia (Knight and Brinton 2017; van Egmond et al. 2010). Throughout Europe, different gender ideologies regarding how men and women should divide

paid and unpaid work are promoted, but ideologies that mix gender essentialism and egalitarianism (that is, egalitarian essentialism) have replaced the once prevailed gender traditionalism in Europe (Grunow, Begall, and Buchler 2018). Therefore, egalitarian essentialism seems to prevail in the Western world. But what is gender norms situation in general, and gender essentialism situation in particular in China, where gender ideologies in the Maoist era (1949 to 1976) and the post-Mao era (1978 to the present) clearly have different implications? A number of qualitative studies on gender attitude shift from the Maoist era to the post-Mao era found signs of essentialist ideologies, such as declining egalitarian gender attitudes in recent male cohorts (Pimentel 2006), an increased domestic orientation among recent female cohorts (Zuo 2014), and a return to a traditional attitude toward marriage (Xu 2016).

Although gender ideology studies in China are substantial and growing, our understanding of changes in gender norms remains incomplete. First, to date, very little research has been conducted to analyze changes in gender ideologies across a variety of fields. Prior studies have explored shifts in gender norms by constructing several items into one or two indexes (Shu and Zhu 2012) or simply by using a single year of data (Liu and Tong 2014). Although they can directly capture changes as a whole, it is not efficient in facilitating a holistic understanding of changes in gender norms in China. In fact, as elaborated later, it is an important oversight in gender ideology studies that has been pointed out recently. Second, to detect changes in gender attitudes from the pre-Reform era (the Maoist era) to the Reform era (post-Mao era), taking gender and cohort into account is essential. This study analyzes the changes in gender norms of 70 birth cohorts and thus provides a more comprehensive yet conservative test of such changes in China. Third, although an extensive literature has documented the great influence of an individual's socioeconomic status (SES) in affecting his/her gender attitudes and provided ample support for an educational and economic gradient of egalitarian gender

ideologies, little evidence exists on how the educational and economic gradient differs between Chinese men and women.

Thus, this study goes beyond the common studies of gender ideologies by analyzing 70 Chinese birth cohorts from a comprehensive national representative survey ($N = 45,949$) to explore the gender and cohort pattern of various gender norms among Chinese adults. It provides a more comprehensive understanding of how SES, that is, educational level and annual income, is associated with men's and women's gender ideologies differently. It also extends the current research on gender ideology by using large representative national samples to assess the multidimensionality of gender norms and to analyze cohort patterns and gender differentials in gender role attitudes.