

Gender Differences in China's Elderly Population and Policy Recommendations¹

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Abstract

Females outnumber males in the elderly population of China. Elderly women also face the challenge of a reduced quality of life compared to that of elderly men. This article first describes the impact of gender inequality within various social institutions including education, employment, income, family, and social security. It also considers the impact of this inequality on the lives of elderly women. Based on the research presented in this article, the author argues that gender inequality embedded within these institutions and the complicated interactions among them are the primary reasons that the rights and interests of elderly women are overlooked. Finally, suggestions are presented for improving the current situation.

Key words

gender, elderly women, gender institution, sex ratio

China's Aging Society

China has transitioned into an aging society. Population aging refers to a society with a relatively high proportion of elderly individuals (Li, 2005). The aging of the population, in essence, reflects the population's age structure.

Characteristics of China's Aging Society

China's aging population can be described as follows:

1. The population base is large (Tian, 2007; Yuan, 2007).

¹ The paper is the result of a Social Science Project conducted by the author in Tianjin, China (TJSR06-10009).

2. It grows rapidly (Xiong, 2002).
3. The aging population and the problems of the elderly population coexist (Yuan, 2007).
4. There is an imbalance between economic development and the aging population (Tian, 2007).
5. The population's aging process is irregular and progressive (Tian, 2007).
6. The aging stage varies from one area to another in China (Tian, 2007).

China presents an aging society with a low sex ratio. The sex ratio for an aging population is calculated as the number of males per 100 females among the elderly population. A sex ratio greater than 100 indicates more men than women. A sex ratio of less than 100 indicates fewer men than women. The elderly population is divided into two age groups: 60 to 79 year olds, and those 80 years old and older. The sex ratio of the younger age groups is slightly lower (ca. 106), while the sex ratio of the older age groups is relatively low. The low aging sex ratio means there are more women than men. From the 1950s to the 1990s, the sex ratio of the aging population increased (see Table 1). However, the sex ratio remains low.

Table 1
Sex Ratio of China's Aging Population from the 1950s to the 1990s

	Unit: %			
Year	1953	1964	1982	1990
Sex ratio	81.7	75.5	86.7	90.8

Note. From *Social Gerontology* by Wu, 1999.

Research shows that in 1999, the female population over the age of 60 accounted for approximately 52 percent of the total elderly population. At the same time, the female population over the age of 80 accounted for approximately 64 percent of the total elderly population. Moreover, the female elderly population is increasing by more than three percent per year. The total elderly population is also increasing. The larger the elderly population, the lower the sex ratio (Wu, 1999). To some extent, the process of population aging reduces the total population sex

ratio. Since the elderly population is disproportionately composed of women, the problems faced by the elderly population are largely those faced by elderly (Wu, 1999).

Problems Faced by Elderly Women

The difficulties faced by elderly women result from the gendered system in which they lived prior to their aging, and are impacted by gender biases in the social structure (Scott, 1997). Therefore, it is extremely important to analyze the gender system. Are the different problems faced by elderly men and women the result of physiological differences or are they caused by the prevailing patriarchal social system?

Physiological differences may be considered by comparing the life expectancy and maximum life span of men and women. Life expectancy is the expected number of years of life, estimated based on disease, health, and environmental conditions. The maximum life span is the maximum number of years one is likely to survive after the removal of environmental risks. From a biological point of view, females have more hormones than men and therefore have long-lived biological immunity. Another theory states that aging is a process, in which the genetic structure of each individual plays a role. Still other theories hold that aging results from the cumulative effect of environmental factors on an organism. Aging is the process of progressive and gradual loss that leads to physical decline. However, biological differences cannot explain the differences identified among individuals of different cultures, classes, races, nationalities, genders, etc. in different types of societies. Western epidemiological transition theory suggests that the prevalence of disease and causes of death occur in three stages: epidemics, infectious diseases, and degeneration (Xu, 1993). A fourth stage ("hybristic") has recently been added to account for the fact that individual lifestyle and health habits are an important cause of disease infection and death (Xu, 1993). A large number of gender studies have found that the influence of gender differences on average life expectancy can be explained by differences in lifestyle. For example, some argue that men have more social responsibility and obligations in their life time and the longtime physical and mental fatigue that results reduces their life expectancy.

Therefore, the study of gender differences among the elderly involves

the following aspects:

1. Aging is a process of life and the final stage of life. The low sex ratio of the elderly population results from the life development process of the aging group. In addition to the chronological age, it involves the gender status and social structural conditions at all stages of life before aging. Prior to old age, men and women are affected by the gender system which results in their different life paths (Ritzer, 2005). Different social gender structures, ideologies, and cultures lead to the difference in lifestyle and life quality between men and women. Thus, identifying the gender system and its impact on men and women is important to understanding and responding to the challenges of the elderly.
2. Gender difference in the elderly population's life style is not only determined by physical factors, but also by social factors. Different gender social structures, gender ideologies, and gender cultures lead to the differences in lifestyle and life quality between men and women.
3. In a patriarchal culture, there are a series of stipulations and evaluations of gender norms for both males and females that compose the gender system. That is, the moral standard of what is a good man and what is a good woman. The gender system is embedded in the social structure and these different social expectations have been identified as the cause of the low sex ratio.
4. Older women are active participants solving problems (Li & Du, 2005), creating power, and promoting social development (Qian, 2000; Zhang, 2003; Zhu, 2003). They can harness tremendous energy on their own, change their fate, and promote community development through the formation of self-organized grass-roots communities. The author of this paper has participated in such grass-roots, self-organized projects². Community grass-roots self-or-

² In 2005 and 2006, the author participated in the "Canadian Citizenship project - to promote women's capacity to participate in the comprehensive management of community" undertaken by the Tianjin Normal University and the Research Center of Gender and Social Development. As part of the project, groups, whose members were over the age of 60, were established in Ziya block, Xiyu Town Street, Hongqiao District, Tianjin. They set up a Kennel Association, with a focus on training dogs, installed public trash cans and screen windows, adhered to weekly reading lists, took care of orphans, the disabled, the sick and the

ganization is important for spiritual and emotional support, and is also a means of self-empowerment by providing a public platform for self-realization.

Gender Differences

Education

The 1987 survey of the country's elderly population over the age of 60 showed that men received more years of education than women.

Table 2
Education Level of the Elderly Over 60 Years Old in 1987

	Males in urban areas	Females in urban areas	Males in rural areas	Females in rural areas
Years	5.29	1.73	2.13	0.41

Note. From *The Senior Citizen in China* by Tian, 1991.

The 1990 census data showed that the illiteracy rate of the male population over 60 years old was 49.6 percent, while that of females was 89.3 percent. Well-educated elderly enjoy several benefits in terms of employment, welfare, income, and social security. On the contrary, the poorly educated elderly, the majority of whom are women, do not enjoy these benefits. In 2002, the State Committee of Aging conducted a nationwide survey with the following results (see Table 3):

1. These statistics indicate that elderly women with little or even no education far outnumbered uneducated elderly men and the number of uneducated or undereducated elderly men. Far more elderly men than women had access to a formal education.
2. More elderly men in rural areas attended private school and/or received a primary school education than in urban areas. The number of urban elderly men and women who received secondary and/or

old in their community, and provided emotional support to accident victims and those facing other difficulties. Members attended monthly meetings, planned social events, enjoyed a sense of power and leadership, contributed to their community, became aware of the importance of their own life experiences, and enjoyed the opportunity to share with their friends.

post-secondary education is much larger than those in rural area, which indicates a difference between urban and rural education. In particular, elderly men in rural areas who attended private school or received primary school education outnumbered the elderly women in urban areas. For those with a junior high school education or above, elderly women in urban areas outnumbered elderly men in rural areas. In all cases, rural elderly women have the most reduced access to education.

3. Educational level is associated with employment. The quality of employment in turn determines an individual's income. These factors in turn determine quality of life and independence. Thus, the reality that the educational level of elderly women is lower than that of elderly men leads to the following results:
 - a. elderly women have fewer job opportunities or lower quality of employment in society than elderly men;
 - b. elderly women earn less than elderly men;
 - c. elderly women's life quality is correspondingly lower.

This is particularly true of the lowest-income elderly women in rural areas who lack financial resources and must rely on their husbands or children.
4. Gender differences in education are the inevitable result that the educational system is essentially embedded in the gender system. This gender system includes several expectations, hereafter referred to as the female: male dichotomy:
 - a. men are expected to work outside of the home while women stay at home;
 - b. men are strong while women are weak;
 - c. men enjoy superiority while women are supposed to be humble;
 - d. men make decisions while women obey;
 - e. men enjoy higher status than women.

Table 3
Education Level of the Elderly by Age and Gender

Gender	Male			Female		
	Total population	Urban	Rural	Total population	Urban	Rural
Total aging population	10,730	5,188	5,542	9,525	4,983人	4,542人
Uneducated	2,611 24.0 %	558 10.0 %	2,053 37.0 %	5,999 63.0 %	2,311 46.4 %	3,688 81.2 %
Private school	850 7.9 %	258 5.0 %	592 10.7 %	279 2.9 %	169 3.4 %	110 2.4 %
Primary school	3,802 35.4 %	1,551 29.9 %	2,251 40.6 %	2,019 21.2 %	1,394 28.0 %	625 13.8 %
Middle school	1,648 15.4 %	1,190 22.9 %	458 8.3 %	660 6.9 %	567 11.4 %	93 2.0 %
High school/ training school	1,056 9.8 %	926 17.9 %	128 2.3 %	357 3.7 %	352 7.1 %	5 0.1 %
Above training college	693 6.5 %	673 13.0 %	20 0.4 %	161 1.7 %	157 3.2 %	4 0.1 %

Note. From *Data Analysis of One-time Sample Survey on the Status of Chinese elderly population in urban and rural areas* by Chinese Research Centre on Aging, 2003.

These norms constrain the behavior of individuals, organizations, institutions, and the nation as a whole. In particular, the provisions of the gender system impact women's access to education in several ways. Firstly, women's main position is "inside," that is, to do housework at home without access to the "outside." That is, their participation in society is limited, so they don't need an education to enhance their "outside" capabilities. Secondly, women are also excluded from society, for instance, it is difficult for them to find employment because of their lack of education. Therefore women's lack of education makes it more difficult for them to participate in social competition. Thirdly, a daughter will leave her family and become a member of her husband's family, so her parents are reluctant to invest in her education. Fourthly, the educational system is also affected by gender inequalities embedded within the system.

Marital Status

Closely related to the low sex ratio of the aging population, widowed elderly women outnumber elderly men. In China the rate of elderly marriage is high, and that of divorce is low. The proportion of widowed elderly increases with age, and the proportion of the male elderly population with a spouse is 25 percent higher than the proportion of elderly women with a spouse (Wu, 1999).

Males with spouses outnumber females with spouses, and widowed females outnumber widowed males. According to the 1990 Chinese census, elderly people living alone accounted for 8.9 percent of the aging population, those who lived with their spouse accounted for 14.9 percent, and 76 percent of the elderly lived with their children or grandchildren. A greater proportion of men lived in two generation households compared to women, with men accounting for 28.4 percent, and females 20 percent. The proportion of women living in households of three or more generations outnumbered that of men, with women accounting for 53.9 percent, men 42.6 percent (Wu, 1999). From the above statistics, we can reach the following conclusions:

1. Most elderly women are widowed or unmarried, so they live alone or with their children or grandchildren. Elderly women live longer than elderly men.
2. Since women's employment and income status is lower than men's, unmarried women have poor economic prospects and a lower standard of living. The primary activities of most elderly women are housework and taking care of their children and grandchildren. Therefore, they cannot be independent or support themselves without receiving a pension. This is especially true of women in rural areas.
3. Elderly women's domestic work is not considered within the gross national product. Their work, in fact, forms part of the country's labor productivity, which includes both paid and unpaid labor. Productivity includes social, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. It also means achieving self-improvement through learning, self-satisfaction, and spiritual sustenance. Elderly women produce, free of charge, socially useful products and services such as: household

chores, caring for children, volunteering, helping family members, etc. In a broader sense, even a disabled elderly woman who cannot leave the home can engage in productive activities. For instance, she can teach her family and friends how to live with dignity, call her neighbor to show support, read to children, listen to a grieving friend, provide help, encouragement, and life experiences to a dis-oriented young people, etc (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2007). Through their work, elderly women make a positive contribution to society since they help others including family members, neighbors, friends, and the community.

Income

The 1994 survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics showed that the main source of income varies for elderly men and women. Compared with elderly women, a considerably greater proportion of elderly men rely on their pension or labor income as their primary source of income. Men seldom depend on economic assistance from their relatives or children, while this is the primary source of income for elderly women (Tian, 1991).

Table 4
Sources of Monthly Income for Chinese Elderly in 2002

	Unit: Chinese Yuan			
	Men		Women	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Employment	57.79	60.19	38.54	51.16
Pension	502.81	41.91	282.02	9.04
Total	560.60	102.10	320.56	60.20

Note. From *Building a Harmonious Society: Focus on Population Aging and its Impact* by Tian, 2007.

In China, the elderly derive their income from three sources: economic support from their children or relatives, income from their own labor, and retiree benefits (Wu, 1999). Studies by American scholars have shown that the possibility that a woman receives a pension is half that of a man

even if they have access to it, the amount is only 50 percent of what men receive women are more likely to be ‘out of’ the labor market than men.

Overall, Chinese elderly women earn less than elderly men, indicating the following:

1. Women in rural areas have the lowest income overall. Men earn more than women in both urban and rural areas, and the overall income in urban areas is greater than that in rural areas.
2. These statistics are the direct result of the under employment of women. Employment, the basic means of survival, is closely related to quality of life. Therefore, equal employment opportunities are some of the indicators of gender equality, an important indicator of an individual’s socio-economic status, and also the basic way to achieve gender equality. In accordance with the rules of the gender system, a woman’s primary responsibility is to be a wife and mother at home, rather than taking part in the workplace. Female job-seekers are often excluded because the requirements demanded of women are greater than those demanded of men. Employers link gender with age, “marital status,” “child bearing,” and “family burden.” These factors in turn become the grounds for not hiring female workers (Tan, 2003). In addition, some employers arbitrarily raise recruitment standards for hiring women, and impose rigid restrictions on female employment.
3. Elderly women with lower income and no stable source of economic support have poor life security (Huang, 2007). In general, income protection from social institutions is relatively high, while that of non-institutional sources is low. Elderly women have had low social status all their lives. They have little or no education, low paying jobs (if they are employed) and limited possibilities for engaging in high-income work. For instance, they have always labored as unpaid domestic workers, or they can only take some simple temporary work with low income and no security. Therefore, elderly women who have never worked outside of the home have no pension or very small pensions. Related to this, the proportion of elderly women who have social security and health care is much lower than that of elderly men. Thus, they must rely on their children or other family members for economic support, especially those elderly women

with no working security or those in rural areas. Therefore, elderly women make up the largest group of people living in poverty. According to a 2005 survey, elderly men in Anhui Province with stable economic sources such as income from employment, retirement pensions, or property accounted for 64.70 percent of the elderly male population, while those relying on the support of family members composed only 32.81 percent. In contrast, the proportion of female elderly who depend on the support of family members was 62.48 percent, nearly twice the proportion of males (Huang, 2007). Economic insecurity directly causes the reduced quality of life experienced by elderly women (Huang, 2007). Survey data indicate that the proportion of elderly women with property rights is 15 percentage points lower than that of elderly males (Yao & Mi, 2005). Closely related to income is the level of consumption. The average monthly consumption levels of elderly men are higher than those of elderly women, and there is also a significant difference between urban and rural areas.

Social Security

Data from a 2000 survey indicate that although women have a longer average life span, their health is generally poorer. The survey data show that the proportion of China's elderly women who evaluate their health as "good" is 9.1 percent lower than that of elderly men, while the proportion who rate their health as poor is 7.2 percentage points higher than elderly men. On the other hand, elderly women have little access to adequate medical care. About 65 percent of urban elderly women and 99 percent of rural elderly women do not have access to public health services. Most elderly women cannot afford to purchase commercial health insurance, so they participate in cooperative medical care. Due to the high cost of medical treatment and the fact that they have less economic support, women are less likely to seek medical care and hospitalization than are men (Yao & Mi, 2005).

Measures for Counteracting Gender Disparities

The disadvantaged situation of elderly women in terms of education, family, employment, and social security is the inevitable result of a patriarchal gender system. The interaction among these systems is the basic premise for the countermeasures proposed here to combat gender inequality among the elderly.

The Embedment of the Gender System in Other Social Systems

1. The fact that the interests of elderly women are ignored and that they have a disadvantageous position in society is the result of institutional and structural features of society. Social relations and activities determine the type of social system (Gayle, 2002). The social system is the normative system of social relations, The gender normative system permeates all aspects of social life, relations, and activities, and is also a social system in itself (Turner, 2001). The gender system refers to the thought and behavior norms of men and women and infiltrates politics, the economy, and culture. The gender system is characterized by the female: male dichotomy. These norms determine the divisive pattern of gender roles in all areas such as family, profession, social organization, national institutions, market activities, and public life. These norms have powerful historical and cultural roots in custom, public opinion, and identity.
2. The gender system is interwoven with the reproduction, educational, marriage and family, employment, income, and social security systems. This is an important reason for gender differences in aging society, with the following specific characteristics.

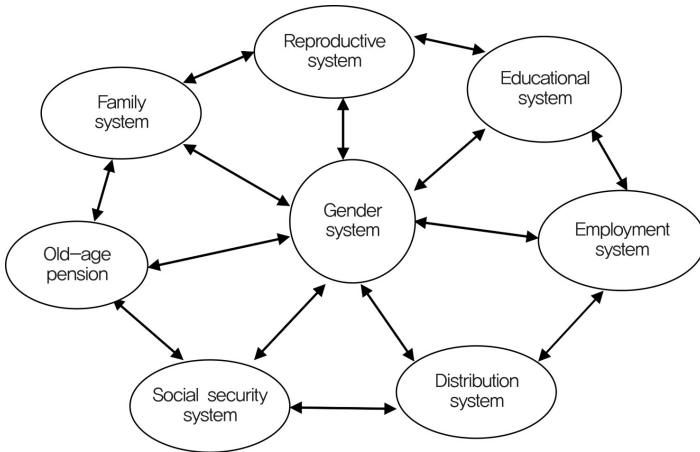
Firstly, the marriage and family and the reproduction systems are embedded in the gender norms of the female: male dichotomy. According to these gender norms, a woman's main task is to play the role of a housewife. Marriage has become an important way to ensure their quality of life. Male babies are preferred over female babies because girls will ultimately contribute productively and reproductively to their husbands' families, not their own. Girls are taught "inside work" at home

from an early age, while boys learn “outside work.” Accordingly, girls enjoy fewer educational resources than boys and are less competitive than boys (Li, 2002). Finally, they have to pin their hopes on their husbands since men have economic power. On the contrary, boys ensure the continuity of the family, so they enjoy the advantage of raising children for old age as well as the advantages of the boy’s future education, employment, and income.

Secondly, the gender norms of the female: male dichotomy are embedded in the education and employment systems. As a result, women have less access to educational resources than men. Women also have fewer opportunities for employment and for promotion at their jobs, and most women are excluded from the job market (Tan, 2003). Closely related to this is the fact that women earn less than men, and lower incomes are linked to reduced social security leaving them with little or no pension benefits. Thus, women can hardly be economically independent and support themselves in their old age. Thus, the gender inequality inherent in one system affects each of the other systems.

Figure 1

The Gender System Affects Each of the Other Systems



In a historically patriarchal social gender system, “the ever-increasing inequality within the aging population has a direct impact on the yielding significance of aging. This inequality has generated different choices and opportunities for the elderly (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2007).” Because of gender inequality, elderly women face more, and more serious, problems than elderly men. If these inequalities are inevitable in the basic structure of any society, elderly women will surely be deprived of their interests. As a result, to improve the quality of life of elderly women, it is essential for social gender equality to prevail throughout the social structure and system.

Countermeasures

Countermeasures against gender disparity and suggestions for improving the quality of life of the elderly to In order to reduce gender inequality in an aging society, the Government may consider adopting following measures:

1. When conducting population censuses, the government should focus on gender differences in quality of life. The government can expand the breadth and depth of women's political participation, so that women's voices are heard by policy-makers. Injecting the concept of gender equality into public policy-making has great significance, especially as China becomes an aging society.
2. The value of domestic labor should be included in national accounting systems. The government may consider paying part of the cost for domestic help required to care for the sick and elderly.
3. A universal pension system should be developed to support all elderly regardless of whether they have worked within the formal economic system. This policy is also especially important for the elderly women in rural areas. At the same time, the rights of elderly women in rural areas should be protected, in particular their ownership of land.
4. Abortion based solely on the gender of the fetus should be prohibited. Families with girls should receive some special incentives in terms of education and retirement pension in order to counteract the preference for male children.
5. Since 2007, tuitions and fees have been waived for compulsory edu-

cation in rural areas all over the country. The government should also reduce tuition fees for the children of poor urban families. This measure will help reduce the number of unemployed, under educated females living in poverty.

6. The government should end to age and gender discrimination, and relax the restrictions on female employment. The retirement benefits offered to men and women should be comparable. The earlier retirement of female workers is the main reason the employers refuse to hire women. Therefore, creating a retirement system that treats men and women equally will help eliminate this reason for gender discrimination. The government should compensate women for their loss of the opportunity for further study due to giving birth to children, etc.
7. The government should give special or preferential medical treatment to elderly women, reduce their treatment cost of common diseases, and establish an elderly women's health fund to give them financial support for serious disease.
8. The government should improve the legal system. The primary concern should be to safeguard the rights of elderly women. Secondly, violence against women including sexual harassment in the workplace, domestic violence, and violence against elderly women should not be tolerated. Third, steps should be taken to prohibit the trafficking of women.
9. To actively eliminate the stereotype of traditional women in the media and education. This is especially important in the rural areas.
10. The government should facilitate the organization of grass-roots community groups for elderly women.

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