Male Teachers in China: A Critical Examination of Gender Identity

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Abstract
In light of the disparity in the gender ratio of teachers around the world, this article utilizes gender as a social construct to explore the recent tendency of the preference for male teachers in China. Drawing on theoretical fieldwork from a multi-perspective analysis of the relationship between gender and educational issues, it examines underlying reasons and potential impacts of encouraging men to join the teaching profession. The policy of recruiting teachers in favor of men is rooted in gender essentialism, which ignores the fluidity of gender as advocated by gender performativity. Not only does this deny the contribution of women who dominate the education profession, but it can also result in the feminization of male teachers' gender identities, which can result in a reduced willingness of men to enter the education profession. The article tentatively concludes that the prevalent inclination for male teachers tends to blame the femininity of current teachers, promoting gender stereotypes and preserving China's patriarchal society. However, the author’s view here is to degenderise teachers not to oppose the possibility of males becoming teachers.

Keywords
Gender identity, Male Teachers, Feminisation of Education, Patriarchal Values

1. Introduction
Since the mid-1990s, a disproportionate number of women have been employed in education worldwide, resulting in a gender imbalance that has been termed the ‘feminisation’ of education. In response, policymakers in England, Australia and elsewhere have created recruitment policies targeting men for the teaching profession (Carrington et al., 2007). In June 2017, China’s Ministry of Education (CME) joined other countries in encouraging men to join the teaching profession, particularly in kindergarten and primary schools, where female full-time teachers account for 97.79% and 67.19% of teaching staff, respectively. There is concern that an increased number of female teachers in schools will result in a shortage of role models for male students and lead to a decline in boys’ academic achievements (Driessen, 2007). Therefore, despite a lack of supportive evidence for male educators’ positive impact on students, the masculinity associated with male teachers is considered beneficial for students, especially boys (Carrington et al., 2007).

This ideologically oriented study dismantles the notion of schooling ‘feminisation’ and anxieties concerning a shortage of masculinity in the education field, rather than focusing on the many studies empirically demonstrating gender-matching strategies’ ineffectiveness. In the next section, the diversity of theorising gender is demonstrated by providing three different approaches toward classifying gender, which provides the critical framework for the rest of the research. Then, a critical analysis is conducted on calls for more male teachers in the classroom, showing how they risk reinforcing existing gender stereotypes and inequalities that have historically contributed to harmful patriarchal norms.
2. Gender as a Social Construct

While sex is assigned at birth, gender is a process of socialisation that can be created, re-created and modified over time, meaning that self-definition is an essential part of gender. The following are three definitions of gender, developed through sociological research.

2.1 Gender Essentialism

‘Gender essentialism’ takes the notions of ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ to be interchangeable, thereby treating gender as a distinct, binary category that can be either ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’, but not both or somewhere in between. As such, gender, like sex, is inborn, biologically determined, unchanging and indicative of relevant categorical features (Gelman, 2005; Smiler & Gelman, 2008), which dismisses gendered traits set by outside influences, preferences and attitudes.

In terms of education, a gender essentialist view posits that boys and girls demonstrate innate cognitive differences, subject preferences and pedagogical styles due to biological determinants. Consequently, some responses to boys’ low educational achievement have been calls for ‘boy-friendly’ curricula and pedagogy. Besides, the disproportionality of female teachers in primary schools is to blame for the gender gap in educational success.

2.2 Gender Performativity

In contrast to the gender essentialist position, ‘gender performativity’ defines gender as separate from sex, recognising gender as socially constructed. Judith Butler, a leading queer theorist, has reinterpreted the sex/gender binary in her landmark text Gender Trouble (2006), where she proposed that gender is “a verb rather than a noun, a ‘doing’ rather than a being” (Salih, 2002, p.55) that is both “verbal and embodied” (Archer, Moote, Francis, DeWitt, & Yeomans, 2017).

If gender is a fluid, dynamic phenomenon that is produced and reproduced at every moment rather than essential to a subject, what makes gender an ‘identity’? While some argue that gender expression is assigned at birth according to our biological features, which then result in ‘natural’ masculine and feminine traits and behaviours, Butler argues that, in fact, such gender expression stems from gender assignment, rather than the other way around. Consequently, sex is not the cause of gender expression, but gender expression dictates how individuals born with a certain sex are conditioned. Vina Adriany (2019) was struck by how pervasive the girls’ femininity discourses were in a kindergarten classroom in Indonesia when she researched how young preschool girls navigate their femininity. It is demonstrated in her study how the princess and Barbie have multiple meanings, which establishes the girls’ femininity (ibid.).

2.3 Feminist Theories

In broad terms, Feminism advocates for gender equality and opposes patriarchy and sexism (Ogletree, Diaz, & Padilla, 2019). Nevertheless, Feminism has various strands and approaches, including radical, Marxist, socialist, black and lesbian feminism, demonstrating the diversity and often overlapping, controversial aspects of this field (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009). This section outlines two different feminist approaches toward gender – one from liberal, the other from radical and feminist readings – and associate them with educational practice.

Liberal feminism equates female empowerment with women’s equal opportunity to secure the chance to compete for social and economic rewards and reach the top rungs of prevailing socio-economic hierarchies. However, radical feminism takes a more critical stance than liberal feminism, arguing that it cannot go far enough in female empowerment in its maintenance of existing liberal institutions and dynamics, because they believe to reach true gender equality society must eliminate its existing attitudes towards gender, including extant gender norms and stereotypes. In the educational sphere, this means that fears over the ‘feminisation of education’ is not, in fact, concern over a lack of male professors but worries that female teachers have specific characteristics that have a favourable or unfavourable impacts on students.

3. The Preference for Male Teachers in China

Concerns over the feminisation of education, boys’ low performance in schools and need for male teacher role models are rooted in presumptions of male superiority, both biological and social, and shaped by patriarchy that is a key feature of Chinese society. Patriarchal values are found throughout Confucian literature that is still referred to
today in Chinese society (Omnia, 2020), while men have historically dominated the country politically, economically and socially. For China’s 2,000-year history, therefore, women have been regarded as social and economic dependents whose function is to provide for men and their families, and the widespread belief that ‘lack of education is a woman’s virtue’ (Lee, 2015, p. 141) has denied women’s right to a modern education for two centuries. Chinese women remain embedded within a society that maintains and re-builds its ‘patriciahal’ notions, including, if necessary, calling for and rationalising a ‘re-masculinisation’ of education.

For decades, the gender gap in student academic achievement has dominated discussions on both gender and education in China. This gap has been seen in data taken from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), an examination providing data on this gender gap among OECD member countries, which found the result in four Chinese regions tested in 2018, Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang, all areas with advanced educational access. The gap is interpreted as stemming from a dramatic social shift: while males have historically held massive educational advantages in Chinese society, they have gradually been overtaken by girls in nearly all academic subjects, especially in reading (Scholes, 2019). China’s economic rise has expanded educational possibilities for both men and women, while the country’s compulsory education regulations are rigorously enforced by the government (Zeng et al., 2014). The subsequent rise in the number of girls in schools and their outstanding academic performance has, to some degree, been the assumed result of a preponderance of female teachers, resulting in China’s Ministry of Education openly encouraging more male teachers in the classroom. The Chinese media has exacerbated this issue, suggesting that the country’s current Teacher Qualification Examination expels potential male teachers, who are depicted as a victim or ‘dying breed’ (Martino & Berrill, 2003; Martino & Kehler, 2006). The overall preference for male teachers tends to blame existing teachers’ femininity, reinforcing gender stereotypes and continuing to shape China as a patriarchal society. Existing research, meanwhile, has found no evidence that gender-matching teachers in the classroom affect students’ goals, attitudes or behaviours (Cho, 2012).

One year after the CEM’s call for the ‘defeminisation’ of schooling, another strategy for the ‘re-masculinisation’ of boys within education was introduced, an explicit call for men to enter the teaching profession, particularly physical education programmes. This call to physical education is informative as to what ‘feminisation’ and ‘masculinisation’ entail within the Chinese context, as it suggests that the CEM holds gender essentialist views associating women with emotion, obedience and timidity. Gender essentialism’s association with physicality and biological variations, not only in cognitive differences but inherent in movement, may be behind the view that boys are braver and calmer than girls, and suggest that male teachers are better equipped to teach children’s physical education.

In contrast to the gender essentialist position, the gender performativity approach seeks social explanations for the male privilege in concerns over educational ‘feminisation’, questioning why such feminisation is seen as harmful. Blount (2000) suggests that the most crucial factor around patriarchal societies’ anxieties over feminisation concern gender variety and homosexuality. Consequently, when men stay in professions dominated by women, which are thereafter seen as ‘women’s labour’, such as elementary school teachers, they risk “reputations as effeminate guys” (Blount, 2000). This means that proactive steps must be taken to combat gendered occupational stereotypes. More male-identified educational domains or niches include administration, sports coaching, vocational education and subjects such as manual trades, math and science (Yamamura, Managi & Tsutsui, 2019). In China, MEA statistics show that males continue to dominate these areas in education, holding more administrative positions than women and frequently teaching physical education and mathematics. To further guarantee that masculinity be imposed in schools, effeminate male teachers are ostracised (John Martino, 2008), showing how gender essentialism on the part of schools may impede men’s entry into gender-atypical occupations (Moskos, 2020).

While the CEM and Chinese media have presented male role models as the victims of feminisation and vulnerable to emasculation, a more nuanced view of gender dynamics in the educational field reveal that these complaints are the effects of heteronormative systems of hegemonic masculinity and efforts to monitor the status of the education profession, ensuring that deviant teacher identities are eschewed (John Martino, 2008). To avoid the relatively uncomplex view of portraying males as victims of reverse sexism (Martino & Frank, 2006), the male labour shortage in education should be seen as part of a broader issue of why women have been tied to the teaching field (Williams, 1993). Feminist sociology has challenged the “natural and neutral appearance of the sexual division of labor, the gendered distribution of social roles and resources, and the ways in which men oppress or dominate women” (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009). Several scholars have shown that women’s career choices circle around certain occupations such as teachers, especially primary school teachers, as well as nurses, waitresses and other low-skilled,
low-paying and socially marginalised employment (Keller, 2019). Combined with limited career options, observed by liberal feminist scholars, it is unsurprising that women have come to dominate teacher positions, and calls for male teacher recruitment may be seen not only as blaming women for a ‘feminisation’ over which they have had little control but encroaching on an important career area for women. Moreover, given teaching careers’ limited social esteem, the sex of the teacher may have limited impact on its gender associations: men may inevitably seem more feminine when employed as teachers.

Gender performativity assumes that external social rules and daily discourses and behaviours reinforce gender norms until they are internalised by a subject, meaning that these norms must be recognised when confronted with politically-charged educational policies carrying the potential to harm women’s rights through a ‘hidden curriculum’ (Booher-Jennings, 2008). The promotion of masculine education and the inclusion of male teachers express the repetitive narrative that hegemonic patriarchy is dominant while rationalizing the inequality of the gender. My attitude here is not to reject the chance of men to be a teacher but to de-genderize teachers in line with the claims of radical feminism. Given the sidelining of other genders by China’s CEM, the author has to simplify gender into female and male in the essay. However, this does not mean the disapproval of their existence and the right to choose gender liberally. On the contrary, increased gender diversity in the teaching profession would help students become more gendered-inclusive, such as critically accepting binary categories, especially for homosexuality and transgender and intersex people (Meyer & Gelman, 2016).

4. Conclusion

This paper reviews problems associated with the perceived ‘feminisation’ of Chinese education and the call for more male teachers in China, using academic literature on gender issues to see how different gender approaches influence this controversy. It argues that the motivations for the call for more male teachers and the ‘re-masculinisation’ of schooling originates from the current academic performance gap between male and female students in China. Moreover, the CEM’s call has also excluded homosexual educators and contributed to views of male educators as ‘feminine’, exacerbating patriarchal anxieties toward education, furthering gender stereotypes and limiting career options. These trends adequately demonstrate Butler’s (1993) view that a society’s reinforcement of masculinisation involves the inherent rejection of the feminine. If Chinese policymakers are serious about narrowing the gender gap in academic performance, they must address the normalisation of patriarchal regimes and gender essentialism in the classroom and how these affect teacher and student identities.

References


