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**How The Trend Of Girls Achieving Better Results Than Boys Emerges In  
China's Schooling**

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## **How The Trend Of Girls Achieving Better Results Than Boys Emerges In China's Schooling**

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A series of statistics show that girls are better and better than boys in China's schooling. Good news or bad news, or neither good nor bad? There are different opinions. I think that good and bad coexist in the phenomenon, but it would bring people more worries than joys. Roughly speaking, there are three reasons for this tendency. First, with the rise of women's social status, girl school enrolments are no less than boy enrolments. Undoubtedly, the increase in the number of girl students would enlarge the proportion of excellent girl students. Second, the sense of destiny peculiar to female students makes them intensely aware that, in a male-dominated society, if they want to obtain as much success as men can achieve, they must make much greater efforts. So female students work even harder than their counterparts. Third, the main teaching objectives in Chinese schools are to master and identify the existing basic knowledge and skills. Comparatively, these objectives are inflexible and stereotyped, and don't encourage innovation and practice. The examination system build on these objectives is obviously disadvantageous to boys, because, generally speaking, they are open, initiative, lively but absent-minded. Based on the third reason, we might say, that girls are doing better than boys indicates that there exist quite a few disadvantages in China's education system which urgently needs a series of relevant reforms.

The phrase "female prosperity and male decline" here refers to the phenomenon that in education girls on the whole are doing better than boys. As a matter of fact, this phenomenon has a long history, but before people thought it only existed in primary schools. In recent years, it has extended to secondary schools, and even further, to tertiary education. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of people in the education field for a long time, and there are different opinions about it. Does the "female prosperity and male decline" phenomenon really exist in China's schooling? If yes, how does it come into being?

### **The Phenomenon**

Let us see some related reports:

In August 21, 1996, *China Youth Daily* published a report titled "Is It Good Or Bad that Females Occupy More Top Places In the National Entrance Examination? It said: In Beijing, in 1996 (the same as in 1995), the Number-Ones in tertiary entrance examination both in liberal arts and science are all female students. In Shaanxi province, three Number-Ones in liberal arts and science (two Number-Ones in science) are all female students. In Shanghai, seven of ten top-ranked students are females. According to non-inclusive statistics, Number-One places in liberal arts are taken up by female students in vast majority of provinces, and the number of female students is extremely large as a proportion of all students who had passed the admission score line. For example, in Beijing city in 1996, among the students enrolled in higher institutes during the first and second enrollment phases, 549 male students were admitted to key universities while the number of females was 1481, 2.7 time as many as male students. The number of male students studying science was 1.4 times that of females. Male students were only 30 percent more than female students in the second enrollment phase.

In January 3, 1997, *Chinese Commercial Times* published a report titled "*Female Prosperity and Male Decline Exist in Shanghai's Key Upper Secondary Schools*". It read: In 1996,

female students outnumbered their counterparts in a majority of Shanghai's key upper secondary schools. For instance, of the 300 students enrolled from the Affiliated High School of Fudan University, two-thirds were females. And the number of females enrolled from The First Affiliated High School of East China Normal University was three-fifth of the total.

*The Shanghai Culture Daily* had similar report titled "*Liberal Arts Are Looking For Man*" in March 1998. It reported: imbalance between proportions of male and female no longer exists in just a few universities, it pervades the whole tertiary education, and is getting more and more serious, especially in liberal arts. Take Fudan University for example, in the Chinese Literature faculty, among those enrolled in 1994, there were 23 undergraduate male students and 33 female students. Among those enrolled in 1995, there were 12 males and 40 females. In a class majored in secretary in 1996, there were 11 male students and 40 female students; among all 41 students enrolled in 1997, there were only 5 male students. In the Foreign Language faculty, 18 male students and 90 female students were enrolled in 1996; 12 males and 68 females enrolled in 1997. (Moreover, in one class majored in English, all students were females.)

In February 26, 1998, *Wenhui Daily* published an article titled "*Issues Reflected From the Long Queue In Front Of the Bathrooms of Higher Institutes: The Proportion of Tertiary Male And Female Students Is Obviously Imbalanced*". The story goes like this: In front of the women's bathroom of a Shanghai higher institute, there stood a long queue of female students 45 minutes ahead of opening time, while only a few males in front of men's. A girl from the Foreign Language Faculty was quoted saying: "The number of female students is much bigger than that of male students. Like in our class, there are 20 students, of which only 4 are males." In recent years, the higher ratio of female to male has become a new issue in university enrollment. For instance, in 1997, the percentage of female students enrolled in Shanghai Foreign Language University was 48%; in East China Politics and Law College, female percentage was 60% in that same year. As such, more and more previous male dormitories are being occupied by females.

In August 12, 1998, with the title of "Females Score Higher", an article in *China Youth Daily* reported: Shanghai Foreign Language University had planned to enroll 14 students from Beijing. When the staff members in charge of enrollment were presented the files of candidate students (120% of the number to be enrolled), they were surprised that 18 candidates were all female students. The university had, but to decrease five enrolments. The university enrolment officer said: imbalance in the proportion of males and females was obvious. The number of males was just 32 percent of the total. In some specialties, there were only a few male students. This has a great impact on normal teaching and management. For instance, in some programs like "TALK" in which students were required to perform role-play, due to lack of male students, many boy's roles have to be played by girls. Male students only made up 25% of total student number. In 1998, Beijing Foreign Language University enrolled less than 30 students in Beijing specialized in 112 less popular foreign language. Liberal arts of normal and comprehensive universities were no better.

In August 8, 1998, again *China Youth Daily*, with an article titled "*University Places Decrease Because There are Not Enough Male Candidates*", reported: Among all the 2657 students above the minimum enrollment score in liberal arts in universities and colleges in Beijing, the number of males was only 687, taking up just 25.8% of all. In three-year colleges, the total number of students above the minimum score was 5168, of which there were only 1383 male students, a mere 26.7% of all.

In September 17, 1999, *the Yangtzi Evening* published a report titled "The Increase of Female Tertiary Students Poses New Issues". It said: a prominent feature of tertiary institutes in Nanjing is the increase of female students. The number of female students was

rising to various extents in Nanjing University, South East University, and so on. Females were only 20% in Nanjing Forestry University the year before, but that year, the percentage moved up to 40%, two times of the previous year.

The phenomenon that female number is much bigger than male number exists not only in terms of school achievements, but also in terms of school student leadership positions. In November 4, 2000, *the Yangtzi Evening* reported: a survey showed that 80% of student leaders were girls in primary and middle schools in Shanghai. "Female prosperity and male decline" is deteriorating.

Although data of larger scale investigations and statistics is not available for the time being, based on reports in the media and our own observations, we might draw a conclusion that "female prosperity and male decline" in education does exist, and this certainly deserves our careful attentions and considerations.

The scores for admission to universities and colleges are different between female and male students. Relevant experts have already paid their attention to the fact that, in some specialties, the admission score for female students is dozens of points higher than that for males, and they have made comments on the potential consequent social problems. At the International Seminar on Research and Development of Women in 21<sup>st</sup> Century held in the Center for Research of Women Issues Home and Abroad, Beijing University in 1998, participants studying women's issues and experts on higher education expressed their deep concerns and worries about these issues. A professor from the Oriental Languages Faculty, Beijing University pointed out: In 1997, the Japanese Major of the faculty enrolled 15 students, of whom, thirteen were female and two male, casting a landslide imbalance in sex. However, on graduation, society need more males, and as such, female students would face more difficulties in finding jobs. A higher education expert argued that a lot of money had been put into higher education in our country and the rate of return must be considered. Given the fact that female students score too high in the national entrance examination, there is necessarily to be a sex imbalance if enrolment is based only on scores. In terms of employment, there will be an overabundance of female labor resources of an impossibility of putting the labor power to full use, which is for sure a kind of waste. Nonetheless, a famous feminist theorist cited what the former president of Fudan University, Mr. Xide, Xie said that female students can also benefit from the different admission scores between female and male. In the long run, imbalance between female and male students in some fields would inevitably bring about a series of social problems.

### **Reasons**

Reasons listed below may explain the "female prosperity and male decline" phenomenon in China's schooling.

The first is the rise of female enrollment in schools. As society progresses and women's social status rises, female enrollment is almost equal to male enrollment, in particular, there is no difference at all in cities and economically developed areas. The increase in the number of females being educated would certainly enlarge the proportion of excellent female students. In the past, due to influence of traditions and confinement of economic development, the number of males being educated was much bigger than that of females, and what's more, the higher the level of education, the larger the proportion of males. In addition, more importance was attached to males' education, and greater expectations were placed on males than on females. Under such circumstances, there was naturally a much bigger proportion of excellent male students.

The second reason is the sense of female-destiny peculiar to women. The role of "woman" makes quite a few girls gradually understand, from their childhood, that up to the present, the society is a male-dominant one in which there exist many hindering factors for women to succeed in terms of social culture, social mechanism and many others. Therefore, if a woman wants to get as many successes as a man may does, she has to pay a dearer price and make greater efforts. Otherwise, she can only be content with her inferior status in the fierce social competition, and then become a dependency of the male in the family. Moreover, generally speaking, in the hearts of females, they are not so self-confident as males, and they feel that in many aspects they are less intelligent, agile and lack of reserved momentum for development. As a result, they are more convinced of the argument that diligence makes up for clumsiness. In a word, the peculiar sense of female-destiny makes women students generally more hardworking than men students, and after all, hardworking is the vital factor of obtaining exceedingly good school achievements, and is particularly so wherein schooling is examination-oriented.

The third is females' earlier mature. Mature refers to the mechanism of the course of development restricted by genes. Mature is one of the important elements restricting the level of individual physical and mental development. It has great effect on the developing process of advanced psychological activities such as individual thinking, emotion, character, etc. The American psychologist Gesell even argues that mature is the decisive factor that influences children's development. He holds that mature and learning are the two basic elements of children's psychological development. Mature is a timetable that shows individual abilities and technical skills, and it's fulfilled naturally and congenitally. Learning cannot change the time sequence of the process of development, but only promote it. Although the Mature Theory may somewhat overstate the effect of mature, it's obvious that mature has an important effect on individual development. In daily life, mature always refers to the degree of children's "sensitivity". Mature is to be sensible, and in turn, to be sensible is to know the reasons of affairs of human lives. Due to the difference in physiology and the impact of social-role expectation, girls, in general, become mature and sensible earlier than boys. Consequently, compared with boys, they are more conscious and diligent in their studies. As a result of an earlier initiation and a relatively solid foundation, girls have an advantage over boys in school work. On August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2000, *the Yangcheng Evening* conducted a survey about the national entrance examination, with a sampling of more than 2,000 people. One of the survey questions was "why are there more female Number-Ones in Guangdong?" 44.7% of the participants thought it's because "girls are more diligent". 33.0% attributed it to "the exam system of '3+X', which is more suitable for girls" (since girls are good at two of the three subjects—Chinese, Mathematics, English). Another 6.3% participants thought it's because "girls are more obedient and then get more encouragement." 1.3% thought the reason is that "girls' intelligences are superior to boys". However, 14.7% of the participants responded with "it is hard to explain".

The fourth has to do with some of the features in female character. Females usually show some of their own features because of the differences in physiology, psychology and social-role expectation between male and female. For example, females are generally quieter, more honest, more patient and cautious, and then have a richer sense of approbation. Once all these female features become identical with a certain system of education (particularly a system of examination) and a certain style of education, girls are easy to become teachers' favorites. This can easily turn into advantages in study. Nevertheless, males become matured later and it's not so easy for them to gain favor with their teachers, either in study or in consciousness and discipline. Doctor Yasong, Du of Shanghai Mental Health Center, analytically says that boys mature later than girls, and then they lose many chances; they always become the "discards" of their teachers because of their naughtiness.

The fifth is related to some abuses in the examination system. It can not be denied that, as a whole, China's universal education has so far been a kind of examination-oriented education. Its examination forms, content and the criteria of assessment corresponding to this kind of education all obviously suit girls more than boys. Some educationists point out that the essence of the "female prosperity and male decline" phenomenon is not about whether girls' scores are high or low. It really doesn't matter whether it's a girl or a boy if s/he is a real excellent person of ability. The key issue of this is that it reflects some flaws in our education, especially in our examination system. Obviously, our tests place emphasis more on knowledge than on ability; more on memory than on thinking, more on identity than on difference, more on imitation than on creation, more on a unified standard than on flexibility. Isn't it suitable for the female? In fact, the examination-centered education is "regarding women as superior to men". Basically, boys are more active and energetic. They have a wider range of interests and more active thinking. They don't like those mechanical, dull and repeated training which is examination-oriented. Therefore, when entering lower secondary school from primary school, more boys than girls are eliminated through examination into inferior schools; and again, from lower secondary to upper secondary school, more boys are sifted out. This foreshadows the imbalanced proportion of male and female tertiary students. The female students, who are better at repeatedly memory and more acceptant to the mechanical drilling, are easier to gain approval and encouragement from teachers, and to receive higher scores. But it's obvious that they are not good enough in terms of range of knowledge, imaginative power, creative power and critical thinking.

Grassroots education practitioners have also expressed their opinions on this issue. A teacher in charge of Senior Three of the Attached Middle School of Beijing University said, the phenomenon of "female prosperity and male decline" in education might has something to do with our current examination system. The National Tertiary Entrance Examination has been held for so many years that some points of knowledge are sure to be repeatedly examined. To some extent, the examination has patternized and is easier to be grasped. Within the context of examination-oriented education, every school is doing exam-centered drilling, which is more suitable for female students who are characteristic of more hardworking, dependable and careful. Another teacher in Senior Three of the same school argued that, the current criteria of marking students' papers are also particularly favorable to female students. When going over examination papers, the examiners are just likely to look for the several key words of the standard answers, to see whether these knowledge points are formed into a complete sentence. If there are no such key words, the examinees can't get scores even if his/her meaning is right. Such criteria require actually a mechanical repeat of knowledge and it obviously suits the appetite of girls.

Some educational scholars attributed this problem to the fact that girls are more adaptable to "examination-oriented education." Who may get high marks in this kind of education? He who is assiduous, silent, prudent and capable of reciting will get. This assessment standard is exactly in accordance with girls' character. But for most imaginative, active and creative boys, this becomes their disadvantage. And it is also the most important reason why they are continuously discouraged by the teachers and parents, and consequently lose their confidence and interest in study gradually. However, the assessment standard is seemingly good for girls but actually is harmful to them, because it strengthens girls' disadvantages all along and limits their further development by not only feminizing boys but also feminizing girls more. That is why people say that "girls are short of potentiality for development," "girls' practical skills are disappointing," and "girls lack adaptability and creativity. "

Scholars outside of China have also done researches on gender differences in school achievement. In the past, researches concentrated on the differences in brain structure and intelligence features and levels between male and female. Recently, researchers have started to pay more attention to gender differences in study style. They think that girls' study

fashion might be an important reason for their leading positions in study competition. There may be certain contradictions in these researches. Nevertheless, 22 analyses around the world found obvious gender differences in study process. A research in Amsterdam University shows that girls adopt "superficial methods" more frequently than boys. They are more willing to consider study as pure reciting, which provide an explanation for girls' success. Scholars in Holland also find that fear of failure was another reason for girls' good marks. With stronger "vanity", girls have stronger motivation for higher marks and study more conscientiously and assiduously, while boys seem to be more careless in study. Another research conducted in Lancaster University, Dalem University, Sheffield University and the Education College in London University indicates that different motivation is a cause of girls' good performance. Investigation of 1200 students in two schools found girls "emphasize tasks" more and gain satisfaction in comprehending their work, while boys "emphasize themselves" more and obtain satisfaction in doing better than others or at least not worse than others.

It is necessary to point out that some people pay special attention to "female prosperity and male decline" in education due to certain psychological factors. From their point of view, women should not succeed, and if they do, it's abnormal. On the contrary, men seem to be born to succeed. If they didn't, it's also abnormal. Why didn't they complaint when men are in great proportion in university in the past? Why people feel abnormal when more women than men are in university? Because of varied bias, man and women get extremely different appraisal when they face similar success and failure. Result of an experiment conducted by people in the West might shed light on this. In the experiment, the participants are required to hear a recorded interview and to appraise the interviewee. All interviewees are candidates of a famous scholarship. The result shows that, on one hand, if these interviewees are males and behave well, they gain higher appraisal than female counterparts who behaved equally well. This is because people's original expectation for females is not high. If women succeed, it is considered as depending on good luck or hardworking, not on ability. On the other hand, if a male candidate performs not well, he will get more criticism than his female counterpart who behaved equally disappointingly. It also indicated that people treat males more harshly than they treat females. In people's mind, men should succeed, if they fail, they should be blamed. But for originally low expected females, people are more tolerant to their failure. The common social attitude revealed in this experiment conducted by the Western people is quite popular. Consequently, people say society is especially harsh to men's failure and stingy about women's success. In our society, gender factors do influence to a certain degree people's opinions about success and failure. Being similarly successful, men become objects of admiration and are regarded as aspiring, capable and daring, while women are considered as ambitious, lucky and skillful of tricks, and if she happens to be beautiful, words even turn dirty and scornful. However, doing similarly ordinary jobs, men will be regarded as hopeless, while women seldom get such comments.

The causes of "female prosperity and male decline" phenomenon in education are fairly complicated. There are two sides of it--normal and abnormal, and as such it is both joyful and worrying. In terms of the abnormal side, "examination-oriented education" is the fundamental cause for "female prosperity and male decline" in education. Primary schools and middle schools in China foster "examination-oriented personnel" from the very beginning. Consequently, directed by the values of examination-oriented education, children learn to use the standard to regulate their study and behavior. They one-sidedly emphasize hardworking, obedience and disciplines in their study. As such, boys' advantages gradually weaken while the advantages of girls (corresponding to examination-orientation) keep being strengthened. This goes down all the way from primary through secondary until the national tertiary entrance examination when the physical and psychological advantages of girls are brought to full play, and their ability of thinking in images and faculty of memory and meticulous character help them dominate in many examinations and tests.

**Reference:**