

Looking Beyond the Glass Ceiling: Gender Economics in China from a Social Perspective.

Book Review of The Economics of Gender in China: Women, Work and the Glass Ceiling by Sisi Sung (2023, Routledge)

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Book Review

Cam Tavanın Ötesine Bakmak: Toplumsal Bir Perspektiften Çin'de Toplumsal Cinsiyet Ekonomisi.

Kitap İncelemesi: Sisi Sung, The Economics of Gender in China: Women, Work and the Glass Ceiling (2023, Routledge)

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Kitap İncelemesi



The Economics of Gender in China: Women, Work, and the Glass Ceiling (2023, Routledge) by Sisi Sung explores the relationship between gender interactions and economic growth in modern China from an interdisciplinary standpoint. The author poses a central question in the opening pages: why has gender equality, as an essential dimension of broader socio-economic development, not progressed at the same pace as China's remarkable economic growth over the past four decades? China does not stand alone in this conundrum; many other nations also face it, but what makes the country special is how drastically its social structure and cultural standards changed after the economic reforms of 1978. Global integration, labor reorganization, and the transition from a planned economy to a market-based system all occurred throughout the reform era. Women's employment rates have increased due to increasing opportunities for education, rising urbanization, and the expansion of the private sector. According to Sung, women are now on equal footing with men in terms of attending universities and pursuing technical professions, and

gender disparities in education have all but vanished. When it comes to top managerial roles, though, this equality falters.

Despite women's high educational levels, China is ranked 107th out of 156 countries in terms of economic involvement and opportunity, according to data from the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2021). There is a notable disparity in the representation of women in leadership and decision-making roles, notwithstanding their high professional competency and labor involvement. To explain this situation, Sung develops a theoretical framework called the "cultural-stereotype paradigm," which combines identity economics and cultural norms. The cultural-stereotype paradigm is an approach that explains individuals' behavior not only through economic motives but also through internalized stereotypes shaped by gender identities, cultural expectations, and organizational norms. According to Sung, such an imbalance can be attributed to both profound structural and cultural impediments as well as individual skills or motivational shortfalls. The work extends beyond statistical data to integrate economic models with cultural and organizational factors. In-depth interviews with forty-five managers in the public and private sectors conducted between 2019 and 2021 provide empirical evidence for this theoretical paradigm. In this way, Sung establishes a mutual relationship between theoretical discussion and field data. The book's introduction clearly demonstrates why the subject has significance from both an academic and societal perspective. Why it matters lies in addressing the structural and cultural dynamics that shape the underrepresentation of women in management and leadership positions in China. Understanding the difference between economic growth and gender equality in China, a key contributor to the global economy, has implications not only for regional but also global policy debates. Thus, the book makes a substantial contribution to both Chinese studies and gender economics literature.

From Theory to Practice: Pursuing Cultural Stereotypes

The main aim of Sung's research is to explore how current explanatory economic theories and Western-centric glass-ceiling literature are conceptualized within the Chinese context. While psychological characteristic theory (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen 2003) emphasizes how men and women differ in their risk-taking or leadership styles, human capital theory (Schultz 1961) argues that women's lack of education and experience is the reason behind their underperformance in the workforce. On the contrary, discrimination models (Becker 2010) highlight the unconscious or conscious prejudices of employers. Beyond these discussions, Sung defines the concept of "cultural stereotype" as a mechanism through which culturally embedded expectations regarding gender roles invisibly shape individuals' behavior, organizational positioning, and career evaluations. Sung notes that although all three of these approaches are beneficial, they have an important drawback since they fail to sufficiently account for the cultural values, personal viewpoints, and social conventions that influence the decisions that individuals make.

Sung has conducted in-depth interviews with forty-five managers between 2019 and 2021 to inform the theoretical framework. Managers from both private and state-owned businesses are represented in the sample. While state-owned businesses tend to have more hierarchical and rule-driven relationships, the private sector is dominated by a flexible, competitive workplace culture that is also marked by strong informal norms. These distinct organizational dynamics have a considerable impact on women's strategies for promoting them to senior positions and the types of difficulties they face. Promotion processes, particularly within state-owned enterprises (SOEs), are centralized within the authority of party committees and senior management within the "nomenklatura" system. Consequently, the criteria determining women's promotion chances are often opaque. In contrast, promotion decisions

in the private sector are shaped by the discretion of senior managers and strong informal networking (*guanxi*). Sung's findings suggest that while the private sector offers potential for quick promotions, women may be at a disadvantage due to fierce competition and network-based promotion. Promotion procedures in state-owned businesses are more predictable, but women's career progression may be hindered by rigid hierarchies. In both cases, cultural preconceptions such as the assumption that women should put their families first have a significant impact on managers' decisions. Chapter 6 of the book, in particular, reveals Sung's extraordinary methodological approach: Sung not only provides statistical analysis, but also applies economic theory to the field data, illustrating how cultural contexts perpetuate organizational inequities.

The Glass Ceiling in Management: Unseen Barriers to Women's Career Progress

According to Sung's field data, the glass ceiling is supported by a deeper and frequently invisible cultural foundation rather than being merely an obvious institutional obstacle. The ongoing quest for equilibrium between professional identity and familial duties shapes the career strategies of female managers. They take into consideration social norms and prejudices in conducting this quest for equilibrium. Some women deliberately take advantage of these norms in order to gain favor in professional interactions. For instance, they attempt to increase the level of their acceptance within the company by portraying themselves as "conciliatory" or "compliant" leaders. Others take on a more aggressive, independent, and results-driven management style in an effort to defy these expectations through active resistance strategies. But in both strategies, the influence of societal norms continues to be an important obstacle preventing women from moving towards top managerial positions.

The book's reexamination of the concept of *guanxi* the core network

of connections in Chinese business in light of gender is another significant contribution. Sung draws attention to the distinctive ways that women develop *guanxi* relationships, whereas Western literature frequently emphasizes the challenges of breaking into male-dominated networks. This emphasis suggests that Western literature focuses on the barriers faced by Western women professionals in accessing male-dominated institutional networks rather than on Chinese women (Acker 1992). By relying on their family, school, and neighborhood connections, female managers may enhance their social capital. This makes it possible for them to broaden their support networks while gaining access to particular employment prospects. Such an advantageous position does not, however, necessarily result in opportunities for promotion and institutional recognition. *Guanxi* has dual implications for women: on the one hand, it gives them access and visibility, but on the other, it can reinforce barriers by perpetuating power systems that are dominated by men. Advancement at the top management level often requires access to influential professional networks, and the ways in which individuals engage in these networks are shaped by existing gender norms. Women's networking activities may occasionally be construed as "seeking support" and not deemed sufficiently professional, while male managers' forms of solidarity are frequently exclusionary. In this context, "seeking support" denotes women's efforts to obtain professional guidance, mentorship, and enhanced visibility needed for career advancement. Sung's work adds a new dimension to the discussion about gender equality in leadership by addressing the social and cultural aspects of the glass ceiling through a particular case study.

Anatomy of a Paradox: The Distance Between Equality Figures and Real Life

Sung's study stands out because of its comprehensive field data and sound

theoretical foundation. However, the study does have certain drawbacks which the author subtly admits. The sample size and diversity are the most evident limitations. Interviews with forty-five managers are not typical of the experiences of all women in China due to the country's heterogeneous economic, cultural, and geographic structure. Women in senior positions in metropolitan centers have different challenges than women in rural areas, among migrant workers, or in ethnic minority populations. The exclusion of such intersectional dimensions from the study's scope appears to be a significant factor limiting the findings' generalizability.

The situation is similar in terms of policy recommendations. Sung offers concrete suggestions such as corporate reforms to increase women's access to leadership positions, flexible work arrangements, family-friendly policies, and strengthening mentor-mentee networks. However, it would have been more beneficial to have a more detailed discussion on the extent to which these proposals can be implemented within China's current political and economic structure, the mechanisms through which they can be supported, and the potential points of resistance. In a centralized management system, leaving gender-based reforms solely to institutional initiatives can lead to limited impact. Additionally, the work's lack of a comparative perspective is also noteworthy. By comparing China's experience with countries that have undergone similar economic transformation processes, such as South Korea, Vietnam, or Malaysia, it would have been clearer which aspects of the "cultural stereotype" model are universal and which are context-specific. Such a comparison would offer the opportunity to both test the theoretical robustness of the model and evaluate the impact of cultural variables on policy design on an international scale. Despite these shortfalls, Sung's work strongly demonstrates that the gap between equality indicators and real-life experiences cannot be closed by numbers alone. In this respect, the work fills a significant gap in the gender studies literature, both conceptually and methodologically.

New Horizons: Implications for Academics and Politics

The Economics of Gender in China stands out for its distinctive approach to gender economic analysis through a focus on cultural factors. Sung's concept of the "cultural stereotype" serves as a useful analytical tool for analyzing the unseen hurdles that women encounter within organizational structures, while also reinterpreting Akerlof and Kranton's identity economics model (Akerlof & Kranton 2000) in the Chinese context. This theory clearly demonstrates that the relationship between economic development and gender equality is not linear; rather, social identities and long-standing cultural norms influence the process. The identity economics approach cited by Sung argues that individuals' economic decisions are determined not only by rational self-interest, but also by the social identities, norms, and expectations placed upon them. This theory is used in the book to explain how gendered roles, in particular, shape workplace behavior, promotion processes, and the reproduction of organizational inequalities.

For three distinct actor groups, *The Economics of Gender in China* provides valuable knowledge at various levels. For the academic community, it highlights the inadequacy of approaches to gender inequality that disregard cultural factors, thereby facilitating an interdisciplinary conversation that spans the domains of organizational behavior, sociology, and economics. From a policymakers' standpoint of, it points out that increasing women's employment and educational rates alone is not enough; rather, it emphasizes the need to change organizational cultures, make promotion processes transparent, and put social norm-targeting programs into place. It fosters a comprehensive view of diversity for company executives that extends beyond simple numerical representation to include productive involvement in decision-making.

The primary argument of the book is, legislative restrictions and improvements in economic indicators might not be sufficient to establish long-

lasting equality unless cultural norms change. This can exacerbate the obstacles in front of to women's leadership in China, especially when combined with factors like the country's highly competitive work climate, strong traditional values, and centralized governmental structure. Hence, Sung's analysis provides a guiding viewpoint for all actors creating gender equality policies in different cultural contexts, not just China. In conclusion, this work challenges us to reconsider the metaphor of the "glass ceiling" by pointing out that the obstacles are concealed not only above us, but also within the subtle and often unseen structural and cultural boundaries that surround us. Sung's work serves as a global call to action, reminding us that in order to break down these barriers, that is, the culturally embedded gender stereotypes and organizational structures that limit women's advancement, cultural transformation has to occur alongside with legal and economic reforms.

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