

# Gender Disparity in Chinese Academia: A Conceptual Analysis Through Organizational Theory Lens

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## Abstract

*Women academics face unparalleled challenges such as underrepresentation and marginalization in Chinese higher education. A review of the literature revealed a tendency in the scholarly discussions that separates gender from the social and organizational processes, which is a missed opportunity to better understand how gender interacts with the broader social, cultural, and political contexts. Using three major organizational theory perspectives, this conceptual paper addresses the issue of academic gender disparity through analyzing organizational culture, organizational management, and the way higher education institutions interact with the external environments. Higher education institutions are gendered organizations that create, fortify, and reproduce gender inequalities. This essay will provide various methodological, epistemological, and ontological possibilities of interventions for transformative organizational change.*

Keywords: academic gender disparity, women in academia, Chinese higher education, organizational theory, organizational change

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## Introduction

This conceptual paper examines the nuances of the academic gender disparity issue in China using organization theories as the analytical lens. After presenting common themes that emerge from current literature on gender disparities in Chinese academia, this paper analyzes the way that Chinese higher education institutions interact with the external environments, organizational culture, and organizational management. I maintain that higher education institutions are gendered organizations that create, fortify, and reproduce gender inequalities.

The term “academics” refers to teachers in universities with teaching and research duties (Dai et al., 2021). While gender used to be conflated with sex in the past, activists and researchers have clarified that gender is not necessarily attached to one’s biological sex. Rather, gender is much more complex, and better understood as a social construction and a social performance (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Women academics face unparalleled challenges in higher education worldwide (Gonzales et al., 2023). Studies in various national contexts show that women are underrepresented in academia and marginalized in low-paid and low-ranked positions (John et al., 2020). Oftentimes, women navigate the male-dominated environment and struggle with work-life balance alongside their career advancement journey toward tenure or leadership positions (Aiston, 2011; Fritsch, 2015; Goulden et al., 2011; Kim & Kim, 2020; Naseem et al., 2020; Tsaousi, 2020). During the academic life circle, an increasing number of women are pushed out or left behind, a phenomenon described by Jensen (2006) as the “leaky pipeline.” Despite the complexities and distinctiveness of the Chinese social, cultural, historical, and political structures, women academics in Chinese academia are confronted with similar, if not more severe challenges.

Gender disparities in Chinese academia manifest in many ways. Women are underrepresented in research activities. In 2019, only 26.5% of research and development (R&D) personnel in China were women. Among those awarded membership to the Chinese Academy of Science and Engineering, a lifelong honor given to Chinese scientists who have made significant achievements in various fields, women take up only 4.95% (Huang & Zhao, 2018). Additionally, similar to the “leaky pipeline,” women academics’ positions in Chinese higher education institutions are highly stratified, where most of them occupy lower-ranked positions rather than leadership roles and teaching roles instead of research (Huang & Zhao, 2018).

While there has been an abundance of research on academic gender disparities in the West, gender equity at the faculty level is still a new area in scholarly discussion in China. With a unique historical and cultural heritage and social structure adding to the complexity of the challenge, it is worth examining the reasons why and interventions for gender disparities in Chinese academia. To unpack the academic gender disparity in China, I first dove into the literature addressing the issue. I reviewed peer-reviewed empirical studies written in both Chinese and English by searching on academic search engines in Chinese (e.g. CNKI.net) and English (e.g. Google Scholar, and ERIC). I noticed a lack of attention paid to the organizational lens in the current literature. Centering organizations as the entities of discussion rather than individuals and departments allow interrogations of the college or university context internally and externally and provides a powerful entry point for transformative organizational change (Gonzales et al., 2018). The following section will dive into the existing literature that touches on the issue of academic gender disparity in China.

## **Problematize Existing Literature**

### **Gendered Perceptions and Expectations**

Two common themes that emerged in the literature are gendered social expectations and gendered perceptions of capacities. Existing studies voice concerns over the gendered perception of women’s capabilities, pointing out that gender stereotypes exist among women academics due to the prevalence of beliefs in the biological gender divide among both genders. As Gaskell et al. (2004) presented, most male academics (63% of men under 40 and 69% of men over 40) surveyed in 5 normal universities (higher education institutions that train teachers in China) in 2004 believe that biological difference between male and female is a major reason leading to gender differences in physical characteristics, character features or intelligence. That said, an updated perspective is needed for understanding academics’ beliefs today concerning the reasons for academic gender disparities.

Literature points out the potential damage of biology-based perceptions on gender differences. Opposite to viewing gender as socially constructed (Risman, 2004) or as an institution that is embedded in all social processes of everyday life and social organizations (Lorber, 1994), the biological-based perception separates one’s biological sex from the broader social and organizational processes, allowing the overlooking of structural inequalities and undermining of women’s capabilities in academia (Gaskell et al., 2004). For example, women are considered naturally less fit for research and leadership roles compared with their male counterparts because of the biological sex-based traits assigned to them (Gaskell et al., 2004). In addition, under the gendered perception of one’s capabilities, women’s leadership styles are not considered as different from men’s but rather deficit and inferior. While men are perceived as naturally rational and male

leaders are trusted, women are the direct opposite, and emotional, and women leaders are associated with negative terms such as being indecisive and weak (Rhoads & Gu, 2012; Zhao & Jones, 2017).

Closely linked to how women are perceived are the social expectations on gender roles, which play a prominent part in shaping the current landscape of gender disparities in Chinese academia. The traditional social-cultural ideology of “xian qi liang mu” (virtuous wife and caring mom) enforces idealized images of women as mothers and housewives, whereas men are prevalently considered the bread-earner. While the dual-career and dual-income family model becomes widely accepted in society and women’s participation rate in the labor market is as high as 60% as of 2019 (Statista, n.d.), women are still expected to take on more domestic and childcare responsibilities in China (Guo & Chu, 2019). The gender ideologies conformed to findings from a study that examined the impacts of having prekindergarten children on faculty’s research productivity: the research productivity gap between women and men in academics widens when the childcare burden is considered. In other words, an increased amount of domestic work in a family has more negative impacts on women’s academics than on male academics (Yuan, 2017).

Some studies illuminate the process of internalizing social expectations as a way of doing and being by many women academics. When faced with the dilemma of fulfilling their career goals and family responsibilities simultaneously, their male counterparts can invest more effects in their career. Chinese women academics tend to conform to their assigned gender roles at the cost of their advancement ambitions (Ren & Caudle, 2019). Zhao and Jones (2017) suggested that gender expectations are internalized when one believes their compliance is a free choice. The authors shared a women interviewee’s use of the passive voice when referring to women’s domestic responsibilities and the reaffirmation of her willingness to comply by saying “‘men should do great things’ and ‘women should get small things done’” (Zhao & Jones, 2017, p. 8). As contradicting as it sounds, the interviewee’s contradictory statement is a perfect example of how women conform to their gender roles assigned by social-cultural expectations and effectively perform such roles to justify their doings (Wiggins, 2017).

## **Pushing the Boundaries**

Although the existing literature exposes gender inequality in Chinese academia and provided practical solutions to narrow the gap, there is a general lack of connections between the discussion of gender disparities and the functionality of higher education institutions as organizations. In other words, researchers have approached the problem as if it arises in vacuous spaces or within individuals (Gumport, 2012). For example, using marriage status, time spent in housework, and women academics’ cognitive gender segregation to capture their essential characteristics, Guo and Chu’s (2019) study isolated gender from other organizational and social contexts. When the authors concluded that both gender and factors other than gender such as gender ratio in higher education institutions and the appraisal systems impact women’s career development in academia, they overlooked the fact that imbalanced gender ratio and the potentially problematic appraisal system are part of the gendered problems. There also exists a tendency to explain the reasons for gender disparities by emphasizing individual choices and behaviors. For example, in Yuan’s (2017) study, “effort put in work,” measured by hours spent in research per week, was used as a moderator. The author argued that gender discrimination does not exist as “efforts put in work” moderates the impact of family support needs on one’s research output. This conclusion shifted the blame to women academics as it indicated that women academics not putting enough time in work contributes to the disparities. The approach taken assumed that women academics have complete free control over how much time they invest in research versus domestic duties. While Zhao and Jones (2017) and Gaskell et al. (2004) disputed this notion, it is an easy trap to fall into for quantitative analysis where gender is considered a variable separated from other factors.

Separating gender from the broader social and organizational processes is a missed opportunity to better understand how gender interacts with the broader social, cultural, and political contexts. That said, I employed an organizational theory lens in this conceptual work to further the discussions about the cause and potential remedies for gender disparities in Chinese academia. As Gonzales et al. (2018) maintained, organizational theory offers “a powerful entry point for transformative work because it takes entire entities (rather than individuals or departments, for example) as the central units of analysis, and is concerned with analyzing such entities holistically” (p. 507). The goal of this conceptual piece is not to negate the contributions of the current literature. Rather, I aim to push the boundaries of current literature and provide additional or alternative perspectives to the issue in discussion. In the next section, I will start with an overview of the analytical lens and reexamine academic gender disparity from an organizational theory point of view.

My analysis is not without limitations. While I collected literature in both English and Chinese, the literature covered in this analysis may not be comprehensive due to access issues with some Chinese literature search engines. As well, the way gender is discussed in this conceptual piece is binary. Although one's gender, as a social construction and a social performance (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009), does not necessarily fall into the sphere of either men or women (Bosson et al., 2018), I was not able to further the discussion of gender non-binary academics in the academia in this paper due to the lack of literature addressing non-binary people.

## **A New Look into Academic Gender Disparity**

### **The Analytical Lens**

The analytical lens I employed in this analysis is adapted from the work of Gonzales and her colleagues (2018), which offers overviews and critical perspectives into major schools of thought regarding organization theories. I applied three of the four schools of thought on organizational theories discussed by Gonzales and her colleagues (2018): environment perspectives, organizational culture, and scientific management to understand why gender disparities persist. First, the environment perspective as a school of thought asserts that the survival, functioning, and development of an organization depend not only on the internal operations and leadership but also on the external environment such as the economic, social, and cultural conditions (Marion & Gonzales, 2013; Stern & Barley, 1996). Meanwhile, the organizational culture school of thought suggests that an organization's culture is operationalized through various elements such as beliefs, values, assumptions, and visual artifacts (Schein's 1993). Gonzales et al. (2018) caution that the culture of organizations usually symbolizes power relations that may give some advantages and marginalize others. Finally, scientific management theories (Fayol, 1949; Taylor, 1919) were primarily concerned with effectively managing people and resources for maximum productivity, which minimizes human emotions and connections.

Examining higher education problems using the lens of organizational theories is not uncommon. In fact, there has been a wealth of examples that approach higher education issues through an organizational theories lens such as faculty hiring and promotion (Hora, 2020), university leadership styles (Chaffee & Tierney, 1988), and higher education institutions and the market and the industry (Berman, 2012; Slaughter & Rhodes, 2004; Smuts & Hattingh, 2020). Hora (2020), for instance, examined how the culture of an institution partially decides the type of candidates the search committee favors. With that said, the subsequent sections draw attention to the chief findings of the study as they pertain to each of the three organizational theories employed. From an environmental perspective, I will elaborate on how gender disparity issues interact with global, national, and historical factors. Then, I will dive into the culture and hierarchical structure of academia through the lens of organizational culture and scientific management. While the organizational theory lens approaches organizations as the unit for analysis, it does not overlook the role of individuals agency. Therefore, I also incorporated the analysis of individual behaviors and impacts in my analysis, underscoring the role individual agency plays in constructing or resisting the gender dynamics in Chinese academia.

### **The Global, National, and Historical Shaping Forces**

This section highlights the findings based on the environment organizational lens. Aligning with the environmental perspectives in organizational theories, higher education institutions are part of and affected by the external environment within and beyond the naturally occurring boundaries. The complex global and national structure and social and cultural conditions (Gonzales et al., 2018). In fact, the global competition in the knowledge-based economy impacts higher education institutions' goals and practices. Higher education institutions globally, including Chinese universities and colleges strive to excel in the global brain race by building world-class research universities. In this context, academic research productivity, measured by publications in prestigious journals, has become a top priority for the higher education sector (Hazelkorn, 2015). To catch up with the global intellectual competition and to build "world-class research universities," for decades, China has been implementing the cash-per-publication reward policy, linking the number of SCI papers to higher education funding allocations. The macro-level ideologies and policies that prioritize research are manifested on the meso level in the form of hiring and promotion policies that favor research activities and outputs. Since

women are more likely to hold teaching positions than their men colleagues, they tend to receive fewer resources and recognition in an academic system where research is valued more than teaching and other academic activities.

National policies also impact women's academic experience in academia. Examples of policies that may impose adverse impacts on all women including women academics' professional experience and career advancement include the national family planning policies and the retirement policy. After a few decades of implementing the One-Child Policy to control the population size, China revised the family planning policy in 2014 with the Universal Two-Child Policy that allows a family to have two children. Some argue that the new family planning policy could further set women back (Huang, 2018; Zhou & Gao, 2019). Employers expect that having a second child leads to women employees' taking more time off work and thus some may have greater reservations about hiring and promoting women (Zhou & Gao, 2019; Zhou, 2018). Further, the retirement age for women is five years ahead of men, which may affect women's career development as they are older and reach higher ranks at their institutions (Rhoads & Gu, 2012). On a positive note, favorable national policies and regulations can significantly improve women's academic experience. As the Chinese government works on updating the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, there are high hopes that workplace gender discrimination can be reduced (The National People's Congress, 2022).

Besides global competition and national policies, cultural heritage also interferes with the gender status quo in academia. Scholars warn that one should not overlook the importance of history, especially the violence and power imbalance that reside in the historical context (Gonzales et al., 2018). Indeed, the long-standing traditional values and beliefs implicitly inform binary gender roles rooted in Confucianism and remain strong in modern Chinese society (Faure & Fang, 2008; Li, 2008). As a famous saying goes "Women's ignorance is a virtue," women's intelligence and agency to be part of the intellectual community has long been disapproved and deprived in history. Under the Confucius set of ideologies, women are considered followers rather than leaders, supporters of important journeys that men embark on instead of the protagonist of critical endeavors. As China undergoes modernization, more and more avenues open for improvement in gender representation in the labor market. Tatli et al. (2017) found, for example, marketization and individualism encourage women to compete in the modern workforce, shedding a positive light on the shifting cultural landscape. However, perceptions about talent, potential, and suitability continued to be colored by traditional gender norms and ideologies and should be taken into consideration when one interrogates academic gender disparities.

## **The Gendered Organizations**

Although the broader social, cultural, historical, and political contexts shape policies and practices at the organizational level, organizations themselves also contribute to the consolidation of the unequal distribution of resources and power. By creating organizational cultures and establishing hierarchical structures, organizations take an active part in fortifying and reproducing "power structures in ways that support bureaucracies that significantly advantage some and disadvantage others" (Amis et al., 2020, p. 14).

From an organizational culture perspective, higher education organizations form the culture of an "old boy network" or "brotherhood" that pushes women to the peripheries of academia (Ramohai, 2019, p. 225). Culture in higher education is integrated into all facets of its functionality and is reflective in "individual and organizational use of time, space, and communication" (Tierney, 1988, p. 18), which is never free from the saturation of power imbalance (Amis et al., 2020; Ray, 2019). In Chinese academia, it is common to discuss research and lay foundations for projects over several bottles of beer during lunch or dinner meetings, a male-centered way of bonding that makes most women uncomfortable (Rhoads & Gu, 2012). This communication style is coupled with the "guanxi" culture in China, referring to personal trust and relations, and oftentimes involves moral obligations to exchange favor that is pervasive in any public and private sector. Therefore, it is much more challenging for women academics to network and establish collaborative relations in male-dominated environments as "doing good research is not as important as schmoozing with powerful bureaucrats and their favorite experts" (Shi & Rao, 2010, p. 128).

Second, the organizational structure of higher education institutions is increasingly characterized by job specialization or academic Taylorism. Taylorism, a concept first put forward by Frederick Taylor (1919), describes the process of dividing a task into smaller parts to allow employees to complete assigned work as efficiently as possible. In the academy, pulling apart the academic profession (Gehrke & Kezar, 2015; Lorenz, 2012) becomes a common approach universities take for administrators to "have more control over the role definition of academic labor and maximize

organizational resources” (Gonzales et al., 2018, p. 522). Traditionally, academics’ roles are complex professional roles that integrated research, teaching, and services. Under academic Taylorism, more contingent teaching-focused positions are created, which seldom lead to advancement in the academic profession. While academic Taylorism does not directly lead to devaluation of teaching and service roles, it consolidates the hierarchical structure in academia, allows those in higher ranked status, men in most cases, to hold a higher degree of control over others and get away from abusing the power they possess (Young et al., 2015).

If the sexist organizational culture is the agency of gender discriminative structures, the Taylorized and hierarchical structure of Chinese academia consolidates gender inequality. When taken together, women academics in China are not only marginalized in “unimportant” and less rewarded positions but feel stuck in those positions. Their exclusion from higher-ranked faculty positions or administrator roles leads to their absence in the decision-making process, which in turn keeps them further away from the “old boy network.” Moreover, what institutionalizes and legitimizes such inequalities is the myth of meritocracy based on the false assumption that advancement and rewards are given only based on one’s capabilities and performance (Lynn et al., 2009). Overlooking organizations’ participation in reproducing inequality, one falsely assumes that rewards are given based only on merit, easily reducing causes for gender disparities to individuals’ traits or behaviors rather than the injustice of the system.

### **The Participation of Individuals**

Thus far, I have established gender disparities stem from organizational structures and cultures that situate in a broader organizational environment. While I challenge that only individuals are to blame for sexism in academia, there is no denying that individual acts of discrimination and microaggressions feed on the hierarchical structure and fortify the patriarchal culture. The social constructivist perspective on organizational culture suggests that members of an organization can create, disrupt, or revise organizational identity (Garcia, 2016). If a good portion of academics believe that the academic gender disparity is a result of biological differences between males and females (Gaskell et al., 2004), it is unsurprising that the organizational structure and organizational culture are less welcoming and inclusive for women. Recognizing individuals as agentic is vital in the organizational analysis as the social constructivist viewpoint allows one to discern the reasons why the problematic organizational culture and structure continue to exist despite the nonexistence of explicit gender discriminative regulations in an organization.

Another way individuals and organizations interact is that individual biases are empowered by their connections to the legitimized and institutionalized sexism in the organizational culture and structure. This is particularly the case when individuals easily hide behind the façade of an organization, refusing to admit or recognize the part they have taken in the gendered organizational processes. For example, some interviewees in Rhoads and Gu (2014)’s study claimed that academic gender discrimination does not exist at their institution. There is no wonder why fighting against gender inequity feels like banging one’s head against a brick wall, an analogy used by Ahmed (2012) to describe institutional resistance to diversity workers’ advocates for change that is universal when any marginalized group stands up for themselves. Here, I intentionally did not specify men as the oppressor in academia. In fact, by conforming and complying with the norms, women’s doing, thinking, and being, sustain and reproduce the system of oppression. Gerth and Mills (1964) demonstrated how personality traits and conduct patterns are shaped by institutional orders. Along the same line of thoughts, one can contemplate how “the context of daily life creates action indirectly by shaping actors’ perceptions of their interests and directly by constraining choice” (Risman, 2004, p. 432), particularly for marginalized women academics. After all, what causes women’s under-representation in the academic professions both in research and leadership is the gender schema through which both men and women perceive and evaluate women (Zhao & Jones, 2017).

Current literature provides a glance into Chinese women academics’ resistance and agency. Ren and Caudle (2019), for example, offered examples of Chinese women academics seeking help from their families to cope with work-life balance after they have kids. Unfortunately, studies that focus on telling counter stories of how women academics resist the current organizational culture and structure are rare finds in the literature, mainly because studies addressing academic gender disparities are mostly quantitative (e.g. Yuan, 2017; Guo & Chu, 2019).

## Discussion and Implications

The critiques and alternatives we can offer to an existing problem are shaped and constrained by our approach and response to the problem (Scott, 2004). Andreotti et al. (2018) discussed interventions for organizational change at methodological, epistemological, and ontological levels. Methodological intervention emphasizes changing practices in the existing system to achieve the goal more effectively and efficiently without shifting the goal itself. The epistemological level embraces interrogation of the validity and value of knowledge. Epistemological interventions interrogate what is valued and rewarded and what is undervalued and unrewarded in academia, what historical, cultural, and political dimensions construct such perceptions of value and legitimacy in academia, and whether women benefit from such a value system or are wounded by it. Lastly, ontological interventions encourage one to focus on different ways of being with the aim to change the system entirely instead of making changes to the system. I argue that methodological interventions are important, yet insufficient, and epistemological, and ontological interventions are needed for transformational change to occur.

Methodological interventions do not cast doubts on the system itself. Most of the national policies on the agenda to mitigate gender disparities such as relaxing the criteria limit for women to apply for certain research funds and offering an allowance to women academics for childcare assistance (Huang & Zhao, 2018) might adversely impact women academics by reproducing a deficit narrative to their experiences despite their benign intents. Within higher education institutions, methodological interventions call for institutional policies and practices to assist women academics to navigate the system such as reducing women academics' workload in teaching and student services after they give birth to a child (Yuan, 2017). Interventions at this layer generate "good" outcomes, however, the underlying problems with the structures and cultures of the organization remain unaddressed. It is also risky that the illusion of institutional commitments to gender equity, or in other words, the illusion of "comrades in arms," according to Rhoads and Gu (2012, p. 745) surface. When the organizational leaders who claim to commit to gender equity and ensure to look after their colleagues as "comrades" are mainly men, the existing male privilege undergirds the idea of "comrades in arms," building obstacles against those seeking to engage with epistemological or ontological conversations.

To engage with epistemological and ontological interventions, reflexivity is required for both supra-organizational decision-makers and micro-level individuals in an organization, particularly on how their positionality limits or interferes with their understanding or ability to know, recognize, and value certain things (Gonzales et al., 2018). These layers of interventions urge reflections on the societal perceptions of gender-based labor division and individual beliefs about one's role in society, family, and the workplace. Meanwhile, each agentic individual in higher education should constantly and consciously check their implicit biases that undermine and overlook certain types of work, traits, personalities, and communication styles, and stand up against such biases.

The epistemological interventions call for re-evaluating the value of knowledge and work in academia. When methodological interventions seek to improve women's academics' research productivity, epistemological interventions question why metrics to evaluate academics' productivity are highly skewed toward research outputs and whether the current academic appraisal mechanism aligns with the core purpose of higher education. Strong as the external shaping forces are, it remains a vital ethical requirement that institutional leaders find ways to reflect broad social values and reclaim the importance of care work, work that focuses on caring for others' non-academic needs (e.g. providing emotional support to students and colleagues, organizing community-building events, etc.) in the academic profession, which is how elitism or sexism that "continuously reproduce prevailing academic values" is rejected (Cardozo, 2017, p. 421). Interventions at this layer include updating criteria for hiring and promotion to include teaching and service commitment and re-bundling the academic profession to allow higher-level of autonomy individually in terms of defining their work. Specifically, besides making efforts to further engage women with research opportunities, institutions, and individuals should also reevaluate the value of teaching and service to include academics' involvement and contribution in those areas in the tenure and promotion system.

Last but not least, the ontological interventions ensure inclusivity for different ways of being. The role gender plays in both the public and private spheres needs to be reimagined. For example, state policymakers may reconsider the laws for maternity and parental leaves as well as employer childcare welfare policies. Specifically, instead of only giving women academics allowance for giving birth and childcare, higher education institutions should also encourage and reward men who participate in domestic work and childcare responsibilities. By doing so, there is hope to reverse the

existing discourse that asserts women are more productive and valuable in the domestic and private sphere, and men the opposite. This way, as Montgomery (2020) puts it, rather than doing “gatekeeping”, interventions engage with “groundskeeping” (p. 135), which emphasized individuals’ experience and growth in the organizations instead of limiting their possibilities. As collective leadership that rejects traditional scientific management “[makes] more deliberate and conscientious efforts to equitably engage those less-powered institutional actors” (Taylor, 2020, p. 193), ontological interventions push the notion of inclusion further. Women should not only be physically included but also recognized and valued in the system. Interventions at this level work on rejecting the notion of considering women’s traits as inferior or “feminine” leadership style as a deficit.

For future studies, I appeal to the need to understand the gendered power dynamics in academia. Further study may consider adopting qualitative approaches to engage in in-depth interactions with academics in Chinese universities. This way, researchers can better grasp the nuanced experiences and struggles faced by women academics. Future research may further examine organizational culture in Chinese higher education institutions. Studying how men and women academics make sense of the organizational culture and participate in creating such a culture at their institutions will illuminate the process of creating and sustaining gender inequity. Another potential area of exploration can be the lived experiences of women academics. As organization studies oftentimes overlook individual agency, it is also of vital importance to examine how individuals may sustain or disrupt and revise the patriarchal academic environment via the experiences of women leaders in Chinese academia. Last, as I mentioned earlier, the current literature approaches gender in a binary way. Future research may expand the discussion of academic gender disparities in China to non-binary people.

## Conclusion

This conceptual piece adds to the existing literature on gender disparities in Chinese academia by explicitly focusing on the organizational aspects of the problem. I attempted to unbundle the intertwined relationships among the environment, organizations, and individuals. I established that the problem of gender disparities in Chinese academia is embedded in the historical, social, cultural, and political environment and it is consolidated in organizations via organizational structures and cultures. While individuals are empowered by such a structure and culture, their attitudes and acts also feed into the organization, reinforcing gender stereotypes and microaggression at the meso level. Hence, it is of vital importance to examine academic gender disparity in China through the lens of organizational theories and engage with epistemological and ontological interventions for transformative change.

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