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Educational reforms and gender emancipation in the 19th century: a comparative study between Spain and China

Reformas educativas y emancipación de género en el siglo XIX: un estudio comparado entre España y China

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between educational reform and gender emancipation in the nineteenth century through a comparison of the cases of Spain and China. It analyzes the proposals of Francisco Giner de los Ríos and Cai Yuanpei, who, from distinct cultural traditions, understood education as a fundamental tool for transforming patriarchal structures and advancing gender equality. The research is organized around three axes: (1) the theoretical foundations linking educational freedom, individual dignity, and equality; (2) the institutional initiatives aimed at guaranteeing women's access to formal education; and (3) the historical and contemporary projection of their ideas in current debates on educational justice. The study adopts a historical-comparative and interdisciplinary approach that integrates contributions from the philosophy of education, gender studies, and sociology. The findings show that both authors defended coeducation, humanistic training, and full citizenship for women as essential conditions for social progress. From a critical perspective situated in the Global South, this research highlights pedagogical experiences that, rather than reproducing Western models, reinterpreted modernity through their own cultural frameworks. The analysis provides conceptual and historical tools to rethink inclusion and equity in contemporary education.

Keywords: Education; Gender Equality; Coeducation; Educational Modernity.

RESUMEN

Este estudio analiza la relación entre reforma educativa y emancipación de género en el siglo XIX mediante una comparación entre los casos de España y China. Se examinan las propuestas de Francisco Giner de los Ríos y Cai Yuanpei, quienes, desde tradiciones culturales diversas, concibieron la educación como herramienta fundamental para transformar las estructuras patriarcales y avanzar hacia la igualdad de género. La investigación se articula en torno a tres ejes: (1) la fundamentación teórica que vincula libertad educativa, dignidad individual e igualdad; (2) las iniciativas institucionales orientadas a garantizar el acceso de las mujeres a la educación formal; y (3) la proyección histórica y contemporánea de sus planteamientos en los debates actuales sobre justicia educativa. El estudio adopta un enfoque histórico-comparativo e interdisciplinario, que integra aportaciones de la filosofía de la educación, los estudios de género y la sociología. Los resultados muestran que ambos autores defendieron la coeducación, la formación humanista y la ciudadanía plena de las mujeres como condiciones indispensables para el progreso social. Desde una perspectiva crítica situada en el Sur global,

esta investigación visibiliza experiencias pedagógicas que, lejos de reproducir modelos occidentales, reinterpretaron la modernidad desde claves culturales propias. El análisis ofrece herramientas conceptuales e históricas para repensar la inclusión y la equidad en la educación contemporánea.

Palabras clave: Educación; Igualdad de Género; Coeducación; Modernidad Educativa.

INTRODUCTION

The 19th century and modernity: a context of social and educational change

The 19th century witnessed the birth of modernity amid profound political, economic, and cultural transformations. The consolidation of the nation-state, the advance of enlightened reason, and the social reorganization driven by the industrial revolution redefined the frameworks of collective life. In this context, education took on a strategic role: it became a key tool for state-building, citizenship training, and the transmission of values that guaranteed cohesion and progress.

Spain and China, despite their cultural differences, faced parallel challenges in their transition to modernity. The educational reforms undertaken in both countries responded to the need to adapt training systems to the demands of the new order. These transformations were not limited to the institutional level, but involved profound disputes over cultural identity and the place of the individual in changing societies.

Figures such as Francisco Giner de los Ríos in Spain and Cai Yuanpei in China articulated pedagogical projects that transcended mere instruction to become commitments to ethical and cultural regeneration. As highlighted by Jiménez-Landi (1959), Hijano del Río (2012), Yu (2013), Zhang (2007), and Pei (2016), their proposals challenged traditional systems of access to knowledge, positioning education as a space for symbolic dispute from which to imagine new forms of citizenship.

Emergence of the gender issue in educational reforms

In this process of educational modernization, the gender issue emerged as a central dimension. In Spain, the Free Institution of Education (ILE) promoted a humanistic, scientific, and critical *paideia* that challenged both Victorian morality and the dominant patriarchy. In the Chinese context, Cai Yuanpei linked educational equity with national regeneration, defending female inclusion as a pillar of inclusive citizenship.

However, these reforms also partly reproduced pre-existing normative structures. The school operated as an ambivalent device: while favoring new female subjectivities, it reinforced gender disciplines. The Spanish-Chinese case shows that education was strategic both in subverting and perpetuating gender roles, reflecting the dual nature of modern pedagogy.

Objectives of the study: education, freedom, and gender equality from a comparative perspective

This study analyzes the convergences and divergences between the educational reforms promoted by Giner de los Ríos and Cai Yuanpei, focusing on their strategies for gender equality. From a comparative and decolonial perspective, both reformers are conceived as key figures whose proposals—forged from different cultural traditions—offer original responses to the challenges of peripheral modernity.

It argues that, despite the asymmetries between the two contexts, Giner and Cai shared a common ethical-political horizon: they placed pedagogical freedom and female inclusion as pillars of a social transformation oriented towards gender justice. The analytical framework is organized around four axes:

- To contextualize 19th-century Spanish-Chinese education socio-historically;
- Tracing the ideological genealogy of Giner and Cai around gender;
- Deconstructing pedagogical devices for coeducation and female inclusion;
- And examining the historicity of their reforms and their epistemic relevance for egalitarian citizenship.

Reformers in dialogue: Francisco Giner de los Ríos and Cai Yuanpei

Sociopolitical contexts of Spain and China in modernity

The 19th century, a melting pot in which global modernity was forged, witnessed profound political and social transformations in Spain and China—civilizations with long traditions. These upheavals laid the foundations for their respective educational modernization processes. In post-Napoleonic Spain, after the trauma of the Carlist Wars, the country was caught in a constant struggle between liberals and conservatives for control of the nascent state. In this context, the ILE raised its voice against the Church's educational monopoly. Founded by Francisco Giner de los Ríos, this institution embodied a secular educational project that combined science and humanism to train critical citizens committed to social progress (Jiménez-Landi, 1959).

Meanwhile, the Qing Empire was in decline, weakened by imperialist pressures and major internal crises. This collapse led reformers such as Cai Yuanpei to conceive of education as a key tool for cultural regeneration and the recovery of national sovereignty. His proposal—analyzed by Yu (2013)—articulated a dialogue between Confucian ethics and the principles of the Western Enlightenment, placing female inclusion at the heart of his modernization project.

Thus, although born of profoundly different worldviews, both projects conceived of education as a means of critical transformation. Spain and China charted divergent paths of modernization in which tradition and modernity were in constant tension, revealing the hybrid and stratified—almost palimpsestic—nature of modernities in peripheral contexts.

Influence of Western and Eastern modernity on education

Giner de los Ríos' pedagogical architecture was grafted onto the European Enlightenment legacy, establishing critical rationalism and ethical autonomy as the fundamental pillars of his educational project. His direct opposition to the mechanisms of ecclesiastical power translated into an educational praxis focused on the integral development of the individual and their dialogical engagement with public life, as Jiménez-Landi (1959) attests. The ILE was thus configured as a heterotopia—in Foucauldian terms—that consummated the epistemological rupture between academic knowledge and religious dogma, generating an environment conducive to intellectual freedom.

In the Chinese context, Cai Yuanpei articulated a counter-hegemonic synthesis that integrated Confucian values into Western currents of thought, giving rise to a pluralistic and innovative educational paradigm. His defense of academic freedom as a form of pedagogical decolonization, as well as his commitment to gender equality—through the incorporation of women into historically forbidden academic spaces—constituted, according to Zhang (2007, p. 837), a silent epistemic insurrection in modern China. This transcivilizational dialogue was not limited to superficial hybridization but operated as a strategy of cultural reform that negotiated

collective identities while incorporating principles of educational justice.

Thus, despite emerging in profoundly different historical contexts, both projects converged on a common horizon: conceiving education as a transformative instrument for the formation of critical, autonomous citizens committed to social equity. Their legacies show that educational modernity was built on crossovers and transfers between civilizations, highlighting the transnational dimension of emancipatory epistemologies.

Ideological convergences around gender equality

The affirmation of gender equality as a central axis of pedagogical modernity is one of the most enduring legacies of the educational proposals of Giner de los Ríos and Cai Yuanpei. In late 19th-century Spain, Giner de los Ríos defended the scientific education of women as a critical tool against the symbolic hegemony of patriarchy. According to Hijano del Río (2012), his project transcended the legal recognition of women's rights and implied:

- Conceiving women's education as a technology for political emancipation.
- Creating, through the ILE and the Residencia de Señoritas, counter-hegemonic educational spaces in which a feminine ethos oriented towards cultural transformation was cultivated.

At the same time, Cai Yuanpei positioned women's education as a pillar of Chinese modernization. His coeducational program—based on the systematic elimination of traditional barriers—aimed, as Yu (2013) points out, to redefine gender roles as the foundation of a more equitable society. This vision represented a break with historical legacy, opening up unprecedented opportunities for women within the Qing Empire's education system.

The gender dimension also permeated the thinking of other intellectuals, such as Manuel B. Cossío, whose work demonstrates how the debate on equality was intertwined with the sociocultural tensions inherent in educational modernity (Arias de Cossío and López Alonso, 2014). These transcontinental convergences allow us to affirm that, despite the differences between contexts, the 19th century was a crossroads from which an emerging consensus began to take shape: gender equality as an indispensable condition of the modern pedagogical imaginary.

Education and gender emancipation: Coeducation as a strategy for social transformation

Nineteenth-century coeducation operated as a device for sociocultural transformation that transcended pedagogy. Giner de los Ríos and Cai Yuanpei conceived it as an instrument for subverting gender hierarchies and building egalitarian citizenships, beyond mere spatial compartmentalization.

In Restoration Spain, the ILE integrated coeducation into an ethical-political project that, according to Jiménez-Landi (1959), promoted identical curricula and female access to philosophical-scientific knowledge to foster intellectual autonomy. The Residencia de Señoritas functioned as a laboratory of political subjectivity, training women to act in the public sphere as intellectuals, teachers, or activists, thereby challenging the symbolic foundations of patriarchy (Hijano del Río, 2012).

In the twilight of the Qing dynasty, Cai Yuanpei linked coeducation and national modernization. From an anti-feudal critique and humanist perspectives, he promoted female integration as a response to historical exclusions (Yu, 2013), going beyond formal equality to culturally deconstruct patriarchal hierarchies (Zhang, 2007). The admission of women to Peking University

embodied both emancipation and a melting pot of republican citizenship.

Coeducation is revealed as both an emancipatory praxis and a device for symbolic destabilization. Both reformers agreed on their potential to deconstruct gender imaginaries and alter entrenched power economies. In the face of neoconservative reaction, their legacy provides keys to reconceptualizing it as a tool for democratic resistance and micropolitical decolonization. The school thus becomes an epistemological field in which the radical reconfiguration of the social is contested, and a transformation toward substantive justice is projected.

Educational policies for female inclusion

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, both Spain and China promoted educational reforms aimed at female inclusion, in a context marked by strong patriarchal resistance. In the Spanish case, the ILE and the Residencia de Señoritas promoted women's intellectual and civic autonomy through coeducation, scientific literacy, and professionalization (Jiménez-Landi, 1959; Hijano del Río, 2012). In China, Cai Yuanpei introduced coeducation at Peking University as part of a modernization strategy that challenged traditional social structures and redefined the roles assigned to women in the public sphere (Yu, 2013; Zhang, 2007; Pei, 2016).

Both cases highlight the dual dimension of education as a space for emancipation and, at the same time, for the suppression of gender hierarchies, revealing the constant tensions between modernization and tradition. Although these reforms expanded women's cultural capital and opened up new possibilities for social participation, structural gender hierarchies persisted. This underscores the need to articulate educational, labor, and cultural policies that allow for effective progress toward gender justice in an increasingly globalized world.

Criticism of the patriarchal structure from the perspective of education

The educational system, as Bourdieu (1992) argues, operates as a mechanism for reproducing patriarchal habits, a structural function that the educational reforms promoted in Spain and China between 1870 and 1920 called into question by revealing the contradictions inherent in this model. These initiatives were not limited to superficial institutional transformations: they reconfigured the psychosocial foundations of power in their respective civilizational contexts.

1. Spain: Counter-hegemonic genealogy. Under the influence of Giner de los Ríos, the ILE developed an alternative educational model that challenged dominant gender norms. Through radical coeducation and scientific-humanistic training, the traditional conception of femininity was eroded, promoting women's intellectual autonomy and political agency (Jiménez-Landi, 1959). This approach took shape in the Residencia de Señoritas, conceived as an emancipatory pedagogical space that challenged the mechanisms of identity control and facilitated processes of female political subjectivation (Hijano del Río, 2012).

2. China: Symbolic insurgency. During the final period of the Qing Empire, Cai Yuanpei articulated an educational policy aimed at dismantling deeply rooted patriarchal structures. His coeducational proposal, understood as a decolonial cultural practice, employed modernizing discourses to transform the place of women in the educational system (Yu, 2013; Zhang, 2007). The admission of women to Peking University in 1920 represented a significant historical break, although it was conditioned by persistent family and social structures that limited the scope of this transformation.

3. Theoretical framework: Generic governmentality. Returning to Bourdieu (1992),

the educational system operates as a bio-device that governs corporealities through sophisticated mechanisms: the political economy of cultural capital, the performative production of docile identities, and the cartography of stratified, gendered spaces. This machinery does not merely reproduce differences; it actively produces them as political categories. Curricula become technologies of subjectivation that naturalize hierarchies, while pedagogical practices materialize a social orthopedics of gender.

Dialectics of power

The reforms analyzed constitute counter-hegemonic pedagogical acts that deconstruct androcentric frameworks, generate spaces for educational dissent, and produce situated feminist epistemologies. However, patriarchy—in its colonial-modern form—is constantly reconfiguring itself, creating tensions between emancipatory projects and educational governance mechanisms.

Profound transformation requires glocal strategies that include a critical review of curriculum content, the implementation of critical pedagogies, and the articulation of intersectional struggles. Future research should focus on mapping everyday micro-resistance that, from the local level, erodes patriarchal structures and advances toward a conception of education as a praxis of integral liberation.

Impact and legacy of gender education reforms

Structural changes in school models

The educational reforms promoted during the 19th century profoundly transformed school organization and redefined the social and symbolic frameworks of gender. Under the guidance of Francisco Giner de los Ríos in Spain and Cai Yuanpei in China, educational spaces, power relations, and gender roles were modified, promoting, in both contexts, an incipient inclusion of women in the educational system.

Deinstitutionalization and secularization

The ILE challenged the hegemony of the Church-State binomial through an autonomous, secular educational project that facilitated women's access to knowledge and weakened patriarchal authority structures (Jiménez-Landi, 1959). In China, the process of educational modernization during the transition from empire to republic enabled women to enroll at Peking University, though they faced persistent social resistance (Pei, 2016).

Curriculum review and knowledge structuring

Giner de los Ríos promoted a comprehensive education for women that incorporated scientific, humanistic, and artistic knowledge, thus overcoming the utilitarian and domestic orientation traditionally assigned to women (Hijano del Río, 2012). At the same time, Cai Yuanpei designed an educational model based on the “five educations,” which guaranteed equitable cognitive training and opened avenues for the intellectual emancipation of women (Yu, 2013).

Restructuring of space and social relations

The creation of coeducational institutions in Spain called into question gender segregation in schools and redefined teacher-student pedagogical relationships (Jiménez-Landi, 1959). In China, the founding of women's normal schools and the opening of universities transformed institutional governance, promoted female leadership in teaching, and fostered new forms of coexistence in coeducational spaces (Zhang, 2007).

Social implications

These educational transformations had a direct impact on the configuration of citizenship and the expansion of civil rights by validating women's political and intellectual agency and destabilizing the symbolic and material foundations of the patriarchal order (Fraser, 1997; Scott, 1988; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Formation of egalitarian citizenships

Towards the end of the 19th century, education emerged as a central axis in the configuration of citizenship. Both Giner de los Ríos in Spain and Cai Yuanpei in China—from markedly different sociopolitical realities—openly questioned patriarchal structures and conceived of education as a fundamental tool for advancing gender equality and the full integration of women into public life.

Beyond its instructional function, education played a decisive role in shaping values, developing critical awareness, and consolidating civic ethics. Giner, with the introduction of coeducation, challenged rigid gender segregation and promoted the intellectual autonomy of women and a renewed civic ethic (Jiménez-Landi, 1959, p. 112). For his part, Cai Yuanpei transcended the neo-Confucian framework through an integrative humanism that recognized women as subjects of rights and agents of historical transformation (Pei, 2016: 78; Yu, 2013: 145).

These initiatives faced strong opposition, grounded in discourses of “morality” and “natural roles,” reflecting the structural tension between modernizing projects and dominant cultural traditions (Scott, 1988, p. 154). The school thus became a symbolic battlefield, where disputes arose over who could be recognized as legitimate citizens. From the perspective of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, p. 211), symbolic school capital and the weight of habitus continued to reproduce social patterns that limited the transformative scope of the reforms.

Egalitarian citizenship is not the exclusive product of normative provisions, but rather the result of sustained social struggles and practices over time. The experiences promoted by Giner and Cai demonstrated that education can nurture political awareness, social responsibility, and autonomous agency, which are essential pillars of effective citizenship. Overcoming gender inequalities, therefore, requires close coordination between educational innovation and cultural transformation, which will enable patriarchal imaginaries to be dismantled from their foundations.

In short, the educational reforms undertaken in Spain and China were part of a transnational movement aimed at reimagining citizenship. Their comparative study sheds light on the profound interrelationship between education, gender, and the construction of the political, offering relevant keys for the design of educational policies with a gender perspective, even in globalized contexts marked by new complexities.

International repercussions of their proposals

The educational proposals of Francisco Giner de los Ríos and Cai Yuanpei transcended their respective national frameworks, decisively shaping the configuration of modern education systems.

Giner de los Ríos promoted a secular, critical, and coeducational pedagogy that challenged the rigidity of 19th-century confessional systems, not only in Spain but also in other regions

of Western Europe. The ILE became a benchmark for educational movements in Latin America, promoting active citizenship, educational equity, and a comprehensive vision of human development (Jiménez-Landi, 1959; Hijano del Río, 2012). For his part, Cai Yuanpei, at the helm of Peking University (1917-1927), articulated Confucian thought with Western-based Enlightenment and humanist currents. His defense of coeducation and women's access to university contributed to a profound redefinition of the Chinese educational system and influenced other Asian contexts (Yu, 2013; Pei, 2016).

The right to female education turned schools into a field of epistemological dispute: established orders were subverted, and new practices of citizenship were instituted. This transnational influence crystallized in:

- Affirmative action mechanisms with an intersectional approach,
- Decolonial curriculum designs that dismantle androcentrism, and effective redistribution of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1992).

In a global context, the ideas of Giner de los Ríos and Cai are highly relevant today. Their proposals on coeducation, comprehensive education, and overcoming hierarchies provide keys to addressing the current challenges of inclusion and gender justice. Their legacy reinforces the need for authentic intercultural dialogue that, without renouncing the principles of equality and freedom, combats both cultural homogenization and the reproduction of inequalities. They thus demonstrate that egalitarian education—truly subversive education—can shape freer and more humanized societies.

Final reflections

The pedagogical proposals of Giner de los Ríos and Cai Yuanpei offer fundamental keys to addressing current challenges in gender equality and social justice through education. Both understood that school is not a neutral space, but a field of symbolic struggle in which identities are constructed, and social hierarchies are perpetuated—or questioned (Bourdieu, 1992). In this sense, coeducation should be understood as a political strategy that transcends mere coexistence between the sexes to dismantle stereotypes, transform the curriculum, and redefine institutional structures (Gimeno Sacristán, 2000, 2018).

Its approach, centered on a comprehensive education that articulates knowledge, ethics, and social responsibility (Freire, 1996), raises the need for structural reforms in teacher training, content, and school governance. Only in this way is it possible to respond to intersectional inequalities of gender, class, and ethnicity. Globalization, far from guaranteeing inclusion, has generated new forms of exclusion that require critical, intercultural, and decommodified educational frameworks (De Sousa Santos, 2010).

Giner and Cai anticipated this vision by promoting a dialogue between diverse philosophical traditions—Krausism and Confucianism, European humanism and Eastern thought—to construct situated, inclusive, and culturally pluralistic pedagogical models. Their critique of patriarchal reproduction and their active defense of women's participation in public life position education as an ethical-emancipatory project, essential for the construction of real citizenship.

Far from belonging only to the past, their ideas remain fully relevant in the face of the current challenges of global education: the commodification of knowledge, the exclusion of the most vulnerable groups, and the persistence of sexist discourses. Recovering their legacy responds not only to historical interest but also to the need to rethink education as a field

of ideological dispute, where new forms of democratic and non-patriarchal subjectivity can emerge. This requires future research that analyzes the contemporary institutionalization and reinterpretation of her proposals from interdisciplinary approaches that articulate intellectual history, gender studies, and critical theory.

CONCLUSIONS

A comparison of the educational reforms promoted by Francisco Giner de los Ríos in Spain and Cai Yuanpei in China demonstrates how education in the 19th century served as a tool for modernization and gender emancipation. Both reformers understood gender equality not as a moral aspiration, but as a necessary foundation for rational and free citizenship. In this context, coeducation was configured as an ethical-political project aimed at challenging patriarchal hierarchies. As Amorós (1997) points out, the universalization of reason requires the active inclusion of women in the public sphere of education.

This work has also highlighted the value of intercultural dialogue in the construction of inclusive pedagogies. Far from replicating Western models, Giner and Cai reinterpreted their philosophical traditions to project a plural and contextualized educational modernity (王承绪, 2001). This perspective contributes to dismantling Eurocentric narratives and making local reforms with universal aspirations visible.

In the face of persistent structural gender inequalities, their legacy remains highly relevant today. Recovering their proposals is not merely a historical exercise, but rather a re-inscription of education as a space for ideological dispute and social transformation.

Future studies should explore the institutionalization and reinterpretation of these proposals, adopting interdisciplinary approaches—from intellectual history to gender studies—that allow us to understand the role of education in building more egalitarian and culturally diverse societies.

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