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**WOMEN, LITERACY AND LIBERATION  
IN RURAL CHINA**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines female illiteracy in rural China, bearing in mind the government's commitment since 1949 to female emancipation, universal literacy and the transformation of the whole of Chinese society. It aims first, to discover what has been achieved and why educational opportunities for rural women and girls are still much poorer than those of rural males or urban males and females. Second, it aims to understand how literacy practice is gendered in China and how this gendering undermines efforts to eliminate illiteracy amongst rural females in particular.

This study is situated within the framework of research on Chinese women defined by scholars concerned with the changing status of women in China. In pursuing the aims of this research, I have also needed to draw on current debates from the three different fields which intersect in this study: literacy, gender and rural studies. Each of these three fields represents a different kind of social practice, which has its own sets of values, ideologies and practices which interact to produce female illiteracy in rural China. In addition to the above, I have analyzed national data and used official government reports to give a broad view of the situation across the country; and provided a detailed analysis of my own data collected in a specific rural locality in central China.

This analysis finds that although the greatest reductions in illiteracy have occurred amongst females, being female still is the single most discriminatory factor associated with illiteracy in China. It also demonstrates that the proportion of the remaining illiterates who are female and rural is increasing. Furthermore, not only are many girls in rural areas still being denied the same educational opportunities for education as rural boys (and urban boys and girls), many married women in rural areas find they have little opportunity to use their literacy skills and hence, these skills are gradually being lost. The reason for this is that literacy practice is gendered according to cultural expectations which are expressed through

the gender division of labour, patrilocal marriage, and the processes involving the production and dissemination of knowledge.

The thesis concludes that neither economic advancement nor the improvement in educational opportunities have brought about male/female or urban/rural equality of opportunity and that literacy data suggests that there has been little change in the position of rural women relative to rural males, or to urban males and females.