

China: The Status of Women Today

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Over 40 years ago, Chairman Mao Zedong announced, "Women hold up half of the sky." This was a clear declaration that in China women and men were equal. Women were not to be discriminated against because of sex. Later, this concept of equality was enshrined into law in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China which states:

Women in the People's Republic of China enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life, political, economic, cultural and social, including family life.

The State protects the rights and interests of women, applies the principle of equal pay for equal work for men and women alike and trains and selects cadres from among women (Article 48).

The law protecting women's constitutional rights went into effect in 1982. Implementation is under way but our information, gleaned from a variety of sources, will show that discrimination still persists in many forms. According to the *China Daily*:

- 70% of the illiterate population are women;
- the majority of school dropouts are girls;
- in cities 70% of the unemployed are women;
- higher standards are set for female job applicants;
- some enterprises force women workers of child-bearing age to quit (CD, July 14, 1993).

One of the consequences of the State's decision to transform the central planned economy to a market economy is a surfeit of workers. As Chinese enterprises run into debt, workers are laid off. In some places 60% of those laid off are women.

In the People's Republic of China in 1949, the policy of the central government was equal pay for equal work, but today, *equal* work has taken on a different meaning. The All China Federation of Trade Unions has shown that a woman's labour productivity is two-thirds that of a man. As a result, work places tend to turn down female job applicants (CD, June 30, 1993).

Women for Sale

In China's long history as a feudal society the sale of women was commonplace. Unfortunately, the custom has come to light again. The practice persists, especially in the poor areas of the countryside.

According to the *Beijing Review*, material wealth and economic gain are two reasons for the revival of the old custom of abducting, buying and selling women. Some women are auctioned off and sold to brothels for prostitution in Taiwan and Thailand. Most victims are between the ages of 16-25 and come from economically and culturally deprived areas of China (*B.R. July 1991*). Others, according to the *South China Morning Post*, are kidnapped from poor villages and sold, often to farmers who cannot find a wife in their own village. China's Public Security Bureau (PSB) said that from 1991-1992, 75,000 were arrested for trafficking in the women's trade. Each year in China, close to one million girls are added to the list of "missing females" (*SCMP, 11/5/93*). The government is determined to put a stop to this lucrative and immoral practice. They have shown how serious they are by sentencing two people to death and several others to life imprisonment for human trafficking in Shandong Province alone (Jinan Shandong People's Radio, 15 July and reported in China, a Country Profile, 1991).

Chinese Women Exported for Brides

Another profitable business in the exploitation of women is the exporting of Chinese brides. According to recent reports, mail order marriages with Chinese brides are growing increasingly popular despite the high risk of failure in such matches and despite complaints from human rights groups who say the business of brokering foreign brides is akin to a slave trade. Energetic marriage brokers have established a booming business matching Chinese supply with Japanese demand--particularly in the countryside. The number of Chinese, mostly women, who entered Japan with spouse visas jumped to 1,779 in 1991, nearly triple the 657 in 1990 (*SCMP 23/6/93*)

Marriage, Children and Divorce

Some Laws Regarding Marriage and Children

The marriage laws restrict the marriage age for men to 22 and women to 20 and discourage childbearing until a woman is 24 (*CCP, Dec., 1991*). To restrict population growth China has promoted family planning, birth control, abortions and finally, the One Child Family policy. Incentives such as school and other subsidies, financial bonuses, larger homes, larger rations of grain, etc., have been provided for those who observe the One Child policy promulgated in 1980. Those who fail to observe it are often fined, coerced to have abortions and even, in some cases, forced to be sterilized.

By long tradition males have always been preferred to females in China whether to carry on the family name, to work on the farms and, according to popular belief, to care for parents in sickness and old age. This cultural conditioning got a jolt recently. In a country that prides itself on its tradition that sons are favoured because for 3000 years the elderly have been supported mainly by sons, the results of a survey conducted by the China Research Centre on Aging revealed that daughters and even daughters-in-law can really be more depended upon than sons to look after elderly parents. When it comes to helping urban old folks with their daily lives, spouses and daughters top the list: spouses, 42.3%, daughters 20.2%, sons, 13.3%, house keepers, 8.2%, and the community 1.9% (*CD Apr. 2, 1993*).

The One Child Family policy is largely responsible for the gross imbalance in the sex ratio at birth. Before its implementation the gender ratio in China was 105 males to 100 females which is considered normal worldwide. Today, "In China there are 113 males for every 100 females, the most imbalanced gender ratio on earth..." (*Stanley Rosen in SCMP Aug. 28, 1993*).

According to another survey the ratio in 1992 was 118.5 males to 100 females. Officials were so shocked that they ordered the results of the survey kept secret. This is 13 points off the international ratio (*SCMP taken from the NYTimes, July 22, 1993*). Whether the imbalanced ratio is actually correct is anyone's guess since many female births go unreported and unregistered. This makes it possible for couples to have a

second child hoping they will have a boy. Unreported and unregistered female births, however, often mean no education and lifelong disadvantages for the girl.

Baby girls, especially in the rural areas, are often expendable. In Jiangsu Province in eastern China, for example, each year more than 700 baby girls are discarded on the street. Sometimes girl babies are the victims of infanticide. Officially, the government opposes such measures but has not yet been completely successful in eradicating the practice.

A new technological wonder machine is also militating against women. The use of the ultrasound scanner to determine the sex of a baby before birth is fast becoming the most profitable equipment available in China. According to a report 12% of all female fetuses were aborted or otherwise unaccounted for in 1992 (*SCMP quoting the New York Times, July 22, 1993*).

The Chinese government is in the process of drafting a law to protect women from traditional forms of discrimination and modern forms of maltreatment. Wu Chanzhen, the drafter of the law says the law will cover female right to education, bar discrimination in the job market, abduction, buying, selling and prostitution (*CD, Feb. 22, 1993*).

Divorce: Changing Attitudes

Laws permitting either husband or wife the right to sue for divorce were introduced in China as early as 1950. These laws were formulated mostly to dissolve pre-arranged marriages that either partner found intolerable. According to Maria Hsia Chang, by the middle of 1952, nearly a million divorces had been granted, mostly at the instigation of women. In some instances divorce action was so traumatic that wives seeking divorce were often murdered by their husbands or committed suicide. By the late 1950s the government had reversed its policy, and a divorce could only be granted with the consent of the husband. (*Women in Human Rights in the People's Republic of China, pp. 144, 250-256*).

Reforms in the marriage laws were again introduced and revised in 1981. These allowed for divorce at the request of either party "in cases of complete alienation of mutual affection and when mediation has failed.."

The following are grounds for divorce more frequently

claimed by women today:

--inability to communicate due usually to not knowing spouse well-enough before marriage;

--because of a third party involvement and one of the spouses wanting to remarry;

--habitual drunkenness, gambling or violence (plaintiffs in these cases always women);

--breaking the law or having to go to prison.

Divorces in 1991 rose from 581,000 in 1987 to 829,000. The general divorce rate is 1.43 per 1000 marriages. (*BR, Sept. 7-12, 1992*).

China's ten years of reform and opening to the outside world have had a definite impact on marriage. In China where arranged and/or negotiated marriages have a long history, a recent survey revealed that today 78.34% of men and 69.72% of women no longer expect or want this kind of marriage. A total of 77.45% of urban women chose their spouses themselves, 16% more than their rural counterparts (*CT, Aug. 1992*).

Traditional attitudes towards divorce have changed drastically:

1) Divorce is not longer considered as disgraceful by many. According to a survey conducted by the Beijing Marriage and Family Research Society only 7.7% of men and 11% of women thought divorce was a disgrace. The survey indicated that 65.5% of men and 70% of women thought divorce did not necessarily cause resentment between the two parties involved.

2) The traditional idea of being either a spouse or an enemy has changed-- 41.2% of divorces are by agreement.

3) More women than men are likely to take divorce action. Among those seeking divorce, 80% had married someone of their own choice. The main cause of divorce was lack of respect for each other and 90% of marriages broke up between the first and fifth year of marriage.

Divorce is a relatively new factor in Chinese society and China has become alarmed with the growing divorce rate and the effect this may have on children. Television, newspapers, magazines and the All-China Women's Federation are all cooperating to help couples build good marriages. Some marriage and family research societies also organized con-

sulting groups to provide advice and counseling (*CT, Aug. 1992*).

Some Statistical Data Related to Women in China

According to a survey conducted by the All China Women's Federation and the State Statistical Bureau in September 1990:

--There are currently 51.4 million female employees in China, 37.4 percent of the total.

--13 million women are receiving adult education (*CNCR Feb. 21, 1992*).

--8.7 million women are working as cadres in various departments, which is 39% of the total number. This is more than 25 times that of 40 years ago. Women hold 6.7% of the posts of minister or vice-minister; 6.3% of the posts of provincial governor or vice-governor and 4.1% of the posts of Party secretary or deputy secretary (*PRCYB 1990-91, p. 446*).

--The National People's Congress has two vice-chairwomen and over 630 female delegates, which accounts for 21.3% of the total.

--There are 8.5 million female technicians and scientists, more than 35% of the total (*CNCR, Feb. 21, 1992*).

--The All-China Women's Federation has provided 12.5 million women in the rural areas with training in technical skills; 1.5 million have attended agriculture classes and 340,000 have been granted technical titles (*BR, Nov.-Dec. 1992*).

--There are 17,087 professors engaged in teaching in China's institutions of higher education and in research establishments; 1570 or 9.2% of all professors are women (*BR, Mar. 11-17, 1991*).

--There are 9,000 female lawyers and one in every six judges is female.

--More than 10 million women are working in scientific and technological fields (*BR, Mar. 9-15, 1992*).

--81% of women believe women and men are equal before the law but only 42.39% of women believe that men and women are equal in social status. Inequalities still exist in education, employment and participation in politics.

--25% of 16 year old schoolgirls would rather be boys. Psychologists believe that young girls' dissatisfaction with their gender can be attributed to physiological factors, to the

concept that men are superior to women and because males have more advantages in recruitment, employment and job assignments (*CNCR, #1923*).

--There are 30 million children aged 5-14 who have never gone to school or who have dropped out before completing elementary school due to lack of money; 83% of 7-14 year olds not in school are girls. Reasons: poverty and traditional attitudes (*BR, Aug. 24-39, 1992*).

--There are 220 million illiterates in China. Women account for 80% of the illiterate and semiliterate, a percentage higher than 67% worldwide. (*CNA, Jan. 15, 1993*).

--35.91% believe that women who bear girls are discriminated against.

--20.56%, mainly in rural areas, saw a problem for daughters in inheriting property. (*CT, Mar. 1992*)

--In the Protestant Church, in 1989, there were 90 women pastors, 10% of the total number; the aim is for 30% in 1994.

--Women make up one-half of the student body in the 13 Protestant theological training centres in China.

--Of the 71 Standing Committee members of the Three-self Movement Committee and the China Christian Council, there are only 10 women (*IGI, Vol 10 No. 3, 1991*).

--Of the 272 delegates to the Fifth National Catholic Representatives Conference, 28 or 10.3% were women.

--Of the 178 members of the General Committee of the Catholic Patriotic Association, 14 are women and of the 66 members of the Standing Committee, 4 are women (*CCIC No. 4, 1992*).

--There are 1200 Sisters assisting in pastoral or other Church-related works and approximately 1000 more in formation.

--A few Catholic Sister theologians have been invited to teach in some of China's seminaries, but there are no Catholic Sisters or lay women studying theology in China's Catholic Seminaries. There are a few lay women on some staffs.

Women Making Strides

News about women in China are not all bleak. Women in Guangdong Province feel they have made great strides:

--During the past decade 7.35 million women have found

work in secondary and tertiary industries alone--three times the number employed before the open door policy.

--The proportion of educated women has also increased. Of the women surveyed 62.8% between the ages of 18 and 45 had a middle school education, 51.7% more than the older generation (*ZF/CWD in BR Mar.2-8, 1992*).

Women and the Media

Unlike most other countries in the world, China has a considerable number of women famous for their work in the media. China has 54 women regular movie directors. Women directors have produced one fourth of all films in recent years and have won nearly one half of the country's film awards.

Among the most notable film directors in China are Dong Kena, Wang Junzheng and Hu Mei. Each has made a significant contribution to China's growing film industry.

Dong Kena became famous overnight with her first film, *A Blade of Grass at the Top of the Kunlun Mountain*. Other successes include *The Lost Dream*, *Wives on the Loess Plateau*, and *A Young Girls' Hotel*

Wang Junzheng is famous for children's films, among them: *Miao Miao* and *Echo Bird*. *Echo Bird* was the most often screened Chinese film at the 1991 Cannes Film Festival. She is also renown for films about women. *The First Woman in the Forest* expresses her interest in matters relating to love and ethics. Much of her appeal lies in her ability to express the feelings of women and children.

Hu Mei is the youngest film director in China. She graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1986. In 1984 she co-directed *Army Nurse* and in 1986 she directed *Far from War*. She thinks of her films as prose-poetry in which she explores her heroine's psychology (*Army Nurse*, and the unbalanced mental world of a retired army officer (*The War Years*). Dr. Paul Clark, chairman of the Hawaii Film Festival in his book *Ten Years of Chinese Film* comments, "Hu Mei is the first film director in China who is good at deep psychological analysis, thus she initiated a psychological style in China's film making."

Women, their lives, and very frequently their very tragic

lives, have become the subject matter for some of China's most popular films. A work of singular artistry on this subject is *The Death of Five Young Girls*. Produced by Emei Film Studios the film describes the tragic lives of five young Chinese women in a remote mountain village in Hunan Province in the 1930s (CT, Mar. 1991).

Women in China are also prominent in television productions. Naturally, many of their works relate to women, their social status and growing aspirations for freedom. One of the year's most popular TV programs has been the fourteen part series, *Woman Is Not the Moon* directed by Pan Xia. The aim of this series is to raise the level of awareness of all Chinese women in both the rural and urban areas. This drama about women has won acclaim all over China.

Some of Pan Xia's outstanding works deal with historic subjects: *Giants Shake Hands* about the leaders of the revolution and a series entitled, *Soong Ching Ling and Her Sisters*, the first ever T.V. series to center on the lives of the Soong Sisters. The series was an instant success and has attracted Japan's and Singapore's attention. These two countries have bought the copyright of the TV series.

Pan Xia has been named the outstanding woman director in China and is the winner of the Golden Eagle prize, China's highest honor for Chinese T.V. drama (BR, Mar. 29-Apr. 4, 1993.)

Guide to References Cited

BR	<i>Beijing Review</i>
CCIC	<i>Catholic Church in China</i>
CCP	<i>China Country Profile</i>
CD	<i>China Daily</i>
CNA	<i>China News Analysis</i>
CNCR	<i>China News and Church Report</i>
CT	<i>China Today</i>
IGI	<i>In God's Image</i>
SCMP	<i>South China Morning Post</i>
UCAN	<i>Union of Catholic Asian News</i>
ZFB	<i>Zhongguo Funu Bao</i>