

THE CHINESE WOMAN IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

by Betty Ann Maheu, M.M.

Introduction

Over forty years ago, Mao Zedong announced, “Women hold up half of the sky.” This was a clear declaration that in China women and men were to be treated as equals. This concept of equality is stated clearly in the Constitution of the People’s Republic.

Women in the People’s Republic of China enjoy 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 of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women, promulgated in 1992, further explains the intent of Article 48. The law

states that women enjoy:

- political rights with men.
- equal rights with men with respect to culture and education.
- equal working rights with men.
- equal property rights with men.
- equal rights with men relating to their persons.
- equal rights with men in marriage and the family.

As China prepares to host the largest international conference ever held in China, the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women from September 4-15, 1995, it is also assessing the progress it has made in implementing the Equal Rights legislation.

China is the first to admit that in its present *primary stage of socialism*, certain provisions on the legal rights of women need to be improved.¹ A recent survey sponsored by the All-China Women's Federation and the State Statistical Bureau involving nearly 50,000 men and women from all walks of life, between the ages of 18 and 64, from seventeen of China's provinces, concluded that: "The social status of women in China has changed greatly, especially in employment, education and the family." It also pointed out that "Women's self-improvement in different occupations, social levels and regions has not been balanced." The final statement admitted, "Many women are still far from realizing equality with men in cultural standing, educational level,

social participation and self-recognition.”²

Nonetheless, China watchers are unanimous in acknowledging that China has come a long way since September 1988, when the Chinese representatives at an International Conference in Montreal, Canada, were informed that a study on the position of women in various countries had found that China ranked 132nd in the world.³

The Status of Women throughout the Ages

What has been the status of women in China throughout the ages? Students of China’s leading philosophies maintain that Confucius believed in the equality of the sexes. Buddha broke with the tradition that men were superior and even allowed some women to become his disciples. Some anthropologists even hold that long ago, especially among the minority groups, China had a matriarchal system. This system bestowed great prestige on women. In many Lahu families, for instance, the head of the household was female, property was inherited through the daughters; the family name was that of the wife. When men and woman married, the husband had first to work in his wife’s natal home. The wife could also order her husband out of the house and the poor chap could only take his clothes and tools with him. The fact that the woman was responsible for raising children made her the most important person in the society. Many

believe that today's universal consciousness of woman's right to protection and respect actually stems from the respect, trust and obedience accorded women in matrilineal societies. When important changes in China's economic structures took place and physical strength became the mainstay of labour, the matrilineal society was transformed into a patrilineal one. Power fell into the hands of the male and women lost their superiority status, their right to property and prestige, their autonomy both in marriage and in the economy.⁴

Confucius and Women's Role

Did Confucius really believe in the equality of the sexes? If so, where then do those norms which even today define so much of a woman's role in the Chinese family and society come from? In the *Analects* (XV11:25) we read, "In one's own household, it is the woman and the small-minded men that are the most difficult to deal with." And Mencius, Confucius' disciple, says, "When you arrive at your new home (he is speaking to the new bride) you are never to disobey your husband" (Mencius 38:2). And "the only proper norms of behaviour for concubines or wives are obedience and docility." A woman is bound by the three obediences: to father, to husband and to her son in her widowhood. Among the feminine virtues mentioned by Confucius "fidelity to the memory of the dead husband" is the noblest.

The Status of Women Today

In China as elsewhere, the woman's role in the family and society has gone through many vicissitudes. Since the demise of the *Gang of Four*, China has given serious thought to the position of wives and mothers in China's society. Throughout its first 40 years of rule China's Socialist government tried unsuccessfully to wipe out any vestige of Confucian tradition that might have an impact on family life. But the influence of Confucianism, at least as it has been institutionalized in China, is still present and operative both in the rural areas and large cities. Recently, even the government, conscious of the moral vacuum in the country, is promoting Confucius and Confucian values.

The Confucian tradition is not the only factor militating against the equality of women in China. Many long standing customs work against her interests. Girl infanticides—though condemned by the government—and the disproportionate number of female abortions stem from a long history of preferring a son to a daughter. Mencius once commented, "There are three things which are unfilial, and to have no [male] posterity is the greatest of them all (4A:26). Brides are still sold and even exported for profit and women account for a small percentage of China's educated elite, of cadres, professionals and delegates to the National People's Congress. Inequalities are still rampant in education, employment and

politics. According to the *China Daily* (14/7/93), 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, and many enterprises force women of child-bearing age to quit.

Torn between Tradition and Necessity

The Chinese woman today is torn between tradition and necessity. While she is still expected to stay at home, to be a loving wife and devoted mother, she is also expected to compete with men in the workplace. She is responsible for fertility control and child care. With the new policy of openness, she is often expected to bring in a second salary to help raise the family's standard of living. And she is also expected to do equal work for unequal pay! The need to abide by traditional values and yet meet their own personal needs as well as the challenges of the times have placed a heavy psychological burden on many Chinese women threatening to make them split personalities. They are pulled in many opposing directions and confused by changing marital, family and societal values. Neither Confucianism nor socialist policies seem to offer any real solution to the problem. A woman, wife and mother trying to pursue a lucrative and important career complains: " I have no time

for tenderness, but is it my fault?" Another sighs, "I am so tired but I have no time to rest." Another pleads, "Tell me frankly, which part of my life I should give up?"

Women in the Catholic Church in China

Does the Catholic Church in China have anything to offer the modern woman to help her confront her difficult task? Does it stand out as a herald of good news for women? for their liberation and their equality with men? A few visits to some of China's churches and convents and a few conversations with lay women and women religious are enough to convince quickly even the most casual observer that "it's a long, long road to freedom".

Because the equality of men and women is deeply fixed in the Scriptures and the dignity of the human person and respect for life deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, women enjoy a certain protection. Within this context, a pregnant Christian woman is less likely than her non-Christian counterpart to opt for an abortion on sex selection alone. A girl child is also less likely to be the victim of infanticide. However, women in the Church in China sense the same kind of sexism experienced by their sisters throughout the world, and I would venture to say, because of culture and tradition, in an even more pervasive form. It is rare in China to see a woman lector and I have never seen a girl or woman

acolyte or a woman distributing Communion. Women are seldom seen anywhere near the sanctuary. This is strange since much of the church's survival in China is due to lay women and women religious who, during long years of persecution, kept the flame of faith alive among Catholics when bishops and priests were relegated to prisons and work camps.

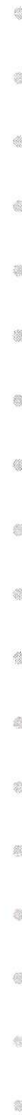
Sexism will remain a "sin" in the Church and in society until there is a change of attitude, of mentality and a change in the structures of power. In China where the very culture and traditions foster male dominance, it is unreal to think that discrimination, whether in society or the Church, can be overcome within a short time. Before the Church can eliminate its discrimination against women, it must confront and admit the sexism found in its own structures, expand its locus of authority and share its decision making processes.

To achieve equality in the Church, the women of China will have to have access to the same theological and spiritual formation as men; they will have to have available the kind of education that will make them aware of the state of injustice under which they live; they will have to develop a sense of self-sufficiency and independence and, women in the rural areas of China, especially, will need to develop a greater sense of their personal dignity and a more positive self-image.

Perhaps the Church in China is not yet ready to enter into the woman's struggle for equality. The Church is just now rising from the ashes of some 40 years of persecution; Catholics are busy picking up the pieces of their lives and molding them into a new design; they are renovating or reconstructing their churches systematically destroyed by a Communist regime; they are occupied with catching up with Vatican II; with changes in the liturgy, theology and ecclesiology, with building seminaries and training young men for the priesthood. Much will be lost to the Church in China if, in the long run, the State is the first to recognize the importance of women in maintaining an equilibrium between prosperity and harmony, and values that foster morality in the midst of rapidly changing societal structures. The Church in China cannot afford to turn a deaf ear to women who are essential to the Church's on-going welfare and development. It cannot afford to ignore women who, like Mary, the Church's perfect model, are women of faith whose compassion and tender nurturing can go a long way towards healing the division existing in the Church and effecting a longed for and badly needed reconciliation.

Notes

1. *Beijing Review*, June 6-12, 1994, pp.12-13.
2. *China Today*, Vol. XLI, No.3, March 3, 1992, pp.13-15.
3. *China News Analysis*, January 15, 1993, #1477, p.1
4. Guo Xianlin, "Minority Matrilineal/Matriarchal Systems," *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, Summer 1993, Vol 25, No.9.



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