

EDITORIAL

This issue of *Tripod* is an attempt to situate the women of China, yesterday and today, within China's tradition and modern culture. It is also an attempt to define the situation of women within the universal reality. "Frailty," Hamlet exclaims, echoing the Scriptures, "thy name is woman!" The Bible often comments on women unflatteringly, "She is fickle and unruly, in her home her feet cannot rest." (Prov. 8:11)

The medieval concept was not much more flattering. According to St. Thomas, the birth of a woman was an accident of an ill south wind. Actually, the situation hasn't changed much.

History attests that, for centuries women everywhere have been perceived, or even perceived themselves, to be inferior to men. Today, however, in the social, economic and political spheres, women are determined to claim their God-given equal status.

The Church is a reflection of culture both in its theology and in its institutional forms. Since the first century the Church, hand in hand with the world, has supported ideas of woman's inferiority. It has opposed her emotionality (femininity) to male rationality; her frailty against his strength (yet women live longer than men in all societies); her powerlessness against his power and thereby reinforced cultural patterns set by a pre-Christian or even by the non-Christian world.

For thousands of years a woman in China was strictly restricted by the Confucian code of conduct which required her to be obedient first to her father, and then to her husband, and later to her son. Women worked with men side by side in the rice fields, but unlike the men, they were never taught to read and write. They had no control over property, money, or other resources. They had no role whatsoever in Chinese society.

In many ways, 1949, the year of the founding of the People's Republic of China, proved to be a watershed year for

women in China. The new government eager to rid itself of any feudal or even colonial ideas decided to liberate women from many of the chains that had bound them for centuries. The government outlawed foot binding; it made education available to girls as well as to boys; it encouraged women to work alongside of men to build the new China. Women were to become an integral part of the decision making process in the government and in its social institutions. Outlawed were the marriage practices that allowed for child brides, for a father to marry off his daughter without her consent, a practice that for centuries often ended by making a young woman the slave of her in-laws. Finally, woman was liberated from male dominance and the Confucian obediences. She was even allowed to keep her own family name rather than take on her husband's. The government indeed passed magnificent rules and laws ensuring women's equality in the political, economic, cultural and social arenas (cf. pp. 62-71).

In 1995, women in China received another boost when China played host to the UN Fourth World Conference for Women. The stress, taken seriously by Chinese women, was on equal opportunities for women in education, health and politics and in the right to work. These new concepts would surely enhance her social status.

And yet after over 50 years of Communist rule, much remains to be done. Women in competition for jobs are under tremendous pressure from their male counterparts and are soon vanquished. The male gender preference is still alive and well. Girl infanticide has reached alarming proportions with little girls abandoned and left to die even in the gutters of the cities or drowned immediately after birth. Poverty among women is still preventing them from getting an education. It is well to ponder the words of Imat T. Kittami, Under Secretary General of the United Nations, "Chinese people often say that 'women hold up half the sky.' If half of the sky should fall, men could not be safe. So both men and women have to help hold up the sky."