

# The Changing Role and Status of Women in China

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## **Introduction**

China is both an old country and a new country, and its attitudes toward women reflect that duality. After existing as a feudal society for nearly 3,000 years, the new China emerged with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The country's modernization has continued in the last 15 years with the institution of economic reform and a policy of interaction with the outside world.

## **I. The Status of Women in Feudal China**

Confucian philosophy preached women's inferiority to men. Women were to remain ignorant and to obey--first, their fathers; after marriage, their husbands; during widowhood, their sons. Marriages were arranged, and a woman's responsibility was to remain married, no matter how undesirable the match. Divorce was not allowed or remarriage by widows. Chastity archways were built for women who killed themselves when their husbands died. The major role of women, considered the private property of men, was to please their husbands and to bear children. Symbolic of women's subservience was the practice of binding women's feet. Introduced in China during the last Tang dynasty, this practice lasted nearly 1,000 years. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, women had to bind their feet to be eligible for a husband.

## **II. Women's Status (1949-1979)**

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the status of women in China changed dramatically. The Chinese Communist Party and the people's government recognized that the liberation of women, who constituted half the population of China, was necessary for the country to realize complete emancipation.

The new government promulgated a series of laws, policies, and regulations that protected women. The Chinese Constitution of the early 1950s stated clearly that Chinese women enjoyed equal rights with men in political, economic, social, cultural, and family life. The state protected women's rights and interests, practiced equal pay for equal work, and provided equal opportunity for women's training and promotion. China's Marriage Law eliminated arranged marriages, stipulating that both women and men were free to choose their marriage partners, and widows were allowed to remarry. The Inheritance Law recognized the equal right of women to inherit family property. The Labor Insurance Regulations Law of 1951 guaranteed women 56 days of maternity leave with full pay. The Land Reform Law of the early 1950s provided rural women with an equal share of land under their own name, thereby protecting their economic independence.

Until passage of the economic reform policy in 1979, the government's protective policy toward women enabled Chinese women to maintain jobs while becoming mothers and raising families. Despite the country's huge population, China allowed everyone a share from the "big iron bowl." During this period, little competition existed, wealth was relatively evenly divided, and the huge population generally was fed and clothed, though at a low standard. This policy worked well initially; people believed in revolutionary ideas and in working for the well-being of the country. Few luxury goods were available, so greed was minimal. Few crimes were committed, and the country was in many respects an ideal society. It also was a closed society, with very little contact with the West. The United States did not recognize the new China and instituted an embargo on its goods.

This period of relative calm and satisfaction didn't last. China gradually expanded its contacts with the outside world. About the same time, the Chinese people began to realize that without competition, those who worked hard got no more reward than those who worked very little or not at all, and lazy workers could not be dismissed. Talented people with initiative became frustrated. The society began to stagnate, and economic development slowed.

Political movements within China, such as the anti-rightist campaign and the "Cultural Revolution," provided negative messages to the great masses of Chinese people. People saw that China was lagging behind the outside world and that reforms were needed.

## **III. Introduction of Economic Reform**

China's economic reform and opening up to the outside world began in 1978 with the convening of the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Communist Party National Congress. It developed and picked up speed after the 12th Party National Congress in 1982. The purpose of the reform was to remove the negative effects of the Cultural Revolution, to free people's minds, and to shift the emphasis of the government's work to economic reconstruction. This meant implementing general reform and opening China to Western technology and investments to increase the country's strength, to enhance China's economic development, and to improve the general standard of living for the Chinese people.

The most striking feature of reform in the countryside was the introduction of the household contract responsibility system, which linked remuneration to output and increased farmers' enthusiasm and productivity. Parallel to this development was the quick emergence and development of township and cottage industries, which successfully absorbed the excess labor force released from the land, while avoiding the concentration of this floating population into big cities.

Official statistics show that China's total rural industrial output value in 1992 surpassed 1,000 billion yuan (US\$166.7 billion). At present, one of every five rural workers in China is engaged in rural enterprises, which now account for 30 percent of the country's gross national product (GNP). Some of these rural enterprises compete in the world market.

The development of the tourist and service trades also absorbed a lot of surplus labor in the cities and provided impetus to the economic upsurge. In October 1992, the 14th Party National Congress formally confirmed the objective of reforming China's economic system into a socialist market economy. Financial, labor, science and technology, and real estate markets all are growing. State-owned enterprises compete with collectives and with private and foreign-funded enterprises. Market competition now flourishes in China.

## **IV. Women's Role and Status in China Since the Reform**

The role and status of women in China today is characterized by increased opportunities along with intense competition and major challenges.

## **A. Increased Opportunities**

As the commodity economy has developed in China, men in the rural areas have migrated to the cities. In some labor force. As noted, labor in the country-side is no longer restricted to farm work. Household industries, processing industries using local raw materials, and handicrafts are flourishing. Farmers, freed from the notion that being prosperous is against tradition, are working hard to become rich. Statistics indicate that rural industry now engages 85 million people, 35 million (40%) of whom are women. Women's federations in many rural areas have helped to launch programs to develop court-yard economies, i.e., the intensive and efficient use of small family plots. For example, the roofs of farmers' houses are covered with gourds; fruit trees and grape trellises have been planted in the yards; poultry and domestic animals are raised beneath these plants; mushrooms are grown underground. Women produce baskets, sofa cushions, and straw mats using maize husks, which formerly would have been used as firewood. Embroidery factories employ young women, who can continue to have babies while doing piece work at home.

By the end of 1989, over 6 million business women were employed in Chinese cities and townships. In large and medium-sized cities, 80-90% of working age women were employed in factories and businesses or were self-employed. As women in China gained opportunities to develop their talents and capabilities, "strong and capable women" emerged as entrepreneurs, scientists, engineers, doctors, and government leaders.

Today, women are mayors or vice mayors in 250 of the 514 cities in China. The Chinese Women Mayors Society, established in 1991, has a growing membership and is welcomed by women in China. The China Socialist Women Entrepreneurs Association held a seminar to discuss China's market economy. Women entrepreneurs throughout China were invited to participate; 50 of them were honored for their outstanding achievements. Among those honored was Jinko, a Mongolian woman, who in 1983 at the age of 39, opened a restaurant and then developed trade with the former Soviet Republics bordering Mongolia. Jinko later bought three Y7-100C2 aircraft from Xian Aircraft Manufacturing Company. With her husband as partner and in cooperation with a national airline, she plans to begin an airline service for the whole Mongolian Autonomous Region.

Chinese women also have been very successful in sports, winning more gold medals than Chinese men. According to a public opinion poll conducted in 1992, eight of the nation's ten best athletes were women.

In 1992, in Beijing, 345,453 women were government functionaries, 44.26% of the total. This figure represented an increase of 3.8% or 12,677 women since 1991. In addition, the 275,415 women technical workers in business enterprises and public utilities constituted 51% of the total in this area, an increase of 201.74% over 1985.

Nationally, 1990 figures showed 8,000,000 women science and technical workers (35% of the total workers in these fields), 200,000 women university graduates (33.3% of university graduates), and 52,491,000 women workers and staff (37.6% of all workers and staff). Chinese women comprise over one-third of workers in the fields of trade, industry, finance, and communication, and almost half of those in education, culture, and health.

## **B. Intense Competition and Challenges**

Economic reform, including the introduction of a market economy and the opening of China to the outside world, has stimulated individual initiative in China. Competition for jobs has become intense. Obtaining stable and secure employment is no longer easy; to be successful, one needs to work hard and compete. In general, Chinese women were unprepared for this environment and have not been able to compete equally with Chinese men. A number of factors help to perpetuate this situation.

### **1. Difficulty of securing jobs**

In a market economy, the efficiency of an enterprise is a top priority. To survive and be competitive, industries in China have been reorganizing their labor force and releasing excess workers. The protective policies and regulations previously applied to women often are ignored by management. Many factories and other business enterprises prefer to recruit men because of women's traditional responsibilities of bearing and rearing children and maintaining households. Arriving late, leaving early, and asking for leave are considered undesirable characteristics of women workers. The result of these attitudes has been that many women have gone into low-paying jobs or are receiving lower pay for the same work.

### **2. Discrimination in education**

With the implementation of China's current family planning policy, many families, especially those in the countryside, wish to have one boy to do heavy farm work and to perpetuate the family line. Infanticide with baby girls, though illegal, is not uncommon.

Country people in the remote mountainous regions of China often are too poor to justify sending their daughters to school. Fewer girls than boys are enrolled in basic education in China today, especially in poor and national minority areas. More than 70% of school dropouts are girls. And more than 70% of China's 220 million semiliterate or illiterate people are women.

Fewer women are enrolled in higher education, in part because some universities openly discriminate against female students, acknowledging that they will choose boys over girls with similar qualifications and entrance examination scores.

### **3. Women's dual responsibilities**

In China, women continue to bear the primary responsibility for bearing and rearing children and for doing housework. Unlike the old China, however, women now also are employed. Doing both jobs is not easy; support from families and society is essential. Putting a career first is acceptable behavior for men, but society is less tolerant of this behavior by women. Because the pressure on women to succeed in both roles is increasing, much more education is needed to create a social atmosphere conducive to women's success. To date, the number of "strong and capable women" in China who have emphasized their career over their roles as wives and mothers is a minority.

### **4. Finding a spouse**

Traditionally in China, the husband was the head of the household; his role was to earn money to support his wife and family. The most important thing for a Chinese woman was to find a husband who was rich or capable of earning money. These views are still deeply rooted in the Chinese mentality. Women's work and careers are still considered secondary to many people. The result is that Chinese women today continue to look for a husband who is more capable and holds a higher position than they do. Chinese men continue to choose wives on the basis of beauty, gentleness and femininity, virtue and their potential as a good mother, and domestic capability. The result is that some people have trouble finding a spouse. A Chinese saying is, "Good men always get married, while

good women remain single." Some strong independent women in China choose a career over family and remain single.

A survey conducted by the author substantiated these claims. The young men interviewed indicated that strong women are fine, but not as their wives. Many of the women interviewed admitted that they were looking for a good, capable, understanding husband and were quite ready to put a career second to doing a good job as a wife, mother, and household manager. Because the standard of living is not yet high in China, women expect to work and earn money to supplement the family income; in addition, many do not wish to be totally dependent on their husbands. But overall, the number of Chinese women who plan to focus on careers is limited.

## **5. Deep-rooted societal prejudice and discrimination**

Discrimination and prejudice against "strong women" is deeply rooted in China, an outgrowth of its long feudal history. An example will illustrate. A woman entrepreneur in her late forties had an elderly mother of 80, a husband, and a daughter of university age. Prior to economic reform, both she and her husband, university graduates, had secure jobs as senior engineers in state-run enterprises. After reform, the wife left the state-owned enterprise and started her own business. The husband had been promoted in the state-run business and therefore, was in a slightly higher position than his wife. As she developed her business, the wife had opportunities to develop her talents. Despite severe competition and discrimination, she became very successful. The result has been "90% bitterness and only 10% happiness." She has had to devote virtually all of her time and energy to her work, overcoming barriers to establishing her business and to her position as a vice manager of a township economic and trading company. She has had limited time to take care of her home and her elderly mother. She hired domestic help, but is rarely home until late at night (the result of numerous business meetings involving foreign visitors and businessmen). Her husband is unhappy and feels threatened by her successful and (now) more lucrative career. Rumors circulate about her late hours and male companions. She refused an offer to become general manager because of the social pressures that would result. Her story is not unique in China today.

The Chinese media has begun to focus on the theme of discrimination. A recent TV program highlighted a woman who was forced by her farmer husband to choose between resigning from her elected post with the local people's congress and a divorce. She resigned. The husband claimed that the local villagers taunted him, "A man of six feet high even bow to a younger wife with a pigtail."

Women today represent a large percentage of the total workforce in China. They are employed at all levels of government as well as in economics, culture, education, and science. Yet a pyramid structure exists: the higher up the pyramid, the fewer women. Because women's political rights and status were carefully protected and guaranteed in the 1950s, a number of prominent women leaders emerged during the revolutionary years. Soong Ching Ling or Mme. Sun Yatsen once served as President of the People's Republic; Deng Yingchao or Mme. Zhou Enlai was Chairwoman of the People's Political Consultative Conference, and Mme. Chen Muhua was Vice Premier. Today there are no women at the top level of national leadership. The President of the People's Republic, the Chairman of the People's Congress, the Chairman of the People's Political Consultative Conference as well as the Premier of the State Council are men, as are all four vice premiers. No women serve in the Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party, a regression from the previous 40 years and an indication that women's voices are not being heard at these upper levels of government. The ratio of men to women state councilors is 8:1; the ratio of deputy chairs of the People's Congress is 10:1; the ratio of deputy chairs of the People's Political Consultative Conference is 25:1, and women represent only 7% of all ministers.

Prior to the International Women's Day of 1993, some city and provincial women mayors and governors met in Beijing with members of the Beijing Women Journalists Association to discuss opportunities and challenges women leaders face in a market economy. Mme. Li Haifeng, Vice Governor of Hebei Province, admitted it is not easy being a woman vice governor. Women leaders need to be enterprising, willing to break with old practices and to face challenges head on. Mme. Yang Xian, Vice Mayor of Lang Fang, suggested, "Don't expect us to manage our career and family both well at the same time because it is just impossible."

## **V. Improving Women's Status**

Is it possible for women to combine a successful career and a happy family life? This section examines potential strategies for improving the role and status of Chinese women in a market economy where competition is intense.

Given today's economy, reinstating protective policies and regulations for Chinese women is not realistic. It is only fair for women to compete in the market with men. However, because of China's long historical and cultural background, Chinese women find themselves in a difficult situation. Awareness of the problem is growing, and measures are being taken to improve the status of women in China.

### **Objectives**

#### **1. To raise women's qualifications to suit the increasingly competitive society**

Women's lower educational qualifications make it hard for them to compete. Traditional and social influences also lead many Chinese women to feel inferior, less capable, and less intelligent than men. China needs to educate and train women and to instill in them a sense of self-respect, self-confidence, self-reliance, and strength. This will take time and effort. Some potential approaches are discussed here.

Popularize basic education for girls. Basic education can change the lives of girls in China. A contribution of 20 yuan (about U.S.\$4) will provide one semester of schooling to one girl in China. The China Children and Teenagers Fund, the China Youth Development Fund, and other relevant organizations and interested people in China and elsewhere have contributed toward and instituted special programs like the "Spring Buds" project and the "Hope" project in impoverished areas of China. Some of these projects have focused on girls.

Develop programs to raise the calibre of women. Women's federations have established programs to strengthen the ability of Chinese women to compete. The effort has focused in rural areas, where these federations have launched campaigns to wipe out illiteracy and offered training classes in cooperation with science and technical schools. Rural women learn one or two skills to participate more effectively in farming, forestry, animal husbandry, side-line production, and fishing. Active participation in production and improved social skills will greatly improve the quality of life and the status of Chinese women.

Establish China College for Women. On January 19, 1993, a foundation was laid for the China College for Women in Beijing. Completion is expected before the 4th World Conference on Women scheduled there in September 1995. Located near the Asian Games Village in northern Beijing, the College will cover eight hectares and have a floor area of 60,000 square meters. The College will train women as leaders and high-level managers.

#### **2. To reduce women's household responsibilities**

With advances in science and technology, and an increase in the level of living standards for Chinese people, Chinese homes have many modern conveniences

and appliances like refrigerators, washing machines, gas cookers, and so forth. These items are no longer considered luxuries, especially in Chinese cities, and they do reduce the household workload for Chinese women. Fast food restaurants, frozen food, ready made staples like steamed bread, stuffed dumplings, baked cakes, etc., and partially prepared dishes like meat and chicken (cut and seasoned) are readily available. Working women can buy these items on their way home from work and have a meal comfortably prepared in half an hour.

Grandparents also can help Chinese families. While fewer three-generation families live under one roof, grandparents, especially those in cities, travel to their daughters' homes or babysit their grandchildren in their own homes. Grandparents transport children back and forth to school and pack their lunches. In addition, domestic help is readily available and relatively inexpensive in China, and women's federations, neighborhood committees, and individuals operate home service companies that take care of babies, young children, the elderly, and invalids at a reasonable charge.

Parents in many industries can take their children to work with them and place them in work-run childcare centers. In addition, women's federations, neighborhood committees, and other organizations and individuals also operate nurseries and kindergartens. The result is that most Chinese women do not stop working when they have babies.

### **3. To compensate women's expenses in bearing and raising children**

In May 1991, a seminar was convened on the topic of "Compensation of Women's Expenses Related to Giving Birth and Rearing Children." Jointly sponsored by the Women's Department of All China Trade Unions and the Insurance and Welfare Department of the Ministry of Labor, the seminar was held to reform the labor insurance and welfare system in China and to tackle the attendant problems that have arisen since China instituted economic reform and opened itself to the outside world. Women's expenses during maternity leave used to be paid by the respective work units and enterprises where the women worked. This created a great imbalance of financial responsibility among industries employing different percentages of men and women and was very disadvantageous for women when competing for job opportunities.

At the time of the seminar, 11 Chinese provinces (including Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Shandong, Yunnan, and Guangdong) and 41 cities and counties had begun experimenting and reforming the insurance system with respect to women's maternity leave. Experimental measures being tried include (1) having society raise the money and pay these costs, and (2) a sharing of the costs by the work unit and the husband and wife. Under these plans, women workers are granted three months maternity leave and one month late childrearing leave with full pay. They may apply for childrearing leave for one year with 80% pay. These measures encourage a change in society's views of women's special role and contribution in human reproduction and their responsibility for this role. They also benefit the health of mother and child, and have been welcomed by Chinese women in particular and by the society in general.

Despite increased recognition of the responsibility of society with respect to childbearing and childrearing, conditions in China today make it difficult for the society to wholeheartedly endorse its role in compensating women during these periods. Thus, the above measures are still experimental and are found primarily in the more economically developed provinces and regions of China and in the big cities.

### **4. To legally safeguard women's rights**

Women's rights need to be guaranteed legally in the form of an all-inclusive women's law. The "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women" was approved by the Chinese National People's Congress in the fall of 1992. The law consists of 9 chapters and 54 articles, of which 6 chapters and 40 articles concern the protection of women's rights and interests. New problems caused by economic reform, the opening of China to the outside world, discrimination against women in labor reorganization, recruitment, and college enrollment are all addressed. Chapter 3 relates specifically to the cultural and educational rights of women. Article 15 states that schools shall guarantee that women enjoy equal rights with men in such aspects as starting school, entering a higher school, job assignment upon graduation, conferring of academic degrees, and dispatch for study abroad. Article 17 stipulates that parents and other guardians who fail to send their female school-age children to school will be criticized and that effective measures will be taken to ensure they are sent to school. Chapter 4 specifically deals with women's rights and interests relating to work. Article 22 states that no work unit may refuse to employ women on account of gender or to raise employment standards for women. Article 26 prohibits dismissing a female employee because of marriage, pregnancy, maternity leave, or infant nursing.

To enforce this law, commissions on the protection of women have been established in some provinces and cities to supervise and coordinate the work. The legal status and functions of women's federations are recognized. Article 48 states that when women's rights are infringed upon, women can appeal to women's federations, which shall protect their legal rights.

Publicity of the Women's Law is important and being carried out in different ways. Trade unions at various levels have organized training classes and published books to explain and publicize the law. Despite these stipulations and efforts, however, many practical and complex situations and problems in China today make it difficult to implement these regulations. More detailed articles are needed in addition to the principles set forth in the law to better enforce this legislation.

## **VI. Conclusions**

Because of the feudalistic influence of thousands of years, the huge population and underdeveloped economy of China, and the generally low cultural and educational qualifications of Chinese women, the full emancipation of Chinese women is still a distant goal. Achieving this goal will take the arduous work of many generations of both women and men as well as the entire Chinese society.

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Madame Xie Heng is a Council Member of the China Family Planning Association and of China's Foundation for Children and Youth. Before 1987, she served in China's diplomatic corps as head of special programs for women and family planning for the Chinese Embassy in London, as First Secretary in the Chinese Embassy in Washington, D.C. and as Consul of the Chinese Consulate General in San Francisco. Mme. Xie's husband is Ambassador Hu Dingyi, who served as China's Consul General in San Francisco from 1979 to 1983.

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