



# The Social Status of Women in China

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A CASUAL GLANCE THROUGH THE COLORFUL PAGES OF CHINESE WOMEN'S magazines or publications concerning contemporary mainland China might impress the modern reader concerned about the status of women in China. Stories abound about women successfully managing both family and career. Women are portrayed as nearly majestic, their outlooks modern and attractive, and they appear to exude more and more personality and confidence. Also emerging in the '90s is a growing number of woman entrepreneurs, scientists, and politicians in mainland China. But do these present an accurate picture of Chinese women nowadays?

Questions about women's issues in mainland China today include the following: Are Chinese women still oppressed? Is a socialist agenda necessary to bring about women's liberation? To what extent do women understand their struggle as unique among the class struggles in socialist society? How do Chinese women respond to these questions? Attempting to answer these questions will reveal the social status of women in socialist China.

Women's social status is best measured according to the power, the opportunities, and the level of recognition women can achieve in social life and society at large. In order to make such an assessment, the legal, economic, political, educational, and familial status of women must be taken into consideration, and social institutions

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*Political, legal, and economic reforms after the 1949 revolution sought to achieve gender equality in communist China. However, political policies and social customs impact women unevenly, and the ideal is yet to be met.*

must be examined. Also coming into play are both traditional and cultural concepts of women as well as the subjective consciousness of women themselves. Considering all of these factors is not a simple task. Furthermore, the study unavoidably becomes a comparative one: women's achievement must be measured against men's in order to make any meaningful statement about gender equality.

Some argue that, despite legal provisions for political, economic, and cultural equality among men and women in communist China, there are still huge discrepancies between the legal ideals and the conditions in reality. Others claim that, on the contrary, the modernization process itself has led to discrimination against women. In fact, a complex of factors, including employers' resistance in the labor market and women's own failure to demand equality, have prevented them from attaining higher status through employment and promotion.<sup>1</sup> This article aims to conduct a preliminary investigation of factors affecting Chinese women's lives so as to provide an update on how women's issues have taken shape in recent years.

## I. WOMEN AND SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN CHINA

### 1. *Women and the State*

It is impossible to examine women's issues without also looking carefully at the role of the state in communist China, for the two are intertwined. It should be noted that after communist China was founded in 1949, constitutional efforts planned to produce a favorable social environment for women. Discrimination against women was to be prohibited and their social, economic, and political status improved. These new policies fit well with the communist agenda, which was to establish a highly unified political, economic, and ideological structure. Women's equality made sense from the modernist's perspective as well: modernization of the nation demanded contributions from women that had been missing in the past. The relation between women and the state in modern China, then, has been dialectical and intricate. For instance, in communist China's early years, plans for economic production went hand in hand with ideological reforms. The advocates of both new economic programs and communist ideals eagerly praised women's involvement in production and their economic independence. However, when the Chinese economy failed and there was insufficient employment, former progressives reverted back to traditional values and women were persuaded to stay at home, devoted to their domestic roles.<sup>2</sup>

In communist China, the government determines the working opportunities of the majority of women in the state, using a complex system for arranging employment. Therefore, the government has significant control over women's economic life. In addition, the national legal system, which leaves women with a great deal of uncertainty regarding possession of property and housing, strongly impacts women's freedom of mobility. For instance, women in rural areas tend to

<sup>1</sup>Jicai Sha, ed., *Women's Status in Contemporary China* (Beijing: Beijing University, 1995) 35.

<sup>2</sup>A typical instance occurred during 1955-1957 when the national production plan failed and the unemployment rate was high. See Shaojiang Lee, ed., *Gender and China* (Beijing: Joint, 1994) 81.

stay and work in the field rather than move to the city so as to maintain property rights to the land on behalf of their households. Birth control is another area of control the state exercises over women—rural women in particular, who have to struggle between national policy and the value placed on childbirth in peasant families. China's birth limitation program makes a very private issue laden with political significance, as anthropologist Margery Wolf notes:

In the matter of birth planning...the state has shown no hesitation about involving itself in the most intimate of family matters, and in so doing it has caught rural women in the middle of a fundamental struggle between family and state.<sup>3</sup>

Women's relation to the state in China is indeed intricate and complex.

## 2. *Women and Family*

Domestic life and public life are equally important in determining the social status of women. In communist China, high expectations are placed on women in both professional and family arenas. Women are *not* expected to sacrifice their family's welfare for their own career. But they *are* expected to achieve professionally. In short, they are expected to do their best in both domestic and professional areas. A review of the division of labor in family and the familial constraints on women will help shed light on the social status of women in China. The areas to be addressed include manageability of family income, sovereignty in domestic consumption, influence in child rearing, marital choice, and birth control. Statistics show discrepancies between rural women and urban women in their degree of control in family life. City women have more autonomy in making decisions, and husbands and wives have almost equal say in domestic matters. Meanwhile, women living in villages and rural regions have little domestic decision-making authority. Even so, urban women are far from having full equality with men. In general, men's position in the family is still higher than women's except in families in which women are more educated and have higher incomes. Both women living in cities and those in villages are more interested in the quality of marriage than in marriage as a traditional form of social contract. However, urban women are more likely to take the initiative and seek divorce to end a bad marriage. For rural women, on the other hand, sustenance comes from the goods they produce in the fields and family collaboration is a necessity. Divorce, therefore, is simply too high a price to pay. Interviews with these women reveal their general motivation for marriage: marriage is not for companionship but for the business of both production and reproduction.<sup>4</sup> Statistics also show that, in general, men have more autonomy in arranging their own marriages.<sup>5</sup>

Some have said that China's revolutionary government follows the standard Marxist analysis in which the source of women's oppression is private property in

<sup>3</sup>Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1985) 239.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>5</sup>Research Group of Chinese Women's Social Status, *Outline of the Social Status of Chinese Women* (Beijing: Chinese Women, 1993) 223-224.

the old family system.<sup>6</sup> Only when private property ceases to exist, household tasks are socialized, and women are fully engaged in social production can problems related to discrimination against women be solved. However, patriarchal ideology in family systems continues to exist in communist China and thus continues to inhibit women's independence and liberation. As anthropologists correctly point out, the majority of Chinese women are judged based on their performance of traditional female gender roles.<sup>7</sup> In order to satisfy the expectations placed on them for success in their domestic as well as professional roles, women in China exhaust themselves both physically and mentally.

Motherhood remains women's primary role in China. Yet, as mentioned earlier, state-mandated birth planning has created a family-state struggle in which women are essentially the pawns. The Chinese government's one-child campaign was announced in 1979 and established economic and social rewards for compliance with the policy, along with punishments for non-compliance. Although in private interviews large numbers of women indicate their desire to have two or more children, based either on traditional values or on natural instincts of motherhood, they have to obey the state for obvious practical reasons. Rural women suffer most with the one-child policy, because the gender of the child determines a rural woman's fate. If she bears a girl, she is sometimes scorned and unrespected. A son, on the other hand, will definitely ensure her esteem and economic security: her husband and in-laws will look upon her favorably, and it is believed that a new male member in the rural family will benefit production and hence the family income. For the rural woman, this is still a common social reality, although the situation has improved somewhat in recent years.

### *3. Women and the Economy*

The differences between the situations of rural and urban women in China and thus their respective social status are significant. Women workers now make up 40% of the working population in the country. They work for various reasons: to gain their living and independence, to actualize their talent, to get away from the boredom at home, and to gain recognition in both family and society. Yet only a very low percentage of the women workers are professionals.<sup>8</sup> They are expected to contribute their labor but not their intelligence. For instance, old rural males admit during interviews that they are reluctant to provide women with technical knowledge in farming because they think women are just not talented enough to learn. Both rural and urban women in China today are torn between their working and domestic lives, while at the same time they continue to try to meet traditional expectations of femininity. Finally, the socialist state's demand that they participate in economic production puts upon them a double burden that some say is the primary handicap for working women's advancement.

<sup>6</sup>See Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: International, 1975) 7-67.

<sup>7</sup>Wolf, *Revolution Postponed*, 182.

<sup>8</sup>Sha, *Women's Status*, 31.

In China, economics are intimately related to other areas in life. For instance, the working unit is central to the urban woman worker's life. This unit must approve her marriage plan, her fertility plan, her housing, and even helps to solve her marital problems. Women are often told that the units care for their welfare, including those related to their biological states like pregnancy and menstruation. However, as social analysis points out, many of the policies originally designed to protect women from poor working conditions ended up keeping them out of many industries.<sup>9</sup> For instance, in China equal work and equal pay has become little more than a slogan. In most cases, equal work is not offered to women. Employers prefer male workers, as they think men are more capable, and they do not really want to cope with women protection policies like maternal leaves and welfare. Justification for this unwritten policy is often cloaked in allusions to the limitations of women's physiology or to practical concerns about the need for extra benefits for women and thus higher production costs.

Rural women are not exempt from this sort of discrimination. For instance, when a woman finds her marriage intolerable, she must take her case first to the leader of her production team, and from there to an officer of the village or brigade. In even fairly densely populated regions, these people are likely to be her husband's friends and relatives. This, of course, makes pleading her own case particularly difficult and is one of the major reasons why there is a very low divorce rate in rural China.<sup>10</sup> Economically, rural women's activities and mobility are further restrained by the government. During the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961), production brigades and teams immediately formed nursery schools in order to free young mothers for full-time participation in agricultural production.<sup>11</sup> Decades later, with more and more men working in cities, rural women, again, have no choice but to take over the farming and look after their children and elders.<sup>12</sup> However, they are ill-equipped to do technical work. When competition comes into play, women can do only light jobs for less pay; they are the first to be laid off during the slack season. Although on record communist China aims to eradicate gender inequalities, in practice there is little to distinguish current gender policies from traditional concepts of women's worth.

It has been pointed out that collective labor in rural China puts women at an economic disadvantage, especially when the rural woman's role in society is still defined as wife and mother, not farmer. Some say, for instance, that for urban women, jobs are an unquestioned part of their lives. Rural women, however, have no such commitment to the working world and are expected to devote their lives to their families and the farm. This dynamic is aptly characterized by one anthropologist: "in the cities, women work; in the country, they help out."<sup>13</sup> It could be

<sup>9</sup>Wolf, *Revolution Postponed*, 59.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>12</sup>Approximately 46% of farmers in China during the 1980s were women. See Lee, *Gender and China*, 132.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 110.

argued that rural women are virtually forced to stay in the field. The state offers no incentive for them to move to urban areas, since both state rules of population registration and property rights limit their mobility and independence. Since they inherit their identities as farmers through their husbands' families, they cannot register to live in urban areas.<sup>14</sup> Further, whether by choice or by convention, they often make their familial relationship a priority, staying on the family property to ensure that it can legally be passed on to their sons.<sup>15</sup> Practically speaking, rural women are relegated to field labor with little job opportunity in the cities and certainly no chance for advancement, personally or economically.

## II. WOMEN, CULTURAL TRADITION, AND SELF-IMAGES

Legally speaking, women in communist China should enjoy equal political, economic, cultural, and social rights. In 1992, more laws were issued to protect women from forms of discrimination and to enhance women's development. Recently, educational opportunities have also been provided to women; these have led to more autonomy in marital and domestic affairs, benefits in career and finance, and hence have improved the social status of women as a whole. However, despite these improvements, women's status in China is still far from ideal. Apart from not infrequent conflicts of interests with the state, in which some aspects of women's welfare are said to hinder the modernization process and increased production, there are also cultural and traditional constraints that restrict the self-motivation of women in China. Issues concerning the social status of women are not only social and political; feudal notions of women's inferiority take a much longer time to reform.

The state's intentions regarding women's liberation are ambiguous. Women's participation in production is part of the state's modernization project, through which women are encouraged to achieve and attain self-actualization. At the same time, however, women are condemned by traditional ideas for this achievement if they fail to meet domestic demands and if they ask for marital freedom. Debates in the press are common between socialists' liberated ideas and conservative traditional expectations of women. Deeply embedded values among the elder generations include the notion that men are always more capable, stronger, and more productive and that women should stay in the private sector and be supportive of men's efforts. Despite these traditional propositions, the common official propaganda downgrades or ignores the housework and child care that women routinely provide. This leads to depression when women cannot meet the standards of male performance, thus reinforcing the idea that women are simply less capable.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it is always difficult to answer the question in communist China today: "What is a proper woman?" The answer may be easier

<sup>14</sup>It is the government's policy to prohibit the influx of rural people into the cities. Agriculture is still the major national production arena, and it is necessary to keep a large population of farmers.

<sup>15</sup>Especially when husbands work in the cities, it is necessary for their rural wives to stay in the field so as to keep the population registration and the right of legacy.

<sup>16</sup>Lee, *Gender and China*, 137.

for rural areas, where it is said that, when conflicts occur between responsibilities demanded by the state and the domestic community, women will always give their family obligations the priority.<sup>17</sup>

Self-evaluation, self-image, and self-knowledge are important factors affecting the social status of women. Research shows that women in China in the 1990s have a higher estimation of their own strength and talent, except in professional or technical knowledge. Some women do think that they can compete with men and have strong professional ambitions. However, their self-evaluation does not match public opinion. The conservative public still prefers domestic women and believes in the superiority of men. These traditional values are major obstacles in the realization of gender equality and of the self-actualization of women. Such traditional expectations also interfere with the execution of various legal rights that aim at elevating the social status of women.

Analysis has also pointed out that as women's liberation in China was first initiated by the national revolution and later enhanced and designed by the government, women have become very dependent on the state. On the other hand, women's surrender to public opinion may impede them from fulfilling opportunities offered by the state. There is still a large number of women who choose a passive social role and blindly sacrifice their self-development for others in response to the conflicting values and demands on women in China.

### III. CONCLUSION: MEN GAIN MORE THAN WOMEN

In the past forty years, the social status of women in mainland China has undergone tremendous changes and revolution. Socialism has made possible gender equality in many ways and has reduced gender differences involving rights and opportunities. Results vary from group to group and region to region. In general, gender equality and women's social status are higher in urban China, where educational and professional opportunities are more available. Though women's development is faster than that of men in China, the level of improvement is still not satisfactory. In summary, the present rate of development of employment and the popularization of education among Chinese women is fast, but the modification of professional structures and the enhancement of qualifying or professional education are slow. Traditional values and familial demands still create a number of constraints on women, limiting the development of their own self-image. The state retains too much control over women's decision-making. Women must still concede too much authority to both state and family. In the words of one woman scholar:

Everybody benefits from the revolution, but men gain more than women. In China, men are always the center of culture; the superiority of men and the inferiority of women have thousands of years of history in China.<sup>18</sup> ⊕

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 139.

<sup>18</sup>Sha, *Women's Status*, 225.