

**Zeitschrift:** Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie  
**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft  
**Band:** 49 (1995)  
**Heft:** 1: Chinese Societies at the Dawn of the Third Millenium  
  
**Artikel:** Liberalization and lost opportunities : the case of Chinese women  
**Autor:** Cornue, Virginia / Wilson, Richard W.  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147181>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 13.12.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# LIBERALIZATION AND LOST OPPORTUNITIES: THE CASE OF CHINESE WOMEN

Virginia Cornue and Richard W. Wilson, Rutgers University

One of the central postulates of theories that link economic liberalization with individual social mobility is that greater autonomy in the market place enhances opportunities for achievement and reward. The evidence for Chinese women, however, suggests that the recent lessening of political influence on economic activity has reduced opportunities. The most frequently cited reason for this is the persistence of traditional gender values, now acted upon more freely as political restraints in various areas of social life are slowly eased. As a consequence, although careers for women on a par with men are sanctioned by government policy, the actual status of women is increasingly threatened. Indeed, in the worst case, the very opportunity to obtain employment outside the home is thwarted by a stress on the prerogatives and needs of males. In such instances, the easing of political controls on decision making in work organizations has redounded to the disadvantage of women, reducing opportunity and reinforcing traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The consequence is that while work outside the home is more available to Chinese women than to others of their sex in Asia, the level of dissatisfaction and discontent is also higher.

This paper focuses on the way that policies in China to liberalize economic activity — and thus spur economic growth — have, at the same time, dampened opportunities for women in a manner that contravenes formally articulated ideals of social development. The goal of the paper, therefore, is to examine gender relations in China in the context of contemporary efforts to expand the possibilities for meaningful involvement by females in social, economic and political life. This exploration will then hopefully shed light on the probable trajectory of change in the status of women into the beginning of the next century.

## *Promoting Women's Welfare*

China has one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Although the era of Deng Xiaoping has been marked by the active suppression of democratic tendencies, the government has simultaneously fostered dramatic economic growth. Indeed, since the Tiananmen Incident in June, 1989, the government has stabilized itself by reliance on the twin pillars of

economic growth and political repression. Party Secretary Jiang Zemin explicitly referred to this policy in his report to the Fourteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October, 1992 when he called for increasing economic growth to 9% a year while strengthening the army and police and maintaining one-party dictatorship.<sup>1</sup>

The extent of reform in the economic area is impressive. Since 1978, when reform began, reliance on state planning to set prices has been progressively reduced. Today, most agricultural and industrial commodities retail at market prices. In fact, "the proportion of industrial production subject to mandatory planning decreased from 97% in 1978 to 11.6% in 1991."<sup>2</sup> Although numerous serious problems remain (not least — an important fact for women — that township and village enterprises have already provided jobs for roughly 90 million underemployed persons and will have difficulty absorbing the 100 to 150 million more people in the rural areas who still need work), China now ranks with middle range countries on the UN's "Human Development Index" that measures items like average years of education and life expectancy.<sup>3</sup> While per capita income is only about \$400, there is now a substantial middle class, especially in the coastal cities, where people are able to afford such things as refrigerators, television sets, and the like.

Statistics on economic development rustle in our minds like dry paper. Across China, however, the changes that have been wrought are tangible and personal. Visitors to the myriad towns of China report an almost wild west type of entrepreneurship with gawdy displays of new found wealth that contrast sharply with the tight-lipped austerity of the Mao period. For example, ten years ago Zhan Yusheng, a 27 year-old man who lives south of Shanghai in a town of 60,000 people, took advantage of new opportunities to engage in sideline business as a way of earning extra income. He went into the button making trade to supply the burgeoning Chinese garment industry. Today, his factory employs 100 people and has sales of approximately \$200,000. Mr. Zhan sports a huge 24-karat gold

1 Andrew J. NATHAN, "China's Path from Communism," *Journal of Democracy*, 4:2, April 1993, 30.

2 *Ibid.*, 40.

3 *Ibid.*, 34-35.

bracelet, lives in a new six story home, and dreams of expanding into new areas of endeavor.<sup>4</sup>

Leadership policy clearly supports an active role for women in the modernization process. And indeed, of those participating in the labor force in 1982, 50% were women; in the countryside fully 80% of peasant women are involved in some kind of paid work.<sup>5</sup> Education, age and residence varied the pattern of employment, but in general women who were less educated, older and who lived in rural areas were guaranteed an "earthen rice bowl." Those who were more educated, younger and who lived in urban areas were provided with an "iron rice bowl."<sup>6</sup>

High levels of participation by women in the labor force are not only sponsored by government, they are fully guaranteed by legal provisions that have been promulgated in step with the economic reforms. The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women was adopted at the Fifth Session of the Seventh National People's Congress on April 3, 1992 in response to increasing concerns about the effect of the reforms on the status of women. Chapter IV focuses specifically on Rights and Interests Relating to Work.<sup>7</sup> Article 21 of Chapter IV states that women are guaranteed an equal right with men to work while Article 22 states that, with special exceptions, no unit may "refuse to employ women by reason of sex or raise the employment standards for women."<sup>8</sup> Of special importance are the stipulations of Article 24. Here it is stated unambiguously that "In such aspects as promotion in post or in rank, evaluation and determination of professional

4 Nicholas D. KRISTOF, "Chinese Bet Their Shirts on Buttons and Bingo!", *The New York Times*, January 18, 1993, A4.

5 Jean C. ROBINSON, "Of Women and Washing Machines: Employment, Housework, and the Reproduction of Motherhood in Socialist China," *The China Quarterly*, 101, March 1985, 35-36.

6 Martin King WHYTE and William L. PARRISH, *Urban Life in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 30-33.

7 Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women, Chapter IV, Rights and Interests Relating to Work (Adopted at the Fifth Session of the Seventh National People's Congress, April 3, 1992), 4.

8 *Ibid.*, 4.



and technological titles, the principle of equality between men and women shall be upheld and discrimination against women shall not be allowed."<sup>9</sup>

These provisions are backed by other laws guaranteeing an equal right to education, the right to the ownership of property obtained from employment and protection against time-honored methods of exploitation and discrimination. For instance, Chapter III of the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women states that schools and departments shall "guarantee that women enjoy equal rights with men in such aspects as starting school, entering a higher school, job assignment upon graduation, conferment of academic degrees and dispatch for study abroad."<sup>10</sup> In the critical area of property rights the law now unambiguously grants women equal rights with men. The absence of these rights in traditional times was, of course, a major underpinning of the disadvantaged position of women. In contrast current law stipulates that "The state shall guarantee that women enjoy the equal right, with men, to property." This right extends to joint property rights in marriage, to claims in cases of divorce, to protection in allotments of farmland, grain rations and housing sites and to equal rights of inheritance and the right to dispose of inherited property without hindrance.<sup>11</sup>

Lastly, specific provisions guarantee women "equal rights with men relating to their persons." Infanticide involving female babies is prohibited as is discrimination against women who give birth to girls. Abduction, trafficking in and kidnapping women is similarly prohibited as is forcing a woman to engage in prostitution. A woman's right of reputation and personal dignity is specifically upheld.<sup>12</sup> These general provisions codify into law decisions that were adopted at the 21st Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Seventh National People's Congress on September 4, 1991 regarding the punishment of Criminals Who Abduct and Traffic in or Kidnap Women or Children and the Strict Prohibition Against Prostitution and Whoring.

9 *Ibid.*, 4.

10 Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection and Rights and Interests of Women, Chapter III, Rights and Interests Relating to Culture and Education, 3.

11 Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection and Rights and Interests of Women, Chapter V, Rights and Interests Relating to Property, 4-5; and Chapter VII, Rights and Interests Relating to Marriage and Family, 6.

12 Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection and Rights and Interests of Women, Chapter VI, Rights Relating to the Person, 5-6.

*Changes in Women's Social Status*

In a survey in 1990 of over 40,000 men and women in urban and rural areas of 21 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities slightly more than 81% of the women stated their belief that men and women are equal before the law. At the same time, only 40.39% believed that men and women are equal when status is judged on the basis of social opinion.<sup>13</sup> The difference here is striking and reveals the great gap that exists between the ideals for women's status, expressed most clearly in law, and the actuality that many women perceive in the social attitudes of their fellow citizens. For the truth is that although legal codes have provided Chinese women with many protections, the laws themselves have lacked rigorous mechanisms for enforcement. Indeed, the recent spate of law making in the area of women's rights is specifically designed to make explicit the protections to which females are entitled.

While it would be mean-spirited, therefore, to accuse law-makers of duplicity, it is not irrelevant to inquire into the social practices that the law has not yet been successful in nudging toward equality. Before doing so, however, it is useful to point out some of the real gains that women have achieved in China and some significant ways that the lot of Chinese women differs from that of women elsewhere. For example, a 1990 survey noted that 78.22% of urban and 48.4% of rural women are now literate. Of those below 40 years of age, 61.25% have been educated beyond the junior middle school level; this compares with 29.05% for those above the age of 40 and 11.35% for the preceding generation. Only 5.18% of women below forty engage exclusively in household chores versus 27.54% for the previous generation. Indeed, the proportion of women who work outside the home is less than ten percentage points lower than men, down from a gap of nearly 21 percentage points for the preceding generation. Clearly, in gross terms, without regard to types of work, women are now employed outside the home in steadily increasing numbers that in percentage terms are beginning to approximate the numbers of men.<sup>14</sup>

Another recent study indicates less gender division of labor in China than in Japan or Britain with the overwhelming number of Chinese women

13 Wu NAITAO, "Changes in Chinese Women's Social Status," *Beijing Review*, December 30, 1991-January 5, 1992, 23.

14 *Ibid.*, 22. See also data from 1982 which noted that 95% of women over 60 were illiterate in comparison to 14.7% for those aged 15-19. LAVELY, *op.cit.*, 64-65.

stating that the husband shares or does most of the housework. This compares with only 4.1% of women in Japan who make such a claim. Perhaps not coincidentally Chinese women express far more satisfaction with their relations with their husbands than do their Japanese counterparts. But it is not just in the home that Chinese women have a greater sense of equality. Although people work long and hard in China (the norm is a 48 hour 6 day work week) women's employment patterns (e.g., regular work status) are closer to that of men's than they are in the UK or Japan. Moreover, average income is also closer and educational differences are less marked. Additionally, there are more extensive child care facilities and better leave provisions for those times when it is necessary to interrupt employment.<sup>15</sup>

*Status Lost? : Feudal Modernity Gained?*

Why, then, given the enormous role of women in China's economic development, do outside observers state that "Although employment policies attempt to insure that women are full-time workers, the indirect effect of women's position in the labour force is to make them second-class workers and thus susceptible to arguments that they should stay at home"?<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Chinese women also perceive themselves as disadvantaged and "second-class." In comparison with Japanese and British women they articulate a greater sense of gender injustice, especially as regards training opportunities and, in comparison with Japanese women, more dissatisfaction with working life. These feelings, it has been hypothesized, are perhaps due to greater expectations for gender equality; or, because Chinese women are better integrated than their counterparts into the national work force, such feelings may also be due to judging work experience less from a household perspective, as Japanese and British women do, and more in terms of employment per se.<sup>17</sup>

If we assume that Chinese women do, in fact, judge the quality of their work lives by the standards of the work place itself, what objective circumstances exist that could be a source of discontent? Moreover, in

15 SHENG Xuewen, Norman STOCKMAN and Norman BONNEY, "The Dual Burden: East and West (Women's Working Lives in China, Japan and Great Britain)," *International Sociology*, 7:2, June 1992, 211, 213-214.

16 ROBINSON, *op.cit.*, 54.

17 SHENG et al, *op.cit.*, 212.

what way do these circumstances reflect traditional values, thus reinforcing gender inequality despite the gains that have been made and the substantial efforts to dislodge decisively older patterns of discrimination and exploitation. For it would be felicitous to attribute sex discrimination solely to the importing of a market economy. A closer examination reveals a more complex interaction of feudal vestiges, Western influences and socialist assumptions in relation to attitudes and practices toward women and their place in the social scheme.

What vestiges from the past, then, are lodged, stubbornly cling even, in the gap between the socialist ideal and contemporary social attitudes, policies and practices, so readily apparent both to Chinese women and outside observers? How do persistent Chinese cultural values and related kinship patterns intersect with Western influences to blunt the public policy gains that are so important to women? Around what structural armature is Chinese society in the 1990's still tightly modeled?

#### *Gender values in Traditional China*

In traditional China the position of women was clearly a disadvantaged one. As late as the 1930s John Lossing Buck's surveys indicated that only 2% of females over the age of seven attended school and only 1% could read a common letter (the percentages for males were 45% and 30% respectively).<sup>18</sup> These figures, however, while revealing, are nevertheless merely indicative of a broad-based and systematic pattern of discrimination and exploitation that was deeply embedded in traditional Chinese mores and folkways. In areas of personal freedom, mobility opportunities and rights to property Chinese women were subjected to a variety of restrictions, ranging from footbinding to requirements for filial submission that were backed by the force of law. Considered natural inferiors, it was not thought appropriate for women to represent the family in prescribed ceremonies honoring ancestors nor to act on behalf of the family in its formal relations with governmental authority. Instead, women were tightly constrained within the family with moral responsibilities that were largely fulfilled in relations with kin.

Within the family laws provided some protection for women. If a wife had kept mourning for either of the husband's parents for three years, a

18 William LAVELY, XIAO Zhenyu, LI Bohua and Ronald FREEDMAN, "The Rise in Female Education in China: National and Regional Patterns," *The China Quarterly*, 121, March 1990, 64.

divorce sought by the husband could be nullified. Such was also the case if a husband, having formerly been poor, became rich and if the wife had no other home to go to. A man could be severely punished if he disregarded these safeguards. He was also liable to punishment if he reduced his wife's status by forcing her to become a concubine or if he made his concubine into a wife while the wife was living. Beyond these legal protections, however, unilateral divorce could be obtained by men on a number of grounds including inability to bear a son, disrespect to the husband's parents, malignant disease, talkativeness, theft and jealousy toward concubines or, for that matter, any other female. Indeed, divorce was compulsory if the wife committed adultery, assaulted the husband's parents and/or ran off.<sup>19</sup>

Duty and forbearance were the primary virtues that women were to exhibit. In fact, respect was formally required toward the husband and the husband's parents. Having entered into the family of their spouse, their right to social consideration was always subject to interpretation by others until they themselves had become the mother of a male child and an elder within the household. Only by establishing a "uterine family" (mother-son dyad) within her husband's household and ultimately becoming a mother-in-law did a woman gain status.<sup>20</sup> In effect, within the patrilineal family a system of natural hierarchy existed with gender and age as the criteria that clearly defined relationships. Within this hierarchy a woman violated the canons of deference at her peril. The words of a traditional love poem describe the plight of a wife dismissed by her mother-in-law on the grounds of lacking decorum: "Long ago in early springtime I left home to come to your gates. Whatever I did I obeyed your mother, In my behavior never dared do as I pleased. Day and night I tried hard at my work. Brought low I am caught in a vice of misery. My words have been blameless, I fulfilled my duties diligently."<sup>21</sup>

19 LEE Show Mong, "Chinese Customary Marriage and Divorce," *The Malayan Law Journal*, July 1972, IV, V; Vermier Y. CHIU, "Marriage Laws of the Ch'ing Dynasty, the Republic of China and Communist China," *Contemporary China*, 2, 1956/1957, 66-67.

20 Margery WOLF, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972) 32-41.

21 Anonymous, "A Peacock Southeast Flew," in *New Songs from a Jade Terrace: An Anthology of Early Chinese Love Poetry*, translated with annotations and an introduction by Anne BIRRELL (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982) 55.



The extent of the penalties that could be levied against women are revealed by the judicial decisions entered against two women who resisted rape by their fathers-in-law. Both women were deemed to be legally culpable because both, in the process of resisting rape, had committed assault on the husband's parent, one of the cardinal sins to be avoided by a traditional Chinese wife. In the first case, in 1812, a wife bit off a piece of her father-in-law's lip; she was sentenced to be beheaded but was pardoned by the Emperor Jiaqing on the grounds that the act was not premeditated and that the father-in-law had himself violated the basic norms of human relationships, thus severing the family bond between himself and his son's wife. This case became an important consideration for the second decision that was delivered in 1830. In this instance the daughter-in-law's resistance had brought about the injury and subsequent death of her father-in-law. Initially, the woman was sentenced by the governor to be dismembered but, as in the first case, the sentence was reduced by the Emperor (Daoguang). This decision became a precedent that was enacted as a supplementary statute. Subsequently, in cases of a daughter-in-law killing her father-in-law while resisting rape, the precedent could be cited as a reason for reducing the daughter-in-law's punishment from immediate beheading to detention in prison for beheading.<sup>22</sup>

### *Traditional Beliefs About Gender*

Central to Chinese social organization is a kinship structure rooted in an ancient ethical philosophy containing metaphysical/cosmological beliefs about gender. This system of beliefs acts as the normative armature for contemporary society, even down to the present-day. In Anagost's words, "In order to understand the role of gender in the interpenetrating discourses of kinship and state and its continuing salience in a post revolutionary context" gender must be comprehended "as a cosmological system embedded in social practice."<sup>23</sup>

Historically, the ancient yin/yang concept, whose dynamic dualism very early became one of the most powerful and central core organizing principles of the traditional Confucian ethical system, implied a cyclical

22 QU Tongzu, "The Qing Law: An Analysis of Continuity and Change," *Social Sciences in China*, 1, 3, September 1980, 110.

23 Ann ANAGOST, "Transformations of Gender in Modern China" in *Gender and Anthropology: Critical Reviews for Research and Teaching*, Sandra MORGEN, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Anthropological Association of America, 1989) 320.



relationship, with each unit of the dyad containing the seeds of the other. Yin was historically associated with negative forces, such as wet, chaos, cold, dark, death and passivity, while yang was associated with the positive forces of activity, heat, rationality, sun, strength and life.<sup>24</sup> When applied to social life, however, yin/yang meanings polarized and came to be understood in fundamental, irreversible terms that clearly referenced status inequalities. For example, a father would be yang, or superior, to his subordinate yin son while that selfsame son would be yang to his yin wife. All were yin to a yang Emperor.<sup>25</sup> Over time yin became more exclusively attached to women as the female principle and yang became attached to men as the male principle.<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, women were no longer thought of as having the seeds of yang forces, or men of yin forces. Rather, women (the female principle/yin) became the bipolar opposite of men (the male principle/yang) although in varying degrees depending upon the historical context.<sup>27</sup>

Chinese kinship patterns of patrilineality, exogamy and patrilocality were shaped historically in terms of the five Confucian relationships (ruler-subject, husband-wife, father-son, elder brother-younger brother and friend-friend), each of which had an embedded yin/yang dichotomy that implied an immutable status inequality. It is these dichotomies, embodying as their defining component supposedly bedrock female-male distinctions of yin and yang, that constitute the solid enduring core of Chinese conceptions of power and hierarchy in social relationships. In the post-Mao, post-cultural Revolution era, this conceptual core, with its axially hinged gendered meanings, has been revitalized although, in fact, it was never fully eradicated or suppressed. As a recent article perceptively suggests, "The Cultural revolution tried to make people forget the past, but

24 *Ibid.*, 321; Daniel L. OVERMYER, "Dualism and Conflict in Chinese Popular Religions," in *Transitions and Transformations in the History of Religions*, Frank E. REYNOLDS and Theodore M. LUDWIG, eds. (Leiden, 1989) 158.

25 ANAGOST, *op.cit.*, 322; Lawrence G. THOMPSON, *Chinese Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1989) 52-53.

26 ANAGOST, *op.cit.*, 321; OVERMEYER, *op.cit.*, 158.

27 Tani BARLOW, "The Place of Women in Ding Ling's World: Feminism and the Concept of Gender in Modern China," Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Davis, 47.

it is impossible to make people forget the past and the Chinese people are too intelligent for that."<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, after the socialist revolution, the rural, agricultural collectivization process served to solidify gender values within the family for the bulk of the Chinese population. To be sure, a number of authors have variously argued the degree to which Mao and the CCP undercut the emancipatory ideals of socialism that pertain to gender.<sup>29</sup> All agree, however, that the collectivization process reconsolidated rural patriarchy.<sup>30</sup> In general, collectivization laid a party cadre leadership system over the old lineage village. Rather than radically transforming the traditional lines of authority based on gender, the newly installed cadres were often the former male village leaders. Since many villages historically were and remain single surname family entities, the party cadre, village leader and family patriarch could well be the self-same person.

Despite the great changes that have swept over China in the twentieth century, therefore, many of them vigorously promoted by political authority, vestiges from the earlier time remain. In one village in South China (where 80% of the homes have television, half of them color sets) peasant women still light incense sticks and an oil lamp as an offering to the gods at the time of the full and new moon. Young women now occasionally become pregnant out of wedlock, something virtually unheard of in the past, but doing so is disapproved by older people. Boys are still preferred over girls, more so, some say, because family planning policies limit the number of children a couple may have and raising at least one son is still desirable. Generally, although opportunities have increased, women remain second class citizens, especially in rural areas. One elderly woman, who has been trying to reclaim a building built by her family in the 1930s,

28 "Confucian Influence Is Starting to Come Back," *Beijing Review*, October 12, 1989, iv.

29 Norma DIAMOND, "Collectivization, Kinship, and the Status of Women in Rural China," in *Toward a New Anthropology of Women*, Rayna Reiter, ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975); Kay Ann JOHNSON, *Women, the Family and Peasant Revolution in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Phyllis ANDORS, *The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women, 1949-1980*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983); Judith STACY, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1983); Majorie WOLF, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985).

30 ANAGOST, *op.cit.*, 316.

has had no support from the village chief. As she explains the matter, "The old society and the new society, it's all the same — women don't participate in village affairs ... If I were a man, then everyone would listen to what I say. But since I'm not, they don't." Her great-granddaughter, Mai Wanhong, went to junior high school and after graduation worked with some friends in Shenzhen, the special economic zone on the border with Hong Kong. However, she had difficulty adjusting and returned to the village. Although a local factory may open shortly, she has few options and does little to sharpen her educational skills. Knowledge of Hong Kong and America comes from television but otherwise, as she says, "Girls my age don't read newspapers ... Boys read papers a bit more than we do."<sup>31</sup>

### *Patterns of Exploitation and Discrimination*

Zhu Lin's short story, "The Web," suggests several extreme examples of abuse women suffer in a village where authority is structured in part on traditional values of male supremacy. Beauty/Beautiful/Toughie, a mother raising her daughter alone, is a stranger (non-native villager), widow and mother of a daughter, who is no longer part of the community. She catches the party secretary stealing while she herself is also stealing, not to feed herself but her brilliant and starving scholar daughter. In order to silence her the Party Secretary rapes Beautiful/Toughie. As a prominent member of the local kin network and a high level party functionary, the Secretary is above the law which forbids rape. Indeed, he is the local law, by lineage right and by party right.<sup>32</sup> Toughie, who by right of law should be protected from rape, is condemned for theft by the very man who assaults her.

Zhang Rongqing, writing in an October, 1986 issue of the *Zhongguo Fazhi Bao*, points out six reasons, rooted in "feudal" belief, why law was and is not efficacious in combating such crimes. Two explanations are most pertinent. First, there is a basic lack of respect for law due to ignorance of it on the part of the populace. "Laws mostly remained on paper and were not really authoritative."<sup>33</sup> Since the law could not

31 Sheryl WUDUNN, "China Village Prospers But Retains Old Ways," *The New York Times*, January 17, 1993, 10.

32 ZHU Lin, "The Web," Handwritten ms. translated into English, nd (ca 1973).

33 ZHANG Rongqing, "Feudal Concepts of Law Still Exist in China", *Zhongguo Fazhi Bao*, October 23, 1986, 2.

adequately contest older practices, the Cultural Revolution, he holds, was inevitable. During this period, law became associated with "feudalism, capitalism and revisionism" and was "swept into the trash heap of history."<sup>34</sup>

Second, Zhang further argues that power is above the law; "word carries more weight than law does." Historically, "the leader's word was law and the higher the position, the more authoritative his word. Even after the revolution, power was highly concentrated. The Cultural Revolution succinctly demonstrated that "power meant everything, while the law was nonexistent. Even today, people still ask: "In the final analysis, which is stronger, power or law?"<sup>35</sup> The answer, he suggests, will most likely be power.

Honig and Hershatler argue that one way power is expressed is in violence against women, sanctioned and accepted as part of the natural order.<sup>36</sup> Earlier it was pointed out that in traditional times death might await a woman who was not properly deferential. Zhang Yimou's Oscar-nominated film, "Raise the Red Lantern," set in pre-1949 China, details the horrifying punishment and death of an educated young woman who is persuaded by her stepmother to become a rich man's concubine. When she resists so called proper wifely duties, she is locked alive in a rooftop cell to starve and freeze to death.

Honig and Hershatler, however, report equally harrying contemporary accounts of violence against women in their volume, *Personal Voices*. They show persistent patterns of behavior in which:

[w]omen [a]re killed, raped, and battered in their capacities as daughters, sexual beings, wives and mothers. The reasons why these intimate relationships are so often diffused with violence, the nature of the connections between private aggression and public inequality, have not been featured in the public discussion of gender violence in China. When Chinese analysts and activists begin to raise them, it will be an important step toward the understanding and elimination of violence against women in China.<sup>37</sup>

34 *Ibid.*, 2.

35 *Ibid.*, 2.

36 Emily HONIG and Gail HERSHATTER, *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980's* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988) 298.

37 *Ibid.*, 298.

Such aggression serves as a forceful reminder of the essence of women's public and private inequality.<sup>38</sup>

*The Reintroduction of Inequality*

Since collectivization did virtually nothing to disturb China's traditional rural kinship patterns, what effect did the household responsibility system, instituted after the Cultural Revolution, have on women? Immediately, it reinforced the unitary patrilineal family by stripping away the collectivist overlay. It explicitly sanctioned private use of land and the responsibility for production by family units. On the ideological plane the "feudal" family had been under attack during the Cultural Revolution. Now it was touted as the basis of the rural economy.<sup>39</sup>

As Elizabeth Croll has noted, women "both benefitted from and were penalized by this new system."<sup>40</sup> The overall standard of living rose with an increase in family income. Individually, however, women's well-being increasingly became dependent on the distribution of benefits within the household unit since rewards were paid to the head of the household. In this context, women's labor was more hidden, since women no longer went in groups to the fields, but worked with their families on individual plots. Additionally, they supplemented family income by domestic sideline work performed within the household sphere.<sup>41</sup>

The one-child policy, which was never as rigidly enforced in the countryside as in the cities, ran headlong into the household responsibility system. More than ever families now needed male kin to secure the lineage as more and more goods were accumulated within the family. Female infanticide, abandonment of girls, early marriage, kidnapping of girls from urban areas all increased in an effort to secure the most goods and male offspring within the patrilineal family. In rural areas girls' education

38 Virginia CORNUE, "Re-dressing Chinese Women: Changing Identity, Status and 'Style' Under Contemporary Reform Policies in the PRC," Unpublished paper presented at the 33rd Annual Meeting of the Northeastern Anthropology Association.

39 "Four Clauses for Rural Reform," *Beijing Review*, August 10-16, 1992, 34

40 Elizabeth CROLL, *Chinese Women Since Mao* (London: Zed Books, 1982) 27.

41 *Ibid.*, 27, 28, 35-36.



became more problematic, since daughters were seen as "watering another man's garden" and therefore as a waste of money.<sup>42</sup>

Huang Xiyi notes that women, as compared with men, have paid a high price for the "transformation of their economic status" shouldering traditional household domestic chores, field or factory work and sideline production. Furthermore, lacking institutional guarantees on the local level to correct biases in rural administration, land property, and choice of labor, rural women's economic status remains on unstable ground.<sup>43</sup>

Urban women have benefitted most from the gains of the past forty years in terms of higher education, better jobs, fewer children, an increase in their general standard of living, more household help from their husbands and some labor saving household appliances such as refrigerators and small washing machines. Still, the incursion of market forces and Western influences has had varying effects on their lives. There has been a

redefinition of moral boundaries in courtship, marriage, and divorce, [as well as] a reinscription of sexual difference in a newly valorized 'femininity' that marks a retreat from the relative androgyny of the Mao Years ... [and offers] a fascinating commentary on the changing position of women in the family and the workplace.<sup>44</sup>

Women's organizations, such as the All-China Women's Federation and some Women's Studies Associations, as well as social scientists (all officials of the government) have invoked gender differences to underwrite justifications for segregating women in lower paying service and light industry jobs. For instance, Hua Jian, a researcher at the Shanghai Academy of Social Science, states that the

market mechanism has transformed workers ... [T]he male sex, due to their relatively long-term employment, strong physique, adventurous spirit and the ability to meet contingency, prevails, while the female ... [is] endowed with

42 Shiren RAI, "Watering Another Man's Garden: Gender, Employment and Educational Reforms in China," in *Women in the Face of Change: The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China*, Shiren RAI, Hilary PILKINGTON and Annie PHIZACKLEA, eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) 20, 29.

43 HUANG Xiyi, "Changes in the Economic Status of Rural Women in the Transformation of Modern Chinese Society," *Social Sciences in China*, 13, January 1992, 102-103.

44 ANAGOST, *op.cit.*, 339.



sentimentalism and a weak psychological quality ... which result in ... inferiority ... <sup>45</sup>

Papers given by Chinese scholars at the November, 1992 Shanghai International Conference on Contemporary Issues Facing Chinese Women used language specifying "women's special characteristics." These qualities were seen as biologically derived, thus predestining women for lower status roles in the economy. Some scholars assert that women's traditional roles of wife, childbearer, homemaker, caretaker of older relatives and mother make women undesirable workers due to excessive time lost fulfilling these role requirements, to exhaustion, and to the expense of maternity leave. Others reason that higher education makes women "unfit" for the traditional roles (e.g., childbearer, homemaker) that are most suited for them; employers, therefore, are justified in laying off educated women. In short, biological differences paraded as science become a tool for valorizing enduring beliefs about women and the basis for public policy positions that support discriminatory labor practices. The consequence is nicely summed up by one commentator, "With the deepening of national economic reform, the urban woman has encountered stiff challenge in their employment, especially since late 1991 ... Women have had difficulties in finding jobs and [run the] risk of being laid off or retired early."<sup>46</sup>

Social practice, epistemology, and public policy regarding gender converged in 1992 with the promulgation of the Women's Law designed to guarantee women's full emancipation in public and private domains. It could be argued, of course, that the passage of laws devoted to "woman" as a special category was a significant event in and of itself. Nonetheless, within the Women's Law, Article 25 stipulates differential health measures and job assignments on biological grounds. Menstruation, pregnancy, "obstetrician period," and lactation all mark women for distinctive

45 HUA Jian, "Challenges Faced by Chinese Women of the '90's," in *Conference Abstracts*, Papers from A Seminar on Women's Issues for Women from the Shanghai Women's Federation and the Shanghai Women's Studies Association, 1992, 46-47.

46 Jia-Feng WANG, "Study of Employment Problems Women Face During the Period of System Transfer," in *Ibid.*, 32-33.

treatment.<sup>47</sup> Gender differences specified in law thus emerge at the workshop level as a justification for restructuring the labor market.

### *Conclusion*

The anomaly of China's recent economic development, which owes so much to the participation of women, is that the introduction of the contract responsibility system followed by further economic restructuring has reinforced the inferior social status of women. It is not simply that female physical attractiveness has become a more important criterion of employment in some enterprises, but more concretely that males are still favored in job recruitment and in selection to higher positions (partly because women still make up only one-third of the enrollment in Chinese universities). While they have good maternity benefits, they are often the first to be sent home with part pay when there is a downturn; employers also complain that maternity benefits make women more costly as workers. In the countryside land allotments are distributed primarily among the men while in the cities apartments, provided by employers, normally also go to males. Such decisions are made at the local level and, since laws mandating equality have weak mechanisms for enforcement, are difficult to challenge. As Tao Chunfang, deputy director of the Women's Research Institute put it, "Everyone has benefitted from the reforms, but men have moved ahead at a faster pace than women ... This is China, where the man has always been the focus of the culture, China has glorified the man for several thousand years." Somewhat more accurate perhaps is the comment by Chen Yiyun, a sociologist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, "Unfortunately, sex discrimination has been brought in by the market economy."<sup>48</sup>

Tao Chunfang and Chen Yiyun both make valid points. Sex discrimination has truly ridden in on the coat tails of the market economy, an unwelcome import according to some Chinese. Yet the ancient and fundamental valuation of men over women also finds a comfortable home in China's new society. The far reaching vision of equality laid out in the new legal framework has been stymied for women, not by the persistence

47 Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women, Chapter IV, Rights and Interests Relating to Work, Adopted at the Fifth Session of the Seventh National People's Congress, April 3, 1992, 47.

48 Sheryl WUDUNN, "Women Face Increasing Bias As China Focuses on Profits," *The New York Times*, July 28, 1992, 1, 6.

of tradition alone, but by the very freedoms underlying the market economy that have favored the resurgence of the ancient discriminations associated with yin and yang.

What, therefore, will be the status of Chinese women in the next century? Some tantalizing and tentative hints are emerging. Certainly, unlike the socialist vision of the past four decades, the gender ideal will be multi-faceted. This may well mean that feminine social roles will be more burdensome, following the western model of "super-woman", as females carry out household duties in concert with responsibilities outside the home. On the other hand, the involvement of elite Chinese women academics, activists and officials with other women around the globe who are concerned with women's issues may have a conserving effect, retaining the best of socialist policies and mitigating the losses that are due to contemporary economic liberalization. This supportive interaction is already developing through academic exchanges, international conferences and international funding for non-governmental organizations that serve women. It will surely be strengthened by the UN Decade Conference for Women scheduled to be held in Beijing in 1995.

In the future Chinese women will surely find themselves linked more closely with international women's networks that will help counterbalance the harm done to women by current economic reforms. Furthermore, the development of a Chinese public service sector separate from party and ideological control hints at the beginnings of an independent Chinese-style women's community rooted in the gains of socialist policies but benefitting as well from economic and social development.

Those women who are the brightest, best educated and most entrepreneurial will thrive best in the new social and economic environment. At the same time, those women who adhere to an ideology of socialist equality may also find new means to realize the provisions embodied in the recent laws pertaining to the protection and rights and interests of women. In their own way both types may help protect other women from being swept aside in the changing tide of economic and social change.