

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN CHINA: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

SOON MAN RHIM

This paper traces the evolution of the social changes in the status of women from traditional Chinese society to contemporary life under the Communist regime.

Although radical changes have been made in the status of women under the Communist regime, the effort to improve that status was well under way prior to the rise of Communist power. These changes have accelerated since 1949 when the Communist regime took national power. While the history of the Chinese women's struggle for their rights dates back to the 2nd century A.D., the most eruptive development began to blossom about the 19th century.

Any serious assessment of the progress of women's emancipation under the Communist rule must begin with the conditions women faced in pre-revolutionary China.

Women's Position in the Old Society

It has been said that Confucius (551-479 B.C.), whose philosophical system dominated Chinese culture for nearly twenty-five centuries, had not one favorable word for women. In this connection, David and Vera Mace noted:

Confucius had little enough to say about women. But what he did say was decisive and far-reaching in its effects. He based his whole teaching about human society upon the patriarchal family, ancestor worship, and the duty of filial piety. The function of the woman within this system was simple and clear. It could be summed up in one four-letter word—'obey.' Woman is a creature born to obedience. Throughout her life her duty is to follow three simple rules. In childhood and early youth she obeys her father; when she is married she obeys husband; in widowhood she obeys her son. The quality of her obedience is to be unquestioning and absolute.¹

The traditional Chinese cosmology propounded the world as being composed of two complementary elements: yang, the male principle, and yin, the female. The male elements representing the positive and superior forces, stood for heaven, sun, height, strength and action;

¹David and Vera Mace, *Marriage: East and West*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1960), p. 67.

and the female elements, representing the negative and inferior counterparts of the male, signified earth, moon, depth, darkness, weakness and passivity. It can easily be seen that Confucian teachings about the status of women were powerfully reinforced by these ideas.²

The birth of a female child always caused some degree of dismay to a family in China. In a poor family or in one with no sons, it was a tragedy. By the time the child was old enough to be of even minimal labor value to her parents, she would have to be sent off to another family as a bride, and her most productive years were devoted to the service not of her own family, but of her husband's. Although at marriage a girl's parents were usually given a cash payment as a "bride price" by the family of her fiance, for a peasant family much of that money was usually returned to the groom's family in the form of a trousseau. Consequently, daughters were considered an economic burden because they would not become a financial support to the family.

In normal times, a girl-child would be treated with affectionate attention, which Chinese typically lavish upon small children. Nevertheless, in times when there was a narrow margin between survival and starvation within which many Chinese peasants existed, the high rate of female infanticide in traditional China is not surprising. For example, as Elisabeth Croll observed:

In a nineteenth-century survey conducted in several different provincial villages, the 160 women over fifty years of age who were interviewed, and who between them had borne a total of 631 sons and 538 daughters, admitted to destroying 158 of their daughters; none had destroyed a boy. As only four of the women had reared more than three girls, the field workers felt that the number of infanticides confessed to was considerably below the truth. The greatest number of infanticides owned to by any one woman was eleven. Sixty per cent of their sons had lived for more than ten years as opposed to 38 per cent of their daughters.³

A heartrending story of female infanticide is cited in Han Suyin's book, *Birdless Summer*. She writes of an incident that occurred as late as 1938-1942, of a woman who, in the hope of giving birth to a male child, went to the same midwifery hospital as her neighbor whose son had been born there. The fate of the woman's nine births of daughters is recounted:

The first was alive, and also the third; but the second had been strangled at birth by the husband and so had the fifth and the sixth; the seventh had been born in a bad year, a year of famine when

² *Ibid.*

³ Elisabeth Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China*, (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 24.

her belly skin struck to her spine, and the husband had smashed her skull in with his axe; at the eight female child the husband had been so angry that he had hurled it against a wall; the ninth was a year old and had been given away to a neighbour...⁴

What happened to the fourth birth? — the woman had omitted telling out of all the other numbered infanticides. Then, sobbing, she related: "She had been so frightened when it was born and it was a girl, that she herself had pushed it into the big toilet jar, and there it had suffocated."⁵ Her tenth child was also a girl. Without any emotion she accepted her fate, and took the child to her own parents' home where the newborn's future fate would still be in question.

Apart from infanticide, it was also common that in order to free themselves of the expense of rearing a daughter, the poorer peasants and townspeople sold their daughters into domestic service or prostitution. It is obvious that the neglect and maltreatment of female children were tied to the oppressive feudal economic system. William Hinton, in his analysis of rural village life, presents the following case study on the integral relationship of child neglect and economic conditions:

In Chingtsun one old woman said, 'I sold four daughters because I had to pay back a landlord debt. I wept the whole night, and the tears burned my eyes. Now I am blind. Poverty forced me to sell my own daughters. Every mother loves her child.' Others said, 'In the society no one loved a daughter because you brought them up and they left the house.' Many parents drowned their little daughters...⁶

In traditional China, women were generally denied the benefits of formal education. They were discouraged from developing any inherent ability or talent useful for a career outside the home. Only the privileged daughters of the scholar-gentry class⁷ sometimes shared their brothers' tutor and enjoyed an opportunity to develop their minds and cultivate their talents.

Generally, it was widely believed that knowledge was a bad investment for a girl who would soon be leaving home. It was considered unnecessary or even harmful, as expressed by the following frequently used proverbs: "A woman's lack of talent is in itself a virtue," or "A woman too well educated is apt to create trouble." As a consequence, there was a general lack of professional skills among women and a tremendously higher percentage of illiteracy

⁴ Han Suyin, *Birdless Summer*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), pp. 163-164.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁶ William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966), p. 397.

among women than among men. For example, in a study of 16,786 individual farms in 168 localities, and 38,256 farm families in twenty-two provinces in China, 1929-1933, by John Lossing Buck, "only 30 per cent of the males, and one per cent of the females, had attended school long enough to learn to read a common letter."⁸

It is apparent that the aim of education for females in traditional China was to develop perfect submission and compliance rather than to cultivate the mind. Among the books of instruction for girls were the "Nu Jie" or "Precepts for Women" and the "Nu er Jing" or the "Classic for Girls." In the "Nu Jie," women were instructed to "be obedient, unassuming, yielding, timid, respectful, reticent and unselfish in character."⁹

According to this book:

A woman should endure reproach, treasure reproof and revere her husband for 'A husband, he is Heaven' and 'Heaven is unalterable, it cannot be set aside.' 'If the wife does not serve her husband, the rule of propriety will be destroyed.'¹⁰

The "Nu er Jing" similarly catalogued the ideal qualities of women, outlining in more detail what were known as the "three obediences" and the "four virtues." Throughout her life cycle a woman was expected to obey absolutely her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son if she became a widow. The four virtues were:

First, a 'general virtue' meaning that a woman should know her place in the universe and behave in every way in compliance with the time-honoured ethical codes; second, she should be reticent in in words taking care not to chatter too much and bore others; third, she must be clean of person and habits and adorn herself with a view to pleasing the opposite sex; and fourth, she should not shirk her household duties.¹¹

The chief aim of a girl's education was the inculcation of ancient stereotypes of female conduct. And girls were almost exclusively trained for their duties in the domestic sphere. As a result, few wives

⁷ Normally traditional Chinese society was divided into four social classes—those of the scholar-gentry, the peasants, artisans and merchants. Outside this classification are those without a recognized place in Chinese society—the "mean" people or the boat people, actors, storytellers, prostitutes and other like social categories.

⁸ John L. Buck, *Land Utilization in China*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1937), p. 373.

⁹ Croll, *op. cit.*, p. 1e.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

received formal education. Proverbial wisdom summed it up: "Educating a daughter is like weeding someone else's field."

In regard to marriages, they were arranged between families of different surnames and usually of similar social standing. Negotiations about the choice of the marriage partner, the bride-price and dowry were conducted by a go-between or a matchmaker. As noted previously, the groom's family presented a bride-price to the bride's family, and in many cases the bride's family invested in a substantial dowry which the bride brought with her upon marriage.

Romantic courtship played no part. The young people, therefore, were strangers to one another. Often the couple had never laid eyes on each other before the wedding day. This was the so-called "blind-marriage."¹²

Traditionally, a family too destitute to bring up a daughter might, rather than sell her into slavery or prostitution, offer her to a boy's family and hand her over to his parents to be brought up as his future wife. She was known as a "child bride." Explaining about this practice of taking a child bride, Dr. C. K. Yang described:

A very young girl, sometimes even an infant, was purchased by a poor family which would raise her along with the young son. When they both reached marriageable age, they were married with a simple ceremony. While the ritualistic function was not outstanding in such a situation, the economic bondage of the couple to the parents was strong, for the parents had not merely raised the son but also the girl.¹³

He went on to say:

The subordination of the child bride was even greater than that of brides normally married into the family, for she owed directly to the parents-in-law the efforts and expense of bringing her up. Consequently, the parents-in-law's treatment of a child bride was frequently more tyrannical than normally.¹⁴

This custom of child brides was more prevalent among the rural poor than among richer classes, and it was extremely difficult for girls who were thus separated from their families at such an early age.

The primary functions of marriage in old China was the production of male offsprings to ensure the continuance of the family line, the acquiring of a daughter-in-law for the service and comfort of the

¹² William L. Parish and Martin K. Whyte, *Village and Family in Contemporary China*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 156.

¹³ C. K. Yang, *Chinese Communist Society: The Family and the Village*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1959), p. 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

parents, and the begetting of sons for the security of the parents' old age.¹⁵ The wife, therefore, was not her husband's friend, confidante, or lover. Her role in life was to bear male children to perpetuate the family name and to fulfill her obligations toward her husband's parents.

As a result, failure to produce a son was the greatest disaster that could overtake any married couple. According to Mencius, Chinese philosopher and teacher of Confucianism (372-289? B.C.), to have no posterity was the greatest of all filial sins. This is the supreme act of ingratitude to a man's parents. So everyone used to approve if a man with a barren wife took a concubine or a secondary wife, and often his first wife would be the one to suggest it. A childless woman could be cast out of her husband's home, disgraced, and socially ostracized. It was only in her function as a breeder that she attained status in society.

The new bride, entering her husband's household as a stranger, had to assume the most important role as daughter-in-law. Her first duties are to her husband's parents; only secondarily is she responsible for her husband. According to *The Classic for Girls*, which established the young wife's priorities:

As a wife to husband's parents,
You should filial be and good,
nor should suffer imperfection in their clothing
or their food,
Be submissive to their orders, all their wants
anticipate,
That, because his wife is idle, they your
husband may not hate.

Be submissive to your husband,
Nor his wishes e'er neglect
First of all in this submission is his parents
to respect.¹⁶

The husband-wife relationship was not stressed, and even the slightest public demonstration of affection was taboo. Thus, there was to be no noticeable expression of amorous life between any couple. In fact, newlyweds were supposed to sleep in the same bed for only seven days. After that, they occupied different beds but in the same room. In public they were to appear indifferent toward each other.¹⁷ In his study of "West Town," the community deep in the mountains of remote southwestern China, in 1941-43, Dr. Francis L. K. Hsu described this traditional attitude:

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁶ Quoted in Croll, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

A local boy returned to West Town after a period of schooling in Hong Kong and one day walked hand-in-hand with his newlywed bride on the street. Some local man threw a bucketful of human manure over their heads from behind. They had no redress, since they had violated the local taboo against intimacy between the sexes in public, and had to leave town.¹⁸

In public, therefore, and even in front of other family members within the household, a couple was expected to refrain from any display of affection.

Another important obligation of the bride with her new family was to willingly perform household chores under the direction of her mother-in-law, who was both her forewoman and workmate. "It was said that when a mother-in-law wanted to find fault with her daughter-in-law, she was as thorough as a donkey going round and round the rolling millstone: she did not miss a step."¹⁹ In cases of conflict, the husband was expected to side with his parents rather than his wife and to defend her submission to familial authority, if necessary, even by the use of physical force. It was, therefore, commonplace for a man or his mother to beat his young wife as a means of discipline, and this practice sometimes degenerated into a mere outlet for their frustrations.

Burgess and Locke, in their work, *The Family: From Institution to Companionship* provide us with a document secured in 1932 from a Chinese student. It records an interview with an aged woman in Chicago's Chinatown. Burgess and Locke point out that this document describes the traditional concept of the roles of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in the context of the changing conceptualization of these roles. This is revealed by the younger woman's inner rebellion against the traditional power and authority of the older woman. For the subject matter under discussion, it may be of particular interest to quote the young woman:

Mother-in-law was deeply religious, a faithful follower of Buddhism. My husband and I were Christians. Before I was married, friends frankly warned me that it is impossible for a Christian to marry into a pagan family without domestic troubles. Some told me that mother-in-law was cruel. Accordingly, the double image of the tender Buddha and devilish mother-in-law constantly appeared in my mind. But I had to sacrifice my own happiness for the sake of my beloved husband.

¹⁷ Francis L. K. Hsu, *Under Ancestors' Shadow*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1971), p. 57.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

¹⁹ Croll, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

A part of the marriage ceremony involves the giving of presents between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Mother-in-law gave me a gold bracelet and I gave her the customary present of a skirt made by my mother. This signified the resignation of family duties by the mother-in-law. According to the old idea, a full-dress was inconvenient for work; and hence the removal of a skirt signified taking on the duties of work. I thought this signified that the wife was to be the successor of the mother-in-law in carrying on family duties. My mother-in-law, however, interpreted it in a very restricted sense. Family duties to her were but the hard labor and the rest of the duties she kept for herself. Family policies were devised and executed by her, as a queen sitting on the throne of her kingdom.

Every morning, while the sun was still lying behind the morning dews, I went quickly to the kitchen to prepare morning tea for mother-in-law. Afterward I came back to my room to comb my hair, and then, I put on my formal dress. The skirt was indispensable for a full dress.

Going to her bedroom, I found that she was still sleeping. I stood beside her bed for an hour waiting to attend her. At last she awoke. I bowed to her humbly; then I gave her my arm in support until she reached her armchair. I went to the kitchen and took a basin of hot water to her bedroom and helped her wash her face. Then I presented her a cup of hot and fragrant tea with all the eastern virtue and politeness I could command.

It was nine now; I had to prepare a breakfast. We had servants, but did they help me do anything at all? No. My own status was lower than any of them. I had no experience in cooking. The criticisms of my cooking were hardly bearable. Such criticisms as 'It is too salty,' 'It is tasteless,' etc., prevented me from being calm; my tears flowed like an inexhaustible fountain. I came back to my private room, crying and crying.

At night I had to take care of her bed. I had to hang down her mosquito net in order to keep mosquitoes out. Besides, I had to say good night while leaving.

I disliked two things particularly. The prohibition against having a private talk with my husband destroyed the best part of my marriage life. Occasionally we talked in our private room. As soon as she discovered it she would call me out with a scornful voice. In her own philosophy private talks were undesirable at home since everything in the home was open to every individual. There was no privacy at all.

Second, I was not permitted to visit my mother's home often. I was permitted to go to her home once a year, though she was living near by. Once when I went to my mother's home for five days, I suddenly found out that a carriage was waiting outside for

my return. Mother-in-law tried to cut me off from both my husband and my mother.²⁰

As for property, Chinese women had practically no rights. When a family estate was divided, all property was distributed among the males. Explaining the total absence of property rights which is almost without example, Olga Lang said:

The property-less woman of China was herself the property of man. Young girls were sold by their fathers and became slaves, concubines, or prostitutes. Husbands sold their concubines, pawned or sold their wives for temporary or permanent marriages to other men. Such transactions were forbidden by law but took place not withstanding. A woman sold as a concubine was enslaved for her whole life.²¹

For the Chinese, marriage was not sacred. Thus, there was no difficulty in accepting the principle of divorce. The term for divorce, which literally meant "oust wife," closely reflected the unilateral nature of divorce. The legal codes of the Chinese Empire followed the Confucian classics in recognizing seven grounds on which a husband might divorce his wife:

1. She is rebellious toward her parents-in-law.
2. She has failed to produce a son.
3. She has been unfaithful to her husband.
4. She has shown jealousy toward her husband's other women.
5. She has a repulsive and incurable disease.
6. She is given to hurtful talk and tale bearing.
7. She is a thief.²²

Nevertheless, there were three circumstances in which, even though grounds existed, the wife could not be put away:

1. She has mourned three years for her husband's parents.
2. She has no family to which to return.
3. She married her husband when he was poor, and now he is rich.²³

A woman had no reciprocal rights. Divorce, therefore, was entirely a man's privilege.

Although in theory, reasons for divorce were enumerated and discussed at length in description of the Chinese marriage system, in practice, divorce was rare in traditional China. A wife who returned to her parents had little or no chance to remarry, and her future

²⁰ Ernest W. Burgess and Harvey J. Locke, *The Family: From Institution to Companionship*, (New York: American Book Co., 1945), pp. 46-47.

²¹ Olga Lang, *Chinese Family and Society*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), p. 45.

²² Mace, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

prospects otherwise were bleak. Her children belonged to her husband's family. She had no property of her own.

The Chinese held that a woman had to be the wife of one man only, and expressed this attitude by setting up memorials to widows who remained faithful. One could see many a monumental arch which lined the Chinese roads to honour the virtues of the faithful and lifelong widow. "There is a long tradition of Chinese wives who committed suicide when the husband died, as a demonstration of perfect loyalty and the conviction that it was better for a wife to go to heaven with her husband than to go living alone on earth."²⁴ To prove devotion to a dead husband, some widows had the idea of cutting off an ear and throwing it into the coffin—a pledge not to marry again. At least this was preferable to joining a husband on a funeral pyre as was the case in traditional India.

Surprisingly, even unmarried virgins were encouraged to die or to refuse to marry in memory of their deceased betrothed.²⁵ Or, more surprisingly, in some localities a girl would still be required to marry her dead fiancé. In such a case, she was brought home carrying a cock as a symbol, and then had to sleep in the marital bed with the memorial tablet of her dead "husband" for three days, after which she was considered to be a married woman. From then on, she would spend the rest of her life as a widow!²⁶

In case a woman chose to remarry against the objection of the family, she had to risk her life. The whole clan had the right to interfere, even the right to kill her. The following incident, as late as 1949 in Honan Province, is testimony to the above fact:

A woman whose family name was Ch'en was married to a man name Hsu. The husband died eight years after the marriage, and both the woman's and the husband's families did not permit her to remarry. In 1949, the widow took the matter into her own hands and married the head of a neighboring village. Two months after this, the woman's uncle, a local bully, and her own brother, ordered her to hang herself. She begged for mercy... Both turned a deaf ear to her pleas. She then requested to see her children and to put on her good clothes before dying, but this was also denied. She adamantly refused to hang herself; so her own brother strangled her to death, then hung her body up below the roof.²⁷

Ideally, a chaste widow should not remarry in traditional Chinese society. However, this was commonly practiced only among the gentry

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ C. K. Yang, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

²⁵ Hu Shih, *The Chinese Renaissance*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1934), p. 104.

²⁶ Yang Yi, "The Past and Present of the Women of Hui'an County," *Women of China*, December 1980, p. 10.

²⁷ Quoted in C. K. Yang, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

who followed seriously the Confucian ethic that the remarriage of widows was abhorrent. Among peasants and the urban poor, widows did remarry on account of economic pressure. In these classes, the husband's family usually arranged remarriage for their widowed daughter-in-law in exchange for a good price. In such a case, the woman was permitted to take neither her children nor her first husband's property, because these belonged not to her but to her first husband's family. Widowers and divorced men, in contrast, were encouraged to remarry, and they did not forfeit any rights to property or children in doing so.

Although custom and law allowed only one principal wife, husbands could take secondary wives or concubines, at least among those who could afford to do so. Traditional China, therefore, "could be said to combine the profession of monogamy with the practice of polygyny."²⁸

A man could take a concubine if the first wife did not bear children, and in practice this was done for many other reasons.²⁹ A concubine, being an informal wife taken into the house with no formal wedding ceremony, had no ritualistic recognition or institutional guarantee for her security nor permanency of her position in the family. She might be thrown away at will. Divorce was not necessary. Consequently, she had to keep her wits about her in order to retain her precarious position. "The two best ways to do so were to make herself sexually attractive to the husband, and to bear him sons."³⁰

The status of the concubine, who often had previously been an attractive slave girl or courtesan,³¹ was lower than that of the wife. In the household, the wife had dominion over all concubines. Usually the concubine and her children had their own private apartments in the household. But she did not enjoy any recognized share of the family income as did the wife and, therefore, she was completely dependent on her male sponsor. The concubine's children, including sons, did not have any ceremonial status and family opportunities

²⁸ Lucy Mair, *Marriage*, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 157.

²⁹ In connection with this, Dr. Hsu, for example, noted: "Concubines are taken by wealthy persons, generally ostensibly to acquire sons. . . . Yet a review of the eleven cases of concubinage I have collected will show that more than half of them have nothing to do with the popularly professed reason. In six out of eleven cases the concubines were taken because the wives were barren." Hsu, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

³⁰ Mac, *op. cit.*, pp. 206-207.

³¹ As for courtesans, they "were often skilled in music, dancing, conversation and poetry composition, and merchants and scholar-gentry frequented the houses of courtesans for such feminine companionship. They often supplied the need for courtship and romance which many men had missed in their youth, and many later became concubines. Some wives cooperated with their husbands in such ventures." Croll, *op. cit.* p. 30.

equal to those of sons born to the wife. The concubine's sons were unable to claim an equal share of inheritance with the wife's sons. They could do so only when the wife had no sons. If the concubine remained in favour until the death of the wife, however, she might find herself promoted to succeed her as mistress of the household. For a concubine, this was considered the classic success story.³² Then her sons and daughters enjoyed the same right as those of the first wife.

Concubinage as a means of continuing the family line seems to have been merely a rationalization. It was often associated with the expression of prestige, or with polyerotic tendencies of the male.³³ An example of this may be cited from Han Suyin's *Birdless Summer*. A concubine, Spring Wave, was a member of the Liu household harem. Liu was a powerful warlord. Since Spring Wave was about to give birth, possibly a son, she was his favorite at the time and was given very special treatment. When she was about to give birth, the warlord Liu brought home a new concubine.

How and why this sudden change? Perhaps the disfigurement of Spring Wave's body, in the last weeks of pregnancy, had displeased him? From the room where she was giving birth, Spring Wave could hear, in the adjoining bedroom, separated only by a screen, the giggles and the little screams of her rival, in bed with the warlord; and when her child was born it was a girl.... And then there was the case of the warlord, who only two hours after his concubine had given birth insisted on intercourse with her... We were called in haste, but she died bleeding to death.³⁴

Thus, the richest of the local lords often had numerous concubines from whom they benefitted for their sexual pleasure. The polygamous household became the rich man's privilege. Certainly it was sometimes the symbol of his prestige. Under the circumstances, Chinese wives, trained to submission, were usually unable to complain about it. They could not be jealous of their rivals, because jealousy was a recognized ground for divorce.

Traditionally in China women were generally secluded. Especially in the upper classes women lived in virtual purdah:

They had little association with unrelated women (other than servants), limited contact with even the male members of their family, and very little information about events outside their living quarters, including the income-producing activities on which they were dependent.³⁵

³² Mace, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

³³ Hsu, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

³⁴ Han Suyin, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

³⁵ Margery Wolf, "Chinese Women: Old Skills in a New Context," in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. by Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 161.

Perhaps the most striking feature of social life in traditional China was the segregation of the sexes. The Confucianists considered it most desirable that men should have no public social relations with women. Thus, this forestalled romantic love as a basis for marriage. Also, they deemed it desirable that even within the home, boys and girls seven years or older were not supposed to sit or eat together. The complete separation of the sexes was carried through "even to the extent that the husband and wife were not supposed to hang their garments in the same closet."³⁶

Where men were entertained at home, rather than at the customary teahouse, women were seldom seen and noticed. At such times women were not allowed to even peep outside the doors of their apartments. Thus advice to a husband was:

So misfortune and intrigue will pass you by.³⁷
 Let not your guests behold your wife,
 and secretly lock the postern gate.
 Restrict her to courtyard and garden,
 So misfortune and intrigue will pass you by.³⁷

The ideal woman in traditional Chinese society was one who concentrated all her efforts on her household tasks. From earliest times all women were taught that they should not concern themselves with outside affairs, especially public matters. Participation in these matters "was abhorred as the root of all evil and the cause of the downfall of the great dynasties."³⁸ Thus, women were cut off from opportunities for independence in political, economic and social activities.

Oddly enough, concerning the practice of secluding women and the division of labor, in reality it was the prerogative of the richer classes to live up to those standards. Peasant families could not afford the luxury of secluding their women. The peasants lived in small separate houses, or sometimes several families shared one of the old gentry houses. Their living quarters afforded them much less seclusion than the rambling courtyards characteristic of gentry dwellings. The light inside their houses was poor, so peasant women frequently sat and worked on their doorsteps. As Elisabeth Croll describes peasant women in the village, they:

sometimes gathered water from the well, did their washing at the river, and had no servants to shop and market for them. They had more contact with local shopkeepers and pedlars and in some areas of China, such as the southern provinces, women traditionally

³⁶ Vern L. Bullough, *The Subordinate Sex: A History of Attitudes toward Women*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1974, p. 249.

³⁷ Croll, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

³⁸ Bullough, *loc. cit.*

worked in the fields alongside their menfolk during the busy seasons.³⁹

She goes on to say:

Women of the non-Han ethnic minorities, boat-women, water-carriers, servants, fuel gathers and scavengers tended to come and go freely.⁴⁰

In this way, women in the lower classes customarily had more freedom of movement.

It should be noted, therefore, that besides class differences in the status of women, there were also regional differences in traditional China. A Canadian feminist, Katie Curtin said of this fact:

The conditions of women in North China, the old heartland of the dynastic imperial system, were more oppressive than in the South. There were deep prejudices in the North against women working in the fields, while it was acceptable practice in the South.⁴¹

It is significant that from time immemorial women in the provinces of Kwangtung, Kwangsi, and Fukien of South China worked in the fields and also as coolies, boatmen, and in other manual tasks.⁴²

Another feature of the inferior status of Chinese women is entirely unique, that is, the custom of footbinding, a practice which made it almost impossible for women to move about without great effort.

The origin of the footbinding custom is obscure. It is thought to have begun about the tenth century A.D. It was first practiced by the women of the upper classes but later became general. So in spite of class or relative wealth or poverty, all women bound their feet. The only exceptions were nuns, Manchu women, and maids, even though maids who bound their feet were regarded as much more valuable.⁴³ In addition to these specific groups, were the Hakka women,⁴⁴ the so-called "hill tribes" of China and the boat population of Canton who also kept their feet unbound.

Bound feet in traditional times came to be such a supreme mark of quality in a woman that it was more important even than being

³⁹ Croll, *loc. cit.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Katie Curtin, *Women in China*, (New York and Toronto: Pathfinder Press, 1975), p. 13

⁴² Olga Lang, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

⁴³ Howard S. Levy, *Chinese Footbinding: The History of a Curious Erotic Custom*, (Tokyo: John Weatherhill, Inc., 1966), p. 272.

⁴⁴ They "had a reputation for hard work and for being exploited by lazy husbands—women are reported to do as much private-plot work as men or even more." Parish and Whyte, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

clever or beautiful. It was, therefore, difficult to marry off a daughter with big (natural) feet. A girl whose feet were not bound would not even be desired as a concubine or prostitute. Only paupers who were obliged to preserve their daughters' ability to work would thus deprive them of having bound feet.⁴⁵ This class of females was contemptibly called "chopping blocks" or "the bigfooted."⁴⁶

Nevertheless, the binding process, which had to be begun in early childhood, was excruciatingly painful and ended in permanent crippling. A woman recalled the indescribable pain she endured:

I was inflicted with the pain of footbinding when I was seven years old. I was an active child who liked to jump about, but from then on my free and optimistic nature vanished... Binding started in the second lunar month; mother consulted references in order to select an auspicious day for it. I wept and hid in a neighbor's home, but mother found me, scolded me, and dragged me home. She shut the bedroom, boiled water, and from a box withdrew binding shoes, knife, needle, and thread. I begged for a one-day postponement, but mother refused: 'Today is a lucky day,' she said. 'If bound today, your feet will never hurt; if bound tomorrow, they will.' She washed and placed alum on my feet and cut the toenails. She then bent my toes toward the plantar with a binding cloth ten feet long and two inches wide, doing the right foot first and then the left. She finished binding and ordered me to walk, but when I did, the pain proved unbearable... My feet felt on fire and I couldn't sleep; mother struck me for crying... I tried to hide but was forced to walk on my feet... Though I wanted to sit passively by the k'ang, Mother forced me to move around.⁴⁷

This excessive pain and suffering were summarized in an old saying: "For every pair of bound feet, a bucket full of tears."

As for the deformity that footbinding produced, the foot looked like a hoof. The bound foot with this hoof-like shape, however, was given the romantic name of "golden lily" or "golden lotus." The ideal size of bound foot had to be only three inches in length from heel to toe.⁴⁸ Thus, adult women in traditional China walked on three-inch stumps.

This barbarous custom, however, was romanticized and eulogized. For example, during his stay in China (about 1895), a French doctor, named Matignon, questioned Chinese gentlemen about the bound feet and found that they were unanimous in their praise: "Oh! The small foot! You Europeans can't understand how exquisite, agreeable, and

⁴⁵ Olga Lang, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁴⁶ Charles Humana and Wang Wu, *The Ying Yang: The Chinese Way of Love*, (New York: Avon Books, 1972), p. 91.

⁴⁷ Levy, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁴⁸ Humana and Wu, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

exciting it is!"⁴⁹ In connection with the aesthetic value of footbinding, Olga Lang said: "Several peasants and coolies interviewed... in 1936, asserted that bound feet, though impractical, are nevertheless much more beautiful than natural feet."⁵⁰ Even Lin Yutang, a modern westernized author, describing the beauty of one of his heroines, says:

She had very small feet, neatly bound, but she stood quite erect... Beneath the trousers showed a pair of red bow shoes, three and a half inches long, beautifully embroidered and topped by ankle bands of white cloth. A well-bound, well shaped pair of dainty feet was a delight because most bound feet were not well bound with regard to proportion and angle. The principal thing, apart from perfect harmony of life, was 'uprightness' so that the feet formed a perfect base for the woman's body. This young woman's feet were almost ideal, being small, unright and neat, round and soft and tapering to the point gradually, and not flattened as many common feet were.....A pair of big unbound feet would have completely ruined this harmony of line.⁵¹

Footbinding was also considered having sexual appeal. A German scholar wrote in 1928 that "the fundamental meaning of this injurious practice was the arousing of male lust."⁵²

The essential function of footbinding, however, is clearly not to make the women beautiful and sexually attractive, but to make them immobile. Bound feet restricted the physical mobility of women, thus preventing them from moving about freely and unchaperoned. In the famous "Classic for Girls" we read:

Have you ever learned the reason
For the binding of your feet?
'Tis from fear that 'twill be easy to go out
upon the street.
It is not that they are handsome when thus like
a crooked bow,
That ten thousand wraps and bindings are en-
swathed around them so.⁵³

According to a rhyme from a presumably Yuan dynasty source, we can see a similar attitude:

Why must the foot be bound?
To prevent barbarous running around! ⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Levy, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-131.

⁵⁰ Olga Lang, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

⁵¹ Lin Yutang, *Moment in Peking: A Novel of Contemporary Chinese Life*, (New York: The John Day Co., 1939), pp. 45-46.

⁵² Levy, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁵³ Quoted in Croll, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁵⁴ Levy, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

So it came to be regarded as a means of teaching chastity and preventing women from becoming lewd. The Chinese believed that if young girls went out of doors, they would be sure to get into mischief. A virtuous woman was discouraged even to look out of the door of her house. Footbinding not only restricted women's freedom, but also considerably injured their health. This practice of footbinding, which was introduced into China in the 10th century, continued well into the 1940s, although it was officially banned in 1911.

Another traditional limitation which applied to the status of women in Chinese society was loss of her name. After marriage, the wife's given name was discarded and she was known to the community only by her surname prefixed with the surname of her husband's family. "In the home she was addressed by a kinship term denoting her position in the family organization which omitted both her surname and given name."⁵⁵ Thus, her individual existence in society was virtually completely effaced.

Thus far, many factors in the traditional oppression of women have been discussed. Yet, it should be noted that some writers have claimed that Chinese women have not always been cruelly subjected to men. Rather than being chattel, Chinese women were believed to have really held the power. For example, Dr. Hu Shih, one of the prominent scholars of contemporary China, had the following to say:

At the outset, it is necessary to point out that the position of women in the old family was never so low as many superficial observers have led us to believe. On the contrary, woman has always been the despot of the family. The authority of the mother and the mother-in-law is very well known. Even the wife is always the terror of the husband; no other country in the world can compete with China for the distinction of being the nation of hen-peck husbands. Certainly, no other country has produced so many stories of hen-pecked husbands. The wife built up her strong position sometimes upon love, sometimes upon beauty of personality, but in most cases upon the fact that she could not be dislodged from her position: she could not be divorced!⁵⁶

There may be considerable truth in what Dr. Hu Shih said. It is true that Chinese women in their capacity as mothers and mothers-in-law did hold some power. This was, however, only over the women of the family. And all the women still remained subordinate to the men. It is also true that the status of women in the family was comparatively high in those areas where they took a greater part in productive labour. But even in such areas, girls were less valued than boys, and they could not inherit property and, therefore, did not

⁵⁵ C. K. Yang, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

⁵⁶ Hu Shih, *op. cit.* pp. 104-105.

become owners of the land. An occasional case occurred where a very strong woman would somehow gain considerable control in her family, including over the male members. The real levers of power, however, were held by the men, in the patriarchal male clan institutions of the village, and in the government bureaucracy. In view of these facts, the position of women relative to men in traditional Chinese society was, without doubt, an inferior one.

Attempts to Improve Women's Position

Thus far, we have discussed the condition of Chinese women which was one of subjection and suffering, frustrated dreams and unrealized potential. Nevertheless, this does not mean that their subordinate position passed unnoticed or unchallenged.

Bemoaning the sad fate of women in contrast to men, a poet Fu Hsuan, as far back as the third century B.C., exclaimed:

How sad it is to be a woman!
Nothing on earth is held so cheap.
Boys stand leaning at the door
Like Gods fallen out of heaven.
Their hearts brave the Four Oceans,
The wind and dust of a thousand miles.
No one is glad when a girl is born;
By her the family sets no store.⁵⁷

In the twelfth century A.D., Yuan Cai grieved for women's inequality and their enforced dependence on husbands and sons. In the sixteenth century, the injustice of the traditional divorce procedures was deplored by one scholar. And another, Yuan Mei, in the eighteenth century, appealed for a system of education for women and mutual sexual license in his anarchist revolt against the entire Confucian system. In his four essays on chastity, Yu Zhangxian, in the eighteenth century, condemned the double standard of morality and rebuked the custom of footbinding.⁵⁸

Perhaps the most satirical criticism of the inequality of women can be found in one nineteenth-century novel, *Flowers in the Mirror*, by Li Ruzhen. In it the author reversed the roles of men and women. In the "Women's Kingdom," women ruled and men attempted to gain their favour. In this land of fantasy, men were dressed in voluminous petticoats and subjected to the tortures of footbinding. With the exclusive advantage of education, women entered the state examination system to take up positions in the government bureaucracy. Moreover, old men painted their beards black in order to preserve their youthful attractiveness. In short, as Elisabeth Croll points out:

⁵⁷ Quoted in Curtin, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁵⁸ Croll, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

Li Ruzhen used the novel to question the inequality of women in society and the double standard of morality. He emphasized the injustice done to women, and later in the twentieth century his novel was heralded as the first 'Chinese Declaration of the Rights of Women.'⁵⁹

Popular rejection of the subjugation of women is often to be found in the ideas and practice of peasant revolts in Chinese history. For example, the Yellow Turban rebellion, one of the two great Taoist uprisings, which broke out in the second century A.D., manifested "a certain assertion of women's rights."⁶⁰ This Taoist movement was seemingly aimed at creating a society in which men and women would be on a more or less equal footing. According to Dr. Denise Carmody, the Taoists' understanding of nature's way was in many respects feminist."⁶¹ And, she believes that "Taoists achieved one notable practical victory when they brought about the outlawing of female infanticide."⁶²

The best known example of a revolution in the position of women is that of the extensive and widespread Taiping ("great peace") peasant rebellion of the mid-nineteenth century. In this Taiping Rebellion of 1850-1864, women were accorded equality:

Women had a right to an equal allocation of land under the Taiping land system, and girls could attend school, take examinations, and become officials. The sale of brides, footbinding, prostitution, and polygamy were forbidden. Widows were permitted to remarry. Women could join women's armies which sometimes engaged in battle although they were more often used in non-combat roles.⁶³

In 1853 the Taipings captured Nanking and made it their capital. By this time there numbered forty women's armies, each with 2,500 soldiers. The early women followers were mainly from the minority nationalities of the southern provinces, but later they were joined by numerous village women from the other provinces. Occasionally, whole families joined the Taiping forces.⁶⁴ For instance, in the case of Marshall Liang Litai's family, it is recorded that

only his two younger brothers remained at home. His mother, wife, sister, son and daughter all joined the Taipings. His elder brother was killed in action. At the age of 34, Liang Litai commanded a men's detachment of 13,000 troops, and his mother, Hu Damei, was in command of 2,500 women soldiers.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Denise L. Carmody, *Women and World Religions*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), p. 70.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 71

⁶³ Deila Davin, *Woman-Work: Women and the Party in Revolutionary China*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 7.

⁶⁴ Croll, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁶⁵ Tian Xiang, "Stories of the Taiping Women Army," *Women of China*, No. 2 (April, 1979), p. 33.

Among the Taiping women marshalls, Hong Xuanjiao and Su Sanniang were exceptionally fearless, mighty warriors. Consequently, their names became legendary.⁶⁶

In the first years of their rule, the Taipings enacted some reforms for women. Later, through the degeneration of the movement, however, polygyny and concubinage became prevalent among the leaders. Women were given as rewards to successful generals. The possession of women even became a badge of rank: the more senior the officer or official, the larger the number of wives were permitted to him. For instance, "the highest ranking men in the armies received more than ten women and the number decreased as the rank lowered."⁶⁷

The leaders, the Kings of the Taiping, built up enormous harems in the decadent years of the rebellion and had unlimited license. The Taiping leader Hong Xiuquan wrote about the role of women clearly:

Women in the rear palaces should not try to leave;
if they should try to leave, it would be like hens
trying to crow.
The duty of the palace women is to attend to the
needs of their husbands;
And it is arranged by Heaven that they are not to
learn of the affairs outside.⁶⁸

It is obvious that the old Confucian ideology persisted.

Eventually, overcome by superior military power borrowed from the West, the Taipings were suppressed, but at the height of their success they held most of Central China, and their armies fought in 16 of the 18 provinces south of the Great Wall. The Taipings were fighting to overthrow not only the Ch'ing dynasty, but also the whole traditional social system. Their doctrine was a sort of primitive communism obtained partially from Chinese tradition and partially from a false or spurious Christianity.⁶⁹

As discussed above, the Taiping attitudes toward women displayed the contradictions and inconsistencies in practice, but their utopian ideals and to a lesser extent, their practice remain valuable evidence of a tradition of dissent. Undoubtedly, the seeds of general revolution among the peasantry had been sown.

In the early and middle nineteenth century the Christian missionaries also challenged existing social norms and attempted to improve the position of women. So many wives of missionaries and

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Croll, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-41.

⁶⁸ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁶⁹ Davin, *loc. cit.*

single women missionaries opened small schools for girls. But only a very small number of pupils attended the schools. As a matter of fact, many of the pupils were slave-girls, foundlings and beggar-girls picked up off the streets. Then, in 1877, the Chinese government officially condemned the activities of women missionaries so as to stop their work among women.⁷⁰

From the early 1800s to the late 1930s, and organized movement against the traditional marriage also developed among women in the Shun-te district of Kwangtung of south China. It was mainly the workers in the silk industry who refused to marry, remained virgins, and went to live in "Girls' Homes." There they stayed with others who shared their views.⁷¹ According to Denise L. Carmody, those women

often took vows of celibacy and formed sisterhoods, frequently in the name of Kuan-yin, whom they believed to have been a princess turned nun, against her parents' objections. This was a powerful model; Kuan-yin had no husband to claim her, no mother-in-law to control her, no children to impede her.⁷²

Despite the fact that this movement was not widespread, it raised furious opposition because it cut to the marrow of the Confucian expectation that women would be obedient wives and good mothers.

In the late 1800s the idea of female equality was championed by prominent liberal reformers like K'ang Yu-wei and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao. In the so-called abortive 100-day Reform of 1898, they advocated modern education for women and the unbinding of their feet.⁷³

Shortly after this, the first women revolutionaries appeared on the scene. They were from the privileged classes, graduates of new educational institutions for women in China and abroad, particularly in Japan. They gave most of their time and effort to working as equals with men in the revolutionary movement led by Sun Yat-sen which aimed at the overthrow of the reigning Ch'ing dynasty and the establishment of a modern nation state governed by parliamentary means. One of the best known of these women was Ch'iu Chin, who published the first "Women's Journal," and who was executed in 1907 for leading an uprising against the Ch'ing dynasty. Women's divisions fought in the Republican revolution of 1911, "a revolution which promoted women's rights to education, 'to make friends,' to marry by free choice of partners, and to participate in government."⁷⁴ And with the establishment of a Republic in 1912, a group of women's

⁷⁰ Croll, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-43.

⁷¹ Curtin, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁷² Carmody, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

⁷³ C. K. Yang, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

organizations made a petition to the Provisional Parliament in Peking demanding that the new constitution grant equal rights to women. When it was denied to them, they physically stormed the Parliament, smashing its windows and injuring guards.⁷⁵

By 1913, the Republican revolution had fallen under the dictatorship of Yuan Shih-K'ai. Revolutionaries were being killed and driven underground again. In the course of this development, China broke up into a number of warlord states, and the women's movement was crushed. But still, intellectually, if not politically, China was awash with new ideas. In 1916, the newly established Chinese Renaissance Movement levelled powerful ideological attacks on traditional institutions and family-oriented values. Advocating a new family system, therefore, its leaders demanded that women be free to choose their own mates, remarry if they wished, and be economically independent. They even went so far as to "demand full emancipation of women from household drudgery, proposing that the care of children, preparation of food, laundry, and home cleaning be put on a collective basis."⁷⁶

In 1919, a profound political upsurge shook China with a series of student demonstrations and merchant boycotts in major cities, against the selling out of Chinese sovereignty by the Western powers to Japan in the Treaty of Versailles ending World War I. This movement, called the May 4th Movement, injected renewed social and political consciousness into the women's movement. The traditional family system was a major target of attack. Women campaigned for reforms in the laws of property and inheritance. They demanded the right to be educated, to work, to vote, to hold office, and to choose their own husbands. Ibsen's plays, especially "The Doll's House," were being translated and performed.⁷⁷

Reform movements, such as those associated with the Chinese Renaissance Movement and the May 4th Movement (1916-1919), attempted to change laws and institutions concerning women. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that most of rural China continued to imbibe the proverbial wisdom that "noodles are not rice and women are not human beings."

By the 1920s, politics, influenced by the May 4th Movement, took a more progressive and nationalistic direction. In 1923-24, Sun Yat-sen reorganized his followers into the Koumintang or Nationalist Party along Soviet Bolshevik lines. He also formed an alliance with

⁷⁵ Curtin, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷⁷ Davin, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14.

the then tiny Chinese Communist Party⁷⁸ established in 1921. So, one could see the successful northern expedition from 1925 to 1927 of combined Nationalist and Communist forces against the warlords of southern and central China.

But then, after the crush of the Shanghai workers' uprising in April 1927 at the hands of the rising bourgeois party of Chiang Kai-shek, the Kuomintang (KMT), the country was unified under the KMT. In the 1927 massacre of the Shanghai workers, Chiang ordered, without warning, all Communists rounded up and executed. Thousands were killed, including women activists. Another uprising in Canton in December 1927 was suppressed by the KMT. In the course of this crackdown, "some two or three hundred women were executed. . . for simply being caught with short haircuts, a symbol of emancipation."⁷⁹ During this bloody year of 1927 it was reported that more than 1,000 women leaders were killed. Chiang Kai-shek was especially vindictive against women activists and eradicated most of the women's associations.⁸⁰ In this year the split between the Kuomintang Party and the Chinese Communist Party took place.

It is noteworthy, however, that in 1931, the Kuomintang government promulgated the Civil Code, which upheld many of the objectives of the women's rights movement:

Woman were granted equality in civil, political, and property rights. The prohibition against footbinding was repealed. Freedom of choice and equality in marriage were upheld. Divorce by mutual consent was permitted, but here a concession was made to custom: the father normally took custody of the children.⁸¹

Many of these legal changes, however, remained solely on paper. There is no evidence that this code was ever seriously enforced by the Kuomintang government. In general, the effects of the new laws were largely limited to the educated urban middle and upper classes. The vast majority of peasant women would never even have been informed of this legislation.⁸²

As for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), following its defeat by Chiang Kai-shek in 1927, it retreated to the countryside, establishing a peasant army and "red bases" in Hunan and Kiangsi. In

⁷⁸ The Chinese Communist Party was founded in 1921 by Ch'en Tuhsiu and a handful of intellectuals who had participated in the May 4th Movement of 1919.

⁷⁹ Curtin, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Davin, *op. cit.*, p. 15. cf. Hu Shih, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

⁸² Despite the 1931 Code which aimed at liberation of the woman from her ancient servitude, "it was reported in 1937, after it had been in operation for six years, that there were still two million girl slaves in China." Mace, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

Kiangsi, Mao Tse-tung and Chu Teh built a powerful Soviet (1928-34). In these rural base areas, the status of women changed dramatically under the impact of mass mobilization. As Katie Curtin put it:

They were granted inheritance and property rights as well as freedom of marriage and divorce. Ten thousand women in the Kiangsi base area participated in local unions. Women were also organized into brigades to make clothing and shoes for the Red Army. They were mobilized to work in the fields while the men fought at the front, and in many villages women were organized into guerrilla groups to defend the area when the men were absent.⁸³

In *Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution*, Agnes Smedley gives a clear illustration of the change that took place in the lives of peasant women of the Ninggang area when it was under Communist control. She wrote:

In this Ninggang district were thousands of women agricultural laborers with unbound feet. For their labor the landlords had paid them rice and four or five silver dollars a year. But some were slaves, bought for work on the land or in the rich homes. When the Agricultural Laborers' Union was formed, these women agricultural laborers entered, dominating it, and when the Red Guards were organized, some of these women stepped forward, saying: 'Our feet are big—look! They have never been bound! We can walk and work like men! We are strong as the men! Give us guns! So the Red Guards of Ninggang became a mixed body of armed men and women with red bands on their sleeves.⁸⁴

Thus, large numbers of peasant women began to stand up, take charge of their lives and fight with their men against Chiang's forces.

The rural base areas in Kiangsi in southern China were destroyed, however, by Chiang Kai-shek. On October 18, 1934, therefore, the Chinese Red Army began the famous "Long March" of 1934-35, and Yanan in northern Shensi province became the new communist capital.

The Communists and Chiang's Kuomintang (KMT) then, as a united front in a general struggle for national liberation, fought against Japanese imperialists from 1937 to 1945. During this period of war with Japan, as its part of the bargain with the KMT, the CCP dropped its program for land reform and played down the activities of the women's organizations. It emphasized that "the vital task for the women's movement was to involve women in productive labour."⁸⁵ Changing its position toward marriage, the CCP no longer referred to the abolition of the "feudal" family which oppressed women. It

⁸³ Curtin, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁸⁴ Agnes Smedley, *Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution*, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1976), p. 115.

⁸⁵ Davin, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

also "backtracked on the principle of freedom of divorce, which it had advocated during the Kiangsi period, introducing a series of restrictions on this right."⁸⁶

At the end of the anti-Japanese War, the CCP opened negotiations with Chiang for its admission into the KMT government as a minority party. But it did not come to realization because of Chiang's rejection. Consequently, another Chinese civil war was to occur from 1945 to 1949.

During this civil war, the change in policy on women was not so drastic. The CCP seems to have felt that too sudden and strong a campaign for women's rights might alienate many peasants, including even many of the women themselves.

Very significant changes, however, took place in the course of land reform as acknowledged in the resolution of the Central Committee of the CCP on woman-work, issued in 1948:⁸⁷

Women have become much more aware and enthusiastic, and consequently there has been a fundamental change in their political and economic status, and in their position in the family and in society.⁸⁸

Under land reform not only did men and women get equal rights to the land, but separate land deeds were sometimes issued. In the words of the above-mentioned resolution of the Central Committee:

When a family is taken as the unit for issuing land deeds, a note must be made upon them to the effect that men and women have equal rights to the land. Every member of the family has democratic rights in the disposal of the property. When necessary, land deeds for women can be issued separately.⁸⁹

In this period of civil war, women had to be mobilized for unaccustomed roles in agriculture, handicrafts, and war support work. Such a mobilization as well as the land reform raised the morale and the consciousness of women.

Women could be found in the army as doctors and nurses, and even more important, in the political and propaganda departments. They worked in government administration, land reform, and cadre training programmes. Here one can see that traditional attitudes to women were crumbling. Thus, women increasingly came to reject their old subordinate role in the "feudal" family and in society.

⁸⁶ Curtin, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁸⁷ For the 1948 Central Committee resolutions, see Appendix 2 in Davin, *op. cit.*, pp. 201-209.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

As we see from the history of any social change, while a new policy may be implemented, the actual practice is hampered by the ages old traditional ways. Therefore, one should not make the hasty conclusion that women's liberation in the communist-controlled areas during the civil war was completely successful. Great numbers of people did still cling to the old ideas of women's subservience and dependence. Thus, in 1948 the CCP was urged to "correct the feudal ideology which values men and despises women"⁹⁰ that still survived both inside and outside the Party. But it is obvious that women had started on the road to full emancipation.

The Position of Women after Liberation in 1949

The Chinese civil war ended with the CCP victory over Chiang's Kuomintang, and on the first day of October 1949 the People's Republic of China was proclaimed in Peking (Beijing). The leader of the new government, MaoTse-tung (Mao Zedong), demanded to put an end to the subjugation of women, regarding subjugation as an intimate part of the evils of Confucian family relations. Thus, he held that Chinese women, who "hold up half of heaven," have to be accorded equality with men. As Parish and Whyte put it:

In fact Mao showed more concern for improving the role of women than he did for the general reform of family relations. This emphasis was incorporated into a number of policies and programs, from the 1950 Marriage Law to a more recent stress on equal pay for equal work and on promoting women into leadership positions.⁹¹

Consequently, the new government was explicitly committed to redefining and improving the position of women in society.

In September 1949, on the eve of the birth of the new China, the Common Programme of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference declared:

The People's Republic of China shall abolish the feudal system that holds women in bondage. Women shall enjoy equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, educational and social life. Freedom of marriage for men and women shall be put into effect.⁹²

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Parish and Whyte, *op. cit.*, p. 236. Mao was betrothed by his family to a girl he hardly knew. He later repudiated the marriage. "Mao is said to have resented it as much for the girl as for himself, just as he resented his mother's traditionally subservient role to his father. He was once deeply shocked by a local girl's suicide on her way to be married to an unknown man twice her age." Maria Roper, "How Do the Chinese People Live?," in *China Profile: A Symposium*, ed. by Ross Terrill (New York: Friendship Press, 1969), pp. 129-

⁹² "China's Marriage Law: Past and Present," *Women of China*, May 1980, p. 12.

On May 1, 1950, the Central People's Government made public "The Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China" which, in its principles, stipulates:

The feudal marriage system based on arbitrary and compulsory arrangements and the supremacy of man over woman, and in disregard of the interests of the children, is abolished. The New Democratic marriage system, which is based on the free choice of partners, on monogamy, on equal rights for both sexes, and on the protection of the lawful interests of women and children, is put into effect.⁹³

This law, setting itself up in opposition to the evil customs and practices connected with the feudal marriage system in old China, prohibited bigamy, concubinage, child betrothal, interference with the remarriage of widows, and the exaction of money or gifts in connection with marriage. It set the minimum age for marriage at twenty for men and eighteen for women.

The equality of husband and wife was asserted in a declaration of their freedom to choose their own occupations and social activities, their equal status in the home and their joint duty of striving for the welfare of the family and the construction of the new society. Women were allowed to retain their own surnames. Women were declared to have equal rights in the ownership and management of family property and its inheritance. The responsibility for rearing and educating children lay with the parents. Children out of wedlock were given the same rights as other children.

The Articles dealing with divorce established a system wherein divorce was a simple matter of registration of the proper papers when both parties agreed to divorce, and in cases where either the husband or the wife alone sought divorce, it could be granted only when mediation by the district's people's government and the judicial organ had failed to bring about a reconciliation. The revised law, however, stated that "in case of complete alienation of mutual affection, and when mediation failed, a divorce should be granted."⁹⁴

Prompt response to the 1950 Marriage Law was clearly evident. Women especially took advantage of the divorce provisions. For instance, in Shanghai, almost 91 percent of the divorce cases in 1950 were initiated by women.⁹⁵ The strong campaign to encourage divorce

⁹³ A translation of the marriage law appears in Paul Chao, *Women Under Communism: Family in Russia and China*, (New York: General Hall, Inc., 1977), Appendix II.

⁹⁴ "Report on the Work of N.P.C. Standing Committee," *Beijing Review*, No. 37 (September 15, 1980), p. 4. The Third Session of China's Fifth National People's Congress, convened in September 1980, had adopted the revised "Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China" which came into force on January 1, 1981.

⁹⁵ Curtin, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

of discontented women brought about "a total of 409,000 divorces in 1951—a rate almost one-third as high as that in the United States."⁹⁶ Nevertheless, it should be noted that old customs died slowly. According to Teng Ying-Shao, vice president of the All-China Democratic Women's Federation, it was observed:

In some rural areas, resistance to the new concepts of women's equality in marriage was so strong that 'there are still found many cases of women being killed, or committing suicide as a result of the absence of the freedom of divorce'.⁹⁷

In 1951, ten thousand women were murdered or committed suicide in Central and South China alone after family disputes about questions of marriage and divorce, and in 1955, it was estimated that between seventy and eighty thousand women were dying every year on the grounds of such disputes.⁹⁸

In 1951 and 1952, the propaganda campaign for marriage and family reform was at its heights. But having seen violent reactions, as cited above, the CCP gradually realized that marriage reform would be a long-term task. The new marriage laws were often opposed or subverted by backward husbands, including party cadres. According to an official report published in the *People's Daily* in November 1953, the Vice-Chairman for the Regulation of the Marriage Law Movement acknowledged that "15 percent of the population accepted marriage and family reform, 60 percent were reluctant, and 20 percent had not been touched at all by the propaganda campaigns."⁹⁸ (The remaining 5 percent were not accounted for.)

But changes in the traditional customs came more rapidly in the cities, where those new ideas had already filtered through for a longer time. According to a survey of eleven large and medium cities, for example, it was shown that "close to 97.6 percent of the marriages in the first part of 1954 were based on free choice."¹⁰⁰ During the same period, however, the selling of women was still going on under various guises, and cash transactions were made secretly in rural areas where old traditions clung tenaciously.¹⁰¹

All in all, however, it is obvious that through the introduction and enforcement of the Marriage Law, promulgated on May 1, 1950, women's new status is being extended to an ever-increasing number

⁹⁶ Edgar Snow, *Red China Today*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 293.

⁹⁷ Curtin, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁹⁸ Davin, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁹⁹ Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

¹⁰⁰ Curtin, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

of women in both urban and rural communities in all sections of the country.

The position of women was also improved by land reform. According to the Agrarian Reform Law of 1952, land in rural areas was to be equally distributed to the peasants irrespective of sex. Each woman had in her own name a certificate of land ownership. Consequently, women were given an unprecedented sense of their importance and, potentially, they were able to appropriate and take their share of land out of the family in the event of divorce, widowhood, or remarriage. This was revolutionary indeed in China where, as a rule, women did not own land.

But peasants were not destined to retain their newly acquired land for long since, in 1953, the government began immediately to prepare the way for the collectivization of agriculture. "By the end of 1956, then, the vast majority of China's 100 million farm families had been organized into collective farms."¹⁰²

The period of the Great Leap Forward which followed from 1958 to 1960 is perhaps best known for the formation of the new forms of rural social organization, the people's communes.

The communes brought about a massive introduction of women into the labor force. In 1959, 90 percent of the total female labor force worked in the rural communes. To get women into the labor force, important efforts were made to free them from household duties. As part of this program, the rural communes set up communal dining halls, collective kitchens, and child-care centers. In order to reduce further the need for individual woman's work within the family, there were developed additional services, such as: laundries, weaving and sewing cooperatives, barber shops, and shoemaking and repair shops.¹⁰³

Concerning the effects that land reform and collectivization had on women's economic position, however, women seem still to be a long way from economic equality with men in the countryside. It is true that wages in industry, which affects only a small majority of the Chinese women, are relatively equal between the sexes. But in the rural communes, women receive fewer work-points per day than men because they are judged to be weaker and still have to do housework, which is unpaid. This lowers both women's morale and their pay-checks. In 1979, for example, Fu Xiuzhen, a woman member of Donggaocun Commune, Pinggu County, in suburban Beijing, explained the reason for women's poor attitude toward work:

¹⁰² Parish and Whyte, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹⁰³ Mark Hutter, *The Changing Family: Comparative Perspectives*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1981), pp. 502-503.

They were unhappy about the pay scale. For a man could get as many as 10 work-points a day while a woman wouldn't get any more than eight, even though many women worked just as much and just as well as the men.¹⁰⁴

The Constitution states that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work. This is able to be guaranteed in the cities through a unified government wage system. To carry out the system in the rural areas was not so easy with conservative ideas from the old society about women.

But there is no doubt that a fundamental change is taking place in that women earn and receive money as individuals and can, in the last resort, support themselves in order to preserve their independence.

According to Engels, the introduction of women into social production was a precondition of their liberation. He stated that

...to emancipate woman and make her the equal of the man is and remains an impossibility so long as the woman is shut out from social productive labor and restricted to private domestic labor.¹⁰⁵

He continued to say:

The emancipation of women will only be possible when women can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of their time.¹⁰⁶

Women in Chinese rural areas play almost as important a role as men in agricultural labor outside the home. Thus, in terms of Engels argument, it is quite natural that one should expect the most important obstacle to sexual equality to have been removed.

In this sense, as Edgar Snow observed, the collective farming "deprived the male of opportunities to use ownership as a means of oppression or exploitation."¹⁰⁷

In China, the broad masses of working women are not only becoming economically independent but also politically emancipated. They take direct part in managing state affairs. Communist Party and revolutionary committees at all levels, from the peoples commune to the provincial and national bodies, all have women members. Women

¹⁰⁴ "Chinese Women Discuss Life and Work," *Beijing Review*, No. 10 (March 9, 1979), p. 21.

¹⁰⁵ Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 148.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Snow, *loc. cit.*

are elected to the National People's Congress and to membership in the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.

For example, when the Ninth Party Congress of the CCP was held in April 1969, 13 out of 170 Central Committee members were women, meaning that women comprised 7.6 percent of that body's membership. In the Tenth Party Congress, which met in Beijing in August 1973, 20 out of 195 Central Committee members were females, meaning an increase to 10.3% of the membership.¹⁰⁸ These figures still show the insufficient representation of women in political and leadership positions in China. Yet, compared with the percentage of women members in the United States Congress, they are much ahead. In the 93rd Congress (January 1973), for instance, there was not one woman in the United States Senate of 100 members. In the House, there were 16 women among its 435 members, meaning that women were only 3.7 percent of the total membership.¹⁰⁹

Women are also making noticeable gains in other national leadership bodies in China. When the Fourth National People's Congress (the highest organ of state power) convened in Beijing in January 1975, more than 600 women attended. This meant that women comprised 22 percent of the total deputies. Over 27 percent of the Standing Committee of the Congress were women. Furthermore, three female members were elected as Vice-Chairmen: Soong Ching-ling (Madam Sun Yat-sen), Tsai Chang (Madam Li Fu-ch'un), and Li Su-wen.¹¹⁰

Between 1966 and 1973, the CCP admitted six million new members, of whom 27 percent were women. Women constituted an average of 40 to 45 percent of the delegates at the provincial congresses of the newly reconstituted Young Communist League in 1973.¹¹¹

Today, one can see more women assuming rural leadership position in China. Reporting on the women of Nui'an County in the coastal province of Fujian, a reporter for *Women of China* stated, in December 1980:

Gradually, women gained equal status to men politically. Today, there are 3,421 farm production teams all over the county, with 1,543 women team leaders and 2,795 deputy team leaders, and 9,802 women working as accountants, cashiers or in other public posts. Quite a few hold leading positions at the production brigade and the commune levels. There are women who are doing an excellent job in the fields of industry, education, health and scientific experimentation, and within the militia.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Mary Sheridan, "Young Women Leaders in China," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Autum 1976), p. 62.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹¹¹ Croll, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

¹¹² Yang Yi, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

One can hardly assume that these figures reflect the general trend of the women's political role in today's rural China. As a matter of fact, it is still true that Chinese women do not have a formal political voice that corresponds to their increased economic role. Nevertheless, as C. K. Yang put it:

That women such as common laborers and peasants now hold responsible positions as a regular part of the political system is striking evidence of the new situation brought about by the changed social status of women under Communist rule.¹¹³

It is amazing that those who were rarely allowed to "slip out of doors," now pay close attention to current affairs and participate in various social and political activities. More continued improvement of the political status of Chinese women, however, requires an indefatigable struggle against the remnants of the age-old feudal viewpoint of "looking down" on women.

Women's equality in the right to education further established their independence. The Chinese Communist Party was confronted with a massive problem of illiteracy, particularly among women. Before the revolution, no systematic census was ever taken in China. And there was no available accurate data on illiteracy. Official estimates varied from eighty-five percent to ninety-five percent. Nevertheless, it seemed probable that well over ninety percent of the rural population was illiterate, whereas in a few cities the figure was possibly seventy percent. Anyhow, in 1949 it was viewed that "not one in ten adults could read and write."¹¹⁴

After 1949, therefore, mass literacy campaigns were launched to combat this problem. With reference to literacy classes, Elisabeth Croll observes:

A great handicap to women's entrance into social production was their illiteracy and lack of technical skills. Literacy classes were very often the first step into public life and women were encouraged to take the opportunities presented by the evening, winter, and spare-time classes. According to figures published in 1951, of the 56 million peasants of both sexes attending winter and spare-time schools, about half were women.¹¹⁵

As time passed, China showed very impressive results of literacy even in the rural areas. For example, in 1970, literacy among rural adults in Kwangtung reached 72 percent. Of this figure, 83 percent of men and 61 percent of women were shown to be literate. It is

¹¹³ C. K. Yang, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

¹¹⁴ Snow, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

¹¹⁵ Croll, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

¹¹⁶ Parish and Whyte, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

believed that this gap of 22 percentage points between male and female literacy is among the smaller gaps for developing societies.¹¹⁶

As for the proportion of women in schools, it increased from 25 percent in 1949 to 30 percent in 1958 at the primary level, from 20 to 31 percent at the technical middle-school level, and from 18 percent to 23 percent in the institutions of higher learning.¹¹⁷ These figures show no drastic increases, but there are some increases of female students in schools at the end of the first decade of the People's Republic.

Schooling as a whole, particularly college level, was drastically curtailed during the Cultural Revolution (1966-69), which put a temporary end to organized education. With reference to the educational climate during the Cultural Revolution, Edgar Snow states:

All universities and secondary schools were closed, to release on the countryside millions of teenagers (initially under the leadership of newly created Red Guards) and other rebels against 'those within the Party who are in authority and taking the capitalist road'. A major propaganda theme of the G.P.C.R. (Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution) was educational reform. 'Old things, old thoughts, old culture, old ideas', and all vestigial bourgeois influences were to be replaced by teaching of pure proletarian content, methods and ideals. That meant reorganizing the primary and secondary schools in ways which placed teaching and administrative responsibility directly in the hands of committees of soldiers, peasants workers. Schooling was divided between practical shop and/or farm work and classroom work. Political reliability received priority recognition above demonstrated scholastic ability, in selecting worker-peasant students to receive higher education. In 1970 this new Maoist educational pattern was still in an experimental stage—with the professional teachers working under 'revolutionary committee' directives.¹¹⁸

The universities which had become the first targets for reform when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, were the last segment of the educational system to resume operations. Not until 1970 did institutions of higher education begin gradually to resume instruction. The results, while not aimed at women especially, were to greatly reduce educational opportunities for all Chinese youth.

It is very difficult for us to find general figures on the percentage of women students among the reduced student bodies of the institutions of higher education after the Cultural Revolution. The Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars visited China in 1971 and was told that women constituted 30 percent of the student body at Beijing

¹¹⁷ Curtin, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹¹⁸ Snow, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

(Peking) University.¹¹⁹ Even today, however, the percentage of women students in some of the major universities does not seem to match the above figure. For instance, in 1980 at Nanjing (Nanking) University, women comprised about a quarter of the student body of 5,800, and of the 150 students in the junior classes of the physics department, 25 were women.¹²⁰ Out of seven million Chinese who leave high school each spring, fewer than 300,000, or 4 percent, will go on to college.¹²¹ In terms of this situation, it must be especially lucky for a girl to study in college.

Today, these women university students are from all backgrounds—worker, peasant, cadre and other families. Before 1949, certainly a poor peasant woman in college was almost unheard of. College was mainly for the upper class. Describing Lu Xuanming studying acoustics at Nanjing University, a writer of *Women of China*, says:

Lu Xuanming's parents are both workers. Before liberation, it would have been inconceivable for the children of workers, let alone girls, to go to university. At that time, only the children of the rich could afford to study at university. Now, however, the three children in Lu Xuanming's family entered university in the same year. She is the eldest daughter. All three benefit from the grants-in-aid system arranged by the state.¹²²

In addition to the basic kind of formal education, it should be mentioned, China has also many other interesting programs for training village veterinarians, paramedics—known as barefoot doctors, midwives, tractor drivers, agricultural demonstration representatives, and the like, that are frequently missing in other countries. This kind of strategy for spreading rural education is very impressive.

In view of these facts, any western visitor may be impressed by the growth of educational institutions and literacy achieved in China since 1949. After visiting many higher, middle and primary schools, Edgar Snow, one of America's finest reporters, concluded:

China had made greater progress in liberating masses of people from illiteracy and bringing millions some knowledge of scientific and industrial technique than any nation had ever done in so short a time. The emphasis had been quantitative rather than qualitative, but standards comparable to those in Russia and the West were now imposed in all fields of advanced study.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Curtin *loc. cit.*

¹²⁰ Liu Fen, "Women Students at Nanjing University," *Women of China*, July 1980, p. 1.

¹²¹ *The New York Times Magazine*, December 28, 1980, p. 32. General information on China's higher education today may be found in Chen Su, "Higher Education Today," *China Reconstructs*, Vol. XXIX (August, 1980), pp. 5-7.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Snow, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

It would, of course, be completely wrong to expect that Chinese women would suffer no discrimination in education introduced since 1949. Today, proportionately more boys than girls attend school. But it is certainly true that, as compared with the pre-1949 revolution, Chinese women today are provided with many more opportunities to receive education, which is a very important prerequisite for their advancement in the social, political and economic life of the country. Indeed, inadequate education had disadvantaged women in China. Now the status of women in China, therefore, greatly depends upon how seriously the present communist regime carries out measures that advance female education as an important vehicle for the elimination of oppression. Since they have been allowed to study again after the Cultural Revolution, today Chinese youths have packed universities and technical schools, as well as night schools, spare-time classes and correspondence course. For their emancipation, Chinese women surely have to make the best use of these opportunities to receive education.

Family planning is another great help to the emancipation of Chinese women. Referring to family planning, *Newsweek* magazine reported in early 1979:

Article 53 of the Chinese Constitution 'advocates and encourages family planning.' In a country of one billion people, birth control is rigorously enforced. Couples are 'advised' to have two children. Those marrying in January, for example, were handed a card that gave them their 'birth quota': one child in 1981 and a second in 1985. If these 'recommendations' are not followed, citizens may suffer. Besides chastising overproductive parents publicly, their 'unit' — the place of work or the street committee that oversees their lives — can cut their rice ration, deny them pay increases and deprive them of their 'forward status' as citizens of 'good proletarian class origin.'¹²⁴

The Chinese have strongly emphasized family planning and birth control since the middle of the 1950s, with a short hiatus in 1959-61 and some disruption during the early part of the Cultural Revolution. Birth control devices are readily available and are distributed without cost in China. Sterilization operations for both men and women are encouraged. Abortions are free and given on request of the woman alone. Of course, there is no social pressure against women who want to have an abortion.

Another form of population control is late marriage, ideally not before 28 for men and 25 for women. Legally, Chinese men may marry at age 22 and girls at 20. This modifies the Marriage Law of 1950 which stipulated that a marriage can be contracted only after the man has reached 20 years of age and the woman 18 years

¹²⁴ *Newsweek*, February 5, 1979, p. 53.

of age.¹²⁵ The practice of delaying marriage helps women to achieve an identity as workers and participants in building the society as a whole, rather than limiting their role to that of housewife and mother.

The family planning campaign in China, however, is more effective in cities than it is in the countryside, where 85 percent of the population lives and old attitudes are more deeply entrenched. On farms, a large family was traditionally seen as insurance against parents' starvation in old age. Despite the fact that the countryside lags behind the cities in lowering the birth rate, it cannot be questioned that the government birth control campaign has made a significant impact. Visitors to the Province's country side often see two charts on the walls of the commune's office: one showing agricultural production targets, and the other targets for family planning.¹²⁶

Having visited China recently, A. M. Rosenthal, the executive editor of *The New York Times*, described China's population problem more vividly:

In China, you can only think about population figures in exclamation points. One out of every four human beings is Chinese! If it were not for birth control, people would be fighting for a place to stand in China. Then you comprehend that free contraception and the availability of free abortion are not matters of ideology here but of keeping China a place where a person can breathe and walk.¹²⁷

He went on to say:

It is official policy to give a bonus to couples pledging to have only one child; the bonus must be returned if they have more. And there are other penalties for having more: Rations and housing are provided on the basis of a two-child family. That means that if a third child comes along, everybody in the family has to get along with less of whatever foods or goods are being rationed.¹²⁸

So, the 38 million Communist Party members have been ordered to have only one child per family. And they, together with the 50 million members of the Communist Youth League, have been urged to set an example for the masses.¹²⁹

But the adaptability of the Chinese approach to family planning in different situations is illustrated by the policy in the national minority areas. China has 55 minority nationalities, which constitute

¹²⁵ "Report on the Work of N.P.C. Standing Committee," *Beijing Review*, No. 37 (September 15, 1980), p. 4.

¹²⁶ Ouyang Huiyun, "Marked Results in China's Most Populous Province," *Beijing Review*, No. 46 (November 16, 1979), p. 23.

¹²⁷ A. M. Rosenthal, "Memoirs of a New China Hand," *The New York Times Magazine*, July 19, 1981, p. 16.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *The New York Times*, September 27, 1980, p. 2.

only 56 million of China's population of 970,920,000, or 6 percent of the total.¹³⁰ These minority people live in an area covering over half of China's territory, and some of them in remote rural areas had almost completely died out because of the harsh conditions before 1949. In some cases, an entire minority was reduced to a thousand people. The Chinese government, as part of a vigorous campaign to preserve the national minorities, has not included them in the birth-control drive. In fact, members of ethnic minorities have been encouraged to take measures to increase their populations.¹³¹ Today, this means that "the minority people will not be subjected to the new program to limit families to one or two children."¹³²

If women are to become liberated, they need to be freed from child-care chores so that they can spend more time working. In this respect, the Chinese system of nurseries and kindergartens has become a help to working mothers. First of all, women workers in China are given sick leave of up to three days per month for menstrual difficulties. They get 56 days of maternity leave, and 70 days leave after the birth of twins or a difficult delivery.¹³³ Those having a miscarriage get 30 days paid leave.¹³⁴ When the women return to work, they bring their babies with them. The infants are looked after in nurseries at the places where they work, and the mothers are allowed time off to nurse them. There are doctors on the premises, and isolation wards for sick children, so the mother need not stay home if the baby is not well.

Today, nurseries and kindergartens are to be seen almost everywhere in China. They are run by government organizations, factories and neighborhood committees in the city. Busy-season and regular nurseries and kindergartens also appear in the countryside. For example, according to Huangxian County, located on the southern tip of Bohai Gulf, Shandong Province:

Since 1977, the 598 brigades in the county have set up 590 kindergartens, accommodating 97 percent of the county's pre-schoolers, 328 day-nurseries, which look after 85 percent of the infant population.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ For a more detailed discussion of China's minority people, see *China Pictorial*, January 1981, pp. 1-13.

¹³¹ *The New York Times*, September 8, 1975, p. 8.

¹³² *The New York Times*, March 4, 1980, p. A10.

¹³³ Fredric M. Kaplan, Julian M. Sobin and Stephen Andors, *Encyclopedia of China Today*, (updated ed.; Fair Lawn, New Jersey: Eurasia Press, 1980), p. 241. In passing, it should be mentioned that "unlike their urban counterparts, commune women do not receive any pay when on maternity leaves." Curtin, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

¹³⁴ Davin, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

¹³⁵ Guan Xia, "The Kindergartens and Nurseries of Huangxian County," *Women of China*, April 1980, p. 11.

In the past, children's nurseries and kindergartens were open only in the daytime. This was very inconvenient for parents who worked on night shifts. There are now industries and factories on 24-hour schedules. And to accommodate all these workers, their nurseries and kindergartens now provide round-the-clock service, and parents can go there whenever they wish. Some families, however, choose to leave the infants with grandparents, a task which the older people welcome. Commune tots especially, are often cared for by grandparents. Furthermore, according to *The New York Times*: "About one-third of the children are boarders, sleeping over at their schools from Monday morning until Saturday afternoon."¹³⁶

China underwent its share of revolutions in modern times—the Kuomintang Revolution, then the Communist Revolution and, most recently, the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. But one revolution that was shaking much of the rest of the world—the sexual revolution—was passing China by completely. During Mao's rule which ended with his death in 1976, an extreme puritanism characterized the official party line on sexuality. Premarital sex, courtship and even dating were a no-no for the youth of Communist China. Any public demonstration of affection between young men and women, was frowned on. So, the Chinese never embraced in public. One hardly ever saw a man and a woman walking arm in arm, or even holding hands. In his discussion of sexual behavior in Communist China, Peter Stafford observed:

Life had to become Puritanic, asexual, almost inhuman. No Chinese play or film ever presented a proper love scene, allowed men and women to kiss. Even though Soviet Russian films have always been excessively prim and proper, the Chinese censor made heavy cuts whenever there was a couple kissing. Because of a few chaste caresses, many films from the Communist satellite states were also banned.¹³⁷

Chinese women had no lipstick, cosmetics, jewelry or hair styling. As Rosenthal pointed out:

Cosmetics or a touch of color here and there were discouraged severely during Mao's rule. Mao, who had four wives himself, did his best to eliminate outward differences between men and women, to make the country almost asexual in appearance and in conduct.¹³⁸

Armed with the ideology of Engels and Lenin, the Chinese Communists believed that law is not a personal but a social affair, and

¹³⁶ *The New York Times*, January 5, 1981, p. B10.

¹³⁷ Peter Stafford, *Sexual Behavior in the Communist World*, (New York: The Julian Press, Inc., 1967), p. 40.

¹³⁸ Rosenthal, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

hence, cannot be separated from politics. In fact, a Chinese girl's ideal husband-to-be had to display the following qualifications: He should have boundless love for Chairman Mao and the Communist Party and a willingness to serve the people wholeheartedly. For Chinese youth, love for Mao, loyalty to Mao's thought, was more important than any other, even the natural affection for husband, wife, or family. Romantic love would be dismissed as a petty bourgeois sentiment.

There was, therefore, practically no premarital sex, no prostitution, and no sex education in the schools. Shirley MacLaine, who had made a trip to China in April, 1973, spoke of ignorance about sex in China:

A man and a woman were expected to meet as virgins on their wedding night — with relatively little knowledge of what was expected of them — and work it out naturally. Queen Victoria would have loved modern China.¹³⁹

And, she continued to say that "I could see for myself that in China you were able to forget about sex."¹⁴⁰

Consequently, the joy of love, the ordinary pleasure of sex, human affections—were all repressed and denied in Mao's China.

In post-Mao China, however, changes in their attitudes toward love and sex appear to be taking place. In this respect, Fox Butterfield, *The New York Times'* Beijing bureau chief, wrote in January 1980: "The wall of puritanism the Communists built around China's sexual mores shows signs of crumbling, but a traditional Chinese reticence still remains."¹⁴¹

Under headlines with such titles as "Love Blooms Again,"¹⁴² "Paris Fashions Go to Peking: With Cardin's Couture, a Great Leap Sexward,"¹⁴³ "China Discovers the Sweet Smell of Money in the Perfume Trade,"¹⁴⁴ and "An East-West Romance Unites a Chinese Knot: Marriage to a Foreigner,"¹⁴⁵ these news stories report a loosening up of the strict moral codes covering relationships between men and women.

Now girls may curl their hair if they wish. They wear other colors than blue, green or grey if they can be found. The heels on

¹³⁹ Shirley MacLaine, *You Can Get There From Here*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), p. 150.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Fox Butterfield, "Love and Sex in China," *The New York Times Magazine*, January 13, 1980, p. 15.

¹⁴² *Newsweek*, February 5, 1979, pp. 51, 53.

¹⁴³ *Time*, February 12, 1979, p. 70.

¹⁴⁴ *The New York Times*, August 12, 1979, p. 12.

¹⁴⁵ *The New York Times*, May 9, 1980, p. A28.

women's shoes are getting higher. Even girls' knees begin to appear. According to the most recent report from Beijing:

The metamorphosis of Chinese women this summer, from being wrapped in cocoons of baggy trousers and formless shirts to wearing colorful and relatively revealing dresses and skirts, even miniskirts, has transformed China into a land not only of beauty but also of beauties.¹⁴⁶

As for Chinese men, of course, they also have knees, and

They have been seeking comfort in shorts and undershirts instead of the pants and long-sleeved shirts that a few years ago demonstrated their 'resoluteness' in adhering to the party's notion that comfort and Communism do not mix.¹⁴⁷

Noticeable increases in the number of young men sporting mustaches and longer hair are also being seen in the cities. These changes indicate that there is less pressure for social conformity.

Finally, romance itself is making a comeback, or at least a Western version of romance. Western observers report that there are now young persons holding hands or sitting on public benches and gazing into each other's eyes. For example, James Sterba, the Beijing correspondent of *The New York Times*, said:

Daytime kissing in the parks has increased this summer...Kissing used to be exclusively a nighttime activity, but there is now a day-shift as well.¹⁴⁸

According to another report:

Occasionally, open affection breaks through and you feel like cheering. Shanghai is for lovers, because boys and girls actually walk hand in hand in public. I once saw a boy with his arm around a girl's waist in Shanghai.¹⁴⁹

In the recent past, one was able to see the publication of a number of literary works with love as the theme. For instance, in the short story "A Place For Love" which appeared in *Women of China*, the author Liu Xinwu wrote that:

while the gang of four lived in debauchery and luxury, literature on how to deal with love and marriage was banned. Just to talk about it publicly meant a criticism. Love had no place in our lives whatsoever. But now that I've fallen in love with Yuchuen — In my deepest emotions, I believe our love is such a wonderful thing that I want to defy the ignorance and obscurantism caused by the

¹⁴⁶ *The New York Times*, July 29, 1981, p. A2.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Rosenthal, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁵⁰ Liu Xinwu, "A Place for Love," *Women of China*, No. 2 (February 1979), p. 44. cf. Yu Yu-wei, "Reevaluating Attitudes on Love," *China Reconstructs*, Vol. XXVIII (January, 1979), pp. 8-10, and Chang Li-han, "A Chinese Love Story," in *ibid.*, pp. 10-12.

gang of four. Love based on common revolutionary ideals and shared interests will certainly blossom and send forth sweet fragrance far and wide.¹⁵⁰

In this work, the author praised the revolutionary concept of love between men and women. Thus, one can perceive that in post-Mao period romance is no longer vulgar. Love is rather an important part of the life of proletarian revolutionaries.

At least in the cities, many Chinese youths began to turn away from politics and toward modernization and their own individual fulfillment. At the same time, personal relations began to be officially reappraised as a legitimate focus of life.

Many of the post-Mao China's new attitudes are on display in "*Watch Out for the Foreign Guests!*": *China Encounters the West*, by Orville Schell. For example, a young Beijing girl tells of her desire to be a fashion designer.¹⁵¹ Another most shocking observation the author made was the Peace Cafe, a scruffy Beijing hangout for pimps, whores and drunks.¹⁵²

In the early 1950s, when the Communists were at the height of their revolutionary zeal and powers, they claimed to have eradicated prostitution, along with opium addiction and venereal disease. So, *Beijing Review* reported:

One of the first items on the agenda of the People's Government was the banning of prostitution. In November 1949, a decision was made to immediately close down the brothels. On the night of November 21, the police in Beijing carried out this decision and rounded up the prostitutes and brothel owners, dividing them into separate groups. A production and training class was started for those newly freed women; their venereal diseases were treated and they were given some proper education.¹⁵³

In Beijing alone, in fact, there were over 1,300 prostitutes and 224 brothels licensed by the Kuomintang government.¹⁵⁴

Prostitution, considered all but eradicated, reappeared in China. This was quite shocking news in terms of the Communists' puritanical moral code. As a matter of fact, in late December 1979, the Beijing police arrested a gang of 16 prostitutes and pimps doing business at the Peace Cafe, charging them with detracting from the fame of their country.¹⁵⁵ The authorities closed the Peace Cafe shortly after this.

¹⁵¹ Orville Schell, "*Watch Out for the Foreign Guests!*": *China Encounters the West*, (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 111.

¹⁵² For detail on the Peace Cafe, see *ibid.*, pp. 33-55.

¹⁵³ Zhou Jinghua, "Beijing for Three Decades," *Beijing Review*, No. 32 (August 10, 1979), p. 18.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *The New York Times*, December 28, 1979, p. A8.

Of course, it would be wrong to exaggerate the number of people who came to the Peace Cafe. They must have been a tiny minority. But they appeared to be part of the overall decline in authority brought on by Mao's last great utopian experiment, the Cultural Revolution.

But we should be wary of misreading these events discussed thus far as evidence that the rigid facade of official puritanism in China has disappeared. That is far from the case, especially in the light of female sexuality. For instance, traveling to China last May, Mr. Rosenthal had an opportunity to visit a reformatory for teenagers known as a "work and study" school. Those youngsters had been accused of "light crimes"—stealing, chronic misbehavior, or "sexual offenses." It was in an outlying district of Shanghai: 200 boys in one school, 50 girls in another a mile away. In the girls' school, Mr. Rosenthal turned to one of the girls and asked her why she was there. Then,

she stood up immediately, looked straight at me with pain and said loudly and firmly. 'My name is Ma Xiulan. I am 18 years old. I am here because I had affairs with boys.'¹⁵⁶

Another girl responded to the same question in a similar way:

She stood up, looked at me, and said, 'My name is Li Shanxing. I am 19 years old. I am here because I had an affair with a boy.'¹⁵⁷

Later, this visitor was informed that "'most' of the girls were there for having 'affairs' with boys—not prostitution, but the crime of sex without sanction."¹⁵⁸

This appears to reflect the fact that in China there is still an air of desexualization and the advances in other fields that Chinese women made are not accompanied by a liberation of female sexuality.

Conclusion

Women were more oppressed than men in old China. In addition to the three forms of oppression weighing upon men, women also had to cope with male domination. In his essay on the "Autumn Harvest Uprising" in Hunan, Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) wrote that:

A man in China is usually subjected to the domination of three systems of authority (political authority, clan authority, and religious authority).... As for women, in addition to being dominated by men (the authority of the husband).¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Rosenthal, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in Croll, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-189.

Mao considered these four oppressions—political, clan, religious, and masculine—to be the four ropes of China's old feudal- patriarchal society shackling the Chinese women, especially those of peasant origins.

In little over three decades since China was put under the Communist regime, the social status of women has been fundamentally altered. Such phenomena as child brides and baby girls being drowned, are now non-existent. Equality between men and women is guaranteed by law. Women are playing a larger role in politics, industrial and agricultural production, culture and education, and have a bigger say in family affairs. For women of an older age who have lived in the old and the new societies, the changes experienced in their own lives are little short of miraculous.

Yet, in present-day China it is also recognized that women have not yet reached their full potential. Chinese women are still confronted with such real problems as: the problem of equal pay for women in rural areas, the insufficient representation of women in political and leadership positions, the persistence of traditional customs in courtship and marriage, and the division of labour within the household.

Today, one can notice that despite far-reaching changes in the status of women, many traditional attitudes still persist, especially in rural China. For example, one of the young female informants in the Parish and Whyte study gave the following picture of the division of labor in 1974 in the rural areas:

Women did all the housework such as cooking, washing, tending the children. In the morning before work, at noon, and in the evening from nine to eleven or twelve, the men would be gathered about in groups of three to five just chatting away. The women, meanwhile, were home working... No, no one talked about men doing the work in the home. It was just about doing the heavy work in the fields that the women complained. We sent-down women pointed out that in Canton husbands helped with dishwashing and even cleaning up the diapers of the children. The village men just laughed and said they wouldn't be men any more if they did that. The village women couldn't even think of such a change, so they didn't express any opinion.¹⁶⁰

That Chinese customs die slowly may also be illustrated by another case of frank conversation held between a female Chinese university student and an American woman on her visit last summer to China. The girl said:

I do not want to be married ever... Here in China, men and women are equal for work. But certainly men are considered best.

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in Parish and Whyte, *op. cit.*, pp. 204-205.

Mothers still prefer sons to be born. Boys are thought smarter, they have more value than girls. Even I, too, cannot stop myself to think boys are smarter. Then I say, 'How can this be? In their brains, girls and boys are the same.' To be married only makes life more hard for a woman. She must not only work at her job to serve our country, but she must shop, cook, clean, help the child with his lessons. The husband helps, too, but only by choice.¹⁶¹

She went on to say: "My mother is of the old fashion. She feels when I am finished with my studies it is right for me to marry. . . . It may be that I shall go to war with my mother. Certainly it can only be a small war."¹⁶²

According to a study on the position of women and marriage in China prepared by a government women's organization in the summer of 1980, it was found that many traditional peasants' customs banned by the Communists in 1950 were continuing. The *New York Times* reported about these classified materials:

In a commune in Shanxi Province, the study said, 43 percent of the children under 5 years of age and 80 percent of the children under 10 had already been betrothed by their parents. As a result of these early engagements, the selling of young women as brides and the insistence of many families on arranging the marriage of their children, a county in Fujian Province had four suicides in the first half of 1980, four people with mental breakdowns, and two attempted murders.¹⁶³

Although these phenomena may not be prevalent in today's rural China, it is still occasionally a shocking news item.

These several illustrations suffice to indicate how China must continue to fight the traditional versus the innovative type of battles, especially for half—the female half—of the total population of one billion people.

There is no hiding the fact that there are women and men who still resist equality, either from traditional habit or from a continuing self-centeredness. The moving component in resolving these inequalities is to recognize that the liberation of women is a part of the continuing revolution in China.

¹⁶¹ Quoted in Muriel Spanier, "Wei Wei, and Kwang," in *The New York Times*, June 6, 1981, p. 23.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *The New York Times*, December 31, 1980, p. A3.