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Women's Rights in China
A Paradigm Shift in Progress

by

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April 15, 1996

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Introduction

Chinese women have been historically oppressed. Female children have been killed. Women's feet have been bound. They have denied access to education. Female oppression is part of Chinese tradition which is the most powerful influence in China. Economic independence and increased education have lead women to mobilize. This paper asserts that this mobilization has created a feminist movement which in turn is causing a paradigm shift in the way Chinese view women.

I. How were women oppressed?

Infanticide

Female infanticide has been rampantly practiced in China. "Baby ponds', immersion in cold or boiling water, suffocation, strangulation, burying alive or more commonly abandonment or exposure" were common methods of extinguishing newborn females' lives. [Guisso, Johannesen 163] Why would the Chinese do this to their daughters?

"A daughter is a troublesome and expensive thing anyway. Not only has she to be fed, but there is all the trouble of binding her feet, and of getting her betrothed, and of making up her wedding garments. Even when she is married off she must have presents made to her when she has children. Really, it is no wonder that so many baby girls are slain at their birth. Admittedly a girl child could be exchanged for a baby girl from another family who would eventually become the wife of a son, or she could be sold as a concubine, slave or prostitute." [Guisso, Johannesen 176]

"On the other hand, boys were of overwhelming importance to the family. When a son reached adulthood, he was expected to work for and support his parents and grandparents; he

was in fact regarded as a form of insurance for old age. Should a son become successful scholar-official, his family, particularly his parents, basked in the glory. Even more importantly, sons were regarded as the only means of ensuring a continuity of ancestor worship. Direct male descendants were expected to carry out such functions as periodic presentation of food at the grave, sweeping the grave and burning paper money, clothes and articles. This is vitally important to the welfare of the family, as it was believed that the ancestors had the power to aid or punish their descendants. In Chinese view, female descendants could not do any of these things for their ancestors.”[Guisso, Johannesen 176]

By these accounts it is no wonder that a female child's life had no value, when such little value was placed on women. Their lives for the most part were of negative value. Infanticide is murder. How could so many women have committed this crime against their own offspring? First it was for their own safety and maintenance of status. Men wanted male children and women who did not provide them were treated harshly. So infanticide was self protection. It was also a way of sustaining life. Male children were the ones who would provide for the parents as they aged. So it was necessary to have male children to ensure support in the future. As the one child policy came into effect having a male child was even more important because families were only allowed one and they needed to be supported in the future.

Culture certainly promotes male offspring but how could female infanticide have been institutionalized in China? Could it be that women are so undervalued that they could not bear to bring a female into this atmosphere? Or could it be that women were already so oppressed that they could not handle the punishment and shame of birthing a female child? The second appears to be the most accurate. Because women were so oppressed, they did not have options and were unaware they could resist in any way. They were oppressed physically through footbinding, and intellectually and emotionally through isolation. Beyond those limitations those that lived were

subject to extremely high and narrow expectations. They also bore immense burdens beginning with the binding of their feet.

Footbinding

“The term ‘footbinding’ refers to the Han Chinese custom of using artificial means to stunt the normal growth of women’s feet and render them unnatural in shape and smallness. The custom dates back at least to 1130 A.D., but some sources claim it originated as early as 1766-1122 B.C. The initial attractiveness of the custom stemmed only from its esthetic appeal but also from its role as a sign of conspicuous leisure, like the cultivation of long fingernails.”[Guisso, Johannesen 179] Women with bound feet were a symbol of status for their husbands. It demonstrated he could keep his wife idle which was expensive.

The pain involved in this process demonstrates again the lack of value placed on women in the Chinese culture. The process of binding the feet begins while the bones are still soft and malleable. “The foot is bandaged so as to make the toes bend under and into the sole, bringing the sole and heel as close together as possible. After a year of intense pain, during which the four smaller toes became broken and portions of flesh were slothed off from the foot and the largest toe was bent up and backwards, the feet became numb. Ideally in return for this suffering, a girl gained a desirable adult foot shape of three to five inches.” [Guisso, Johannesen 180] Girls chose this fate rather than suffer the shame of the community for not doing it. She was socialized into the practice and had little or no choice due to the economic impact of her decision.

“In a society in which marriages were parentally arranged, status was a prime consideration in marital alliances. Thus women instructed their daughters that without bound feet no suitable marriage proposals would be forthcoming. Intermingled with notions of marriage desirability and ideal beauty was a mystique of sexual attractiveness. After puberty, a footbound

woman would not allow anyone to glimpse her naked feet; thus the bound foot exercised an even more powerful effect on Chinese male imagination than the female ankle or breast on the fantasy life of Western men.”[Guisso, Johannesen 180]

Footbinding was a device for the suppression of women. It restricted female activity but more importantly served as a cultural symbol of female dependence and subservience. This physical mutilation is a manifestation of women’s subservience. They are willing to endure pain, limit their capabilities, hide their deformed feet for a husband they have yet to meet. For this sacrifice they gain dependence. Yet they will have much toil to maintain their status.

Footbinding further institutionalized dependence. Division of labor was clearly drawn down gender lines. Women’s work was domestic and occurred only in the private arena while men’s was public. The binding of the feet made women incapable of labor outside the home for they were immobile. As this became more and more normative, the upper class became even more extreme. Ideal foot size decreased further. Having a neighbor say that they had never seen the woman especially outside the house was the highest compliment. So both their physical pain and their isolation increased. As this happened their level of education fell and their emotional well-being decreased with their lack of contact with the rest of society.

Language

Male superiority over women was established in Chinese philosophy of ancient times and it was this premise that would define the relationship between men and women in society. This is first realized in its reflection in the Chinese language. “In terms of both sentence construction and vocabulary, every language is closely connected to the way its speakers conceptualize the world. The characters of Chinese script, thus, also contribute to an understanding of Chinese culture. In this system of writing, which originated from pictograms, each meaningful element of language is

represented by a specific character. As the society developed, however, maintaining a purely pictorial script would have led to innumerable complicated characters that would soon have become impossible to manage. Through the centuries, Chinese script has continued to develop toward increasing abstraction and conventionality. The character for women can be interpreted as a pictogram of a woman kneeling with her hands crossed in front of her." [China for Women 7-8]

The character for a married women is composed of a woman and a broom. It originally meant to assist or help. The married women is a "helper" who follows the instructions of her husband and submits to others. The verb to match is made of the symbols for a woman and a mouth. It originally meant to follow. The nature of a woman being to follow orders given by the mouth of a man. The character for slave is a woman and a hand. Slavery was punishment for criminals. The symbol for good is a woman and a child. Good and beauty are closely bound together here. [China for Women 9-10] Through these examples it is clear that women have no identity independent of men. They are present to take orders, perform tasks, and give birth. And beauty was defined by men through painful deformation of the feet.

Other composite characters that use the woman symbol fall into three groups. The first and largest is the name. The second largest group has the meaning beauty or good. Words that fall in this category are restrained, respectful, modest, obedient, and practiced. The third group refers to women who are neither good nor beautiful. Some examples are unrestrained, disruptive, greedy, quarrelsome, jealous, slanderous. In this category also fall expressions concerning sexuality. [China for Women 10-11] Though the final group is the smallest, it is the most oppressive. Women feared being called these words and their behavior was restricted by this fear. It is similar to slave men in the United States fearing lynching and women fearing rape. The fear limits options and changes their behavior.

The association of good and beautiful seem to have very little to do with actual physical

beauty or beauty that comes from within that comes from knowing the self. Good and beautiful seems to be defined in terms of a woman's interaction with men. Their names are defined in relation to men, the tasks they perform, or where they are located. Their worth is determined by how well they conform to oppressive traditional roles. The pressure to conform is great because their worth is built on their marriage partner and reputation; and a reputation can be ruined in a moment. This leaves little or no room for deviation. Any deviation can ruin your reputation and that is a fate worse than death.

Even subconscious messages reinforce submission. Positive explorations of self, relationships, and the world are regarded as the worst of insults. These insults contain the character for woman. Their symbols have no power. Their role models have no power. There are no obvious nor acceptable ways to challenge the status quo.

Nushu

The women of the Shangjiangxu province developed Nushu. Nushu is the secret language of Chinese women. It was developed because women did not have access to education. Nushu has its own characters. It is centuries old (Shang dynasty 11 B.C.) and now there is only one woman who can read and speak it fluently. "Generally denied access to an education in "men's words," they were spared indoctrination in the textual tradition that subordinated them. Nor did they have to agonize over making their truths palatable to men. Yet because they were not writing in men's words, nothing they wrote would revise the dominant textual tradition in the slightest. But these women maneuvered within social constraints in immediate, daily ways, forming in the process social networks of emotional and sometimes economic support in which they could voice their objections to the inequities and pain of their lives."[China for Women 13-14]

Men did not mind this secret language. They accepted and even encouraged its use

because it was a prestigious activity for their women to engage in. Women shared songs and stories over needle work, fires and potlucks. Their words are written on cloth, paper and fans. These pieces tell the stories of the Chinese woman. There are autobiographies, vows of sisterhood, letters of condolences and prayers. It is ironic how as women's education has increased their language of support and sisterhood as ceased to exist, instead of gaining strength. It symbolizes their integration into the culture but decreases their uniqueness and bond to one another. Since this was a source of power, community and strength, it is unfortunate that as their struggle for equal treatment progresses its frequency is decreasing.

Tradition of "Old Same"

Another tradition that bound Chinese women together is called laotong. The word literally means "old same." Old is a term of endearment. A girl at the age of eight or nine was paired with another girl from another town that was her equal, her "same," in every way. The children would have the same size feet, the same family status, the same level of beauty. The girls would exchange fans and pledge undying sisterhood. These couples defined traditions and gave women and opportunity for expression. Because these women had no economic opportunities, marriage was a necessity. They left their families to assume the lowest status in another. The "third-day book" is delivered to the bride on the third day after marriage. It was a way the woman and her friends to express their feelings about the marriage and the loss involved. Some even contained threat to the mother-in-law to treat the new bride well.

"Confucius seldom mentioned women. Once in his reply to *Ai Kung*, he said, 'Women are those who follow the instruction of man; thus do they become capable.'" [Guisso, Johannesen 66] Since the primary role of education was to learn to read Confucian teachings, women had no

messages or images of power. They were not considered worthy of education and if they were exposed to education it was only to improve their ability as a wife. Women then are respected only then for their familial roles.

Unfortunately both Nushu and laotong were traditions that were practiced by few. Nushu was limited to one province and laotong was often limited to the upper classes. These two rituals are significant because they were ways that women broke their isolation and found a sense of community and validation. For these reasons they increased women's esteem and knowledge about the world. It was an escape that made their lives both more meaningful and more bearable.

Education / Cultural Role Expectation

The education women did receive came from four books that have long been used as basic textbooks for Chinese women. They were written over the course of a thousand years from the Han dynasty to the Ming dynasty. "The *Nu chieh* (Commandments for Women) was written by a female author named Pan Chao and was concerned with women's virtues. She wrote it to meet the needs of the women of her time. Her attempt to benefit women ironically became the fetter of Chinese women. Pan Chao wrote specific rules, as part of an unchangeable moral code, to be practiced in everyday life. She divided the book into sections based on relationships to others." [Guisso, Johannesen 67]

"A woman should humble herself and respect others, she should always put others first and self last, she should do something good but not mention it, if she should do something wrong, she should not deny it, and she should behave subserviently and always appear faithful. She should go to bed late and get up early to work. She should perform household tasks day or night, easy or difficult. She should finish whatever she did completely and tidily. She should control her

facial expressions and her attitude in order to serve her husband; she should purify herself mentally and physically, and she should not be addicted to joking or laughing; she should prepare the wine and food to worship the ancestors properly. When a woman follows all these rules, her name would be honored.”[Guisso, Johannesen 68]

Sense of shame seems to drive Chinese women. Their behavior is limited by custom. The rules are restrictive and the punishment for nonconformity was devastating. It is no surprise that women did not rebel. It is also no surprise that suicide rates for older women, especially widows are very high. They have lived isolated, lonely, tasks driven lives. As the pace of their lives slows widows find there is no one to care for and they find that they themselves need caring for. They have no more use in terms of what they have been indoctrinated to believe. They are to obey their sons but can be of little use so they feel worthless and their lives have no pleasure. In a culture where community welfare is most significant women take their own lives so as to not be a burden.

II. Criticisms/Change

The first real critic of the tradition came in the Ch’ing dynasty. Yu Cheng-hsieh (1175-1840) severely criticized the concept of female chastity. He questioned the widower’s right to remarry in view of the prohibition placed on women. He openly denounced the injustices suffered by women and asserted their equality with men. His efforts had little effect upon the deeply-rooted tradition itself, but he did inspire other scholars to take note of this problem. There were other critics over the next several centuries, but no significant changes seemed to have come from their questioning and challenging of tradition.

Footbinding

During the 1890’s footbinding came under scrutiny of Western culture. Especially radical

intellectuals who stated that footbinding was a tradition of the past which crippled half the population and caused China to be viewed as culturally backward. Simultaneously it was recognized that women in Europe and the United States were a resource that increased production and made countries more successful. Attacks on footbinding became more and more frequent. Two leaders who wrote protesting literature were Kang Yuwei and Liang Qichao. Mainly upper class read these writings began to think about change but were unwilling to risk the ridicule until they realized that others were thinking the same things. Reformers and foreign women joined together in Anti-footbinding societies. These provided the necessary support. [Croll 47]

In Shanghai in 1892 Kang Yuwei organized the first "Unbound-Feet Society." Natural foot societies and the like began to come into existence in other cities and bordering towns. These societies were both welcomed and ridiculed. Discussions began. Town gatherings were places of decision. To decide not to bind the feet could endanger their daughters' chances of marriage so having a large group consent was imperative because it would be their sons would be potential spouses. A report from Sichuan reported fifty or sixty men founding a society then inviting all the women of the town to a feast, but only those who would unbind their feet would be allowed to sit and eat. The others had to watch. The report documents that only wives of chief leaders sat down. [Croll 48]

Members of the natural foot societies were ridiculed and shunned among their upper class peers. Reformers enlisted help from influential people. They had meetings, circulated writings, imported and shoe patterns. Together societies petitioned the government to support their cause. In 1902 Empress Dowager decreed that footbinding should end. She encouraged the gentry to set an example and a formal system of rewards and punishments was established.

The tradition of footbinding was laid to rest when large numbers of men joined these

societies and pledged that neither they nor their sons would marry a small footed woman. It was a masculine boycott of tradition. The belief that bound feet were a prerequisite to a good marriage was challenged. This happened at a time when values were changing. The presence and influence Western culture was being felt. Some societies were actually headed by American women and later turned over to the leadership of Chinese women.

Education

The anti-footbinding movement is said to have grown out of the movement to educate women. The education movement provided both the impetus for initiation and support for the continuous efforts of the anti-footbinding movement. In the late eighteen-nineties Western influence began to be felt and the education movement began. It was motivated by male oriented nationalism. In order to serve the country well women needed to be able to aid in teaching their sons. This line of thinking did not break with tradition, but it resulted in schools for girls multiplying in number. Missionaries were finally able to set up the schools they had been struggling for. Wealthy merchants opened other schools to provide an alternative to foreign education. Many of these schools, especially those sponsored by foreign aid, would not admit girls with bound feet. Education challenged traditional values and for sections of the upper classes, who were the most revolutionary, it won. Government controlled schools that previously made no provision for girls, began to allow them into the primary grades.

There are many repercussions of these changes. Primarily women became more mobile. But further their isolation was decreased as their sense of community increased through participation in the anti-footbinding movement and in education. Women gained power and confidence from community bonds and heightened awareness. Their status began to change as a result. Education became a symbol of prestige. Since status is a driving force in China education

became a priority. This change in priority and status represents a cultural paradigm shift in values.

The change is demonstrated through one woman's story about a party. She purchased a new silk dress and attended the party where she found herself ignored. No attention was paid to her elaborate dress. The attention was focused on a quietly dressed woman who was educated and speaking about the world. She was eclipsed by others interested in her words and knowledge. [Croll 54] With the advent of this behavior, women of all ages began to pursue education. Of course this privilege was restricted to women who had the monetary means to afford schooling and whose families could forgo her labor. These changes that began as means of improving male children's education and had no goal to increase the status of women, led to the development of a woman's movement.

Economics Early 1900's

As this was happening, economic changes were occurring. In the cities industrialization was taking place and women were assuming positions in the labor force that previously had been unavailable to women. There was deviation from the ideal in rural areas too. Out of sustenance needs women had previously worked in the fields. So economic needs made women's participation in the labor force essential. The benefit to women for their work was again a reduction in isolation and an increased sense of community and self worth.

Class plays a major role in how women experienced both oppression and reform. The upper class who had the means to attend school often had the added experience of going abroad for further study. This not only got them out of their home and homeland but exposed them to revolutionary ideas. The ideas of feminism began to spread through the upper educated class. Women were breaking away from tradition to become teachers and support themselves. These were the first activists. They wrote in attempt to enlighten their uninformed sisters. Awareness

was their priority. Once the women were aware of their oppression then they could begin to look at their options and take public action, which was the writers' second goal.

Assembly

Many of the women who returned from studying in Japan joined secret revolutionary societies. By 1911 they were serving as nurses, conveying messages and smuggling arms and ammunition. Some even put on uniforms and fought in the revolution that overthrew the dynasty. Women threatened suicide if they were not allowed to fight. They organized themselves into battalions and also served as nurses on the front lines. Other women gave jewelry and valuables to support the cause. [Croll 64]

After the war women rights became a larger issue for China. Women now knew they had value and were able to organize. They were seeking equal rights like their sisters in other countries. Chinese Suffragette Society was formed in Peking. It was a revolutionary group whose visionary ideals were for in its constitution. "The constitution contained ten points: the education of women, abolition of footbinding, prohibition of concubinage, child marriages and prostitution, provision of social service for women in industry, encouragement of modest dress, better terms of marriage, establishment of political rights and overall evaluation of the position within the family." [Croll 70]

By the end of the first phases of women's rights development women had new experiences in public, social and economic life. They began taking on symbols of status that they saw on others. For example they cut their hair to look like women whom they saw as having power. These symbols are significant because they are a physical manifestation of their belief that they are equal and worthy. They signal a coming demand for the rights that are being withheld and that they are entitled to.

The next phase of the movement focussed on gaining rights to and in the public domain. This means challenging the sexual division of labor and pressuring the government to give women rights to land, to vote, to hold public office, to education, to work and to free marriage. Hunan Women's Association began to coordinate these goals in 1921. At this juncture feminism joined with patriotist, nationalism and labor movements. The next twenty years were spent continuing this struggle and making slow progress.

“During the Republican era the women's and children's labor were used in the factories. There was a growing awareness of the rights of the individual. There was increased emphasis on the young, a decline in strict observance of the age-old ideal of filial piety and the passing of new laws granting equal status to men and women. There was propaganda against Confucian ideals and also strict surveillance of each member of the community.”[Guisso, Johannesen page 177] Here is evidence that economic success and necessity increase status and value of women and children.

Economics 1949-1978

In 1949 the communist party took over China and the Cultural Revolution began. Land was divided up and everyone was given a job and a subsistence level salary. At this time the value of work changed. Now a woman had to work to support the family. No longer was one income sufficient. Even if the husband could make enough to support the family there was pressure for the women to work. Ling Yang, a recent immigrant to the united States from China, said that she can remember as a child neighbors coming over and pressuring her mother to get a job. When she did not, more people came. A value shift had occurred. Previously it was prestigious to have never seen the woman out of the house and now it was a cultural violation to stay at home.

Economics in China is in a cycle that is increasing the welfare of the majority. But this is a

slow process so the majority of women are not in a position to become activists. Economics also influences education. Because education is government funded the number of students who receive education beyond high school depends on the education budget. It further affects education and employment because before a student is accepted into the university the government or institution has already determined their job after graduation. If no jobs are predicted to be available students do not further their education. Education is the best way to raise consciousness so to restrict access to this privilege and information will keep the movement from gaining momentum.

Marriage, Labor and Land Laws

With the Cultural Revolution came many new laws. Marriage law, Labor law and Land legislation all came in the first few years. These laws gave women the right to choose her own marriage partner, to access to land and equal rights to participate in the labor force. Legal protection was provided to protect those rights. These changes were widely publicized. The second major change during the Communist regime was to expand opportunities for women in employment. This gave women the potential for economic independence. The third facet was to establish new ideology of equality. [Croll-Since Mao 2] There was an attempt to redefine women and replace the male dominant model.

All-China Women's Federation, commonly called the Women's Federation set goals and worked with the Communist government. They set up small organizations all over the country, their goal being to have most every woman to have access to one or at least information.

One-Child Policy

By the late ninety-seventies population was becoming a real concern for China. The One-

Child Policy was implemented. There were rewards for abiding by the policy and punishments for violation. Rewards and punishments were monetary as well as social. The economic pain was not nearly so great as the social. Birth control was emphasized and nearly mandated. For women in rural villages this was a problem because they need children, especially male children, to work in the fields. Women in the cities were less bothered by the policy because their focus was work not children. If they took issue with the policy, it was more for the violation of their rights.

This policy was put in place for the protection of the people. Protection from starvation was its aim. The policy therefore had the community's interest in mind. It was also a defense for the government against revolution. In China most revolutions took place when people began to starve. So as time progressed the potential for revolution increased. The population was growing and China had the same resource restrictions. The Great Leap Forward was an attempt to increase production, but its success was not great enough to meet the growing needs of the country.

Granted this policy is restrictive, but it has the country's best interest in mind. The two reasons for participation are coercion and volunteering. The untold part of the story lies in how the government regulates this policy. The government decides on a birth rate, a number of births and then divides that number by region or province. Then that province divides that number down and gives each institution a number of allowable births. Ling Yang explained that during the eighties while she was working for a university. All eligible women's names would be placed on a list then the government official in charge of birth control would decide which women would be allowed to conceive that year. Each woman would be called in and told her fate. After discussion and the ineligible unconsenting women are coerced to sign that they would not conceive that year.

The government not only controls the number of births but it controls who gives birth and

when. This is the part that Ling Yang rejects. That is a violation of privacy. It is humiliating. As much progress as women have made that are still oppressed by the two most powerful forces in their culture, the culture itself and the government.

Education 1978-1990's

Education through high school is now standard for women. Then on one day across the country anyone wanting further education takes an exam. Ling Yang states that about fifteen percent of students are allowed further education. (That statistic varies with the amount of money available for education in the given year.) These students will be offered the opportunity to further their education but will be told where they will study and what they will study. The score on the exam and the family's political background are the factors in the decision. Because her scores were so high she could not be denied the opportunity but because her father was a capitalist her choices were very limited. In fact her only option was to study history.

As economic necessity increases, economic independence increases which leads to an increase in status. The causal relationship may not always be that clear but economics is an important factor in the increases of status of women.

III. Current Situation

Suicide

“Girls are frequently abandoned in train stations, bus terminals or the steps of city halls by disappointed parents. Because parents rarely want to give away a son unless he is severely disabled or ill, orphanages are crowded with girls. One sign of the stress this causes is the high suicide rate among rural women between the ages of 17 and 27.” [Mufson] Selling women is

slavery. It still happens in China. The message is the government is not adequately protecting women there, or that there are still people in China who have no respect for female life. It could be compared to the KKK in the United States. Though not all citizens of the U.S. condone racism or white supremacy violent acts against African Americans still occur. The difference is the emphasis on justice in the United States. Here the headline would be about the punishment but this article was only about the event.

The high suicide rate among young women has many implications. One possibility is they are internalizing the culture so completely that they are feeling worthless. The messages they receive are female children are a burden and that women have price tags and are valuable only in relationship to men. Another possibility is they are so fearful of not meeting the ideals they would rather die than suffer the shame that would be brought upon themselves and more importantly their families. A third possibility is that they lack outlets and feel so suffocated that death seems to be the only option.

Once past the initial hurdle of being brought into the world, women face remnants of China's Confucian tradition, which teaches that a woman has three obligations: to obey her father before her marriage, to obey her husband and to obey her eldest son after the death of her husband. China says the position of women has improved dramatically under communist rule. The Communist regime assigned jobs to everyone, regardless of sex. For the first time, large numbers of women went to work outside the home. To some extent, communal living, identical Mao suits, Communist rhetoric and homogenization of Chinese life covered up the traditional ways of thinking that continued after Communist rule began. With the loosening of social controls, many of the underlying beliefs were laid bare. [Mufson] This exposure however does not seem to have caused great change in Chinese attitudes about women.

Violence

“Two sisters from rural Sichuan Province were taking a train to Guangdong earlier this year in search of work when they met a man from their home village. He persuaded them to get off the train, and they were abducted and sold into marriage by a broker.”[Mufson] “An epidemic of violence affects the lives of hundreds of millions of Chinese women, while widespread discrimination in education and employment both reflects and reinforces social prejudices against women. Hundreds of thousands of women have been abducted in the revival of a lucrative, and often violent, trade that meets growing demand for wives, slaves and prostitutes, said a report compiled by the New York-based Human Rights in China (HRC). [Macartney] As China’s move to a market economy puts greater stress on working men and breaks down a rigid social surveillance system, women are becoming the victims of worsening domestic violence. Some say this recent epidemic of violence is caused by women’s increasing economic independence which threatens men’s status as well as the status quo. As women become independent, they become aware of their own capabilities and the injustices they suffer. Since men perceive their desire for equal rights as a reduction of men’s rights, opportunities, and powers they are unsympathetic to the cause in fact some are even hostile which results in violence against women. The message of the violence is to return to their subservient role. Shame is no longer a successful motivator and when faced with a new threat people seem to regress to physical strength and threat of injury to motivate.

Extramarital affairs and divorce

“Traditional views of female inferiority and growing numbers of extramarital affairs by many newly rich businessmen also cause problems, she said, adding that millions of women laid off by loss-making state firms had become more vulnerable as economic dependence on their

husbands increased.”“ Chen said Sichuan, in China's southwest, was one of the regions with the highest incidence of abuse, along with neighboring Hubei, eastern Shandong and the country's three far northeastern provinces. [First all-women] "Feudal traditions of male dominance are strong in these areas. Northeastern men are very chauvinistic, while in Sichuan they're famously bad tempered," she said, adding that the problem was also worsening in areas that had got rich quickly, like the Shenzhen special economic zone in the south." Filing for divorce is often out of the question, not only because many women still hold to the tradition that wives must stay with their husbands, but also because China's housing system makes it hard for single females to secure a home.

"There are laws, but the procedure is very costly and many women don't have the money, connections or knowledge to protect themselves," said Chen, adding that China's legal system had failed to bridge the gap left by the breakdown of administrative social control systems in place under state planning. [First all-woman] Though divorce can be costly 75% of divorces are filed for by women. [Reluctant] The implications of this are that some women have bought into the new paradigm. They believe women have value and therefore the right to happiness and an identity beyond a relationship to a man.

Assembly

The creation of women's organizations such as the All-China Women's Federation and the Association for the Advancement of Feminism demonstrates a heightened awareness and commitment to women's rights by women. When faced with this type of opposition women are banding together for strength. The organizations reflect the sentiments of a portion of the population and certainly represent a movement in progress. These organizations are calling for

more policies to ensure their rights are upheld, for it is not enough for them to merely exist, though that is a step.

Employment

There was a job fair featuring 42 organizations under the State Council for which 2000 women came to apply for 800 positions. Twenty-seven of those forty-two organizations refused positions to women. “The chief of one state department told the newspaper that women were turned away for three reasons: they do not like to travel, they cannot carry a heavy workload and they want to have children.”[Chinese women spurned] “Cannot carry some heavy workload” sounds subjective. The article does not mention a test so how was their work capacity determined? The desire for children does not seem like a substantial reason for refusing employment. This demonstrates that though there is a law guaranteeing women equal rights there is a gap between theory and practice.

Research

A survey done at the City University questioned 1,380 students from 42 schools in Central and Western China the study demonstrated that “a huge majority of children still believe that mothers should be housewives. Forty percent believed their fathers were more capable in every way.” [Kwok] Children are not consistently getting messages that are empowering to females.

The same university did a study involving 235 women managers. Eighty percent of whom said a good wife always puts her children and family first. A majority said they would show submission to their spouse by giving him “face” although he would not do the same for her. Ninety eight percent of these same women said that women should develop their own interests and skills. They said that a marital relationship would be in danger if the women took a stronger

role than her husband. Thirty percent said men should make all important choices. Ninety percent said that a woman should be able to obtain an education in any field and enter any field of work.” [Yeung]

Chinese women seem to believe that they should have the right education and work. But they seem to be willing to allow the man to maintain power in the home. There was consensus that women silently and willingly put up with these burdens because they are conforming to social expectations. It seems that they are becoming aware of the injustice because they are disproving of sexist husbands. This appears to be a shift in values. Women want the opportunities previously denied them. They also want families and traditional values are associated with that, so there is a struggle to integrate traditional values and the value/desire for equal status. Women are trying to integrate the traditional paradigm of oppression with the new paradigm of individual rights. This is a struggle and represents a paradigm shift in progress.

Many of women who participated in the study “expressed a desire for better support services from their employers and felt it is necessary for women’s activists to continue fighting for women’s rights in the workplace and in society as a whole.” [Yeung] What does this mean? Women want those rights. Are they willing to fight for them? Do they have time when working and raising children? Are their children learning of their mothers’ support for the women’s rights movement or are they seeing their mothers behave submissively and learning that submissiveness is a norm to be upheld? It means that women want rights. They are trying to find to find the safest way to find for them. In this struggle children are receiving mixed messages.

Scholarship

Scholars are studying human rights. This is a sign of a movement. It appears that papers and research begin almost simultaneously as movements gain momentum. “The Chinese society

for the study of human rights and other national academic bodies have been set up one after another," said the paper, "some institutions of higher learning and research bodies have set up human rights research centers and human rights teaching and research offices or research offices." [White Paper] "Meanwhile, a large number of special human rights bodies for the study of the human rights of women, children and the disabled have emerged, the paper claimed.

According to incomplete statistics, since 1991 China has held over a dozen large-scale national theoretical symposiums on human rights and over one hundred discussions, forums and reports on human rights." [China attacks] "The research achievements of the academic circles have benefited the formation of state policies on human rights and exerted a favorable influence in strengthening the people's sense of human rights and promoting social development," said the report. "China has translated and published a large number of books from other countries on human rights which not only collect, sort out and introduce various ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign theories and ideologies on human rights, but also collect the declarations, conventions, agreements, resolutions and constitutional documents on human rights of all countries and international societies," said the white paper. "Tv stations, newspapers and magazines have started special programs and columns, which extensively propagate and heatedly discuss the issue of human rights, said the paper. At present publicity and education on human rights have been included in national education and vocational training. Almost all institutions of higher learning and training organizations have started special lectures on human rights, and some universities have a human rights course to systematically teach theories on human rights, according to the paper." [White Paper]

Government

"The Chinese government, belatedly realizing that by the end of the century they'll have a

“hoodlum army of 70 million single men” on their hands, has let it be known that women have some value. But perhaps this is only a pretense. The government is in fact achieving its objective. What form of population restraint could be more effective than limiting the number of available wombs?” [Ellmann] There is a trend in this line of questioning. It seems common that the government is questioned about the validity of its positions and about the motives behind its words.

China enforced legislation this year to ban doctors from telling parents of the sex of a fetus to try to stop couples aborting girls to ensure their only child is a son, a move that underscores the extent of the problem. [Macartney] It is also another step in the government’s efforts to assert the value of females without clearly enunciating the idea that it believes women are of value. China seems to communicate more that it will uphold their rights because it must not because it believes in the innate worth of women.

Many laws have been published in the last five years. The largest government document is the Women’s Programme. It lays out government priorities to increase the status of women through reform efforts including education, employment, legal protection, and health care. China has already accomplished huge improvements in increasing the economic level of its female population. It is establishing procedures to ensure further success. The legitimacy of the program and its objectives are distrusted. Behaviors like not hiring women, banning conferences, and spreading negative propaganda make the government’s intentions suspect. The hypocrisy makes citizens and foreigners alike challenge the government’s commitment to these ideals.

China has worked to reinforce the lawful protection of women's human rights. In 1992 China promulgated and put into effect the law of the People's Republic of China on the protection of women's rights and interests. It stipulates in concrete terms all aspects of women's rights and interests, including rights and interests in politics, culture and education, labor, property, person,

marriage and family. China has now established a legal system with the constitution as its basis and the law of the People's Republic of China on the protection of women's rights and interests as its main part; it includes some 10 legislations, more than 40 administrative laws and regulations and more than 80 local laws and regulations guaranteeing women's rights and interests. In August 1995 the Chinese government issued the program for Chinese women's development (1995-2000), which makes clear that the main goal for Chinese women's development is to raise the quality of women in general and make sure that women enjoy all the rights they are entitled to by law. [White Paper] As examples the number of female government employees, women in work force, and number of females enrolled in schools were cited. Other issues such as birth control decisions, overall health care, reduction in female kidnappings and sellings, women's rights organizations, discrimination against women and improved status were mentioned.

Women's Conference

The United Nations held its Fourth Conference on Women in September of 1995 in Beijing China. China was to simultaneously host the Non-Governmental Organizational Forum in Beijing. The Chinese government banished the Non-Governmental Organizational (NGO) forum from its original site in central Beijing because it feared the possible impact of women's demonstrations on its own citizens, who have not been allowed to protest openly since the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising. [Hartmann] Was this a smart government decision to protect itself against uprisings or was it an excuse to move the conference to a less public area and to restrict interaction between Fourth United Nations Conference on Women participants and participants in the NGO forum?

Shiva suggests that people in China and those in the United States and other developed countries have different perceptions of human rights. She says that "meeting basic human needs

does not fit into the US discourse on human rights. The Beijing conference provides an opportunity to widen our thinking about human rights to include issues of economic justice, and political and environmental space to meet basic needs.” “China, the world's most populous country, has undertaken the largest experiment in this century in attempting to make good on the fundamental human right to food, clothing, and shelter. Instead of focusing on this tremendous endeavor, the US and its lobby groups have focused only on China's violation of relatively narrowly construed human rights.” [Shiva 18] This statement raises the question of common definitions. Maybe what is needed is some discussion of the ultimate goal and steps to lead to its accomplishment, so that progress can be acknowledged and not criticized for not meeting outsiders' higher expectations.

“The role played by the NGO coordinating committee in excluding NGOs and undermining their activities at the forum has not become known, because the Chinese authorities were constantly blamed for actions and decisions taken by the NGO Committee, which seemed to do anything but facilitate. Among the committee's arbitrary actions was the fixing of a \$50 registration fee, which excluded a large number of Third World delegates, and the denial of conference access to thousands of women on the grounds that their registrations were late. ‘I was refused registration for the forum, although I was registered at the UN conference in Beijing. I finally made it into the conference on the strength of press accreditation, over which the NO Committee had no control.’ NGO facilitating Committee also overstepped its role by usurping the space from women's movements and groups by monopolizing the space for their own use.”[Shiva 18]

“It was the world's largest gathering of women, attracting more than 15,000 to the non-governmental meeting in Huairou and more than 5,000 to the official meeting in Beijing. It compelled Chinese officials to circulate rumors prior to the event that participants would be

prostitutes and lesbians running naked in the streets.” [Weinstein 11A] Considering that a seeming majority of Chinese women were unaware that the conference was going to take place this propaganda must not have been successful. It also again brings into question the sincerity of the Chinese government’s commitment to women and raising their status. Propaganda like this would seem to demean the effort. It would also make it appear like a circus and cause crowding for gawking etc. This could provide sufficient reason to move the location of the conference since it would not benefit the citizens to see this and it would be difficult for the police to control both the participants and the onlookers.

“When China is deciding who can and who cannot attend the conference, it uses communist ideas to screen people’s thoughts,” said Lu, convener of the parliament’s Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee.” [Clinton welcomes] There are also many reports of visas being held up. Some arrests and restrictions on movement are said to be other tactics the Chinese are employing to keep people from participating in the UN Conference.

Trained police women patrolled the conference. Five thousand women officers and one thousand two-hundred male officers. [First all-women] The government said that women were under-represented in the police force. It seems that the government gathered all its female officers and trained at least sixty-six more for the Conference. This hiring act for appearances only.

IV. Analysis of Change

Education

During the past century there has been a trend in which women’s participation in economic production and education has preceded change. So, economics and education are the fathers of change. Modern leadership has come from the economic and social elite. Their

economic position has given them access to information. As education increases dissatisfaction with the status quo increases. As students were exposed to new ideas and ways of life they found their own was criticized by others and they agreed with outsiders' opinions and to challenge their own assumptions. Historically the Chinese people have been isolated. The government controls what they see, read and have access to. The government also controls their communication and opportunities for communication. In this was the entire population was isolated and women even more acutely because they were denied education and then restricted to the home. Students found freedom in behavior and in thought. With their information and enthusiasm they began social movements by providing information and by offering options where there previously had been none. Women who had been in the working world were ready to embrace these new ideas. They were often more middle class women. The poorest women did not receive information and were too busy subsisting to participate in social change.

Economics

Women's participation in the labor force made them ready for new ideas in several ways. First broke their isolation and gave them a community. It built their confidence and it provided exposure to new ideas. Those who embraced the new ideas saw new possibilities. Consensus built around the desire for improvement. Their source of power and strength came from their numbers and commitment to their vision. This is the birth of the women's feminist movement. Social movements are a primary way of bringing about change in China during this century. Social movements overthrew the dynastic government, ended footbinding and increased women's education.

It has been shown that these two factors, increased education and participation in the labor force, increase women's self esteem, build community, broaden ideas, and allow women to be

independent. This independence is two pronged. Women have become self sufficient and they have developed identities distinct from relationships with others. Women have proven their worth to themselves and to the men of China.

Paradigm Shift

One outsider noticed the natural feet and the bobbed head of the girls, the free mixing of the sexes, and the freedom and ease with which women appear in public. These are outward signs of inward changes in the mentality of women themselves and society at large.”[Yu-ning 80]

“Moral codes have undergone a metamorphosis. Filial piety is still considered the highest virtue, but blind obedience is no longer upheld.”[Yu-ning 80] More value is being placed on free thought and on individualism. That is further demonstrated by love being taken into account in marital arrangements. Moral standards involving intimate relationships are changing. Women are demanding that standards be the same for men and women. Monogamy is recognized as the proper form of marriage. This is a symbol that women are being viewed more as equals one to one demonstrates equality. Violations of fidelity are no longer tolerable for either partner. In the union women no longer lose their identity. So it is truly a relationship based on mutual respect.

The second major change is women’s outlook on life. Women are no longer content to stay at home. They too, feel obligated to make a contribution. Housework and motherhood continue to be priorities, but no longer are they all consuming priorities. The value of women’s work has experienced a change. The third change is that of social status. Women are contributing to production in society and therefore are being considered more valuable by men so their status is increasing.

All of these changes together represent a paradigm shift in Chinese values. The shift is away from traditional obedience toward individual informed decision making. To title the previous state would be to call it the paradigm of oppression. The new state is one of individual respect. It is a shift because one form has not been outright rejected and replaced by a new one throughout the culture. The changes are happening slowly and progressively. Integration of old and new create the shift. Values and beliefs are changing and with that behavior to demonstrate true change.

The shift happens in four stages. Patterned behavior changes, which leads to a change in thoughts, which leads to a change in value, which ultimately leads to a change in perception. Change in perception demonstrates true change because it represents a different world view. Unrecognized assumptions of old are apparent. The new perception is more aware. People see the deeper meaning and consequences of past oppressive conditions. New options are available and strived for.

Social Movement

Like other major changes this century the shift in the paradigm of the value of women has taken the form of a social movement. Similar to other social movements it began with those who had information and resources. With information come options and options are freedom. This change is slow for many reasons. Some basic ones are China is enormous and it takes time for information to filter through it. Those who initially reject the idea will need time to get used to it before they are ready to embrace it. Not all women in China have the resources or the desire to work for change. The government and tradition hinder progress.

Unlike some social movements there was no critical moment or incident. There were trends, which brought about changes in behavior that sparked change. China's women's

movement had no charismatic leader. In fact most would agree China no one charismatic leader could be successful. Tradition and government are simply too powerful. It would also be difficult to appeal to a majority of the population because the needs and values are vastly different.

V. Future Implications

Hinderance to Women's Movement

Tradition

While there are two trends that brought about change there are two major institutions that hinder change. The first is tradition. It is the most powerful force in China and the women's movement opposes its values. Challenging and risking are not valued in Chinese society, in fact they are threatening, offensive, and disrespectful. Therefore gaining and maintaining support is difficult and opposition can be intense. Women are socialized to make decisions based on community, superiors, work and family priorities. So the average women does not become active in the women's movement. The Chinese culture emphasizes emotion not reason. Social pressure is the highest form of social control and it is pure emotion. Chinese say that the pressure is unbearable and incomprehensible to Westerners. Because the Chinese operate on an emotion and the women's movement is based on reason, it is difficult to integrate the feminist movement into traditional behavior.

Government

The other institutional obstacle is the government. Government restricts freedom in many ways. The first is, mobility in China is severely restricted. People may not move unless the government approves the relocation. Travel is difficult. Most people do not have the means to travel. Second government controls education and job placement. Women are discriminated

against by the institution. Third, it is a severe violation of the norm to challenge the government. It can also be disastrous. The community will be notified immediately. They will pressure the individual. The offense will be documented and put in the offender's file and that file follows the person everywhere they go for the rest of their lives, so it is nearly impossible to escape it. Fourth, government does not provide the channels or support for change.

Logistics

The third obstacle is a host of logistic problems. China is an enormous country. Communication and collaboration are difficult. As large as the country is there are equally as many perspectives, differing levels of education, and differing needs. The women's movement is one of the upper class and will continue to be. Until basic needs are met, rights are insignificant. Geography and class are contributing factors to the lack of consensus in China.

Lack of Necessity

The final obstacle that may be the most significant is that change in women's rights are not necessary. Gilmartin, Hershatter, Rofel and White say that "every class of women has its own pressing issues that are not mutually reinforcing and may even be contradictory. But there is one thing they do have in common: none of these women's problems endangers social existence or creates detrimental effects to society." [371] It could be argued that the lack of women's rights has detrimental effects on society, that the country could be more productive, that quality of life would increase, and that China would be more competitive in the world market. But arguing those points would come full circle to the fact that China has other more pressing needs and that there is not an absolute need for change in this sphere now.

Results of Hinderance

It is ironic that in a period of economic reform and development of society that development of women has come into conflict especially when logically women's development and social development are congruent. [Gilmartin, Hershatter, Rofel and White 371] Here again China's culture demonstrates just how powerful it is. When female is associated with power, both men and women in China show contempt. Certainly this not true across the board or no movement would exist, but it is the remnant of traditional value that controls a large portion of the population.

With the movement there is not unity. The Women's Federation, which is supposed to be the leading organization for change for women, is disliked. It does not represent all women's views. It is a political structure that constantly challenges. This does not sit well with the traditional Chinese. The majority of women are not taking active roles. But both their inactivity and seeming contempt and at a less extreme indifference, are coming from invisible social pressure that arises out of instability. [Gilmartin, Hershatter, Rofel and White 368] Women's development is in a low point in the ebb and flow of change.

"To eat from an 'iron rice bowl' means to have a permanent job in the state sector of the economy. The idea is that such jobs have the guarantee of security, unlike contemporary jobs." [China for Women 329] Instability is coming from the breaking of the 'iron rice bowl'. This causes political stress which causes the invisible social pressure to abandon pursuit of rights because it simply increases political tension. "A new phenomenon attracting economists attention and women's panic is the phenomenon of women returning to the home in apparent conformity with economic reform (and social pressure): it caters to a male need to participate in high level competition. This symbolizes the return to the traditional role for contemporary women and a suffocation of women's self worth." [Gilmartin, Hershatter, Rofel and White 364]

It is also a response to the backlash they are experiencing in the workforce. Women are not being hired because hiring happens at the same time that women tend to get pregnant. Employers do not want to bother with women who might leave the workforce. Women who are hired find that they are fired if they conceive.

Reaction of Feminists

The counter trend is that women who are employed are tending to abstain from beginning families. These women are the ones who have more education and have decided that work is a priority. All of them have different reasons for not beginning a family. The most common reason is that work is more important. That reflects an internalization of the feminist need to be self-sufficient. It also represents a change in values. Family is less of a priority. This is significant because as women spend more and more time out of the home and in the workforce and as their rights increase, the family, the primary structure of Chinese society, is effected. One important way is as education and self-sufficiency increased the choice of a husband became more important. This choice encompasses not only the right to choose a mate but the right to unchoose or divorce a mate. This brought the revolution into every home. If more and more priority is placed on education and careers, the family may become a less persuasive force in China which would remove one hurdle on the road of the feminist movement.

Conclusion

Great change has taken place in China in the last century. The image of women has changed from that of a commodity that is not to be seen to a person who has the right to work, own property and choose her marriage partner. The Chinese have experienced revolution,

differing forms of government, multiple social movements and a cultural paradigm shift. The change is felt differently depending on geographic location and social class. The upper class has set the standard throughout history beginning with footbinding through its abolition. In doing so they are leaders.

Two trends, increased economic necessity and increased education, are leadership initiators for the Chinese because they expanding the idea of “can.” When women entered the work force and received increased education their confidence, ability to be self-sufficient, sense of community, and number of options increased. Women mobilized and a feminist movement began. This movement has made great progress by dramatically increasing women’s rights during this century. The feminist movement has caused a paradigm shift in the way that Chinese view and value women.

As the ‘iron rice bowl’ broke the movement has and is experiencing a backlash. Women are being pressured back into the home by traditional Chinese social control. At the same time, across the China education is increasing, access to information is increasing, and overall economic level of the population is improving. Though presently the movement appears to be in a slump, all the forces that initiated the movement to begin with are on the rise. In addition there are people in China who are acting as leaders by establishing new patterns in both the public and private sectors. The stage is being set for another rise in activism.

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Ling Yang Whitworth - interview.