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Status of Women in Changing China: Past and Present

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Abstract:

China has always boasted its glorious culture, which describe China as the centre of the world (Middle kingdom). Many renowned Thinkers and philosophers such as Confucius, Mencius etc has emerged from China, during its 'spring and autumn' period. The core of their teachings was Universal peace and harmony, however, their attitude and understanding towards gender was not explicit. The modern period in China indeed witnessed the overthrow of Monarchy and advent of western thinking leading to the "New Cultural Movement" in China in 1919 This could not have happened without the youth awakening of May 4,1919 .However, it too, could not reform the society and bring equality among the masses. The measure reason of present Communist Party of China gaining popularity in China was that it stood for equality and was against any kind of oppression and exploitation in the Chinese society. It has been cases in Mao China where women were considered as equal to men and were given opportunities to work shoulder to shoulder with men in the field and factories. However, the overall socio-economic condition of China remained very poor during that period.

In order to revive Chinese Economy, Deng Xiaoping carried out economic reform and opening up in China in 1978. Globalisation and the economic development of China present increased opportunities along with increased competition at the same time it also brought socio-economic and political inequality in China.

This paper will trace the status of women in various historical phases of China's development, its policies and try to examine its socio- economic status in mainly education, occupation and income disparity in order to examine the present status in Chinese society.

Keywords: Women, Chinese Political thought, Mao era, China Economic Reform & Opening Up, Globalisation

Historical background: China has a history of more than 5000 years. The cultural similarities can be traced long back right from the advent of Buddhism in China. The social traditions and norms for Indian and Chinese women had been clearly defined in the Chinese

philosophy. In Chinese societies, men have been seen as the core of the family. The women's loyalties were always in questioned Chinese societies. Confucius (孔子-Confucius) in his doctrine of filial piety (仁- Benevolence) believed that, if everyone does their duty honestly can bring harmony in the society.

Confucius probably took for granted these sorts of attitudes toward women, common in his society. He greatly esteemed ancestral rites and related family virtues such as filial piety. He hoped that through the practice of ritual everyone, male and female, high and low, old and young, would learn to fulfill the duties of their roles. Women's roles were primarily kinship roles: daughter, sister, wife, daughter-in-law, mother, and mother-in-law. In all these roles, it was incumbent on women to accord with the wishes and needs of closely-related men: their fathers when young, their husbands when married, their sons when widowed. Confucius's follower Mencius declared that the worst of unfilial acts was a failure to have descendants (Mencius 4A.26). In later centuries this emphasis on the necessity of sons led many to be disappointed at the birth of a daughter.¹

In the centuries after Confucius, in academic and social discourse, gender was discussed as 'Yin' and 'Yang'

Women were yin, men were yang. Yin was soft, yielding, receptive, passive, reflective, and tranquil, whereas yang was hard, active, assertive, and dominating. Day and night, winter and summer, birth and death, indeed all natural processes occur through processes of interaction of yin and yang. Conceptualizing the differences between men and women in terms of yin and yang stresses that these differences are part of the natural order of the universe, not part of the social institutions artificially created by human beings. In yin yang theory the two forces complement each other but not in strictly equal ways. The natural relationship between yin and yang is the reason that men lead and women follow. If yin unnaturally gains the upper hand, order at both the cosmic and social level are endangered.² Maintaining a physical separation between the worlds of men and the worlds of women was viewed as an important first step toward assuring that yin would not dominate yang.

The Confucian classic the Book of Rites stressed the value of segregation even within the home; houses should be divided into an inner and an outer section, with the women staying in the inner part. One poem in the Book of Poetry concluded: "Women should not take part in public affairs; they should devote themselves to tending silkworms and weaving." A similar sentiment was expressed in the Book of Documents in proverbial form: "When the hen announces the dawn, it signals the demise of the family."³

Later during the Han(202BC to 220BC), the Confucius values led to the establishment of the family system, where male was considered to be the head of the family, with men

¹ Patricia Ebrey, "Women in Traditional China" <https://asiasociety.org/education/women-traditional-china> accessed at 6/2/18 at 5:31pm

² ibid

³ ibid

exercising full authority over the female. Han laws supported the authority of family heads over the other members of their families. The family head was generally the senior male, but if a man died before his sons were grown, his widow would serve as family head until they were of age. The law codes of the imperial period enforced monogamy and provided a variety of punishments for bigamy and for promoting a concubine to the status of wife. Men could divorce their wives on any of seven grounds, which included barrenness, jealousy, and talkativeness, but could do so only if there was a family for her to return to. There were no grounds on which a woman could divorce her husband, but divorce by mutual agreement was possible. Han times on was patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal, and allowed concubinage.

At marriage a woman had to move from the household of her father to that of her husband's parents. Given the importance assigned to continuing the ancestral sacrifices through patrilineal descendants, a wife's standing within her family of marriage depended on the birth of male heirs. Yet, because of the practice of concubinage, even if a wife bore sons, her standing could be undermined if her husband took concubines who also bore sons. Thus, so long as the family system continued without major change, women would continue to resort to strategies that seemed petty or threatening to men, and not until a woman became a grandmother was she likely to see the interests of the family in the same way men in the family did. To most of those who left written record, however, the problem did not lie in the family system, but in moral lapses. Thus, moralists held up models of self-sacrificing women for emulation, women who adhered to principles of loyalty, chastity, and faithfulness, often at great personal cost.⁴

Song period (960-1279) witnessed the liberation of women and moving away from the Confucian tradition. In this period women undertook a wide range of activities never prescribed in Confucian didactic texts. There were widows who ran inns, midwives delivering babies, pious women who spent their days chanting sutras, nuns who called on such women to explain Buddhist doctrine, girls who learned to read with their brothers, farmers' daughters who made money by weaving mats, childless widows who accused their nephews of seizing their property, wives who were jealous of the concubines their husbands brought home, and women who drew from their dowries to help their husband's sisters marry well.

It is often said that the status of women began to decline in the Song period, just when Neo-Confucianism was gaining sway. The two signs of this decline most frequently mentioned are the pressure on widows not to remarry and the practice of binding young girls' feet to prevent them from growing more than a few inches long. Foot binding seems to have steadily spread during Song times, and explanations for it should be sought in Song circumstances, but widow chastity had very little specific connection to the Song, the idea predating the Song and the exaggerated emphasis on it developing much later. Foot binding

⁴ *ibid*

was never recommended by Confucian teachers; rather, it was associated with the pleasure quarters and with women's efforts to beautify themselves.

By the early Qing period (1644-1911), the cult of widow chastity had gained a remarkably strong hold, especially in the educated class. Childless widows might even commit suicide. Young women whose weddings had not yet taken place sometimes refused to enter into another engagement after their fiancé died. Instead, they would move to their fiancé's home and serve his parents as a daughter-in-law. Although most Confucian scholars and government officials disapproved of widow suicide and chaste fiancées, they often expressed great admiration for the determination of particular women they knew, thus helping spread the custom.

As in much of the rest of the world, in twentieth century China, intellectuals and social activists levelled many criticisms against the old family system and especially the ways it limited women's chances. Foot binding, widow chastity, parental control of marriage, and concubinage have all been eliminated. It should always be kept in mind, however, that a great many women were able to fashion satisfying lives under the old system.⁵

In the period between the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the role of women in Chinese society began to change dramatically.

The MayFourth Feminist movement was the the first feminist movement in China that challenged the gender stratification of Chinese society in an open and systematic fashion, though it was limited to urban and elite women. The majority of women lived in country side that were least affected by the movement. May fourth era witnessed surge in the debate about 'New Women' which was epitome of modernity and freedom. But that too could not bring significant change in the status of women in Chinese society. In sum, history tells us categorically that women in the past had been relegated to the background. There were mostly found in the kitchen and other absurd places.

The status of Chinese women in Contemporary China: In China, the drowning of infant girls was tolerated in poor rural areas as an economic necessity. Globally, the births of babies are mostly met with joy and felicitations but in China, the birth of women is met with ridicule and bitterness. This was because girls were seen as "just another mouth to feed", another dowry to pay and a temporary family member who would leave to her husband kin to serve. Women were simply not allowed to work in factories and also to inherit property. Parents were proud to have pictures of their sons hanging in their room but the girls were simply not given any attention. Females from poor homes couldn't marry because their poor families couldn't pay the bride price.

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China under the leadership of Communist Party of China, things began to take a U-turn. It was only after Communist

⁵Patricia Ebrey, "Women in Traditional China" <https://asiasociety.org/education/women-traditional-china> accessed at 6/2/18 at 5:31pm

Party of China coming in power in 1949 witnessed the significant change in the life of Chinese women. Mao Zedong famous quotation, “Women hold up half the sky” reflects the firm determination of CPC toward giving equal status of women with men in China.⁶ People’s Republic of China came out with a la, “The People’s republic of China shall abolish the feudal system which 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 (article 6)”.⁷ In the years immediately after established of the People’s Republic in 1949, Mao Zedong banned the 1,000-year-old tradition of foot-binding, outlawed arranged marriages and polygamy, launched literacy programmes to benefit women, and invited women into the workforce. Chinese women began participating shoulder to shoulder with men in various movement such as Great Leap Forward, collective production etc. Communist Party of China sought to improve the lives of females by freeing women from household work, putting them in factories and giving them the right to work and own property. Although, Chinese women participated shoulder to shoulder with men, However, various slogan used during the long 10 years of Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) such as “whatever men can do, women can do too”, using men as yard stick to evaluate women and banning of All China Women Federation were the testimony of ignoring of women in Chinese society during Mao Period.

Seventy years later, Chinese women contribute 41 percent of the country’s gross domestic product or GDP (as of 2017), according to a report by accounting firm Deloitte China.

But gender equality remains a distant goal, and conditions are actually worsening. For the fifth year in a row, China has slipped down the rankings of the World Economic Forum’s global gender gap index; its gender gap widening even as other countries narrows theirs.

Ranked 57th (of 139 countries) in 2008, China is now 103rd (of 149 countries). In terms of "health and survival", it ranked last.

In some areas gender discrimination is blatant. in 1979, the government's draconian one-child per couple population policy began this in a bid to increase the value of women. This was to make parents love their babies whether male or female. This greatly reduced female infanticide and also made girls to have a good image. Men and women were considered equal and they all participated equally in economic development of China.⁸

Economic reform and opening up phase (1978 to 2017): Globalisation and the economic development of China increased opportunities along with increased competition. Characterised by over-population and a high percentage of educated citizens, China is a

⁶ Li, Yuhui, "Women’s Movement and Changes of Women’s Status in China" Journal of International women’s Studies, Volume 1, Issue1, Jan 2000

⁷ *ibid* p.31

⁸ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/china-women-battling-tradition-70-years-revolution-190927054320939.html> accessed at 12:18ma on April1,2020

society wherein women lose out to their male counterparts. The One-child policy (独生子女政策 - one child policy) introduced in 1978 places huge pressures on young families, as the care for elder grandparents falls to one grandchild and his or her spouse. Because enterprises tend to favour male employees, child-rearing falls primarily to the women. Today, the role of women in China differs across social boundaries. Although there are, in theory, endless opportunities, only some women can access them. There is no accepted role for women; some women are CEOs and government officials, whilst others opt for completely different lifestyles.⁹

Hartmann argues that in the capitalist societies, capitalism and patriarchy reinforce each other and produce an environment in which men exercises control over the women at level that is much more organised and institutionalised than in any other social system prior to capitalism. Women in other words, are part of the exploited working class class in capitalist societies.¹⁰ The various policies reforms undertaken by the post-Mao leadership, led to various cultural changes in Chinese society and the most effected strata of Chinese society are women. China’s former “one child policy” led married couple to maintain the sole care of four elderly parents.

This care become more like the responsibility of women than men. with the economic independence, many young women don’t want to get married. With the personal interview with some of the Chinese women, it revealed that the women are afraid of the domestic violence by their partners. They believe that it better to stay alone and remain free to pursue their interests than to get beaten by their partners. highly educated women such as Phd’s could not find suitable partners to get married as their male counterparts don’t like their female partners better educated than him.

In area of education, the representation of women in higher education has steadily increased,

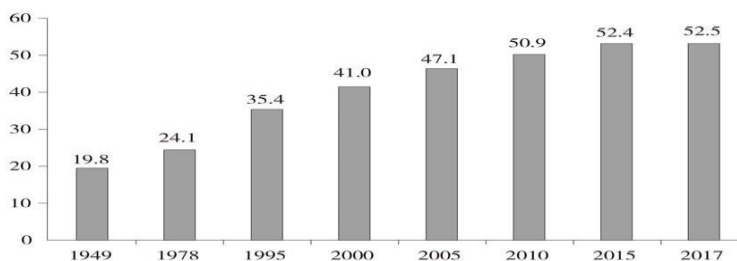


图 4 普通高等学校本专科在校女生比例 (%)

⁹ https://www.fairobserver.com/region/central_south_asia/role-women-china/ accessed at 5:41pm on 6/2/18

¹⁰ Li, Yuhui ,”Women’s Movement and Changes of Women’s Status in China” Journal of International women’s Studies , Volume 1, Issue1 ,Jan 2000

Table:1. Ratio of female student in Higher Institution ¹¹

it can be a very good sign for the women empowerment but on other hand it has become a problem as well for the women. The women salary and other incentives are less than men as they are considered naturally weaker than men. Employer most of the time use the long maternity leave to deny women employment and this is not a typical case for china, it is prevalent across the globe. The table 3 which has been published in 2019 shows the significant increase of the number of employed women in China since the beginning of Chin’s economic reform, but in other hand certain reports reflects the discrimination of women at the time of recruitment.

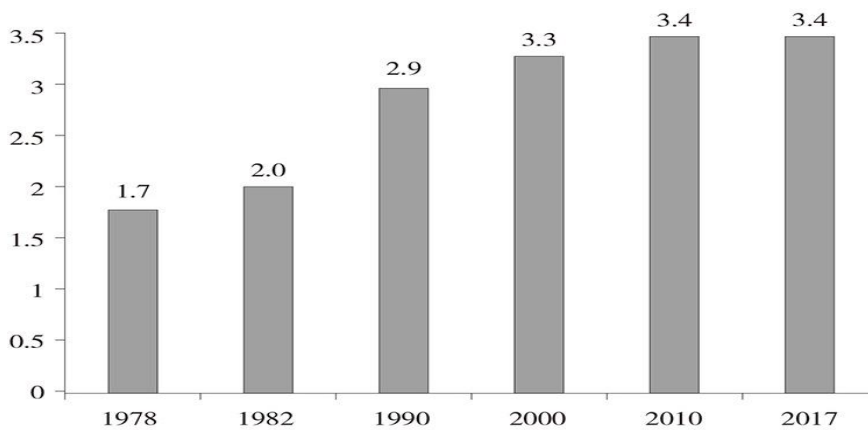


图 3 全国女性就业人数(亿人)

Table: 2. National Women employment number (hundred million) ¹²

“When Zhao Yilin, 29, applied for a job at a tech company in Beijing several years ago, one of the interviewing managers asked whether she expected to have children, noting that the job would require travelling.

“I knew I could do the job regardless of whether I planned to have kids, so it didn’t seem fair,” Zhao said. “In the end, I was honest. I said we planned to have children in the next few years.” She didn’t get the job.”¹³

¹¹ 平等 发展 共享：新中国70年妇女事业的发展与进步 retrieved from <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0919/c1001-31362781.html> at 1:58am on April 2, 2020

¹² 平等 发展 共享：新中国70年妇女事业的发展与进步 retrieved from <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0919/c1001-31362781.html> at 1:58am on April 2, 2020

¹³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/china-women-battling-tradition-70-years-revolution-190927054320939.html> accessed at 12:18ma on April 1, 2020

According to an official party survey released in 2017, 54 percent of Chinese women report similar experiences in job interviews. In blue collar occupation (e.g. factory workers) are often required to retire at the age of 50, and women in white collar occupation (e.g. professionals, managers) at age 55. Special categories of women (e.g. college professors) can work until age 60, however, the mandatory retirement of urban employed men is 60. This unequal practice devoids women with missed career development and advanced opportunities, reduced pensions, and fewer social security benefits for female retirees. Despite high labor force participation, there are few women representation in the leadership role.

In 2016, women were just 17% of all legislators, senior officials, and managers in China. Only 17.5% of firms in China have women as top managers. In 2015, women represented 9.2% of boards and 22% of CFOs of companies in China. In 2013, only 3.2 % of CEOs of Chinese companies were women.

Women have low representation in political offices. Less than one quarter (24.2%) of all positions in China's single house parliament are held by women, placing it 72nd out of 193 countries. 12% of ministerial positions in China's government were held by women in 2016. Out of past 50 years, there were only four with a female head of state. No woman has ever been among the nine members of China's top level decision-making, the Politburo Standing Committee of the Communist Party.

Nowhere is the gender gap more apparent than in politics. In 70 years, not one woman has ever been appointed to the country's highest governing body, the Politburo Standing Committee. Among the wider 25-person Politburo, only one woman is included, and of 31 provincial-level governments, not one is led by a woman.¹⁴

Looking at present China, there has been a sky rocketing rate of divorce. Marital instability as evidenced by high divorce rates in the 1990's and the 2000's have motivated many women to either stay single, give birth outside wedlock or opt for adoption. The 21st Century female now does not spend much time with her children. Children now have to live in constant depression and mental agony while staying with a single parent. The economic impact of divorce on non-working women is also often disastrous as alimony and child support are not always forthcoming. Most previous non-working women enter the labor market following divorce. Promiscuity among the 21st century woman has now reached an unprecedented height. This is more pronounced in the entertainment industry where most of the female celebrities now give birth outside wedlock. The number of single parents has now reached an implausible figure. The Chinese women are mostly engaged in service industry but not in higher designation such as manager etc.

These higher wages for women have produced other reallocation of time and purchasing patterns to facilitate labour market work. Day care services have partly replaced personal child care. Fast food, restaurant meals, pizza delivery and prepared take home food have

¹⁴ *ibid*

substituted elaborated homemade family meals. Lawn care and in-home cleaning services have now proliferated. Microwave ovens, dishwashers, automatic washers and dryers are now commonly used in the home. These have made women to have more time to work.

The Feminist Five case is an example of how the space for protest has shrunk since Xi came to power. Gender equality and feminist causes are, at least officially, endorsed by the Chinese Communist Party, and in the past they have fallen into the safe zone of issues that could be publicly discussed. But the arrest of the Feminist Five signalled that the safe zone had disappeared.¹⁵

The shift has been accompanied by a pronounced change in the way state media describe women in the public eye, Beijing Foreign Studies University's Jing told Al Jazeera; an idealisation of what she calls "middle-class female domesticity" and a growing emphasis on appearance.

In the past the focus would have been a woman's achievements, Jing said. Today, it's not uncommon to hear descriptions such as "the beautiful athlete" or "attractive official" when successful women are being discussed.

Nevertheless, activism has produced some change, from China's first anti-domestic violence law in 2015 to improvements to the gender ratio of public toilets.¹⁶

Conclusion: In sum, history tells us categorically that women in the past had been relegated to the lower status in Chinese society. It has been observed that the Confucian doctrine of 'filial Piety' was more instrumental in bringing down the status in and encouraging subjugation of women by men in the feudal society and mostly the rural women. It has also been seen that the urban women to some extent enjoy better life than the rural women in ancient China. With the change in era and political system, the women emancipation gained momentum especially with the Communist Party of China coming in power after the establishment of People's Republic of China in 1949. Before 1949, Chinese women were mostly found in the kitchen and other absurd places.

With all these changes, the 21st Century woman now looks tall and elevated from the bondages of the past and she now stands on an enviable pedestal. Today more than 70% of women are in full or part-time paid jobs. Women now have rising wages rate. Women have now acquired higher and more education and skill training which have greatly increased their productivity in the workplaces. Women's wages have now increased over-time. In response to this rising wages, more females have substituted work for having more children. This is more pronounced in married women.

At the end it can be argued that there is significant elevation in the status of Chinese in present China, However, they still has to undergo lot of discrimination in the Chinese

¹⁵ JEFFREY N. WASSERSTROM AND MAURA ELIZABETH CUNNINGHAM,"Women in China, past and present <https://blog.oup.com/2018/03/women-china-past-present/>

¹⁶<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/china-women-battling-tradition-70-years-revolution-190927054320939.html> accessed at 12:18ma on April1,2020

society in form of socio-economic and political participation .Chinese women has to go long way to achieve gender equality and All China Women's Federation can work and become link between women and Party/government and demand for favourable law and strict implementation so that women can feel equal to men in all aspects in society in China.

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