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## **Women's Movement and Change of Women's Status in China**

By Yuhui Li

### **Introduction**

The year 1999 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China. Achievement of women's liberation has been on the agenda of the Chinese Communist Party since the beginning of the PRC. This research studies the women's movement and changes in women's status in China. The first part of the paper reviews the history of the women's movement in China and relevant theoretical perspectives on gender stratification. The second part examines empirical and secondary data to demonstrate the transformations of women's status in China. The final section examines some conclusions emerging from the data. The findings show that the change of women's status, measured in terms of income, occupation and education, over the last fifty years has been unstable and inconsistent. Although China has been tremendously successful in achieving gender equality, women still suffer a lower status compared with men.

### **History of the Women's Movement in China and Theories on Gender Stratification**

#### *History of the women's movement in China*

Like women in most cultures, women in China have suffered as the result of their extremely low status. The most systematic, institutionalized and deep-rooted sexist ideologies and practices in China originated from the philosophy of "filial piety" of Confucius (551-479 B.C.). The three components of "filial piety" stipulated that women must obey men, citizens must obey their ruler and the young must obey the elderly. For thousands of years, the rules of these three obediences helped maintain the patriarchal social order in China. Abusive practices and behaviors such as the sale and purchase of women, wife-beating, and female infanticide were not uncommon. The practice of foot-binding of young women in China is probably one of the most brutal, and at the same time, long-lasting and wide-spread rituals known to human history. It first started in imperial circles during the tenth century when, according to the legend, the emperor was fascinated by the small feet of a dancer. Since then, small feet were considered to be an element of female beauty. Young girls at five or six years of age throughout China had to have their toes forcibly bent under the bottom of their feet with tight and lengthy cloth, and the feet remained bound for the rest of their lives. Their feet eventually became deformed, confining them to the home environment and making them dependent upon men. Foot-binding was almost a universal practice in China for more than a thousand years prior to this century.

Foot-binding was outlawed in 1902 by the imperial edicts of the Qing Dynasty, the last dynasty in China which ended in 1911. It took another several decades, however, before the foot-binding practice was discontinued. One of the most important factors that helped to bring an end not only to this ritual, but also to the dynasty was the reformist movement that started at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by a small number of intellectuals who had been exposed to Western ideas and societies. Among the Western models that these intellectuals tried to introduce to China, in addition to a democratic social system

and scientific orientation, were family and marriage patterns. They advocated equality between women and men, free love and marriage, educational opportunities for women, labor force participation of women, in a word, women's emancipation. This period of the women's movement in Chinese history was named May Fourth Feminism, referring to the May Fourth Movement during the 1910s and 1920s when mostly intellectuals protested against the corruption and incompetence of warlord government and against foreign invasion in China. It is worth pointing out that the activists and reformers during the May Fourth Feminist movement were overwhelmingly male. The main motivation of these male intellectuals' enthusiasm over women's liberation was really their desire to change Chinese society and make China a stronger nation (Stacey 1983). Tracing the source of China's weakness and problems, they concluded that the problems within the Chinese family structure were among the main reasons for China's underdevelopment and weak status. Women's lack of education and bound feet, the activists argued, prevented them from bearing and raising a healthy and strong future Chinese population. Consequently, women's liberation had to be achieved in order to save China from disarray and humiliation.

The May Fourth Feminist movement was the first feminist movement in China that challenged the gender stratification of Chinese society in an open and systematic fashion. This movement, however, included and was affected by only a small number of urban and elite women. The vast majority of women who lived in the countryside were only impacted minimally by this movement. It was after the revolution of 1949 that dramatic changes took place that had a strong impact on the lives of hundreds of millions of Chinese women and men. The new government of the People's Republic made a firm commitment to guarantee the equality between women and men. The famous quotation by Mao Zedong reflects the determination by the government to raise women's status: "Women hold up half the sky." The basic law implemented when the People's Republic of China was first established in 1949 stated:

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).

In accordance with the law, the Chinese Communist Party adopted two of the most important legislative documents in 1950: the Marriage Law and the Land Law. Prostitution, arranged marriage, child betrothal and concubinage were outlawed according to the Marriage Law. Marriage was to be based on love and mutual consent. Free marriage, free divorce, economic independence and other concepts that were foreign to the majority of the population became the advocated codes. There were constant and intensive campaigns by the government to educate the population about the Marriage Law. Many women who were not happy about their arranged marriage sought and were granted divorce. A popular phrase at that time to justify the high divorce rate was that it was to dissolve "feudal" marriages. According to the estimated figure, the divorce rate in China during the early 1950s was as high as 1.3 per 1,000 population (Stacey 1983: 178).

Not only were there campaigns to implement the Marriage Law, there were also campaigns to mobilize women to participate in the labor force, which was demanded by

the restructuring of the economy at the beginning stage of the People's Republic of China. The new government was confronted with the heavy tasks of rebuilding the cities, developing the economy, especially industrial economy, and establishing or restoring social institutions and services. Tremendous numbers of women as well as men were recruited for various occupations in need of labor force. Much of the recruitment involved the relocation of large numbers of women from rural areas to the city, from densely populated areas to scarcely populated areas, and from regions with a gender-neutral distribution of labor force to areas with a concentration of female-oriented employment such as textile and silk production, and other light industries.

Then, by 1953, the government realized that the economy could no longer absorb the amount of labor power that it had mobilized. Besides, the implementation of the new Marriage Law, unlike the Land Law, brought about strong and widespread opposition from male members of the society. Murder and suicide of women who sought to terminate their marriage reached such a high level that the government decided that collective stability rather than individual freedom, particularly freedom of women, was now to be given priority. For the next several years, there were more stiff regulations about divorce, and the government advocated women's domestic duties and the importance of harmonious family life. Campaigns were launched to encourage women to be socialist housewives and model mothers, emphasizing the domestic responsibilities of women. This trend lasted for only a few years. After the agricultural collectivization and the start of the Great Leap Forward Movement in 1958, China launched another massive campaign to speed up economic development, especially the development of industry and technology. Women were once again persuaded to join the labor force, particularly in the fields vacated by men who had been transferred to male-oriented industrial occupations. Moreover, due to thorough agricultural collectivization, domestic duties that used to be performed within the family units also required collectivization and the subsequent establishment of service centers for these duties. Newly established institutions such as cafeterias, kindergartens, and nurseries mushroomed and were mostly staffed by women. According to one source, "there were estimates that 4,980,000 nurseries and kindergartens and more than 3,600,000 dining-halls were set up in rural areas by 1959" (Stacey 1983: 214).

Although the Great Leap Forward Movement ended as a disastrous failure, it did bring women's labor force participation to a nearly saturated level, and the pattern persisted throughout the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976). The ten years of the cultural revolution were arguably one of the most chaotic periods in recent Chinese history. And then, the most recent twenty-some years following the Cultural Revolution have been one of the most prosperous and progressive periods measured in terms of economic development level and the relaxation of the political atmosphere. The economic reform that started at the end of the 1970s and continues even today has won wide support from both within and outside China. In spite of resentment and dissatisfaction from the masses and periodic political turmoil, China's economy has been steadily and rapidly developing. It "grew at an average annual rate of 10 percent from 1981 to 1991, and 12 percent from then until 1995. Average personal income more than tripled in the 1980s, and doubled again in the first half of the 1990s." (Liu and Link 1998).

The dramatic changes in China since the Cultural Revolution have had a mixed and inconsistent impact on women's movement and status in China. On the one hand, the literature shows that Chinese women experienced rapid progress in terms of gender equality during the Cultural Revolution. Women's labor force participation rate, as has been discussed earlier, remained high, and women's representation in higher educational institutions was also higher during the Cultural Revolution, compared with either earlier or later times. On the other hand, however, there is evidence that women still suffered an extremely low status in Chinese culture. Repeated reports of female infanticide after the implementation of the one-child policy was one of the first messages that alarmed the Chinese as well as the world population as an indicator of the persistence of women's low status in China. It was during the Cultural Revolution that the All Women's Federation was forced to suspend itself, an indicator that women's affairs were placed in a secondary position compared with what the Chinese Party considered as the more pressing political agenda during those years. Wang also points out that the ultra-leftist Cultural Revolution Movement that lasted for 10 years completely ignored women's issues and women were either hardly differentiated from men, or they were simply rendered masculine (Wang 1997). The uniform color and style of the popular outfit for both women and men during the Cultural Revolution, and slogans such as "Whatever men can do, women can do too," using men as the yardstick to evaluate women, attest to this argument.

The reform movement that started in China since the end of the 1970s has brought about tremendous changes and success to China's economy. The impact of the reform on women's status, however, does not seem all that positive. Unequal employment opportunities and the increasingly unequal income distribution between men and women have become such serious problems that the Chinese government and international organizations such as the United Nations Development Program have allocated funds and established projects to help laid-off women (Rosenthal, 1998). Other publicized problems that women face in China in recent years include but are not limited to prostitution in areas that experienced economic boom, a problem that had been entirely eliminated in post communist China, and increasing divorce rate. In rural areas, the decollectivization of agriculture, a policy adopted by the government to revitalize agricultural economy, has played the role of restoring traditional sexual division of labor within rural households by bringing women back into their homes. This has obviously reduced rural women's participation rate in the labor force and in public services (Wolf 1985).

Despite the problems, there has been encouraging development of the women's movement in China since the economic reform. Arguably the most significant would be the development of women's studies programs and academic scholarship on women. The Center for Women's Studies in China was established at Zhengzhou University in Henan Province in 1987, followed by many women's studies programs and research centers (Wang, 1997). The scholars and research institutions on women have engaged in the intellectual analysis and discourse of women without the all-ubiquitous government surveillance, which was unprecedented in the history of the PRC (Wang, 1997).

#### *Theoretical perspectives on gender stratification in China*

Among the various theoretical frameworks that comprise feminism, socialist feminism is probably the most applicable to the explanation of women's status in China.

This perspective argues that in capitalist societies, capitalism and patriarchy reinforce each other and produce an environment in which men exercise control over women at a level that is much more organized and institutionalized than in any other social system, prior to capitalism. Women, in other words, are part of the exploited working class in capitalist societies (Hartmann 1981). Unless the political and economic institutions of capitalism are changed, it is not possible to fundamentally change women's inferior status. Based on the principles Marxism, socialist feminism argues that the mode of production in the economic institution is the determinant of all other social relations and structures in capitalist societies, including gender relationships. To achieve women's equal status with men, therefore, the society must first of all realize public ownership of the means of production in the economic institution. Only when economic exploitation is controlled or eliminated can the society expect equal access to valuable resources by all members of the working class, including individuals of different race and gender. Socialism, consequently, is an alternative social system for women to achieve equal status with men, according to the feminist perspective.

The People's Republic of China has been following socialist principles in the last fifty years. Like most other socialist countries, China has established programs and organizations designed and organized from the top to protect women, increase women's status and ultimately emancipate women completely. Research studies have shown, however, that the goals that the Chinese Communist party set to equalize women's status with that of men have far from being achieved (e.g., Wolf 1985; Stacey 1983). Women suffer inferior status compared with men in almost all spheres of life in the contemporary society. Stacey offers an explanation of the failure of the CCP to achieve gender equality in China. She argues that although the CCP brought to China dramatic changes in the areas and built new political, economic, social and cultural systems after the founding of the PRC, it is consistent with the dominant forces in China for thousands of years in the sense that it is patriarchal. "... the socialist revolution in China was a patriarchal revolution as well – a radical transformation in the rural patriarchal family mode of production. Confucian patriarchy was replaced first by new democratic patriarchy, and then by patriarchal socialism." (Stacey, 1983, p. 253). For example, when land was redistributed to all the peasants during the land reform movement, it was distributed to men, instead of women. In other words, just like patriarchy and capitalism reinforce each other in the capitalist society and perpetuate patriarchy, patriarchy and socialism have also transformed and structured each other in the process of establishing the current patriarchal social order in China.

Not only is gender inequality still a severe problem in China, but women in rural areas are worse off compared with women in urban areas. As has been pointed out, China has been undergoing the economic reform since the late 1970s. The reform first started in rural areas and urban reform started during the mid-1980s. A significant component of the urban reform is the increasingly important role that the market economy has been playing in the urban economy. What has been the impact of the urban reform on women's status in urban areas in China? What can we anticipate in terms of women's status when China enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century if the current economic reform continues and China integrates more elements of the market economy into its economic system? I will try to provide answers to the above questions by examining the socioeconomic status, namely, income, education and occupation, of urban women in China.

## **The Gender Gap in Socioeconomic Status in Contemporary China**

### *Gender Difference in Income*

According to a survey conducted by the institute of population studies in China in 1991 (*Sampling Survey Data of Women's Status in Contemporary China*, Table 5.20), there is a tremendous income difference between working women and men in urban areas in China. Women were two and half times as likely as men to fall under the lowest income group with a monthly income of no more than 100 yuan. Urban women were also more likely to fall under the second lowest income group (with a monthly income between 101 to 200 yuan). Starting from the next higher income group (with a monthly income of 201-300 yuan) until the highest income group (with a monthly income of 501 yuan and above), however, there was an increasingly higher percentage of men than women. Urban men were approximately twice as likely as urban women to be in the income brackets of at least 300 yuan per month.

Is it possible that the income difference between women and men in China is due to the difference in occupations that they are engaged in? In other words, does income difference between women and men disappear if the variable occupation is controlled for? Evidence has shown that the income gap still exists even after women's and men's occupations are controlled for. For example, the research institute of All China Women's Federation published longitudinal data on the monthly income of urban male and female workers employed in enterprises in China in 1978 and 1988 controlling for five occupational categories (*Statistics on Chinese Women, 1949-1989*, Table 3-36). The five occupational categories are (1) executives and managers, (2) professional and technical personnel, (3) administrative support personnel, (4) service occupations and (5) industrial workers, which is the largest occupational category for both men and women. In all the five occupational categories and in both time periods, women earn less than men. This finding is consistent with earlier research studies. Martin Whyte, for example, looked at average wage levels and female representation in various occupational groups in urban areas in China in 1977-8 and his data suggest a highly negative correlation between average income and female representation (Whyte 1984).

### *Gender Difference in Occupation*

Occupational distributions in urban areas in China show severe gender bias. The data source published by the All China Women's Federation mentioned above shows that the largest occupational category in China for both male and female employees in urban areas is industrial production (*Statistics on Chinese Women, 1949-1989*). Specifically, it shows that 49 percent of female employees and 60 percent male employees in China's enterprises were in the area of industrial production in 1988. Not only do China's enterprises have the largest proportion of employment in industries, this is also the case for the whole non-agricultural employment in China. The 1991 survey, for example, shows that a little more than one third of male and female employees in China in 1991 were in the area of industrial production. Furthermore, the proportion of female employees in the following areas to the total female employees surpasses the proportion of male employees to the total male employees: (1) professional and technical occupations, (2) commerce and service occupations, and (3) industrial production. The areas in which proportion of male employees to the total male employees surpasses the

proportion of female employees to the total female employees are (1) managers and heads of the party and the government, and (2) administrative staff (*Sampling Survey Data of Women's Status in Contemporary China*).

The above data show that compared with males, females were more likely to work as professional and technical staff, as staff in commerce and service areas and as industrial workers in urban areas in China in 1991. On the other hand, males were more likely than females to work as managers, party and government officials and administrative staff. Women were more likely to be employed in industrial production and service areas, but much less likely to be employed in executive and managerial positions.

Based upon the data presented above, we can make the following conclusions. Women in China are very under-represented in the most desirable occupations such as managers and heads of the Party and the government. In the enterprises, only 1 percent of the female employees but 7 percent of the male employees were in managerial and executive positions in 1988. In the urban employment as a whole, about 5 percent of female employees but 13 percent of male employees were in managerial and governmental official positions.

Other research studies show similar results on gender difference in terms of occupation in China. Whyte's research (1984), for instance, shows that the highest female-oriented jobs in China in the late 1970s were pre-school teachers (100 percent female), nurses (97 percent female), nursemaids and servants (93 percent female), street cleaners (86 percent female), and primary school teachers (80 percent female). Not surprisingly, these occupations are at the bottom of the table that Whyte presented according to the descending order of average income levels of various occupational groups. In other words, as has been pointed out earlier, there is a strong negative correlation between female representation and income levels in China's occupational structure in urban areas.

### *Gender Gap in Educational Levels*

Beverly Hooper (1991) conducted a study on gender and education in China, and she points out that there have consistently been less female students than male students in schools of all levels in China since 1949. In 1950 when the People's Republic was first established, the percentages of female students in elementary, secondary and tertiary schools were 28, 26 and 23 respectively. By the end of the 1980s, the percentages for these school levels rose to 46, 41 and 33, which means the raise of representation of female students was most difficult at the highest educational level. The increase of female representation was also difficult, as suggested by the data that Hooper presents, during the early 1960s when China experienced wide-spread famine and severe economic setbacks. It is not difficult to explain this phenomenon: when social and economic conditions are bad, women suffer more than men. The data that Hooper presents also show that on the whole, the relationship between the time period from the beginning of the People's Republic until the late 1980s and the female representation in educational institutions of all the three levels is curvilinear. There was a gradual increase in the female proportion of total students, with the interruption mentioned above, until the mid-to late 1970s, which was the end of the Cultural Revolution period. After that point the curve starts to go downward, indicating that the peak of the curve was during the Cultural



Revolution. In other words, compared with the Cultural Revolution period, there has been a decline in the proportion of female students in all the three levels of educational institutions during the economic reform period that followed the Cultural Revolution.

The higher female representation in educational institutions during the Cultural Revolution compared with earlier and later times was very likely the result of the intervention of the government. The extent to which the Party has strict control over Chinese society, including the educational institution, largely depends on the political atmosphere which has been fluctuating over the decades. The Cultural Revolution was one of the periods when the Party exercised extreme control over all aspects of society. During the Cultural Revolution, entrance to institutions of higher education was determined by criteria inspired by the Party and included such characteristics as political ideology, family background, and work experience. Such an atmosphere was apparently favorable to women.

What is most disturbing about China's educational system is probably the fact that there is systematic sex discrimination at the institutional level, and that institutional discrimination has been intensified during the economic reform of the recent decades. Part of the reason for educational institutions promoting this adversary policy is that women's marketability after graduation is not as promising as men's. Hooper points out that higher educational institutions have set quotas for the admission of female students that have been much lower than for male students. In order to meet the quotas, they set different criteria for male and female students. Such institutional discrimination is one of the major reasons why women are under-represented in the student body of higher educational institutions, especially in the fields of science and technology. For example, in 1982 and 1988 respectively, women accounted for only 16.5 percent of students at Qinghua University and 20 percent at Beijing University, two of the most prestigious higher educational institutions in China. (Hooper 1991)

Other factors that have contributed to women's lower educational level compared with men include cultural and ideological ideas and the influence of the patriarchal family structure. The widely held views such as "it is a virtue for women not to be talented" reflect deeply engrained attitudes, which discouraged women from obtaining education.

#### *Women's Labor Force Participation*

If we use female labor force participation as the indicator to measure gender equality, China would be one of the most egalitarian countries in the world: female labor force participation in China increased dramatically after the founding of the People's Republic and almost reached the universal level. According to a study by Bauer et al, of women who married between 1950 and 1965, 70 percent had jobs, and women who married between 1966 and 1976, 92 percent had jobs (Bauer et al. 1992). Although women's labor force participation rate is high in China, the distribution of male and female labor force varies tremendously according to age groups. Generally speaking, women beyond 45 years old have much less chance of being employed compared with men of the same age group. The data that Bauer et al present show that in 1987 the percentages of employed men and women were 97.7 and 73.6 respectively for the age group of 45-49 years old. The percentages of employed men and women for the age group of 55-59 years old were 73.2 and 28.7 respectively. In other words, older women

were much less likely to be employed compared with younger women or with their male counterparts in China during the 1980s.

Unfortunately, employment opportunities for women, especially older women, in China have become worse in recent years with the reduction of public sectors in the economy as a result of the reform. The proportion of female labor force was consistently slightly more than 43 during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s (*Statistics on Chinese Women*, 1991, Table 3-2). According to a report in *New York Times*, however, during 1997, “women accounted for only 39 percent of China’s work force but nearly 61 percent of its laid-off workers, according to the Ministry of Labor. What is more, 75 percent of laid-off women are still unemployed after one year, surveys show, compared with under 50 percent of their male counterparts” (Rosenthal 1998). One of the major reasons for the lower employment rate of women in recent years is that open discrimination against women, especially older women, by businesses and companies has been commonplace. Although discrimination on the basis of gender is technically illegal, the government does not seem to have much control over the hiring and laying-off practices of private businesses, which have become an increasingly significant component in China’s economy.

## **Conclusion**

This study examines history of women’s movement and gender stratification in urban areas in contemporary China. Undeniably, there have been many changes in the PRC that have significantly reduced the gender inequality in China compared with the past in the thousands of years of Chinese history. Many of the changes were institutionalized from the top and were fairly effective. The central government has been directly involved in designing many policies and implementing them to protect women. Women’s labor force participation was for some time brought to almost the saturated level. There has been significant increase in the level of general public’s awareness over the issue of gender inequality. Gender gap has become smaller in the areas of educational achievement, labor force participation and occupational distribution.

On the other hand, however, gender inequality is still a serious problem in China fifty years after the founding of the PRC. Men earn more than women for doing the same types of work. Men are more likely to occupy the most desirable jobs, men’s participation outside the home is higher than that of women. Men have better educational opportunities. In a word, compared with women, men have more access to social resources and have higher socioeconomic status. This study focuses on gender stratification in urban areas in China. Based on numerous studies discussed in this paper (e.g., Wolf 1985 and Stacey 1983), we can assume that gender gap is even wider in rural areas where more than 70 percent of the Chinese people still reside.

Not only is gender stratification still a serious problem in China, but the progress that has been made to reduce gender inequality is not consistent. There is a tendency, for example, since the economic reform that started in the early 1980s whereby women have suffered setbacks in many ways, moving backwards in terms of gaining equal status with men. Women’s educational level has not been as high as during the Cultural Revolution period. Women’s labor force participation rate has dropped significantly in recent years, and they have to face open discrimination in the job market and in the competition for

educational opportunities. Women also experienced such setbacks during earlier years of the PRC, as has been discussed in this paper.

While it is true that setbacks and inconsistencies in the progress of women's liberation are to be expected, it is worthwhile to point out that, to a great extent, the Chinese government and the CCP are directly responsible both for some of the advances and many of the problems that the women's movement in China has encountered. The government makes its agenda based on what the CCP considers to be the most important considerations. The accomplishment of the agenda sometimes is accompanied by the sacrifice of women's interests or it tends to obstruct or even reverse the progress of women's liberation movement. In other words, this study shows that this socialist system does not necessarily mean an advantageous environment for women to achieve equal status with men. It was thought that the Communist revolution of 1949 would bring to an end the thousands of years of male-dominated history, what Stacey terms "Confucian patriarchal order" (1983), but in reality this goal has not yet been achieved. Gender inequality persists at the institutional and structural level, as has been shown in this study, and it is very likely prominent at the individual and micro level as well.

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