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4
Women and Gender

Mary Gallagher

In the opening of *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston narrates the shocking story, told by her mother, of an aunt she has never met who falls victim to seemingly archaic and cruel village customs. The narrator's young married aunt, whose husband has left for America, becomes pregnant in the absence of her husband and gives birth to a child. As the day of birth nears, apparently in an effort to "cleanse" the village of the pollution brought upon it by the arrival of an illegitimate child, the villagers at first

> threw mud and rocks at the house. Then they threw eggs and began slaughtering our stock. We could hear the animals scream their deaths—the roosters, the pigs, a last great roar from the ox. . . . The villagers broke in the front and the back doors at the same time, even though we had not locked the doors against them. Their knives dripped with the blood of our animals. They smeared blood on the doors and walls. One woman swung a chicken, whose throat she had slit, splattering blood in red arcs about her. . . . The villagers pushed through both wings, even your grandparents' rooms, to find your aunt's, which was also mine until the men returned. . . . They ripped up her clothes and shoes and broke her combs, grinding them underfoot. They tore her work from the loom. They scattered the cooking fire and rolled the new weaving in it. We could hear them in the kitchen breaking our bowls and banging the pots. They overturned the great waist-high earthenware jugs; duck eggs, pickled fruit, vegetables burst out and mixed in acrid torrents. The old woman from the next field swept a broom through the air and loosed the spirits-of-the-broom over our heads. "Pig." "Ghost." "Pig," they sobbed and scolded while they ruined our house.
>
> When they left, they took sugar and oranges to bless themselves. They cut pieces from the dead animals. Some of them took bowls that were not broken and clothes that were not torn. Afterward we swept up the rice and

> sewed it back up into sacks. But the smells from the spilled preserves lasted. Your aunt gave birth in the pigsty that night. The next morning when I went for the water, I found her and the baby plugging up the family well. (3–5)

Could this story be true? Is this what it was like to be a woman in traditional China? How does one empathize with these people and their behavior? Trying to understand and describe accurately the essence of women's lives in any country is complex. So many things affect one's life experiences: big factors such as wealth and social class, region of the country, historical period, or smaller individual factors like one's age, physical appearance, personal talents, or even birth order. Generalizing too much (e.g., "women in China") obliterates the rich multiplicity of actual experiences. Moreover, describing life in China is particularly problematic because of its very long—over 3000—years of civilization. Anyone in America today, knowing how different U.S. society was in the 1950s, 1970s, or even 1990s, can appreciate the difficulties of such a task.

How then does one begin to learn about the lives of others? One method is to start by describing and analyzing the main social and ideological factors of a society at a particular time. Because these provide the framework and the perspective within which people act and interact, it is then possible to look at actual behavior and begin to understand it. For heuristic reasons, this chapter will describe the sociocultural bases of women's lives at two periods: one in "traditional" Chinese society, which is actually a composite from the late imperial period (Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644, and Qing Dynasty, 1644–1911), and one in modern times (late 20th century).

Traditional China

Economic, Social, and Political Factors

Traditional China was patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal. This meant that men had the formal power in the society, that inheritance and descent were through the male line, and that the newly married couple resided with the husband's family. Women were subject to the authority of men throughout their lives. According to the Three Obediences, a woman was to obey her father when she was young, her husband after she was married, and her son in her old age. Female infanticide, the selling of girls, and concubinage, while not generally regarded as desirable behaviors, were nonetheless common and accepted practices.

Unlike men, women did not have a permanent place, assigned at birth, in any group. Though born into her father's family, a girl was not considered a member of this family. If a woman died before she was married, she did not get a tablet on her father's family altar and the death rituals were not performed for her. If she got married and had children, then she earned a place on her husband's family altar. Marriages were arranged by the parents, and typically the girl's opinion was not sought. It was simply assumed that she would obey her parents' wishes.

When a young woman married, the doors of her childhood home were both literally and figuratively slammed shut behind her, as her formal ties with her father's household were severed. Visits home were strictly regulated by law and custom. While theoretically welcomed into her new home as a potential producer of male descendants, in practice she was often resented for the money it had cost for her betrothal and wedding. Though her husband probably enjoyed her as a sexual partner, they seldom saw each other during the day and a warm and emotionally supportive relationship, if it developed at all, took years to form. Until she actually produced children, she became the de facto servant of her mother-in-law, who was happy to have someone to take over the heavy household chores. Indeed, a common term for marriage in Chinese is "taking a daughter-in-law." Because the mother-in-law feared that the new bride would steal away the affections and loyalty of her son, she despised her and tried to make her life miserable. But even if the bride was desperately unhappy, even if her husband beat her, divorced her, or died, she was still not welcome back in her natal home. "If you marry a chicken, stay with the chicken; if you marry a dog, obey the dog" was the common folk saying.

A clear indication of the lower power and prestige of women was the custom of foot binding. From the time of the Song Dynasty (960–1279), foot binding, supposedly started by a concubine of the emperor, became widespread. Many young girls had their feet bound, a painful process that began around age five or six, though sometimes as early as two. A long cloth was wrapped around the foot several times, bending all the toes except the big toe under the sole. For years young girls lived with the constant excruciating pain this caused. Typically mothers bound the feet of their own daughters, and though they empathized with their anguish, knew that they had to keep the bindings tight or their daughters could not make a good marriage. Over time the bones were broken, resulting in feet only three or four inches long. The sight of women teetering on bound feet was considered particularly erotic by men, whose sexual fantasies often involved touching and unwrapping the bindings of a woman's tiny "golden lilies." Foot binding produced women who were functionally crippled, so that farm labor, carrying bundles, or even walking for more than short distances caused them great pain.

Though brothers inherited equally, women did not inherit land, the major source of both income and prestige. In some parts of China and at some historical periods, women were able to retain control of their dowry, but this seems to have decreased in the later imperial period. In general there was a sharp division of labor by gender, with men doing agricultural work in the fields and dominating the outer realm of social relationships, and women occupying the domestic inner realm and responsible for child care, food processing, and cloth processing. There were of course differences among women depending in part on family wealth and on the region of China in which they lived. Women in poorer families usually faced a lifetime of onerous and unremitting hard work, and might even be sold as prostitutes,

concubines, or slaves if family fortunes took a downturn. Women in rich families were not likely to be sold nor forced to perform hard physical labor, and sometimes were even taught to read and write. On the other hand their isolation in their own households was more complete than that of poorer women because they were never allowed out of the family compound nor could they be seen by or talk to any visiting males. Region of the country also affected women's lives. One survey for example found that in certain southern areas of double rice cropping, 29 percent of the farm labor was performed by women, whereas in the winter wheat millet areas of northern China women performed only 5 percent of the agricultural labor (Buck 293). There is a rough correlation between the amount of work women did in the fields and foot binding, with women in the south somewhat less likely to have their feet bound.

Besides marriage, there were a few other occupations open to women. These included becoming a slave, servant, prostitute, medium, Buddhist nun, or courtesan. As bad as marriage could be, these alternative occupations were generally worse in terms of income, prestige, safety, and security. Women who entered such occupations put themselves outside the pale of normal life and generally did so only when they were forced into it by family circumstances or sheer desperation.

Women's Behavioral Response to Their Position in Society

Women's general response to their formal position of powerlessness was to strenuously apply their energies and efforts to the one arena in which they could exert some control: the family, and particularly to that subsegment of the family that Margery Wolf (1972) labels the "uterine family," consisting of a mother and her children. The only way for a young bride to escape the isolation and resentment she found in her new husband's house, and to recreate the warmth and sense of belonging she had experienced with her mother, was to create her own uterine family. By bearing children, completely devoting herself to them, and thus psychologically binding them to her forever, a woman was able to provide the close emotional ties otherwise lacking in her life.

But the uterine family was more than just a strategy to achieve emotional security. Because women were not usually allowed their own property, investment in sons (who did not move away when they got married) was the only feasible economic security for a woman's old age. So adaptive was this strategy that even prostitutes tended to form uterine families by either adoption or bearing illegitimate children (Margery Wolf, *Women* 207). Even though they might be contributing money to their natal families, they also felt the need to build their own uterine circle of financial and emotional security.

That this strategy was successful for many women can be inferred in a number of ways. For example, most biographies of famous Chinese, including Mao Zedong, credit their successes in life to the indomitable strength, will, and steadfastness of their mothers. Looking at the subject of humor, the many jokes about hen-pecked husbands and women who run their families with an iron hand are another testimony to how women attempt to exert their influence in the family whenever circumstances permit. From a different perspective, Guan Yin, the goddess of mercy who always responds kindly to human requests, is most likely a religious parallel of the warm emotional relationship between mother and child in the uterine family.

Functionally the effect of patrilineal succession and women's coping strategy of investment in the uterine family was to force women into a competitive relationship with one another. The mother-in-law viewed any attempt by the daughter-in-law to establish a positive relationship with her new husband as an all-out attack on the security she had worked so hard to build. Sisters-in-law competed for the scarce resources available in the extended family, for if a woman was not vigilant, the members of her own uterine family might end up with less than others. The only female-female relationship of positive affect was the mother-daughter one, and this was successfully severed by patrilocal residence.

Ideology

Folk Beliefs. Another way to understand the position of women in Chinese society is to look at the beliefs and values associated with women. In general, the beliefs and values of a society explain and support the behavior that the social structure deems necessary. Common folk wisdom about girls is revealed in sayings such as: "Girls are goods on whom one loses money." "Feeding girls is like feeding cowbirds." "Girls are like maggots in the rice." "It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters." When a girl is born it is a "small happiness;" when a boy is born it is a "big happiness." These sayings emphasize the negative because they are focused on economics, and in economic terms girls were a bad investment. Because girls moved out when they got married, the family that reared a girl lost her labor and the costs of their investment in her. While children in general were highly valued, sons who stayed at home, worked the family land, and became lineal descendants performing the ancestral rituals, were of inestimably greater value.

It was also believed that women were ritually polluting (Ahern 193–214). Menstrual blood and postpartum discharge were seen as both unclean and dangerously powerful. Anyone who came into contact with these substances was barred from worshiping the gods. Several negative beliefs were associated with women's reproductive powers. Pregnant women, for example, were considered particularly dangerous and harmful to others. There was also a belief that women who had borne children or died in childbirth were punished in a special place in the underworld. Thus women were punished in the supernatural realm for doing what was the most adaptive thing they could do in the natural realm.

Orthodox Beliefs. Many people believe that the "traditional Chinese" devaluation of women began with Confucius in the classical period. However, the general purpose of the Confucian *Analects* is to talk about what is necessary for good government, and Confucius simply did not address the inner world of women and the

family. Of the few references that do exist, most extol the importance of children being filial—responsible, caring, and fulfilling the rituals—to their parents (Waley 2:7, 8). A few urge men to use caution and restraint in responding to female beauty (16:17, 15:13), and one is rather patronizing in its view of women: " The Master said, Women and people of low birth are very difficult to deal with. If you are friendly with them they get out of hand, and if you keep your distance they resent it" (17:25). Overall, however, it seems that in a Confucian world the family is taken for granted as an important structure lying at the base of the society. Family relationships (husband-wife, parent-child, sibling-sibling) imitate in form the relationship between the emperor and his subjects, and individuals use the same moral traits and ritual behaviors in both.

In another classic text, the *Liji* or *Book of Rites*, the chapter on marriage stresses wifely deference and submission, but at the same time affection, partnership, and shared responsibility are seen as part of the marital relationship. Susan Mann hypothesizes that the *Liji* emphasizes natural distinctions and difference rather that hierarchy, dominance, or submission:

> A proper marriage was arranged and celebrated to underscore gender differences and to emphasize the complementary and separate responsibilities of man and woman in the conjugal relationship. Marriage was the primary human social bond demonstrating the "righteousness," or "propriety" (*i* [*yi*]), of each distinctive human role. Like all primary relationships, marriage required deference and submission (wives are to husbands as sons are to fathers and subjects to rulers). But the *Li Chi* [*Liji*] stressed that husband and wife interact to demonstrate harmony.(209)

Husbands and wives also had complementary responsibilities: women's was the regulation and harmony of families, and men's was the regulation and harmony of government.

Thus the extreme patriarchy found in Chinese culture in late imperial times does not seem to be a part of the early Chinese classics. Rather, these more excessive attitudes emerge later on in Chinese history. The cult of widow chastity is an excellent example of how beliefs and values related to women changed significantly over China's long history. As part of the Neo-Confucianist revival beginning in the Song Dynasty, the chastity, or the nonremarriage of widows, became a significant mark of a woman's virtue. Tens of thousands of "Biographies of Virtuous Women" became part of the official records during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The lives of these "virtuous and honorable women" were generally tragic, as they were either killed or committed suicide to keep their chastity or honor intact. The state, however, had a system of rewards for widow chastity (Waltner 422). Though the specifics varied, a woman who was widowed before she was thirty and remained chaste until she was fifty could be granted a memorial arch and her family was exempt from certain kinds of taxes. Certainly, a major function of the "valorization

of virtue" represented by these stories was to keep women under the control of their families and in a subservient social position (Carlitz 124).

Heterodox Beliefs. Opposed to this orthodox or official state ideology, there was in China a consistent heterodox tradition that served to negate the view that women are inferior, and to provide an alternative perspective. There is, for example, the story of Fa Mu Lan, the legendary woman warrior who took her father's place in battle and fought gloriously and victoriously. (The Chinese American author Maxine Hong Kingston created her novel *The Woman Warrior* around this legendary figure.) In many secret societies, most notably those in the thousand-year-long White Lotus tradition, women could hold office, and leadership was often passed down through a matrilineal line (Naquin 22). In the Tang Dynasty (618–907) there were many female adherents of the cult of the Queen Mother of the West, the most important goddess of Taoism, and the special patron of women, such as prostitutes, who were outside the realm of the family. As the creator of the world and one who held the secret of immortality, the Queen Mother of the West held great power (Cahill 34). The official ideology of the large-scale Taiping Revolution, 1850–1864, held that men and women were equal, that women could go to school, own land, and join in battle. Though easy to ignore because it was outside the mainstream of conventional thought, nonetheless the many strands of this heterodox tradition functioned to provide challenges and alternatives to orthodox beliefs, and thus in difficult times could absorb the worst of the contradictions concerning women.

Behavioral Studies

The ideologies just described have to do with Chinese beliefs and values about women, but without observations or behavioral descriptions, it is difficult to know the extent to which people's actual *behavior* conformed to the ideal. Because it was not within the orthodox Confucian paradigm, officials certainly would not include biographies of famous courtesans, literati women, or sexually unconventional women in their official list of "Virtuous Women." Arthur Wolf, in his study of Hai-Shan on Taiwan, presents some intriguing evidence that hints at the extent to which women did in fact control their fertility and maintain their independence. Using the Japanese-maintained household registers from the early twentieth century, he showed that most widows, including those under twenty-five, did not remarry, a fact that seems consistent with the Neo-Confucian cult of widow chastity. However, he goes on to point out that women who did not remarry bore nearly as many children as those who did—an astounding statistic, given this cult of chastity. A possible explanation for this is

> that women who had borne children and established what Margery Wolf calls a "uterine family" were reluctant to remarry. Their children gave them the right to a share of their husband's father's estate, and this in turn allowed

> them an independence normally denied to women. Had they married out of their husband's family, they would have lost both their children and their claim to family property. They therefore preferred informal to formal arrangements and resisted marrying a second time. (108)

A related finding is that, regardless of age, women in second marriages bore fewer children than women in their first marriage. This can be explained by the fact that while a woman in her first marriage was dependent on her husband's property, in a second marriage a woman often controlled property through her sons and could make her husband dependent on her (Wolf 108). She was thus in a much better position than a woman in her first marriage to decide on whether or not to have more children. Based on these and other statistics, Wolf argues that substantial deviations from the orthodox ideal did in fact occur, and these were due to women actually having some power, derived from their uterine family, to make decisions about marriage and offspring.

More evidence of actual behavior that does not conform to the orthodox ideal comes from Shunde County in Guangdong Province in southern China where the marriage resistance movement flourished for at least one hundred years, from the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth century (Topley 67–88). Marriage resistance typically took the form of women forming sisterhoods. In one type, *zishunu* 自梳女 (women who dress their own hair) went through a hairdressing ritual to signify their adult status and then, before a deity, took vows to remain celibate. Another type, *bulojia* 不落家 (women who do not go down to the family), were married women who lived apart from their husbands without consummating their marriages.

To understand such extreme heterodoxy one needs to look at a number of local factors. The economy was based on sericulture: fish breeding, mulberry trees, silkworms, silk spinning, and weaving. Women's feet were not bound in this area and they performed an essential and large part of the labor. Because of ideas about pollution, unmarried rather than married women were involved in most aspects of sericulture. In the mid to late nineteenth century, domestic production of silk decreased as industrialization began. Huge filatures were set up, again largely hiring unmarried women. As the domestic economy declined, men began to emigrate in large numbers and women's income became even more important for families. The local economy was thus clearly a factor in the resistance: unmarried women could support themselves in a socially accepted manner—a very rare thing in traditional China.

Far from being opposed, many parents in Shunde County were of a practical mind and encouraged at least one daughter to become a *zishunu*. They gained economic support and, after the daughter took her vows, did not have to worry about her marrying and interrupting their steady income. In-laws as well did not mind having a daughter-in-law become a *bulojia* because she was then obliged to send money back to her husband and his family. If she decided never to return and bear him children, she not only had to provide a concubine for him, but also had to support any children they had.

Women in Shunde got ideological support for nonmarriage from a local White Lotus sect. It spread "precious volumes" containing biographies of model women who showed that refusing to marry is not morally wrong, that childbirth is polluting and dangerous, and that chastity is desirable. In contrast to the picture of women as isolated competitors within the family, the women in Shunde formed sisterhoods and supported one another. They visited temples and attended theatrical performances together, and formed money saving associations that sponsered death benefit, festival, retirement, and mutual aid funds. Shunde demonstrates the extraordinary extent to which women rejected the traditional system of inferiority when the economic system allowed them to support themselves in a socially respectable manner.

Modern China

The twentieth century saw major changes in the structure of Chinese society: 1911 was the end of the emperors and the more than two thousand years of the imperial system; Western influence, from the mid nineteenth century on, as well as two world wars, affected people's lives drastically; and the 1949 founding of the People's Republic of China was the institutional culmination of the development of Chinese communism. For women also this was a century of great change. Footbinding largely was stopped by the 1920s, due to Western influence and the action of anti-footbinding societies. Education of girls, selection of one's own marriage partner, and women working outside the home were all part of the early-twentieth-century urban scene. In rural areas, change was slower, but the advent of Maoism brought new ideas and new structures. Mao's strategy for winning over peasants to communism involved setting up village associations to discuss the causes of poverty, and then implementing land reform. One of the successful tactics used to involve women in this process was the "Speak Bitterness" sessions in which village women gathered and publicly recounted their humiliations under the old system. This public testimony often transformed their personal anger into a collective hatred of both landlords and patriarchs, and women learned how to stick together and support one another. Nearly every ethnographer of this time describes such scenes, but perhaps the most famous is Gold Flower's story. When Gold Flower was fifteen, her parents arranged a marriage for her to a man fifteen years older in a distant village. He was a vicious man who beat her violently whenever she did not jump to serve him or his father quickly or demurely enough. In 1947 when Gold Flower was twenty-one, she hesitantly told her story to the newly formed women's association in her village. The women ran to get her husband, tied him up, and asked him if he would reform. When he answered disdainfully,

> as if by a signal, all the women pushed forward at once. Gold Flower quickly went in back of her husband. The crowd fell on him, howling, knocked him to the ground, then jumped on him with their feet. Several women fell with

> him, their hands thrashing wildly. Those in the rear leaped in, tore at his clothing, then seized his bare flesh in their hands and began twisting and squeezing till his blood flowed from many scratches. Those who could not get close, dove under the rest and seized Chang's legs, sinking their teeth in his flesh.
>
> Chang let out an anguished howl. "Don't beat me! Don't beat me," he bleated in terror. "I'll reform. Don't hurt me any more."
>
> Under the blows of the women, his cries were soon stilled. The women backed off. Gold Flower peered down at her husband. He lay there motionless on the ground, like a dead dog, his mouth full of mud, his clothes in tatters and blood coming in a slow trickle from his nose. "That's how it was with me in the past," Gold Flower thought. Unable to restrain a feeling of happiness, she turned to the other women. "Many thanks, comrade sisters, for your kindness. If it had not been for you, I would not have been able to get my revenge."
>
> "Don't be polite," said a girl. "This is only justice." (Belden 302)

Groups started by the Communist government, like the peasant Women's Association described above or the agricultural collective work teams, did much to end the isolation of peasant women within their family compounds, and also provided structures that placed women in cooperative rather than competitive relationships with each other.

Ideological Changes of the Mao Period: 1949–1976

The driving force of change during this period was the radical leadership group's adherence to Marxist ideology, which states that women and men are equal, and that women were oppressed in the past because they were confined to the family and had no access to socially productive labor.

One of the first major pieces of legislation passed by the Communist government was the 1950 Marriage Law. This law incorporated principles of freedom of choice and gender equality, and outlawed early marriage and concubinage. According to this law women had equal rights to choose their own spouse, to divorce, and equal ownership and management rights in community property. This law was popularly referred to as the "divorce law" because of the large number of women who attempted to take advantage of it! However, the empowerment of women contained in this law conflicted with the entitlement of poor farmers and landless peasants, who had been persuaded to support the Communists because of their program of land reform, which the peasants saw as a means of acquiring not only farms but also wives. At the same time as they were trying to push reluctant peasants from private ownership of land to collective ownership, the Communist leaders were faced with a sharp increase in the number of women petitioning for divorce, as well as resistance from "feudal" cadres (i.e., those who were patriarchal or traditional) who were

reluctant to enforce the new law against their male relatives and friends. Rather than risk alienating male peasants, the Communist leadership chose to dampen enforcement of the Marriage Law and instead emphasized family and village solidarity, thereby promoting cooperative production (Ocko 320).

Full employment for women was a major agenda item for the Communists when they took over in 1949. In the cities they organized a variety of women's groups in order to promote and deal with special problems of women in employment. Far from having to encourage women to work outside the home, there were not nearly enough factory jobs for all the women that wanted them (Davin 177). The slow pace of industrial growth at the time meant that there were not enough jobs for everyone, and even men were often out of work. Government attempts to organize women for handicraft production in their own homes floundered for lack of capital, materials, and the narrow range of products and skills emphasized. The government's response to these problems was to create and promulgate the *wuhao* 五好 (five good) movement, which glorified the role of the housewife and attempted to politicize housework by giving it a recognized revolutionary value. Women were encouraged to work at home to maintain a harmonious household, to rear responsible socialist children, and to keep up family morale so that men could produce more at their jobs (Davin 163–190).

In both these instances, the same mechanism was at work. An ideologically driven Communist leadership group pressed for equality for women. But when issues of production, government policy, or family concerns conflicted with women's rights, it was always women who lost out. Equality for women became a goal that could be put off until it was more convenient. Judith Stacey interprets this as the substitution of one form of patriarchy for another in the Maoist period, while Margery Wolf (1985) sees it more simply as a "revolution postponed."

Communist policies in the Maoist period had contradictory effects on the traditional family (Davis and Harrell 1–7). Collectivization of land and labor and the elimination of most private property got rid of family farms and businesses, the economic basis of the traditional extended family. The denunciation of ancestor worship as superstition and of lineage activities as wasteful and nonproductive hit at the ideological and religious core of the family. On the other hand, more equitable distribution of food and better health care meant that infant mortality decreased, people lived longer, and population increased. Restrictions on internal migration, enacted to insure an orderly economic development, meant that males stayed put in their home village and that women still moved into the villages of their husbands. Development of a very large formal bureaucratic system to manage the whole state apparatus, also resulted in individuals developing their own informal system of personal ties and networks of connections (*guanxi* 關係) to navigate the bureaucracy. Overall these factors combined to produce the conditions conducive to the development of large, multigenerational households with extensive social and economic ties to both nearby and farflung kin. Thus while undermining some economic and ideological aspects of the traditional family,

particularly patrilineality, overall the Communist policies did not seriously challenge patriarchy and patrilocality.

Post-Mao Period: 1976—Present

Ideology. The official ideology of modern China is codified in a constitution and set of laws. Those most pertinent to women are as follow:

1. Article 48 of the *1982 Chinese Constitution*, which guarantees sexual equality.
2. The *Marriage Law of 1980* changed the criteria needed for divorce. The 1950 law had stipulated that a divorce *might* be granted when mediation failed, but the 1980 law said that a divorce *should* be granted if connubial love and affection had truly been destroyed and mediation had no effect. Two things are noteworthy: one is that love and affection are acknowledged as being a major part of marriage, and when they are no longer there and mediation fails, a divorce *should* be granted. Another part of the law added that women were entitled to their own lives outside the marriage, that is they could have social or educational relationships outside the family.
3. The *Inheritance Law of 1985* guaranteed the inheritance right of daughters and widows, and confirmed the right of a widow to take property away with her into a new marriage. (Ocko 314–327)

Of course, just because new laws are enacted does not mean that actual behavior changes. Most observers conclude that China has a long way to go before equality in property rights and in spousal relations are the norm (Ocko 338; Honig and Hershatter 227; 263; 273; 340). As Margery Wolf pointed out, "patriarchy is not just a domestic ideology but a social ideology as well" (*Revolution* 163), and feudal remnants persist in the thinking of ordinary citizens as well those cadres responsible for enforcing the laws. As forms and amount of property continue to grow and as property relationships become more complicated, the courts are increasingly used for contract resolution, thus giving more opportunities to bring practice into line with the law.

Economic, Social, and Political Structures. The two major post-Mao government initiatives have been strict population control and liberalizing economic reforms, usually referred to as a "market economy under socialist conditions." China's one child policy has been fairly successful in the cities, with the average number of offspring close to one child per family, and in rural areas the average number of children is about two per family. Economic liberalization has produced dramatic changes in the standard of living: most families now have telephones, refrigerators, washing machines, and color televisions, as consumer goods have become available, plentiful, and affordable. Fewer people are employed in state-owned factories as more jobs become available in the private sector, and the economy is open to entrepreneurs.

How have these major structural changes affected women? Have these economic and demographic changes produced corresponding changes in patriarchy, patrilineality, and patrilocality? As one would expect, the answers to these questions are not always easy to see as effects have been mixed, depending, again, on variables such as social class, region of the country, and family situation.

Changes in the countryside have indeed been dramatic. Communes have been disbanded and the household has reemerged as the basic unit of production. Women still generally move to their husband's home village (patrilocal residence), and this has several effects. Parents are still more reluctant to invest in education for their daughters because they leave home, and parents feel that they must have a son who will stay at home and take care of them in their old age. When the government was requiring strict adherence to its one-child policy, women were often caught between the competing demands of their husbands and the local birth-control cadres. This was the origin of the pressure for abortion if the fetus was female, or for infanticide, abandonment, or adoption out if the infant was a girl. Currently the pressure on women has eased because a second child is allowed if the first one is a girl, and also because the central government is not quite as powerful and intrusive as it was.

Recent economic changes and loosening of the rules about mobility have led increasing numbers of rural people to look for jobs outside their local areas. Women are finding jobs as maids or babysitters in the cities, and many young unmarried women are finding factory jobs in the special economic zones of southern China. Men find contract work in construction, carpentry, transportation, or production, also often away from home. Increasingly women are taking over much of the actual agricultural work while men are engaging in small-scale entrepreneurial activity, both locally and away. Whether rural married couples live with the husband's parents depends mainly on the availability of different kinds of economic opportunities. Gao thinks that although the effects on women have been uneven, overall rural women's lives are better. She finds that there is less patriarchy as males "recognize women's competence and authority in the home, discuss important matters with their wives, subsidize their daughter's school attendance, and are beginning to help with household chores" (88). Likewise Judd, who did fieldwork in Shandong between 1986 and 1990, believes that power relations in the domestic realm are undergoing renegotiation. Though she sees that the "Three Obediences" are still a compelling determinant of gender behavior, she also found that the male patriarch did not have complete control over family finances. Women's earning power has given them more of a say.

In urban areas modernization has brought many changes in the traditional patterns, many of which show an erosion of patriarchal ideas. Urban women generally are employed away from the home for most of their lives, and they are often the ones who control family spending. Most urban residents have only one child, and if that child is a daughter, parents invest heavily in her upbringing, education, and success. Many retired elderly prefer to live with daughters rather than sons because they have a warmer social relationship with them. Neolocal residence (married couples live in a new place, not with the husband's or wife's family) is the preferred pattern

in the cities, and is the most common form when housing is available (Unger 27–40). Working daughters-in-law are thus not at home to be controlled by mothers-in-law. Mothers-in-law of today complain that they have to wait hand and foot on their daughters-in-law if they want to be close to their son and grandchild!

Contradictorily, there is a lot of evidence that even in urban areas patriarchy and feudal ideas continue to persist. Women earn on average 71.7 percent of what men earn (Whyte and Parish 204–206). Women face open discrimination in job hunting, and must have higher test scores and more education to be hired over men. Women are perceived of as less desirable workers because of their "special conditions"—pregnancy, maternity leave, nursing, and taking time off when children are sick or for babysitting emergencies. Women are generally thought of as less intelligent and less clever than men (Gallagher; Honig and Hershatter 243–263).

In assessing the current state of affairs however, the Chinese people themselves express widespread optimism about the future. Both genders see their own lives as being better than their parents', and think that their children's lives, whether they are girls or boys, will be better than their own (Gallagher).

Summary

Trying to understand women's lives in China, one of the intriguing points is that Chinese women by and large have not internalized the ever-present social idea of women's inferiority. Whenever the economic or social system allows them some options, they take them. Women in China do not usually play the part of the downtrodden, pitiful victim. But why not? Certainly until recent times the political, economic, social, and ideological factors have all conspired against them. Perhaps, in a paradoxical way, the answer lies in the same Confucian ideology and traditional Chinese culture that is often pointed to as causing their oppression.

As Henry Rosemont has pointed out, though Confucian ideology is often antiwoman, it is not antitypical female gender traits, traits such as nurturance, yielding, intuition. The yin-yang symbolic concept, based on supposedly natural differences between male and female, also implies each gendered person incorporates, at different times and in different circumstances, the gender traits of the other sex. Being active is called for at some times, being quiescent at others; being logical in some circumstances, being intuitive in others; being nurturant to some people, being demanding of others. In a Chinese world each person does not have a core, innate identity, but rather each person is contingent, relational, and constantly being constructed from interactions with others. Each person performs themselves into being, through ritual role performances. Although gender hierarchies are everpresent, which gender's traits an individual manifests depends on the situation. As blatantly sexist as the patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal traditional Chinese society was, women were able to resist internalization of personal inferiority, and instead model traits adaptive to their context. This enabled them as

individuals to deal with their personal circumstances, and to change their behavior as those circumstances changed.

> When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talking-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen. . . .
>
> Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep. . . .
>
> At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story. After I grew up, I heard the chant of Fa Mu Lan, the girl who took her father's place in battle. Instantly I remembered that as a child I had followed my mother about the house, the two of us singing about how Fa Mu Lan fought gloriously and returned alive from war to settle in the village. I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind. She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman. (Kingston 19–20)

Glossary

Foot binding The practice of tightly binding the feet of young girls in order to make the feet as small as possible.

Heterodox Not in accordance with established or accepted doctrines or opinions.

One child policy Official government policy in the post-Mao period to limit births to one child per family.

Patriarchal A form of social organization in which males have the supreme power, prestige and authority; a social system in which men dominate women.

Patrilineal Descent traced through the male line only.

Patrilocal Living with the husband's relatives after marriage.

Ritual pollution traditional belief that women's menstrual blood or pregnancy rendered them unclean, contaminated, or impure.

Three obediences According to this Confucian ideal, a woman was to obey her father when she was young, her husband after she was married, and her son in her old age.

Uterine family Margery Wolf's conception of that subsegment of the family composed of a woman and her children.

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