The Changing Roles of Women in The People's Republic of China

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The Changing Roles of Women in The People's Republic of China

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by Priya Helweg, April, 1990

I.

Introduction:
The present Chinese government has persistently claimed that women have been completely emancipated through the enforcement of Communist ideology. In spite of the claim that women in modern China 'hold up half the sky' traditional beliefs continue to influence the position of women in contemporary China. As a consequence, women in the People's Republic of China -- especially students -- find themselves in a situation of confusing contradictions and frustrating obstacles. Traditional ideologies, as seen in the patriarchal kinship structure and the economic and political systems, aid rather than hinder the present government as it maintains a similar relation to the people as the dynastic rule of pre-liberation China (Stacey 1983. The radical social, political and economic changes China has undergone from traditional political and social systems under to the present government are not to be trivialized. But change is a matter of degree and there is a reoccurring historical pattern concerning the treatment of women during each phase. This paper will trace such patterns through an examination of traditional China, pre-liberation, liberation and the P.R.C. in the 1980s.

Several theories will be explored concerning women in industrialization and how sexual asymmetry is perpetuated within a rapidly changing country. Though these theories may be applicable to other social systems and China be used as an example, the uniqueness of the Chinese situation must be stressed. It is not a concern of this paper to establish blame or propose a key solution to women's liberation but to determine what can be accomplished through understanding what contributes to and perpetuates the oppression of women in the entire social system.
Study Methods and Difficulties

In pursuing this project, various methods were used to collect information. I conducted interviews with individuals and groups of students at Nankai University, determined relevant situations and traced influencing factors as experienced by one or more students in order to understand social process. This field portion of my study occurred during a nine month residence period in 1988-89 when I was an exchange student at Nankai University in Tianjin (located about 70 miles west of Beijing, People's Republic of China). Since I did not speak fluent Mandarin, my interviews were limited to members of a small English-speaking group, mostly undergraduate students, in the English and Tourism Departments.

A search of relevant literature relating to this project was also conducted in order to discover similarities and differences between my personal observations and previous studies made by others. Portions of this paper will be spent reviewing and analyzing that literature. I will examine some theories presented in previous research done on Chinese women and evaluate their applicability to my study. Finally I will attempt to place my observations into the context of existing literature realizing that further study is needed to adequately evaluate each hypothesis.

Along with the difficulties previously stated, I also experienced difficulty acting as a participant observer, skilled analyzer and interpreter, because of the isolated nature of my situation, lack of former interviewing experience, and lack of language skills.

Initially I interviewed groups of four to seven students, both men and women, under the assumption that they would be more comfortable in groups than one-on-one interviews. The main difficulty I found straightaway with group
interviews was peer pressure and intimidation. Often, individuals would change their stance on a suggested issue when they discovered the group disagreed. I found these contradictions interesting and enlightening, though sometimes frustrating. Therefore, I used another form of group interview, involving teaching conversation classes for advanced English students. These were helpful in gaining a general idea of what larger groups (20-30) of students felt about the situations I presented. I also singled out certain students to conduct individual interviews with. As all individual interviews are, they were partial to one person’s opinion. The students I spoke with on an individual level were usually friends who I saw frequently.

By employing these several sources of information, I sought to identify social processes that determine the way things happened for the particular group I was dealing with — namely students at Nankai University in 1988-89. From the data collected, I attempted to identify patterns of behavior from which generalizations relevant to my sphere of study could be made.

II.

Historical Overview

"When a woman is born she is educated to act like her mother and her mother was taught by her mother."

--- A Chinese women student

In order to understand the current position of Chinese women, some attention should be given to their role in the traditional system. In the following discussion of Chinese women — before, during, and after the Communist revolution, one can appreciate the progress that has been made as well as note the need for further improvements. A further reason for understanding the cultural and social roots from which modern Chinese women progressed is to see how traditional values, ideologies, and philosophies have
remained to promote or hinder their progress.

Traditional Systems:

The customs and norms of the pre-revolution Chinese family that designate the position of women within the family vary according to social class and region. However, the dominant patterns of descent and residence were patrilineal and patrilocal.

The subordination of women to men was inherent in the patrilineal and patrilocal nature of the family and in the broader kinship system that allocated status and authority. Women in the attendant outlook lacked rights of property ownership and management, and carried no independent decision-making authority in important matters affecting the family and clan (Johnson 1983:62).

The generalization is commonly made, that the socio-political status of women in traditional China was relatively low (Johnson 1983:62), and there were few means by which a women could increase her position.

A woman's future position was reflected and established in her treatment from birth. When a daughter was born she was considered a "small happiness" (Hinton & Gordon 1984) and met with fewer expectations and less ceremony than a son.

Daughters did not perpetuate the family line or name and they could not participate in ancestor worship, provide economic support or enrich the family reputation through official appointment. The crucial fact was that 'a boy was born facing in that a daughter was born facing out'... (Hsieh 1943:10)

Women were considered outsiders until they were able to establish their own uterine family.¹ Prior to marriage a girl was considered to be a temporary

¹ This term was developed by Wolf to describe a woman's perspective on her family. Wolf defines the uterine family as "a contemporary group that comes into existence out of a woman's need and is held together insofar as she has the strength to do so...The uterine family has no ideology, no formal structure, and no public existence. It is built out of sentiments and loyalties that die with its members, but it is no less real for all that" (Wolf 1985:37).
member of her natal family. She was raised to go to her husband's house when she married. After marriage she entered their husband's house as an outsider relegated to the lowest position.

The education a daughter received in her pre-marrital years was "designed to further their attractions as obedient and capable wives and daughters-in-law" (Hsieh 1943:11). A system of rules that confined and controlled women were developed and passed down from generation to generation in several forms. One form being the three obediences and four virtues. The three obediences are: 1) as an unwed girl in her natal family a woman must obey the males of the family, beginning with her father and extending to her brothers; 2) when she is married, a woman is obligated to obey her husband; 3) and when she is a widow her adult sons are to be obeyed (Wolf 1972:2). A woman must uphold the four virtues: 1) to be moral; 2) to have proper speech; 3) to be modest; and 4) to be diligent. I also found that "not being visible" was a fifth virtue. In traditional China, a girl seldom seen by her neighbors was considered virtuous. When a marriage was being arranged, the groom's family were concerned about how much the neighbors knew about their prospective daughter-in-law. If the young woman was known to be "wild" and constantly in the public eye, then she was not regarded as a virtuous marriage partner for their son. I found that most women I spoke to in modern China knew these traditional rules, although their enforcement varied from one family to another.

During the Tang Dynasty women were allowed certain leniencies in so far as their deviation from gender roles and accomplishments in the public sphere were not threatening to the over all social system. During the Song Dynasty a pre-capitalist economy emerged and women entered the public work spheres. As
a result they began exerting themselves by questioning their subordinate role in the family patriarchy, earlier perpetuated by their confinement to the domestic sphere. They began exercising decision-making rights that their economic contribution in public work should (ideally according to Sacks 1985) allow them, and went so far as to take refuge from the oppressive forced male/female union of marriage and heterosexuality by forming supportive sisterhoods (Gates 1989; Stacey 1983). They no longer needed the male gender half to complete a whole, since by entering the public economic sphere, they were partly fulfilling male gender characteristics. 2

As a result of women's increasing movements into the public system, the Song Dynasty began to witness the reorganization of the traditional family patriarchy and kinship system, which would in turn, have serious repercussions on the organization of the political system, as well as take the control of the utilitarian functions of women away from men. During this time, the Song Dynasty rigorously enforced a "Neo-Confucian reassertion of family values," (Gates 1989:301). The traditional concept of female gender and what a "good" women should be was strongly propagated and the practice of foot binding emerged (a practice which physically maimed women into subordination). Also, at this time, the law supported the old kinship orthodoxy by specifying that "the men should be the owners of and inheritors of the means of production, and that women should not" (Gates 1989: 301).

During this time it was the obligation of the mother to instill in her

2 Note the use of gender is as Rubin would use it in her definition of a "sex/gender system". The sex/gender system is the imposition of social determinants and defined characteristics (gender) on a biological situation (sex) which in fact has little to do with actual biology. Thus gender is a socially defined set of characteristics attached only to biology by association (Rubin 1975).
daughters the correct practical and personal attributes considered desirable to prospective in-laws and the rest of the community. One of these desirable attributes was small feet. In order to insure a good marriage for her daughter, a mother was forced to bind her daughter's feet. The practice of foot binding did more than simply make a woman's feet small and aesthetically pleasing, it made it impossible for her to stray far from the domestic sphere. This confinement reinforced the control that family elders and males had over women and insured their economic dependence (Johnson 1980:64).

Marriage in traditional China was as important as it is today. In traditional China marriage was seen as a contract between two families instead of two individuals. There was generally a bride price. This practice illustrates that "daughters were goods on which one lost money" (Wolf 1985:1). It was a price to compensate the bride's family for raising her and suffering the loss of her services. Also, bride price could be seen as payment for the reproductive services of the young women. In the patrilineal family it was essential for her to bear male heirs to perpetuate the family name. And finally, the groom's family was purchasing the bride's abilities to perform domestic duties.

The first years of marriage were the most degrading and difficult for a young woman. She held the lowest position in the household, was considered an outsider, and was denied emotional support from her natal family (Johnson

3 For a description of foot binding see Hsieh (1943:43). Note the mother's words to her daughter: "I must bind your feet because I love you. If I do not bind your feet I shall not be doing the right thing by you. You must realize that a girl with huge feet will never be accepted by a husband."

4 For a description of the limitations of footbinding see Hsieh 1943:35-36.
The young bride, upon entering her in-law's domain, came directly under the supervision of her mother-in-law who, having been in the situation of being a bride once herself, recognized the threat the girl posed to the uterine family she had struggled to build. Thus, instead of befriending the lonely bride, the mother-in-law would be quick to prevent any ties the bride might make with her husband that might undermine his mother's long struggle for power (Wolf 1985:9). The function of arranged marriages enhanced the control and authority of family elders. Furthermore, it protected "the filial bond between son and parents from being undermined by a strong conjugal bond that could threaten the family hierarchy" (Johnson 1980:65).

Within this kinship and gender system, it is easy to see why it was profitable to invest family resources in sons rather than daughters. Whatever the natal family invested in a daughter would benefit a different family when she married. Thus, she was of little economic value to her natal family (Johnson 1980:65). Sons, on the other hand, were permanent members of their natal families and obligated to spend their lives supporting them. Even if a woman was educated, she could make little use of her knowledge. She was barred from most occupations except those deemed acceptable "woman's work" which mostly revolved around domestic tasks. In traditional China, the general view was that women belonged to the domestic sphere, the education of girls being a loss to the natal family; however, since marriage was inevitable she could gain some respect through bearing sons.

Pre-Liberation (early 20th century)

The early decades of the twentieth century were a time of questioning older values in China. The struggle between the Nationalist and the Communists was building. Young women began struggling with the dilemma of
reconciling their traditional roles of wives and daughters in the old patriarchal family system with desires to fulfill their own search for freedom and independence. During this time, the traditional practices, customs, and beliefs concerning women continued to be questioned (Croll 1981). For the first time literary and political influences from abroad were widespread. Notions of romantic love, mobility, agility, female education, and occupation were set against arranged marriages, footbinding, seclusion of women to the domestic sphere and dependence on marriages (Hsieh 1943:9-10).

During the late 1920s and early 1930s women began contributing to the labor force as outworkers and laborers. As casual workers, they usually worked seasonally. As outworkers they were employed along with children to complete tedious production work in their homes, such as gluing matchboxes, weaving mats or sewing uniforms for the reigning landlord. Until the 1930s, when cotton mills began to hire women, women made up a very small percentage of the labor force. After the mid-1930s, the women who made up the work force were generally unmarried and young. During that time, the mills in Shanghai and Tianjin were owned by the Japanese and strict rules existed that forbade their employees to marry (Hershatter 1986:57). Since most women were married before the age of 16 the average age of women employees was quite young (Hershatter 1986:65). In 1945, the Nationalists returned and attempted to implement policies to liberate women. Married women were allowed in the mills, thus raising the issue of maternity leave. The Nationalists were said to provide maternity leave for married women but Hershatter's "interview data suggests that pregnant workers were still often forced to leave the mills, returning some time after the birth of their children," (1986:57-8). Maternity leave is also an issue the Communists Government is forced to deal
with today. Unfortunately, it is often used as an excuse to suspend women from the work force or simply exclude them.

Employment during these early times caused a second problem for women relating to their social situation. Working outside the home was less desirable than working at home for two reasons. First, young women in the factory and in transit from their homes to the factories were vulnerable to sexual harassment from overseers and fellow employees. The risk that a working woman might lose her virginity could limit marriage prospects and cause grief within her natal family. Second, the social view that a "good woman" does not work caused the families of a working woman to lose face; women often became the victims of gossip and social discrimination (Hershatter 1986:62). This latter notion might arise from the traditional view that a virtuous young woman is seldom seen by her neighbors. This attitude continues to some extent in modern Chinese society, as reflected in the fact in that women are rarely selected for important highly visible public relations positions.

Hiring women during this time of pre-revolutionary China was "an outgrowth of the struggle to recruit a cheap and tractable labor force, and to circumscribe the power of the foreman" (Hershatter 1986:144). Also during this time, the sexual division of labor outside the family was in the process of being redefined. The concept that certain work is acceptable for women and other work is not, continues to limit women in the modern Chinese work force. In 1929 men held the highest paying jobs and were often paid more for doing the same work as women. In 1930 women held the lowest paying positions in the textile industry. They dominated in the preparation and finishing sections of the weaving departments but usually did not do the actual weaving. In
Tianjin, during this period, both piece and time wage systems were used. But most time paid positions were held by men and women were almost always paid by piece. This manipulation of the system was one way management was able to extract productive and quick labor from workers, (Hershatter 1986:156).

Post Liberation

Before the 1949 revolution. The Nationalists had attempted to implement laws promising the improvement of the economic and political situation of women. But, they were ineffective in reaching all but a small pocket of urban intellectuals. The lives of the vast majority of women, due to isolation and extreme suppression, were never affected. The Communist party was the only political force able and willing to implement family reforms that would lead to the liberation of women. After 1949 they were able to carry these reforms to the entire country (Johnson 1980:67)

The new marriage law and land reform were the first two major reforms to be carried out by the Communist party that affected the position of women and the traditional family. According to Stacey, during the implementation of a socialist state, it is deemed useful to attack the patriarchal family system partly to "honor socialism's historical ideological commitment to the liberation of women," and partly to break down the systems of the old regime (Stacey 1983:1). But, she proceeds to argue that the "union of socialism and anti-patriarchal politics amounts only to a short-lived marriage of convenience" (Ibid:2). Once power is gained, the revolutionary force attempts to stabilize the social order and "sexual radicalism" or family instability are no longer considered necessary (Stacey 1983). Actually the complete break down of the patriarchy on the family level can be detrimental to the
State. China's political structure during the dynasties and presently parallel the patriarchal family structure. The rulers insured the loyalty of its subjects by likening itself to the family (Gates 1989). This will be expanded upon in the Theoretical Considerations section of this paper. This pattern is apparent in Chinese socialist history. The marriage law of 1950 abolished systems directly related to enhancing the authoritarian sex and age hierarchy of the traditional Chinese family. Arranged marriages, concubinage, child betrothal, and polygamy were outlawed. In this way, the patriarchy of pre-1949 China was directly subverted (Johnson 1980: 67).

The marriage law was also a direct push for women's liberation. It gave women the option to sue independently for divorce. It outlawed third party interfering in marriage contracts, the union between consenting adults (Johnson 1980:67) rather than a bond between families. This was geared to undermining the authority that parents had exercised over their children. And finally, it stated a minimum marriage age of 18 for women and 20 for men (Johnson 1980:67) which enabled people to grow to a level of maturity where they could employ a certain amount of control over their own marriages. This law theoretically gave women control over their lives, in the sense that they would no longer be forced into an undesirable and oppressive situation. Since a woman could choose her mate, she supposedly would not be thrust into a family of strangers as an outsider, and free choice marriages strengthen conjugal bonds between the wife and husband, which ideally would cause their relationship to be the core of the family rather than the traditional core -- the bond between family and son. The law went further to give the woman more leverage in the home by giving her the freedom of a divorce if she found her situation unbearable (Johnson 1980:68). But more than decent and marriage
patterns contributed to the low position of women.

In order to make the marriage law effective women needed to have some economic independence of their own. It has been illustrated that some urban women already had access to economic independence in spite of the fact that they may have been viewed as only supplementing the man's income. In the rural sectors, land reform laws provided opportunities by assigning land equally to both men and women. Women were not only given rights to own land but also household property (Johnson 1980:68). Ideally, the implementation of these two reforms -- reorganization of marriage practices and granting women some limited economic control -- were supposed to promote eventual equality between the sexes. In practice the reforms have contributed considerably to increasing the position of women. But, that increase is relative and a matter of degree rather than evidence that women in China have been emancipated.

During the time of Mao and socio-cultural reforms, ideal laws were instituted and published. They worked to a degree in some areas but not so well in others. There are two main reasons why these reforms did not instantly "liberate" women in the family and economic sectors of Chinese society. First, tradition is seldom easily and quickly changed by laws. Second, the methods, degree of conviction and difficulty in implementing the laws should be explored.

Aspects of the Chinese system had been built and defined for thousands of years, the women alive in 1949 were raised in the long tradition of strict social rules and norms that defined their roles and dictated the course of their lives. It was difficult to communicate the new reforms, let alone see to their successful execution. Women were not experienced in the skills of assertion and organization which would aid them in the public, decision
making sphere of economic independence. Social taboos such as the obediencies and virtues dictated to girls at an early age made it extremely difficult for women to assert themselves to the full extent the new reforms allowed (Johnson 1980:68). To compensate for this lack of aggression and confidence a Women's Association was formed to provide support for women and bring about full awareness of their new rights. But the Association was directly influenced by the Party, and if class consciousness or economic achievements override gender issues then the Women's Association reflected these later values.

One of the professed intent of the Communist Party was to "liberate" and "improve" the situation of women but during implementation of the new laws, countless difficulties arose that caused gender equality to lose priority. Under the reforms, women were suddenly expected to participate and contribute to the social and political transformations of the country. But, it became apparent that alongside campaigns to eliminate wife abuse and arranged marriages, the Party must acknowledge its need to gain the support of men (Honig & Hershatter 1988:3). If men were alienated by the gender equality movement, the situation could become critical for the party. Also Maoist doctrine at this time emphasized that through the resolution of the class struggle gender inequality would automatically be resolved. As a result, gender issues were considered secondary, some campaigns were abandoned and situations were overlooked in order to promote class consciousness over gender consciousness. The social reality promoted the goal of "less conflict and production maximization." Women were mobilized to promote the socialist structure over gender equality (Honig & Hershatter 1988:3).

Post revolutionary China took many turns in defining gender roles up to the present and doubtless will take many more. Briefly, women proceeded from
contributing to the collectives of the 1950s to gaining mobility, assertiveness, and some independence during the Cultural Revolution, to having their lives restructured in 1978 with new economic reforms (Chan 1984). When the dust settled, they found themselves with opportunities to contribute to the sustenance of the family but again under the dominance of a patriarch (Honig & Hershatter 1988:4). This holds with Stacey’s argument that during a socialist revolution, the system is anti-patriarchy until such time as its stability is threatened.

III.

Contemporary China

The remaining part of this paper will concentrate on the situation of young Chinese women in modern China as I observed it personally during 1988-89. Their obstacles, concerns, and benefits will be juxtaposed with the traditional notions and Communist ideals discussed in the early part of this paper.

In spite of the fact that China in the 1980s boasts a growing and flourishing economy, the country is grappling with housing shortages, the limited availability of high paying jobs, discontent and other situations that result from rapidly changing political and socio-economic conditions. These factors play a critical role in social interaction and gender definition. As education is improving and becoming widespread, more people are forced to work in jobs for which they are over-qualified. Qualified and educated people strive to move to the cities in search of economic opportunities. The cities, as in many industrializing countries, are living centers desired by more people than they have the capacity to accommodate. Since gaining permission is often difficult new ways to get around the system are constantly being
employed -- such as marriage -- which poses a new set of circumstances.

Under these quickly changing social, economic and political conditions, China has been attempting (theoretically at least) to improve the position of women and increase their situation as a whole. Ideally, laws and propaganda are geared at destroying traditional thoughts that prejudice society against the advancement of women. The government has claimed, at various times, that women and men are equal, and some individuals I spoke with stated that women indeed "hold up half the sky." However, when I enquired about equal opportunity employment and education, people defended statements like, "Women are naturally weaker and more emotional than men so they can't do certain things." I found that among the factors that inhibit the advancement of women in China are beliefs in their "natural" traits and culturally based prejudices. When I asked about these so-called "natural" traits of women that prevented them from going on to higher education, holding high paying jobs, or jobs at all, remaining single and asserting their individuality as women. Also, certain government supported programs hinder women directly.

The following description of the socialization of women from childhood to adolescence was depicted by college students at Nankai University in Tienjin, where I studied. The formal structure of education varies from place to place and I am, therefore, leery of over generalizing. But my guess is that the classroom situation and the treatment of boys and girls does not differ drastically from one region to another.

As in every culture, children are taught from birth what is to be expected of them. The following examples will illustrate the contradiction between the "ideal" situation presented by the government professing gender equal educational opportunity and the "real" situation of how young people are
manipulated into taking on traditional socially acceptable gender roles. This discussion will show that traditional ideology has not been eradicated by the modern Chinese "communist" doctrine; it has simply been reshaped to achieve similar ends. Note that the ends achieved may be molded by tradition but not a reenactment of it (Honig & Hershatter 1988:6). China is not stepping back or mimicking other social philosophies concerning women though traditional ideology may be encouraged and parallels to the situations of women in other similar historic situations can be drawn (Honig & Hershatter 1988:2). The gender situations are unique to the country and the times though parallels with other industrializing countries can be drawn.

In adulthood, women are expected to fill three main roles: wife, mother, and paid laborer. (Honig & Hershatter 1988:13). As in pre-liberation China, a mother is responsible for providing her daughter with the skills to fill her socially accepted place which is not necessarily the public, economically successful place advocated theoretically by the constitution.

Much of Honig and Hershatter's research supported by my observations suggests that in China today girls are still considered inferior to boys in intellect, physical ability, and emotional stability (Honig & Hershatter 1988:14). Gender identities are not only marked for children, "but they are perceived as markedly unequal." (Gates 1989 [reader]: 295). The traditional kinship pattern of China was a strong gender and generational hierarchy. This hierarchy was taught to and learned by children to be "natural," inevitable" and "good," (Gates 1989:295). Rubin's discussion on the stress of gender difference and the values placed on male gender associations is communicated to children causing boys to grow up with the confidence needed for success in the public sphere and girls to grow up with a low self image, feelings of
inadequacy and an acceptance of their "naturally" meek gender (1975).

Students that I spoke to supported this view and consistently stated that women have "smaller brains" and could not "grasp as much as men." Women are "too emotional and weak" to do as well in school as boys. "Everyone knows this, it is a biological fact" a women student said. As a result of this attitude, girls are not overly encouraged by their parents to go to school beyond state requirements.

Honig and Hershatter (1988) observed that female models in the media display characteristics which Chinese gender definition consider to be female biological weaknesses. This reinforces the stereotypes, and does not prepare them for obstacles faced in challenging school work and later within a competitive work force (Honig & Hershatter 1988:30). As the alleged "natural weakness" of females is reinforced, parents undermine the ambitions and intelligence of their daughters at an early age (Honig & Hershatter 1988:38). They raise them under traditional guidelines. Furthermore they are being influenced by the media. As a result, parents do not instill confidence in their girls.

One student related her family experience in urban North China: "When relatives came over, my brother was naughty and they said that was good. A boy should be naughty." In turn, the girl's mother taught her to be shy and stay in the background to be less assertive so the relatives would consider her a "good girl." Socially accepted behavior for a young girl in China is still to be quiet, shy and seldom seen. "Girls should never laugh out loud or show their teeth," she continued. "We are told to walk without moving our skirt and to sit in a modest manner." Of course the number of girls and women who actually follow this advice is undeterminable. Honig and Hershatter
(1988) suggest that the current One-Child policy might change the way daughters are raised. As more and more families must raise girls as their sole heirs, they will be encouraged not to make gender distinctions, and thus raise them more as if they were boys (Honig & Hershatter 1988:20). If this does happen, women would begin to develop the confidence and assertiveness that would benefit them later. The students I spoke with were one generation ahead of the new generation, soon to emerge from the enforcement of the One Child policy.

Today, girls are expected to achieve at least a primary school education, and then they can get a job. However, traditional notions are manifested in subtle ways. As illustrated in the traditional overview section of this paper, keeping girls within the home and teaching them passive behavior was a traditional value. Footbinding was an extreme way of insuring almost complete helplessness and subordination from early childhood. When a girl in contemporary China enters primary school, she initially is encouraged to employ those study patterns at home and in school. She is persuaded to concentrate on humanities which would eventually lead her into less competitive occupations such as elementary education, medicine and service positions that are considered acceptable for women.

In primary school "the teachers tell us that boys will have more advantages than girls," a second year student told me. In primary middle school the students are split into sciences and humanities. The males are top in sciences and the females dominate in humanities. One woman told me about her chemistry professor who was fond of calling only on the top male students. As a result, the girls didn’t like the class and chose humanities. She went on to say that in traditional thinking, if a person is good at sciences they
are deemed intelligent and humanities are overlooked.

During primary and middle school, girls are taught to learn by memorization and are encouraged by parents to stay inside and study. When I asked about the life of a girl in primary school, one woman blurted out "girls don’t have time to play. They spend all their time at home studying or doing homework, home to school and school to home." They were allowed to play some sports but boys had greater freedom. Boys learn to quickly understand their homework so they can go out and play. As a result, this woman argued, boys are taught creativity and social skills while girls learn by rote memory.

The problem of segregated schooling is being recognized. The constitution advocates equality, and "feudal thought" should prove to be a "temporary worry," (Honig & Hershatter 1988:2). But, the means by which discrimination is being dealt with is far from effective. Government supported media frequently presents role models that students are expected to emulate. As emphasized by Honig and Hershatter, these models are often noted for their class values. Women are told that they can overcome the handicaps of their sex and succeed in two ways: if they perform well by male standards, and if they acknowledge their "innate weaknesses" and seek professions where they can accomplish what "women are best at," namely low paying jobs such as teachers, secretaries, waitresses and doctors.

One article states that if a woman peruses something she is "skilled" at, then she will give twice the effort and achieve only half the result. Thus she won’t benefit the state (Honig & Hershatter 1988:14). In role model examples of 1980, the youth were encouraged to contribute to the modernization of agriculture, technology, industry and defense. Some role models were judged according to their contribution to these "larger" issues which override
"gender issues" (Honig & Hershatter 1988). This type of role model almost encourages women to "succeed" to their "natural weakness", and reinforces attitudes towards female virtues similar to those of the imperial era. Also, if articles promote the class struggle over the gender issues the woman who "fail" end up blaming themselves for not being able to overcome or utilize her feminine virtues and perform well by standards which have been set for her by the state and society.

It is supposedly mandatory for women to work and contribute to the subsistence of the family since the government sees this as the key to her emancipation and gender equality. But again the "real" is much different than the "ideal" and the economic freedom of women is not necessarily supported whole heartedly by the State. It is first necessary to note the type of jobs women get, the hiring process in China, and how much energy they can direct toward their occupation. Most of the women students I talked to were concerned about their futures. They had already experienced gender discrimination when entering the university. Many students told me that women must get higher marks than men on university entrance examinations by at least five points or they would not pass. This was not a written rule, they said, but "everyone knows it." I also spoke with women graduating seniors who were aware of the fact that they would endure similar biases when they entered the job market. First of all, women students, regardless of their educational achievements, were primarily hired for lower paying jobs. For example, in the department of tourism, women were considered for waitress and maid positions. Employers recruiting on campus for managers would state that they were not even considering women for the high positions. General reasons were given to me, such as women were not "naturally" suited to take on such an important
position or they cannot think systematically and rationally enough to hold a managerial positions. Also since women, I was told, are naturally meek and not assertive they cannot hold jobs where they are forced to make important decisions and they are also not good at public relations.

As has been illustrated, women are rarely taught assertiveness. In their natal families it is still regarded as unbecoming for a woman to draw attention to herself in the public sphere. Though the degree to which women are confined as young girls and young women is not close to the restrictions of pre-revolutionary China, the notion still prevails that women should be restricted to certain accepted place.

Keeping women out of the public eye not only denies them access to the skills necessary for decision making and public relations jobs, but it also causes men to be uncomfortable when they must deal with women on a business level. Generally, it is not thought beneficial for a company to hire women into these important positions.

An article I had translated was dedicated to this problem. It discussed the "concerns" of a few women who had gained management positions and took active part in business meetings. These women, the article said, were forced to learn to drink and smoke in order to be accepted; they got sick on a regular basis and no one benefited. In the end, women were encouraged to stay with jobs that took advantage of their "female skills."

The traditional notions that confine women to the home provides even more complicated reasons why an employee would not consider it beneficial to hire her. A primary complaint is that women will eventually marry. Most women I spoke with said, "of course" they would marry. A few did not want to, but knew they eventually would. If a woman chose to remain single after the
accepted marriage age, she suffered social pressure and discrimination. Well meaning neighbors constantly introduced her to prospective mates. In "a society where the need for intimacy is met by a family and spouse" (Honig & Hershatter 1988:108), it is socially inconceivable for a woman to desire a single life. If she is outgoing and has male friends, she is the victim of gossip (Ibid: 1988). Public opinion not only effects her personally and socially but also in her job. Single women are given unfavorable work schedules and often are passed over for raises since time and money are not considered important for them as compared to a male employee with a family to support (Honig & Hershatter 1988:107).

The problem of housing shortages also discourages women from remaining single, I was told. According to government policies, a single woman is the last on the list to receive housing. The priority sequence is as follows: families with children get first choice, couples are next, single men and last single women. In China, there is hardly enough space for the families to get a room which makes it virtually impossible for a woman to live alone. I have heard of women sharing small space with other women but generally they live in dormitories with curfews, community facilities, and small spaces. Or, if they work in the same location as their natal family (which is usually where the assignment bureau assigns students), a single woman will not be given dormitory space but must live with her parents. These situations, both social and economic, make remaining single extremely difficult.

What happens when a woman gets married? Why do employers frown on the institution for woman employees but not for men? If the couple receives housing, the woman is given the added responsibility of taking care of the home and she is judged critically by the social eyes if she does not maintain
the house. When a woman holds the responsibility of work both in the home and in an outside job, her situation is that of a 'double burden'. It is becoming increasingly popular in China for men to help in the house. But Wolf says that when the man helps he usually adopts the 'enjoyable' tasks such as cooking and the women are still left to clean and supervise (Wolf 1985). When I spoke to students about the work their mothers do in the home, they confirmed that their mothers looked after them, cleaned and generally were responsible for the upkeep of the house. Their fathers cooked occasionally, "when they had time." When I asked directly who cooked, many said, "whoever came home early." I asked who usually came home early, most said their mother.

Some of the women students I spoke with did not want to marry. In spite of the fact that they knew they eventually would, they praised the law that advocated later marriage and equal status within the home. A couple cannot marry before the woman is 20 years old and the man is 22 years old (Women of China 1987:4). Under this law the husband and wife ideally should "enjoy equal status in the home" (Ibid:1987:5). In the course of my research I found that this was ideally interpreted as men and women should share housework. If they could not insure equal help in the home from their husbands at least they could delay the double burden and possibly begin a career. This, of course, does not concern the employers who still see women as potential wives and mothers rather than good workers.

Employees, I was told, argue that once a woman gets married, she will have children and her attention will not be on her work. A woman will take maternity leave, causing the employer to lose money because by law they must pay the woman something during her leave. It is also believed that a woman's
attention will wander with the family responsibility she will have acquired. I spoke to some women about this and they said that if their child gets sick and needs special care, she will be the one to take off work. Thus, a profit oriented employer would be reluctant to hire women.

One woman told me that she strongly approved of the One-Child policy. She was married and doing her graduate work. She did not want to have children because they would get in the way of her pursuing a career as a journalist. Her husband and his parents wanted her to have a child. She saw the one child policy as liberating, since she would suffer less of a burden and could concentrate on advancements she wanted for herself and still satisfy her in-laws.

The One-Child policy also can be seen in a negative light, especially in rural areas, because it denies some families the productive contribution of children. The negative aspects are more common in the countryside where, with the system of private family plots, it is again crucial to have sons.

Considerable changes have occurred in the roles of women now that they are a part of the work force. Traditionally a woman went through a series of hardships to eventually establish her uterine family and gain a respected position within the family by becoming a mother-in-law in charge of a brigade of daughters-in-law. In contemporary China the reward is not very appealing. Due to inadequate child care facilities and low incomes, elderly women are assuming the positions of baby sitters while the parents are at work. By law, children are responsible for the care of the elderly but they do not have the same reverence for them as was the case in traditional China. Thus a woman still lives through discrimination and fatigue, but the realization of a
mother-in-law's position, sitting in command of her son's wives is no longer a reward.

IV.

Theoretical Considerations

It is difficult to determine what factors specifically determine the position of women in a particular society. Karen Sacks (1975) suggests that, since the development of private property ownership and production placed a high value on the contribution of productive, "public" work done primarily by men lead to oppressive social systems and the low position of women, the position of women could be improved by changing the political and economic systems. Gayle Rubin (1975) takes a more holistic approach and argues that though economics play an important part in determining the position of women, the role of kinship systems and the way socially defined roles and situations ("gender") are perpetuated psychologically should not be overlooked. As a result, a major aspect of Rubin's "solution" to the problem is the restructuring of the value placed on things associated with men (the public sphere) and in turn, place less stress on the difference between male and female, which would create an egalitarian rather than a hierarchical relationship. Gate's analysis (1989) of Chinese women before liberation is a good example of how socio-cultural, political and economic systems all intertwine to determine the position of women and perpetuate the systems that oppress women.

As this paper has illustrated, gender definition and social systems that enculturate individuals with these definitions continue to influence the Chinese in the 1980's. At one point Rubin states that sex and gender organization once functioned to organize society but now it only perpetuates
itself. She states that kinship has been "systematically stripped of its functions — political, economic, educational and organizational," (Rubin 1975:199). In spite of the fact that the system is not fulfilling its original end it continues to shape human action and in contemporary China serves political and economic ends. As the sex/gender system contributed to the perpetuation of the kinship system and in turn the political structure during the Song dynasty it is used by the Communists in more subtle ways. Instead of footbinding, contemporary China encourages traditional gender definitions through the media as well as neglecting to pass equal rights laws for education and employment. As I have discussed, admittance into higher educational institutions is biased against women. Most women cannot acquire jobs that pay them enough to have their economic contribution as viewed more than supplementary to that of their husbands.

In my study, I found that a woman's position is still very much dependent on her performance within the domestic sphere rather than her success in her career. Society continues to judge her according to her traditional obligations in spite of the fact that she has been able to venture from the confinement of the house. One specific "role model" they often presented in the media is that of the "loyal wife" who is praised for having traditional attributes, placing family over her job, supporting her husband and taking good care of her house (Honig & Hershatter 1988).

Gates makes the point that the gender and generational hierarchy in the traditional Chinese family was promoted by China's ruling class. The family became the "microcosm" for the greater "national-family" and "taught the cosmological subordination of children citizens to their father-emperor" (Gates 1989:275). In this way, the ruling class maintained their power
structure by relying on the sex/gender system and kinship values along side economic and political systems to insure loyalty and service. "With gender confounded in kinship, and the family conflated with the State, social hierarchy seem as natural as mother’s milk" (Gates 1989:295). Gates goes on to say that though the generational hierarchy could be challenged as the authority of the State could be challenged, the gender aspect of the hierarchy was viewed as "inevitable biological destiny" (Gates 1989:296). What is connected is that the gender definition is ingrained early on in an individual based on a biological function, thus producing an individual who will act according to the gender characteristics of that society, enforcing the family and kinship systems and finally that of the state.

So, what happens when that gender hierarchy is challenged, when women increasingly gain access to the economic resources and move into public production? Gates observes (1989) that "a mode of production in not [only] a set of technical production practices, but rather, is a complex of social, political, and ideological relationships that, in class societies, transfers the surplus beyond what producers need for their own reproduction from one or more classes into the wants of a ruling class" (Ibid. 297). This illustrates the importance of the "wants for the ruling class" and the control it strives to maintain over capital produced by the working classes. Pulled down to a family level the "ruling class" can be seen as the eldest male as the ruler of the household. Thus, in this system, just as the ruling class dictate to the working class, the male in a patriarchal kinship structure controls the production of his socially determined family subordinates, woman. When women enter the public sphere of this capitalist-like system, means must be found to keep the ruler (in both the family and State) in control of the capital.
In contemporary China, under the socialist ideological system, women are encouraged to move from the private to the public sphere. But as this paper has illustrated the support of this process is limited due to other social systems (kinship patterns, the sex/gender system) and in the threat a gender equal, non-patriarchal society would pose to the political structure. Also, the economic system of contemporary China is similar to that of the Song dynasty in that it is a rapidly growing capitalist-like system.

China is not unique in its problems concerning the situation of women. Simone de Beauvoir discusses similar patterns occurring in France during its industrialization after the revolution. Women were hired for their cheap, exploitable labor and were forced to reconcile between their part in production and their reproductive role (de Beauvoir 1974:132). She argues that ideally women in an industrializing, modernizing society should not be slaves "to the generative function" (Ibid.:136). In China women are participating in productive labor and, through the One-Child policy, they are being freed from over abuse of their reproductive capabilities. However, in contemporary China the generative function of women is still used as an excuse to restrict their participation in the work force for the benefit of males. As a result of China's economic situation, as I saw it in 1988-89, China is experiencing an over abundance of labor or high unemployment. Men are not able to find jobs and they are still regarded as the main supporters of the family. Thus the dilemma, as the Chinese government sees it, is how reduce employment competition between the sexes by getting women to go back to the home, yet still argue that they are improving the predicament of women in

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5 Due to the complexity and detail of de Beauvoir's argument I cannot concentrate on it in this paper. Such a comparison would be a paper in and of itself. For further detail see de Beauvoir 1974:Chapter VIII p.122-155.
contemporary Chinese society. Whether this predicament emerges as a major socio-political issue in the near future remains to be seen.

According to Sacks (1985:294) the transition from "private family work" to "public work" will cause women to become "social adults." Gates' example proves the limitations of this argument. It illustrates the strength of early gender definition (sex/gender hypothesis) and kinship relationships and values. More accurately, Sacks might say that a woman's gender role should move from being less valuable to as valuable as the man's gender role. However, this is not easily done. As Rubin (1975) points out, and Gates (1989) supports, entire ideological and economic systems (value definition), political systems and kinship systems must be drastically altered.

In her documentary on women in a Chinese village entitled "Small Happiness, Woman of a Chinese Village" Hinton (1984) statesthat as long as China is a patrilineal, patrilocal society, women can never be considered a 'big happiness' at birth. The family structure is integrally related to the situation of women. No matter how much they contribute to the finances of their natal family, women are almost (especially in the countryside) guaranteed to take their skills and income to another family when they get married. This situation has improved to some extent due to the Marriage law denouncing arranged marriages and the limited mobility of rural people in contemporary China. As Hinton explains, marriages are taking place within the village between familiar individuals. This allows women to stay in close contact with their natal family and acquire some support. Also women are increasingly playing a more active role in the support of the elderly because of the almost impossible economic burden of supporting two families that fall on a single son family.
The Communists realized this and implemented two laws in hopes of correcting the situation. Article 16 states that "children may adopt either their father's or their mother's family name." (Women of China 1987:7) This allows descent to be traced literally through either sex. Article 8 states: "After a marriage has been registered, the woman may become a member of the man’s family, or the man may become a member of the woman’s family, according to the agreed wishes of the two parties," by promoting neolocal residence patterns (Women of China 1987:5). This article was inserted in hopes of solving "the practical difficulties of families who have daughters but no sons," (Women of China 1987:19).

The intent was clear when these articles were included in the marriage laws, but culture and tradition are not easily changed, especially drastically. A culture cannot be expected to reverse its entire descent or residential structures overnight. On the other hand, the exceptions do seem to be increasing from what I observed and was told. It is becoming increasingly popular for couples in urban centers to move into the homes of the wife’s parents. But this is a result of urban economic conditions rather than an illustration of overall changing tradition. For example, if the bride’s family lives in the city in which one or both of the couple work and they are on a long waiting list for housing, it is more beneficial for them to join the women’s natal household. Also in some progressive communities are experimenting with such laws as the above. But, generally, China still remains a strong patrilineal, patrilocal society. Indeed, I think Hinton’s argument is especially insightful and I believe that the existence of Articles 16 and 8 demonstrates that the party recognizes the significance of her point as well.
V.

Conclusion:

Sack's argument that woman's integration into the public work sphere may cause their emancipation is much too simplistic and culturally biased. The kinship structure and political structure are also important influences on the gender definition. First of all, as Rubin argues (1975), the initial enculturation of gender definition persist throughout an individual's lifetime and may hinder them when they are expected to perform outside the sphere that their gender expectations prepared them for. For example, women are taught gender expectations which allow them some success at functioning in the domestic sphere but may hinder them when they enter the public sphere. As a result one cannot look to the incorporation of women into the public production as a primary means by which they can gain freedom without understanding their childhood training within the family. Second, the strength of the kinship system and political system must also be considered.

In Gates' (1989) example, women were entering the public production sector but through the revival of kinship values (i.e., commoditization of women and their subordination to the family men) as well as the stress on gender distinctions as biological distinctions ('women are "naturally" thus...') women were kept subordinate and the existing political power was maintained. This tendency to stress women's gender ("natural traits") in order to exploit them shows how women were considered "naturally" suited for monotonous, detailed work as well as and less quarrelsome. Women also can be exploited because of their gender definition within a specific culture. But a positive aspect of bringing women into the public sector was observed. Communities of women developed and an
awareness of their situation began to emerge. In conclusion, Sacks' economic solution is an important part of a whole social system that needs understanding and reorganization for the successful emancipation of women. But, as this paper has observed, social systems (descent patterns, residence patterns and marriage practices), psychological implications and the political system as well as the economic system must be understood to completely determine how the position of women in a society is established and perpetuated.
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