

CHINESE WOMEN UNDER THE ECONOMIC REFORM

Gains and Losses

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Since 1949, for more than half a century, Chinese women have traveled a long path: they have experienced dramatic shift in policies and their social and economic status have experienced up and down in society. From a subservient group with limited roles to play in the public sphere, Chinese women have become full participants in the social and economic arena, making inroads into many traditionally masculine fields. The economic reform and opening undergoing in China since 1978 have posed new challenges to Chinese women, at the same time offering them new choices and opportunities. Chinese women have gained a lot, but the road to full equality with men is still a long journey.

Chinese Women in the Pre-Reform Era

When the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, the communist government experimented on a very ambitious project: Full liberation of the Chinese women. Women were to be freed from the yoke of feudalism oppression that had lasted for more than 2000 years, and they would be treated as equal human beings with men, holding up "half of the sky" in socialist reconstruction. To implement this major change, the Chinese communist government enacted a series of laws that supported freedom of marriage, equal pay, equal benefits, and equal educational opportunities for women. Economic independence and social political recognition have enhanced women's social status, giving women unprecedented confidence and enthusiasm. Women also became involved in politics. Female leaders were visible in local governments as well as in high ranking government offices.

Yet, the gains were accompanied with losses. For example, the National Women's Federation was more a political rubber stamp for approving government policies than an independent and powerful organization for women. Under strict ideological control, women had little say in what they should believe in, and during the Cultural Revolution, strict dress codes were enforced wherein women could not express their individual preferences in dresses or life styles. Since social changes had come from the top, a sense of dependence had been nurtured, and self-awareness that allows a critical voice to arise was underdeveloped.

Economic Restructuring and Female Employment

The impact of Deng Xiaoping's economic reform has been dramatic for urban women. From full reliance on the government for their job, healthcare, education, security and retirement, many are experiencing the loss of job security, the loss of social benefits, and the loss of social respect. In the fierce competition for jobs in a market economy, women are losing grounds and becoming increasingly marginalized.

In the economic restructuring, millions of urban and township workers have been laid off. Women have been especially disadvantaged in several ways: 1) more women are laid off than men; 2) women are forced to retire at younger age than men; 3) women receive less social support after being laid off; and 4) the chance of re-employment are lower due to the lack of social connections. The sense of dislocation and deprivation is very strong among some unemployed women, who felt betrayed after having given all their life to the service of the state.

For unemployed women, job opportunities given to them are mostly low skill, low paid, low social status jobs. Common features of these jobs are: 1) Long hours: A survey finds that 20-80% of the private businesses and foreign China collaborations demand more than 8 hours a day for the women. 2) Lack of safety: Jobs that involve working in hazardous environment are offered to women in violation of the government's rules. 3) Low job security: Most jobs do not guarantee employment; contracts are not signed to give women protection. 4) Low salary: Businesses take advantage of women's eagerness to find jobs and cut salary to very low level. 5) Low trust: Businesses break their promises and often delay paying the women. All these hurt the pride of the unemployed women, who feel they are being deserted by the society altogether.

In recent years, the Chinese government is no longer assigning jobs to university graduates. Employment of female university graduates has become an issue. A survey of 1068 graduates in 2002 found that with same qualifications, 63.4% females graduates are employed right after they finished university, as compared to 72.1% for male graduates. Female students also hold lower expectation for

their job and are paid lower starting salary. In terms of educational access, although girls' enrollment in primary schools has reached the level of boys, in universities, still women represent only 40% of the students. In terms of positions, while male are hired mostly as technical and administrative personnel, women are hired as assistants, sales personnel or cashier. A saying is widespread in China's university campuses that an M.A. for female is worth a B.A. for male, and a Ph.D. for female is worth an MA for male.

Rural Women Remain at the Bottom of the Society

In the reform era, rural women are the most ignored group, although they represent the largest female group. Located at the bottom of the society, rural women lag far behind other groups politically,

socially, economically, and educationally. Rural women have fewer educational opportunities, and no social benefits from the government at all. The most significant change for rural women under the economic reform is the breakdown of homogeneity. Before the reform, rural women were bound to the land and greatly restricted in their mobility to go living and working anywhere, as the household registrations system disallowed them to leave their village except through marriage and a few other means. Under the economic reform, such restrictions were loosened, and rural women migrated to cities and more economically developed regions in the millions, working as waitresses, babysitters and household workers, or selling merchandises and transporting goods from one place to another. They do the dirtiest work, are paid very

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little, and marginalized by urban residents who look down upon them. Millions of young girls went to coastal cities to work in foreign corporations, earning low wages and working more than 10 hours a day and seven days a week. Many are sexually harassed. In short, after more than 25 years of economic reform, rural women have become a diverse group: A small number have become successful owning their own businesses; some have settled down in cities and become integrated into urban life, while the majority of others are still working at the margin of cities. In the rural areas, farming has become the main task of women: more than 60% of the farm land is being taken care of by women now, as men leave for cities and fast developing regions for opportunities.

Cultural and Educational Sphere

In the cultural and educational sphere, there has been a resurgence of traditional cultural values that call for women to be feminine, supportive, and dependent, while strength, courage, success and confidence are considered by many as unfavorable traits of an “iron women” who have no feelings and are unfit for ideal wives. Beauty becomes a commodity, as many jobs require women first of all to look pretty. Popular culture and media have been reinforcing the trend. There are more than 9000 magazines now in China, and the popular magazines all feature the head of a pretty woman on the cover of all issues, regardless of the content of the magazine. The reason — they sell.

Women in Leadership

Women are grossly under-represented in government offices in all levels, especially in the top levels of the government. Women are underrepresented in businesses and nearly all sectors in the society. Despite the requirement to have quotas for women in promotion, they tend to be tokens. In the top level, all the nine members of the politburo are men. In provincial level, few women are state governors. Women tend to be more visible in fields that are considered suitable for women, such as education and health, yet in science, technology, and other traditionally masculine fields, women are still highly invisible.

Women’s Social Status and Identity Reconstruction: A Conclusion

Eminent women’s studies scholar in China, Li Xiaojiang (2000), publishes an article reflecting on the change of Chinese women’s social status and relationship between self and society. Entitled “Fifty Years, How Far

Have We Reached: Reflection on the Liberation and Development of Chinese Women”, the article sums up the two major phases for Chinese women in half a century: The first phase, from 1949 to 1976, witnesses Chinese women being liberated as a whole group, socialized to be “half of the sky” equal in all aspects with men, included even in the jobs that required the most stringent physical labor. The second phase, from 1977 to present, sees women break out of the broad social categorization as one homogeneous gender and return to “themselves with separate individual awareness.”

Meanwhile, Chinese women also completed the process of integration with the world, modernization and international women’s movement.

Indeed, the first phase is crucial for Chinese women to recognize their potentials as a group. However, this also means a neglect of individual differences. In the second phase, a more reflective overtone develops, as greater autonomy in the society

awakens women’s inner desire to be not only equal with men but also to be themselves as individuals. Modernization poses grave challenges to women, and the cruel competition for profit and survival renders a slide in social status for women as a whole. Women lack the social, economic and political capital to take advantage of the opportunities created by the economic reform as men. In the attempt to establish China as a progressive society, the

Chinese government has given women much needed help to stop the slide. For example, the government establishes quotas for women in the promotion of government official, promulgates new laws to protect women’s rights, including the heatedly debated law that punished men with extramarital affairs in divorce settlement. Girls in extreme poverty are supported to finish schools. How-

ever, Chinese women still have a long way to go. For one, as Li observes, there have been very little bottom-up initiatives from the society to advance women’s interests, and the Chinese government is still exerting control in all forms of social organizations, which effectively stifle the growth of civil societies for women’s development. Overall, for the life of Chinese women, the changes in the last fifty years have seen a lot of progresses, but there have been regresses as well. The journey toward full equality with men is still long.

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