

Women's Issues in China: Some Facts

Xiaoming Ai

Zhongshan University

(UBCHEA at University of the South)

China experienced great changes in the last century: the democratic revolution in 1911, Western humanism, individualism and finally Marxism.

The establishment of a socialist system after 1949 influenced women's lives profoundly and in many ways. I will tell my family story as an example. My grandmothers on both my mother's and my father's side were victims of foot binding. When my maternal grandmother failed to give birth to a male baby, she was put aside by my grandfather when my mother was six. For the rest of her life she lived alone on a small piece of land in a remote village. She never had a chance for an education, and was deprived of the right to care for her daughter. My grandfather, a rich warlord in the 1920s, had high expectations for his first child. He had accepted new ideas from the West and so he sent my mother to school in Shanghai, the most modern city in China at that time, and then supported her for higher education in the 1940s. But conflict arose between them. When my mother lost her first husband in the resistance against the Japanese in 1938, she wanted to marry a man from a poor family, but this was disapproved by traditional morality: widows were not supposed to remarry. After 1949 when they had been in love for thirteen years, however, under the new freedom of marriage law in the new, liberated society, my mother was able to marry the man of her choice—my father.

I grew up with the new idea that women were half of the sky; in other words, women had rights equal to men. In my childhood in the city, it was normal that fathers and mothers went to work six days a week. They hung a key around their child's neck and gave him or her some food stamps to eat in a dining hall. In the evenings parents had to attend political study meetings—there were so many political movements in the 1950s and especially in the 1960s, so there was little time for family life.

There was another extreme phenomenon designed to show that women were equal to men. When I read the novel *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg in a women's study course, I was surprised to learn that women who wore men's clothes in the United States were miserably persecuted as perverts for a long period. Looking at the *Chinese People's Illustrated Magazine* during the 1960s and 1970s, you would see all Chinese women wearing men's clothes, every last one without exception short-haired. During the first years of the Cultural Revolution the most popular and

favorite clothing fashion was the military uniform. I was obliged to give up my girl's dresses when I was thirteen since in such attire I would have been conspicuous on the streets. After a period of eleven years, when the revolution ended and women began to dress a bit differently, I got my first new skirt.

Without a doubt it was liberating for women to wear men's clothes after 1949. It was the first time in Chinese history that women were encouraged by the government to enter into the work force. My mother worked about twenty-three years and got her pension and lifelong medical insurance for another twenty-three years after she retired. She won her financial independence through work, and she supported her family and her self. She had a great advantage compared to other women who couldn't take advantage of job opportunities and could get only part-time work.

On the other hand, one could ask: What's wrong with women's clothes? Why should women have to resemble men? Is there room for individual expression? Is there time and space for private life? In fact this represented obligatory compliance under Mao Zedong's regime, a kind of forced masculinity and toughness, along with a firm political stance. Men and women were required to be absolutely loyal to Mao, and ruthless to socialism's enemies, however those might be identified. From the class struggle perspective, traits normally associated with females, such as caring for family or love in personal relationships, were considered politically incorrect. Makeup and dressing-up were considered degenerate. There was only one choice for all women, to become women-warriors (like Hua Mulan, a female in an ancient legend who took a commission for her father). In my generation when I was young, we idealized ourselves as the bravest fighters for Mao, who was a father figure. No one wanted to be identified with a gender different from a man. Womanhood, as it had been previously conceived, became inferior, retrogressive, bourgeois, selfish, and lacking in political consciousness. No woman dared to exhibit those dangerous characteristics if she wanted to be accepted and safe in this context.

But even those radical ideas became old stories. Things changed rapidly in China under the new and open policies since the 1980s and have kept changing in recent years. After the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, women's rights and gender issues became hot topics on academic agendas as well as in the public.

At this juncture I would like to discuss some facts which are currently main concerns for Chinese women. All facts and data are from reports in the *China Woman's News* web page (www.china-woman.com) over the last two months.

Crimes of kidnapping women and children for sale

This kind of crime began in the 1970s and has become rampant in recent years. In the 80s and 90s, along with the economic development, the gap between the remote countryside and the city, between rich and poor people, became bigger and bigger. More and more country girls heard about jobs in the cities. The kidnapper-dealer goes to villages, pre-

sents himself as an agent for employment, and convinces the young girls that there are job prospects. The girls are then taken to buyers and sold as wives. The abduction and human trafficking phenomenon is an enormous, well-organized industry with a clear chain of suppliers and buyers all over the country. Women and children from the poorer inland provinces are abducted and sold to the richer provinces in the south, either as spouses or as adopted children.

A report from Xian on March 31, 2000 states that six women, all under the age of twenty-three, were rescued by policemen. All were tricked by their desire to flee to the city for job opportunities. The youngest one was seventeen years old. They spent from one half to two years after they were sold to their buyers, unable to escape and feeling their options closed because they had only an elementary school education. When these women were freed and sent home by police, one of them was insane from her suffering and another woman, who had been sold three times, had a venereal disease.

Children for purchase are mainly boys. They are provided to families which have no children or who want a male child. This phenomenon is obviously related to the one child policy. When a family already has one child, it is not permitted to have more, except for special reasons (such as the only child is seriously disabled). The price may vary, but it is certain that the price for a boy is much higher than for an adult woman. A four-year-old boy was kidnapped from Wuhan, Hubei province and taken to Yunnan last October. He was sold for 10,000 yuan (\$1,250), while more than ten women from Hunan were sold in Jiangsu for 3,000 (\$375) yuan each.

From the statistics we can see how serious this crime has been. In 1999, the police force solved 6,898 cases, broke up 1,640 criminal groups, and rescued 7,660 women and 1,874 children. The Minister of Public Security launched a new attack against this crime from April 1 to July 31. Buyers are prosecuted for the first time. Only when a buyer does not make trouble for the rescuer or does not abuse the victim will he be excused of responsibility for the crime. On April 10 the Guangdong police announced that in the first ten days of the campaign they had arrested 484 suspects working for 54 human-trafficking syndicates and saved more than 1,000 women and 500 children from slavery. Hopefully there will be more missing women and children coming home during this four-month offensive campaign.

Domestic violence

Domestic violence is a new concept to the public in China. It was not illegal for a long time. It was supposed to be a private thing within a family and there was thought to be no necessity to intervene. The victim felt the same way, that to report violence or abuse is so shameful, it is worse than the abuse to open your family ugliness to the public. Under this consensus, lethal violence against women can be tolerated very well; femicide cases happen in terrible forms. Here are some facts from reports.

A Beijing factory worker suspected his wife just

because he saw her talking to a man in her room. He hit her many times from then on for nearly one year. His fellow workers on night duty often heard his wife's horrible cries from their room, but no one tried to help her. In July 27, 1998, the husband beat her with a shoe, stabbed her in the vagina with a screwdriver, and then stitched her labia shut. The wife committed suicide in the morning. He confessed and was sentenced to only six years in jail.

Another case is from a domestic violence investigation done by the Hunan Provincial Women's Federation. A woman, married in 1977, underwent abuse during her twenty years of marital life. There were sixteen hospital records showing broken ribs, eye injuries, bruises on her body and bleeding from the mouth and nose. When the wife brought a suit against the husband in court, the judge concluded that all of the attacks were only casual offenses with no intentionality, hence no criminality. The man was an official in the local government, a possible explanation for the judge's decision.

The same thing happened in Chongqing on February 13 of this year. A man tore the skin off his wife's leg and pulled out a tendon to disable her. On February 17 in Chengdu, another man used a metal lock to close his wife's genitals. When he was reported, the police said it was a family entanglement, so the man is still free.

The good news is that a resolution to prevent and stop domestic violence was passed on March 31 in the fourteenth meeting of the Ninth People's Congress in Hunan province. It was the first resolution with legal effect issued by a provincial People's Congress in China. It emphasized that the prevention of domestic violence was as important as attaining public security. The same effort can also be seen from other organizations. Last year on December 28, the Women's Law School of Beijing University established a working group to prevent domestic violence with a women's study center in Zhonghua Women's College and the Women's Federation in Shanxi province. Their task is to set up a network among lawyers, police, courts, hospitals and local women's rights organizations. They also plan to select a district as an experimental area for the project.

Sexual services and prevention

Prostitution has been banned in China since 1949. It started appearing again in the 1980s and has been on the increase in cities, especially in developing areas. A report on March 19 stated that the president of the All-China Women's Federation, Peng Peiyun, made an appeal recently that all sexual services should be prohibited, that we should eliminate the spread of such ugly moral corruption.

Sexual service is a rather vague description that lacks explicit definition. In Peng's words, it includes all service as sexual partners in places of entertainment such as restaurants, bars, ballrooms, public baths, etc. The reasons given for the ban were that those services easily led to prostitution and caused other social problems.

Providing sexual services is a way for women to get a lot of money. There are statistics from an investigation

by the Women's Rights Department of Liaoning Province Women's Federation, which show that, among more than 1,000 staff in restaurants and other entertainment service trades, 88 percent are women, 25.4 percent of women staff are massage girls, 15.4 percent are dancing girls, 24.7 percent are drinking partners, 14.6 percent are swimming partners, 12.9 percent are singing partners, and 7 percent are other service girls. Most of female staff are age 20 to 36, and 71 percent of them had only a middle school or elementary school education, 54.1 percent of them have an income lower than 1,000 yuan (\$125) a month, 43 percent of them have an income between 1,000 and 3,000 yuan (\$375), and 7.8 percent of them earn more than 3,000 yuan. Women who earn between 3,000 and 10,000 yuan do so mainly from sexual services. Twenty-eight percent of them admit they initiate sex with their customers.

Rape and violence against women develop from such services. There have been more than 100 girls killed by their sexual partners or customers recently in Chenyang, according to the statistics from police there. Though sexual services are strongly criticized they are still available. The local governors and even police in some areas do not take it as a serious problem but see it is a business to attract more businessmen with more investment. Besides, some of them enjoy it and make a good profit from it.

Some sociologists and feminists point out that sexual services are not moral, but they are not a violation of the law. They introduced the idea from Western feminist thought that prostitution should be legalized. Such opinions are in the minority. Sometimes people mix up the sphere of morality and law. Readers of the *China Woman's News* were shocked by a recent report of a seventeen-year-old girl who stabbed her female boss in the head and broke three of her fingers. The reason was that the boss forced her into prostitution. The lawyer said he would argue for her reasonable defense. Most people are sympathetic to the girl.

In discussions about preventing the sex business, some researchers prefer the presumption that most prostitutes are victims of social injustice, that it is wrong to label them as evils of society or pleasure-maniacs. Though it is a rather conservative idea, they invoke it to support a new suggestion, which is, to reform the male sex buyer in camps (through education and labor) in order to control the sex business. This is seen as an alternative remedy for the current punishment, which is to send female prostitutes to camps or jail and free the male partner after he pays a penalty from 3,000 to 5,000 yuan (\$375-\$725). A problem with this suggestion is that customers who purchase sex often move around so it is difficult to catch them. Also it is difficult to define the sex business. For instance, how does one define a relationship between sexual partners which results in financial gain for the female? Girls who are sexual partners for rich businessmen from Hong Kong and Taiwan are known as "second ladies." Is it realistic to punish those businessmen? How can one afford the time, money and space for such a practice?

I think that since most of the prostitutes are driven

by economic inequality, the best way might be to create more job opportunities for them. In the meantime, moral education and psychological therapy can be of help. I believe that to prevent prostitution in China as in the rest of the world is as difficult as to legalize it. Perhaps there are other ways to deal with such a complicated problem. Last year in Quanzhou, the local government demanded that all girls in escort services should have medical check-ups, and job certification, and should pay higher income taxes. To the more than 1,000 women in the Jilin provincial women's penitentiary, the local college and women's federation provided computer and other undergraduate courses, all efforts intended to help them on a path different from their past.

Other points and conclusion

There are other crucial issues for Chinese women, such as women's rights in new economic institutions including joint-stock companies, co-operation enterprises and private businesses. A report shows that 37 percent of managers will not make contracts with women of child-bearing age. In questioning 583 female workers, 47 percent answered that they didn't have contracts with their companies, not to mention other rights they should have.

In the workplace, where women have made distinguished contributions, the glass ceiling obviously exists. From a nation-wide investigation in 1998, there were 15.9 percent male journalists promoted to the rank of senior editor or reporter while only 6.7 percent of female journalists were in this rank. In general, only 8.5 percent of editors-in-chief at newspapers, news agencies, radio stations and TV stations were female. The remaining 91.5 percent are male. In addition, women do not serve as other policy makers.

It is impossible for me to exhaustively discuss all of these issues here. My perspective, limited by my own experiences, is far from comprehending the diversity of women in China. In the beginning of the last century, women's rights and liberation meant freedom in love and marriage against the patriarchy, coeducation in schools, and even having the right to wear short hair. Chinese women have achieved those goals. Today we are more aware of our situation: to implement further changes and improvements will prove very challenging. My hope is that we can incorporate the wisdom from our history and from the women's liberation movement in the larger world into our reality. In any case, we will be persevering to win a better future in the new century.