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**THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN AND  
WOMEN'S STUDIES IN CHINA SINCE 1949:  
An Introduction**

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## **Abstract**

China has a unique tradition, and it has undergone tremendous social changes over the last fifty years. As a result, the development and social status of Chinese women have evolved differently than they have for women in other countries. In this paper, the author traces the course of Chinese women's development within a broad socio-political context since 1949. She draws on findings from Chinese feminist research in three main areas. One area concerns the meaning of equality and the long process Chinese women have experienced in transforming ideas about equality. Another area, the subject of on-going discussions among Chinese academics, centres on questions about the advancement of Chinese women's emancipation and on whether emancipation has upset the traditional division of labour within the Chinese family and thus diminished economic and social development. The third area of research deals with the various new problems and challenges facing contemporary Chinese women in this time of great social transformation.

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In the exchange of viewpoints between my Canadian colleagues and myself, I observed great differences in our cultures and research methods, East and West. I found that Canadian academics knew little about Chinese Women's Studies. This led me to the idea of introducing them to my work in Canada. With the help of several people I completed a paper, in English, on the development of Chinese women and women's studies over the past several decades. I followed this with a presentation in Dr. Gloria R. Geller's course, *Feminist Theory and Analysis* (MSW8200), in the autumn of 1997.

I wish to express my special thanks to Shandong University for the opportunity to participate in the academic exchange program. I wish to acknowledge, as well, the assistance of my friends and colleagues at the University of Regina: Dr. Doug Durst, Professor Mona Acker and Dr. Gloria Geller of the Faculty of Social Work, and Dr. JoAnn Jaffe of the Department of Sociology. Without their help with research and writing, this paper would not have been published. I am grateful also for the conscientious, hard work of Dr. Dave Broad and research coordinator Fiona Douglas of the Social Policy Research Unit, and I thank them for their patience and assistance in revising and publishing my work. The memory of everyone's kindness and help is still fresh in my mind.

Ping Zhuang

## Background<sup>1</sup>

China is a developing country in the midst of rapid economic and technological growth. It is also an ancient culture steeped in tradition. In its modern history, China has suffered several invasions from western countries. From an economic perspective, China has lagged behind nations of the “developed” world for reasons both internal and external. As well, the level of education in China remains low. In fact, it has only been 80 years since China cast off its burden of feudal monarchy, and it has not yet been 50 years since the creation of the People's Republic of China following civil war and the War of Resistance against Japan (1937 - 1945).

A number of forces—mainly imperialist power, clan power and patriarchal power in the home—have contributed to the repression of Chinese women. For example, although the illiteracy rate for the Chinese population as a whole reached 50 percent in 1949, the illiteracy rate among women for the same period was over 70 percent (Zhuang, 1995).

During the thirty-year period after 1949, China continued the momentum of class struggle and maintained efforts to propagate “left-trend” thought in socio-political matters. In the economic sphere, China instituted the planned economy and the practice of average distribution (the planned economy’s policies of guaranteed income and food). At the same time, the emancipation of China women was begun.

It must be noted that emancipation, or what is referred to as women’s liberation, has come about in a much different manner in China than it has in the West. The liberation movement in the West emerged largely among the educated middle class as the result of spontaneous initiatives within the movement itself. Women played an active or a pro-active role in the movement’s evolution. This was not the case in China where women’s roles in the emancipation movement were passive and, in a sense, involuntary. Rather than being a spontaneous arising, emancipation processes came about as the result of a state-initiated policy.

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<sup>1</sup> A portion of this paper is revised from P. Zhuang, *The Traffic in Women for Marriage in China: Problems and Perspectives*, SPR Occasional Paper 9 (University of Regina, 1998).

## **Implications of Emancipation (1949 – 1977)**

Forced administrative measures on the part of the State have been the foundation of Chinese women's emancipation. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Government has played a decisive role in the process of women's emancipation. Through administrative decrees and organic measures, the government has prohibited foot binding and prostitution and advocated marital autonomy and women's employment.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Chinese women have won a series of rights: to be educated and employed and to vote just as equally as men.

From 1949 onward, women and men enjoyed equal pay for equal work, as the government's policies of the day encouraged high employment and low income throughout the country. Women and men received equal salaries in the cities and equal 'work points' (a calculation used to determine rates of pay) in rural areas for performing the same work. Since 1950, the employment rate for Chinese women has risen to between 75 and 80 percent, representing one of the highest rates of employment for women in the world. In contrast, the 1991 labour participation rate for Canadian women stood at 58.2 percent (Statistics Canada, 1992). Although Chinese women were employed on a wide scale, there were essential differences between China and the countries under a market economy. Chinese women were able to obtain employment by assignment and without competition, and this meant no free choices and, at the same time, no risks for them.

In 1949, the All Women's Federation was established and developed as a network of official organizations for the protection of women's rights and benefits. At the very least, the Federation has played an important role in maintaining a series of accomplishments for women. Today, there are 68,355 women's associations at all levels in China. Thirty are organized at provincial levels, 370 at municipal levels, and 2,810 and 65,145 at country and village levels respectively (Li, 1997:6).

When the Election Law was passed in March 1953, women gained the rights to vote and to be elected. The 96<sup>th</sup> provision of the 1954 Constitution reiterates: "The

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<sup>2</sup> A well-known view, representing the Li Xiaojiang feminist school of thought and finding general agreement among scholars of women's studies, purports that it took western women one hundred years to achieve comprehensive employment, yet Chinese women accomplished the same in less than ten years.

women in the People's Republic of China enjoy the same political, economic, cultural, social and domestic rights as men in all respects.” In the 1950s, up to 90 percent of all Chinese women voted to elect their own representatives; however, most women were not aware that they could participate in public affairs because, at that time, voting and participating in state affairs were viewed as two almost different activities.

Women's position in society continued to grow and strengthen. Beyond matters of employment and career, women gained equal rights in many areas, including education, marriage and inheritance. Perhaps the greatest gain for women took place in the realm of consciousness. Chinese women, possibly for the first time, gained an awareness of their inherent value and rights, their true capabilities and the greater possibilities opening up for them. During these times, ideas about equality were highly popular topics in social affairs.

From a practical political perspective, the early years of the emancipation of Chinese women proceeded from the requirements of nationalistic government policies, not from the economic requirements of the marketplace and not from the efforts of a feminist woman's movement. In ideological terms, emancipation reflected the ideals of Chinese communist justice based on the principle of *equality for all*. On the social plane, emancipation served the interests of the state administrative goal of greater centralization.<sup>3</sup>

In retrospect, we see that “human beings” in Chinese history were male—the centre of society—while women had no real social position outside of the home. In the early stages of the emancipation movement, women looked for role models in the larger society they were entering. Naturally, the only models available were men, and so women came to depend upon and identify with the men they observed. They adopted their male counterpart's behaviour and attitudes, they sought to emulate male standards, they accepted male methods in order to suit the demands of the workplace, and they

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<sup>3</sup> When the Communist Party began to prop up power in 1949, China was economically backward and the United States had severed commercial and financial relations with it. In order to channel needed funds into developing its industrial base, the Chinese government adopted a policy of high accumulation and low distribution. As measures of high employment and low pay were implemented in the cities, women as well as men were motivated to work outside of the home and, in the process, supported industrialization. As well, all rural people had to work under the government-established people's commune. Thus, we say that emancipation served the goals of national development through greater centralization.

eventually copied the work of men in their traditional fields, be it labour, business, industry, or the military. Women considered this to be real equality.

Along with changes in the workplace, great changes were taking place in the traditional Chinese family. The emancipation of women transformed family relations for women were being encouraged, as an official government policy, to “leave the home,” find work and become an equal part of employment units established by the government. As a result of the conditions of the time, the starting point of women’s emancipation was limited to what might best be termed *equality without development*. As the historical gap existing between women and men was narrowed, women had to adjust and adapt to a new “equal” life. Between 1949 and 1977, popular slogans in China included, “Both men and women are the same because the times have changed,” “Women can do anything that men have done,” and “Women hold up half the sky.” The social system during this period protected many rights of Chinese women and brought them many benefits, especially in terms of their legal status, but there remained a fundamental gap between women’s legal status and their actual social position.

### **Chinese Women in Transformation (1977 – 1996)**

Over the past 20 years, tremendous changes have taken place in China. A market-driven economy has, to some extent, replaced the planned economy. In the ideological sphere, Chinese society has abandoned the principles of class struggle and moved toward relatively greater freedom of speech. There are now many contending schools of social and economic thought evolving in China. In the field of employment, the reliance upon both the “iron rice bowl”<sup>4</sup> and average distribution is gradually giving way. And in the cultural arena, China has opened its doors to the world and western culture has been quick to enter. In short, it is most apparent that Chinese society has changed dramatically since 1977 and continues to undergo great social and political transformations, which has had significant repercussions for women in China.

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<sup>4</sup> In a planned economy, workers did not have to worry about employment, pension and medical treatment because the government took care of that. That stable state of affairs is called the iron rice bowl. Now, with a market economy, people are responsible for finding their own jobs and those jobs are not very secure. This fragile state of affairs is termed the soil rice bowl.

### *Women as Agents*

The first to be affected by the transformations was the equity principle established under China's socialist system. That system had addressed many women's issues such as arranging women's education and occupational life. Women had come to believe that emancipation resulted through the efforts of society, not through their own efforts. Self-development was rarely considered. Indeed, one of the biggest problems facing Chinese women today is their strong dependence on society and their low self-reliance.

Prior to 1949, the number of women employed throughout the country was very low; women made their living mainly as dependents of men. This changed after 1949 as women came to depend largely on society to earn a living. That is to say, it seemed indisputably right for society to arrange everything for women, such as an education, employment, medical insurance and retirement pension.

But recently and certainly since the move to a market economy, women have begun to encounter a new set of problems. The planned economy is gone and so are the advantages that came with it. The state no longer provides secure jobs. Market forces now dictate employment patterns and work is not guaranteed. Chinese workers must compete for jobs in the cities, and as factories and businesses lay off employees, women are the first to go. As a result, many women have been thrown off the "standard" development trajectory and are left feeling puzzled. They must change and become more self-reliant, otherwise the issues, which affect women, will become much more serious.

### *Women and (Un)Employment*

It is now more difficult for women than for men to get new jobs (Chinese Social Science, 1996a).<sup>5</sup> In 1995, 60 percent of the registered unemployed Chinese population were women—almost twice the male unemployment figure. In China's cities, women's

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<sup>5</sup> The government likely intended to maintain its equity policies but times have changed. With a huge labour market and with the upheaval of adjusting to new industrial structures, China faces rising unemployment. Older workers are especially affected. Their products, forged under traditional industrial enterprises, do not sell as readily any more, and the process of learning new skills and competencies can be difficult. Furthermore, employers are now more concerned with cost benefits and staying competitive in the market place. For many employers, particularly those in private business, joint ventures and foreign enterprises, pregnancy is considered costly and, thus, females are viewed as less desirable employees than male employees.

unemployment and re-employment are most urgent social issues needing to be settled, especially given the strong link between unemployment and poverty.

Research shows that in competing for jobs, women’s greatest deterrent is childbearing. This is especially true for city women who, on average, give birth to at least one baby during their lifetimes. Seventy percent of male employers and 80 percent of female employers investigated agreed unanimously that childbearing poses the most serious threat to female employment, and that it is childbearing that places women in adversity (Xing, 1990). “When you give birth to a child, you resign” is the unproclaimed law of enterprises.

### ***Balancing Work and Family***

Table 1 below provides a cross-cultural comparison of women’s assessments of the sexual roles in the family. The data suggest that most Chinese women (59%) tend to think of themselves as equal to their husbands in the home. Furthermore, of all women surveyed, the greatest proportion who felt superior to their husbands at home was Chinese (17.3 percent).

**Table 1. Women’s Assessments of Sexual Roles in the Family**

Role	Country (year)					
	Japan (1992)	Philippines (1993)	U.S.A (1993)	Germany (1993)	Sweden (1993)	China (1990)
Male superiority	63.8	39.9	51.4	26.4	10.0	23.7
Equality between males and females	29.1	53.3	32.4	53.0	77.1	59.0
Female superiority	4.5	6.8	14.3	13.5	9.3	17.3
Unreplied	2.7	0	1.9	6.6	3.7	0.1

Source: A. Xu. *Collection of Women’s Studies*. Social Science Institution of Shanghai, 1995.

Yet despite relatively positive perceptions of their equality, Chinese women expend more time and energy than their husbands do in many non-paid household activities (see Table 2). On average, on-the-job women in China spend one hour and 25 minutes more with

household affairs than their husbands; in both urban and rural areas, women spend more time than men engaged in cooking, washing and other domestic chores.

**Table 2. Daily Schedule of Both Sexes Aged 16 to 60 in Urban and Rural China, in Hours and Minutes. 1990.**

Activity	Urban		Rural	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Paid job	7:03	7:36	5:46	7:13
Transportation	0:37	0:35	0:26	0:37
Cooking	1:28	0:42	1:56	0:28
Washing	0:45	0:16	0:51	0:10
Other household affairs	1:32	0:48	2:03	1:15
Shopping	0:38	0:24	0:21	0:21
Studying	0:33	1:00	0:11	0:26
Watching television	1:40	1:43	1:05	1:18
Sleeping	7:46	7:40	8:13	8:11
Other activities	2:34	2:55	2:27	3:07

Source: National Statistics Bureau, *Females and Males in China*. Chinese Statistics Press, 1995: 38.

### ***Women and Agriculture***

There are growing problems for women in the countryside. The rural economic reform of the *contracted responsibility system* where remuneration is linked to output, along with the aspiration for greater wealth, have lured much of the male rural labour force away from farmlands and into city, town, and township enterprises in the non-agricultural sector. The gender ratios of men and women in farming, manufacturing and tertiary industries are 116:100, 165:100 and 188:100, respectively. That is, more women work in farming than in manufacturing or in tertiary industries (Jin, 1992). Rural women have been left to bear the burden in agricultural production and this has led to a major demographic shift in many areas.

The distinct trend for more men than women to be involved in the large-scale mobile rural labour force is corroborated by investigations conducted by the Institute of the Rural Development of the Academy of Social Sciences of China. It found the ratio of male to female labourers who transferred from rural to urban areas in 1994 was nearly

5:1. Lin Dian, a research organization in China, found a 2:1 ratio among rural male and female labourers hired in Shanghai and Beijing in 1994.

Along with this trend is the appearance of *two systems within one family*, a growing phenomenon wherein some members of the same family engage in farm work while other members engage in business or work in factories. It is, as a general rule of thumb, the men in the family who leave home to make money and the women and the aged who stay in the hometowns to work in the fields. With non-farming income being five to ten times greater than farming income, it is not hard to understand why the development of agriculture and the development of rural women themselves may be under threat.

### ***Education***

Changes are also taking place in education patterns. In a society becoming increasingly materialistic, the need to make money takes on great importance. Predictably, the gap between the rich and the poor is increasing. For at least the last ten years, many children have had to discontinue their education because their families simply want them to work and bring more money into the home. And here again, girls are the first to make the sacrifice. It is estimated that more than one million school-age children in China drop out of school each year and, of a combined total of ten million school-age dropouts, over 70 percent are girls (Chinese Social Science, 1996b).

Girls quit school because their parents, having traditional ideas, prefer sons to daughters and tend to emphasize family interests. In some rural areas, marriage custom also plays an important role. For instance, research on a village in Huian County of Fujian revealed that of its 144 school-age girls who did not attend school, 55 (38 percent) were engaged to boys through parental arrangements. Furthermore, the Fujian Education Committee reported that the rural marriage custom of “Tongyangxi,” which refers to the adoption of a daughter-in-law, is relatively common in China. For instance, of the 76 school-age children in the village in Changding County of Fujian province, 24 girls are Tongyangxi. Reportedly, some rural girls will even marry before finishing elementary school (Wu, 1991:22). While the illiteracy rate among women in cities and towns has

dropped to below 2 percent, it is nearly 10 percent in the countryside; in other words, one out of every ten rural women is illiterate or semi-illiterate (Zhuang, 1994).

For those women able to continue their studies, problems arise after graduation. China's planned economy had assured every college or university student a job upon graduation. This is no longer the case. Graduates must now compete for good jobs. Once again, the females are often last to be considered. Unfortunately, such a situation serves only to reinforce or even to strengthen the traditional belief that females have less value than males.

### ***Prostitution***

The phenomenon of prostitution has once again emerged in China. But this old problem has taken on new meaning under a market economy. On November 21, 1949, the 52<sup>nd</sup> day of the founding of the People's Republic, the Chinese government took decisive measures to close all brothels in Beijing and moved to eliminate the system of prostitution in all Chinese cities. By 1952, prostitution had all but disappeared (Wang, 1992:420), and the Chinese government was able to declare to the world that prostitution had been eradicated from the country. Today, however, even though prostitution is against Chinese law, there are an estimated one million prostitutes in China. By 1992, China had established 111 detention centers holding a total of 28,000 prostitutes (Xu Hu, 1993).

Before the victories of the communist forces and between the 1920s and the 1940s, women and girls who turned to prostitution often did so as a matter of basic survival. Now, after two decades of reform, the gap between the rich and the poor has quickly widened and indigent people are feeling the disparity. Some, who have been lured by the hedonism of the wealthy, resort to prostitution to gain riches. Indeed, many women have turned to this profession simply for the "better life" it offers. An investigation conducted by Canton's detention centre for prostitutes reported that only 2 percent of those engaged in prostitution did so because of economic necessity, 1.5 percent had been forced into prostitution and all others had become prostitutes by choice (Zhuang, 1994).

### ***Gender Imbalances and the Traffic in Women***

China began an official policy of birth control in the early 1970s in order to reduce population pressures. In itself, this policy has led to some unexpected problems having major consequences for women. The country's attempt at controlling the population is now seen to be the main reason for a large and increasing gender ratio imbalance. Because male children are regarded as more desirable and because families are restricted in the number of children they may have, it is understandable why China has a great surplus of males. Within its 1990 total population of 1.26 billion, China had over 36 million more men than women (Statistics China, 1993) - a number greater than the entire population of Canada. With so many men in need of wives and so few women available to satisfy the need, a whole new trade in trafficking in women arose in the early 1980s.

China's new market economy has played a large role in creating the conditions that have made possible this illegal trade. Social mobility, a feature of market economies, has increased both geographically and vertically in China over the last 20 years. Most of the population has accepted this trend as an inevitable part of modern life - but social mobility can be seen as one contributing factor to the trade in women. This is especially true in cities with good transportation facilities where many abductions and "sales" take place. And, as I have found through my own research (Zhuang, 1998), it is not uncommon for peasants and families in the poorer rural areas far from the reach of government or official control to sell or trade women to men seeking partners. Although the practice of trafficking in women is prohibited by the state, it has so far proved impossible to stop. In some areas it is a most serious issue.

### **Women's Studies in China**

The position of women in China has gained much attention in academic circles over the past 10 years. There are now on-going discussions about "women's liberation" and about "equality between men and women," all based on the concrete experience of women's emancipation over the past 40 years.

### ***Equality between Men and Women***

The slogan, "Women can do anything men have done," has been popular in China for a long time. It is an ideal now being reconsidered by academics. The ideal of gender

equality does not mean that men and women are to be considered the same (Nan, 1986). Rather, the slogan originally reflected the hope of Chinese women to become stronger in their transition into society and to model themselves after men in the workplace as a way towards liberation. That hope, which in fact was never fulfilled, was to go beyond merely emulating the accomplishments of men. However, in reality, many women admired their role models and depended on them. Indeed, the saying among Chinese women, “First a person, then a woman” actually means: “First a person just like a man.” For Chinese society, “women’s issues” was a non-issue because women did not regard themselves as people different from men.

Gender equality in China is more than an ideal, a principle, or a slogan of progress. Equality between men and women means that women share not only the work and the successes with men but also the sufferings and the disappointments. Women and men fight together in times of war, suffer together in times of famine, and together bear torments in times of political unrest. Men’s field is not a paradise, so sharing the hardships is a natural part of equality. In short, equality should be a basic human right and freedom, and equality will have no significance without freedom of choice. But in contemporary society, women have fewer choices, or fewer rights of choice, than men.

### ***Reaction to Women’s Emancipation***

Women’s emancipation in China has caused some serious social reactions. Many Chinese men believe that emancipation has shaken the very foundations of patriarchy and threatens what are believed to be men’s traditional and intrinsic privileges—privileges they are not so willing to give up. Certainly, powerful forces oppose women’s emancipation in China today. For the women themselves, emancipation has not lessened the burden of their reproductive role. It has, instead, only added wage employment to their overall burden. Furthermore, Chinese women have experienced greater levels of distress and frustration over the last few decades (Meng, 1995:85).

### **The “Advanced” Status of Women**

Many people in China, including male scholars, believe that in order to achieve gender equality and women’s emancipation, certain social conditions are needed. In other

words, social productive forces must develop to a certain stage for emancipation to be realized (Zheng, 1995). That is, emancipation could not arise in the slave or feudal societies of the past. It only emerged in 1980 - its actual historical starting point - when questions about emancipation could be raised.

Chinese society was completely patriarchal for over two thousand years. But today, although China's economic, cultural and educational development lags behind the developed countries of the world, women's emancipation is at the forefront. It will be impossible, however, for Chinese women to achieve genuine emancipation and gender equality by strengthening their position and suppressing the position of men through administrative measures alone.

The *legislated advanced status of women* is a term used within academic circles to refer to the notion that the emancipation of Chinese women is neither the result of a feminist movement started by women themselves nor the result of confrontations by women. Rather, women's emancipation is granted by the socialist revolution of China. For instance, the Marriage Law of 1950, Socialist China's first law, abolished many outmoded conventions and feudal customs harmful to women's rights and interests. The first Constitution, passed in 1954, stipulated the right of equality between men and women. At the same time, the government and society urged women to take jobs. To some extent, then, the emancipation of the Chinese women is legislatively advanced; we could say, the legal rights of women are set up before women realize they want them (Li Xiaojiang, 1996).

The belief continues that a direct outcome of emancipation has been the disruption of normal relations and the traditional division of labour within the Chinese family. For instance, it is well-known in China that physical labour (conventionally equated with *manpower*) is an important part of the productive foundation. It is argued that as a result of women's emancipation, many Chinese men have experienced a loss of self-confidence and many Chinese women no longer feel weak. This, in turn, is seen to have resulted in inefficient social development and to have caused a major disruption to life in the home.

It is also argued that gender equality has hindered economic development. To support this argument, it is noted that when a Japanese girl matures she leaves the home

to participate in the workforce. After marriage she may return home to take on childcare, and once her children have been raised, she may again leave the home to return to the workplace. It is then said, “One man and half a woman have completed the modernization of Japan.” In China, it is said by contrast, “one man and one woman” have been working outside of the home, but have not brought about advanced economic development. It is also argued that when a Chinese couple’s work is over for the day they return to a disorderly household (Zheng, 1994). In sum, it is common believed that Chinese women’s emancipation has upset the division of labour between the sexes and diminished the efficiency of social and economic development in China.

Some feminists have raised difficult questions about the conditions that have been created. They counter-argue that for a very long time China had the most stable social structure in the world—a feudal society totally dominated by men. Within this normal patriarchal society, the division of labour was clear: Men worked “outside,” women worked “inside.” This social structure did not, however, bring about the development of a highly productive force (Zhu and Dong, 1994).

Chinese women have now entered the workplace, have had rich experiences and have known many hardships. It is not possible to expect them to return to domestic life and give up the rights they have gained. Despite the many problems women have faced, progress has been made. In fact, the standard of living in China is higher than it has ever been. Female participation in social labour has become an irreversible trend; most Chinese women work not only to support themselves and their families, but also because paid work has become a mode of life, an integral part of the self, and it would be unfair to deprive women of this right.

Researchers in Beijing and Guangzhou report that women in those cities strongly desire to work even if they have few financial needs. Of the working women interviewed, nearly 94 percent in Beijing and 92 percent in Guangzhou are motivated by factors other than money (Liu, 1991). On this basis we can predict that Chinese women in the next century will more actively engage in social/public activities and that the pattern of a working husband and a working wife will remain dominant in China. After the abrupt rise of the market economy and the end to special benefits from the government, Chinese women must give up the old idea of adopting male models as a way to further

women's emancipation and, instead, begin to redefine their place in national development.

### **Further Reflections: Stressing Difference**

As noted, many rights of Chinese women were granted through the government's legislative and socialist initiatives, instigated "top-down" within a span of several decades. It was only after the reformation and the "opening" in China in the 1980s that Chinese women as a group began to demand equality. Formal studies on women's issues began at this time, and Chinese women promoted the awakening of women's self-consciousness under conditions in which equality between men and women is acknowledged legislatively, socially and economically (Li Xiaojiang, 1996:153).

If you were to engage in women's studies in China, then you would find that almost all women - from radical women writers to scholars of women's issues - refuse to be labeled feminist. As the theory of women's studies was being introduced from the West into China, "feminism" - a special concept - was also imported. It was translated as *the doctrine of women's rights*. But when scholars of women's issues in China explain their ideas, they will often refer to *the doctrine of the female sex*. Why? First, in China's cultural tradition, any talk about "rights" is taboo and puts one in "a bad condition." Second, feminism has been a bourgeois concept in China. Third, Chinese women were emancipated legislatively before they themselves were aware of their own possibilities. No matter what the actual situation is, Chinese women at least have legal rights of equality. If anyone were to mention "women's rights," most people, in response, would simply not understand the special rights women want. Chinese women do tactful things for their rights and interests as it is difficult for them to seek anything further (Li Xiaojiang, 1996:320).

Clearly, Chinese women have been granted legal rights of equality, but they do not yet fully understand that they must win real equality through their own efforts. Any awareness of female as subject is still rather weak. Generally, women tend to identify themselves with "Man," rather than with a female group, and do things according to male norms. This weak point in the historical development of Chinese women has led some scholars to argue that, in addition to their legal rights, Chinese women need to realize

their *own* values and to understand themselves more thoroughly. Some scholars devote themselves to studying the notion that women are people, different from men. For these scholars, women are human beings and should be their own masters.

Over the last ten years, Chinese women have been transforming themselves from the 'object' studied and liberated to the subject of self-recognition under the pressure of social reformation. As women confront social problems such as unemployment, poverty, prostitution and so on, they must be able to recognize the importance of striving for their own rights and interests. Indeed, this subject-consciousness of women, which is being awakened daily, is key to the further development of Chinese women.

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