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Chinese Women: Becoming Half the Sky?

Editorial

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Editorial

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There are now 650 million women in China, almost 10 percent of the world's population. Yet this impressive number is not equal to half of China's population. The last population census (2010), the results of which were published in the middle of the year, confirms this: China remains, together with India, one of the very few countries in the world where men are in the majority. This situation is proof, if ever there was, of the discrimination to which Chinese women are still subjected, and raises many questions. For even though the country's economic development over the last 30 years or more has been remarkable, and the overall standard of living has risen significantly, women and men are still not on an equal footing.

The fact remains that all Chinese women do not, as famously formulated by Mao and recently epitomized by Liu Yang, China's first woman astronaut in space, hold up "half the sky." The rights and interests of women are nevertheless increasingly protected by law, and the fight for equality between the sexes regularly brings new victories. Liu Yandong, the first woman rumoured to be considered for nomination as a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, can be seen as a good example. However, although these remarkable feminine achievements are part of a general trend towards promoting the status of women, the extreme complexity of recent social changes is nonetheless evident.

In societies in transition, social and economic transformations, which are often swift and sudden, can lead to a reconfiguration of the power relationships between different categories of the population, sometimes with considerable repercussions for individuals. Such transformations are often all the more sudden as they take place against a background of demographic transition, which, with the fall in the number of children and increase in the number of older people, brings about major changes in family structures and consequently, in the status and role of individuals. The relationships between the generations and the sexes in particular are put to the test, and the way in which they evolve testifies to the capacity of individuals and families to adapt to new opportunities as well as to the new constraints imposed by these transitions.

From this point of view, China is almost a text-book case for those interested in the combined effects of this double transition (demographic and economic) on society and individuals. The disengagement of the state in key areas such as employment, social security, education, and health leaves families to fend for themselves and contributes to exacerbating socio-economic inequalities. The population, more vulnerable as a whole, therefore has to develop new strategies for meeting its own needs and getting the best out of the transformations that are taking place. At the same time, whilst Chinese legislation remains among the most advanced of the developing world as far as the promotion of equality between the sexes is concerned, and while there are many initiatives in favour of women, society only gives them relative autonomy, limited in particular by their unique access to resources (in particular educational, financial, and inherited assets) in comparison to men. Different roles and spheres of influence, still clearly identified, continue to be attributed to men and women.

In this context, what are the motivations of individuals and families, and how are they related to gendered roles? How do Chinese women fit into these social and economic transformations? What resources and protection do they have at their disposal to help deal with them? Do they have the same opportunities as men in the face of the new openings offered by the reform of the economic system? In which areas do inequalities between the sexes remain most obvious today, and more generally, what assessment can be made of the developments in the status of Chinese women over the last 30 years?

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the question of women and equality between the sexes remains a priority on the international political agenda, and with good reason. Rare are the countries (does one even exist?) that offer conditions of perfect equality between women and men in areas as varied as access to health care, education, and employment, salaries, political representation, representation of assets, and in private life, decision-making within the couple and the family and the sharing of domestic tasks. In certain societies, such as China, inequalities between women and men sometimes even affect life itself: it may happen that a person's survival is, at various stages of existence, affected by such inequalities; whether they are biological (inherent to their sex) or social (based on their gender). It is in the latter case that the most socially unacceptable manifestations of inequalities between the sexes are to be found.

The articles in this issue deal, from a demographic, sociological, or anthropological point of view, with the complex realities with which today's Chinese women are confronted. Isabelle Attané's article, which reflects various aspects of the life of women and men, paints an ambivalent picture: whilst Chinese girls are studying longer at school – almost as long as boys amongst the younger generations – the persistence of deeply entrenched gendered roles in the workplace and family life continues to limit their autonomy from men and contributes to the social reproduction of gender inequality. Moreover, although there will be fewer Chinese women than men in adulthood for the foreseeable future (a direct consequence of the inferior status attributed to them), nothing at first sight indicates that they will be able to derive any benefit from this new demographic deal.

Nevertheless, as the article by Tania Angeloff and Marylène Lieber shows, the promotion of equality between the sexes remains a political priority for the Chinese government. The successive laws passed since 1950, and the programmes of action implemented since the 1990s in particular, theoretically ensure the protection of the rights and interests of women in all areas of their life. The All-China Women's Federation, a para-governmental body entrusted with the defence of the women's cause, represents, moreover, a non-negligible arena for the development of demands for the rights of women, even serving as a crucible for the Chinese feminist movement.

The three articles that follow reveal, through the results of field surveys and life stories, particular aspects of the life of women. They shed new light on the way in which family strategies and social logic overlap to limit, or on the contrary reinforce, the influence of the sexual division of social roles

on women's lives and careers. Huang Yuqin investigates the new opportunities for social mobility offered to girls in rural areas through education, and shows that family arbitration in the matter can sometimes benefit them to the detriment of boys. However, although there is a tendency, including in rural areas, towards equality between girls and boys as far as access to education is concerned, this is more the result of a strategy that aims to improve the socio-economic situation of the family as a whole, rather than any real desire to improve the status of girls. Sally Sargeson reflects on the reproduction of social and economic inequalities between the sexes in the urbanisation process. Whilst available studies generally concentrate on inequalities in salary, this article places the emphasis on the question of assets, which are mainly held by men. In the new market economy, men and women's access to capital is highly differentiated, which in turn contributes to maintaining or even exacerbating economic inequalities between men and women and thus to the perpetuation of gender inequalities. Lastly, Florence Lévy considers the case of Chinese female migrants in France. By drawing attention to problems that are not necessarily the preserve of women but which bring into play the often distinct social expect-

tations and resources of the sexes, she shows how their experience of gender relations and gender discrimination has played a part in their decision to emigrate.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, this issue on Chinese women highlights the persistence of gender inequalities in China in the age of reforms. Above all, it shows how the social and family roles of men and women, which remain deeply gendered, continue to bind together Chinese society. For this reason, the symbolic and practical challenges of the emancipation of women illustrate the complexity of the processes at work in what we must henceforth call Chinese "modernisation": some important keys to understanding them are presented in this issue.

■ **Translated by Elizabeth Guill.**

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