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CHINESE WOMEN UNBOUND: AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION IN CHINA

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Abstract:

"Chinese Women Unbound" gives a brief historical background of the status of women in China and presents a well-documented history of the evolutionary process of Chinese women's emancipation—from the first missionary school for girls in the 1840s, to the first females admitted to Beijing University in the late 1920s, the marriage law of 1950, and the divorce rate in the 1990s, among other events. The paper also discusses Chinese women's involvement in the 1911-1912 revolution, the Communist revolution, and the modernization of Chinese economy. In narrating this evolutionary process, Moeller analyses the various forces behind the changes, as well as the social, cultural, and political issues that were intertwined with the women's movement in China. The original version is 24-pages long; the article presented here is a condensation made for this publication by the author.

"For all women there are the three obediences—
to the father before marriage,
to the husband after marriage,
and to the son after death of husband..."¹

Yu-fang was born in 1909 in southwest Manchuria. She was the first daughter of her fifteen-year-old father and twenty-one-year old nameless mother. At age two, Yu-fang's feet were bound in the popular fashion by bending the toes under the sole, wrapping tightly with cloth and crushing the arch with a large stone. Yu-fang's father had one valuable asset, his beautiful daughter Yu-fang. From the time of her birth he had plans to use this asset to better himself. Yu-fang was groomed to be a high-class courtesan. When she was fifteen, her father sold her as a concubine to General Xue Zhi-heng who was connected to the warlord government in Peking. Yu-fang did not agree with the arrangement, but to resist her father would have made her a very unfilial daughter. Nine years later Yu-fang faced another terror. General Xue was gravely ill, and she told her granddaughter years later, "if the general died she would be at the mercy of the

wife, who had the power of life and death over her ... sell her to a rich man, or even into a brothel, which was quite common".²

Yu-fang's early life was very typical of the oppression and subjection Chinese women endured for thousands of years. The depravity of women taught by Confucian ethics was the basis for this subjection. This paper will briefly discuss the status and condition of women in dynastic China in the areas of marriage, property, education and the practice of footbinding. Events and circumstances that brought about changes in the lives of women and when those changes began to take place will also be examined, as well as an examination of the role and status of women in China today, especially in the areas of marriage, education, employment and participation in government.

Confucian philosophy and ethics dominated Chinese family and cultural dynamics after Han Wu Di (156-87 B.C.), Emperor of Western Han Dynasty, adopted a policy to "Reject all other schools of thought and hold only Confucianism in esteem."³ The patriarchal and patrilineal family structure dictated by Confucian ethics taught the inferiority of women and became the basis for sexual discrimination and subjection of Chinese women and girls.⁴ According to Confucius, a virtuous woman had three obediences: to her father and brothers before marriage, to her husband after marriage and to her son if she was widowed.

Early Chinese marriage practices and customs exhibited many elements of a male dominated patriarchal family structure. The "bride price" paid by a groom's family was indicative of the idea that females were "property" to be bought and sold. After a young bride moved into her husband's family home, she was subject not only to him, but to other members of her new family.⁵ A woman's duty to her parent's-in-law was the subject of teaching in the *Book of Filial Piety for Women*. The subject of serving parents-in-law stated:

With regard to a woman's service to her parents-in-law, she is as reverent as to her own father, as loving as to her own mother. Maintaining this attitude is a matter of duty, and adhering to it is a matter of ritual. When the cock first crows, she washes her hands,

rinses her mouth, and gets dressed to make her morning call. In the winter she checks that [her parents-in-law] are warm enough, in the summer cool enough. In the evening she checks that they are settled, in the morning that they are getting up...⁶

If a wife failed to bear a son, a man could bring a secondary wife or a concubine into the household. A concubine was usually acquired by purchasing a young girl from a poor family. According to Florence Ayscough in *Chinese Women: Yesterday and Today*, "ancestors required male descendants. If one woman did not produce them, another should be given the opportunity to do so."⁷ A concubine's duty was to serve the first wife and bear children.⁸ Whether taking a concubine for reproduction or as an object of pleasure, the practice was degrading and humiliating for women.

In the Chinese kinship system, divorce was nearly impossible for a woman. A man could divorce his wife for any one of seven reasons, but women had no rights in regard to divorce, separation or property.⁹ The fate of concubines was even more precarious. They could be expelled by the husband at any time and also by his family after his death.¹⁰

A widow was obligated to continue serving her dead husband's family. Confucian norms were that she would remain a widow, but her in-laws had the right to sell her if they chose. Any children she bore into the husband's family legally belonged to the family.¹¹ The practice of immolation was quite common and widows were exalted if they "followed their husbands on death."¹² Immolation for many widows was more desirable than the prospects of continuing with the dead husband's family.

One of the most graphic examples of the restrictions Chinese women had to bear was foot binding. Began during the Song Dynasty (960-1279), the practice of binding young girls' feet so they would be tiny little "golden lilies" was touted as necessary in order to obtain a good marriage. But, many young girls did not survive the effects of rotting flesh and broken bones. The physical act of binding feet was confining, and women with bound feet experienced physical pain and limited mobility throughout their lifetimes.¹³ In a Confucian culture, foot binding was a symbol of dependence and subservience.

The movement against foot binding began during the Manchu rule in 1644. According to Alison Drucker, after China's ports were opened to western missionaries by the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, pressure increased to stop the practice of foot binding. Chinese converts were encouraged to stop the practice, and western opinion that the practice was barbaric also had influence. Mission boarding schools from 1867 on refused to keep girls unless their feet were unbound. The T'ien tsu hui (Natural Foot Society) was created in 1895 by ten foreign women, but by 1908 it was operated exclusively by Chinese, including a male Chinese doctor. This society was very active in promoting natural feet, even getting an audience before the Qing court. The missionary

societies had some indirect influence on abolishing foot binding, but only after the efforts became more Chinese and nationalistic was there any success.¹⁴

Leaders of the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) not only prohibited foot binding on pain of death, but also opened the door of emancipation for women in several other areas. Intellectual Kang You Wei, leader of the 1898 Hundred Days' Reform, was an outspoken critic of foot binding. By 1905 girls attending state schools could not bind their feet and by 1908 many Chinese intellectual and political leaders were speaking out against the practice. Many of these leaders had been exposed to western education. Yuan Shi Kai, a social conservative, publicly announced foot binding as injurious to women's health and an impediment to their education. Chang Chih-Tung, governor-general of Hupei and Hunan from 1889-1907, also reiterated Yuan's sentiments. Foot binding diminished the productivity of females, both inside and outside the home. Foot bound women could not enrich their families or their nation. The Nationalist government that came into power in 1911, banned foot binding outright. A survey done in 1929 in an area approximately 125 miles south of Peking revealed that 99.2 percent of the women born prior to 1890 had bound feet. None of the women born after 1919 had bound feet.¹⁵

On the education of women Confucian thought was "...women indeed are human beings, but they are of a lower state than men, and can never attain to full equality with them. The aim of female education therefore is submission, not cultivation and development of the mind."¹⁶ The thrust of women's education was how for women to properly fulfill their role as virtuous wives and good mothers.¹⁷ There is however, evidence that many girls of the elite class were taught to read and write. The *Book of Filial Piety for Women* written around 730 by Nee Zheng and translated in *Under Confucian Eyes* is an instruction book on how to be a good filial woman. That Miss Zheng wrote such a book is evidence that some women could read and write.¹⁸ *Under Confucian Eyes* also has examples of other Chinese women writers from the Ming and Qing eras. Ban Zhao (A.D. 41-ca. 115) is another example of the flexibility of the Confucian system. China is indebted to Ban Zhao for the completion of the history of the Han dynasty left unfinished after her brother Ban Gu, a well-known historian, died. She was also author of the text *Precepts for Women*.¹⁹

Educated women in early China were the exception. Few women possessed more than basic literacy, and peasant women would not have had even that. Early missionaries reported they seldom met a Chinese woman who could read. One female missionary reported, "With very rare exceptions women are never educated. Of heathen women possibly one in two or three thousand can read."²⁰ From Chinese, comments like, "can you teach the horse to read and write" and "oh, but the women . . . they can't learn" were common. Girls usually married in their

teens and became the property of another family, so the expense of educating girls was thought a waste of resources.²¹

The first school for girls in China was established in 1844 by Mary Ann Aldersay in Ningbo. Within a year Miss Aldersay had fifteen students and by 1852 she had forty. Within the next fifteen years schools opened in Shanghai, Foochow, Canton and Amoy, all under the direction of various mission organizations. The Treaty of Tianjin in 1858 opened all of China to missionaries. Thereafter the opening of girl's schools began to move inland and north. Schools were opened in Tianjin and Peking in 1864 and Chefoo in 1872. By the early 1900's mission schools had more potential students than they could accommodate. These schools provided education free of charge for girls from the poorer sector of society. Many of the students from these early mission schools became teachers in the governmental institutions established early in the 20th century.²²

Late in the 19th century, Chinese intellectuals began to be more vocal about women's issues, especially the education of women and girls. Liang Qichao in 1897 expressed his views in an article:

In China today, whenever the subject of women's education is debated, someone is bound to say, "There are much more important and urgent issues that this business of women's education" . . . However, I think the cause of weakness and failures in our society can be traced to the fact that women's education in this country has long been ignored.²³

Growing sentiment such as this caused the Chinese to take some initiative by establishing private schools for girls. The first was established in Shanghai in 1898. This school was the forerunner of many private schools that were established in the first decade of the 20th century.²⁴ By 1907 in Shanghai alone, there were over 800 girls attending schools established and funded by private Chinese citizens.²⁵

Empress Dowager Cixi issued an edict in 1901 permitting the establishment of government-sponsored schools for girls. Nothing was officially provided until 1907. Boys and girls attended school together in lower elementary grades, but had to have separate classes in higher primary schools.²⁶ After the founding of the Republic of China in 1911, females in primary education made up only 2 percent of the primary school population. This figure increased to 19.2 percent by 1936. The percentages for secondary education rose from 9.8 percent in 1911 to 17.6 percent by 1930. Figures gathered in 1916 give a better perspective on how young female education was. Estimates are that 95 percent of school age girls were not in school.²⁷

Opportunities for higher education for women before the May Fourth Movement (1919) were available only through three all-woman universities ran by foreign churches. Female secondary school students participating in the May Fourth Movement

became torch-bearers for women's liberation and equality in China. They had a voice that could no longer be ignored. Cai Yuanpei, chancellor of Beijing University, and Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, the founding father of the Republic of China, were both driving forces behind the advancement of women's education. On May 6, 1921, Sun, speaking at a girl's school in Guangdong Province, remarked, "there would be no equality between the sexes without women being educated, and... without sexual equality there would be no representative movement."²⁸ Cai, as chancellor of Beijing University, admitted two female students in 1920. Those students, however, were not been allowed to take the entrance examination and were considered "visiting" students. Cai was publicly defiant, declaring that the university charter did not prohibit the admission of females and there was no reason to refuse them. Cai stated "the road to our country's prosperity is through universal education: in order to achieve this, one should begin in earnest with women."²⁹ Females were officially enrolled in Beijing University in the late 1920's. After that females were admitted into secondary schools and universities across China. This was the beginning of higher co-education in China.³⁰

Concurrent with education, was progress in other social issues. Individuals who study Chinese history often credit the Taiping Rebellion of 1850-1864 as the beginning of emancipation for Chinese women. Hong Xiquan, the Hakka leader of the rebellion wanted to establish a new dynasty where women would be equal with men. Under the Taiping government women served in the military as generals and soldiers. Women served with courage and in large numbers. A Qing official wrote about an upcoming battle over the control of the city of Nanjing; "after we recapture the city, all the Guangxi women should be executed. Absolutely no leniency or mercy should be shown them. For they have been just as courageous and fierce as male soldiers in defending the city."³¹ The Taiping government also outlawed foot binding, concubinage and prostitution. The traditional practice of arranged marriages was replaced with free choice monogamous love matches. In addition, land was distributed to women and men equally. Although Qing forces put down the rebellion, a new era for Chinese women had been ushered in.³²

The leaders of the Self-Strengthening movement, which followed on the heels of the failed Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, began to see women in light of industrialization and modernization. Women were being recognized as potential factory workers. Zhang Zhidong, governor of Hunan and Hubei provinces in the late 19th century, used the terms "essence" and "practical use" to develop China's first industrial area. Zhang's goal was to retain the "essence" of Chinese moral and philosophical values, (in this case, women's place was in the home) yet put to "practical use" western knowledge and technology.³³ Nonetheless, Zhang began to see women in light of what they could contribute to Chinese industrialization. By the late 19th century a large number of women and girls were employed in the silk-reeling industries around Wuhan and

Shanghai. Their small agile fingers were especially suited for this work, and it quickly became difficult to hire men to replace women because it was considered "women's work."³⁴ Naturally, women responded to their new role by becoming more independent and assertive.

In contrast to the Self-Strengtheners "essence" of keeping the old Chinese ways, proponents of more drastic change came forward in an 1898 movement known as the Hundred Days Reform. One of the leaders, Liang Qichao, was an advocate for women's liberation and education. Liang, a well known journalist, wrote that China's poverty was due to the fact that women were totally dependent upon men. He described the dependent, illiterate women as parasites of Chinese society, consuming but not producing.³⁵

Women's reform movements in China often paralleled national reform movements. Such was the case with the Red Lanterns, the female counterpart to the Boxers. The Red Lanterns was an organization of young girls between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Their participation in the burning and killing that took place during the Boxer Rebellion of 1898-1900 reveals that young women had passion and were no longer going to be spectators in the reformation of China. Those young girls had the courage to become participants. Many lost their lives but they made it possible for future generations of Chinese women to gather the courage to fight for their rights. A piece of propaganda from the Red Lanterns read: "The red lantern shines, lighting the path for the people."³⁶

From 1900 to the present, Chinese women have been involved in revolution. Early in the 20th century, women's magazines began publishing revolutionary propaganda for women. Chen Xiefen, a revolutionary writer, argued that men's promotion of women's rights and education had been strictly for the benefit of man and the state. It was time for women to promote themselves. Qiu Jin (1875-1907) has been labeled Woman Revolutionary, and is a hero to women in China. Qiu Jin had bound feet and was forced by her parents into an unhappy marriage. She left her husband and children and went to Japan to study. After returning to China, she became active in secret societies whose aim was to overthrow the Qing dynasty. She also spoke to women's groups challenging them to take control of their future. In one speech she told the women:

... If you have children, please send them to school by all means. Girls, no matter what, never have your feet bound. Young women, if possible it's best for you to go to school; but even if you can't, then read at home and study your characters all the time ... Everyone, the nation is on the verge of collapse. Men can no longer protect it, so how can we depend on them? If we fail to rouse ourselves, it will be too late after the nation perishes.³⁷

Qiu Jin was executed in 1907 at the age of 32, after plans for an armed revolt were exposed.

Early in the 20th century Chinese women were also forming women's rights organizations. Of the groups studied, all were founded by Chinese women who had studied abroad or mission schools in mainland China. These groups openly opposed concubinage, female slavery, and foot binding, and promoted education and encouraged economic independence. The Free Marriage Lecture Society formed in 1909 in Hunan met with resistance when speaking out against arranged marriages. The society was banned and all governors were ordered to be on the look out for "unseemly" activities.³⁸

In 1911, women's revolutionary activity again paralleled national activity. Women were involved in the revolution that brought down the Qing dynasty. Female military units were formed and women spoke in the streets exhorting crowds to support the revolution. Women in the military also served as barbers: cutting the queues of Chinese men rejecting Manchu rule. Chang Chu-chun, a trained physician, was opposed to women in combat, but she organized forty women to go with her to the front line and tend to the medical needs of the wounded.³⁹

Women's involvement in the 1911 revolution was focused more on nationalism than on specific women's suffrage. This changed by the mid 1910's when young educated reformers began taking up the pen to advocate women's liberation. Democracy had been achieved, so the focus again turned to social issues. Essays on chastity and arranged marriages began appearing in *New Youth*, a revolutionary magazine put out by Beijing University faculty. Stage performances of *A Doll's House*, where lines such as "don't become a man's play-thing" and "demand freedom" became inspirational slogans for young people. When news of the Treaty of Versailles reached Beijing, the youth all over China reacted. Female students as young as thirteen were involved in mass demonstrations. They were demonstrating for the preservation of their country. But their demands continued even after China refused to sign the treaty. Women's voices grew louder in their demands for equality and liberation.⁴⁰

In China the years from 1919 until 1949 were years of nearly constant unrest. The nation had to deal with the civil wars between the Nationalists and the Communists, as well as the imperialistic aggression of Japan. Women's social issues were again secondary to the issue of preserving the nation. The establishment of the People Republic of China in 1949 was the catalyst that brought women's issues back into the mainstream of social reform.

"Men and Women are equal. Women can hold half the sky"⁴¹

In the year 1919, Mao Zedong wrote a series of articles titled *A Critique of Miss Zhao's Suicide* for a newspaper in Changsha. The articles were a response to the recent suicide of a young bride named Zhao Wuzhen. Miss Zhao, in protest of the

marriage her parents had arranged, stabbed herself to death in the bridal carriage. In his articles Mao wrote, "It happened because of the shameful system of arranged marriages, because of the darkness of the social system, the negation of the individual will, and the absence of the freedom to choose one's own mate."⁴² Mao Zedong was passionate about social reform. The Jiangxi Soviet was established in 1927 by communists who had fled Chiang Kai-Shek's purge in Shanghai. After Mao became chairman in 1931 he put into force a new marriage law. The new law gave people free choice of marriage partner and forbid forced or arranged marriages. A new divorce law allowed women as well as men to seek divorce. There was some discrepancy between law and practice for there is evidence that women in the Jiangxi Soviet were often coerced into marrying against their will.⁴³ These social reforms, however, were the beginning efforts to eradicate feudal oppression and backward ideas that had enslaved Chinese women for thousands of years.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) was established on October 1, 1949 by the Chinese Communist Party with Mao Zedong as the Chairman. The PRC quickly began a mass movement in social reforms, particularly in the area of women's rights and equality. The first session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference met in Beijing late in 1949. 10 percent of the delegates present were women. Those sixty-nine women represented Chinese women throughout the country. Women had leading roles in the organization and implementation of the new government. The vice-chairperson of the new Central People's government was Soong Qing Ling.⁴⁴ Since that time, the number of women participating in political activities has continued to increase. The most basic way women exercise their freedom and political rights is to participate in elections. In the first general ballot in 1953, 90 percent of the women in China cast their vote. The number has risen to 95 percent today. After the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing in 1995, the Chinese government began an aggressive campaign to increase women's involvement in government and political affairs. Today there are 650 female deputies (21.8 percent) to the Ninth National People's Congress (NPC), and there are two female vice-presidents of the Standing Committee of the NPC. The State Council has two female ministers and 16 female vice-ministers. In 668 cities across China 463 female mayors or vice-mayors are female. Female cadres account for 35.7 percent of the total across the country. Females account for about 33 percent of all public servants in China.⁴⁵

The participation of women in government from the establishment of the republic to the present has insured the consideration of women's interests. Very significant is the fact that the first law passed after the establishment of the Republic changed the lives of Chinese women forever. The marriage law issued in 1950 did away with the feudal marriage system of arranged and forced marriages. "Freedom of choice in marriage, monogamy, equal rights for men and women, prohibition of

bigamy, concubinage, and child-bride marriages, and freedom of remarriage" became the new marriage law.⁴⁶ Because the National Marriage Law was such a dramatic change from feudal practices and thinking, a series of educational campaigns were carried out between 1950 and 1953. Doubtless, this made a significant difference in the lives of young women. But, as late as the 1980s there were gaps between principle and practice. Surveys done in 1979 in rural counties in Anhui province revealed that 75 percent of marriages were first negotiated by parents and 10 percent were arranged by parents according to old traditional ways. This was not just a rural phenomenon. In Shanghai during the same year, only four of twenty-two marriages were based on "free choice."⁴⁷ In the book *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s*, written by Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter, several young Chinese girls share how their families imposed feudal marriage practices upon them. Today the issue of free choice in marriage, especially in minority and rural areas, is one of the issues being addressed by the All-China Women's Federation.

Under the Marriage Law divorce also became an option for women. Previously, only men could instigate divorce. This was quickly embraced by women, and if statistics can be used as an indicator, hundreds of thousands of women had been locked into unhappy, undesired marriages. The number of divorce cases brought before the People's Courts in 1950 was 186,167. For the first half of 1953, the number was 398,243. Of the total, 75 percent of the cases were instigated by women. Divorce would have been very difficult for most women, but the land reforms that gave women property made it possible for some to support themselves. There was much resistance from men and mothers-in-law, for losing a wife was like losing a valuable piece of property, and for a wife to willingly leave was like treason. As one saying put it, "a good wife hangs herself, while a wicked woman gets a divorce." In the early 1950s, thousands of women were killed over divorce and property rights issues.⁴⁸

Divorce rates had dropped significantly by 1980, to only about 2.66 percent in the city of Beijing. It was much lower in the countryside. In the 80s divorce petitions were sent to a mediation committee. If differences could not be settled then a divorce was granted, regardless of who initiated the petition.⁴⁹ The national divorce rate in China as of March 2002 is about 10 percent. It continues to be much lower in rural areas. A divorce can be obtained in a day if a couple has agreed on all property division issues. The long term affects this might have on the stability of families and women has yet to be seen.⁵⁰

Chinese women have also gained the right to own land and inherit property. This was a major advancement in women's efforts to become self-sufficient. Now, by law, women's names have to be registered on the family land deed. The land reform in the early days of the Republic distributed land equally to women and men. What this meant to women was expressed by a Shanxi peasant woman who stated, "Our husbands regard us as some sort

of dogs who keep the house . . . that is because for a thousand years it has been . . . after we get our share [of land] we will be masters of our own fate."⁵¹ Today, women have equal rights with men in ownership of property, allotment of farmland, and inheritance rights. The impact of this change has helped women become more secure socially and economically. Women are no longer confined to the home as consumers. They have become productive, contributing citizens of a growing market economy.

Women workers in China make up 44 percent of the total work force. In rural areas they represent one-half of the work force. The contribution these women make to the economic reform and development of China is immeasurable. In urban areas women are employed in an array of sectors, including education, finance, public health, radio and television, government and social institutions, and social welfare. The growth rate of women employed in these areas from 1982-1990 exceeded that of males by 21 to 78 percentage points. Women with professional and technical titles accounted for 36.8 percent of the total number of persons in professional and technical fields in 1993.⁵²

Rural women have become an indispensable asset to the rural economy. Women generate between 50 and 60 percent of the total rural output value. There are also about 4.8 million rural women self-employed in commerce and service trades. Rural women are the driving force behind the development of township enterprises.⁵³ One example is the Wu Guei Village, Tian Yuan Township in the Sichuan province. Chang Yu Xheng, the administrative leader of the village, is a typical peasant woman. Born in 1944, she had seen many changes in her village. But, she reports, men and women are equal and there are many women leaders. She also stated that because women were so involved in work outside the home, men shared in the housework. In addition to farming, the village collectively operates other small industries such as a furniture factory and a shoe factory.⁵⁴ More examples of peasant women's involvement in township enterprises can be found in *Halls of Jade, Walls of Stone* by Stacey Peck. These township enterprises in rural China earn the most foreign exchange for the country. Women make up the bulk of the work force in producing textiles, silk, tea, toys, electronics, and embroidery. In Longhou City, Shangdong Province, the embroidery articles produced by women bring in US \$2.5 million annually.⁵⁵

How has the mass movement of Chinese women out of the home into the work place affected their daily lives, and what obstacles must they face and overcome to experience equality in the work place? Pregnancy and childcare, equal pay, equal opportunity and division of housework and family responsibility are just a few of the things a contemporary working woman would face. It is not possible to address every issue, but a significant issue is childbearing. The Chinese government has been especially diligent in providing protection for employed pregnant women. In urban areas, surveys show that nearly 85.3 percent of child-bearing workers get at least a three-month paid maternity leave. Many state-owned work places provide

healthcare, nurseries, and kindergartens. This relieves a great deal of anxiety from the working female.⁵⁶

Another issue that would be interesting to explore in depth is how Chinese women feel about being such a working force. Do they experience a sense of self-respect, self-sufficiency, and even a degree of power that their ancestors were never able to experience? Doubtless, many working women carry a load of responsibility that is sometimes overpowering and exhausting. But for many, the experience is fulfilling. The testimony of a 58-year-old (in early 1980s) retired dining room cashier in a Beijing wheel factory speaks for countless liberated women in China.

What is the best time of life for a woman? I don't know about other women, but for me the best time was my first job. The best day of my life was my first payday. A woman who has no work cannot control her own life. Later, when my husband died, I put all my energy into my work. If I had not had a job life would have been intolerable and I could not have borne the grief. My son is very good to me now, but I would not be happy depending on him entirely. I have my pension and my independence.⁵⁷

One of the most important aspects of achieving sexual equality for women is improving their economic status. The most efficient and effective way to do this is through education. Whether it is on the job training, night classes, literacy education or a college degree, education is a form of property for women that can be used for upward mobility. Since the first females were officially admitted to Beijing University in the late 1920s, the education of women and girls has been a top priority for women's advocates. China has made major strides in the area of women's literacy. The All-China Women's Federation reported in 1999 that the illiteracy rate for adult women was 21.6 percent. Most of those women live in remote areas. The average number of years of education for women is 6.5 years. In July 1986, China implemented a Compulsory Education Law, which said that every child regardless of gender should have nine years of schools. As a result, the average number of years of education should rise with future generations of educated girls. Also reported in the year 2000 was the figure that 99.07 percent of girls in China were attending school.⁵⁸

Compare the 1916 figure of 95 percent that did not attend school with the current figure and you can quickly see that education of girls has made tremendous progress. The leading obstacle to education for girls is economics. If families can only afford to send one child to school they will send a son. Girls are often kept home because they are needed to assist with household chores. The government is addressing the problem by allocating more money for education, taking some of the financial burden off of families. Programs such as the Spring Bud Plan and Project Hope, initiated by the All-China Women's Federation and the China Youth Development Foundation respectively, target girls in poor areas and assist them in getting or furthering their

education. At the end of 2000, it is estimated that over one million girls have been helped by the Spring Bud Plan.⁵⁹

Opportunities for higher education and special training for women abound. Women have equal opportunity with men in higher education. A woman has many options when looking for further education. There are 1600 secondary vocational schools and three vocational colleges in the country, as well as junior colleges, four-year colleges and universities, and programs for Master's and PhD degrees. In addition, there are multiple specialty schools and training centers, as well as distance learning opportunities. In 2000, 45.63 percent of women in China are in or have attended various schools or centers for adult education.⁶⁰

Women in China today are also extensively involved in educational professions. Nationwide in 1992, women teachers at all levels accounted for 30-45.5 percent of the total number of teachers. One-third of the 3,000 academics at Beijing University are female, including 19 who are tutors of postgraduate candidates. In 1992 there were 20 female university presidents or vice-presidents. In addition women are very involved in areas of science and technology research. The State Council reported in 1993 that there were 8,097,000 women scientists and technicians in China. In the area of scientific research, the Chinese Academy of Sciences in 1993 had 186 women directors of research centers and 29 women academicians. Women with senior professional titles make up 40 percent of the scientists at the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences. In 1992, 204 women were named state-level experts in their field of study.⁶¹

The advances made in women's education over the past two hundred years allow many women and girls in China to pursue any field of study they desire. Unfortunately, at this time education is still not an option for many in remote areas. But the government of China is aware of the problems and is addressing the issue. Education can give women power to make choices and control their environments.

For more than two thousand years, women in China were in bondage to a Confucian influenced social structure that dictated they be kept in a subservient, suppressed state. Women were considered "property" to be bought and sold. The only voice a woman had was the taking of her own life to avoid being forced into an undesirable position. If a young girl survived the physical act of foot binding, the pain was constant and had to be endured for a lifetime. The foot bound woman was also physically restrained to a state of dependency.

It was the influence of outsiders that ultimately began the slow process of freeing Chinese women. Western missionaries, directly and indirectly, brought about changes in attitudes and treatment of women. The mid-19th century Taiping Rebellion had millions of followers and was the first large-scale recognition of equal rights for women. Thereafter progressive thinkers, many whom had been educated abroad, used every platform

available to free Chinese women from centuries of Confucian cultural dictums.

Early in the 20th century, women became very vocal and active in their own liberation. Freedom to pursue an education, to serve in the military, and to contribute economically brought women out of the home and into the public eye. For over two thousand years half of the country's population was suppressed and in a state of subservience, contributing to China's lagging behind the world in modernization. Now society began to see that for China to prosper and move forward, all people had to have equal rights and opportunities.

Women in China today have the same rights and opportunities as men. Education is equally available. Women have equal rights in marriage, property and inheritance, and equal opportunity in government and politics. The government of the PRC has established women's organizations to safeguard women's rights and to diligently check areas of abuse. The All-China Women's Federation, founded in April 1949, is a mass organization dedicated to further emancipation of all Chinese women.

End Notes:

¹ Zhangling Wei, *Status of Women: China* (Bangkok: UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 1989), 3.

² Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (New York: Random House, 1992), 22-39.

³ Wei, 6.

⁴ Kay Am Johnson, *Women, the Family and Peasant Revolution in China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 1-8.

⁵ Johnson, 7-13.

⁶ Susan Mann and Yu-Yin Cheng, eds.

Under Confucian Eyes, Writings on Gender in Chinese History, trans. Patricia Buckley Ebrey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 52-53.

⁷ Florence Ayscough, *Chinese Women: Yesterday and Today*, quoted in Albert Richard O'Hara, *The Position of Women in Early China*, (Taipei, Taiwan: Mei Ya Publications, 1971), 3.

⁸ Dorothy Perkins, *Encyclopedia of China: The Essential Reference to China, Its History and Culture* (New York: Roundtable Press, 1999), 9.

⁹ Albert Richard O'Hara, S.J., PhD. *The Position of Women in Early China: According to the Lieh Nu Chan, "The Biographies of Chinese Women"* (Taipei, Taiwan: Mei Ya Publications, 1971), 264.

¹⁰ Kathryn Bernhardt, *Women and Property in China, 960-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) 164.

¹¹ Johnson, 13-14.

¹² Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 25.

¹³ Perkins, 164.

¹⁴ Alison Drucker, "The Influence of Western Women on the Anti-Footbinding Movement 1840-1911," *Historical Reflections Reflexions Historiques*, no. 3 (Fall 1981): 181-199.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Margaret Burton, *The Education of Women in China* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1911), 18-19.

¹⁷ Yin Lee Wang, "Women's Education in Traditional and Modern China."

Women's History Review 4 (1995): 345.

¹⁸ Mann and Cheng, 47-70.

- ¹⁹ Burton, 11 -20, and Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 54 -55.
- ²⁰ Burton, 23-24.
- ²¹ Ibid, 11-33.
- ²² Ida Belle Lewis, PhD., *The Education of Girls in China* (New York City: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1919), 18-25.
- ²³ Wang, 356.
- ²⁴ Lewis, 26-28.
- ²⁵ Burton, 112.
- ²⁶ Lewis, 29.
- ²⁷ Wang, 356-361.
- ²⁸ Ibid, 358.
- ²⁹ Ibid, 359.
- ³⁰ Ibid, 358-359.
- ³¹ Ono Kazuko, *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution, 1850-1950*, ed. Joshua A. Fogel. trans. Kathryn Bernhardt and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 10.
- ³² Ibid, 2-22.
- ³³ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search For Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 224-225.
- ³⁴ Kazuko, 23-25.
- ³⁵ Ibid, 26-27.
- ³⁶ Ibid, 48-53.
- ³⁷ Ibid, 59-65.
- ³⁸ Charlotte L. Beahan, "in the Public Eye: Women in Early Twentieth-Century China," *Historical Reflections Reflexions Historiques* no. 3 (Fall 1981), 215-220.
- ³⁹ Ibid, 228-229.
- ⁴⁰ Kazuko, 92-111.
- ⁴¹ Wei, 3.
- ⁴² Spence, 304-305, and Kazuko, 100.
- ⁴³ Spence, 375-376.
- ⁴⁴ "The Situation of Women in China: Chapter I," *Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China* June 1994. < <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/whitepaper/8.html> > (15 April 2002).
- ⁴⁵ "Report on the State of Women In Urban Local Government," *Peoples Republic of China Report*, n.d., < <http://www.unescap.org/huset/women/reports/china.pdf> > (14 April 2002).
- ⁴⁶ Kazuko, 166-67.
- ⁴⁷ Elizabeth Croll, *Chinese Women Since Mao*, (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1983), 75-77.
- ⁴⁸ Kazuko, 179-180.
- ⁴⁹ Croll, 82-83.
- ⁵⁰ The Straits Times. *Breaking up is easy to do in China*. 31 March, 2002 < <http://straitstimes.asial.com.sg/women/story/0,1870,111507,00.html> > (15 April 2002)
- ⁵¹ Kazuko, 108.
- ⁵² "The Situation of Women in China: Chapter III,"
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Stacy Peck, *Hall of Jade, Wall of Stone: Women in China Today* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1985), 230-235.
- ⁵⁵ "The Situation of Women in China: Chapter III,"
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed, Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 56.
- ⁵⁸ "All-China Women's Federation" April 2000 < <http://www.women.org.cn/womenorg/English/English/index.htm> > (6 March 2002)
- ⁵⁹ "All-China Women's Federation,"
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ "The Situation of Chinese Women: Chapter 5."

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Faculty comment:

Professor and Director of the University's Asian Studies Program, Henry Tsai, in his letter recommending the publication of Ms. Moeller's work, wrote:

The subject matter of "Chinese Women Unbound: An Analysis of Women's Emancipation in China" is critically important to the understanding of Chinese

history. As a teacher of Chinese civilization for over three decades, I've come to the conclusion that suppressing half of China's population was the key reason why China experienced so many problems in modern centuries. For over 2,000 years, Chinese women lived in a state of subservience and women were considered "property" to be bought and sold. Worse still, beginning in the eleventh century, young girls were subject to foot binding, which physically restrained them to a state of dependency. But as important as this issue is, there is a paucity of scholarship on the subject of Chinese women. Moeller is an outstanding graduating senior, has completed four semesters of Mandarin Chinese, and maintains a 3.85 grade point average. Her willingness to explore this hitherto neglected issue should be commended. She has demonstrated the kind of intellectual curiosity that *Inquiry Magazine* wants to encourage in our undergraduates.

In terms of gathering source materials at the Mullins' Library, this subject is much more demanding and more difficult than most, and requires diligence and dexterity. Overall, this senior paper is well researched, carefully crafted, and is jammed with significant primary and secondary sources. In addition, Moeller provides a very useful bibliography and generally follows the standard Chicago format for footnote citation.