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Constructing an historical narrative: change and continuity in women's lives in China.

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Abstract:

This article explores the significance of historical narratives for teaching history in Australia in three ways. First, it contextualises some recent claims and assumptions about the nature and purpose of historical narrative with reference to developments in history teaching in Australia. Second, it explicates some features of a transnational narrative written for Australian students. This narrative on the changes and continuities in women's lives in China is presented with an accompanying glossary as the third and final segment of the article. In framing the analysis in this way, the article aims to demonstrate that narrative portrayals of the continuities and changes of past ideas and events are always determined by the standpoint of the historian and, unlike recent claims, are open to critique.

Part A: Writing historical narratives

The teaching of history in Australian schools has received considerable attention since John Howard delivered his speech, 'A Sense of Balance: The Australian Achievement' (Howard, 2006), on the eve of Australia Day in January 2006. In the debates that followed, emphasis has been placed on politicising the broader issue of how Australian history is represented in the curriculum, and, most notably, the neglect of historical narrative. Indeed, much debate centred on the Prime Minister's claim that Australian history was being taught as "a fragmented stew of themes and issues" captive to "a postmodern culture of relativism where any objective record of achievement is questioned or repudiated" (Howard, 2006, p. 5). Howard's solution was to advocate the reinstatement of a "structured narrative" of the "central currents of our nation's development" (Howard, 2006, p. 5).

The construction of historical narratives should provide a fundamental structure for studying and portraying the past. However, Howard's views when linked with his insistence that "you can't learn history by teaching issues" and by his subsequent reproach to not "waste our energy" (7.30 Report, 2006), debating the nature of European settlement in Australia are disturbing. Indeed, John Howard's desire for teachers to transmit a 'structured narrative' free of debate to students is problematic. It suggests a lack of knowledge about the nature of history as a discipline, and an ignorance of the past thirty years of international research on how students acquire historical knowledge and understanding. Concomitantly, it ignores current principles that guide pedagogy in the history classroom. Further, Howard's advocacy of an unquestioned narrative of national achievements raises questions about the use of history by powerful figures to forge a particular ideological perspective of national history.

The move to transform history teaching from memorising 'facts' to an emphasis on inquiry-based learning was prompted by the British Schools Council's History 13-16 Project (BSCHP). The BSCHP was established in 1972 in response to "teachers' dissatisfaction with 'traditional History'" (Shemilt, 1980: 1). As the project's evaluator observed,

(T)he Project's answer to the question 'What History should [we] teach?' is 'The nature of the subject!' At the secondary level, this involves, first, introducing pupils to the historian's methods, asking 'How do we know?', evaluating

evidence and using it to establish 'facts' and arbitrate amongst competing 'explanations'; second, it involves adolescents learning something of the logic of History and the meaning of key ideas such as 'change', 'development', 'cause and effect' and so on; finally, it involves introducing pupils to some of the various approaches to History – the line of development, the depth study, contemporary History and local History. (Shemilt, 1980: 4).

The Schools Council History Project impacted on Australian history curricula in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Henderson, 1989). Classroom practice began to focus on the use of primary and secondary sources, explanatory open-endedness and in-depth studies. North American educators have also made a significant contribution to an increasing awareness of history's value in the school curriculum in Australia. For example, the work of Peter Seixas (2004) on historical consciousness, Sam Wineburg (1994) on historical thinking and Keith Barton (1997) on historical education and national identity has been emphasised by the National Centre for History Education in Australia (Taylor and Young, 2003).

These developments in history teaching do not denigrate the importance of narrative. Rather, they indicate that the construction of narrative is the outcome of a complex process of inquiry that centres on student engagement in the interrogation of sources of evidence. All practicing historians accept that evidence from the past is often incomplete and unreliable. Indeed, the historian Gottschalk observed decades ago in *Understanding History*, that evidence is "the surviving part of the recorded part of the remembered part of the observed part of the whole" (1951: 45). Similarly, sources of evidence are not-self explanatory; they are only meaningful in particular contexts. So history involves a selective reconstruction of the past and an interpretation of what has happened. Of course, rather than present a list of probable events and facts, historians then interpret the major themes which emerge from their inquiry and write a narrative to give meaning and cohesion to their interpretation. This is what we encourage students in schools to do.

While the teaching of Australian history has been enriched by a greater focus on social and oral history, the teaching and learning about non-European history has also received increasing emphasis in the Australian classroom. For example, curriculum materials are now available which support the critical inquiry of Asian history and culture, so that students can engage in the process of interpretation, which is central to the study of history. These resources and curriculum approaches help facilitate the development of an empathetic understanding of what it might be like to experience events in different cultures, times and places. As the British Schools Council Project's evaluator put it, "(h)istory uniquely widens pupils' ideas of what it means to be human because it forges connections and explores differences at one and the same time" (Shemilt, 1980: 3). I argue that engagement with other cultures is one of the most powerful ways to develop values of tolerance and respect for human rights.

Although John Howard emphasised the importance of Australian history, I wish to take up the notion of narrative with reference to writing transnational history; for in his speech Howard also referred to building "our relationships in Asia" and the fact that "Australia occupies a unique intersection of history, geography, culture and economic circumstance" (Howard, 2006, p. 5). Sadly, Howard failed to make the obvious connection that if Australia is to maximise its proximity to Asia, it is essential that young Australians learn about the history and culture of the nations of this region. As someone who has written inquiry-based history texts for the Australian classroom (Henderson in Hoepper *et al*, 1996, 2005), I seek to provide opportunities for young

Australians to engage with the history of Asian nations, notably China. In Part B and C of this paper, I attempt to demonstrate that the construction of an historical narrative derives not only from a process of inquiry, but that it is also crafted by historian's intent or standpoint. Moreover, my narrative (Part C) seeks to provide opportunities for students to engage with what the Schools Council termed "the logic of History" (Shemilt, 1980: 4) and the meaning of key historical concepts and ideas. Thus, what follows is my attempt to explicate, and then present, a transnational historical narrative. In foregrounding narrative in this way I seek to demonstrate that the Prime Minister's assumptions, that narratives are value free and history does not involve the teaching of issues, are flawed.

Part B: Explicating my narrative

In the historical account about the changes in women's lives that follows I attempt to incorporate some significant historical concepts and weave together two narratives of Chinese history. I draw upon the historical concepts of change and continuity; cause and effect; moral judgements in history; and making connections with the lives of today's Australians. In doing so, I construct my narrative account as follows. First, I attempt a 'big picture' portrayal of China's political and economic development contextualised through past centuries to the time when China was a 'Middle Kingdom' relatively isolated and insulated from the influences of Europe. My second narrative endeavours to portray the changing roles and status of women in Chinese society. It commences with a painful symbol of women's subservience to a male construction of female beauty, footbinding, and concludes with a depiction of the complex and ambiguous position of women in China today.

Throughout this account I attempt to depict how political and economic developments produced changes in women's roles and positions, and also how women's initiatives helped bring about political and economic change. Hence the interrelationship between the two narratives is a significant feature of my interpretation of the changes in women's lives in China.

As noted, this article attempts to highlight some key historical concepts. In emphasising change and continuity, I seek to stress that China has experienced dramatic change but that there have been notable examples of striking continuity. To do this I depict the unrelenting female subservience to men in 'Traditional China'. Then in turning my attention to contemporary China, I describe the obvious signs that many Chinese women have thrown off the traditional shackles of subservience and refer to a trend in large coastal cities where some wealthy Chinese women aspire to Western forms of beauty. Concomitantly, I emphasise that deep underlying cultural beliefs about gender roles remain powerful in China and indicate the ways in which the lives of many Chinese women are restricted by law and custom. Significantly, traditional beliefs persist in the rural areas and continue the centuries-old practice of gender inequality.

I include in this account a reference to the fact that while modern Chinese women may no longer suffer the pain of footbinding, some wealthy women willingly undergo a series of long and painful operations to lengthen their legs, believing that 'Western-style' longer legs will make them more attractive to men as both partners and as employees. Here, the 'continuity' between footbinding and leg surgery seems obvious (although the comparison is between a very widespread historical practice and a modern practice that involves few women).

This article also highlights the concepts of cause and effect. I claim that the changes in the status and roles of women in China have had many possible causes. I list

among these causes: the influence of Western ideas taken up by Chinese intellectuals travelling to Europe; the example of Japanese women's experiences during the post-1867 modernisation; the desire to protect China's interests by harnessing the intelligence and energy of women in the cause of nation-building; the desire to abandon old and discredited ideas and practices associated with the imperial and Kuomintang periods. In my efforts to analyse these causes, like many historians, my challenge is to try to work out how important each of these was a causal factor in the changes that occurred. How influential, for example, were the film adaptations of Ibsen's play *The Doll's House* or the 'big cities fantasies' - films depicting 'glamorous women in Western fashion visiting foreign nightclubs'?

I also seek to demonstrate the complexity of 'cause and effect' with reference to the 'One Child Policy'. This policy was driven largely by the government's recognition that the increasing population was unsustainable in terms of its demands on China's resources, economy and environment. However, the policy had the unintended effect of reducing further the status of women, as the policy (in practice) reawakened traditional beliefs about male children being more valuable and important.

Given this emphasis other key concepts embedded in my narrative are gender, discrimination, equality, feminism and liberation. The terms gender, discrimination, equality and liberation, foreground the significance of values and morality in human interactions. The history of women in China raises questions about human rights, about fairness and about the types of society that best meet people's needs. Students can discuss, debate and make judgments about the fairness of Chinese beliefs and practices over time. And, because those discussions take students across time and into a different culture, they raise questions about 'cultural relativism' and 'judgment across time'. That is, discussion about such issues encourage students to ask whether we should pass judgment on ideas and practices from times long past, and whether we need to take into account the different cultural belief systems that have existed in the past and that still exist today. In other words, should we judge historical practices from the standpoint of twenty-first century Western values?

I signal one specific connection with the lives of today's Australians in the section of the narrative that explores the poor employment conditions many Chinese women endure to produce goods for global markets. This is an attempt to remind students of the ways in which the globalization of production and consumption links people around the globe. In constructing my narrative with this connection I am attempting to write a form of 'transnational history', that is a history which demonstrates the working out of particular historical phenomena in different parts of the world, and the way developments in one place can affect corresponding developments elsewhere. Hence, in making some reference to the impact on Chinese women of events elsewhere, this article is an effort to produce a transnational study of women's changing roles. Of course, teachers and students in schools can go further, investigating parallel developments in Australia and elsewhere, illuminating the complex array of cause and effect that has transformed the position of women in societies around the globe, and continued to do so.

Part C: The narrative.

Introduction

In the world's oldest continuous civilization, it could be argued that women had no legislated rights until after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), under Mao's leadership, was victorious in the civil war in 1949. Until this time, most women lived

lives of unquestioning subservience to men and had limited access to formal education. Some female members of the rich nobility were educated at home, but this depended on the attitudes of their fathers or husbands. For most of the millions of Chinese women, life was restricted by traditional feudal codes and customs which reinforced their inferiority and obedience to men. Despite the hopes of many women and efforts to free them from traditional customs following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, millions of Chinese women still struggle with poverty and hardship in the twenty-first century.

Foot-binding

One of the most obvious signs of such subservience was the practice of foot-binding. Women began to bind the feet of their daughters when aged between three and eight years. In order to prevent normal growth, the feet were bound with tight cloth wrappings which caused excruciating pain, especially in the early stages when the unfettered foot would still have been growing naturally. The practice is thought to have originated in the tenth century, but became more widespread, with tighter binding of the feet, in the course of time. By the late nineteenth century it is thought that between half and four-fifths of all Han Chinese women had their feet bound, depending on the region of China. Although tiny feet were accepted as a measure of feminine beauty, there is no certain evidence of exactly how widespread the practice was. The women of minority nationalities in general did not bind their feet, with the exception of the Muslims. Although foot-binding was found among all classes, it was much more prevalent among upper classes than among peasants. It was considered a sign of poor breeding for a Chinese girl to have 'big' – in other words, natural – feet.

The aim of foot-binding was to enhance the beauty of women and make them more attractive to men, as well as to prevent them from eloping. It was one of a number of practices of bodily mutilation and painful ways of making oneself attractive found all over the world. In traditional China, it was assumed that foot-binding made women more sexually attractive to men, allegedly because it increased the size of thighs and buttocks. The shape of an unbound 'lotus' foot was supposed to be sexually exciting and to remove the foot binding in the presence of a man was rare and a sign of great affection and intimacy, not normally given to husbands. Of course, the reality for women who endured foot-binding was that walking was painful and awkward. Such physical limitation reinforced women's subservience to men.

Other factors

For fifteen hundred years China was barely touched by outside influences and the Chinese thought of their world as the Middle Kingdom, or special place between heaven and earth. Powerful families, or dynasties, governed China. As head of a ruling dynasty, the Emperor was thought to be the celestial representative on earth. However, his authority could be challenged in times of natural disaster or unrest when his right to govern, or Mandate from Heaven, was withdrawn and a new dynasty could be formed. Dynastic rule was also influenced by the conservative teachings of Confucius (551-479 BC) about proper government and human relationships. For centuries, Chinese society was marked by rigid class distinctions and a large gap in the standard of living between the rich and poor. This meant that life was harsh for the majority of Chinese whose lot was determined by birth and usually marked by poverty.

As can logically be concluded, young girls at this time had no say in their futures. An arranged marriage was the best option they could hope for. If an arranged marriage was not secured through a marriage broker, a girl could be sold for life as a slave,

prostitute or concubine. Feudal laws allowed wealthy men to have several wives and keep other women in compounds for their desires as concubines. Confucius's teachings about family responsibilities and filial piety emphasised the role of men as family elders. In order for the family unit to survive, members were required to submit to and respect their elders.

Gradually, influences from outside China began to impact on the Middle Kingdom and challenged some of these traditional practices. During the nineteenth century, Western traders and missionaries increased their activities in China. Before the Christian missionaries arrived in China, no formal system of education existed for girls. By the 1860s, missionaries established eleven schools and within a few years other schools for girls were set up by some wealthy Chinese. These individuals were perhaps influenced by the self-strengthening movement that aimed at empowering China to resist the West by copying it. They thought that formal education could liberate girls from arranged marriages and provide opportunities for them to contribute to China's modernisation. Interest in educating girls prompted other efforts to improve their lives. A campaign to stop foot-binding, the 'Heavenly Feet' movement, was led by two men, Kang You-wei and Liang Qi-chao in 1883. However foot-binding was accepted as a 'normal' practice by so many Chinese, that both men were victimised for their efforts and forced into exile.

The last dynasty to rule China, the Qing, also known as the Manchu as they originated from Manchuria in north China, were fearful of revolts and held fast to harsh traditions. Significantly, the period of Qing rule coincided with Europe's expansion of trade and acquisition of colonies. European traders sought China's specialised luxuries such as cloisonné, porcelain, silk and tea. At first the Qing emperors, suspicious of Western traders, rebuffed foreign government delegations. Yet by the 18th century the port of Guangzhou (Canton) was opened to limited trade. For the first time, Chinese technology fell behind other nations and this would have ramifications in time of conflict with foreigners. China was now vulnerable to the West and the Qing dynasty seemed to be ineffective in its dealing with foreigners.

China's first feminist

Unrest intensified and a young woman some regard as China's first feminist played an important role in efforts to overthrow the Qing. Qui Jen's feet were bound as a child, yet she was determined to seek an education and improve her life. She was part of the first group of Chinese women to study in Tokyo, Japan. In a letter written in 1906, promoting overseas study to students from the Number One Women's School in Hunan, Qui Jin expressed some of her beliefs.

If you seek to escape the shackles of men, you must be independent. If you seek independence, you must gain knowledge and organise. Women's education is becoming more popular in Japan, with each woman becoming expert in her own business and building a life for herself. They [Japanese women] are trying to rid themselves of a life without work of their own in which they are dependent upon their husbands. And, as a result, their nation is getting stronger.

(Source: Ono Kazuko 1989, *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution 1850-1950*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. p. 62).

When she returned to China, Qui Jen resolved to fight for change. She and other 'new Chinese women', as those who helped to organise uprisings were known, fought bravely and inspired others. Amongst her achievements, Qui Jen started a school for girls and campaigned for women's rights by lecturing against arranged

marriages and foot-binding. By 1907, at the age of 32, Qui Jin was vice-commander of an army in the campaign to overthrow the Qing. However, as she was preparing for an armed revolt she was captured by Royalist forces and beheaded. Fortunately, Qui Jin's children survived and her daughter would become China's first female aviator. At the time of Qui Jin's death, the Beiyang First Girls' Normal School was established in Tianjin, and the Chinese Ministry of Education issued a statement 'Regulations of the Ministry of Education on Elementary Schools for Girls'. It seemed as if the Qing were starting to respond to calls for reforms to the education system. Yet by 1909, only approximately 13,000 girls were enrolled in schools in China, and a small number were studying in schools overseas.

Discontent with the Qing

However, efforts to overthrow the Qing Dynasty continued and many women, encouraged by the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and strengths, fought in support. By October 1911, the first Women's Army was formed in Shanghai and this was followed in November by the establishment of the Women's Suffrage Alliance. Its members had to be at least 16 years old and 'equipped with common sense'. The Women's Suffrage Alliance used slogans such as 'create a suffrage institute, invite lecturers, and offer supplementary classes in politics and law' and 'communicate to the provisional government our demand for the right to vote' to promote their organisation.

Other individuals and groups worked against the Qing dynasty. Like Qui Jin, Dr Sun Yatsen wanted to create a more equitable society for men and women in China. Sun became prominent in a coalition of various groups from across China's provinces who wanted to overthrow the Qing. This coalition was known as the Tongmenghui. Soon revolts spread across China and by 1911, fifteen provinces declared themselves independent of Qing rule. Elections were held in the rebel provinces and on 1 January 1912 Sun Yatsen was appointed provisional President of the Republic of China. One of Sun's first acts was to abolish foot-binding. However, the uneasy alliance between Sun's Republican followers and other groups who opposed the Qing did not last. Sun resigned in mid-February 1912 and soon China disintegrated into periods of military rule and a 'war-lord era' characterised by strong competing figures governing different regions across the provinces. Violent confrontations racked the countryside. During this time a reaction against women's rights gripped those vying to control China, and by November 1913, an order for the dissolution of the Women's Suffrage Alliance was issued and its eleven provincial branches closed.

Despite these setbacks, attempts to improve the lot of Chinese women continued. Qinghua University sent female students to the USA to study in 1914. By 1915, an American woman opened the first college for female students, Jin Ling College. Five years later some two thousand students attended fourteen similar colleges. In 1920, against centuries of tradition that denied Chinese women any hope of higher education, Beijing University and Nanjing Higher Normal School officially permitted female students to enrol.

Movements for change

Other changes were happening in China. The desire for transformation was evident in two movements prompted by young Chinese intellectuals. The New Culture Movement began in 1915 and became part of the May Fourth Movement of 1919. Influenced by the ideas of Self-Strengthening, followers of these movements were critical of Western imperialism, yet were keen to strengthen China by using Western ideas to their advantage.

One way the thinkers of the New Culture Movement wanted to strengthen China was to substitute the old culture based on Confucianism and replace it with a new one. Since Confucianism had been a fundamental part of traditional Chinese culture, 'down with Confucius and sons' was a popular slogan of the New Culture Movement, and early Chinese feminists found this notion appealing. The development of feminist ideas in China was also prompted by the publication in 1918 of a special edition of the magazine *New Youth*. This edition was devoted to the work of Norwegian dramatist Henrich Ibsen and it contained a full translation of Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*. At the end of the play, the central character, Nora, leaves her unhappy marriage and independently seeks her own destiny. Nora became a personal and cultural symbol to young Chinese women. Film adaptations of the play became popular in China and also helped to spread feminist ideas. However, many women also realised that unless Chinese women achieved economic independence and equality, their dreams of being like Nora would not be fulfilled.

Such new views and desires for reform were also evident in the May Fourth movement when frustration over the ineffectiveness of China's leaders to deal with Japanese demands was expressed in huge student demonstrations. Some protestors were inspired by the success of the Russian Revolution; others were angered by continual foreign interference in China. One young intellectual, Mao Zedong (1893-1976), wanted China to be free of feudal bonds and gendered restrictions. He wrote passionately about his vision for the rights of women and social change. Some of his work was published in a provincial magazine *The Greater Union of the Popular Masses* in July 1919, providing an insight into Mao's position on women in China. In the extract that follows, Mao expresses his desire for social revolution from the perspective of Chinese women.

Gentlemen! We are women. We are even more deeply immersed in an ocean of suffering! We are also human beings, so why won't they let us take part in politics? We are also human beings, so why won't they let us participate in social intercourse? We are gathered together in our various separate dens, and we are not allowed to go outside the front gate. The shameless men, the villainous men, make us into their playthings, and force us to prostitute ourselves to them indefinitely ... Spirit of freedom! Where are you? Come quickly and save us! Today we are awakened! We want to establish a union of us women! We want to sweep away all those devils who rape us and destroy the liberty of our minds and of our bodies! (Source: John Gittings 1973, *A Chinese View of China*. New York: Pantheon Books, p. 94).

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

At this time, other young intellectuals travelled to France and were influenced by French labour organisations, socialist beliefs and Russian activists based in France. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) developed from the interactions amongst these different groups. Along with Mao, Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping were prominent at the first plenary meeting of the CCP held in Shanghai in July, 1921. Of these members, **Xiang Jingyu**, was determined to push for women's rights as well as for socialism. At the time of Xiang Jingyu's return, Shanghai was developing into a sophisticated hub of Western investment and activity. Those 'new age women' who challenged family tradition to work in foreign owned factories assumed that freedom and excitement awaited them in Shanghai. The new Chinese film industry encouraged big city fantasies by depicting glamorous women in Western fashion visiting foreign nightclubs. The reality was different for tens of thousands of

country girls seeking employment. Many became victims of criminal triads and were forced into prostitution in gambling dens and bars. Others were employed in silk and cotton factories under terrible conditions.

The Long March

A small group of women demonstrated their support for the Communists by going on the Long March. This arduous journey was prompted when the Nationalists or Kuomintang (KMT) forces were gaining the upper hand against the Communists in the civil war. Waves of KMT soldiers encircled the Communist base in Ruijin, Jiangxi and it seemed that the Communists were trapped. Yet between 21 October and 13 November 1934, Communist troops slipped quietly through the three lines of encircling KMT troops. They left a rear guard of soldiers to fool the KMT troops into thinking the entire 'Red Army', as the Communists troops were known, was trapped in the base. This tactic worked and by the time the KMT commanders realised what had happened, the Red Army had about three weeks' start on them. Left behind were about 20,000 sick and wounded Red Army soldiers to fend for themselves.

Historians estimate that about 100,000 members of the Red Army, including 35 women cadres, marched an average 39 kilometres a day west, then north, to escape the pursuing KMT soldiers. Those who survived this Long March (1934-35) to reach the safety of remote Shaanxi province would become folk heroes to their fellow Communists. During this treacherous journey of more than 10,000 kilometres, thousands of Communists died. For 368 days the marchers struggled through mountain ranges, rivers, and marshlands during the harsh winter. To get an idea of how far they travelled – imagine walking from Sydney to Perth and back again! From this march, Mao emerged as the Communists' leader.

By the 1980s, Mao's legacy was being reevaluated. As Spence notes:

By 1982 it was acceptable in the PRC to criticize Mao Zedong. The consensus was that he had been a fine leader during the formative years of the revolution, but that from the Great Leap onward his policies had been erratic and at times destructive.

(Source: J. D. Spence 1990, *The Search for Modern China*, W. W. Norton & Co, New York, p. 697)

The achievements of the Long Marchers were also debated. Did they really participate in an epic journey or were their achievements exaggerated as part of an effective CCP propaganda campaign?

Two historians, Lily Lee and Sue Wiles, worked together to research the experiences of women cadres on the main section of the Long March. Their research indicates that of thirty five women cadres who left Jiangxi nineteen survived by the time they reached Shaanxi.

At least six of them had given birth along the way; each for different reasons of survival, abandoning her child ... Little is known in the West of these women, even though a handful of them rose to national prominence after 1949, when the communist People's Republic of China was established. The idealism of these women as well as their courage and endurance under cruel conditions inspired us ... we are motivated by an admiration for those thirty young women of the Long March - the youngest was nineteen when they set out, the oldest thirty-four - who retained a lifelong commitment to their ideals despite the disappointments,

and sometimes betrayals, of reality ... The Long March women sometimes spoke to interviewers and biographers of their sufferings, but rarely did they reveal their feelings. American journalists, Helen Foster Snow and Edgar Snow, who lived in China during the period of the Long March, wrote repeatedly of how difficult it was to get the Chinese communists to talk of personal matters. Thus, we can never know how He Zizhen felt when she left her child behind, because she spoke of this publicly only once we know of, when she admitted tearfully that she had never forgotten the baby she abandoned on the Long March. (Source: Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles 1999, *Women of the Long March*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, pp. ix-x).

Against such hardship, Chinese feminists were dismayed when the Nationalists issued proclamations against the hiring of married women and suspended the rural education plans of some women's youth associations. By 1941, the head of the Nationalist government, Chiang Kaishek, condemned women's political participation. In contrast, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) developed bases that encouraged women's participation in the border regions, where approximately 97% of the people could not read or write. By 1942, the CCP Central Committee issued a Resolution on Women's Work at Present in the Anti-Japanese Base Areas setting out their goals for women's participation.

The People's Republic of China (PRC)

When the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, many women had high hopes for equality. Some 466 delegates representing female soldiers of the Red Army, renamed the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA), militiawomen, intellectuals, workers and peasants attended the 1st National Women's Congress in Beijing that year. At this Congress, the All-China Democratic Women's Federation was formed to address the issues facing women. Soon renamed the All-China Women's Federation, and commonly called the *Fulian*, or Women's Federation, it faced the immediate challenges of national reconstruction. For example, in the countryside devastated by war, shortages of food and medicine had to be overcome. Relief had to be provided to the millions of orphans and children at risk of starvation or dying of illness. Education and childcare were required for urban women keen to play their part in rebuilding China. In the longer term, the Women's Federation sought to develop programs that freed women from the burdens of tradition.

Two survivors of the Long March would play significant roles in the *Fulian*. Cai Chang (1900-1990) was elected as its first President and served in this role from 1949-79. Today in China, Cai Chang is remembered as one of the great female revolutionaries. Kang Keqing (1911-1992) was elected deputy chair in 1957 and resumed this position in 1978. At her death, the CCP's Central Committee described her as a 'proletarian revolutionary, outstanding leader of the Chinese women's movement'. Cai Chang and Kang Keqing lobbied hard for change. They were encouraged by Mao's statements on gender equality. For example in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong*, known in the West as *The Little Red Book*, Mao wrote 'women represent a great productive force in China, and equality among the sexes is one of the goals of communism. The multiple burdens which women must shoulder are to be eased' (Chapter 31, quote no. 7). Laws were passed to secure equality between the sexes, such as the Marriage Law of 1950 that guaranteed women equality in marriage, divorce and property ownership. It also outlawed the killing and sale of children. Many women applied for divorce soon after it was passed

The 1954 Constitution also emphasised gender equality. For example, Article 86 noted:

all citizens of the People's Republic of China, who have reached the age of eighteen, have the right to vote and stand for election, irrespective of their nationality, race, sex, occupation, social origin, religious belief, education, property status, or length of residence, except insane persons and persons deprived by law of the right to vote and stand for election, women have equal rights with men to vote and stand for election ...

Article 96 stated

women in the People's Republic of China enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of political, economic, cultural, social and family life. The state protects marriage, the family, and the mother and child ...

(Source: *Constitution of the People's Republic of China 1954*, Peking: Foreign Languages Press).

However, it must be noted that in a communist nation, people's rights are very limited. Only one party – the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) can stand candidates, only issues deemed acceptable to the CCP are discussed and those who question or try to speak out against CCP dogma are usually arrested and interned without trial.

What has changed?

However, many question whether that much has changed for women since the Communist victory of 1949. The historians, Lily Lee and Sue Wiles, write that

despite their rhetoric, the communists' behaviour left no doubt that they believed man was born to rule, woman to clean up after him. From the start, certain work associated with women was done solely by women. This consisted mainly of explaining communist policy on marriage, divorce, foot-binding, women's and girls' education, and recruiting women and girls to the party ... the practical reason why women did this work was that the traditional gender segregation within Chinese society made it easier for them to contact and move freely among other women. The women found, however, that once they became part of the separate women's bureau that was set up to oversee women's work they were, in the main, unable to assume positions outside the bureau. This meant that they were all but excluded from the decision-making process since the bureau had no place in the power structure of the all-male party hierarchy.

(Source: Lily Xiao Hong Lee & Sue Wiles 1999, *Women of the Long March*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, p. 222).

After Mao

Following Mao's death in 1976 there was brief power struggle. By 1978, the moderate Deng Xiaoping, a survivor of the Long March who was isolated by his enemies during the Cultural Revolution, emerged as the new leader. By this time, the results of Mao's failed policies were evident. China's standard of living, education and technology lagged behind its Western counterparts. Deng realised that if China was to modernise, it had to be more open to the West. At the same time, Deng wanted to maintain the Marxist-Leninist ideology that inspired the formation of the Chinese Communist Party. China was to remain a one-party state, with appointed

officials. For Deng, 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' would ensure that the CCP maintained control over development in China and a limited amount of capitalism was permitted and social reforms were introduced.

These reforms coincided with a spread of investment, employment and technology amongst industrialised nations across the world. This process, referred to today as globalisation, impacted on China in several ways. First, Deng dismantled the Mao-inspired communes and allowed peasants to own their land. These 1979 land reforms resulted in high levels of production. Deng's second major change involved the gradual removal of Mao's 'iron rice bowl' policies. Conditions such as lifetime employment and guaranteed welfare benefits that included housing, pensions, health care and education were discontinued.

One Child Policy

Deng also set about tackling one of China's greatest challenges, population growth. Mao had encouraged large families, assuming that an increase in population would lead to more rapid economic development. Yet by the late 1970s, authorities realised that China could not sustain population increases of about 14 million per year. For although China has one-fifth of the world's population, its proportion of the world's arable land is only 7%. The new Marriage Law of 1981 required both partners to agree to family planning. By 1982, the government introduced a family planning program to encourage couples to restrict their family size to one child. The 'One Child Policy' is monitored by local and provincial authorities and has been enforced more harshly in urban areas than in rural areas. For example if an urban couple has a second child they face the loss of a family allowance and medical benefits, heavy fines and demotion or discharge from a government job.

Moves towards a Market-Based Economy

Deng's reforms meant that the Chinese economy underwent significant change. More Western goods became available in China, tourism increased, and large numbers of Chinese students left China to study in the West. Foreign corporations opened offices and factories in China.

Yet Deng kept a tough stance on what sorts of changes were permitted. His decision to send in troops on 4 June 1989 to crush student demonstrators calling for democratic reforms in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, indicated how determined he was to maintain CCP control of China's future. Following the Beijing massacre, many Western nations restricted their trade with China. China's economic and political reforms stalled, and CCP leaders who were sympathetic to the student protestors were purged.

Reflecting global trends, employment in China is now based on contracts, temporary work and less formal work arrangements that do not offer the same social protection as state sector jobs. Such market-oriented reforms impact on women who are frequently employed in lower status, lower paid jobs. Despite the 1992 Women's Law, job advertisements still discriminate against women by asking for males, or young attractive women. Women also have a high share of lay-offs. This was most evident when many under performing state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were restructured in 1998. For example, by 1999 the China Statistical Yearbook indicated that 50% of laid-off workers were female, although they made up roughly 38% of the formal workforce.

The impact of globalisation on women in China has been conflicting. Today those Chinese women who have benefited economically from the changes in society are free to express their notions of femininity and be part of a globalised culture based on Western patterns of consumption. Yet many Chinese women work in poor conditions with low pay to produce goods for global markets. The continuing presence of traditional values also impacts on the quality of women's lives today.

Traditional assumptions about women

Despite the social and economic shifts of the past fifty years, deep underlying cultural beliefs about gender roles remain powerful in China. These beliefs, voiced today most frequently in the countryside, influence the pace of change for women.

One belief is that women are inferior to men. The other stems from traditional Confucian notions of filial piety. It centres on the preference for male babies over females and the associated filial duties of males in Chinese family life. Today in China, sons carry the family name, inherit family assets, take care of their aging parents and perform filial funeral rites. Due to China's size and diversity, it is difficult to gain an accurate insight into how these beliefs impact upon Chinese women. The gender picture varies across regions, between urban and rural areas and amongst different nationality groups.

Major concerns include female infanticide, abuse of women who do not bear male children, abandonment of female and handicapped babies, and the problem of educating single children ('spoiled brats'). Deeper worries lie in the long term. When the new family structure - four grandparents, two parents and one child - takes shape, domestic resources will be hard stretched to ensure the support of the elderly.

(Source: L. Wong, and S. MacPherson, S. eds. 1995 *Social Change and Social Policy in Contemporary China*, Aldershot: Avebury, p. 55).

China is now one of the great industrial bases in East Asia, as it offers low-cost manufacturing to the rest of the world on a scale not experienced before. China has demonstrated that it can manufacture goods cheaply and efficiently and is now moving into another phase of economic development. It is developing its own technology with highly skilled professionals, not dependent on Western experts, and has the potential to be the world's largest economy. China's cities are expanding at a rapid rate and new generations of well-educated Chinese entrepreneurs earn large amounts of money. And for some, this new wealth provides opportunities to alter their bodies in the age old desire to become more 'attractive'. It is ironical that although foot-binding is now banned in China, new forms of bodily mutilation such as eye augmentation and leg stretching are sought by a select few, wealthy Chinese women aspiring to Western forms of beauty in the salons, cosmetic surgery clinics and 'finishing schools' of the big cities.

Yet this rapid pace of change and access to global culture and products has also highlighted fundamental inequalities in Chinese society, as the new wealth is only enjoyed by a fraction of China's population. Millions of poor farmers and workers, unable to make a living in the impoverished Western provinces, are flocking to China's large cities seeking employment and a better life. This is one of the largest mass migrations of people in the world. These workers are often paid subsistence wages. Health issues such as the spread of HIV and AIDS present enormous challenges for those who cannot afford medical treatment. Many Chinese women working as prostitutes and call girls in the large cities are now HIV positive. (For details of HIV rates in China, see: <http://www.avert.org/aidschina.htm> and

http://www.unaids.org/en/Regions_Countries/Countries/china.asp.) Health issues, low wages, poor working and living conditions compound the inequality and hardship that continues for millions of Chinese women. Although women in China are no longer forced to endure 'lotus' feet; the question remains; how much have women's lives *really* changed in China?

Glossary

Comment [s1]: Suggest to delete the glossary.

Feudalism in China

Feudalism is a social and economic system characterised by strict class differences, in which the powerful upper class usually provides land and protection to peasants who, in return, provide labour, rent, taxes and possibly military service as soldiers when required. The Emperor or 'son of heaven' was at the apex of Chinese society and below him were the major landowners and gentry, the Shenshi. They were described in Chinese documents as 'heads of masses'. The peasants were the next group in this hierarchy and although some were wealthy, most lived in grinding poverty and paid rent to their landlords. Although not regarded as highly as peasants, artisans and craftspeople had better standards of living as they could sell their crafts. Landless labourers formed a poor class of workers, performing whatever tasks they could. Merchants and professional soldiers were the least respected groups in feudal China. In times of upheaval and war, the officers of the Emperor's army were drawn from the Shenshi and peasants were conscripted to fight alongside professional soldiers.

Confucius

Confucius (551-479 BCE) was an important teacher and scholar who drew together many features of traditional Chinese beliefs known as the 'Confucian Analects'. At the centre of Confucianism was the family system and filial piety, or reverence and respect for one's elders, especially the older male or father. Confucianism was ethical and political, rather than religious, and emphasised proper government and correct human relationships.

Cloisonné

Cloisonné is China's traditional enamelware that has been produced for over 500 years. It is one of the best known arts and crafts of Beijing as cloisonné manufacture is comprehensive and sophisticated, combining the techniques of making bronze and porcelain ware, as well as those of traditional painting and sculpture: The making of cloisonné requires complicated processes: base-hammering, copper-strip inlay, soldering, enamel-filling, enamel-firing, polishing and gilding. Cloisonné ware was traded in the form of jars, bowls, containers and even jewellery.

May Fourth Movement

The May Fourth Movement of 1919 was one of the most important periods during the warlord period of China's history. This period was characterised by the efforts of regional dictators with their own armies fighting for control of China in areas that were far away or semi-independent of the fledgling government established after the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. The movement developed from discontent with the treatment of China at the Paris Peace Conference, following the end of the First World War. This conference appeared to show no concern for China's rights and was prepared to hand over the areas controlled by the defeated Germany in Shandong. The conference accepted Japan's demands to control this part of China. On 4 May about 3000 students from Beijing University and other educational institutions in Beijing rallied to protest against the treatment China received at the Paris Peace Conference. This demonstration sparked protests and strikes in other parts of China. Yet when the Paris Peace Conference produced the Treaty of Versailles, signed on

28 June 1919, China refused to sign. The spread of nationalism, a cultural, youth and feminist movement also accompanied the May Fourth Movement. This meant that many of the young students protesting about China's treatment by the West were also protesting against the rigidity of traditional Chinese institutions and culture. However, although these students advocated the importance of modern science and democracy, they considered themselves to be patriotic and nationalist.

Xiang Jingyu

Xiang Jingyu, from the Changsha region of Hunan, was active in local labour agitations and in anti-warlord and anti-Japanese protests and became a close friend of Mao Zedong. She was prominent in the fight for women's rights as well as socialism in the region and in 1919 travelled by sea with other activists to study special classes in France. Many of these students also worked in French factories, such as car plants, where they were introduced to French Labour organisations and socialist ideas. Xiang participated in a "revolutionary" marriage when she married another Huanese student working in France. She and her partner were photographed following the ceremony holding together a copy of Marx's *Capital*. Xiang wanted Chinese women to study science and argued that the government should not make women sit for the same exams as men, claiming they were disadvantaged in the education system. Xiang also demanded that equal numbers of men and women should participate in the French work-study scheme.

Kuomintang (KMT)

The Kuomintang, or Nationalist Party, was formed in 1912. Its members believed in parliamentary democracy and the principal of electing officials. However from 1912 - 20, the KMT was ineffective in China as the President of the Chinese Republic, Yuan Shikai, outlawed it in 1913 and expelled its members from parliament. By 1924 a revived KMT under Sun Yat-sen's leadership, issued its manifesto based on three principles: nationalism, democracy and the people's livelihood. At first, the Nationalists and the Chinese Communist Party cooperated with each other. Both parties wanted to end the power of the warlords and establish a new government. When Sun Yat-sen died in 1925 differences emerged. The General controlling the KMT army, Chiang Kai-shek, did not trust the communist elements in the left-wing branch of the KMT. By 1927 Chiang moved against this group and launched a series of attacks in Shanghai, known as the Shanghai Massacre. Many Communists were brutally purged and violence spread to other cities. Those Communists and their supporters who fled set up a revolutionary base in a remote region and reformed their army, known as the Red Army. This was the start of China's civil war which was broken by an uneasy truce from 1937-41 as the KMT army and the Red Army tried to resist the Japanese. The Japanese occupation of China ended with its defeat in 1945, at end of World War Two. The Communists were eventually victorious and Mao Zedong proclaimed the Peoples' Republic of China on 1 October 1949.

Beijing massacre

This event is more commonly called the 'Tiananmen Square Massacre'. On the night of 3-4 June 1989, Chinese Army soldiers attacked demonstrators gathered in the huge square in Beijing. Public protests had been occurring since mid-April, and the government had declared martial law on 20 May. The protestors had mixed motives, including dissatisfaction with political restrictions, government corruption and the impact of economic reforms on some people's livelihoods. No-one knows how many people were killed in Tiananmen Square and in other parts of Beijing. The Chinese government concedes only about 20, while other estimates go into the thousands. Political repression, arrests and media controls followed the massacre. Around the world the massacre was condemned. It has since taken on an iconic status,

representing to many people the continuing repression and abuse of human rights by the Chinese government.

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<http://www.avert.org/aidschina.htm> and
http://www.unaids.org/en/Regions_Countries/Countries/china.asp.