

## **Chinese Women's Status in the Society and in the Church**

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For more than 2,000 years, Chinese society was oppressed by a feudal system, the constrictions of which were compounded by influences from Confucian philosophy. The concept of male superiority was deeply ingrained into the political, social, and economic consciousness. The degradation and devaluing of women is aptly illustrated by the Confucian saying, "Of all people, women and small-minded men are the most difficult to keep in the house." Clearly, this identification of women with small-minded men was bound to result in sexism. Furthermore, women were deprived of their right to education because it was generally upheld that, "Inability in women is a virtue." Marriage represented yet another central arena of a woman's life where she had no freedom of choice. Her husband and consequently her future was determined by "the commandments of her parents and by the pronouncements of matchmakers." In old China, women's fate was so desperate and miserable that they lost their sense of self.

In the 19th century, Christianity was introduced into China by western missionaries at the time of the expansion of the West. On the one hand, the missionary movement was unfortunately tied to western colonialism to a certain extent. On the other hand, it introduced western cultural values which countered feudalistic ideas. Women missionaries opened schools for girls. The YWCA, first established in Hangzhou in 1890, significantly advanced the cause of women through promoting girls' education, supporting professional women, and developing children's nurseries. Some women missionaries advocated the freedom of Chinese women by organizing an anti-footbinding society. At that time, women's footbinding represented their humiliating status as men's playthings. The Door of Hope, another church-related organization in Shanghai, provided a safe haven for women who had been forced into prostitution. Despite the beneficial impact that the church had on women, the problem of women's inequality was largely a social problem which could not be adequately addressed until the social system was changed.

After the founding of the New China, the first constitution formulated in 1954 stipulated equal rights for women in terms of their political, economic, cultural, social, and family life. The improvement of women's economic status is illustrated dramatically by the marked increase in the number of women employed. Economic independence is considered to be a prerequisite of women's emancipation. There were only 600,000 women employed across the country, accounting for 7.5% of the total workforce in 1949. In 1989 this number had increased to 50.36 million women employed making up about 37% of the workforce. Today, they enjoy equal work, equal pay, and a seventy-day maternity leave with full pay.

In recent years more and more talented women have emerged. By studying hard and working diligently, they have become active participants in both social and economic developments as well as in the area of commodity production. In rural areas women take up a wide range of work including farming, weaving, embroidering, and tailoring. In urban areas some women have become directors and managers of various enterprises and factories, while other women are outstanding in the fields of science and technology.

The position of women in the church has also greatly changed. Women are no longer inferior members waiting for others' sympathy and help, rather, they have raised their consciousness to the level where they are faithful and useful elements in the building of the church. There is a saying prevailing in China today, "Women hold up half of the sky." Recently, however, it has been modified as women assert that because they make up more than half of the church membership, they should "hold up more than half of the sky in church." The implication of this suggestion is that women would devote more to the church which indeed they already do.

Though very few church women, with the exception of female theological students, know anything about feminist theology, the essence of feminist theology with its emphasis on women and men being created in the image of God and on women's right to know God and serve God from their own contexts, is fully appreciated. Of course there are some Christians who are influenced by the theological approach which preaches women's submission to men, yet most Chinese Christians stand on Galatians 3:28 and insist that male and female are one in Christ. My interpretation of Ephesians 5:22 where Paul said that wives should submit to their husbands has two levels. First, this statement should be taken metaphorically to be referring to the relationship between the Church and Christ. Secondly, it should be taken in the context with the previous verse as a general principle for all Christians to submit to one another (this includes men submitting to women).

Before 1949 there were very few women pastors in China. The Rev. Lee Tim-oi of the Anglican Church was the earliest ordained in the year 1944 during the time of the Japanese occupation. However, her ordination was not fully recognized by the Anglican Communion, and she could not exercise her pastoral duties for a long time. In recent years, in response to the urgent need for pastoral care, women's ordination has been widely accepted. By the end of 1989, there were 90 women pastors nationwide, nearly all of whom were ordained after 1981. They make up just under ten percent of the total number of pastors in China. In the thirteen theological training centers, women make up nearly half of the student body.

I do not, however, want to give a rosy picture without mentioning our difficulties. With regard to women's equality with men, some feudalistic ideas still persist in the mindset of the people. Some recent social trends are worthy of concern. For example, though the constitution guarantees women's basic rights, some factories refuse to accept women into their enterprises arguing from the pretext that women get married and get pregnant and take maternity leave which decreases the production of the company. Even among college graduates, men are more welcomed than women. A second trend stems from China's problem of over population. China has 1.16 billion people which makes family planning a necessity

rather than an option if the standard of living of all people is to be raised. Because every family is expected to have only one child, female infants are sometimes discriminated against and even maltreated. This is especially true in the countryside where quite a number of people think that only a boy can carry on the family line.

In addition to the problems which stem from the remnants of feudalism, China's policy of openness to the outside world has resulted in the infiltration of many unhealthy western influences which are harmful to young girls in the large cities.

Chinese women today shoulder dual duties entrusted by society and family. Being a career women and a good wife at the same time is something not easy to balance. Wages in China are low, and household duties are heavy. There has been a debate among women workers in Shanghai on the topic, "shall women go back home or still keep their job?" Ninety-five percent are for the latter because they fear that they would lose their independence again if they could not earn their own living. The fact is that competition is the crucial reality of modern society. Women must maintain their sense of four-selves (i.e. self-respect, self-help, self-reliance, and self-development) in order to improve their abilities and raise their position in society.

In our church today, I would not think that women's ministry is limited by discrimination. The cooperation and relationships between men and women church workers is good. The problem is that church women, in general, are not as well educated or trained as men. Despite their hard work and widespread participation, women have not well organized themselves nor have they adequately raised their level of theological understanding. In the local congregation, gifted women assume the responsibility of taking care of the flock, and they are loved and honored by Christians, especially women. But at a higher level, few women are recommended to occupy leading posts. Of the 71 standing committee members of our national Three-self Movement Committee and China Christian Council, only ten are women. We are going to hold the fifth national Christian Conference in 1991, and we hope to raise the percentage of women delegates to 30%.

Please pray for Chinese church women that we might play a more important role in our church and in our society.

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