

Main | Other Chinese Web Sites

Chinese Cultural Studies:  
Women in China: Past and the Present

Compiled from various sources, including Compton's Living Encyclopedia on America Online (August 1995), The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The San Jose Mercury.

#### MODERN CHINESE SOCIETY AND THE FAMILY [Compton's]

Traditionally the family has been the most important unit of society, and this is still true. The family is also an important economic unit. In rural areas, where about 74 percent of China's people live, the traditional family consisted of the head of the household, his sons, and their wives and children, often living under one roof. Common surnames gave families membership in a clan. In some villages all families had the same surname, or four or five surname clans might account for most of the villagers.

Land, the main form of wealth in traditional China, was divided equally among all the landowner's surviving sons when he died. Thus, as China's population grew, the landholdings became smaller and smaller, and many people were very poor. In the first half of the 20th century the family as a social unit came under severe stress. Rural conditions were bad, income was low, and food was often scarce. Health care was poor or nonexistent for most peasants, and mortality rates were high. Civil unrest, warfare, and foreign invasions added to the difficulties.

After the Communist revolution in 1949 rural conditions stabilized. Private ownership of land was abolished, but each peasant family was given a small plot to farm. Health care improved. The fluctuations in the food supply leveled off and life expectancy increased. Living conditions for the average peasant are generally better today than they were in 1949, and there are opportunities for at least some education. All these things have meant a considerable improvement in the quality of life and greater security for the family as a social unit.

Today some rural families are still likely to have three generations under one roof. Despite state ownership of the land, they once again serve as basic production units. The Production Responsibility System, initiated in 1978, permits individual families to contract with their local production team or

brigade to lease land for farming. Production quotas are also contracted. Whatever is left after taxes are paid and quotas are met belongs to the family.

If a family works hard, it can meet its contract quotas and also produce a surplus for consumption or sale. This program was designed to stimulate production, but one result has been to strengthen the role of the traditional family as a consuming and producing unit.

Urban family life is different from that in rural areas. In the cities, families usually are smaller, often composed only of parents and children. Since both parents work, the children are left in day-care centers or schools. Sometimes couples are split up if their work units are not close together, and husband and wife may see each other only rarely. Despite such problems, family life for most people in the cities is stable, and family ties continue to play a major role in the lives of both parents and children.

## THE BURDEN OF WOMANHOOD: THIRD WORLD, SECOND CLASS

Washington Post , April 25, 1993

By JOHN WARD ANDERSON AND MOLLY MOORE

When Rani returned home from the hospital cradling her newborn daughter, the men in the family slipped out of her mud hut while she and her mother-in-law mashed poisonous oleander seeds into a dollop of oil and forced it down the infant's throat.

As soon as darkness fell, Rani crept into a nearby field and buried her baby girl in a shallow, unmarked grave next to a small stream.

"I never felt any sorrow," Rani, a farm laborer with a weather-beaten face, said through an interpreter. "There was a lot of bitterness in my heart toward the baby because the gods should have given me a son."

Each year hundreds and perhaps thousands of newborn girls in India are murdered by their mothers simply because they are female. Some women believe that sacrificing a daughter guarantees a son in the next pregnancy. In other cases, the family cannot afford the dowry that would eventually be demanded for a girl's marriage.

And for many mothers, sentencing a daughter to death is better than condemning her to life as a woman in the Third World, with cradle-to-grave discrimination, poverty, sickness and drudgery.

“In a culture that idolizes sons and dreads the birth of a daughter, to be born female comes perilously close to being born less than human,” the Indian government conceded in a recent report by its Department of Women and Child Development.

While women in the United States and Europe often measure sex discrimination by pay scales and seats in corporate board rooms, women in the Third World gauge discrimination by mortality rates and poverty levels.

“Women are the most exploited among the oppressed,” said Karuna Chanana Ahmed, a New Delhi anthropologist. “I don’t think it’s even possible to eradicate discrimination, it’s so deeply ingrained.”

From South America to South Asia, women are often subjected to a lifetime of discrimination with little or no hope of relief. As children, they are fed less, denied education and refused hospitalization. As teen-agers, many are forced into marriage, sometimes bought and sold for prostitution and slave labor. As wives and mothers, they are treated little better than farmhands and baby machines. Should they outlive their husbands, they frequently are denied inheritance, banished from their homes and forced to live as beggars on the streets.

While the forms of discrimination vary tremendously among regions, ethnic groups and age levels in the developing world, Shahla Zia, an attorney and women’s activist in Islamabad, Pakistan, said there is a unifying theme: “Overall, there is a social and cultural attitude where women are inferior -- and discrimination tends to start at birth.”

A woman’s greatest challenge is an elemental one: simply surviving through a normal life cycle. In South Asia and China, the perils begin at birth, with the threat of infanticide.

Like many rural Indian women, Rani, now 31, believed that killing her daughter 3 1/2 years ago would guarantee that her next baby would be a boy.

Instead, she had another daughter.

“I wanted to kill this child also,” she said, brushing strands of hair from the face of the 2-year-old girl she named Asha, or Hope. “But my husband got scared because all these social workers came and said, ‘Give us the child.’” Ultimately, Rani was allowed to keep her.

She paused. “Now I have killed, and I still haven’t had any sons.” Amravati, who lives in a village near Rani in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, said she killed two of her own day-old daughters by pouring scalding chicken soup down their throats, one of the most widely practiced methods of infanticide

in southern India. She showed where she buried their bodies -- under piles of cow dung in the tiny courtyard of her home.

“My mother-in-law and father-in-law are bedridden,” said Amravati, who has two living daughters. “I have no land and no salary, and my husband met with an accident and can't work. Of course it was the right decision. I need a boy. Even though I have to buy clothes and food for a son, he will grow on his own and take care of himself. I don't have to buy him jewelry or give him a 10,000-rupee (\$350) dowry.”

Sociologists and government officials began documenting sporadic examples of female infanticide in India about 10 years ago. The practice of killing newborn girls is largely a rural phenomenon in India; although its extent has not been documented, one indication came in a survey by the Community Services Guild of Madras, a city in Tamil Nadu. Of the 1,250 women questioned, the survey concluded that more than half had killed baby daughters.

#### Sex-selective abortion

In urban areas, easier access to modern medical technology enables women to act before birth. Through amniocentesis, women can learn the sex of a fetus and undergo sex-selective abortions. At one clinic in Bombay, of 8,000 abortions performed after amniocentesis, 7,999 were of female fetuses, according to a recent report by the Indian government.

Female infanticide and sex-selective abortion are not unique to India. Social workers in other South Asian states believe that some communities also condone the practice.

The root problems, according to village women, sociologists and other experts, are cultural and economic. In India, a young woman is regarded as a temporary member of her natural family and a drain on its wealth. Her parents are considered caretakers whose main responsibility is to deliver a chaste daughter, along with a sizable dowry, to her husband's family.

“They say bringing up a girl is like watering a neighbor's plant,” said R. Venkatachalam, director of the Community Services Guild of Madras. “From birth to death, the expenditure is there.” The dowry, he said, often wipes out a family's life savings but is necessary to arrange a proper marriage and maintain the honor of the bride's family.

After giving birth to a daughter, village women “immediately start thinking, ‘Do we have the money to support her through life?’ and if they don't, they kill her,” according to Vasanthai, 20, the mother of an 18-month-old girl and a resident of the village where Rani lives. “You definitely do it after two or three daughters. Why would you want more?”

Few activists or government officials in India see female infanticide as a law-and-order issue, viewing it instead as a social problem that should be eradicated through better education, family planning and job programs. Police officials say few cases are reported and witnesses seldom cooperate.

“There are more pressing issues,” said a Madras police official. “Very few cases come to our attention. Very few people care.”

Surviving childbirth is itself an achievement in South Asia for both mother and baby. One of every 18 women dies of a pregnancy-related cause, and more than one of every 10 babies dies during delivery.

For female children, the survival odds are even worse. Almost one in every five girls born in Nepal and Bangladesh dies before age 5. In India, about one-fourth of the 12 million girls born each year die by age 15.

The high death rates are not coincidental. Across the developing world, female children are fed less, pulled out of school earlier, forced into hard labor sooner and given less medical care than boys.

#### A girl's life

Boys are generally breast-fed longer. In many cultures, women and girls eat leftovers after the men and boys have finished their meals.

Women are often hospitalized only when they have reached a critical stage of illness, which is one reason so many mothers die in childbirth. Female children often are not hospitalized at all. A 1990 study of patient records at Islamabad Children's Hospital in Pakistan found that 71 percent of the babies admitted under age 2 were boys. For all age groups, twice as many boys as girls were admitted to the hospital's surgery, pediatric intensive care and diarrhea units. Mary Okumu, an official with the African Medical and Research Foundation in Nairobi, said that when a worker in drought-ravaged northern Kenya asked why only boys were lined up at a clinic, the worker was told that in times of drought, many families let their daughters die.

“Nobody will even take them to a clinic,” Okumu said. “They prefer the boy to survive.”

For most girls, however, the biggest barrier -- and the one that locks generations of women into a cycle of discrimination -- is lack of education.

Across the developing world, girls are withdrawn from school years before boys so they can remain at home and lug water, work the fields, raise

younger siblings and help with other domestic chores. By the time girls are 10 or 12 years old, they may put in as much as an eight-hour workday, studies show.

#### Held out of schools

Statistics from Pakistan demonstrate the low priority given to female education: Only one-third of the country's schools -- which are sexually segregated -- are for women, and one-third of those have no building. Almost 90 percent of the women over age 25 are illiterate. In the predominantly rural state of Baluchistan, less than 2 percent of women can read and write.

Across South Asia, arranged marriages are the norm and can sometimes be the most demeaning rite of passage a woman endures. Two types are common: bride wealth, in which the bride's family essentially gives her to the highest bidder, and dowry, in which the bride's family pays exorbitant amounts to the husband's family.

In India, many men resort to killing their wives -- often by setting them afire -- if they are unhappy with the dowry. According to the country's Ministry of Human Resource Development, there were 5,157 dowry murders in 1991 -- one every hour and 42 minutes.

#### A pregnant life

According to a 1988 report by India's Department of Women and Child Development: "The Indian woman on an average has eight to nine pregnancies, resulting in a little over six live births, of which four or five survive. She is estimated to spend 80 percent of her reproductive years in pregnancy and lactation."

A recent study of the small Himalayan village of Bemru by the New Delhi-based Center for Science and the Environment found that "birth in most cases takes place in the cattle shed," where villagers believe that holy cows protect the mother and newborn from evil spirits. Childbirth is considered unclean, and the mother and their newborn are treated as "untouchables" for about two weeks after delivery.

"It does not matter if the woman is young, old or pregnant, she has no rest, Sunday or otherwise," the study said, noting that women in the village did 59 percent of the work, often laboring 14 hours a day and lugging loads 1 1/2 times their body weight. "After two or three . . . pregnancies, their stamina gives up, they get weaker, and by the late thirties are spent out, old and tired, and soon die."

In Kenya and Tanzania, laws prohibit women from owning houses. In Pakistan, a daughter legally is entitled to half the inheritance that a son gets when their parents die. In some criminal cases, testimony by women is legally given half the weight of a man's testimony, and compensation for the wrongful death of a woman is half that for the wrongful death of a man.

### Widows weep

After a lifetime of brutal physical labor, multiple births, discrimination and sheer tedium, what should be a woman's golden years often hold the worst indignities. In India, a woman's identity is so intertwined and subservient to her husband's that if she outlives him, her years as a widow are spent as a virtual nonentity.

In previous generations, many women were tied to their husband's funeral pyres and burned to death, a practice called suttee that now rarely occurs.

Today, some widows voluntarily shave their heads and withdraw from society, but more often a Spartan lifestyle is forced upon them by families and a society that place no value on old, single women.

Widowhood carries such a stigma that remarriage is extremely rare, even for women who are widowed as teen-agers.

In South Asia, women have few property or inheritance rights, and a husband's belongings usually are transferred to sons and occasionally daughters. A widow must rely on the largess of her children, who often cast their mothers on the streets.

Thousands of destitute Indian widows make the pilgrimage to Vrindaban, a town on the outskirts of Agra where they hope to achieve salvation by praying to the god Krishna. About 1,500 widows show up each day at the ShriBhagwan prayer house, where in exchange for singing "Hare Rama, Hare Krishna" for eight hours, they are given a handful of rice and beans and 1.5 rupees, or about 5 cents.

On a street there, an elderly woman waves a begging cup at passing strangers. "I have nobody," said Paddo Chowdhury, 65, who became a widow at 18 and has been in Vrindaban for 30 years. "I sit here, shed my tears and get enough food one way or another."

Divorce in Modern China. New York Times August 22, 1994

By SETH FAISON

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BEIJING - For centuries, ordinary Chinese have greeted each other on the street with a question that reflected the nation's primary concern: ``Chi le ma?" or ``Have you eaten?"

Now, according to a popular joke in Beijing, people who see a friend on the street voice a new concern with a new question: ``Li le ma?" - ``Have you divorced?"

In China, where rapid economic growth is creating new hopes and fears and where government interference in personal lives is receding daily, many

Beijing residents say one of the most profound changes in their society is the surge in divorce.

The divorce rate in Beijing leapt to 24.4 percent in 1994, more than double the 12 percent rate just four years ago, Beijing Youth Daily reported this month. Although statistics can be misleading - the divorce rate is measured by comparing the number of marriages and divorces in a given year - officials say it is rising all over China, and faster in cities than in the countryside.

The national divorce rate is now 10.4 percent, still far behind the United States, where the divorce rate rose sharply in the 1970s to around 50 percent, where it has remained.

The U.N. conference on women, to be held here from Sept. 4 to 15, is expected to draw attention to the social and economic ills facing women in China and elsewhere.

Yet for women in Beijing, the growing divorce rate is a reflection of a new social and economic freedom, of the rising expectations that women bring to marriage, and of damaging effects from what many Beijing residents say is a remarkable increase in adulterous affairs. More than 70 percent of divorces are now initiated by women, divorce lawyers say, and the most common reason given is that a husband has had an affair.

``Only a few years ago, people would let a temple be destroyed before they would let a marriage fail," said Pi Xiaoming, a leading divorce lawyer whose work at the East Beijing Women's Federation used to involve applying intense pressure on couples not to divorce.

``We did everything possible to keep people from separating," Ms. Pi said. ``If there was 1 percent chance of saving a marriage, we'd expend all our effort to overcome the 99 percent of difficulty."



Now, Ms. Pi and other government officials who once actively opposed divorce support it as an acceptable alternative to an unhappy marriage, and a divorce that once took years to win approval can now be processed in three days if both sides agree. Many officials even recognize a positive side of divorce.

“The high rate of divorce reflects a kind of ‘master of my own fate’ notion among urban residents,” wrote the Beijing Youth Daily. “From an overall perspective, the high rate of divorce represents a kind of social advancement.”

But the government's shift in attitude is only one ingredient in the rising divorce rate. A larger one seems to be growing demands by women in an era of expanding opportunity.

“My husband used to say, ‘You have your job, your study overseas, a roof over your head, what more do you want?’” said Liang Hua, 41, who divorced last year. “What I wanted was a husband who didn't sit at home all day, watching sports on television.”

If most Chinese men still look for a stable home and a reliable mother for their children, several women in different professions agreed, women who used to be content with a steady family income now want more: romance, sex, and affection.

“My husband never kissed me, not once,” said Lan Ding, 40, a self-employed tailor who said she had divorced her husband, an air force officer, because of the way he treated her. “We had a child, but he never kissed me. I only learned how to do that much later.”

One of the most popular books in Beijing this year is “The Bridges of Madison County,” the American best seller whose story of a midlife affair that brings romance to a woman's life clearly struck a chord here. Several women said they had spent evenings sitting around with friends, debating whether the romance described in the book is possible in marriage.

“Before, marriage was very stable, but the quality was very low,” said Wang Xingjuan, who listens to hundreds of complaints each month on the women's hot line she runs in Beijing. “It was something you did and didn't think about. Now, people have high expectations from marriage.”

Ms. Wang also said that most Chinese women traditionally had sex only for the purpose of bearing children. But China's one-child policy, while resisted by many women in the countryside, has made urban women freer both to pursue careers and to pursue sex. “Now it's for pleasure, for health,” Ms. Wang said.

Wu Liyong, a 36-year-old director of a food products company in Beijing, said one of the causes of her divorce earlier this year, after 12 years of marriage, was an unsatisfactory sex life.

“We were taught that the man is the one to initiate sex,” she said. “I didn’t say anything for a long time. But when I finally talked about it with my friends, they told me I was stupid. I feel like I wasted 10 years.”

If China’s economic reforms have brought greater independence to women in some ways - more choice of career, place to live, husband, lover - they have also brought women a greater danger of unemployment than men face.

At the same time, the loosening of government control has also meant a resurgence of traditional attitudes among men: that money means access to women.

“Men like to see women as objects,” said Feng Yuan, an editor at China Women’s News who has written extensively on how social changes affect women. “They feel that the more they achieve, the more ability or charisma they have.”

A 32-year-old man who works for a securities company in Shanghai said that he was faithful to his wife during the three years they dated before marriage, but that he started having affairs about six months afterward.

“Chinese men need other women,” said the man, who added that many of his friends feel the same way. “Family life is one thing; life outside is another. You don’t have to hide it; everyone at work knows who my girlfriend is.”

Part of the broader problem, both women and men say, is that Chinese society does not teach men to treat their wives well.

“My husband was a good worker, a good son to his parents, a good father to his son, and a terrible husband,” said Ms. Lan, the woman who divorced an air force officer. “That’s what our society teaches men to do.”

Ms. Feng, the newspaper editor, thinks that one of several causes of the rising divorce rate is the influx of books and movies from the West.

“Ten years ago, the government blamed affairs on ‘bourgeois liberalization,’ ” code words for Western influence, she said. “But it was counterproductive because it made a lot of people think, now that capitalism is OK, it’s also OK to have affairs, too.”

The current surge in divorce is not the first in modern China. The 1950 constitution and a new marriage law, which redefined rights within families,

encouraged a wave of divorces in the early 1950s. Many of these were initiated by communist army soldiers who, after their victory in 1949, moved to cities and divorced wives they had married in rural hometowns but abandoned during the long years of war against the Japanese and Chinese Nationalists.

At the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, when millions of lives were shattered by accusations of political incorrectness, many people were forced to divorce a spouse for political reasons. After that period of turmoil ended in 1976, many others divorced spouses they had married in unusual circumstances, though no reliable statistics have been kept on what the divorce rates were at that time, Ms. Feng said.

For all the women who have divorced, there are countless more who have considered it but been unable or unwilling to do so.

At the women's hot line, run out of a small office in central Beijing, a recent caller described herself as a 31-year-old doctor who has been married to a businessman eight years and has a small daughter.

When she discovered that her husband was having an affair, she asked for a divorce. He refused, saying that he wanted to stay married for the sake of their child, and tried to soothe his wife by saying he would buy them a new house and give her a car of her own, still a rarity in China.

"I don't know what do," said the woman, who can still win a divorce if she demonstrates that she is incompatible with her husband. "I want to rely on myself, but I don't want to have a less comfortable life."

Ms. Lan said she urged many of her friends not to follow her own example, because of the economic difficulty she has had raising a son on her own, and because of the hard time she has had finding another man.

"A lot of people still see a divorced woman as immoral, but see a divorced man as fine," Ms. Lan said.

As for her son, Wang Xiyue, 14, Ms. Lan used to worry that he would be the only student in his class whose parents are divorced. She doesn't worry any more.

"There are six of them now," she said, affectionately rubbing a hand over his head. "It's getting more and more common."