Women's Roles in China: Changes Over Time

The family has traditionally been the basic unit of Chinese society, where women have long been charged with upholding society's values in their roles as wives and mothers. While the expected values changed from the imperial period to the Communist revolution to the modern day, this responsibility for women remained constant. Women were required to balance society's ideals with the reality of raising a family and maintaining a household.

Women in Traditional China

Throughout the imperial period and into the beginning of the twentieth century, the relationship among family members was prescribed by Confucian teachings. The revered philosopher sought order in the ancient ties within a family and codified the position of the male patriarch as the sole arbiter for the family unit. All family members were subordinate to the eldest male, just as all loyal subjects were subservient to the Celestial Emperor. This hierarchy also dictated relationships between a husband and his wife and concubines, a father and his children, and an elder and younger sibling. Marriages, births, and deaths were all accompanied by rituals designed to reinforce these unequal but mutually supportive roles. Matchmakers usually arranged marriages for the mutual benefit of both families, often without the prior knowledge or consent of either bride or groom. Brides' families paid a dowry and women were given articles to set up their households and valuables to maintain them if their husband's family did not. Traditional Chinese architecture reinforced the unequal familial relationships. Houses protected and sheltered the family, especially women, from outsiders. Filial piety (obligation to one's family) was the overriding social moré of traditional China.

The status of women was set at birth. Sons were cherished additions to a family, not only for their physical and economic ability to contribute to the family, but also as the carrier of the family name. Only a son could provide for his elderly parents and properly venerate his ancestors. Daughters were considered a "small happiness" because they would marry into another family. To make a daughter more desirable to a potential spouse, her feet were broken and bound to produce three to four inch stubs suitable only for teetering around the house. In times of famine or dangerous warfare, daughters were the last to be fed, and newborn girls were smothered. While such severe actions were rare, they did occur and left a lasting legacy of discrimination against females.

Women in Revolutionary China

In the second half of the twentieth century, the family underwent considerable change with respect to filial piety and the position of women. The Communist Revolution set out to destroy traditional familial bonds by attacking the Four Olds--old ideas, habits, customs, and culture--and by elevating women to an equal position as comrades in arms. Key strategies were the use of propaganda posters and repetitive community meetings to purge Confucian ideals from people's thoughts. The Marriage Law of 1950 outlawed many harsh practices directed against women, including arranged marriages, concubinage, dowries, and child brides. Women were also granted the right to file for a divorce. These beneficial changes for women embodied all that the Communist Party wanted to see as new in the "new" China.
As the Chinese Communist Party centralized its power, women's rights were subjugated to the greater goal of running the country. Women often had contradictory goals placed before them. They entered the workforce, but were also expected to have many children in support of the revolution. Red Guards and other urban youth were often separated from their parents and sent to the countryside as Mao's words of wisdom replaced those taught at home. A common phrase was "Father is close, Mother is close, but neither is as close as Chairman Mao." During the Cultural Revolution, femininity was hidden under unisex clothing, and women were often blamed when they suffered sexual harassment or abuse. The population explosion placed new burdens on women, including their responsibility in adhering to the one-child-per-couple policy. Girls were the immediate victims of this policy, as many of their births went unregistered, or worse, were aborted. The effects of advanced technology, such as ultrasound detection, coupled with the traditional preference for male offspring left China with a significant gender gap and thousands of bachelors.

Women in Modern China

The economic reforms of the last twenty-five years have also affected Chinese women. As guaranteed employment under the state-controlled economy disappeared, women have lost ground. Both men and women have actively sought employment outside and often far away from their homes. Today, migration into cities from the countryside is illegal in China, yet millions of peasants arrive in urban areas looking for work each day. Many migrants are young women whose families cannot provide for them in their home villages.

At the same time, because many girls are singletons, they are showered with all of their family's resources to receive a top-notch education. They now compete for enrollment in the best universities and for employment in the most competitive companies. Women are often waiting longer until marriage, although their ability to marry ultimately depends on the approval of their work units. A couple must have approval from these units before they can marry, and many people in China receive housing and health care benefits from them.

Chinese women have withstood incredible pressures to conform to the ideals and norms established by the Chinese state. Whether it was Confucian values, revolutionary Maoist ideals, or the search for economic and educational advancement, women have endured numerous changes as they bent with the prevailing political winds. While political policies were often created by men, women had some control over how these policies played out in their daily lives. Although many women were pushed to conform, some rebelled in small and large ways. Throughout the tumultuous twentieth century, the family is still the basic unit of Chinese society and women are still expected to be wives and mothers. Many elements of traditional Chinese culture survive and are interwoven with modern arrangements. Family members demonstrate a tremendous respect and deference for each member, especially those in the eldest generation. Children are cherished. Marriages and deaths are marked by rituals that display the importance of continuing the family lineage. The next generation of women is seeking a new identity in China. To what degree Chinese women will retain these traditions as they craft new identities in today's China is a sensitive matter that the next generation of women will need to resolve.