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Chinese metaphysics recognized two forces at work in life: the Yang or dominant male element and the Yin or subordinate female element. The philosophy of Confucius, the "code of filial piety", was strictly adhered to, and acted as a prevailing influence on the Chinese people in the pre-revolutionary period. The philosophers of the ruling class made it a law of nature that women should be inferior to men. Chinese ethics seldom fought against the evil treatment of women. Patriarchal Chinese society rested on the position of the Elders and their possession of women as material sources of wealth.

The manifestations of the subordination of women were oppressive and horrifying, to say the least. Girls were killed at birth by parents too poor to support them. Women were the first to be sold into slavery during famine or periods of heavy taxation, and they were the last to receive medical aid or food. So inferior were they considered, that often girls' names were only a number until they were married, when the addition "married to so and so" was added to their name. Sometimes Gun-di ("who will make way for a brother") was also added.

Arranged marriages were prevalent, where many young girls were found having committed suicide the night before the wedding ceremony, as the only way they knew to free themselves from their circumstances. Once married, a bride moved to her husband's home, where the extended family, including the husband's parents and siblings, placed her on the lowest rung of the existing family hierarchy.

The best looking women were captured by the Kuomintang and or Japanese armies, for purposes of entertainment. In many cases they were concubines to feudal lords, in whose homes they produced wealth through their labour, but also many sons, and thus contributed to the gentry's local political power.

Prostitution flourished, particularly in the large urban centres, especially in Shanghai, which was considered to be the greatest market place for women in the world. The prostitutes, owned by men or groups of men, were tortured if they dared protest against their oppression. The custom of foot-binding began with the upper classes, who, objectifying women as possessions, could afford economically useless ones. Within the structure of the Chinese family, the only women with power were mothers-in-law, who, in their husbands' household, had control over their sons' wives.

Sisterhoods of single women were formed in an attempt to retaliate against women's oppression. These women would make vows never to marry, and cases were reported where bands of them committed mass suicide in loyalty to one sister forced to marry.

But until Liberation in 1949, ideas about women's welfare and equality, although slowly beginning to spread, affected only the upper classes, and bad conditions continued to exist for the poor. Even with Chiang Kai-shek's reforms, rural women continued to be oppressed. The reason Chiang's regime could not improve the status of rural women and very often made it worse, was above all "...due to the fact that the Kuomintang never squarely faced up to the semi-feudal land relationships which, unless abolished, guaranteed that

the chinese woman ~

on her way

farm women would remain serfs and without them, a great proportion of men, too."

While not repudiating women's equality, the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek not only failed to develop their own program for promoting the women's movement, but actually hunted radical women down on the suspicion that they must be communists. Girls and women were killed on the evidence of their bobbed hair alone.

In 1945, the Communist 8th Route Army formed the Women's Associations. Within these associations a woman could, with the support of fellow suffering women, make public for the first time the brutality she had to endure from her husband and his family. These meetings were called "Speak Bitterness" meetings, and gave women a chance to talk about their lives and come up with solutions. Men accused of brutality toward their wives were "brought to the gate" where, in a public forum, they were given an opportunity to confess their outrageous behavior and promise to reform. If they refused, the women used threats of violence or actual beating until the men were prepared to confess. Since a sophisticated ideology would not be enough at the beginning to counter-act traditional chauvinist attitudes, such tactics were necessary and served to assure the guilty that the women were serious. Guarantors were appointed to ensure that the men kept their promises, and if they didn't, they were brought back to the gate for repeated beatings.

Needless to say, the formation of the Women's Associations caused a domestic crisis in homes where previously-accepted oppression was now being disrupted. Through the associations, literacy classes were organized, as well as classes in politics and women's rights. Looms were made to stimulate weaving and spinning, and classes were transformed into groups where the women worked together rather than as individuals isolated in their homes.

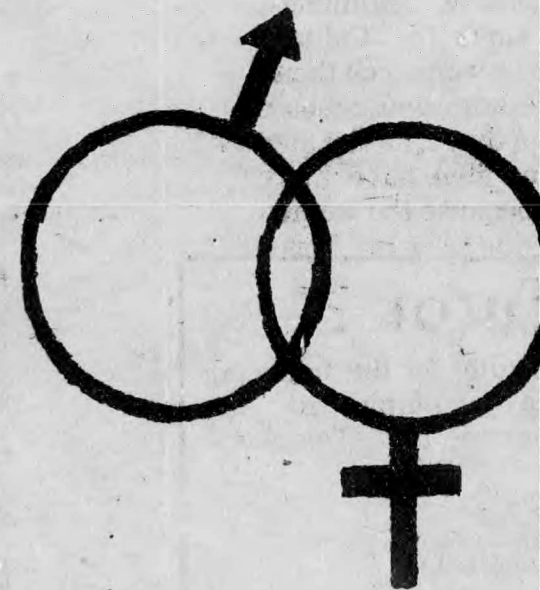
The Marriage Law, passed in 1950, just months following Liberation and the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949, was the first official step toward ending the legal oppression of Chinese women and constituted the actual beginning of their emancipation. Women were declared equal to men, were allowed to own material possessions and to take jobs and raise their children. Dowries and forced marriages were abolished, venereal disease was taken under control, women were given an equal right to divorce, and, most significantly, they were given the right to own property and land in their own name, which gave them independence from their husbands and a sense of economic freedom they had never experienced before.

Brothels were closed, allowing prostitutes to rejoin society, "not as outcasts, but as rehabilitated victims of old China".

The Chinese Communist Party's analysis of women is in accord with Canadian feminist Margaret Benston's analysis of the relationship of women to the capitalist economy. Benston shows how women's

powerless position is determined by their inability to take an active role in capitalist production. Women have little control over the conditions that govern their lives, and their economic dependence on men is reflected in emotional dependence, passivity, and other "typical" female personality traits. Thus women tend to be conservative, fearful, and supportive of the status quo.

Benston indicates that society has to take responsibility for the work which is currently done "privately" by housewives. Housework must be integrated into the public economy, through the setting up of day-care centres, communal eating places, and public laundries. As Benston says,



"when such work is moved into the public sector, then the material basis for discrimination against women will be gone."

Benston's theory, which to a great extent derives from Engels, has been the starting point for a great debate in the women's movement. History seems to show that although socialism carries with it vast improvements in women's position, it has not yet managed to establish full equality of the sexes in any country. China is a case in point. There, discrimination against women continues to exist, in practice if not in theory, in spite of massive gains since 1949.

Half of China's doctors are women, and women comprise more than half the work force in the textile industry. All highly mechanized tasks are done by both men and women.

Most jobs in heavy industry are performed by men. A small percentage of women are employed in heavy industry, but their tasks are usually confined to painting the finished machines or working in the day-care centres.

Most nursery and elementary school teachers are women. While women are