

CHINESE GENDER RELATIONS

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Introduction Chinese society in the late neolithic and early bronze ages developed largely independent of other ancient societies. As a result, there are a number of distinctive features infrequently seen in other areas of the ancient world. How or why this combination of attributes emerged as it did is not known. Nonetheless, these achievements: a strict patriarchy and social structure built on Confucian and Daoists ethics; a strong, highly centralized, interventionist government in an era when that was rarely seen; and a commitment to social order and the greater good over individual rights and liberty, converged to produce an ideal that has endured for more than 4000 years. Of course, there have been periods of divergence and of great social disruption, such as the integration of Buddhism, the Mongol invasions, and the leveling of society under communism. Indeed, each ruler and every generation have left their own mark on China. Nevertheless, the idea of “China”—its identity—has remained steadfast in essential ways across many different epochs, at least among the ruling elites. Chinese civilization, despite interludes and discontinuity, has endured.

PREHISTORY—The Neolithic Age (10,000-2000 BCE)

Gender relationships. Daughters were likely married out but sons likely were not. Women were pregnant for many if not most of their childbearing years and often died in childbirth. Men hunted, fished and fought, and suffered injury and death from those activities. Though likely, it is not known whether serial monogamy was practiced in mating partners. Boys learned life skills from older men in the group and girls learned from older women. To the extent possible, families cared for the old and infirm, although few would have survived into their dotage. The struggle to survive in an age where disease, injury and unexpected death were constant companions even for the young and healthy provides context for social relationships. It indicates that flexibility and utilitarianism must surely have governed most of humanity. Orphans must have been adopted, widows remarried and wanderers taken in.

BRONZE AGE (2000 BCE-600 BCE)

Gender. In bronze age China, gender roles were well established. Family units were dominated by a patriarchy and women were rarely allowed to participate in public life. This attitude reflects the social milieu just before the time of Confucius, who taught that only men were head of household and women bore children and took care of the family. In particular, women were expected to bear a son who would eventually become head of household and pass on the family name. This was her foremost duty. Still, peasant women worked alongside their husband in the rice paddies during the labor intensive planting and harvesting season. As the Zhou dynasty began to decline, in the 7th century BCE, the fighting season began to lengthen. Men went to fight, kill and be killed, thereby leaving many women the total responsibility for subsistence and family life for longer periods of time. Of course, social convention often did not (and still does not) apply to aristocratic women, some of whom emerged to become prominent figures in society.

IRON AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)

Gender. Along with Confucianism, which restricted the position of women in society, Daoism also played a role in the social structure. The concept of yin and yang illustrates this duality. Women were understood to represent yin: passive, soft and reflective. Yin was associated with darkness and carried a negative connotation in Chinese society. Men represented yang, which is active and assertive. It was associated with light and positive energy. These forces: light and darkness, positive and negative, hard and soft, active and passive help to maintain harmony in the universe. For iron age Chinese, this was the natural order of the world. However, it should be noted that, theoretically, neither side was to dominate the other. Instead, they were to complement each other. By the time of the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE), the legal system had relegated women to second-class status. Women could only be head of household if there was no adult male and were never able to initiate divorce proceeding from their husband for any reason. And, of course, men of means could take as many concubines as they desired and could afford.

POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD (500 CE-1500 CE)

Gender. Women could not aspire to serve the state. The Confucian elites articulated a moral code which kept women both out of public service and even out of the public eye. If possible, it was the job of women to stay at home, take care of the household and prioritize either fathers, husbands or sons. Women's goals and aspirations were always secondary to those of the men around her. Strict adherence to this code was complicated for peasants and laborers. Peasant women worked alongside their husbands in the fields and rice paddies.

Foot-binding. In the Song period (960-1279), if not before, there arose the custom of foot binding among those who could afford it. It is not clear why this particular activity began, but it had the effect of crippling any woman who had the misfortune of experiencing it. Late in childhood, girls' toes were doubled under the soles of their feet, bound tightly and kept there as their feet grew. This was a very painful ordeal. Over time, it retarded the growth of bones in the feet and created very small feet that were said to resemble the beauty of a golden lotus. Women with bound feet were unable to walk very far or engage in any sort of work which required them to stand for long periods of time. It was not possible to work in the fields or rice paddies. However, this condition conveyed status and made women more desirable for marriage. Though foot binding was outlawed in the early 20th century, it existed in the rural areas for another decade or so. Today, a tiny number of very elderly women with bound feet survive in China.

Concubinage and Polygamy. Women in China also had to endure the peculiar institution of concubinage. Concubines existed in all societies in the pre-modern world. In China, it existed until outlawed in 1949. In general, girls who became concubines were from very humble origins. In this system, young women were sold by their father or older brother to a wealthy and powerful man. She would then become his sexual companion for life. The offspring of concubines were not afforded the same level of legal legitimacy that the children of first, second or third wives enjoyed and could not inherit unless no other heir existed, and most often not even then. However, they existed within a well-established legal framework and were not considered only sex slaves who could be discarded at will without cause. They were a part of the family and treated as such. Nonetheless, the young women sold into these situations rarely had a say in the decision to become a concubine. It was sometimes considered a badge of honor to have a daughter sold as a concubine to a wealthy, powerful man who could also provide financial assistance to the father's household as well. Nonetheless, the concept of free will for women in post-classical China was at best a secondary consideration.

Unmarried Men. It is not clear how large a percentage of women were concubines in post-classical China. However, the practice was widespread. One of the enduring problems in post-classical China was the lack of suitable women available to marry working class men. Polygamy and concubinage among elite men was at the root of the problem. Poor, unmarried men who were never able to marry and start a household of their own were destined to remain on the periphery of society and often became law breakers and trouble makers.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1500-1800 CE)

The 19th CENTURY

Early 20th CENTURY (1900-1950)

Gender. As is the case in any society traumatized by war, invasion and occupation, social conventions broke down. In the occupied areas, Chinese men of fighting age were considered by the Japanese to be potential adversaries and treated as such. Men of fighting age risked their lives if they left their dwellings. In active war zones, they were often killed on sight irrespective of whether or they were a combatant. Women were often brutalized and sometimes kept as comfort women or personal sex slaves. In cities such as Nanjing in the winter of 1937-1938, tens (if not hundreds) of thousands of men, women and children were killed after the city surrendered. When the war was over in 1945, the number of men needed to work the farms and factories was insufficient and women did many of the jobs that men formally had done. Social conventions limiting widows remarrying were also relaxed due to the vast number of unattached women.

Late 20th Century (1950-1999)

Gender and the One Child Policy. China's current population is approximately 1.4 billion. It is the most populous nation, by far, in the world. The only nation that comes anywhere close is India, which has a population of approximately 1 billion. China's leaders struggled for decades after the revolution to make the nation nutritionally self-sufficient. But that didn't happen in most years. More alarmingly, it became clear to the Chinese central economic planners in the early 1970s that the population would continue to rise to the point that famine and malnutrition would be an ever-present specter. The push to bring more and more land under cultivation would lead to environmental degradation and ultimately, the collapse of the social and political order. Therefore, the government instituted its draconian "one child" policy in 1979—which limited all women to bearing one child only. While the policy was in place, one had to acquire permission from the authorities to procreate. Children born without permission were often denied full social benefits including healthcare and education and their parents punished. As expected, this unpopular policy disproportionately effected women and created a number of other social problems up to an including infanticide if the baby showed any signs of abnormality, infant abandonment if the child was female (and not a male who would carry on the family name), forced abortions and sterilizations. But the policy did yield results and the population of China is expected to begin declining sometime around 2045. Therefore, some of the most intolerable elements of the law were relaxed in 2013. However, Chinese society has been forever changed as a result of this policy. Having a large family had been a marker of one's wealth until 1979. Now, smaller families are not just encouraged by the government but have become the social norm. Finally, an unnatural demographic anomaly has emerged whereby there are slightly more males children in China than female children. For context, a slightly larger number of females have been born each year worldwide in all cultures. This has been a constant for thousands of years. A by-product of the one-child policy has therefore managed to change thousands of years of evolution and gender demographics.

Readings

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- 3) Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius*, (University of California Press, 2006)
- 4) Evelyn Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Institutions*, (University of California Press, 1998).
- 5) Andrew G. Walder, *Fractured Rebellion: The Beijing Red Guard Movement*, (Harvard University Press, 2012).