HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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GENDER IN CHINESE HISTORY

Key themes Chinese gender history can be used as a classic case of patriarchal relationships, which tended to deepen with time. Certain practices, most notably footbinding, went to extreme lengths in subordinating women, though it is always important to remember that the most striking inequalities applied in the upper classes, not among ordinary people for whom women's capacity to work remained essential. Yet premodern Chinese history also illustrates the respect that could be paid to women who successfully carried out their roles in family. And traditional subordination of women did not prevent significant and rapid reforms in gender relationships, beginning in the later 19th century and certainly carried forward under communism. Yet it remains interesting that, as in other communist societies, women have yet to rise to the top power positions in the Chinese political and economic structure.

The Confucian approach Women's subordination was a crucial feature of the political and social structure that developed during the ancient and classical periods. Confucian thinking, emerging from the 6th century BCE, held that the husband and father in the family played a role similar to that of the emperor in society as a whole, ruling over wives and children alike. Family manners were developed both to display appropriate deference to the household head, and to distinguish sons from daughters; sisters should recognize the superior positions of their brothers. Women were urged to be subservient, and concentrate on domestic skills. Ban Zhao, an unusually well educated woman writing during the Han dynasty, insisted on the gender hierarchy: women must recognize that "continuing the sacrifices means serving one's husband-master with appropriate demeanor. Ban Zhao's service as advisor to emperors shows that talented women could find spaces within the system, and Ban Zhao herself, building on Confucian precepts of reciprocity, urged that women deserved careful if separate training to be able to carry out their duties successfully. But her manual for women, reprinted into the late 19th century, on the whole emphasized the importance of female deference and humility. In practice, gender inequality showed in the common assumption that wealthy men would take concubines in addition to a principal wife, in part to assure the production of sons. Infanticide, common as a means of population control, disproportionately targeted girls. Arranged marriages, in the upper classes, often saw women sent to husbands they had never met, in order to maximize family economic and political position, and surviving records show the unhappiness that sometimes resulted. Women were systematically excluded from positions in the all-important bureaucracy, or the schools that prepared for bureaucratic service. It should also be noted that, under Daosim, another key belief system, women were accorded greater respect; the Chinese cultural patterns harbored some complexities, though Confucianism gained ascendancy.

Further deterioration Women's position worsened during the Tang and particularly the Song dynasties. Introduction of foot binding was a telling example, as it spread gradually among the upper classes (on into the 19th century), particularly in the cities. In this system, girls had their feet severely bound and bent, breaking some of the small bones, limiting the size of the foot and resulting in a characteristic halting walk, both taken as signs of breeding and beauty. Needless to say the process was quite painful and sometimes caused serious damage. The families involved sacrificed women's economic capacity to this particular demonstration of subservience. The imperial government also introduced more elaborate regulations over concubines, specifying menial duties while also confirming the legitimacy of taking women in addition to the first wife. Though technically illegal, some wives were themselves treated as property, even sold into brothels. The spread of Buddhism to China in some cases served as a spiritual outlet for wives, but Chinese Buddhism also modified the religion to emphasize the primacy of husbands in the family. The Chinese pattern did include important variants As manufacturing expanded, particularly under the Song dynasty, women gained new, though low-paying, opportunities in the silk industry. Growing cities supported new groups of female courtesans and entertainers, some of whom gained considerable informal power and also created works of art and literature. Within the family, many women cultivated tight emotional bonds with their sons, which could provide protection and even opportunities for informal influence in later life. Officially, in best Confucian fashion, sons made the decisions for their widowed mothers, but in practice the relationship was often more complex. In the 14th

century the powerful main wives of some Mongol rulers gained considerable power and looked down on the conditions of their Chinese sisters, but did nothing to change the system.

Early modern period The Ming and Qing dynasties did not introduce major changes to the gender system, but there were new official efforts to reward women who carried out their duties as wives and mothers. The government issued commemorative plaques and other tributes, in an interesting effort to shore up the gender system. Artistic work increasingly featured female subjects, portraying beauty and other attributes. Basic features, however, did not change. Most women still were confined to family roles, and it remained very difficult, a clear sign of failure, for women to attempt to leave even the most ill-functioning household. Confucian ideals in this area were maintained, as with a woman poet who wrote "Women are the inferior part of humanity; the basest functions are, and should be, our portion."

The modern period Significant change began to occur from the late 19th century onward, partly spurred by Western observers, including Christian missionaries, who criticized footbinding and other servile conditions. Chinese reformers themselves extended these themes. A Reform Society was established in 1874, with this as a major theme, and the imperial government itself abolished footbinding – though the practice lingered until the communist government ended it completely after 1949. As one reformer noted, "I look at the Europeans and Americans, so strong and vigorous because their mothers do not bind feet and therefore have strong offspring." Educational opportunities expanded, with some individual (upper-class) women even attending universities abroad. A feminist movement developed by the early 20th century. As one leader put it in 1907: "Men and women are born equal/Why should we let the men hold sway?" Reform goals broadened, beyond specific issues like footbinding, for example urging freedom of choice of marriage partners. While Western example was still cited, by the 1920s developments in the Soviet Union also won attention. Under Mao Zedong, Chinese communist leaders began to call out the "special oppression" of women, urging women's participation "in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the entire society."

Communist policies Communist victory in 1949 led quickly to a variety of major changes. Women were actively recruited into local leadership committees, in a few cases achieving 48% of total membership. A 1950 ruling banned arranged marriages, and allowed divorce by both parties. Educational opportunities expanded rapidly, including access to the growing universities. From 24% in 1978, women's share in university enrollment rose to 52% by 2020. Public health groups sought to ease the burdens of motherhood. Women's labor force participation, outside the home, was vital in the nation's rapid industrial expansion, particularly after 1978. Yet limitations also persisted. Many conservatives objected to undue change in family relationships, even justifying the beating of wives. Communist party leadership at the top included only token women. Measures taken after 1978 to control population resulted in dramatic birth rate reductions that undoubtedly created new opportunities for women beyond motherhood, but also included forced abortions and sterilization for some. And restrictions on the number of children per family produced renewed signs of preferences for sons, as many infant girls were abandoned to orphanages so that the family could produce a male heir. Feminist activity was suspect, and efforts to address problems like sexual harassment made only limited headway. China was no longer a patriarchal society, but it carved a distinctive path in gender relations.

Study questions

1. What were some distinctive features of the Chinese system of patriarchy? How did it fit into the Confucian value system?
2. What were some of the main ways women might adjust to the patriarchal system?
3. What were the main changes in gender relations introduced under communism after 1949?

Further reading

Keith McMahon, *Women Shall Not Rule: imperial wives and concubines from Han to Liao* (London: Roman and Littlefield, 2013).

Beverly Bossler, *Courtesans, Concubines and the Cult of Female Fidelity: gender and social change in China, 1000-1400* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013).

Ruth S. Watson and Patricia Ebrey, eds., *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life Under Socialism: love, intimacy and family change in a Chinese village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

Gail Hershatter, *Women and China's Revolutions* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018).