

## Women in Leadership in China: Past, Present, and Future

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The People's Republic of China (China or PRC), established in 1949, has transformed from a closed agricultural economy to a market-oriented socialist economy in the past 65 years. As the second largest economy in the world, China has become one of the most influential countries during the globalization process, not only because it is a global hub for manufacturing, but also because it is the world's fastest growing consumer market and importer (Cooke, 2006). With an above-average world record of labor force participation, Chinese women have long been held up as a model for women in Asia (Zeng, 2014). A famous saying since Chairman Mao's era (1949–1976) is, “women hold up half the sky.” Chinese women play a critical role in the nation's economic development (Lee, 1995).

Despite increasing participation in various sectors, the representation of women in society at decision-making levels actually has been consistently low

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(Cheung & Halpern, 2010; Cooke, 2006, 2010). It has been widely argued that the improvement in gender equality in employment is mostly in quantity rather than quality, especially when measured against the proportion of women in management (Cooke, 2005; Lu & Zhao, 2002). For instance, there has been no woman among the nine members of China's top level of decision-making, the Politburo Standing Committee of the Communist Party since the establishment of the PRC; only 12% of ministerial positions in government are held by women in 2016, and there has been only one female head of state (Li Bin) in the past 50 years (The World Economic Forum, 2016). In business settings, only 18% of firms in China have women as top managers, and women were represented with only 10.7% of board members and 3.2% as CEOs of companies of all types (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2014).

Through a comprehensive review of both English and Chinese literature, we examined Chinese women's leadership status in the unique Chinese transitioning cultural, economic, social, and political contexts. The review traces back through 2,200 years of history from which gender-role perceptions still influence Chinese women's career advancement and leadership development.

## WOMEN'S FAMILY ROLES AND SOCIAL STATUS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE CULTURE

Gender inequality in China has been particularly problematic because of the well-known contradictory effects of gender stratification in two phases of the nation's history. One has to do with the 2,200-year-old Confucian attitudes and norms, established in 246 BCE, that supported a strong hierarchy, based on gender and age, that saw women as subordinate to men. The other concerns the efforts by the communist government since 1949 to challenge the tradition and improve the status of women (Bauer, Feng, Riley, & Zhao, 1992). We examine the influence of traditional cultural norms on women's contemporary status in this section and the influence of communism in the next section.

Throughout Chinese history, a woman's social status has been low, and China has been categorized as a gender-segregated society where women were discriminated against in accordance with the patriarchal value of the Chinese traditional culture (Jia, 2015). The Confucian doctrine systemized discrimination by making it the foundation of social relations that governs the Chinese society. This system emphasizes *wu lun* – five cardinal

relationships: emperor to subjects, father to son, husband to wife, elder to younger siblings, and older to younger friends. *Wu lun* basically set forth a hierarchy (paternalism) and group orientation (collectivism) and defined the social expectations of people's role. It aimed to maintain a stable and harmonious society (Ardichvili et al., 2010). According to these social norms, a woman's responsibility was limited to serving her husband and her parents-in-law, taking care of her household, and giving birth to healthy male children (Attane, 2013).

In traditional Chinese culture, women were inferior to men. For instance, there is a Confucianism value that has dominated people's attitudes and behaviors for over 2,000 years, collectively known as females' three obediences and four virtues. *Three obediences* meant that unmarried women had to be obedient to their fathers, married women to their husbands, or to their sons in case their husbands died (Jia, 2015). *Four virtues* were good appearance and manner, ability in housework, appropriate language, and self-control (Bell, 2010). All of these cultural values and norms are still influential and continuously constrain Chinese women's behaviors, especially in their career pursuits. It is not uncommon for women to give up career opportunities due to family needs. The proverb, "a woman without talents/literacy is virtuous" (Chen, 1937) is often heard when parents try to persuade their daughter to give up her career pursuits or desire for higher education. Being a good wife, a good daughter, and a good mother receives comparatively higher appreciation than being a good manager or a good leader.

With all of these social norms in place, women's individual rights and personal freedom are taken, and they are submissive to men throughout their entire lives. They have no right to pursue their interests and cannot make their own decisions, own property, or have economic power. The most degrading era for the social status of women in Chinese history originated in the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), when women's foot binding became a common cultural phenomenon, lasting almost a thousand years until the late Qing Dynasty (1622–1912 CE). Foot binding further limited the range of activities of women and promoted men's paternalistic control and authority over women.

Women's rights were also limited in educational opportunities, according to the traditional culture. From a child, girls were taught to be subservient to men in the house and to learn the virtues of being docile and obedient. The skills that women learned were limited to cooking,

sewing, knitting, cotton spinning, and housekeeping. Women's emancipation and right for education did not become a prominent issue until the late nineteenth century (Wolf, 1985).

Due to traditional values, even today women's burden of family responsibility consumes much of their energy and makes them less competitive in their careers. Because of the deep-rooted Confucianism, Chinese still think that women should not be above men, or a wife should not be more advanced than her husband in her career (Cooke, 2003). Women workers in China were disproportionately laid off or forced into early retirement when the radical downsizing program took place in the government sector in the mid-1990s and early 2000s (Liu, 2007). As the perception of women managers by men colleagues and subordinates is that women should be only homemakers and mothers, men do not accept them as supervisors. For instance, in a recent qualitative study on career development of managers, Sun (2014) recorded a female manager's account of a conversation with her husband when she wanted to make a career change to a more advanced position. She recalled what her husband had told her: "You are a woman working there without any pressure, so it is a good place for any women to stay until retirement" (Sun, 2014, p. 142). Obviously, her husband did not think it was necessary or important for her to take on more work responsibilities and more pressure to pursue her own career as a woman and a wife.

### THE RISE OF FEMINISM AND COMMUNISM

The birth of the People's Republic of China also marked the true transformation that took place in the lives of Chinese women. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) saw protecting women's employment rights and interests as an essential measure for realizing gender equality, at least in principle. In order to promote women's participation in employment, the state intervened through legislative, administrative, economic, media, and educational mechanisms. Significant investment was made in childcare facilities to relieve this burden on working mothers. This intervention has provided considerable advances in pay and social equality for women workers (Cooke, 2010). The real improvement in the social status of women was evident in the following passage from the basic law implemented in 1950:

The People's Republic of China shall abolish the feudal system that holds women in bondage. Women shall enjoy equal rights with men in political,

economic, cultural, educational, and social life. Freedom of marriage for men and women shall be put into effect (Article 6). (Li, 2000, p. 353)

With these statements, the Communist government made a firm commitment to gender equality.

The actual outcome of the rise of feminism in China in the past six decades has received mixed reviews. The nascent feminist policies implemented by the CCP have made certain that Chinese women could no longer be forced to stay in the home. Instead, they could enjoy the same educational opportunities as men and have marriage equality. However, the traditional value of the authority of father and husband within the family remained intact, thus not releasing women from household responsibilities. In addition, promoting women's participation in the labor force was mostly to serve the interests of the CCP for several decades, mobilize women to join in agricultural production, and support the infamous Great Leap Forward, which was a national movement in the 1950s promoted by the CPP to mobilize the entire population for native production of iron and steel with a goal of surpassing the UK and the USA in 15 years (Johnson, 1983). During that time, the emancipation of women was largely measured by numbers, such as how many were in the workforce, and how many were enrolled in political organizations, but rarely were women's viewpoints incorporated into policies and decision-making processes (Johnson, 1983). Thereafter, the political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and later the rapid economic development of the 1990s left the emancipation of women in a secondary place at best, if not forgotten entirely.

The situation changed in 1995 when the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing. The meeting not only legitimized and increased gender-related research in China but also put China in the world stage in terms of women's rights. China again affirmed the gender equality principle and admitted that the gender gap remained as a significant problem that needed to be addressed to improve the situation (Attane, 2013). To correct this situation, the CCP has initiated a series of programs for the development of Chinese women (Attane, 2013). The first period (1995–2000) focused on programs that promoted equality between spouses and deterred domestic violence and women trafficking, while encouraging political participation and representation in government bodies. The second period (2001–2010) aimed at protecting women's rights and interests, including education, equal access to

employment, economic resources, and health care. The newest and third program started in 2011 and targeted persistent discrimination against women in the development of a market economy and international competition (Attane, 2013).

Recent success in economic development and globalization has brought western influence and transformed the concept of feminism in China. Previously, emancipation of women was always guided by governmental and CCP policies and was never initiated by grassroots activists. The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF, 2011), a patron group led by the CCP government that champions women's causes, has mainly played a welfare and supportive role to help women regain employment, instead of campaigning against their lay-offs and gender inequality in employment, such as gender pay gaps and discrimination in recruitment and promotion. Ineffective policies in representing the interests of women have prompted Chinese feminists to start organizing and voicing their ideals. For instance, a group of Chinese feminist protesters was detained for staging a protest prior to International Women's Day in 2015 but was subsequently released due to public outcry (Hu, 2016).

### *Women's Educational and Working Opportunities*

National policies and social movements have changed the structure and size of Chinese families, as well as their life style, and, in turn, changed women's lives. This section will discuss how these critical movements have influenced women's educational and working opportunities.

### *The Impact of the One-Child Policy*

The more than three decades of the one-child policy has a dual impact (1980–2016). On the one hand, it has caused a severe imbalance of gender, especially in the rural population. Influenced by the traditional belief of *Zhong Nan Qing Nu* (*daughters are inferior to sons*), families used to keep trying for more children until they finally got a boy. Due to the one-child policy, a family can only get one child no matter if it is a boy or a girl. Unexpectedly, it caused many abortions and infanticide of girl babies and induced high ratios of males to females (Ebenstein, 2010). On the other hand, the policy ushered in an age of families without boys, especially in urban areas. As a result, these girls, and later women, have more educational and career opportunities (Matthews, 2016). According to Liu (2016),

women from the one-child generation had higher education participation in contemporary China. Among more than 1,000 women undergraduates in the eastern provinces of Anhui and Zhejiang, singleton women students did substantially better than those with siblings. They performed far better on the university entrance test and were much better represented in elite universities (Liu, 2016). Because of the one-child policy, these girls did not have to compete with brothers for resources and attention and so were able to blaze a trail through China's universities (Matthews, 2016). A woman who was seen as successful from the one-child policy generation shared her feelings in an interview: "My parents treated me as if I were a boy" (Liu, 2016, p. 28).

### *Urban versus Rural Areas*

The representation of women in higher education has steadily increased in the past six decades. For example, over half (50.7%) of enrolled students in post-secondary education are women (The World Bank, 2016). Most Chinese women who grow up in urban areas were educated at similar levels to men, and 72% were employed full-time at the time of publication of Cooke's (2005) article. In contrast, women who grew up in rural areas did not enjoy equal opportunities, in either education or the labor market. A national survey of China's rural labor market found that educational attainment in rural China was still low. While the typical sample rural resident between the ages of 16 and 60 attended school 6.6 years for men, it was only 3.6 years for women (Zhang, Huang, & Rozelle, 2002). Women's participation in the job market is even lower; most have to move to urban areas to find a job (Fincher, 2014).

### *Urbanization*

With unprecedented economic development in China, a parallel development has been the increasing number of rural migrant workers moving to urban areas since the late 1980s (Cooke, 2005; Fincher, 2014). As a result of accelerated urbanization, China's urban population has overtaken the population in rural areas since 2011 and reached 54.77% in 2015 (National Bureau of Statistics in China, 2015). Several millions of rural migrant workers are transforming both rural and urban landscapes, especially men workers who are employed in construction sites and in manufacturing plants. Women, in the meantime, are staying in the home

in villages supporting the family and conducting farm work that used to be shared by husbands and wives (Xu, 2016).

As mentioned above, the preference of having a son has been a traditional mindset for thousands of years in China, which not only causes a severe imbalance of gender, especially in the rural population, but also major societal problems. Coupled with mobility from rural to urban areas in China, most young men have left their home and have gone to big cities for more opportunities and better income. Women are left in the countryside as *liushou nvshi*, meaning *stay at home ladies*. They are taking on a heavy workload, including farm work, feeding animals, and taking care of the elderly and children (Xu, 2016). Given that women are the majority in the workforce in rural areas, and their low educational level and lack of skills have been the bottleneck to developing rural areas, the Chinese government has promoted a new policy of *building a new socialist countryside*, focused on improving the skill sets of women in rural areas (Jacka, 1997; Xu, 2016).

### THE IMPACT OF MARITAL STATUS ON EMPLOYMENT

Unlike Korea and Japan, Chinese women have constantly high participation in the workforce. Most still have a full-time job after marriage and do not leave their job even during the neonatal and toddler years. Of mothers between 25 and 34 years of age with children under the age of 6, 72% remain employed (ACWF, 2011). While working the same long working hours as men, women still have to take care of family chores every day. China is known for long working hours in almost all industries, which makes it challenging for women to take care of family and pursue career advancement at the same time. If men are needed by both family and work, they usually choose work. Women, however, are supposed to take care of family as their first priority. In turn, this makes women less accountable at work and less likely to be promoted to a managerial position.

In addition, as one quarter of the population live in a household containing three generations, wives are supposed to play several family roles and obligations at the same time, including being a child of surviving parents with responsibility for them and a parent (Pilkauskas, 2012). The three-generation family household was an old custom in China in which married couples lived together with their parents and shared responsibilities for raising children and providing support to the elderly. It is still quite influential, although fluctuations in family structure and size have been induced by



variations in age distribution following the one-child policy. It is especially popular in rural areas where a social security system has not been in place yet. It is not only a custom but also a necessity for young couples to take care of their children and the elderly. Even if the couple does not live together with their parents, the care for elderly parents is still their responsibility according to the Elderly Rights and Security Law (Cook & Dong, 2011).

Fortunately, most urban areas in China have a good network of childcare provision that can be sourced from employers, local communities, family networks, or private paid assistance. This provides a context within which married women with young children are unlikely to find themselves confronted with the dual burden of employment and family life to the same extent as women in other countries (Cooke, 2005). Nevertheless, overall heavy responsibilities of housework and many family roles keep working wives extremely busy and make it difficult for them to consider career advancement opportunities such as promotions and relocation assignments (Zhang, 2012).

Due to the influence of western values and economic development, women are marrying later, with the average age of first marriage for women being 25 years old in 2015, compared to 23 years old in 2011 (The World Economic Forum, 2016). This is coupled with another interesting phenomenon – many highly educated and high-income women remain single. Almost 50% of highly educated women (with post-secondary education) are unmarried, 10.1% higher than unmarried and highly educated men (National Bureau of Statistics in China, 2015). This is partially due to the traditional belief that men should be more educated than their wives. An increasing number of highly talented single women is facing serious work–life balance issues with little time for a personal life and much social pressure to get married. They are called *Sheng nu*, or *leftover women*, conveying disapproval and dissonance with social expectations (Gaetano, 2014; Sargeson, 2014). This group of women has long been a topic of concern in Chinese society that prioritizes marriage and motherhood for women. As a result, women are not motivated to pursue higher education or job positions due to social pressure and difficulty in placing themselves in the marriage market (Fincher, 2014; Graham, 2015).

## WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IN GOVERNMENT

The achievement of a high rate of woman employment can be credited to the efforts of the CCP government. Little attention, however, has been given to improving the quality of employment prospects of

women by listening to their needs and providing developmental opportunities. Many women are stuck in clerical and lower level manual labor due both to barriers against career progression and limited promotional opportunities. Cooke (2010) found that women are severely discriminated against in their applications for professional and managerial positions in government sectors, even worse than in the private sector.

These phenomena have resulted in policies aimed at increasing the participation of women in government leadership positions in the past decade. For example, a quota system was implemented in some governmental departments that required a certain number of women to be placed in leadership positions. By the end of 2010, 86.2% of government departments at the county level offered leadership positions to women, and 87.1% of provincial governments had at least one female deputy governor (Zeng, 2014). However, the overall participation of women in the current political body and high-level government entities remains a disappointment to many Chinese feminists (Bell, 2010). At the three highest levels of the Chinese governing body, the current National Congress consist of only 23% women members, the Central Committee has just 6% women members, and the highest decision-making body, the Politburo Standing Committee, has yet to have a women member for more than 50 years of its existence. At the provincial level or ministry level, women are generally serving as deputy provincial party secretaries, vice-governors, or vice-ministers, with only two women governors. Among the ministers, only two are women; one is Wu Aiyong, the Minister of Justice, and the other is Wang Xia, the Minister of the National Health and Family Planning Commission (Li, 2016).

It is hoped that the number of women participating in leadership might increase as the number of highly educated women increases in China. The percentage of women university students has grown significantly over the past 50 years, from close to 0 to 53.1%, and 49.7% of students currently pursuing postgraduate degrees are women (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016). As China opens up recruitment for government positions through examinations, an increasing number of educated women will be attracted to participate in the competition. Therefore, the chance of women being selected will also likely increase. Overcoming male domination in government leadership positions, however, will remain a problem in China for the foreseeable future (Li, 2016).

## WOMEN LEADERS IN THE CORPORATE SECTOR

It has been difficult to get accurate statistics for women participation in corporate leadership positions in China, and those that are available show vastly different results. A report by Grant Thornton's International Business Report (GTIBR) (2013) stated that 51% of senior management positions in Chinese companies are held by women, while at the same time the world average is 24%. Chinese women occupied 19% of CEO positions in 2013, double the world average (GTIBR, 2013). In a report by Shi (2012), women were reported to lead 15% of the 802 companies listed in the Shanghai Stock Exchange. Another statistic from Catalyst (2016), a nonprofit organization that champions women's initiatives, had Chinese women's participation in top management positions at 18% in 2015. Compared to women in top political offices, the corporate sector presents a more encouraging picture of women's participation in leadership compared with world averages.

Women's participation in top management positions is on the rise and is considerably more visible in private companies when compared with state-owned enterprises. Companies are also more likely to promote a woman to CEO when there is at least one woman director on the company's board (Lam, McGuinness, & Vieito, 2013). Given the influence of the one-child policy on recent generations, there has been a large number of women CEOs generated from private companies and inherited family businesses founded by their parents (Zhang, 2012). Hence, the growth of the private sector has been the driving force for the increase in women in leadership in the corporate sector.

The most significant and enduring challenge facing women leaders in the corporate sector is gender discrimination. Even though the government has implemented laws and policies to ensure equal employment, apparent gender discrimination still exists in government policies. For example, men and women have different retirement ages. As per this policy, women have to retire 5 years earlier than men. It truncates their career advancement opportunities and prevents them from reaching higher level positions (Bowen et al., 2007). In addition, there is a persistent earning gap between men and women counterparts, and recent studies have found that the gap grew larger when state ownership increased (Cooke, 2003; Lam et al., 2013).

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Chinese women have made remarkable progress in both public and private realms in the past six decades but still face challenges and obstacles on their way to high-ranking leadership roles. A number of barriers were found in relation to deeply embedded Chinese social conventions and norms in which women are widely expected to play a supporting role to men (Cooke, 2003, 2005). Although a series of equal opportunity legislation has been introduced by the government, the fairness of these regulations and the effectiveness of their implementation are highly debatable (Cooke, 2005).

Specifically, education and working experiences are two major avenues for women to take in order to improve their opportunities for appointment to leadership positions. While the educational level of women has been closer to that of men, the overall education level of employed women and length of tenure are generally lower in the workforce (Jia, 2015). That means women are less likely to have the required managerial skills or experience to compete equally for leadership positions. Due to social expectations, women are less likely to make an education or career-related decision purely based on their own interests, while families and society place more emphasis on a woman's roles as a mother and a homemaker. Even in cases where women have similar levels of education to men counterparts, childbirth and family responsibilities make it difficult for them to gain relevant and equivalent work experiences.

Because China has enacted a one-child policy for the last 36 years, women in younger generations, as the single child in the family, have been able to overcome the effect of the traditional customs of *Zhong Nan Qing Nu* (*daughters are inferior to sons*). Therefore, they have been motivated to participate in higher education and receive better working opportunities, including the possibility of inheriting family businesses as successors. With the end of the one-child policy in October, 2015, however, will Chinese patrilineal culture reassert itself so that sisters lose out to brothers again in the fight for resources and education opportunities? Would parents who take advantage of the policy and have a boy revert to the old mindset of *Zhong Nan Qing Nu*? China has witnessed a resurgence of patriarchal Confucian tradition in recent years (Sargeson, 2014), and that may again create more challenges and obstacles for women to pursue leadership roles.

Actions to improve women's status have so far mainly come from government policies in which a minimum ratio is set for women

politicians and women leaders in government organizations and in political congresses. But we would like to echo Cooke's (2010) argument that these policies can be used only to guarantee the minimum number of women present in these positions, rather than an effective approach to help women in other sectors to advance their careers. Favorable treatment as a token policy can serve only to damage the image of women as a whole and undermine their performance in the long term because they are seen to be in a position more as a woman instead of as a competent person (Cooke, 2005). Furthermore, women may not be encouraged to pursue leadership roles in sectors where such policies do not exist. The real barriers to women's career advancement have not been removed.

While fair legislation from the state level and effective human resource management policies from the organizational level are needed to create a level playing field for women to compete with men, changes are also needed from the public and from the grassroots of society. Social media and other public voices need to change their tone and should not evaluate a woman leader just from the traditional cultural perspective. More grassroots women organizations and activists are needed to protect women's rights in both rural and urban areas. The society needs to be educated to look at women leaders in the same way as their men counterparts. It is time for the longstanding social expectation of women to be replaced by a new attitude; that is, valuing women's efforts in their career pursuits and self-representation in all aspects of life. Then, a real era of women *holding up half the sky* will come.

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