

Ausgabe HSG Focus 1/2014 - Dossier

# Women Power in China

What does it feel like to be a woman in China? A topic full of controversy and contradictions, writes Daria Berg who investigates the cultural riddle of women power in her latest book “Women and the Literary World in Early Modern China”.



Bild: Keystone/Image Source

China boasts the world's highest number of self-made women entrepreneurs and the world's richest self-made women billionaires. The one-child policy appears to have minimised women's family obligations, enabling them to concentrate on their careers – yet women are sold on the marriage market, subjected to forced abortions in late pregnancy, and few make it into the top echelons of power in China. Who is in charge of a woman's life and her body in China today?

## **...or so it seemed**

Women hold up half the sky, Mao proclaimed famously. The founder of the People's Republic of China in 1949 prided himself on having liberated not only the country but also women, freeing them from the shackles of Confucian

tradition. Already on May 4th, 1919 the student reformers who demonstrated for freedom and democracy on Tian'anmen Square dreamt of a new China that would provide gender equality, equal education and opportunities for women. Mao and the Communist Party claimed to have fulfilled these dreams. They created the All-China Women's Federation in 1949 to 'protect women's rights and interests'. Mao delivered the new marriage law in 1950, giving women the right to divorce and enshrined gender equality in China's 1954 constitution. Foot-binding, arranged marriage, concubinage, the sale of women and lack of education appeared to have become ghosts of the past. Access to the job market promised women economic independence. The darker sides of patriarchy and polygamy appeared to have been relegated to the pages of history. Or so it seemed.

## **A second job**

Not everybody agrees, though. Zhang Yue, a women's talk show host who presented the show 'Half the Sky' on national television from 1994 to 2011, argued in 2012 that gender issues remain a matter of urgency. She remembered how in Mao's China her mother would return home from work at night and shoulder her second job running the family. Women's liberation, she realised, had burdened women with a double job commitment.

Today the media are bursting with sensational news about the rise of women in China. In 2012 China launched its first female taikonaut into space – for Chinese women, even the sky is no longer the limit. Pictures and stories of Chinese businesswomen, self-made women millionaires and the world's richest women billionaires fill the news. China appears as the land of dreams, having produced the highest number of self-made women entrepreneurs in the world, i.e. 29 Million, a quarter of China's national total.

The Shanghai-based Hurun survey of the world's richest people already noted in 2010 that 11 of the top 20 richest self-made women were Chinese. The three richest women in the world in 2010, according to Hurun, were all Chinese self-made billionaires, top among them Zhang Yin (alias Cheung Yan), 57, the

founder and chairwoman of Nine Dragon Paper, China's largest containerboard producer. The Hurun report claims that more than half of the world's wealthiest women billionaires are Chinese. Their wealth mainly derives from property, retail and consumer goods.

Forbes Rich List produces different and less optimistic statistics but its 2013 issue of the China Rich List includes two self-made women billionaires among the Top 20: Chan Laiwa, owner of a Hong Kong-based multinational company that deals with real estate, tourism, electronics and the hotel business, with a net worth of 6 billion USD; and Wu Yajun, a real estate developer.

### **Most women in senior management**

A report published in 2012 by Astrid Tuminez of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore and the Asia Society in New York notes that Mao's motto of 'women holding up half the sky' has 'fueled the rise of many women in professional fields'. In Asia, China is the country with most women in senior management. Yet 53 percent of women in China never make the transition from middle to senior management.

Although 'deeply entrenched cultural values appear to pose the greatest barriers to women's progress in organizations' in Asia, Tuminez' report claims that in China 'gender equality embedded in communist ideology has mitigated the impact of Confucian patriarchy'. Tuminez cites communist values coupled with a capitalist market system and a flexible business environment as the reasons for women's success in reform-era China. China's family planning policy usually restricts women to one child only but may have freed up time for women to develop their careers, suggests Hurun publisher Rupert Hoogewerf, according to a 2013 report in The Guardian.

### **Missing baby girls**

Yet there are downsides to Chinese women's success story. The traditional preference for boys over girls remains, leading to millions of missing baby girls, pre-natal sex selection, female feticide, female infanticide, a skewed sex ration of

118 boys for every 100 girls in China, the abandonment of female infants, and the social injustice of the rich being able to circumvent the family planning policy by simply paying the fines for extra offspring.

Many women, especially those with lower incomes or from the countryside, have little say about their own bodies. The one-child policy results in forced sterilization and abortions in the late stages of pregnancy. A World Bank survey led by Elaine Zuckerman in 2000 found that China has the world's highest rate of female suicides, five times higher than world average.

The All-Women's Federation strives to help China's 'left-over women' to get married quickly, targeting single professional women over the age of 27 who spent too long studying for their Master's and PhD degrees. The Federation arranges matchmaking events for 'highly educated, high-quality' women to 'speedily find conjugal happiness'. It suits Party policy to upgrade 'population quality' as an antidote to the family planning policy. Internet dating services offer partners for China's lonely women millionaires.

### **And in politics?**

Few women lead in politics in China today. The Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) who unofficially ruled China from 1861 to 1908 poses an exception in modern history. Soong May-ling, alias Madame Chiang Kai-shek (1898-2003) and Jiang Qing, alias Madame Mao (1914-1991) participated in politics but mainly owed their position of power to their husbands.

There is no woman yet among China's seven-member top leadership assembled in the Central Politburo Standing Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCP). Since 2012 two women have sat on the 25-strong Politburo: chemical engineer Liu Yandong, 68, Second-ranked Vice Premier of the People's Republic of China; and mechanical engineer Sun Chunlan, 63, CCP chief of Tianjin city. Men still decide on Politburo membership and therefore China's present and future.

### **Dreams and tears**

Perhaps we need to look into Chinese history to understand the contradictions in Chinese women's lives, the reasons for their successes and failures, their dreams and tears. The present time only shows the tip of the iceberg in terms of values and attitudes in the Chinese mind. We now know that women were not all oppressed or cloistered in traditional China. They emerged as celebrated poets, painters, artists, writers, and editors already in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Men in late imperial China eyed the women's rise with suspicion but accorded them praise and admiration, valorizing women for their literary, artistic and intellectual achievements. Famous courtesans such as the poet and painter Xue Susu (fl. 1575-1637) counted among the top celebrities of her time. She even encouraged her lover, a scholar-official, to suppress a rebellion and offered to sponsor a military expedition against the Japanese in Korea.

Other talented women who appeared in the public eye in late imperial China included elite ladies who composed poetry, edited books and painted pictures that today grace the world's art galleries. Their achievements enabled them to participate in cultural, social and political elite life.

The young talented women poets of the all-women Banana Garden poetry club in late seventeenth-century China for example set new styles and changed the vogue for women in China. These women embodied the birth of a new beauty ideal in China – combining beauty with virtue and talent. They blazed a new trail for China's women today.

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