

The Family Status of Chinese Women: the Past and the Present

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(Play the video)

This is an old ladies dance group from a village in South China. They are performing at the CCTV Spring Festival Gala, their glamorous dance charmed the whole country. What is special about them is that they all have very small feet as the result of forced binding when they were children. These are the last small feet women in China. Their average age is 75.

Foot binding was the worst suppression of women in old China. Young girls' feet, usually at around 4-7 years old, were wrapped in tight bandages so they could not grow normally. The bones would break and the feet would remain small. This was done for aesthetic reasons. People used to think that the smaller a woman's feet were, the more beautiful she was; thus the more likely she would be chosen as a bride to a noble man.

In the feudal society which lasted several millennia and the subsequent century of semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, Chinese women experienced a bitter history of prolonged oppression, degradation and abasement. Women were considered inferior and subordinate to men in family life, as well as in many other aspects of society. This was profoundly manifested in the following ways:

Confucianism placed conservative rules on women with **“Three Obediences” and “Four Virtues”** (the so-called “San Cong Shi De”). Three Obediences are three following precepts, i.e. women should be obedient to father before marriage, to husband after marriage and to son after the death of husband. At that time the criterion whether a woman is good or not is obedience. Four Virtues are morality, proper speech, modest manner and diligent needlework.

For centuries, Chinese women enjoyed no freedom in marriage but had to obey the dictates of their parents and heed the words of matchmakers (**arranged marriage**). Once she got married, she could not divorce her husband, but only be divorced by him. Besides, she was not allowed to remarry if her husband died. Traditionally, a married woman is expected to live with her husband's family. When the husband has to live away from his family, however, she has to stay with her in-laws and take care of them. Men thus suffer chronic separation from their wives, such as traveling merchants, may “marry” another woman where he lives and set up a separate household with her. Due to the geographical separation, the second woman often regards herself as a full wife for all practical matters. Yet legally this marriage is not recognized, and she is treated as a concubine. This old practice has influenced the recent surge of **polygamy** in mainland China. Since the opening of China's border in the 1970s, businessmen from Hong Kong and Taiwan started setting up **“secondary wives”** (the so-called “er nai”) in mainland. Since then it has spread to local affluent men.

In old China, as many as 90% of women were **illiterate**. According to Confucianism, **“Ignorance is a woman's virtue.** (女子无才便是德)”. This is an old

fashioned saying meaning that women should stay at home. Probably that's because illiterate women would be more obedient to men and less likely to protest. Therefore, a married woman was totally a housewife. She would not step out of her home to take part in any social production. The traditional view is that men should work outside of the home while women should perform housework and take care of children.

After the founding of the People's Republic, there was a surge of mass movements throughout the country to change the backward economic and cultural outlook left over by old China. The economic and social changes also significantly accelerated the "family revolution" started at the beginning of the 19th century in urban China and extended during the early 1950s to rural areas. The aim overall was to eliminate patriarchal domination and establish a more democratic family system.

In modern China, the status of women in family is improved tremendously. Gone is the time when women were expected to **keep their head low, keep their mouth shut and keep their hands busy**.

Then what is a modern Chinese woman like in her family life? I'll talk about this based on the results of some surveys conducted in recent years and my personal experience. Let's examine the changing family status of Chinese women from the following perspectives.

Changing Views of Marriage

Marrying and having children later in life

The age at which women get married for the first time is usually determined by their social and family status. Early marriages, which are generally arranged by parents, often contribute to women's low academic credentials, low income, and high birth and divorce rates. It is a positive development that a growing number of Chinese women are marrying later in life. Results of the fifth population census, issued by the State Statistical Bureau in 2001, indicated that only 1.2% of women married between the ages of 15 and 19, down 74% from 1990.

According to another survey done to people born between 1978 and 1981 in China's eight largest cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Changsha, Chengdu, Nanning, Harbin and Xi'an) Chinese youths tended to get married at a mature age --- men married at an average age of 28; women, at 27. Correspondingly, a growing number of couples have been having children later in life. The survey indicated that the average at which couples had children was 29.7 years, and about 60% percent of the couples wanted to have just one child.

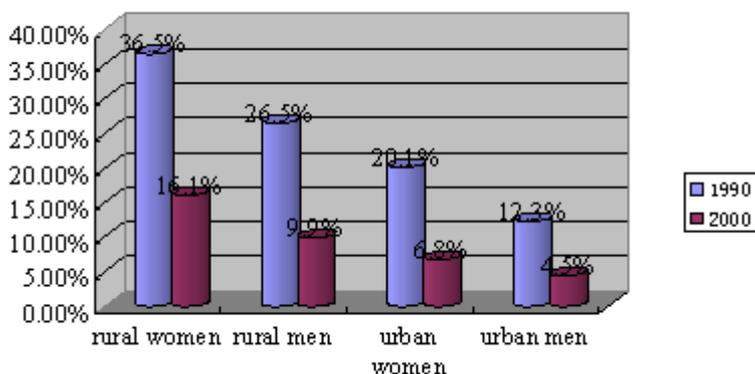
My own experience

Freely choosing a lifelong companion

The freedom of choosing one's spouse reflects an improvement in women's family status. According to the surveys done in 1990 and 2000, women now enjoy greater freedom in making their own marriage-related decisions, and their parents have much less influence over their daughters. In 1990, 36.5% rural women said their parents had arranged their marriages. Ten years later, that number had fallen to 16.1%.

In urban areas, it was 20.1% in 1990 and 6.8% in 2000. (See charter 1)
 Nowadays most women decide their marriage under the guidance of their parents.
 Usually, they themselves have the final say.

Chart 1 Percentage of marital decisions made by parents over the past 10 years



Rights of Income Management and Allocation

Income management used to be the women’s responsibility in the past. It reflects the Chinese traditional view that “women take care of family matters, men of those outside” (男主外，女主内). Nowadays it still is mainly the women’s responsibility to deal with family income management and allocation. Wives usually have clearer ideas than husbands about family income and expenses.

disposal income

In many urban families (at least this is the case in my family and most of my friends’), husbands give their income to their wives. Wives have the rights of their family income management and allocation. According to a survey on women’s consumption in eight of China’s largest cities conducted in 2005, some 46.5% of the married women said they spent their personal incomes freely; 51.3% combined their personal incomes with their husbands’ for communal use; and only 2.2% gave their income to their husbands.

Speaking Freely: Decision Makers

The results of the survey conducted by the All-China Women’s Federation and the Statistical Bureau in 2001 and 2002 on Chinese women’s social status indicated that in 60% of Chinese families, women share equal decision-making power with their husbands (in urban areas, the proportion reached 71%, compared with 56% in rural areas). In more than 20% of the families, wives have more decision-making power; in nearly 20% of the families, men have more authority over decisions. However that figure was comparatively lower compared with European and American countries.

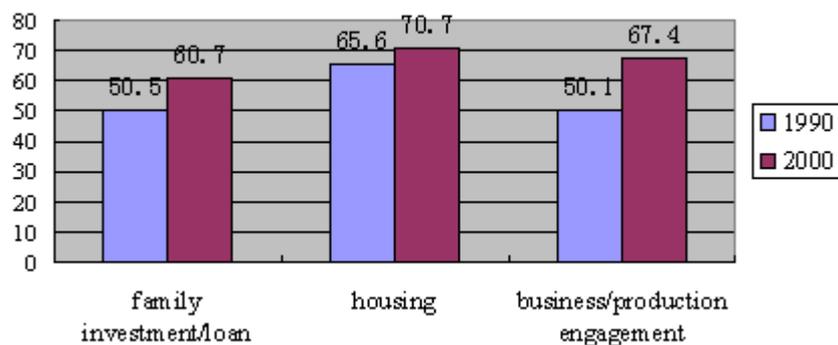
On daily consumption

Another survey, entitled the “2005 Survey on the quality of Chinese women’s Lives” indicated that women were decision-makers, in terms of their families’ consumption habits. The respondents of the survey were career women from all walks of life in China’s 8 largest cities. It was found that, in most families, women made the decisions about daily consumption ---- 77.3% of the respondents were in charge of choosing and buying food, clothes and daily necessities for their families.

On major family issues

Women are participating more in deciding major family issues. When deciding “what business to be engaged in,” 67.4% of the respondents stated that the decision was “the couple’s mutual decision” and “the wife dominated in the decision”, a 17.3% increase on the 1990 survey. 60.7% of wives said they were involved in making decisions related to “family investments or loans”, an increase of 10.2%. 70.7% of wives were involved in making decisions relating to “housing,” a 5.1% increase. (see Charter 2)

Chart 2 Women’s Involvement in Making Decisions on Major Family Issues over the Past 10 Years (%)



The survey conducted in 2005 showed that in large cities, 22.7% of the married women had the final say in purchasing houses, cars or other valuables, and the other 77.3% made decisions after they had consulted their husbands. Their attitudes, to a large extent, affected their families’ decisions on major purchases.

On women’s personal matters

The majority of women made their own decisions on personal matters. The survey found that no distinct differences between the autonomy men and women exercised when making decisions related to personal matters:

- 88.7% of women said that they can “totally” or “basically” decide on their own to “purchase goods of top grades.”
- 90.9% of male respondents provided the same answer.
- 91.3% of women could decide on their own to “support their parents.”

-94.0% of men gave the same answer.

Housework

Less housework

Nowadays, with the improvements in Chinese people's living standards, and given the popularization of household appliances, women spend much less time doing housework.

Results of survey conducted by the State Statistical Bureau indicated that the average time a woman spent on housework every day fell from 5.01 hours in 1990, to 4.01 hours in 2000. An urban woman, in 2000, spent an average of 3.34 hours on housework, 2.08 hours more than that of her husband; a rural woman, 4.27 hours, 2.92 hours more than her husband.

The results of the 2005 survey on Shanghai women's social status, conducted by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, indicated that men performed housework in just 5.3% of the families. Also, the survey indicated most men performed housework that involved less time energy ---- such as buying daily necessities, making repairs and paying bills. In most families, the wives accepted major responsibilities for daily chores ---- such as cooking, washing dishes, doing the laundry, cleaning and caring for children.

Family-oriented stereotype

Although women spend less time on housework than a decade ago, there is little change for the traditional model that women do much of the housework. The traditional stereotype that "men should work outside the family while women should be responsible for family affairs" still influences the public. According to investigation, 53.9% of the surveyed men and 50.4% of women agreed on this point. So women, in general, are considered by society as family-oriented. They are supposed to bear more family responsibility, but this demands time and energy. That's why, for the long term interest of the work unit, women should not be hired nor given serious responsibility such as supervising other people if men are available. And quite a lot of (72.8%) urban women still believe that a wife should sacrifice her own career for her husband's.

Modern Views of Childbirth

Reducing the birth rate

In some of China's large, economically developed cities, a growing number of women, of childbearing age, have been rejecting the traditional views of childbirth. In 2003, an investigation company affiliated with the Shenzhen Special Zone Cultural Center, surveyed white-collared women employees. The results indicated that nearly 80% of the respondents wanted to have one child, while 21.7% of the women said they preferred to be DINKs (couples with "dual incomes, no kids). Most of the women ---- about 76% said they did not want to have children because they felt they

could not give kids the attention and care that they would deserve. Nearly 55% of the women said they were in a predicament ---- they wanted to become mothers, but they feared having children would cause their careers to suffer, as they would have to divert their attention from their work.

Boys or girls

In terms of the views of childbirth, there is a sharp contrast between city and countryside.

There used to be very strong belief in the importance of continuance of family line. If there was not a son, the family line could not be continued because children could only take their father's surname. Therefore, if a woman can not give birth to a son, the family line cannot be continued. Chinese patriarchal power used to be based on the patrilineal kinship system. People wanted to have sons for old-age protection because daughters would move out of their parents' home to live with their husbands' family once they get married.

Along with economic development, social notions and culturally determined social phenomena are changing. Nowadays, the urban employees benefit greatly from the bonuses of their work units in addition to the welfare system of the government. Urban parents no longer have to depend on their children's support for old age protection, so the once very strong belief in the importance of continuance of the family line, is weakened. According to the survey conducted in 1990, only 34.9% of urban residents do not agree that the children may take their mother's surname, 49.7% do not care and 13.2% agree to let their children be named after their mothers. According to a survey in five big Chinese cities, 18% of newly married couples choose to live together with the wife's family.

The surveys also show that in the big cities more women want to have daughters than sons. "You get a name by giving birth to a son and get lucky by giving birth to a daughter." "You will lose your son when he marries, you will have a new son when your daughter marries." These popular sayings reflect the changed notion in urban areas.

But the situation in the countryside is not the same for the reasons discussed above. Compared to urban women, rural women are less independent economically, their income is not as stable as urban women employees and their old age is not secured by any welfare system. They have remained throughout responsible for giving birth to sons in order to provide security, and women are still blamed if they fail to give birth to a son. The pressure on women has also become greater under the government's compulsory birth control program.

But in both urban and rural areas, children are usually the most privileged family members. Many women, including myself, think they love their children more than love their husbands.

Divorce

For centuries, Chinese woman could not divorce her husband, but could only be divorced by him. Now women's right to divorce are guaranteed by the Marriage Laws. In recent years, the divorce rate has increased rapidly, from about 4.7% in 1979 to 9.97% in 1993. About 70% of divorce cases in China during the last few years were initiated by women.

Besides, people's opinions on divorce have also changed. People used to regard the problems between husband and wife are kind of family scandal, and the traditional views are "family scandal should not be made public", and "even an upright magistrate has a difficult time settling a family quarrel". So once a couple wanted to divorce, their parents and relatives always tried to make peace between the couples. With the changing times, China has gradually become an open society. People no longer regard divorce as bad thing. They advocate that couples should make peace with or say goodbye to each other in a civilized manner.

Conclusion

From what is discussed above, we can see the status of Chinese women within their families has improved substantially since China launched its policy of reform and opening to the outside world. Then how modern Chinese women feel about their marriages? Are they satisfied with their family lives? Let's look at two more survey results as the conclusion of my lecture.

Nationwide surveys on Chinese women's social status, conducted by the All-China Women's Federation and the State Statistical Bureau in 2001 and 2002, indicated 77.3% of the women were content with their material lives, and 67.6% said they were satisfied with their spiritual lives. 93.2% of the women felt satisfied with their marriages and family life.

Another survey done to women in China's eight largest cities showed that 45.6% of women regarded their marriages lives as "happy"; 19.9% thought the relationship between them and husbands were "treating each other with respect (相敬如宾)"; 31.7% said the quality of their marriages was "so-so"; only 1.4% felt their marriages were "miserable".