

An Analysis of The Change of Female Status from The Historical Dimension of Chinese and Western History

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Abstract. By analyzing the historical dimensions of both China and the West, the evolution of female status in both China and the West is largely driven by similar factors, including three basic ones: labour, reproduction and culture. In China, despite the emancipation of women since the founding of the People's Republic of China and the significant improvement in their status, women continue to suffer from stereotypical gender discrimination in the labour market, in childbearing, in family life and in other areas, due to the long-standing influence of the traditional idea of "men's superiority over women". By using gender analysis, this paper identifies the reason why these phenomenon are so easily overlooked, and points out that, besides technological factor, the human nature is also an important factor affecting female status. Finally, in the light of legal, educational and cultural considerations, it suggests that legislators should incorporate gender awareness in the process of the enactment of law, gender education should be included in the education reform, and female cultural confidence and identity should be re-constructed.

Keywords: Female status; gender analysis; labour; gender awareness.

1. Introduction

Female status within society has attracted a great deal of attention during the second half of the 20th century, and debates about it have been very intense. The issue of gender equality is primarily a question of unequal treatment between men and women. Gender theory has been developed in the Western Feminist Movement and is still developing in today's society. Gender issues remain a hot topic in current society. Chinese society has long been influenced by Confucianism and its traditional agrarian civilization, men and women still face many inequalities in society, and the attention to and discussion of women's equality in China are now showing signs of becoming increasingly tired.

By studying the history of changes in the social status of men and women in Chinese primitive and class societies and the history of the rise of women's social status after the Renaissance in the Western world, and by making specific analyses from the perspectives of religion, ideology, and labour, this paper arrives at the three factors affecting women's status-labour, fertility, and social-cultural factors. Afterwards, through analyzing the changes of women's social roles in modern China, the author explores the problems that still exists in the female status in today's Chinese society, and argues that, apart from technology, the "human nature" is also an important factor affecting the female status. Finally, from the point of view of legislation, education and social culture, it makes recommendations on how to improve the female status in society.

The newspaper adopts literature research method, gathering and studying information from Freidrich Engels, Simone de Beauvoir and Sun Yat-sen, as well as the books *Classic of Mountains and Rivers*, *I-Ching* and *Book of Rites* in order to focus primarily on changes in the female status within Chinese society and the factors that have influenced them. The newspaper also uses historical analysis method to study and analyse the change of female status in China in the primitive society, the class society and the period after the Western Renaissance from a historical perspective. Meanwhile, the newspaper adopts comparative analysis method to analyse three important factors affecting the female status in both China and the West.

2. Historical Developments in the Female Status in China and the West

2.1. Historical Developments in the Female Status in China — From Primitive Society to Ming and Qing Dynasties

The issue of female status in China is a matter of historical and pragmatic importance. A series of changes in the female status have accompanied the development of the productive forces in ancient Chinese history. In the matriarchy of primitive society, the position of women had once been the most glorious. Women played an important role in the birth and rearing of their offspring during this period with low productivity, a harsh environment and lower per capita life expectancy. They contributed significantly to clan's overall fertility. In this period, women had once become the focal point of clan cohesion because all matrilineal clans are connected to each other by blood. The ancient Chinese story of *Nüwa's Creation of Humans* is a good example of this, and it vividly demonstrates that in primitive societies, women were revered for their ability to bring up their offspring and were in a dominant position. At the same time, men were mainly responsible for hunting and fishing in primitive society, while women had a primary responsibility for harvesting fruits or planting crops. Compared with hunting with simple stone tools that yielded little gain, harvesting and planting was obviously more stable, and thus women's labour became an important source of resources for clan members, and women were more highly respected by the members. Women were leaders who took care of their communities and managed their internal and external lives, so much so that the saying "the people know their mothers but not their fathers" was spread widely at that time. However, in the primitive matriarchal society, although the female status was higher, women did not discriminate against men just because women were respected, and there was no so-called "who gives privileges to whom"; equality and freedom were the main characteristics of the gender society at that time, and these characteristics continued until the arrival of the paternalistic society.

Looking at the trajectory of Chinese history, it can be seen that, along with the development of social productivity, the female status begins to decline. China began to become a patriarchal clan society at the end of primitive life. Agricultural work had grown more and more demanding since private ownership of means of production was established. In spite of the fact that women had also participated in agricultural production, they were not able to deal with excessively demanding working conditions and eventually fell into a lower position, while men played an increasingly significant role in agriculture, crafts as well as animal husbandry. Although men gradually got dominance, men and women were initially equal, and women were not subordinated to men at first. Male power grab is a long process. During the process of male taking over the power, there was even a phenomenon such as the story which was written in *Classic of Mountains and Rivers*: "The Emperor Shun ordered Zhu Rong (god of fire in China) to kill Gun (emperor Yu's father) in Yujiao (a place), and Gun gave birth to Yu (the founder of Xia Dynasty, Gun's son)". It means that Yu was born from his father's belly instead of his mother's womb. It is obviously counter-intuitive. This is the male's way of depriving women of their power, which reflects the twisted course of the male power grabbing.

During the Zhou Dynasty, the dominant position was gradually taken over by men under the influence of patriarchal systems such as the "paternalism" and the "lineal primogeniture system". The rulers set up a series of schemes restricting women in the era when male wrote laws and myths by words. A complete set of ethical norms and codes of conduct for women was established in *Zhouli*, which tells the rites of the Zhou Dynasty in ancient China. And in the Book of Rites, it said that "Women have the principle of 'three obedience' and no independent path. Therefore, she follows her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son after her husband's death. Hence, the father is the heaven of the son; the husband is the heaven of the wife." This is the so-called "the three obedience". By the "three subordinates", Women were bound to the domestic sphere, deprived of the rights they once had in public life, such as politics and the economy. Another example is the saying in *I-Ching*, "Women are properly situated in the inner quarters, men are properly situated in the outer areas." During this period, women were gradually regarded as being in the private sphere of the family and were gradually reduced to the subordinate position of the man, gradually becoming the object,

they lost their independent economic dominance. As men made the rules and regulations, they became dominant over women, and the idea that men were superior to women began to develop. At the same time, for the dual role of women as both temptress and victim in the dualism of good and evil, the negative side was particularly remembered, and prejudices that stigmatized women were gradually formed. The Zhou Dynasty reflected on the demise of the Shang Dynasty, and believed that, “When a hen crows at dawn, it only heralds the searching of the household [1].” It symbolized that a woman who overstepped her role would bring distress to the family. People considered that, female participation in politics would wreck the country and bring ruin to the people, which was an ominous sign. Learning from its lessons was the only one way that could ensure that the country’s blessings would be prolonged, and the nation’s fortune flourished eternally. According to *Zhouli*, “The nine concubines are in charge of the laws of womanly teachings, and they govern with the nine teachings: womanly virtue, speech, appearance, and accomplishments.” This was the “Four Virtues” of which women had to conform to men's morality and order, yet they could gain a certain degree of status and dignity by being dependent upon men. In this way, the Zhou Dynasty ideologically established the idea that men were superior to women, and an invisible oppression of women was taking shape.

After the Han Dynasty, Emperor Wu of Han decided to “ban all schools of thought except Confucianism”, so that Confucius’ thoughts officially developed into a system of philosophy known as Confucianism, and with it, the female status continued to plummet. Mencius said, “When a daughter is married off, her mother instructs her, sends her to the door, and admonishes her, saying, ‘Go to your husband’s house and be respectful and thoroughly cautious in all things, and do not bring disgrace to your husband.’”

Confucianism was exclusively for men, the “three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues as specified in the feudal ethical code”, the “three obedience and four virtues” and other ideas under the extreme expansion of men's power, the prejudice against women was increasingly strong. Under this social culture, women were gradually driven out of the economic arena, and as the ruled, they had no sense of independence, no independent personality, no dignity to speak of, and were in a permanent position of repression and humiliation.

By the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Confucianism and feudal monarchy reached their peak in China. The Emperors of the Ming and Qing Dynasty chose Neo-Confucianism as a dominant philosophical ideology to rule this land [2]. The metaphysical theories advocated by Neo-Confucianism were combined with the ruler's state power, and the moral demands on women rose to the level of national significance. “Starvation is a minor matter; losing one’s integrity is of great consequence.”, women should be faithful to their husbands and observe their chastity, and those who kept their chastity for their husbands could be praised and rewarded by the state. After thousands of years of development, feudal ethics began to infiltrate every aspect of social life, people’s minds were captured by the rules and morals, and men had full control over women.

The status of women has continued to decline and become subordinate to men as can be seen from the above discussion, ranging from a primitive society until the Ming and Qing Dynasties, along with changes in production methods and gender roles. The importance of culture should also be considered. Traditional Chinese culture, with Confucianism as its basic ethic, is a social culture in which men are the single sex, and it is gender rather than sex that creates the stereotype of women.

2.2. Changes in the Female Status in the West after the Ming and Qing Dynasties

However, at the same time, there was a quiet awakening of feminist consciousness in the West that had begun to manifest itself among the privileged classes. In the Renaissance, legendary women such as Juana and Hippolyta·Fioramanti who had been excellent in politics and military matters were born into power, gender neutral personalities. The Enlightenment has challenged the old ways of thinking, and the Enlightenment thinkers have come up with the slogan “human rights”, which means that women belong to the common humanity as much as men. Cultural salons have become a craze among women, where both sexes can talk about politics, philosophy and ethics in one place [3]. In the salons, women's keen insight into the ways of elegance was noticed, and this refined and elegant

culture gradually replaced the martial and vulgar chivalrous culture [4], and women became the main participants in the cultural scene. In the public arena, there was a more tolerant attitude toward women. Women were beginning a new era of revolution in the nineteenth century, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution. As Beauvoir said in *The Second Sex*, “Woman's awareness of herself is not defined exclusively by her sexuality: it reflects a situation that depends upon the economic organization of society, which in turn indicates what stage of technical evolution mankind has attained.[5]” Gradually, women had begun to free themselves from the constraints of family life and became involved in factory production. When productivity increased greatly and technology gradually eliminated the gender gap in terms of physical strength, human civilization entered into a new age of steam.

2.3. Reasons for the Changes in the Female Status in China and the West

Firstly, one of the main factors influencing women's status in society is labour. In the division of labour in the agricultural civilization, women were confined to the private sphere, such as domestic work, because of their inability to engage in intensive labour. And compared with men's work in obtaining the means of subsistence outside the home, women's domestic work became less important. However, technological progress made it possible to compensate for the physical handicaps of women in the agrarian era. At the same time, the industrial revolution did not have enough workers to meet the demand for industrialized labour, so the cooperation between male and female became inevitable. Just as Marx and Engels said, “Woman can be emancipated only when she can take part on a large social scale in production and is engaged in domestic work only to an insignificant degree. And this has become possible only in the big industry of modern times, which not only admits of female labour on a grand scale but even formally demands it...[5]” Slowly, women will become equal to men in terms of their work because of modern machinery.

The other important factor is the reproductive factor, apart from the labour factor. Another important role for women in primitive societies was to bear and raise children, apart from harvesting wild fruits. Fei Xiaotong pointed out that the reproductive system is based on the need for the continuation of the human race, the deepest internal cause of the continuation of the human race lies in the individual's dependence on and need for the race, and the prosperity of the race is a need for the individual's survival and security. After the establishment of a private society, men's desire to confine women to the domestic sphere was an important factor in their desire to subordinate women to their reproductive functions. For example, under the influence of Confucianism in ancient China, there was the birth of the “Seven Ways Out”, which was the basis for divorce in ancient China, and “childlessness” was the first. In other words, if a woman could not bear children, she could be divorced by her husband in ancient China. Under the influence of such social values, the whole society had become a single male society, and women had been in a submissive and subordinate position for a long time. However, with the development of the ages, the advancement of technology and the change in the perception of women's values, women's reproductive rights are becoming more and more important. On the 4th of March 2024, France officially approved the right to abortion in its constitution, which undoubtedly sent a signal to all women that “your body belongs to you”. Women can control over their bodies, control over reproduction, and are freed to a great extent from reproductive slavery, and then they are able to enter the economic sphere and achieve further and more complete independence.

Social-cultural factor affects the female status in society as well. In social contexts, the identity of women is a key issue, and culture moulds women's identities at both the biological and social levels. At the biological level, women were given the image of the delicate dependent. In the Han Dynasty, Ban Zhao, in his book *Commandments for Women* mentioned that women are considered most beautiful when they are gentle and frail looking. Under the influence of feudal concepts such as the “Three Obedience and Four Virtues”, women were regarded as dependent on physiology and the standard that gentle, and frail-looking was beauty were gradually fixed. In the feudal era, female beauty, which was recognized by the feudal society and culture, was a bargaining chip for women in

exchange for the means of living. At the same time, as a dominant role, it is clear that a strong woman is not easy to dominate, so the rulers suppressed the development of the female organism through a social culture that promotes weakness as beauty. At the social level, women were given domestic roles, which were confined to the private sphere. Under the influence of feudal rites, women in ancient China were not allowed to go out of the house after the age of 10 and had to stay at home with their mothers to learn household chores, during which time they lost the right to contact society and participate in public affairs. In feudal society, women in China were only allowed to play “daughter”, “wife” and “mother” throughout their whole lives, and they could not get rid of the feudal patriarchal system and remained in a state of absolute subordination. They lost their independent personality and dignity. However, with the continuous development of society, women’s self-consciousness is increasing and multiculturalism is developing, women’s social identity is no longer a single and fixed, but is in a fluid and unfixed process of dynamic change, for example, new identities such as “working girl” [6] have emerged in the UK.

3. Issues of Gender Equality in the Current Chinese Society, as well as Ideas for Improvement

3.1. From the End of the Qing Dynasty to the Present: The Rising Social Status of Women

At the end of the Qing Dynasty, women began to move out of their homes, challenge feudal customs, and become involved in public affairs as western democratic ideas were introduced to China. Women were further liberated in both physiology and ideology. The abolition of “foot binding” was a prominent feature of this. In feudal society, “foot-binding” was in line with the standard of the so-called “female beauty” at that time. On 13th March 1912, after the establishment of the Republic of China, Dr. Sun Yat-sen issued a decree prohibiting the “foot-binding”, which had a significant impact on the traditional Chinese concept of “man is superior to woman”. The abolition of “foot-binding” not only liberated women from thousands of years of bondage, but also allowed women to leave the house and join the social production and revolutionary movement. It also liberated women’s right to education. In 1898, Li Run, the wife of Tan Sitong, and Huang Jinyu, the wife of Kang Guangren, they established the first Chinese-run women’s school, the “Jing Zheng Girl School” to encourage women to receive new education. Culture is stable [7], the emergence and dissemination of advanced women's periodicals provided an important ideological medium for the awakening of local women's sense of affirmative action and independence. In addition to receiving new education, women’s participation in politics was also guaranteed. In November 1911, Lin Zongsu initiated the “Women’s Political Comrades’ Association” in Shanghai, with the aim of popularizing women’s political knowledge, developing women’s political ability and gaining full participation in politics, which was encouraged and supported by Dr. Sun Yat-sen.

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, from the beginning of the new country to the end of 1956, in the 756,000 agricultural cooperation, about 70%~80% of the cooperation had women presidents or vice-presidents, approximately 500,000 people, these people made up 66.1% of the total number of presidents and vice-presidents, with an even greater number of women serving as members of the cooperation and as production team leaders. These phenomena just verified Chairman Mao’s saying that “women can hold up half the sky”. The People’s Republic of China has written equality between men and women into its constitution, and the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) even wrote “we will remain committed to the fundamental national policy of gender equality and protect the lawful rights and interests of women and children” into the Party’s policy programme and introduced a series of favourable policies to encourage women to enter the labour market. Women can have access to a good education like men, this will promote the development of their own quality. They are able to participate in public affairs, gradually achieving economic independence and becoming the breadwinners of their families, just as men are. They are able to participate substantively in political life, with a growing awareness of political participation.

3.2. Problems with the Female Status in Chinese Society today

Although the female status has improved significantly since the birth of the People's Republic of China in marriage, economy, education, employment and political affairs, remnants of traditional moral values are still playing a role in today's society. The traditional gender concept of "men are stronger than women" still affects the labour market, and women do not have equal opportunities to compete and gain employment in fields such as mechanics, electricity and programming.

At the same time, although the female status has improved a lot in today's society, traditional thoughts still prescribe the image of the so-called "good wife and good mother", and women are expected to achieve higher grades and have higher working abilities when they are in school and at work. When they achieve the so-called "proper" age for marriage, women are expected to be housewives who support the family and raise children and are once again confined to the private and domestic spheres. At this time, strong career-oriented women will be seen as irresponsible and be coerced by social and family pressures.

Furthermore, the idea of "male superiority over female" still affects modern family life, and women are often enslaved by childbearing. In some parts of China, if the wife cannot give birth to a boy, the elders of the family will force her to continue childbearing until she gives birth to a male child. Some families even name their female children with "Zhaodi" and "Pan Di", these names mean that the family is looking forward to a baby boy, and women are treated like reproductive machines in the whole family, and they cannot control their own bodies.

3.3. Analyzing the Social Actuality with Gender Analysis

"Gender" means the social culture constructed gender characteristics and differences between men and women, as well as group characteristics and behavioral styles belonging to men and women, and the gender division of labour, value judgments and power structures based on such divisions. Engels was right to a certain extent in the previous section, but he missed one point: he only noted the effect of changes in the history of technology on the female status, but he did not note what is more inherent in the transformation of the group system into the private ownership, that is the human nature. He did not look beyond historical materialism to the history of female status, such as why men want to possess things, and the transcendence and ambition of men themselves. When new tools appeared, they were not satisfied with what was in front of them, they wanted to make a wider reclamation and expansion. In other words, even if bronze and iron farming tools had been invented, there would be no discrimination or oppression if people did not want to rule or dominate others. The earliest gender discrimination begins with the natural division of labour among the sexes, but human nature is also an important factor in the female status. Gender analysis suggests that this idea of male discrimination against women is rooted in the culture of the society, which in turn shapes the male culture. In this single-sex society, men dominate the law and order of the society. They have taken this thought to an extreme and institutionalized it through legislation. At the same time, the rulers try to cover up gender with theories and legislation as much as possible in a so-called "scientific way" and put a so-called "neutral and fair coat" on the law and society to reconcile conflicts. However, in essence, the society is still a single-sex society, which has led to the continuous reinforcement of gender, and the stereotypical moral concepts about male and female gender that used to exist in history are still affecting the Chinese society, which is the main reason for the social conflicts in China today.

4. Measures to Improve the Women Status in Chinese Society today

Human gender is determined from birth. However, it is the society that determines the attributes of male and female instead of nature. Female Status has never been natural, it is the product of history and society. Every gender oppression and inequality based on biological foundations are unfounded, can be changed and eliminated.

In terms of legislation, "gender awareness" should be added into the relevant laws. For example, in the cases of domestic violence, according to data released by the Supreme People's Court of

People's Republic of China, in the cases concluded at first instance in divorce disputes involving domestic violence in the whole country, 91.43% of the cases about domestic violence were committed by men against women[8]. Justifiable defence lacks implementation basis in the family realm. At the same time, due to China's judicial conservatism, courts generally adjudicate domestic violence as family dispute. From the angle of gender analysis, this is due to history and society: by the influence of traditional thoughts, the female status was low, domestic violence was regarded as a private matter rather than a criminal offence, domestic violence has been long been covered under the cloak of "private family matters". This laxity in thinking has been carried over into the current judicial practice of domestic violence cases in China, which is easily ignored by society. During the judicial practice, courts usually adjudicate the act that battered women use violence to stop violence as intentional crimes. Such an approach is likely to unduly restrict the scope of justifiable defence. This act does not consider that the special psychological and behaviour responses by the battered women which are caused by long-term domestic violence, finally they have to choose the most tragic way to end the domestic violence. The legislator has ignored the physiological differences between men and women in the context of domestic violence, as well as the psychological changes that occur in battered women in the context of prolonged violence. A gender gap has been created. The theory of "Battered Women Syndrome" has added a gender dimension to its assessment in foreign countries [9]. A battered woman can be given a lighter sentence or even acquitted as long as she is certified by an expert as having "Battered Woman Syndrome". This will enable people to consider the behaviour of battered women in combating violence to put an end to domestic violence from a brand-new angle and make the administration of justice more humane from the perspective of the actual situation of women.

In terms of education, gender education should be incorporated into the education reform. China has adopted the same approach to education for students of different genders for a long time. This kind of gender-neutral approach, which seems to implement the concept of equality between men and women, but actually assimilates women to men. In textbooks and in the portrayal of characters of both genders, the proportion of males is much higher than that of females, and males are often portrayed as aggressive leaders, while females are often portrayed as submissive [10]. The imbalance in the number and roles of male and female characters has a subtle influence on learners, who unknowingly believe that men have a gender advantage in social competition. In this regard, the country should develop policies to ensure that textbooks are written from a woman's point of view and reviewed in order to eliminate sexist or objectifying representations of women on texts, incorporate gender equality principles into textbooks and subject teaching; and specify how men and women will be divided among staff who write them.

In terms of culture, it is significant to rebuild women's cultural confidence and identity. In ancient Chinese traditional culture, under the oppression of the feudal society, women were limited into informal territory, and even be seen as plaything. Women had to mould themselves according to men's desires. Women were once regarded as sex symbols, played the role of the so-called "seducer", and many female images have been objectified as "sexy objects" in men's eyes. Consumerism and hedonism have also influenced women's culture. Women's culture needs to be reconstructed. Cultural concepts such as life culture, emotional culture and artistic culture need to be promoted. As an independent individual, women should fully express their emotions and show their knowledge of life. Female beauty should fully show women's subjective feelings about beauty, rather than pursuing male aesthetic standards for women.

5. Summary

Sexual discrimination is determined by a country's history, economy, social-culture and other complex factors. There is still a disparity between male and female status up to this day, especially in a country which has an agricultural civilization for thousands of years. It takes a long time to liberate women, but with the inclusion of more gender awareness in society, the society will not be a single-sex society anymore. This has great significance on eliminating stereotyped image about female,

tearing off the “gender label”, breaking traditional moral idea and promoting women’s liberation, just like the saying in the film *New Women*, “No slavery, the world is common. No matter men and women, the world of universal harmony must come true.”

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