

A Cross-cultural Study of Women's Status in Society

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1. Introduction

Traditionally, Chinese believe the world is made up of two parts: yin and yang. Yin is commonly expressed in the culture as female and yang as male. When yin and yang are in balance, it is said, the world can continue in peace. From a long time ago, in most Asian countries, all people lived in a kind of social model where men did farm work and women engaged in spinning and weaving. When the countries were in war, men fought to protect their countries' safety, while women gave medical treatment to men. As nations across Asia developed their government, arts and technology, men held many of the most important positions in society. This is perhaps why many famous people with contributions to society are men.

However, this does not mean that Asian women have had little achievements in history. There have been a number of famous female leader across the continent. In China, Wu Zetian (624-705) was the only Empress in Chinese history. In South-east Asia Jayadevi was the queen regnant of the Chenal Kingdom and the predecessor polity of the Khmer Empire from 681 to 713. In the arts, Murasaki Shikibu (978-1014) from Japan wrote "The Tale of Genji", which is known as the world's first novel. Rani of Jhansi (1835-1858) from India, was the leader of the Indian Rebellion.

Not only the women above, but also other famous women in history and their achievements are treasures of the glorious tapestry of Asian history and culture. Across history, men have

had more authority because of their superior physical strength. Because many Asian cultures are deeply patriarchal societies, in order to show their authority, men have created social rules and laws, and this has lead to serious consequences for women. Even in contemporary society, those problems still deeply affect women's daily life, such as the problems of access to education and work, the problems with marriage and the crime aimed at women. Furthermore, those problems also lead to deep influences on society. The imbalance in gender ratio in some countries make marriage a difficulty. Additionally, crime towards women and victimization of women only brings society into an unstable situation. Today more than ever we must talk about the problems Asian women are facing.

2. Education & Work

2. Access to education

Most people devote a great deal of their life to their education. In most countries and areas, children have to finish nine years of compulsory education regardless of gender. Depending on the career they choose, students go to the high schools or technical school as their need. But a great number of girls, especially girls in poor or low education level areas, are not allowed to finish even their compulsory education. According to UNESCAP (the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), there are 7.81 million people who are illiterate in the world today. Sixty-four percent of these are women, and sixty-seven percent of these women are living in the Asia-

Pacific region. In Western Asia and Northern Asia, among people between 15 and 24 years old, 16% of men are illiterate, while the rate of illiterate women is 26%.

Furthermore, in areas with war, it is even more difficult for children to access education. Based on the statistics from UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund), there are now over 25 million children who cannot go to school. This is disproportionate to gender; over 65% of this number is made up of girls. Many girls who quit school are asked to work early for their families. However, because of their low degree, often they cannot find good work, also they cannot get good salaries. Although some people can get high wages because they have special skills after graduating from a technical school, most girls quit school and have no chance to learn skills to ensure a decent lifestyle. There is also a large discrepancy in wages by gender in Asian societies. For example, in China, people do not need high degree to become a waiter or waitress. At the present time, waitresses' hourly wages are two-third of same level waiters, only 3.71 Chinese Yuan (around 0.56 US. dollars) per hour. On top of this, because of their low education and low salaries, it is hard for these girls to find a partner for a decent marriage. All of these factors combine to create a vicious circle of poverty and lack of access to education.

On the other hand, in richer and more developed countries and areas, most girls are able to gain access to higher education. According to the Information Office of the State Council in China, for example, the rate of women with a university degree is 52.1%, with graduate degree is 51.6%, and with doctor's degree is 36.9%. According to the State Statistics Bureau of China, in 2015, the percent of women completing higher education is around 47.3%, a rate 17% higher than in 1990. This figure has risen along with China's rapid economic growth

over the same period.

2.2 Work opportunities

However, even if girls are able to get a good education, it is still hard for them to find a good job. Because of the disruption to availability due to the duties of marriage and pregnancy, some companies prefer to employ male staff, or female staff with high abilities. Although there are laws protecting women's rights to find jobs, the discrimination is still existing. In a recent case in China, a college graduate prosecuted Beijing Juren Education Company for discrimination. It is a rare case in which women protected their rights to work. And in some places, when the companies are in recession, even highly-educated women are at more risk of losing their job than men. In Turkey for example, because of the failed coup in 2016, more than 25 thousand women lost their jobs. They also are not allowed to find a new job, which means they lost their economic independence. Also in 2016, 4.6% of Malaysian women with college degree lost their jobs, higher than 3.8% of men who also did. In some Arab countries, the number of well educated women is more than 23%. Furthermore, in company structures in many cultures, women are more difficult to promote, which means women find it hard to put themselves into the higher levels of management. According to the China Women's Research Network, the percentage of junior clerks who are women is over 64.9%, at the middle-level it is around 39%, while the at management-level the percentage is lower than 24%.

3. Marriage & Family

3.1 Attitudes towards marriage

Though divided by language there are many cultural similarities between Asian countries, and the view of marriage and family is one of them. In ancient societies, men were the first

labor force and ancestral lines continued through them. So, it is commonly thought in Asia is the most important way to expand a family is to have more sons. This means that even though thousands of years have passed, there are still lots of people who believe the most important thing for women is marry a man. Depending on the traditional thought of the elders, many women are pressured by their families to have boys, especially by their husbands' families. However, nowadays, because of greater access to education, increased abilities and more open mindsets, more and more well-educated women are subscribing to a non-marriage doctrine. A recent article says there are more than 200 million young Chinese women are willing to go through life unmarried. However, in some instances higher levels of education do not translate to higher rates of marriage. According to data from the Korean Health Research Institute, in 2016, 70.1% of women who graduated from college got married, a figure lower than women who graduated from high school (79.5%), while the number of married women with a postgraduate degree was lower than 50%.

On the other hand, traditional forms of marriage remain popular in some Asian societies. Many traditional elders in China worry about their children's marriage, and many of them still today ask their children to go through an arranged marriage. There are still many conditions for marriage partners, such as age, work type, salary and property. In China, in almost every city there are places called "dating corners". The parents take their children's data, in place of their children, to find a prospective son or daughter. The young people are like goods in the grocery stores to be picked by strangers. This is an unfriendly and cruel way for women to be made into commodities. The most important condition for women is age. Many elders usually do not care about the

women's educational background, or what kind of special skills the women have. They just want a young and fertile daughter in law, in order to have a baby boy sooner. Can this model create families who will be happy? Some of them endure their terrible marriage for the sake of their children, but that may make the marriage even worse.

3.2 Familial duties

Many people would agree that marriage is one of the most important things in a person's life. A marriage which includes a loving relationship is not only play a positive role for an individual, but also produces good effects around them. In Asian society, women always play an important part in families. Because of the traditional small-peasant economy of many Asian societies, which means men work outside of the house and women do house work inside, still many people believe it is the duty for women to do housework and take care of their families. Data from the Institute for Women's Policy in Korea showed that 47.5% of men agreed it is fair to partake in housework with their wives, but there are 16.4% of them actually did. Although the concept is accepted by more people, it is still a concept in most people's mind. In order to have a better life, an increasing number of women still work after marriage. This is why it is difficult for women to keep a good balance between work and family.

As people know, in Japanese society, men who work outside and women who quit their work to take good care of their families has been a very common family model. Actually, there is a large number of Japanese housewives who regret quitting their job. According to data from the Japanese Government, in 2013 the number of households in which both husband and wife are working was over 10.5 million, almost double of the number of the same in 1980. Still there are many housewives believe they should not

quit their jobs. Data from Recruit Works in Japan shows that more than 40% of housewives regret quitting their job. Although a number of women do not quit their job, but take time off for pregnancy, childbirth and childrearing, they still have many difficulties when they return to work. So, some housewives choose to do temporary work to earn money to have more income. However, because of their job status, they cannot get the same welfare as the regular employees do, so it is difficult to protect their rights.

4. Crime & Violence

4.1 Violence against women

Violence against women is another enormous problem in contemporary society, and Asia is no exception. The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women states clearly that 'violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women' and 'violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men.' Fortunately, society is beginning to bring issues of violence against women to public attention. In January, 2017, women in Turkey held a demonstration for violence against and killing women in the nation's biggest city, Istanbul. In the same year on September 12, Indians held a protest rally for the famous Indian female reporter, Gauri Lankesh, who was killed by a person who felt dissatisfaction towards Gauri, who worked to condemning violence. Although there are many women present at such protests for their rights, violence against women remains a serious problem all over the world.

4.2 Human trafficking

On the other hand, women trafficking is a common problem in Asia. In many countries and

areas, there is an imbalance in the sex ratio, due to the reasons discussed earlier in the paper. In China for example, there are over 32 million men who cannot find a marriage partner. Theresa Hesketh from University College London has calculated that over 10% to 20% of young men in China and India cannot find a wife (Hesketh, 2013). This is why some single men are forced to "buy" their wives from different areas or countries. Based on statistics from the Ministry of Public Security of China, the rate of women trafficking from Southeast Asian countries is now rising. In China's Hebei Province alone, in 2009 the police rescued 109 women trafficked from Vietnam or Burma. In the entire nation of China, the number from January to October 2013 was over 50,000. Many of these wives are bought and sold through illegal dealings. This figure shows how social imbalances and trends can lead to international crime, not to mention the suffering and exploitation of women.

4.3 Honor killings

Furthermore, in some Muslim societies there exists a special kind of violence against women known as "honor killing." Wikipedia defines honor killing (or shame killing) as 'the homicide of a member of a family, due to the perpetrators' belief that the victim has brought shame or dishonor upon the family, or has violated the principles of a community or a religion.' This is usually for reasons such as refusing to enter an arranged marriage, being in a relationship that is disapproved by their family, having sex outside marriage, becoming the victim of rape, dressing in ways which are deemed inappropriate, engaging in non-heterosexual relations or renouncing a faith. According to United Nations data, more than 5,000 women worldwide die yearly through honor killings. But this number is the cases which are on record, which indicates that the real number may be far more startling. The official data from Pakistan shows there were

4,101 women who died due to honor killing from the period 1998 to 2003. Even though women's rights are gaining ground across Pakistan in recent years, there are still about 1,000 women who killed in this way every year. Although the Parliament of Pakistan has passed a bill which provides killers in such cases will face at least 25 years of custody, it has produced very little discouraging effect.

5. Conclusions

The problems discussed above have negative effects not only on women themselves, but also cause lots of problems for wider society. Since women find it hard to be promoted to management level, more and more people have come to believe that it is more important for a woman to marry a rich man rather than finding a good job, a sad social trend that even women are beginning to agree with. A study by the Shanghai Women's Federation showed that in 2000, 30% of Chinese men and 37.3% of women are agreed with the statement that 'it is more important to marry a wealthy man rather than find employment'. By 2010 the number of men who agreed with this statement rose to 40%, while the number of women who agreed was 48%. This trend may make it hard to confirm women's real ability and value. In China, there are more and more young men who subscribe to traditional gender roles, and believe the main role of a women should be to run the family. In 2010, 61% of men agreed with this statement, a figure 10% higher than in 2000. Modernisation of the economy and lifestyles does not always mean a modernisation of values in respect to gender equality.

In India, there exists a kind of divorce called the "Triple Talaq", which means that when a husband says the word "talaq" to his wife three times, they are officially divorced, without resort to any official procedures. Divorced women are

not allowed to remarry, and also, they have difficulty in to find a job. In some cases, their parents do not accept them back home. In India, and indeed in many Asian societies, when a woman loses her economic power, they may also lose their ability to live on an equal footing with a man.

Although there are still many social issues affecting the lives of Asian women, there are instances of improving situations. Malala Yousafzai is an activist from Pakistan who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 when she was 17, as the youngest winner in the history of the prize. She is a passionate feminist and strives for women to have access to education. Although she is just a student, even after being intimidated countless times and almost killed when she was shot by the Taliban, she still devotes herself to access to education for girls and women. In my opinion, there are lots of problems that cannot be solved perhaps due to the poor economic condition of some Asian countries. However, I still believe things can be changed. The path of reform might be hard, sometimes it involves pain and the loss of life. We should believe that based on the efforts of international organizations and enthusiastic like-minded people from all over the world, the world will increasingly pay close attention to the issues faced by women, and we will take steps toward real gender quality.

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