

# 1949-2007: Women workers in China



Wildcat analyse the situation, role and struggles of women in China from the Cultural Revolution until today.

## **Female Workers under Maoist Patriarchy**

One may think socialism wiped out the Chinese form of "feudalistic" patriarchy. At least, Maoism improved the women's situation in comparison to the time before "liberation", in the cities as well as on the countryside. After "liberation" in 1949 most urban women did wage labor in state-owned factories or other businesses, while rural women were drawn into the people's communes' labor service. That changed their position in the family, also because due to the low wages in the Mao-era the women's wage was an important part of the family income (Wang: 159). But even though the women were not to the same extent locked up in the house and new laws treated them more or less the same as men, their life took still place in a patriarchal framework. On top of the "traditional" household work they had to do wage work - mostly outside the family or the community of women in which they grew up (McLaren: 171). The socialist regime adopted changed forms of "feudalistic" patriarchy and integrated them into the new forms of social organization.

In her book "Gender and Work in Urban China. Women workers of the unlucky generation" author Liu Jieyu follows the fate of some urban female workers of the generation of the Cultural Revolution (age-group born about 1945 to 1960). Women were hit harder than men by the redundancies following the restructuring of the state industries after the mid-1990s. 62.8 per cent of those laid-off were women, but they only constituted 39 per cent of the urban workers (Wang: 161). Liu wanted to find out which factors played a role here and how the women's life under socialism was dictated by the patriarchal structures and social norms.

The author, today a lecturer of sociology at the University of Glasgow, grew up in Nanjing, and her mother belongs to those who were fired by their danwei (work unit) in the 1990s. Liu talked to more than thirty women from her mother's generation, nearly all of them unskilled workers, about their experiences and their life situation. Whether during the "egalitarian collectivism" of the Mao-era or in today's "socialist market economy", the interviews show that the women were disadvantaged and discriminated in each phase of their life.

## **History of Discrimination**

The urban Cultural Revolution-generation - the first one born under "socialism" - saw the central turning points in the history of the People's Republic of China: the "Great Leap Forward" and the following famine at the end of the 1950s and in the early 60s, the "Cultural Revolution" in the 1960s and 70s, the beginning of the reforms and the "One-Child-Policy" in the 1980s, the repression of the "Tian'anmen Movement" at the end of the 1980s and the drastic restructuring of the 1990s.

Those women who remember the campaigns of the 1950s and the "Great Leap Forward" have seen the extent of the subsequent famine catastrophe. Their accounts are infused with the contemporary state rhetoric, the official version: The wage labor of women, their breaking out of the households was seen as a sign of liberation and shapes their memory until today. The term housewife (jiating funü) still has a bad tone for them. Liu writes: "Although their mothers went out to work, they were not as liberated as official history would have us to believe. In the workplace, these women's mothers only performed the lower paid jobs in the service, textile and caring industries. Inside the family, the traditional patriarchal pattern still persisted. Interviewees reported that their mothers, sometimes with help from themselves, were in charge of domestic affairs while fathers were mainly breadwinners and decision-makers." (Liu: 27)

The women react with bitterness when they remember the preferential treatment of sons (zhongnan qingnü).<sup>1</sup> In the early 1950s the regime still encouraged women to have as many children as possible. That added to an enormous population growth. In the families the boys were treated better than girls, and they were more likely to be chosen to receive (higher) education. The girls had to do the housework, including taking care of smaller siblings and the grandparents. That in turn effected their school education. "The women themselves attributed the neglect of their education to traditional 'feudal' attitudes. However, in a labor market biased against girls, investment in a son's education is a rational decision." (Liu: 29) So due to the gendered division of labor and the "traditional" privileging of boys, the women had less chances in life, in getting education - and later on the labor market.

During the Cultural Revolution from the mid-1960s onwards there were slogans like "Now the times have changed, men and women are the same", at the same time all feminist demands or references to the special problems of women were denounced. They were seen as "bourgeois" (Honig: 255). The class origin was the decisive factor which determined whether someone was attacked and re-educated or not. For women the main criteria for the class assignment were the (father's) origin and the marriage (the origin of the husband).

The children of so-called "class enemies" had to deal not only with the attacks on their parents, but they themselves had problems in school and were excluded from many activities - or they did not want to take part because they were sick of all the attacks and apologies. Elite families that were attacked during the Cultural Revolution could still use their connections to make sure their children received an education or job training, while workers' children - with or (allegedly) without "good family background" - could not finish their education because the schools were closed and the children sent to the countryside.

The first wave of children being sent to the countryside took place between 1966 and 1968. The school education or job training of those youth was interrupted or stopped for good. Until today Chinese people say that generation has "learned nothing". The official reason was that the "intellectual youth" (zhishi qingnian) had to be reeducated on the countryside. Actually, there were also other reasons behind it, for instance, the lowering of urban unemployment. But not all children were sent to the countryside. Students at professional schools could stay in the city as well as a small quota from each school class. Parents with good connections also had the chance to keep their children in the city.

A second wave was sent away between 1974 and 1976. This time the main criterion was how many children each family had kept in the city and how many were already sent to the countryside. Families with more kids in the city had to send some to the countryside.

On the countryside men and women worked in different production teams. Men had to do the allegedly "harder" work. For instance, they had to carry the bags with rice seedlings, while the women had to plant them - often in a squatting position for hours. The hardship of a task was valued by "work points" (gongfen). One woman recalls: "In our place, men's labor was worth 10 points. The worst of them got 8.5

points. The best got 10 points. As for women's labor, the highest was 5.5 points." Another woman says: "We were only worth half labor." (Liu: 34)

The women interviewed nevertheless talk about their tough labor and the hardships they endured on the countryside with pride. They use the term "chi ku", literally: eating bitterness. "All of them had no doubt that work was an inevitable part of their life. In this sense, the state campaign positively shaped their gendered identities by enforcing their identity as a worker; but, at the same time, despite the official rhetoric, they had experienced a gendered division of labor at work which rendered them inferior to men." (Liu: 35)

In the interviews the women avoid speaking about their own participation in the Cultural Revolution's Red Guards. They underline the chaos, a result of the political attacks and the interruption of school education, but when their own involvement is concerned they appear as "outsider, follower or silent sympathizer" (Liu: 36).

"This common avoidance of the label 'Red Guard' in women's memories of the Cultural Revolution is related to the post-Mao depiction of Red Guards as perpetrators of violence, unjustified attacks, and it shows how the women's memories of the past were reconstructed according to the present through a publicly available account." (Liu: 37)

Even though the Red Guards' violence was directed against the "class enemies", it was still often "sexualized" and "gendered". Many young women were exposed to sexual assault, on the countryside by local cadres, in the cities by Red Guards and other gangs (Honig: 256, also see Xinran: 160, 185). During the Cultural Revolution women were attacked because they wore fashionable clothes or looked "feminine". The female Red Guards dressed like men. Whoever behaved like a woman could be seen as a "backward element" (luohou fenzi). There were cases where women were attacked under the pretense of "sexual immorality". One woman says: "At that time, people were attacked for bad class origin. To women, at that time, people would say, you had 'lifestyle problems' [a euphemism for sexual immorality]. Such lifestyle problems would be a huge blow to you. When they had no reasons to attack you, they would say that you had lifestyle problems. I remembered during the Cultural Revolution, those women who were said to have lifestyle problems wore a string of worn shoes around their shoulders, parading through the streets, being tainted as 'broken shoes' [a euphemism for a loose woman]." (Liu: 38)<sup>2</sup>

This kind of "morality" also played a role for the control and surveillance of women and their sexuality in the danwei. The first generation of those sent to the countryside returned to the cities after Mao's death in 1976, the second generation after 1978. The year before the high schools' entrance exams were taken up again. Most women did not apply anymore, though. They had missed too many years of education.

The first generation was assigned work in the danwei. The second generation finished middle school in the early 1980s. Because of unemployment they did not get work assigned, but were taken over by their parent's (often mother's) danwei.

### **Work in the state combines**

According to Liu the danwei-leaders played the role of the traditional family patriarch. The Confucian family, theoretically obsolete under socialism, was transformed into different forms of everyday control and discrimination.<sup>3</sup> The danwei's family culture - the combination of public and private spheres - added to the strengthening of the gender segregation at the workplace and the gender division in society. "The mobilization of women into the workplace did not bring about the liberation in the way socialist rhetoric claimed. The socialist work unit operated as an arbiter of women's careers and personal lives and continued the patriarchal function of pre-socialist institutions. As a result, women workers were put at a

greater social disadvantage than their male counterparts, and lost out in the economic restructuring." (Liu: 86)

The "danwei was not gender-neutral; instead, gender was a complex component of processes of control." (Liu: 64) The assignment of work-places always followed the gender lines (without openly expressing this). The gender specific segregation of work was horizontal and vertical. The horizontal segregation describes the difference between "heavy" and "light" industries. Women made up 70 percent in the "light" industries, 20 percent in the "heavy" ones. The workplaces were also separated in "heavy" and "light". Women took the allegedly "light" jobs, but the distinction was arbitrary. "This division of labor took the 'natural' difference between men and women for granted and suggested the underlying assumption that women's 'weak' physique was best suited to 'light' work." (Liu: 42) Men were also rather assigned to jobs that demanded "skills" while women took less skilled jobs. Referring to the cases of two state companies in Guangzhou, Wang writes: "Men were overwhelmingly assigned to technical jobs and women to non-technical, auxiliary, and service jobs, regardless of educational level. This gendered employment hierarchy established women's subordinate position and shaped women's self-definition." (Wang: 159, see also: 168/9) Already in the 1980s there was a trend initiated by the state to transfer women workers to "auxiliary sections" (departments such as cleaning, the canteen, the factory clinic) in order to reduce the labor surplus (Liu: 43).

The vertical segregation describes the chances for promotion. In China's danwei all employees were either workers (gongren) or cadres (ganbu). Among those who could become cadres were: 1. Ex-soldiers, at least in the rank of platoon leader; 2. graduates from vocational schools or colleges; 3. workers who were promoted. Very few of the soldiers were women. Women were disadvantaged in receiving higher education or professional training. So there was only the last option left. There were three hierarchical levels of cadres, junior cadres, middle-level cadre and senior cadre. Women usually only reached the first level. And those who made it had rather symbolic positions (for instance leader of the Youth League). Another precondition for promotions and for avoiding being laid-off in the 1990s was party membership, and women were also disadvantaged here.

The fact that women worked in the low-wage industries and segments was due to this horizontal and vertical segregation.<sup>4</sup> Two aspects played a role: biao-xian, literally performance or conduct, here more precisely work performance and politically correct behavior, as judged by the superiors; and guan-xi, the contacts and connections with higher employees or functionaries and the delivery of favors. Both are connected since they include forms of pressure, obedience, good conduct and "emotional work". The allocation of wages, benefits and promotions were based on the assessment of biao-xian. Apart from the work performance the social behavior was controlled, so that there was also a moral aspect, that is whether a woman behaves in a proper according to her status, sex and role (for instance as a mother). The guan-xi were and are the base for getting the courtesy of the superiors and functionaries. They play a role in all aspects of social life in China, for instance in getting a job or flat, or for promotions. Since women in the danwei had an inferior status, male and female workers tried to build up good contacts mainly to men in higher positions. Women often only had connections to lower cadres, cadres with low influence, "bad guan-xi".

All in all, women could not pay as much attention to biao-xian and guan-xi because they had to deal not only with wage labor but also domestic labor. Furthermore, they often lived in their husband's danwei (or worked there in lower positions), so they often had no network of their own but had to rely on their husband's guan-xi. Whenever women could establish good guan-xi they often got the reputation - even amongst female colleagues - of trading in sexual services. Men in higher positions, on the other hand, used their status and put sexual pressure on women or molested them. Women had to develop strategies to avoid those situations without finally having male superiors as their enemies, and without gaining a bad reputation among other workers. "The golden rule for women to maintain a good reputation is to avoid

close contact with men, which comes into tension with those practices of biaoxtian and guanxi." (Liu: 64) Women had limited space to evade that pressure. They stayed ordinary workers until they were sacked.

According to Liu, life in the danwei was determined by forms of familiarism. She highlights four aspects: the arrangement of marriages (matchmaking for young people), the allocation of housing (an incentive to marry), the surveillance of family life (to stabilize the marriages) and family planning (i.e. population control).

In China the arrangement of marriages (matchmaking) is seen as an honorable and virtuous undertaking. Often many people, cadres and ordinary workers, are involved in arranging marriages for the youngsters. Under Maoism it was also seen as a task of the danwei. Difficulties occurred when a proposed person was turned down or when there were problems during the marriage, because that concerned the relation to the matchmaker who arranged the marriage as well. Women who did not want to marry were seen as "strange". Some married just to escape the social pressure and discrimination. Many Chinese are more tolerant where single men are concerned. The acceptable upper limit for getting married is an age of 25 for women and 35 for men.

The allocation of housing (an incentive to marry) was a general problem. Flats were rare and had to be allocated by the danwei. Male workers were privileged. Often only men could apply for a flat. Single men got a place in the dormitory; single women had to stay with their family. The traditional form continued: The woman became part of the family (here: danwei) of her husband. "This housing arrangement in the danwei further reinforced the traditional idea of female dependency in marriage and family life". (Liu: 69) Mothers passed this ideology over to their daughters. They took care of them, until they found work and married. Then they expected the daughter's husband's family to provide a flat (and money for the wedding). In case of marital problems the women had to cope with the living situation. Since they had no flat of their own, they might have to move back to their parents. But even earlier they had problems, for instance because of the long times of commuting to work (in another danwei) or because they had to take their kids to their danwei's-kindergarten. Today there is a market for rented flats but the rents are so high that most women cannot afford them.

The surveillance of family life (to stabilize marriages) happened within the danwei. The cadres had an interest in keeping up good relations among workers and other residents. In case of conflicts a "reconciliation committee" or "neighborhood committee" intervened. "Whatever justifications the committees provided to people with grievances, they tried to persuade women to comply with gendered social expectations and to make compromises in order to maintain family harmony." (Liu: 71) For instance, they advised women whose men had extramarital affairs to ask themselves what they had done wrong. Despite all the socialist rhetoric about equal rights in the family, in reality the traditional ideology of gender roles prevailed. In the danwei-housing units women were also controlled by the neighbors, who reported to the committees.

Family planning (i.e. population control) in China went through different phases. From the 1950s until the 1970s China saw - supported by government propaganda - high birth rates. The only exception was the period of the "Great Leap Forward" in the early 1960s when the immense work pressure, the precarious supply situation and famines reduced the birth rate. After 1979 public birth control started with the One-Child-Policy. The danwei-leadership controlled the reproductive performances of the female workers. "It is women's bodies that undergo all the processes imposed like close examination, forced abortion, use of obstetric health services." (Liu: 74) Women were supposed to have just one child and to renounce having more for the benefit of the "nation", but paradoxically women could also partially use the One-Child-Policy for their own benefit: Some refused to have more children in order to have more freedom. Others thought (and think) of the One-Child-Policy as just "another sacrifice" they had to make for the state (Liu: 76). In the case of the first child being a girl, women were put under pressure. Socialist and

traditional patriarchy clashed here: The family expected a boy to continue the family line, the state only allowed one child. Women took the big part of the burden, and their behavior was controlled.<sup>6</sup>

Liu also discusses the control over time from the perspective of the gendered division of labor. Since the definition of time distinct from wage work time is a manifestation of gender discrimination, she starts with distinguishing four kinds of time: necessary, contracted, committed and free time.<sup>7</sup> "Necessary time refers to the time needed to satisfy basic physiological needs such as sleep, meals, personal health and hygiene and sex. Contracted time refers to regular paid work. Time for traveling to work is included here... Committed time encompasses housework, help, care and assistance of all kinds, particularly pertaining to children, shopping, etc. Free time is the time left when the other time activities are removed." (Liu: 76/7) "Time wealth" depends on having appropriate amounts of time, control over time and in having similar time rhythms as other family members. Liu calls that "personal time sovereignty". (Liu: 83).

For the women the organization of the danwei again and again created time crises and played a role in upholding the gendered hierarchy. Although the women were doing wage labor and, therefore, had to spend time at work ("contracted time") they were not relieved of the "traditional" task of a "good wife and mother". The majority of the women Liu interviewed had to do machine work in a three-shift system. They were subordinated to the machine time, while men in their workplaces took over jobs that allowed more control over time (day shifts, maintenance, office work...). Women constantly had to solve time crises, caused by the three-shift system with its blurring of day and night, and by the conflicts between "contracted" (work, commuting) and "committed" time (domestic work or "household management", children) (Liu: 79). That usually led to a constant conflict between wage labor and family task, and to exhaustion. Many women changed their work places - regardless of biao xian and guan xi - often to inferior, lower paid jobs that still gave the women more time.

Even though the danwei partially helped the women workers to do both, wage labor and domestic work, these arrangements also meant that women were not seen as "proper" workers. The "family distractions" were one factor in the decision to sack woman first (Liu: 81).

Women were also disadvantaged regarding the non-work time (non-contracted time). In the danwei all workers, male or female, had to attend meetings outside of working time, for instance political study sessions. In the 1980s assessment tests were introduced that had to be passed before promotions. Preparing for the tests had to be done in non-work time. Women had more problems to invest time because they were busy with domestic work when not doing wage work. According to a study of the Chinese Women's Federation, women spent 260 minutes a day doing domestic work, men did 130 minutes (Liu: 82).<sup>8</sup>

Women did not have much time for social activities either. Due to the traditional gender discrimination, the possibilities for married women to socialize with other people were limited. They "virtuously" stayed at home, and they found social relations predominantly during working hours. That is where they exchanged information and formed social networks. However, the main topics of conversation circled around the traditional roles as wives and mothers, further enforcing these roles.

### **Return to house and home**

In the reform phase after 1978 the income gap widened and the gendered segregation of the new labor market increased. Already from the early 1980s on there were campaigns for the "return home" (hui jia) of urban women. At that time more than ten million "returned youth from the countryside" added to an increasing urban unemployment, and the return of the women to house and home was supposed to reduce it. The women should leave the danwei to increase productivity in the socialist planned economy, too. They were asked to sacrifice themselves again for the "nation" (Wang: 163/4).

When with the restructuring in the 1990s, increasingly after 1997, 85 percent of the redundancies were happening in the industrial danwei, the women were hit harder. There are several reasons: Their percentage in the workforce of the industrial danwei was especially high. Sex and age were the critical factors in choosing the workers who were then laid off, not so much education and skill. Many women were just 40 years old when they had to retire and leave their job, men often 50 and older.<sup>9</sup> That was backed up by the idea that men can perform better when old than women. When the situation of the company changed (because it got new orders...) men were more likely to be called back or "hired", even when they had to retire earlier. Furthermore, the auxiliary and service departments - where women worked - were the first to be dismantled.

The guanxi (connections/contacts) played an important role here. Men had more opportunities to prevent forced retirements, and the financial burdens they brought with them, by using their contacts and connections or asking to be transferred to another department. But Liu also describes how the women she interviewed did not just accept being laid off or retired but searched for ways to defend their interests. They asked to be transferred, called in sick, used their husband's guanxi or went just for the best form of redundancy or retirement. Some women also accepted the dismantlement because afterwards they had more time for their family tasks - as long as it was financially sustainable. In that case their husbands supported it, too. Both, wife and husband, saw the women's work as a source of an additional income, the domestic work was seen as the main responsibility of the wife. But this "choice" was limited.

Wang cites a manager who made clear, that they sacked women first because they expected less resistance. He said: "If you lay off men, they will get drunk and make trouble. But if you lay off women, they will just go home and take it quietly by themselves." (Wang: 162) This hints to a strategy of party cadres and factory directors whose main aim was to avoid social conflicts. They calculated that it creates less unrest to fire a woman of a family and not the man.

After being laid off the people kept their flat, but not other benefits like medical care. That was especially hard for those women who were "bought out", i.e. who got compensation and whose connection to the danwei was completely cut off afterwards. One former female worker said about that: "We have no connection with our former danwei, they treated us like thrown away rotten meat." (Liu: 107)

The laid-off women found little support in the newly adopted forms of the "three guarantees", the small benefit payments for sacked workers. Due to the financial crisis of the danwei and corruption, the "guarantees" did not work. Cut off from state financial support the women had to resort to informal ways that were on the rise since the transformation to a market economy had begun. The decay of the danwei or the women's cutting-off reinforced the family connections the women now had to rely on.

In some cases the laid-off women supported each other. The pressure to find a new job was big - partly due to the financial problems after their redundancy, partly because the children were in puberty and the rising costs of education and job training had to be covered. While looking for a job the guanxi again played a major role, the connections to people of power and influence, but also certain forms of "social capital", the women's own networks, for instance with former female colleagues, resources the women could draw on.

Women found mainly jobs in the lower segments of the labor market or as precarious street sellers, result of their former low social status and comparably "bad guanxi".<sup>10</sup> "Women with poor social capital were trapped in a vicious circle of low-paid, unskilled part-time work providing only further poor social capital. Former cadres were able to maintain their social positions; the workers were vulnerable to downward mobility" (Liu: 115). The gendered networking reproduces the segregation of the labor market. The laid-off women were too old for the newly created job in "private" services, their skills were too low, and they

were not young and charming enough. Young and attractive women who pushed onto the labor market from the countryside or just after finishing school got these jobs. While women, considering all the problems, often accepted low paid jobs, men often refused them because they saw it as undignified to do lower jobs with a bad reputation. In some cases women did not search for new jobs because of their duties and domestic work. "She became a full-time family servant", writes Liu about one woman. (Liu: 115). Most women had to take care not just of their own family but were also used as an unpaid laborer by members of the extensive family.

The women Liu interviewed were for the most part doing wage labor, but none of those working in the private economy had a work contract or regulated working hours doing part time work. Many were molested and insulted by their bosses. Those self-employed lost money and were harassed by the authorities. That produced a kind of nostalgia for the former situation in the danwei, especially for the social "security" at that time. Only those few who had started a successful career considered the restructuring and social transformation positive because they appreciated the new "liberties".

### **The following generation**

Liu interviewed the women's daughters, too. Most of them were born after the beginning of the One-Child-Policy. Different from the experience of their mothers, they were the center of attention in their families. The "traditional" Chinese family was parent-centered, that is, the needs of the parents stand above those of the children. Children should pay respect and honor their parents. When the first One-Child-generation grew up this old constellation bit by bit collapsed.<sup>11</sup>

In the danwei the One-Child-Policy was strictly imposed,<sup>12</sup> so that many families could have just one daughter. Subsequently the educational gap between boys and girls was partly closed. Many women from the "unhappy generation" who had enjoyed little education and experienced many setbacks in their lives invested a lot in the development and training of their daughters "to realize vicariously their unfulfilled dreams" (Liu: 126).

The work around the children still lay on the mothers' shoulders, the fathers stayed away from it. In some families the mother dealt with all aspects of life, the father just with educational questions. Mothers tried to adapt their own labor to the needs of the child, for instance by changing from rotating shifts to day shifts in order to have more time for the child - even if that involved accepting disadvantages at work.

The "unhappy generation" of women suffered from three burdens: They had to "pay honor" to their own parents and care for their needs, they did everything for their child(ren), and they had to answer to the demands of their husbands. After being laid-off by the danwei - their "return home" - they temporarily or ultimately became full-time mothers. The daughters liked that because their mothers had more time for them and cooked regularly. The daughters accepted that their mothers were sacked as unskilled workers. They considered that as a necessary sacrifice of the old generation during the transformation to a market economy. For them the "society" with its interests stood above the "individuals". They supported the reforms although they were responsible for the fact that their mothers lost their job and the security of the danwei. And they accepted the official slogans and explanations that justified the social hardships that accompanied the reforms: stimulation of self-initiative, support of young employed people by domestic helpers from the danwei, make space for the young workers.

The daughters know what the mothers hoped for and expected from them, and they are very ambitious themselves. "The daughters' desire for success reflects the values of competition and efficiency which have been highly promoted in the changeover to the market economy." (Liu: 133) The daughters by no means want to repeat the past of their mothers. While for the mothers, their wage labor was just a job, and promotion and career was not important, the daughters are different. They think about their personal development. They do not want to sacrifice themselves for the family, they do not want to live for their children (or their parents) (Jaschok: 122). Nevertheless, the daughters partly use the services of their



mothers who take care of their grand-child while the daughters lead their own life and use their time in a different manner. The daughters do not want to sacrifice themselves for the family, but they leave their mother in exactly that position.<sup>13</sup>

While only few mothers recognized gender discrimination as the reason for their lay-off and linked disadvantages to biological differences, the daughters were rather conscious about gender disparities. The daughters experience discrimination on the labor market, sexual harassment and violence that limit their space and opportunities. "The wider social constraints on woman are pervasive in post-Mao China" (Liu: 135) The young women have their own goals, they plan their careers. They emphasize their independence - but at the same time they expect a future with a "breadwinner" husband for their nuclear family. Liu refers to Maria Jaschok here: "Jaschok interpreted the 'awakening desires [of young women] to change and adapt' more as 'a modernization of established patterns than as an experimentation with alternative life-styles'" (Liu: 135/6; Jaschok: 126). And Liu adds: "The daughters seemed to hold dual values, which were infused by past and present, tradition and modernity; the contradictions in their values were representative of the tensions and frictions arising from these oppositional ideologies" (Liu: 136). They have to bring together individualist and collectivist orientations. They want a modern and independent life without sexist discrimination, but they hold on to the "promise of happiness" through marriage and having children.<sup>14</sup>

Liu's research shows that proletarian women - especially the older ones - had (and still have) to pay a big part of the costs of the economic reforms in China. The lay-redundancies of women from the danwei was the result of "the culmination of a lifetime of gender inequalities" (Liu: 143), from the Great Leap Forward until today. Worse educational opportunities, more burdens in the households and families, more pressure in everyday life, stricter surveillance of personal behavior, close control of sexuality and reproduction, less chances for promotion at work, a limited social network, lower wages: the list of results of structural and personal discrimination of women is long. Still, the women of the "unhappy generation" hold on to beliefs of the "natural difference between men and women" and the "feminine" readiness to make sacrifices. They cannot just get rid of the patriarchal heritage of Confucianism, patrilineality<sup>15</sup> and the strict control of chastity and monogamy of women. And even though their daughters are trying to find their own way, they have not broken completely with the "traditional" concepts. However, what is left is the hope that the young women will successfully fight for more control over their own life.

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#### Footnotes

1 The correspondent term for "adults" is nanzun nübei, roughly: Women are inferior to men. These sexist slogans are part of the (neo-)Confucian pulp that still gums up many social discourses in China.

2 Until today many Chinese use this term. For instance, divorced women, in particular those with children, often have problems finding a new partner, because they are seen as "worn shoes". Getting a divorce in China today does not promise (new) independence but loneliness, economic insecurity and gossip (see Jaschok: 119).

3 It was not just the patriarchal feudalistic structures that were adopted (something that happened in other Asian countries, too). New versions of the imperial governmental units in China, from the mandarins down to the village heads, can also be found in the socialist structures.

4 Still, Wang points out that one reason for the acceptance of the gendered assignment of low-skilled jobs to women lies in the fact that the difference in wages and benefits in a danwei was rather small - in accordance with the egalitarianism of the Maoists. Another factor was that the situation of the urban women working in a danwei was far better than those of rural women. (Wang: 160).

5 On the Confucian and nationalist-socialist background of the notion of sacrifice (for the emperor, the state, the party, the family) see Zuo: 16.

6 China today has far more males than females because many parents make a sex test before birth - and if it is a girl they abort the fetus. The relation between men and women is around 117 males to 100 females.

7 Here Liu refers to Davies, K. (1990): Women, Time, and the Weaving of the Strands of Everyday Life. Aldershot: Avebury.

8 Lipinsky writes that in 2001, 85 per cent of all families the women were "responsible for cooking, washing clothes, washing up dishes, tidy up, cleaning and other domestic tasks". Women spent 4 hours a day on domestic work, men 2.7 hours. This average number includes countryside and cities. Looking at cities alone men do just 1.7 hours domestic work per day (Lipinsky: 224).

9 Sometimes the age was 45 and 55; the official retirement age is 50 (women) and 60 (men).

10 They worked, for instance, as domestic helpers or taxi drivers. See the article on domestic helpers in China on the website <http://www.wildcat-www.de/dossiers/china> and the review of the film "The Taxi-sisters of Xi'an" in the German edition of "Unruhen in China", page 77.

11 In the public discourse - which is dominated by the party and the older generation - there are still many allusions to the obedience towards the parents, the past few years even with an open reference to reactionary Confucian doctrines.

12 That was not and is not the case in all areas and social groups in China.

13 That attitude of children of workers who by no means want to become workers themselves, but also of parents who want something "better" for their children, can be found anywhere on the planet. Whether the children manage to escape the "dirty" jobs is a different question.

14 The dagongmei, young women who migrate from the countryside to the cities to work in the factories, hold similar attitudes (see Pun/Li 2006).

15 The term for a patriarchal system in which one belongs to one's father's lineage; involving the inheritance of property, names or titles through the male line.

*Article on the struggles of migrant workers in China from wildcat-supplement "Unrest in China", wildcat #80, winter 2007/08 [www.Prol-Position.net](http://www.Prol-Position.net)*