

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

# Feminism and Socialism in China

Elisabeth Croll



## Feminism and Socialism in China

First published in 1978, *Feminism and Socialism in China* explores the inter-relationship of feminism and socialism and the contribution of each towards the redefinition of the role and status of women in China. In her history of the women's movement in China from the late nineteenth century onwards, Professor Croll provides an opportunity to study its construction, its ideological and structural development over a number of decades, and its often ambiguous relationship with a parallel movement to establish socialism.

Based on a variety of material including eye witness accounts, the author examines a wide range of fundamental issues, including women's class and oppression, the relation of women's solidarity groups to class organisations, reproduction and the accommodation of domestic labour, women in the labour process, and the relationship between women's participation in social production and their access to and control of political and economic resources. The book includes excerpts from studies of village and communal life, documents of the women's movement and interviews with members of the movement.

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‘The thoroughgoing liberation for women is not something ready-made. . . .’

Woman Correspondent, *Renmin Ribao*, 8 March 1973

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Elisabeth Croll

# Note on romanisation

In this study I have mainly used the Hanyu Pinyin system of romanisation. The exceptions are composed of well-known place names such as Peking, Tientsin and Canton and persons such as Chiang Kai-shek. Where Chinese authors and titles have been written in, or translated into English, they remain as they are presented in the available texts. Where the source material refers to persons in an unusual spelling, and it has not been possible to check for the original spelling, I have used the form given in the source consulted.

# Abbreviations

ACDWF	All-China Democratic Women's Federation later became the National Women's Federation (NWF)
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
<i>CQ</i>	<i>China Quarterly</i> (London)
<i>CR</i>	<i>China Reconstructs</i> (Peking)
<i>CWR</i>	<i>China Weekly Review</i> (Canton)
FLP	Foreign Language Press, Peking
<i>NCH</i>	<i>North China Herald</i> (Shanghai)
NCNA	New China News Agency also <i>Xinhua she</i>
<i>PC</i>	<i>People's China</i> (Peking)
<i>PR</i>	<i>Peking Review</i> (Peking)
<i>RMRB</i>	<i>Renmin Ribao (People's Daily)</i> Peking
<i>ZF</i>	<i>Zhongguo Funu (Women of China)</i> Peking
<i>ZQ</i>	<i>Zhongguo Qingnian (Youth of China)</i> Peking

# Introduction: The Women's Movement in China

# 1

They too were fired with a fanatical desire to fight to the death for the revolutionary cause. This very remarkable phenomenon of women taking an active part in the Chinese Revolution was observed in Shanghai as well as in the south.

(F. Farjanel, 1911)<sup>1</sup>

One of the most striking manifestations of social change and awakening which has accompanied the Revolution in China has been the emergence of a vigorous and active Woman's Movement.

(Irene Dean, 1927)<sup>2</sup>

The revolt of women has shaken China to its very depths. . . . In the women of China, the Communists possessed, almost ready made, one of the greatest masses of disinherited human beings the world has ever seen. And because they found the keys to the heart of these women, they also found one of the keys to victory over Chiang Kai-shek.

(J. Belden, 1946)<sup>3</sup>

Travelling through China we saw old women with feet painfully crippled from foot-binding, younger women working in the fields and operating machinery in factories, and middle-school girls shooting rifles in a militia drill. These contrasts convinced us that the changes in the lives of women since liberation may be one of the greatest miracles of the Chinese Revolution.

(Group of American Students of China, 1971)<sup>4</sup>

At every stage of the continuing revolution in twentieth-century China, one feature which has immediately impressed observers has been the active participation of women in the revolution, and the parallel changes in their public and domestic roles. What had been described as a 'remarkable phenomenon' in 1911, a 'striking manifestation of social change and awakening' in 1927 was said by 1946 to have 'shaken China to its very depths'. In the 1970s an impressive array of *prima facie* evidence has caused many observers, like the group of American Students of China, to contrast the occupations and confidence of women in China today with the reports of bound-footed, hobbling and secluded women

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that reached Europe and America in the nineteenth century. Even at the turn of the present century women could still describe themselves as leading the existence of a 'frog in a well'<sup>5</sup> and Peking was observed to be 'a city of men'.<sup>6</sup> In the twentieth century women emerged as a new social category of public economic and political consequence. No longer did they think of themselves 'as different from men as earth was from heaven', but as half of China holding up or constituting the other 'half of heaven'. Despite the impressions of contemporary observers at each stage of the revolution and the changing self-image of Chinese women, the details of this national and conscious attempt to collectively redefine the position of women in society has until recently remained largely undocumented in Western literature.<sup>7</sup> There has been considerable research and debate on the role of peasant and labour movements, their history and contributions to the victory of the Communist Party, but these same scholars have largely ignored the fact that women, too, formed a significant group in Chinese society which in attempting to improve their own position could potentially furnish a separate and organised basis of support for the revolution. Only recently have students of Chinese society begun to document their life-patterns, the history of their separate movement and its relationship to the revolution.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout this century two forces, the wider revolutionary movement and the separate and organised women's movement, have worked to redefine the role and status of women in China. The term 'wider revolutionary movement' is used to refer to the continuous attempt to redefine economic, political and social institutions in the twentieth century. It began with the reform and republican movements which culminated in the 1911 Revolution during which the Manchu dynasty was toppled, and it continued with the development of a nationalist revolutionary movement, led initially by Sun Yat-sen and later by the Communist Party, to unify China and establish a socialist society based on the principles of Marx and Lenin but adapted to the special social and economic conditions of agrarian China. The establishment of the Communist Party as the government in 1949, the period of social reconstruction, the Great Leap Forward (1958–60), the Cultural Revolution and the recent movements to criticise Confucius and Lin Biao (Lin Piao) all constitute stages in this continuing revolutionary process.

The organisation of women to achieve new rights of equality marked the emergence of a new social movement. The women's movement in China as elsewhere is distinguished from other social

movements by the sex of its members and its specific interests and pursuits. The redefinition of the role and status of women in public and domestic spheres required not only the ending of legal, social, political and economic discrimination against women, but also an analysis and consciousness of their position in society, together with a total change in their beliefs, self-image, obligations and expectations. That is, all those activities contained under the general rubric of the 'emancipation of women', the 'liberation of women' or 'woman work',\* which have deliberately been left as open-ended concepts by Chinese women to allow for constant redefinition. Feminism is not an easy term to define. In China its meaning has been constantly reinterpreted. For the first two decades it was used to denote the exclusive advocacy of women's rights, later it referred to the women's movement which worked to forward the interests of its members within the context of the wider revolutionary movement to alter the basic structures of society. In the last two decades the term feminism has become much more a term of abuse referring to those who exclusively pursue women's interests without regard for the forms which political and economic systems take. It refers to those who survey or describe women's oppression but stop short of an explanation which requires a class analysis and class struggle.

In China the integration of feminism with socialism has demanded that in addition to improving the status of women, the women's movement also arouses an awareness of class interests and responds to all forms of oppression. While in theory the women's movement was to be a separate but not autonomous part of the socialist revolution and the achievements of the goals of each were seen to be mutually interdependent, in practice the uneasy alliance between the wider revolutionary and women's movements have sometimes brought competing claims on the identity of women. The balance of these dual demands has directly affected the history of the women's movement. At various stages certain conditions have favoured a strong group identity among women which has led to its criticism for following an independent feminist policy and disregarding the wider goals of the socialist revolution. While at

\* Woman work is a popular term describing the education and organisation of women for struggle within their own and the wider revolutionary movement. Hereafter woman work refers to this type of activity in order to differentiate it from women's work, the more usual translation of *funu gongzuo*. Women's work is reserved for reference to work or occupations to which women are traditionally confined.

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other times women have displayed a weak group identity in the face of these competing claims with the result that their interests have been neglected. The history of the women's movement shows that it has been marked by certain ambiguities which have surrounded its position as an independent power-base in a society in which class struggle is viewed as the motivating force generating social change. The special oppression of women did call for the separation of women into their own solidarity groups, but women did not form a class however the term was defined. This book examines the historical and fundamental relationship between feminism and socialism in China.

The attempt to redefine the role and status of women in China has recently attracted the attention of members of the women's movement the world over. Like many other contemporary analyses of the position of women in China, the present study arose out of a joint training and interest in the study of Chinese social institutions and an involvement in the women's movement in London in the late 1960s and early 1970s. One of the main issues that has concerned the women's movement in Europe and North America has been the relevance of radical societal change, revolution and socialism, to the emancipation or liberation of women. Some have concluded that socialism alone promises to change the social order enough to enable women to acquire new rights or to exercise in practice those rights increasingly accorded in principle. But it is this question which has divided the women's movement in Europe and North America from the turn of the century to the present day. The apparent successes and the evident failures of the movement to redefine the position of women in China have equally been used by both sides to support their points of view.

I began this study fairly committed to the view that only the broader economic, social and political transformations that have occurred in China have made the unquestionable changes in the lives of women in China possible. And while not deflected from this view, the present study has raised a number of important questions. For example, how has the women's movement, whose programme essentially suggested a struggle between the sexes, been integrated into the broader class struggle of the wider revolutionary movement? How have the problems of women been defined in relation to the definitions of class struggle in theory and in practice? Has the revolutionary movement as the government satisfied the expectations of women aroused in the early years of struggle when it required their support? Has the implementation of

socialist policies and institutions brought with it a concomitant rise in the status of women? The way these questions have been defined and handled in China reveals that in practice the alliance between the women's movement and a political party committed to radical social change is inherently uneasy, complex and, at certain junctures, antagonistic. Indeed in China it has been these same issues which have divided the women's movement itself around the question: which should come first, political or class struggle and the establishment of socialism, or the struggle between the sexes or feminism? Tension between the two sets of priorities has marked the history of the women's movement in China. But to grasp the full complexities of this alliance requires a detailed examination of the changing social, economic and political background of China.

The history of the wider revolutionary movement can be divided into a number of distinct phases each of which had particular implications for the ideological and structural development of the women's movement in China, and raised pertinent questions for women's movements elsewhere. First, this book identifies and summarises the ideological, physical and economic factors responsible for the oppression of women at the turn of the century (chapter 2). It examines the degree of suppression experienced by women at each stage of their life-cycle and for each social class, the forms of protection afforded to women and the attempts made prior to the twentieth century to challenge their subordination. The first two decades of this century were marked by the questioning and confrontation of the old and traditional ways and the search for new social and political institutions. The source of inspiration for the reform movement of 1898, the Republican Revolution of 1911 and the new Thought and Cultural Renaissance of 1916 which were all attempts to redefine social and political institutions in China, was the Western powers of North America and Europe which seemed to hold the secrets of wealth, power and stability. The period which saw the height of Western influence in China in political, social and economic thought and institutions was also marked by incidents of foreign aggression and penetration at the hands of scrambling foreign powers and capital. It was the age of the *Punch* cartoon in which China was shown as the enticing melon or cake ready to be portioned by the foreign powers at the Party table. The increasing incapacity of China's governments of the day to respond to this challenge fed the reform, republican and patriotic movements of the first two decades. Along with other radical movements, the women's movement developed in response



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to this foreign encroachment, to the growing urbanisation, and to the influence of Western principles of individualism, freedom and self-fulfilment. The women's movement that emerged was primarily confined to, and its platforms reflected, the dominance of the privileged defined in terms of wealth and education. Its members were labelled and harassed as aberrant individuals engaged in quixotic combat with a predestined and established social order. It is the history of the early patriotic, romantic, revolutionary and feminist struggles of the women's movement in this period (chapters 3 and 4), which raises a number of questions to do with the construction and development of similar movements elsewhere. What are the social conditions and the specific condition of women that may produce a revolt? What are the effects of a new imported ideology and/or new economic relations on the size, class-nature and activities of its participants? Where in society should the women's movement identify the agents and institutions of power?

The second phase in the 1920s was marked by further penetration of foreign capital and the steady decline of the power of the central government in the face of competition from a number of regional warlords. The establishment of new economic relations in the cities contributed to the growth of urban areas and new social classes and the decline of the rural economy. In response to the deteriorating economic, social and political conditions of China there emerged a single new revolutionary movement made up of the Communist and Guomintang (Kuomintang) Party members under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen. It was dedicated to the unity of China and the reform of political and economic social institutions, but the latter were subordinated to the immediate military goals of defeating regional commanders and establishing a new and strong central government in China. The structural integration of the women's movement into the nationalist revolutionary movement (1922–7), whereby feminism became linked to a social alternative, marked the turning point in the history of the women's movement in China (chapter 5), and it also raises a number of fundamental questions concerning the integration of feminism and political movements. How did the expanded women's movement go about soliciting the support of peasant and working women and attempt to establish a mass base to the women's movement? What is the relationship between feminist struggle and the struggles of the oppressed? What conditions make for co-operation or conflict between the women's movement and the wider revolutionary

movements? What are the revolutionary theories or strategies that accord a distinct place to women's oppression and their movement?

Following the split between the Communist Party and Guomindang Party in 1927 and the suppression of the Communist wing of the nationalist revolution, the Guomindang Party as the government turned to the traditional ideology of Confucianism and nurtured the traditional economic relations based on land rents, and the new economic relations of capitalism in the urban areas. They solicited and increasingly came to rely on foreign aid to restore national unity, mend the social fabric and defeat the Japanese invaders. However, the government was challenged by the growing revolutionary movement led by the Communist Party, which introduced a new ideology and new economic relations based on the writings of Marx, Lenin and later Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) and the experiences of the Soviet Union. The 1930s and 1940s were punctuated by periods of co-operation, mutual tolerance and deadly rivalry or civil war between the two. The division of China into two areas, one governed by Chiang Kai-shek and the Guomindang Party and the other by Mao Zedong and the Communist Party, provides a unique opportunity to follow the development and fate of the women's movement within a decaying semi-feudal society with capitalist trappings (chapter 6) and a burgeoning socialist society (chapter 7). Its study raises the questions which are of great relevance to the reform versus revolution debate within the women's movement. What are the differing political and social interests affected by the demands of women and how far can they be accommodated within certain political and economic systems? How can government policies affect the composition and platforms of the women's movement? Is a change in the socio-economic structure of society necessary to the redefinition of the position of women? Must women wait till after the revolution to achieve their aims? What are the effects of economic development and modernisation on the status of women in rural and urban areas?

The proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 marked the beginning of a nationwide attempt to introduce new political, social and economic institutions in China. A number of major reforms were initiated in the early and middle 1950s: land reform, involving the redistribution of land and the organisation of peasants; the publicisation of the new Marriage Law; the founding of modern industry and the gradual displacement of individualised

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peasant production by collectivised agriculture. The period of the Great Leap Forward which followed from 1958 to 1960 is perhaps best known for the formation of the new forms of rural social organisation (the people's communes), its utopian flavour, and the subsequent expansion of production. From the 1960s and culminating in the Cultural Revolution, the emphasis has been on the further consolidation of new forms of social organisation, socialist education to raise the political awareness of the people and the struggle against bureaucratic, routinised, capitalist and feudal forms of thought and behaviour. Within the context of these general programmes designed to change the economic base and create new social institutions and values, the women's movement has worked to introduce the new policies and support the interests of women.

The history of the women's movement since 1949 provides an opportunity to study its strategy, its theoretical basis and implementation in practice, in a developing socialist society (chapters 8–11). The relationship between the role of women in the economy and their status in society, the conflicting demands of production, reproduction and the accommodation of domestic labour, the structure of the household or kinship organisation in defining the position of women, and the nature of the labour process, are all current and formidable research problems facing the social scientist and members of the women's movement. The direct and neat correlation between participation in social production and the degree of participation in political activities which gives women access to and control over the strategic resources of society has been questioned. Recent analyses have suggested that although female productive labour is a necessary condition for female status, it is not a sufficient condition, for other factors, often not identified, may interfere with and discourage access to political power. What might these factors be? What are the ideological and structural constraints which continue to inhibit the redefinition of the position of women in Chinese society? How far does socialism bring improvements in the position of women in its wake? What are the role of female solidarity groups and how far can they constitute an independent power base in a socialist society? Is the tyranny of a tight organisation comparable to the tyranny of structurelessness? In sum can the struggle between the sexes and between the classes be combined in the one strategy? I cannot, of course, pretend to be able to discuss all these questions in depth or even that I fully understand the complex nature of the

many questions themselves.\* But a consideration of how the government and women's movement in China have assessed, analysed and attempted to resolve some of these problems cannot but be of interest and relevance to those concerned with developing analyses and strategies to redefine the role and status of women in society.

In any study of women it is difficult to maintain a balance between presenting an outline of the socio-economic structure in which they are located and the details which directly affect the role and status of women. This problem is magnified in the case of China, where the cultural and political frameworks may be unfamiliar to many readers and where individuals and groups of women should be allowed to relate as much as possible their own observations of and participation in the struggles to redefine the position of women. The documentary sources upon which the book is based fall into two main categories. The first category is composed of official documents of both the government and the women's movement, including authoritative theoretical discussions in the media and educational materials of all forms. These documents include descriptions of role models or public reference groups, commonly used to define the goals of the respective movements and promote the strategies devised to achieve these goals. The reactions to these goals of women in and out of the movement and their perceptions of the events in which they participated or observed has required the use of a second category of materials such as diaries, autobiographies, letters, magazine articles and interviews conducted by anthropologists and journalists. This study exemplifies the problems of documenting the history of a social category hitherto hidden from history by their omission from any of the established and recognised sources for historical analyses, and it has often been necessary to rely on the less formal historical sources and in particular on eye-witness accounts of those who alone at the time thought the movement important enough to attend some of their meetings and interview leaders and members. To maintain balance these accounts are based on a wide variety of political persuasions. At each historical stage the majority of the English-language sources are contemporary to the period in

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\* There is one important set of questions missing from this list and this is the difficult one of sexuality. This topic is probably subject more than any other to the dangers of simplification and ethnocentrism. I have preferred to leave its consideration to future studies.

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question. For the Chinese-language sources the historical chapters are based on a study of the general histories of women and the women's problem published in China in the 1930s,<sup>9</sup> while the chapters devoted to the People's Republic of China are based on an extensive reading of contemporaneous Chinese magazines and periodicals and my own interviews in 1973. Without the advantage of broad surveys and statistics allowing for the compilation of tables and membership maps it has been necessary to rely on individual group or community case studies to reveal the intricacies of general large-scale structural changes. These have been chosen to illustrate general patterns and trends of development, less to demonstrate the degree of social change than to delineate the problems involved in combining the goals of feminism and socialism in a single strategy.

The history of the women's movement in China is the history of a long and many-layered complex struggle. It was summed up recently by Jin Zhifang, a peasant woman living on a commune in Jiangsu (Kiangsu) province.<sup>10</sup> In 1973 she described the changes within her lifetime. In the past, like their sisters in other parts of the country, the women of her commune suffered multiple oppression—they were inferior to men, had very little say in the family and were dependent on their husbands economically. Indeed there was an old saying that 'women were always busy, either beside the kitchen stove or at the far-off riverside'. This, she said, aptly described how the labouring women of her village were tied down from morning to night with household chores such as cooking, fetching water and washing. Besides heavy housework they had also to row boats, fish and collect firewood and some even worked as maids in the big houses of the neighbourhood in order to earn some money for their families. 'Some women', she said, 'were so poor that they had to leave six-month-old babies at home and become wet nurses.' Now their position had changed. Both men and women took part in the political, social and economic life of the community. For example, nearly 500 women held leading posts in the commune and popular organisations, women composed 46 per cent of the commune's labour force and now were receiving equal pay where they did equal work. To help women assume a public role, the commune had established a number of neighbourhood organisations such as creches and permanent and seasonal canteens. In describing the present position of women in her commune today, Jin Zhifang constantly referred to their continual battle against old and persistent conventions and ideas.

'Old institutions were rigid, old moral concepts and old customs lingered.' She concluded with real feeling that their new position had only been 'hard won after many, many struggles'. This book is an attempt to analyse the many many struggles of women like Jin Zhifang to win 'half of heaven'.

# 2 'A Frog in a Well': Mechanisms of Subordination

The past in China was a pit,  
Grim, bottomless, accursed,  
Where common folk were trodden down,  
And women fared the worst.

(Old Folk Song)<sup>1</sup>

Over the centuries the position of women in traditional China gradually deteriorated until the degree of subordination and control of women, whether in the family or in society, has become proverbial. The most apparent means for ensuring the acquiescence of women in their own subordination was the dominant use of ideological mechanisms. The cosmological foundations for this elaborate code of subordination were to be found in ancient Chinese beliefs dating from the first millennium BC. These held that the universe was composed of two interacting elements, 'yin' the female and 'yang' the male. The 'yin' elements displayed dark, weak and passive attributes in contrast to the 'yang' elements which were characterised by all that was bright, strong and active. The rhythms of day and night or the sun and the moon and summer and winter fitted the balancing roles of male and female. While man was endowed with the 'firm nature of heaven', woman partook of 'the yielding nature of the Earth'.<sup>2</sup> Originally conceived as interacting and complementary, these elements were soon arranged in a hierarchical relationship juxtaposing superiority to inferiority and goodness to evil. In time, 'yin' elements came to stand for all that was negative and inferior in the universe. The revised cosmological belief was incorporated into the teachings of Confucius and his disciples which became the established and ruling ideology from the second century BC. Confucius himself had been mainly concerned with the form and content of ideal social relationships between prince and ruler, father and son, husband and wife, brother and brother and friend and friend. In the Confucian classics are to be found the rules of conduct appropriate to each type of social relationship. Confucius is believed to have said of women that they are as different from men as earth is from heaven. 'Women indeed are human beings, but they are of a lower state than men and can never attain to full

equality with them.’<sup>3</sup> The *Book of Changes* noted that ‘Great Righteousness is shown in that man and woman occupy their correct places; the relative positions of Heaven and Earth’.<sup>4</sup> According to the *Book of Rites*, compiled in the second century AD and later to become one of the venerated Confucian Classics containing rules of correct conduct, ‘to be a woman meant to submit’. Women were to take no part in public affairs: ‘A man does not talk about affairs inside [the household] and a woman does not talk about affairs outside [the household].’<sup>5</sup> From these principles establishing a position of submission and the division of labour, practical rules were derived governing women’s correct behaviour be they daughters, wives or mothers. These latter were elaborated in a particular set of books expressly written in the first few centuries AD for a feminine audience.

The aim of female education was to develop perfect submission and compliance rather than to cultivate the mind.<sup>6</sup> Among the books of instruction for girls were the *Nü Jie* or *Precepts for Women* and the *Nü er Jing* or the *Classic for Girls*. The *Nü Jie* was written by the famous woman scholar, Ban Zhao (Pan Chao), in the first century AD. She was educated, and fulfilled the functions of court historian following the deaths of her scholared father and brother. In the *Nü Jie* she wrote ‘The Yin and the Yang, like the male and the female, are very different principles. The virtue of the Yang is firmness, the virtue of the Yin—flexibility.’ She exhorted women to be obedient, unassuming, yielding, timid, respectful, reticent and unselfish in character. ‘First others then herself.’ A woman should endure reproach, treasure reproof and revere her husband for ‘A husband, he is Heaven’ and ‘Heaven is unalterable, it cannot be set aside’. ‘If the wife does not serve her husband, the rule of propriety will be destroyed.’<sup>7</sup> The *Nü er Jing* similarly catalogued the ideal qualities of women. It outlined in more detail what were known as ‘The Three Obediences’ and ‘The Four Virtues’. Throughout her life-cycle a woman was subject to the three authorities of her father and elder brothers when young, of her husband when married and of her sons when widowed. The four virtues comprised, first, a ‘general virtue’ meaning that a woman should know her place in the universe and behave in every way in compliance with the time-honoured ethical codes; second, she should be reticent in words taking care not to chatter too much and bore others; third, she must be clean of person and habits and adorn herself with a view to pleasing the opposite sex; and fourth, she should not shirk her household duties.<sup>8</sup> The *Lie Nü Zhuan* or



*Series of Women's Biographies* was first arranged by Liu Xiang in the first century AD. The general preface to these biographies reads: 'The wife leans on the man. Gentle, yielding, she early listens to the words of others. She has the nature and emotions of those who serve others and controls her person in the way of chastity.' The biographies themselves include filial daughters, chaste maidens who would sooner meet death than dishonour, and ideal sisters-in-law, wives, mothers and widows whose chastity and devotion to duty is above reproach and worthy of emulation.<sup>9</sup> One breakdown of the *Lie Nü Zhuan* includes 19 examples of women who were far-sighted and benevolent; 19 who were celebrated because of chastity; 18 who refused to marry after widowed whether by death of husband or betrothed; 18 who were celebrated for far-sightedness and widowhood; 18 who should be considered as warnings for girls; 16 who were great mothers; and 16 who were celebrated for their docility and constancy.<sup>10</sup>

As Confucianism was gradually institutionalised, the Classics and these Books were increasingly adopted as the authorities on feminine conduct. They set the ideal standards and were used as textbooks in the education of girls throughout succeeding generations. From the first centuries AD onwards an endless succession of Confucian writers extended these texts and perpetuated the belief that women were as different and inferior to men as earth was to heaven. In particular, the Neo-Confucian philosophers of the Sung dynasty (960–1279) further elaborated the code of feminine ethics by re-emphasising the practices of segregation and seclusion, and introducing the practice of bound feet. In theory the division of labour in society was complete. Most could not read the Classics for themselves. For the illiterate, quotations from the Classics were repeated to them by village gentry and bits of homely philosophy were handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. Male superiority, embodied in proverbs and folklore, became an attitude prevalent in popular thought. The persuasion of an ideology became the forces of fate, inescapable. But the lives of women in traditional China were not influenced by the ideological mechanisms alone. In examining the position of women their socio-economic or class position in the social structure was as important a factor in defining their field of activities. Normally traditional Chinese society was divided into four social classes—those of the scholar-gentry, the peasants, artisans and merchants. Outside this classification lay those without a recognised place in Chinese society—the 'mean'

people or the boat people, actors, storytellers, prostitutes and other like social categories. Each of the four official 'classes' was associated with a distinctive occupation and life-style which affected the lives of their women by modifying the division of labour, the amount of seclusion and their particular positions in the household. It was the interaction of economic with ideological and physical mechanisms of subordination which finally determined the degree of subjugation and control experienced by women in society and in the household.

In the social, political and the economic affairs of the country, the most important distinction common to all classes was the sexual division of labour between household or domestic affairs and non-household or public spheres of activity. If ideally women did one and abstained from the other, in reality it was the prerogative of the richer classes to live up to these norms. Among the poor, economic factors interceded to a greater or lesser degree to modify these standards in practice. But from earliest times all women were taught that they should not concern themselves with public affairs. The *Book of Rites* clearly stated that women should have no public influence or knowledge of affairs outside the home. 'A wife's words should not travel beyond her apartments' and 'a woman does not discuss affairs outside the home'.<sup>11</sup> The classical writing and literature go so far as to suggest that there is something inherently vicious in the female nature that brought men possessed by women to an evil end. The compilers of one of the Classics thought the contemporary lack of harmony and disorder in the state was caused by the interference of women in public affairs:

A woman with a long tongue  
Is [like] a stepping stone to disorder.  
[Disorder] does not come down from heaven;  
It is produced by the women.<sup>12</sup>

In literature it is often women who divide brother against brother and bring men to ruin with their 'sexual aggression and dangerous cunning'. In the popular novel, *The Water Margin*, the heroes sacrifice the company of women so that the heroic code among sworn brothers may endure.<sup>13</sup> Women were denied participation in any of the government or local community institutions. They had no access to the system of examinations which furnished the major path to political office in traditional China. All the significant Confucian ceremonial roles in society could only be fulfilled by men. In the provinces of southwest China for instance, women

## 16 *Mechanisms of Subordination*

were not even permitted to witness the rituals and rites which were held annually to pray for a prosperous year with good crops.<sup>14</sup> Even in the wider kinship units whose boundaries often coincided with those of the village or local community, the leadership and ceremonial roles were reserved for men. Only they could perform the ancestral rites of central importance in the clan or lineage. Women in general tended to turn to Buddhism and especially to the Goddess Guanyin, the female protectress, for help and solace in their troubles. Theirs was a private and individual religion usually confined to the domestic sphere. Within the household they kept images, recited beads and sometimes they visited temples and shrines to pray and plead for a son, good health and good fortune. Likewise they were responsible for placating the Kitchen God with offerings in order that prosperity visit the household in the coming year.

The confinement of women to the domestic sphere was further reinforced by the concern for, or almost obsession with, the preservation of the virtue, honour and chastity of women. Perhaps the most striking feature of social life was the segregation of the sexes. It was deemed desirable that men should have no public social relations with women, and even within the home boys and girls seven years or older were not supposed to sit or eat together.<sup>15</sup> The cult of feminine chastity and ideal of segregation led to the increasing isolation of girls from all save the women of their own family and the seclusion of women in the richer and poorer households. The very word for woman became '*nèirén*' which literally meant 'inside person'. In the upper classes a woman tended to live within the confines of the women's apartments occupying herself with her toilet, embroidery, the management of household affairs and parlour amusements. The contrast with the life of her brother was self-evident. In the words of the poet Fu Xuan:

Boys standing leaning at the door  
Like gods fallen out of Heaven,  
Their hearts have the Four Oceans,  
The wind and dust of a thousand miles. . . .

When she grows up she hides in her room,  
Afraid to look men in the face.<sup>16</sup>

If men entertained at home, rather than at the customary teahouse, women were seldom in evidence. At such times women were not

supposed to even peep outside the doors of their apartments; advice to husbands was:

Let not your guests behold your wife,  
And secretly lock the postern gate.  
Restrict her to courtyard and garden,  
So misfortune and intrigue will pass you by.<sup>17</sup>

In the eleventh century, a time when the value of seclusion was being forcefully reiterated by the neo-Confucianists, the poetess Li Jingzhao expressed her thoughts and longings as:

Silence, solitude, deep in women's enclosure,  
A single inch of soft intestine holds a thousand  
threads of grief. . . .<sup>18</sup>

In the novel *The Family* Ba Jin (Pa Chin) describes the New Year custom which persisted into the twentieth century allowing women into the streets:

The women of the family . . . walked smilingly through the main gate and out on to the street. This was the women's annual comedy of 'going abroad'. It was only during this brief interval each year that they were permitted to travel freely in public other than in a closed sedan chair. The women feasted their curious eyes on the sleepy little street. Then fearful of meeting any strange man, they hurried back into the compound.<sup>19</sup>

In peasant households women customarily had more freedom of movement. Their living quarters afforded them less seclusion than the rambling courtyards characteristic of gentry dwellings. The very size of the peasant dwelling allowed less segregation and where the light inside was poor, peasant women frequently sat and worked on their doorsteps. In the village, peasant women sometimes gathered water from the well, did their washing at the river, and had no servants to shop and market for them. They had more contact with local shopkeepers and pedlars and in some areas of China such as the southern provinces women traditionally worked in the fields alongside their menfolk during the busy seasons. Women of the non-Han ethnic minorities, boat-women, water-carriers, servants, fuel gatherers and scavengers tended to come and go freely. But despite the influence of their living standards and type of work on the ideals of segregation, the movements of most village women were still restricted. They were often not permitted to leave their courtyards for the first three

years of marriage,<sup>20</sup> and one traveller in nineteenth-century China found that tens of thousands of women had never been more than two miles from their villages and this was often only on the occasion of their marriage.<sup>21</sup> They were generally said to live the existence of a 'frog in a well' and one lady told the Englishman, A. H. Smith, that in her next life she hoped to be born a dog for then she might come and go where she chose.<sup>22</sup> The common sayings 'A man travels everywhere while a woman is confined to the kitchen' and 'An incompetent man can get about in nine counties but a competent woman can only get around her cooking stove' arose because appearances of women outside their household yards were rare.<sup>23</sup> One working woman recalled how she and her elder sister were not allowed on the city streets after they were thirteen years of age and if a stranger came to the door they had to disappear into an inner room. Women were not always welcome as visitors in the district in which she lived. They could not visit on the first or thirteenth day of any month and could not, when visiting, lean against the frame of the door. They should not stand or sit on the doorstep or even touch it in crossing, for to do any of these things might give them power over the family they were visiting and so ruin it. 'Women', she said, 'were not considered clean.' She also recalled that when a family wanting to know more about a girl who had been suggested as a prospective daughter-in-law, asked neighbours for an opinion, the highest praise and compliment in response was 'We do not know, we have never seen her.'<sup>24</sup> Symbolic of the status of women in one village in northeastern China was the reply given to male visitors when the men of the house chanced to be out. The customary answer to the question 'Is anybody at home?' was 'No, there's nobody in'—given by the housewife herself!<sup>25</sup>

The physical mobility of most women in China was devastatingly affected by the practice of footbinding which itself has become a symbol of their role circumscription. The practice is said to date from the fashion of small bowed feet current among the court dancing girls in the tenth century. The custom was first practised among the upper classes, but because bound feet were then associated with wealth and status they eventually became an essential prerequisite to an advantageous marriage and any form of social mobility. The degree of binding did vary with each social class. Matchmakers were asked not 'Is she beautiful?', but 'How small are her feet?' A plain face was said to be given by heaven, but poorly bound feet were a sign of laziness and poor breeding.<sup>26</sup>

Many an aspiring mother subjected her daughter to this painful process and soon girls of all but the poorest families had lost their freedom and agility. The painful memories of women contrast starkly with the poetic appreciation of men<sup>27</sup> though there were a number of specific groups in Chinese society among whom the practice of footbinding was not common. For example: Manchu women, Hakka women, the so-called 'hill tribes' of China and the boat population of Canton.

Where it was practised girls of seven and eight years of age had their feet tightly wrapped and bent until the arch was broken and the toes permanently bent under. The memories of those first years of agony remained forever etched in one woman's mind:

I was inflicted with the pain of footbinding when I was seven years old. I was an active child who liked to jump about, but from then on my free and optimistic nature vanished. . . . My feet felt on fire and I couldn't sleep; Mother struck me for crying . . . I tried to hide but was forced to walk on my feet. . . . Though I wanted to sit passively by the *kang*, Mother forced me to move around.<sup>28</sup>

Another recalled that her 'feet hurt so much for two years that I was forced to crawl on my hands and knees'.<sup>29</sup> The intense pain and suffering were summed up in an old saying: 'For every pair of bound feet a bucket full of tears.' Women were condemned to the life of a cripple while men praised their aesthetic and erotic qualities. The small feet, measured steps and the gentle swaying gait were thought to be reminiscent of the willow or poplar in the wind. The body shimmered all over and looked ready to fall at the slightest touch. Lin Yutang, the writer, thought that looking at a woman with bound feet walking was like looking at a rope-dancer, 'tantalising to the highest degree'. He considered the bound foot the highest sophistication of the Chinese sensual imagination.<sup>30</sup> The cult of the 'golden lotus' or 'golden lily' occupied an important place in sensual poetry and song. Su Dongbo (1036–1101) wrote one of the earliest verses in praise of footbinding.

Anointed with fragrance, she takes lotus steps;  
Though often sad, she steps with swift lightness.  
She dances like the wind, leaving no physical trace . . .  
Look at them in the palm of your hand,  
So wondrously small that they defy description.<sup>31</sup>

## 20 *Mechanisms of Subordination*

The practical implications of the bound feet were not lost on men or women. They restricted the physical mobility of women thus preventing them from moving about freely and unchaperoned. A verse in the *Classic for Girls* asks of women:

Have you ever learned the reason  
For the binding of your feet?  
'Tis from fear that 'twill be easy to go out upon the street.  
It is not that they are handsome when thus like a crooked bow,  
That ten thousand wraps and bindings are enswathed around  
them so.<sup>32</sup>

A similar attitude was expressed in a Yuan dynasty rhyme 'Why must the foot be bound? To prevent barbarous running around'<sup>33</sup> or in a folk ditty from Hebei province: 'Bound feet, bound feet, past the gate can't retreat.'<sup>34</sup>

Although the prevailing social ethos reinforced by physical constraints were instrumental in confining women to the domestic sphere, as important a factor was the absence of any available independent economic role in society and their total dependence on the family unit. There were few public occupations open to women. They were excluded from the civil service which was the main source of income of the ruling class. Women scholars, artists and writers were rare and practically never derived any income from these activities. They were prevented by the laws of inheritance from owning property in their own right, and as the anthropologist, Fei Hsiao-tung, pointed out, in a community where land is the main foundation of the economic structure, the dominance of the landowning sex is to be expected.<sup>35</sup> The unilateral principle of inheritance excluded women from any matter concerned with land. Only her jewellery represented convertible savings. Leisure was the hallmark of the lives of women of the upper classes and among the poor the few occupations that were open to women were mainly associated with magic or procreation. They could become midwives, marriage-brokers, prostitutes, courtesans, procuresses or spirit diviners. Peasant women and wives of artisans were far from idle, but their productive roles were largely confined to the household. The family unit was to a large degree self-sufficient and was the chief organisational unit of production and consumption. Within the family there was a sharp distinction drawn between the processes of production and transformation or those performed immediately prior to consumption. In the main production was carried out by the men of the family and the bulk of its preparation

for family use fell to the feminine side of the family. Although women's share of the total labour time expended on transformation activities (grinding corn, pounding rice, etc.), child care, cooking, making clothes and sometimes livestock rearing and cultivation might be equal or greater than that of men, the production of the latter was held in higher esteem. Denying importance to women's work helped to maintain women's subordinate position.

In the southern provinces some peasant women laboured in the fields during busy seasons, but they never played a large part in the agricultural cycle. J. L. Buck who did a survey in the early years of the twentieth century found that women supplied only 16.4 per cent of all farming labour.<sup>36</sup> Peasant women, especially in the north of China, might participate in domestic and handicraft industry such as spinning and weaving, but because these were performed within the confines of the family unit and hardly distinguishable from household work, they were supervised by the men of the family and afforded the women no independent source of income. Except in a few areas given over to the silk industry, any non-household jobs were rarely of sufficient duration or quantity to provide the women with a viable source of economic support alternative to that afforded by the family unit. As a result the men of the family had an extremely strong economic basis for power; women ordinarily could not produce or consume without male sanction. The tradition of economic dependence, even in hard times, is evident in the following extract from an autobiography of a working-class woman.

Day after day I sat at home. Hunger gnawed. What could I do? My mother was dead. My brother had gone away. When my husband brought home food I ate it and my children ate with me. A woman could not go out of the court[yard]. If a woman went out to service the neighbourhood all laughed . . . I did not know enough even to beg. So I sat at home and starved. . . . How could I know what to do? We women knew nothing but to comb our hair and bind our feet and wait at home for our men. When my mother had been hungry she had sat at home and waited for my father to bring her food, so when I was hungry I waited at home for my husband to bring me food.<sup>37</sup>

In effect the individual woman held no publicly recognised position in the public sphere and her confinement to the activities of the household ensured minimal co-operative links with other women



which might have mitigated the effects of male dominance. Ideological and economic factors interacted to deprive women of the opportunities of independence or association which might have arisen from participation in public, social, economic or political activities.

Women's activities were mainly confined to the domestic sphere. The family, the primary unit of the social system, was from the time of Confucius and his disciples consciously cultivated as the ideal foundation of an orderly state. It occupied a central position in society assuming a multiplicity of economic, educational, religious and even political functions, with few additional organisations and associations being available to serve the individual's social needs. Ideally several generations were to live harmoniously under one roof. Large extended families were usually confined to the richer classes who had the economic resources to maintain such a household. The peasants rarely achieved more than three generations under one roof—the grandparents, parents and their children. The structure of the Chinese family was based on a hierarchy of the generations and the sexes with well-defined patterns of authority. The locus of power and responsibility was overwhelmingly in the hands of the male members of the household. Within the patrilocal, patrilineal and patriarchal family institution women played a subservient role until they became the sole representative of the senior generation. Women's life-cycles were dominated by two states: first they were 'temporary' and then they were 'outsiders' or 'strangers'. In their early years they were temporary members of their natal family destined to leave the family on marriage. On their marriage they entered their husband's family as outsiders or strangers. The stability and ideal harmony of the family organisation was not maintained without considerable stresses and strains, and these were particularly apparent in the lives of women. Since the subordination of women formed what was one of the most potentially disruptive lines of tension within the household, a number of ideological and economic factors combined to reinforce their position of dependence within the domestic sphere.

It was not always true, especially in the richer classes, that in the words of the poet Fu Xuan, 'No one is glad when a girl is born and by her the family sets no store',<sup>38</sup> but certainly a girl was welcomed into the family with fewer expectations and less ceremony than a boy. *The Book of Poetry*, one of the richest and most authentic

source materials depicting social life in ancient China, recorded the unequal treatment of the sexes from birth:

When a son is born  
Let him sleep on the bed,  
Clothe him with fine clothes,  
And give him jade to play with.  
How lordly his cry is!  
May he grow up to wear crimson  
And be the lord of the clan and the tribe.

When a daughter is born,  
Let her sleep on the ground,  
Wrap her in common wrappings,  
And give her broken tiles for playthings.  
May she have no faults, no merits of her own  
May she well attend to food and wine,  
And bring no discredit to her parents.<sup>39</sup>

There were reasons why a daughter was generally less welcome than a son. Daughters cannot offer ancestral sacrifice, cannot glorify the family through official appointment or perpetuate the family name. Sons were of overwhelming importance to the family because of their potential role as providers of the family income through office-holding, commerce, landownership or labour and handicraft skills. Even after death it was the sons, as sole performers of the religious rites, who were responsible for the welfare of their departed parents in the spirit world. 'Men rear sons', says a proverb, 'to provide for old age, just as they plant trees because they want shade.'<sup>40</sup> Daughters consumed rice, needed clothes and their weddings were usually a drain on the family resources. The expression a 'commodity on which money has been lost' was a paraphrase sometimes used for a girl.<sup>41</sup> After her marriage she became the exclusive property of her husband's family and was thereby as beyond the control of her own parents as 'water which has burst its banks'. An old saying that 'a boy is born facing in and a girl is born facing out'<sup>42</sup> reflected the transient nature of her life with her parents and the loss to her natal family on marriage. Indeed the relative advantages of sons and daughters were emphatically indicated in the meanings of the names sometimes given to girls after a succession of daughters, such as 'Better luck next time' and 'Wish you were a boy', and the maxim 'Eight lohan [model] daughters are not equal to a boy with a

limp'.<sup>43</sup> In extreme cases girls were reckoned of so little account that a father would leave them out of his calculations when asked the number of children in his family. In these circumstances it was not difficult to understand the preferential treatment often accorded to sons in times of economic hardship and, for the majority of the peasants who constantly struggled for a living, the lower economic value of a daughter accounted for much of the general discrimination against the female infant.

Girls were the main, if not exclusive, victims of infanticide and tended to have a higher infant mortality rate in times of poverty and famine. In a nineteenth-century survey conducted in several different provincial villages, the 160 women over fifty years of age who were interviewed, and who between them had borne a total of 631 sons and 538 daughters, admitted to destroying 158 of their daughters; none had destroyed a boy. As only four of the women had reared more than three girls, the field workers felt that the number of infanticides confessed to was considerably below the truth. The greatest number of infanticides owned to by any one woman was eleven. Sixty per cent of their sons had lived for more than ten years as opposed to 38 per cent of their daughters.<sup>44</sup> In other areas there was no sign of female infanticide. On the contrary there was much evidence of parental care and affection. In remote and poor northern Shanxi where girls were more scarce they were a precious commodity and did not suffer any obvious childhood discrimination. In conversation with Jan Myrdal an old resident of Liuling village in northern Shanxi elaborated on this point. He said that there was a shortage of girls in all northern Shanxi, he didn't know why this was so. 'It was just a fact that far more boys had been born here than girls.' He quoted the figures for his own family, of 9 grandchildren 3 were girls, and for his village where 36 out of 58 children were boys.<sup>45</sup>

Apart from infanticide it was also a fairly common practice among the poorer peasants and townspeople to free themselves of the expenses of rearing a daughter by either selling them into domestic service and prostitution or offering them as child-brides to be brought up as adopted daughters-in-law in their future husband's family. For the husband's family this arrangement spared them the later expenses of a wedding ceremony, secured an additional household worker and ensured that the young girl was conditioned early in the habits of their household. One anthropologist described the fate of the daughters of the poor in the villages in south China:

Poor families need money and have too many daughters. The daughters consume rice and need clothes; when they are grown up they leave the home and furnish additional service to the productivity of the economic family of the group into which the girl is married. The parents in poor families consider it better therefore to get rid of the girl at the first opportunity and thus free themselves of her expenses and at the same time get some cash.<sup>46</sup>

In contrast, in social classes where girls were less of an economic burden, they grew up and occupied an affectionate place in their families. Many scholars lamented the death of or marriage of a much-beloved daughter in the verses of their poetry. In all social classes however it was recognised that girls were destined to become a daughter-in-law and wife in another family. As the *Nü er Jing* stated 'You should study as a daughter all the duties of a wife'.<sup>47</sup>

Generally these duties did not include the advantages of literacy. The richer Chinese families were stimulated to educate their sons by the ambition to have them hold a government position, but the daughters had no such argument to advance. Only the privileged daughters of the scholar-gentry class sometimes shared their brother's tutor and enjoyed an opportunity to develop their minds and cultivate their talents. One Chinese professor estimated that only a very few girls 'learned something of books' and the main works taught to them were the four classics especially written for girls.<sup>48</sup> The line of demarcation between the ideal boys' and girls' education was drawn in the following poem:

When he grows to years of boyhood,  
Then a teacher call at once,  
Who will books and manners teach him, that he may not be a  
dunce.  
Lazy habits in his study will good people all annoy,  
And his indolence the prospects of his future life destroy.

For your daughter in her girlhood,  
To learn fancy-work is best,  
Ne'er allow her to be idle,—lolling to the east or west.  
If in youth you do not teach her, when full grown 'twill be too  
late.  
When she marries it will bring her only shame, disgrace and  
hate.<sup>49</sup>

Generally, knowledge was widely believed to be a bad investment for an 'outward-facing' girl, and was considered unnecessary or even harmful. For 'a woman without talents is virtuous'<sup>50</sup> while 'a woman too well educated is apt to create trouble'.<sup>51</sup> Girls were almost exclusively trained for their duties in the domestic sphere. The chief aim in a girl's education was the inculcation of ancient stereotypes of female conduct. All the older members of the family assisted in informing what she may, or may not do, in all sorts of situations, particularly in relation to her brothers, father, mother, uncles, and her future husband and his parents. The possession of propriety, the right attitudes and correct conduct, were some of her greatest assets for a desirable marriage contract, and for the successful adjustment in her new home after marriage. For the practical achievements of this vocational aim, daughters in peasant households were early initiated into the household chores by their mothers. Household chores in a peasant subsistence economy were numerous. Girls learned to sew, spin, cook, wash, clean and care for younger children, poultry and pigs. In the southern provinces the girls sometimes learned the skills required in the fields during busy seasons. In the richer households girls destined for a more leisured existence learned household arts rather than chores of a more utilitarian nature. By the time the marriage took place girls of all classes had received much of the domestic knowledge which their mothers possessed.

Early marriage was well-nigh universal. Marriages were arranged between families of different surnames and usually of a similar social standing by 'matching a bamboo door with a bamboo door and a wooden door with a wooden door' to procure the services of a woman's reproductive powers and domestic labour. Negotiations regarding the choice of the marriage partner, the bride-price and dowry were conducted by a go-between or broker and the young people were strangers to one another upon marriage. Romantic courtship played no part. Any overt intimacy or affection would be bound to strengthen the conjugal tie and threaten the dominance of parental affection, loyalty and authority. The new bride entered her husband's household as an outsider and embarked on the most difficult and personally humiliating period of her life. The most important role she assumed on marriage was that of daughter-in-law, and many institutional devices were brought to bear to subjugate and integrate the daughter-in-law so as to prevent a division or break-up of the Chinese extended family. The obligations of the new daughter-in-law towards her husband's

parents were numerous. According to the *Book of Rites*, she was 'to revere and respect them', 'never to disobey them day or night', and 'serve them as she served her own parents'.<sup>52</sup> The *Classic for Girls* established her priorities:

As a wife to husband's parents,  
You should filial be and good,  
Nor should suffer imperfection in their clothing or their food,  
Be submissive to their orders, all their wants anticipate,  
That, because his wife is idle, they your husband may not hate.

Be submissive to your husband,  
Nor his wishes e'er neglect  
First of all in this submission is his parents to respect.<sup>53</sup>

In the *Twenty-Four Patterns of Filial Piety*, the only girl held up for emulation nourished her old and toothless mother-in-law with milk from her breast by which means she was able to keep her alive. She walked several miles every day to get river water for her mother-in-law because she preferred it to that from their well. She made similar efforts to provide the old lady with minced fish to gratify her desires.<sup>54</sup> A Tang-dynasty poem ruled that as far as the new daughter-in-law was concerned 'The husband's mother ruled the roost'.<sup>55</sup> In the daily household routine the daughter-in-law was under the constant surveillance and discipline of her mother-in-law. It was said that when a mother-in-law wanted to find fault with her daughter-in-law she was as thorough as a donkey going round and round the rolling millstone: she did not miss a step.<sup>56</sup>

It was as if, having been trapped all their lives, women turned around and with the authority of the mother-in-law expressed their new security and compensated for their own former suffering and impotence as an outsider by repeating the very process of domination that they themselves had suffered. Indeed, in peasant households the abuse of a young daughter-in-law was so common a circumstance, especially in situations where the family had incurred heavy debts to procure a daughter-in-law, that unless it was especially flagrant it attracted little attention. The new wife in a richer household was spared the rigours of constantly supervised domestic labour but the mother-in-law normally acted to maintain her influence with her son. In cases of conflict a wife could not necessarily count on her husband's support. Sometimes he sided with his wife, but more often with his mother. The husband, who was himself in a subordinate position in his parent's home and was a