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Transformation of Women's Status in Chinese Society

Chinese civilization has been around for five thousand years. From the very beginning to the modern day, the status of women in the society has continued to reshape and transform. Like other civilizations, women in Chinese society started powerless and slowly evolved into equally respected individuals of society as the civilization continuously develops. The status of women throughout time changes because the ideology of the times is constantly changing too. From Confucius scholars to communist reformist, their philosophical reasoning and thoughts go hand in hand with society's view of women. It could be argued that women at first were not fully a part of society; they were properties of men. In this essay, I want to discuss the effects philosophical transference have on the transformation of women's status in Chinese society.

During the era which Confucius teachings was at its peak, the societal views on women were centered on the ideas of submissiveness and dependence. There was no freedom in the hands of women. The ones who made their decisions were fathers, husbands, and even their sons. Under the influence of Confucius, there was the custom which women must listen and obey their father and, after marriage, their husband. Even after the death of their husband, they were to listen to their son. It was as if women have no roots, and for them to survive, they must depend on men. This introduced to society that: "To be a woman means to submit" which was stated in the Record of Rites as a decorum. This norm took a long stand in history. Even till today, that

idea is still vaguely present after so many years. On the other hand, other thinkers have argued that Confucius did not mean to strap all the power away from women. He meant that women were in charge of the small decisions of the family and men made the big decisions.

The Record of Rites is one of the classics that was deeply influenced by Confucius studies. The book consisted of traditions, ceremonial rules, and proper ways to interact with others from ruler and subject to husband and wife. Recorded in the Record of Rites, boys and girls over the age of seven were not allowed to sit or eat together; this would be practiced in earlier times. As common as it is in the modern era, it was a discord with etiquette back then. Along with this decorum, women had to follow many other strict rules to prevent being shamed and rumored about. The concept of clean reputation was critical for women, and polluting it is as easy as exchanging a few words or standing a few steps too close with a man outside their family.

Another factor that caused women status to be lower in ancient times was due to filial piety. Consistent with cultures around the world, children inherit the last name of their father's. Therefore, it made sense that parents were biased towards their sons rather than daughters because sons can pass on their family name and care for them after their death which caused the formation of a patriarchal society. On the other hand, daughters were doomed to take part in another family after marriage, so their filial piety was assumed to go toward their parent-in-law and their husband's ancestors. Women and their family-in-law held an awkward relation until a they give birth to a son. They were at the point where they leave their biological family and try to assimilate into their husband's. To their biological family, they are no longer a part of family life, and to their husband's family, they were outsiders that serve the purpose of giving birth to a son that will carry on the family name.

Leading up to the Literary Revolution was the attack on Confucianism starting in 1916. One of the earlier leaders of this attack was Chen Duxiu. He worked as an editor of the magazine *The New Youth*. His targeted audiences were the younger age populations. He wanted to tell the society how vulgar Confucius teaching had become during his time. His efforts in doing so did form an outcome; due to the westernization of education, the younger generation of the time supported his ideology. Beijing being the nation capital, it is more advanced and often first to encounter foreign products and ideas. Westernized education was first introduced there which caused Beijing to be the center of Chen's supporters.

According to Chinese decorum, it was considered shameful for a widow to remarry after the death of husband. However, a man who had lost his wife could marry another woman and no one would say anything. So why is it that women had to obey that hypocritical decorum? It boils down to the unforgettable obedience to men. In Confucius teaching, there are three bonds and five relations. Of the three bonds, is women's devotion between husband and wife, and of the five relations, there is husband and wife, father and son, but no mother and son. However, it could be argued that the relations not listed are included within the ones that are. The consistent practice made the inequality among the genders look normal in society. Slowly, as the civilization advance forward, this norm gradually becomes abnormal but does not totally disappear.

In Chen Duxiu's "The Way of Confucius and Modern Life," he stated: "Years and Years these many promising young women have lived a physically and spiritually abnormal life. All this is the result of Confucian teachings of ritual decorum." The way women were treated under Confucius influence is a strong argument against Confucius teachings. Chen listed many unreasonable decorum to support his claim that it was time to discard them all and lean towards

western ideology and its social norms. He illustrated some aspects of women's life in Western society to show how outrageous Chinese society is with women. He wanted to show what kind of life women should be living. Such as, the free-will of remarriage and the openness of neutral physical interaction among men and women. Chen made complaints on societal rules such as, "In giving and receiving anything, a man or woman should not touch each other's hand." It made sense that he criticized Confucius influenced ritual decorum so unscrupulously since during his lifetime western influences were present and the feudal society of the Confucius age was already fading into history.

The historic fictional short story, "New Year's Sacrifice," written in 1924 by Lu Xun attempt to show the world the hardships society put on women. In the story, the narrator, a scholar, finds the answer to the question, who killed Xianglin's wife. Before her death, Xianglin's wife sincerely asked the narrator three questions: "Do dead people turn into ghost or not? (Then) will all the members of a family meet again after death? That means there must be a hell too?" The narrator answered yes to all three questions, but his answers were not his true answer. Being a scholar, he knows there is no definite answer to superstitious questions, but he thought he was doing her a favor in saying yes because of how distressed she looked. His response could be the final straw that caused the death of Xianglin's wife.

In the story, Xianglin's wife's name was never mentioned. She was simply referred to as Xianglin's wife, 祥林嫂. She had to have a name of her own before, but after marrying Xianglin, she was only known as Xianglin's wife even after her husband's death. Name is significant and more so in Chinese society. The surname represents family which comes first, and name represents identity and individually, yet she lost all of that after marriage. Her marriage was not a success. Her first husband was younger than she was but died young. She ran away from that

family and ended up in Lu Zhen, the small city of the narrator's fourth uncle's home. His fourth uncle's wife saw that she was diligent work ethic, so allowed her to be the maid for their house. Working as a maid is the only option for her since she wasn't educated or skilled in anyway. She was then found and brought home to the Lin family, and the only reason they looked for her was to marry her off to a different family in return of money to find a wife for the Lin family's younger boy. Xianglin's wife was married off to the Ho family unwillingly. Despite how unwilling she was, she wasn't strong enough to protect her chastity and loyalty to her dead husband. Later she gave birth to a son which should've made her life easier, but her faith was bitter. She later lost both her husband to illness and then her son to carelessness. When she went back to the fourth uncle's home in request for her job back, she had completely changed.

The setting of the story is in a small city around the end of the lunar calendar in the twentieth century, yet Xianglin's family is from a rather poor village on the mountainside. Poverty is a problem faced by many. Prior to the communist revolution, the rich stayed rich and the poor stay poor. Education is only something the wealthy could afford. So, families in poverty are going in a vicious circle that repeats itself keeping them in poverty. Women, like second classed citizens, have even less access to education. If she were educated and had known that superstition is simply superstition, and no one knows the answers to her three questions she might have not died. Because poor people are not educated, they lack the ability to tell right from wrong, a virtual of Confucianism. Amah Liu's superstitious prediction of what was going to happen to her after death factored into her death. Her fear of being split in half between two families after death pulled the life out of her. When the narrator asked fourth uncle the reason of Xianglin's wife's death, he said that Xianglin's wife died of poverty, which is true in the sense of being poor of wealth and knowledge.

Women's inability of decision making, mentioned previously was also present in this story. Xianglin's wife didn't have a say in her first marriage, assuming that her parents were the ones who arranged it. Her second marriage was decided by her mother-in-law. Once again, she had no say. As violently as she had fought back, she had no power in changing anything.

This story also conveys the idea that men are not the only reason why women's fate were difficult. Xianglin's mother, Amah Lui, and fourth uncle's wife were all women who negatively influenced Xianglin's wife. If her mother-in-law did not marry her off to Ho Glen against her will, if Amah Lui did not criticize her second marriage, and fourth uncle's wife did not transfer the anger from her husband to Xianglin's wife, she would not lose all hope and die from the inside.

Lu Xuan was successful in creating Xiangling's wife as a character. She fit the general characteristics of a woman from a small village: come from a poor family, uneducated, weak-minded, and unpretentious. The fourth uncle's characteristics fit a typical man of that era: a man who doesn't really respect women. This short story indirectly tells the hardship of womanhood in the early twentieth century. Lu Xuan chose to tell such story from a scholar's perspective rather than Xianglin's wife's perspective because he was not able to capture and imagine all the feelings and thoughts of a woman from a small village. Like early literature, he left blanks in the story which allows room for individual interpretations of characters' thoughts and emotions.

Following the attack on Confucianism, Chinese society needed a new philosophy that would answer the questions about life fitting that time. Chen Duxiu wrote "The True Meaning of Life" in effort of addressing his answer of what is the purpose of life. Different from Confucius thinking on how woman and men should act in the world, Chen's perspective was simpler. He addressed women and men all as individuals. The main concept of his thinking is individuals live

for happiness. He believed the purpose of life was to create and live in happiness and leave a part of that happiness in store for other individuals of the future.

Chen drew the conclusion that if a society was to follow Confucius teachings the society would be feudal. He believed in this because of his contact with western ideas. He saw how open society could be so didn't understand why Confucius teaching called for virtues and rites. I think it is because Chen Duxiu didn't go back enough studying the formation of unequal rites regarding women. Ancient Chinese literature is broad and profound. Scholars of the time wrote in a fashion which was not so direct and prevalently left blanks for individual interpretation. This cause there to be many different interpretations of ancient literature.

He Zhen, a feminist and anarchist of the early twentieth century, argued that men wrongfully interpreted Confucius learning in their favor to take away freedom and power of women. For example, to keep women from remarrying after widowhood, men created the concept of honoring chastity in the name of Confucianism. Furthermore, she pulled focus to the inequality within a marriage. She complained why men could divorce his wife, but women cannot divorce her husband; she questioned about who put all the say in the marriage in the hand of the man. She claimed, "the entire learning of Confucianism is a murderous learning...." I think she views were a little biased but true. Her counterattacks on the decorum of Confucius learning revolve around the idea of equality such if women had to honor chastity after the death of their husband, why could men remarry after the death of their wife.

The War of Liberation in China replaced the political system with communist ideology in 1949 which is also the establishment of modern-day China, People's Republic of China. Starting then, gender equality was formally brought to light. Gender equality in society was initially Liang Qichao's argument. He believed women should be productive members of society so

called for change starting with education. Women started to take part in roles once only men had. It was one big step toward equality. Not only did the system level out the rich and the poor but attempt to even out the differences between men and women. The central ideology of communism is equality among all individuals.

Could live of women been different from the start? He Zhen's idea that the wrongful interpretation was passed down and carved into society had me think would women's lives been different if He Zhen's interruption were pasted along from the beginning. I think Chinese society would have been completely different. Men wouldn't have practiced polygamy; women wouldn't have lived such hard lives. In the case of Xianglin's wife, she would not have died of fear and disappointment.

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