The Role of the Female Christian in the Mainland China Church

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In recent years, more and more attention has been drawn to the Church in Mainland China from the Western World from both inside and outside of the church. David Aikman’s masterpiece *Jesus in Beijing*, Tony Lambert’s *China’s Christian Millions* and a series of books by Paul Hattaway have offered a vivid picture of the Church in Mainland China and thus stimulated a great interest among scholars to study the church in China and to predict her future.

The view of these three authors is basically from outside the church in China. In this article, I will convey internal pictures from inside the Church in Mainland China (CIMC). This article will discuss the topic in three sections. I. Developing the Direction of the CIMC; II. Female Leadership in the CIMC; III. Three Reasons for the Opportunity for and the Success of Female Leadership in the CIMC.

I. Developing the Direction of the CIMC

A. A Brief History of the Church in China

At four times in history, Christians have come into China.

1. In a.d. 635, Nestorian missionaries brought Christianity into China, but Christianity perished in 835.4

2. In the time of the Yuan Dynasty of the Mongolian Empire (A.D. 1206–1368), the Roman Catholic missionaries, especially a Franciscan, Giovanni of Monte Corvino in 1294, brought Christianity again into China. The Mongols called Christianity “Arkagun” according to the Syrian pronunciation, but Christianity disappeared when the Ming dynasty took over China.7

3. In 1583, at the end of the Ming Dynasty of China, the Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci brought Christianity into China, but his teaching was forbidden in 1724 by the emperor of the Qing Dynasty because of conflicts with Confucianism.8

4. In 1807, during the Qing Dynasty, the London Missionary Society sent Robert Morrison to bring Christianity into China once again. Christianity was jeopardized and later put out by the Communist China government after 1949 and the connection with overseas churches was cut off totally.11

After the Culture Revolution (1966–1976), at the end of the 1970s, the church in China was restarted by local Christians because the root of the church remained alive in China’s deep spiritual soil. Thus, the church in China began to revive, and Christianity explodes with revival in China to a greater degree than ever in history.

B. The Second Reformation in the Church

In the spring of 1979, the Chinese Central Government allowed the Three-Self State Church to be restarted in Shanghai. Then, on March 31st of 1982, the government issued document No. 19, which gave Christianity some limited freedom officially under the political exchange between Deng’s China government and American Ronald Reagan’s government. Accordingly, twenty-six years later, today in 2005, the church and Christianity have exploded and the fire of truth has been spread over Mainland China.

Over the past three decades, the CIMC has developed a new and interesting church model with a strong spiritual life and much potential, which is generally different from the historical Western church system. Because of the limited freedom and persecution in the Communist political surrounding, and also because the tradition of the church is not strong among the new generation of Chinese Christians, the CIMC is moving towards reformation without clear self-awareness.

If we want to describe the reformation in the CIMC briefly, we need to address its three internal characteristics: 1. A non-institutional (invisible) church system, especially in the urban church after 1996; 2. A non-professional ministry; 3. A middle level theology (contextualized applicable theology).

These three main characteristics have been developed mostly because of the harsh anti-Christ social and political surroundings.

1. A non-institutional (invisible) church system. After 1979, the church restarted in the traditional model which Western missionaries brought. In contrast to the Three-Self state-run church, the house church suffered greatly because of the institutional church system. Institutional house churches in China (especially in Henan and Anhui provinces) quickly grew very large and were persecuted greatly by the government. After the 1990s, a non-institutional church movement began to develop, beginning in the cities, and after 2000 (by my observation), this movement also has been adapted in the rural areas. So far the movement survives very well. The church needs an institutional system, but so far the CIMC cannot have that, for

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its congregations must remain as much invisible as they can to survive the hostile society and government.

2. A non-professional ministry. Because of opposition, only those who have a strong Christian life and a clear call from the Lord dare to take a position of leadership or service in the church. Most leaders in house churches do not have traditional ideas about church systems. They also need a social or professional identity as a means of survival. In the non-institutional system, leaders normally have their own jobs besides their church work, because they do not treat the ministry as an occupation.

The leaders in the institutional house churches in China are vocational church workers, but normally they do not have stable or enough payment from their churches since the church financial accounts cannot get legal status (usually remaining underground and using a cash operating system). Thus, on the one hand, financial corruption is common, and, on the other hand, many of them have to rely on financial support from the overseas church or Christian organizations. Such factors put these churches at serious risk for dictatorship in church leadership. The institutional church in China is plunged into confusion. (The vision of the “Back to Jerusalem” reform movement in recent years is a good channel to solve the internal crisis for institutional house churches.)

3. Middle Level Theology (Contextualized Applicable Theology). Because the church is new and under persecution, the people in the church are not there for fun, but rather to seek earnestly for the truth. Believers are not interested in abstract or fancy theology. They want a practical theology that can help them apply the truth in real life. Thus, church leaders must have the gift to translate propositional theology into applicable theology, or to take their theology from the Bible directly. Christians in China view the Bible as their authority, not theology itself. But because they do not pay enough attention to the construction of systematic theology, they have suffered from heresies and become confused from various heterodox theologies. Now they are starting to develop a theology system to address theological error. Since most heresies are indigenous ones, the task is to develop a sound indigenous theology which will require broader

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An Interview with Shan

1. What was it like growing up with an ordained Mother? Are there any other ordained women in your family? I am the first Christian in my family. I told my mother about Jesus and she accepted that. She is like thousands of other house church leaders, many of them are not ordained by a church for they do not have that kind of system. Besides my mother, I am the other family member in leadership in a house church in China.

2. How did it affect your view of women in ministry? Because I did not know the traditional church culture before I came to the U.S., for me it is very normal that a woman plays a role in leadership in church. Also I knew quite a number of powerful female church leaders before my mother assumed leadership in church. During the first stage of my Christian life, an older female church leader influenced my faith in a very powerful way.

3. Do you think having an ordained woman’s perspective in your upbringing shaped your view of the Gospel or God? In what way? I am convinced totally about what it means that all people are equal before God, as the Bible teaches. God is our creator. Also, I found out that, even if God used only female leadership in church, the church would be the same. I feel sad the potential of female leadership has been ignored and marginalized by men’s understanding of gender and Scripture, in some church systems.

4. What inspired you to go to seminary? I have my own way to understand God’s special calling and will on me, which has developed through personal interactions with God by the means of prayer, reading the Bible, and doing ministry. In 2001, through many ways of God’s reminding, like spiritual, reasoning, and physical intervention in my life, I realized that God wanted me to study in a seminary overseas.

5. What was the Bible passage that was key in your maturing as a Christian and deciding to go to seminary? Jesus said in John 10:30, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

6. What do you think of your experience here? How did it differ from what you expected (either the seminary in particular, or the United States in general, or American churches or Christianity, or whatever you want to comment on…). I had great and wonderful experiences living in America. America is the greatest nation. Compared to what I expected, the American natural environment, social justice, peace, personal quality, high-technology are much better. But the general condition of Christianity, church, and Christians is much worse. One thing I dislike a lot—I might be wrong, but I notice many Christians here are not proud of or feel honored for being a Christian outside of the Christian community. Christianity seems to be reduced to ethics, culture, and a dying religion rather than a vibrant personal relationship with Christ.

7. What does it mean to carry your cross in Mainland China? Ready to spend more money, suffer from a hostile society and family, to be in prison, and to die for Christ.

8. What advice would you give to people here in the USA? Please do not forget that the great blessing on this nation is from the Lord Jesus. Be careful since many scholars are working hard to steal the capstone from your national system. Pay more attention to international politics. The danger is coming as a thief, but most people are still sound sleep.

9. Why is it important to stand up for what is right wherever you are? That is part of the nature of being Christian. When we stand for what is right, we stand for the Truth of Christ. Thus God’s power and justice can be shown more through us in the world. Every time we stand up for the right, we must be ready to be hurt by evil and to risk and sacrifice.

10. What advice would you give other ministers’ children? Be proud and honored with the spiritual heritage and culture from your parents. Make Christian faith part of your life. See truth as precious to you as your blood.

11. Any advice for students wanting to become missionaries? Being a missionary means being a soldier for God’s kingdom, fighting all forms of evil. You must develop your own way to discern and understand God’s will for you. Pay much attention to spiritual holiness when confronting pluralism. Be an extremist when you confront challenges to our Truth and faith. Then you will win in Christ always.

12. Anything else you want to share or say? To theologians, church leaders, missionaries and all the students in seminary, remember that the judgment from Jesus on us is greater than on other Christians.
study and reflection, theologically.

Because of the above three characteristics, one interesting phenomenon that appears in the CIMC is female Christians have played a very important role in the church and ministry.

II. Female Leadership in the CIMC

A. The Historical Record

In modern China, women began to play an important role when the indigenous church started an independent mission for the first time. In 1948, in response to God’s strong calling, about five Chinese seminary students, a teacher, and an American female missionary began the mission in FengXiang, near XiAn city (where the Nestorian tablet was dug out). They were all from the seminary established by Hudson Taylor III, who was then still president, and, under the leadership of Miss Enzheng He, the seminary theology teacher, called themselves the “Preach the Gospel Everywhere Band” (in English it is called the “Back to Jerusalem Evangelistic Band”). Among the seven Christians in the band, only two were male Christians. They walked westward to Xinjiang, an Islamic region, with the vision of “preaching good news back to Jerusalem.” A half-century later, the churches they planted in Xinjiang became prosperous.

B. The Christian Women in the CIMC

From 1949 to 1979, behind the iron curtain, one in ten people either were executed outright, or starved to death from mismanagement of village resources under the Communist system. Countless Chinese citizens, including a vast number of Christians, were persecuted to death in this period. When Christian men were imprisoned, their wives still held the faith and shared the truth in their families or in small close Christian circles.

Because of the Communist social culture, those who did not have a job from the national assignment were despised in society. When the church restarted after 1979, many male Christians had other jobs. They dared not or did not want to resign, and they did not have enough time and confidence to work for the church. Also the new generation Christians did not think that church work

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An Interview with Shan’s Mother

1. What was your training? Through self-studying the Bible and spiritual and theological books, I learned from other Christians, learning from the Lord’s leading and lessons in life and ministry.

2. How did you come to be ordained? By planting a church and leading the church, I naturally became a church leader without any ordination.

3. Is leadership something you sought, or did it find you? The leadership position found me.

4. Did you have any other models of women ministering in your life? Yes. There is one.

5. Please tell us about your church and your ministry. I planted three churches in my province and led the churches for years.

6. What would you say are the challenges facing women in ministry in Mainland China? The persecutions are from family, especially from non-Christian husbands.

7. What are the challenges facing Christian parents when child-rearing in China? The forced education from Communist atheist ideology in the school and the possible punishment (like a bad person tag, losing some rights for getting benefits) of children if their Christian faith is exposed.

8. How do you see them differing from the challenges Christian parents face in the United States? Here the challenge is “too much freedom” and a life that is materially rich but spiritually poor.

9. Do you face any challenges from Feng Shui, Eastern Lightning, or any other source? Mostly from Eastern Lightning. They kidnapped me once a few years ago and tortured me physically for 5 days and 4 nights. They also did evil things to many house church Christians, even murdering Christians in these 3 or 4 years. The government does not punish Eastern Lightning or protect the house churches. The reason is unknown. We guess that they both hate the house churches.

10. You reared a son very strong in the Christian faith. How did you do it? He led my whole family to know Jesus. Jesus trained him well.

11. Any advice you wish to share with other parents? Educate your children to apply Christian truth in their daily life with wisdom (not simply pray before they eat, or ask a blessing for a sneeze). Do not let them choose their belief after they grow up, for everyone’s belief is taught by someone. If you do not choose for them, someone else will choose for them.

12. Any advice you can share with other women in ministry? Pay attention to training male Christians to join the leadership. Also train young Christians to be church leaders.

13. What strengthens you? The commandments from Jesus: Love God and people.

14. Do you have any particular advice for American Christians? Especially in regard to the church in China? Stand up for the right and fear not the evil. Give more teaching in church on understanding spiritual warfare and holiness.

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An Interview with Shan’s Father

1. Are you ordained? No.

2. How exactly did you help your wife to develop her gifts? Encouraging her all the time. Highly respecting her leadership.

3. How exactly did you help your son develop his gifts? Encouraging and respecting his gifts all the time.

4. Were you ever uncomfortable or insecure with having a pastoring wife? No. Very happy for her.

5. What advice would you want to share with other husbands of women who feel God’s calling on their lives to be ordained and serve in ministry? Support your wives with encouragement.

6. Are you ever worried for your wife as a minister in a Communist country? Yes, for we fear mostly that the church will be torn up by the Communist government. Also we do have fear to be persecuted by the Communist government and Eastern Lightning, but we will not stop doing God’s work, for that is our eternal choice.

7. What advice would you want to share with other parents? Teach your children about God’s word and applying it. Do not let others help your children to choose a belief and faith which contradict your Christian faith.
should be treated as a career, so the church leadership consisted of old people mainly, and it was not easy to find enough male Christians to work in the church. Thus, many Christian women began to work in the church as the leadership.

Among the young generation, the first fruits of the evangelical movement in China in the 1980s were mostly among women in the rural area. Even now, over 70 percent of believers in the church are still women. But these Christian women are very strong in faith and are willing to take the dangerous positions of leadership in the church. Many of them are single women who exercise leadership with excellence and great courage.

Because of the social culture's influence on Christians, many male Christians do not think doing church work is to their honor, so the female Christians have had to take the main responsibility in some churches, especially in urban churches. When the women stand up in churches, the Lord empowers them and uses them to bless the church. As God states in 1 Samuel 2:30, “Those who honor me, I will honor them.”

In one province, I met some young Christian women. Their ages were from 18–30 and they were both church leaders and missionaries. I felt amazed, because they have built a church network in half of the province. Their house church was the biggest and the most influential one in the province at that time.

I also visited some state-run churches in cities. I found many pastors and even senior pastors were women. Some of them are even in charge of big churches, with congregations of thousands of believers. One woman even leads more than ten churches, including around 20,000 believers. In the rural area, the church leaders are mostly men but women also share important leadership.

My mother is an influential church leader in her hometown and also a famous preacher among the local churches. She is a retired middle school teacher. God uses her in a powerful way and ordained her with spiritual authority and gifts.

The female leadership has played a successful role in the CIMC, for God is with them and helping them. That has been clearly proven so far.

C. The Coming Balance of Male and Female Leadership

After 1996, more freedom for the Three-Self Church was endorsed by two important laws. Meanwhile, people lost hope in politics and the economy. The psychological crisis and spiritual needs in the whole nation have continued growing in China. Many more young people, more men, as well as many intellectuals, have begun to come to church. The CIMC has believers from a more complicated social class and a better gender balance.

When some of these intellectuals and young men come into a church, they bring a fresh force as well as a challenge to female leadership in the church. Because many churches are established by female Christians, their reputation and authority make male Christians feel humble. In general, the female leadership does not feel threatened by the capable and gifted male Christian. Instead, they are quite happy about their arrival, for they are longing for male leadership to be established in the church. Once I talked to a female pastor of a huge church: she told me that she prayed and longed for male Christian leadership taking place in the church.

That does not mean that the female church leaders think they are not qualified to be church leaders or male leadership would be better, but that they think that a balance of male-female leadership will make the church system stronger and healthier. Both women and men are called to have dominion together (Gen. 1:28). As male church leaders in China, we admire and respect those female church leaders, and their faithfulness, humbleness, and willingness to sacrifice for God’s kingdom. They have encouraged us so much. For the Lord has used what the world calls “weak” to shame the “strong”: us men.

From my experience of working with female leadership, I have found that women have many virtues. For example, they are very faithful to the Lord without fear in the face of evil and danger. They are just like those women who visited Jesus’ tomb on Sunday, in contrast to the men who hid behind a locked door (John 20:19). Christian women seem more interested in ministry while men seem very interested in power and authority. The women are willing to share the leadership with men and do not view men as rivals.

Gradually, the balance of male-female leadership in the CIMC will come, and it is already coming. With different virtues and gifts from both men and women, the church will begin to function fully in China.

III. Three Reasons for the Opportunity for and the Success of Female Leadership in the CIMC

No doubt, the role of female leadership in the CIMC is enriching the theology, especially concerning women in ministry. The Chinese church sets a good example for other parts of the world church to support the full participation of women ministering.

Feminism has brought changes in modern society, and the foundation of that is from the Bible: the New Testament’s teaching about human rights. Certainly, we must first find out this truth from the Holy Bible as our foundation. Such a Bible based “female theology” will bring changes inside the church. But without female leadership practically being carried out in the church, a female theology is difficult to develop.

Female leadership is continuing to play a very influential role in the Church in Mainland China. Therefore, a sound theology must be based on spiritual and ecclesiastical study.

A. First, the old garment has been stripped away.

Before the Communist Party took over Mainland China in 1949, the church in China was under the leadership and the system of the Western church model, but the church did not grow well and the theology never took indigenous root in Chinese society. Of course, another important reason is that the traditional religion and Confucianist ethical system were very strong and dominant in the church. In addition, people also naturally had anti-Western sentiments because of the Opium War.

From 1949–1979, under the bloody reign of the Communist
government in China, especially after the ten-year cultural revolution, the traditional culture was washed away from the whole nation's mind. After the 1979 economic reform, materialism and Western technological culture influenced China powerfully. The old morality system died, and an atheistic, money-dominant ethics system built up.

Further, when the whole nation was educated by science and Marxist philosophy for half a century, gradually the traditional way of Chinese thinking was transformed from a feeling-literature-oriented approach to a much more logical-philosophical approach. We can call that a kind of “Greek-Culture” class shift. Meanwhile, the ethical system was transformed from a Confucianist-Buddhist one to the Communist-atheist one. The young generation born after 1980 (the year in which the birth control policy was begun formally) has very obvious marks of the new culture: logic-oriented thinking, an atheistic moral system based on evolution theory, and a materialistic, money-oriented lifestyle. The old garment of Chinese traditional culture thus was peeled off in a significant way.

Also, because the church in China lost the leadership, theological teaching and financial support of the Western church during those decades after 1949, after 1979 the church and each Christian in China have had to walk independently. Thus, they are stepping into a blank area with much freedom, but without a traditional church system or a theological framework. Another old garment has been lost.

As all the old restrictive garments are gone, a new fashion of clothing itself in female leadership now adorns the bride of Christ in China.

B. Second, the social culture demanded fairness and respect from the Church and its theology.

Without living in Communist China before 1989 (before the June 4th movement), one cannot easily determine the influence Communism had on modern Chinese culture and the church in China. One special mark is that people respect the one who has a government-assigned job, including any position, from government leaders to the ones who hold the cleaning jobs. Before 1989, even if you were a millionaire, you would feel inferior in front of a person who is poor but who held a government-assigned job. After the 1990s, people began to respect money as society’s lord, but the cultural respect about the person who holds a government-assigned job still is very strong.

One thing of which we should be aware is that China’s Communist government made many laws that benefit those who have government-assigned jobs and make much trouble for those who do not have one. That was a powerful way to control people.

Thus, if anyone works for the church only, people will despise this person, and this one will even lose his good social standing. One old famous Chinese Christian missionary once told me, with a kind of regret, that no one in the family had a government-assigned job.

Because of that kind of social culture, male Christians do not view a church job as an honored job. They would rather keep their other employment and work for the church after working hours. If a woman is working in the church, her situation can be much better, according to the culture, since a man is assumed to represent a family generally and should have a “good” job. That is one reason why female church leadership plays an important role in church.

Also, women in China inherited a special emancipation. The Communist government successfully taught the whole nation that “man equals woman” means women can do, and need to do, the same jobs as the men. Before the 1990s, many young women worked in exhausting, heavy-labor factories along with the men. Under this kind of “emancipation,” women were oppressed. One benefit, however, in the family, the wife could take half or even more than half authority to run the family. Moreover, no one considered seeing a women leader or preacher in the church strange. While Communism liberated women in the work place, was it helpful to demand that all people work equally hard, physically? How many women returned to their homes to assume much of the household work after an exhausting or injuring physical job?

C. Third, God has chosen women to be the shepherds of the church.

In China, when reality gives women enough opportunity to be leaders in the church, God blesses women leaders in special ways. Women did not have real rights and emancipation in China because both traditional Confucianism and Communism despised and persecuted women in different ways. But, when women come to church, they begin to experience real freedom and equal human rights with men in Christ. They taste the real emancipation which they never received in thousands of years of China’s history.

Especially women leaders in the church have experienced so much of God’s calling, blessings, leading, and encouragement. They have understood the true meaning of all people being equal in Christ. When men do not stand up for God’s Kingdom, women continue to respond. They are chosen by God to do a mighty job.

Because so many of the churches in China, especially the house churches, are not institutional, the leadership of many churches is not ordained or assigned by a church organization. People come to church and follow the leadership simply because the leadership has spiritual gifts and authority. Believers choose a church generally by choosing leadership, not choosing by theology or a denomination.

Conclusion

Female leadership in the CIMC is one of the fruits of the new growing Church in Mainland China. As the Church in Mainland China grows and becomes stronger in its unique cultural soil and environment, the new church system and theology will not only be shaped with its life and truth from the Bible, but also with a different beauty and a stronger power than those
of the traditional church in the world. As all Christians, men or women, are empowered, global Christian power will be strengthened significantly.

Female leadership in the CIMC is part of God’s divine plan. Though the phenomenon comes from a unique background, from one perspective, there was no option since male Christians fell behind in the previous social culture. From another perspective, that was the way God proved to be in control. God will proceed in establishing the church no matter what obstacles confront it. A balance of female leadership and male leadership in the church is in the business of spiritual transformation continually. The female leadership in the CIMC has been shown to us as a clear symbol that the transformation of the church has come into well. Thus, the government and the Chinese harbored anti-Western sentiments.

If God thinks the reformation of the church in the sixteenth century is not enough, perhaps He wants a second reformation as noted with the Church in China. How should we respond? If God thinks the current Church in the world is not strong and wise enough to bring the Good News back to Jerusalem before Christ’s second returning, He wants to establish the right one in China to fulfill the Great Commission, and then we can only say, “May the name of Jesus Christ be glorified.”

Endnotes
5. Aikman, Jesus in Beijing, 29.
7. Ibid., 319.
9. Ibid., 34.
10. Ibid., 35.
12. Ibid., 276.
13. Ibid., 302.
18. In 1840, Britain went to war with China over the issue of Britain’s Opium Trade in China. China was defeated and Hong Kong was taken by Britain. After that, more wars occurred between Western countries and China. China was defeated in each case. Through many treaties, Western countries, including Russia, gained rights to enter China. They set up Western areas in cities, factories, businesses, and churches as well. Thus, the government and the Chinese harbored anti-Western sentiments.
19. In 1978, the Chinese government made its birth control policy into law, but did not enforce it. In 1980, the Central Communist China government officially introduced its slogan “one couple with one child” to enforce the birth control policy with determination. Children born after 1980 are often the only children in their family. In China they are called the “emperor” of the family. In 1979, China government leader Xiaoping Deng visited America. From 1980, the schools in the whole country began studying English and the course became more scientifically oriented. The generation after 1980 is viewed as selfish, well-educated, smart, with a materialistic world view.
20. For example, if you had a government-assigned job before the 1990s, you received monthly salary payments whether you worked hard or not. Also you could have food in famine time. You could have government medical insurance and you could live in a government-built house. If both parents had a government-assigned job, the children enjoyed the same benefits. Most importantly, their children were given government-assigned jobs themselves. If you did not have a government-assigned job, you did not receive these benefits. People who lost or resigned from a government-assigned job, faced many difficulties, even more than those who originally did not have a government-assigned job.
21. For example, they misled women to hate colorful cloth, but to like soldier’s uniforms and blue factory cloth. They made young women work in heavy labor factories, doing work beyond women’s physical ability, such as lugging large cement bags, using heavy hammers to break rocks, lifting big steel construction material, and constructing buildings by hand alongside much larger men. At the end of the 1980s, I personally saw some girls starting at 15 years old laboring with heavy hammers, cutting steel, lifting heavy steel materials by hand, taking red hot steel by simple tools from a thousand degree temperature stoves in working shops where one side of their face was burned, etc. When I saw that, even though I too believed in the Communist ideal and slogan “man equals woman,” I still felt saddened for those beautiful teenage girls. This is one way that women have been abused in fact under the Communist government.
22. From the surface, it appears women in China were liberated, but in fact they were not at all, since the general view of them is still from Confucian ethics. Add Communist influence, and women were viewed as good labor and they suffered as a result. Women are not protected well in China. So, generally, the women are despised by traditional Confucian culture and are abused by Communist culture.