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### Women in China, Between Confucius and the Market

Tonia Warnecke

*Rollins College*, [twarnecke@rollins.edu](mailto:twarnecke@rollins.edu)

Alain Blanchard

*Rollins College*

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## Women in China, between Confucius and the market

[Alain Blanchard](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

[Tonia Warnecke](#) <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** [labour](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

Neoliberalism, Confucianism and the gender dimension in China's post-command economy period

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The story of China's economic transition is more than a story of economic growth. It is a story of the collision of values, and how it has affected the political, economic and cultural realms of Chinese society. Economic practices are not value-free; they are consistently filtered through an ages-old, complex institutional arrangement of cultural and political norms. In China, these norms have long been grounded in Confucian beliefs and traditions. Confucius argued for loyalty and filial piety as the foundations of Chinese values, and spoke of honoring elders for their wisdom and guidance. These ideals glued an entire society together, linking the individuals to the government and establishing national strength and cultural unity.

China's market liberalization has shifted citizens' focus away from collectivized values and towards individual responsibilities (Rai 1999). However, Confucian values have not disappeared. While neoliberal ideology is reflected in economic policymaking, Confucian ideology helps to maintain state order. The resulting collision of values is shaping gender-related norms and socio-economic outcomes in China.

In 1968 Mao noted that women hold up half the sky, but *de jure* rights do not always translate into *de facto* rights. This is particularly true for disadvantaged or minority groups in society, as socio-cultural norms and hierarchies of power work to bar these groups from receiving certain rights and privileges. This is better understood in light of Confucian philosophy, particularly the *yin* and the *yang*. Although the symbol reflects interrelatedness, socio-cultural harmony and unity, the prominent Confucian Dong Zongshu "maintained that...*yang* is superior and *yin* is inferior...the husband is *yang*...and the wife is *yin*" (Li 2000: 188). For centuries, such doctrines translated into oppressive practices such as women's foot-binding (Li 2000: 188).

Shortly before the 1978 economic transition, "women's average wage was 83 per cent that of men's; the male-female ratio of Communist Party membership was 2:1 and male-headed households were given priority in terms of welfare housing allocations" (Lee 2005: 2). Females occupied 57% of urban jobs with the lowest benefit levels, but only 37% of the highest-benefit jobs (Lee 2005). Chinese women still are forced to retire at the age of 55, while men retire at 60; this enables men to accrue more job tenure and receive a much higher pension than women (Warnecke 2011).

During Mao's rule, the Communist Party focused on universal priorities and "the specificity of women's needs was not taken on board" (Rai 1999: 185). Gender was viewed as a secondary issue to class, and women's independent organization of social groups was not permitted because of the fear of weakened class solidarity (Rai 1999). Still, longstanding practices such as concubinage and planned marriage were dismantled, female primary education improved dramatically (Baden and Green 1994), and female labor force participation rates were generally high. However, there were 'hidden' inequalities for women. "Collectivization increased the percentage of women working and

the amount of time they spent in the fields,” but this did not necessarily signify female empowerment or the improvement of gender relations (Liaw 2008: 241). It did not mean that women were relieved from their traditional responsibilities in the household or that they were immune from sexual harassment (Schirokauer and Clark 2008).

The effects of China’s economic transition on women have been multifaceted and complex. Confucian influences remain strong, reflecting “assumptions of family, market and voluntary sector responsibility rather than state responsibility, strong expectations of women’s obligations without compensating rights, [and] a hierarchy of gender and age” (Pascall and Sung 2007: 7). As women’s roles slowly change, Chinese women precariously balance on a tightrope linking tradition to modernity.

While many scholars agree that Confucianism has oppressed women, women are not a homogenous group. Furthermore, many elements of Confucianism are compatible with feminism; Confucians and feminists share a “strong caring orientation...[both] advocate the conception of human beings as socially connected individuals, not as disinterested, separate individuals...both ethics emphasize situational and moral judgment as well as character-building, instead of rule-following” (Li 2000: 192).

Although neoliberalism focuses on freedom, this is negative freedom—“the absence of restraints imposed by others (typically the state) on the choices of individuals,” not positive freedom—“individuals having the means to be more in control of their own well-being” (Warnecke and De Ruyter 2010). The minimal state role advocated by neoliberalism is likely to be insufficient to foster positive freedom, and certain groups of people are more likely to be disadvantaged by negative freedom.

Until the mid 1980s, government labor bureaus assigned Chinese female university graduates to lower-wage paying jobs (Baden and Green 1994); the increased competition for jobs associated with the economic transition only aggravated this trend (Rai 1999: 187). Many women have been forced out of work because employers are not willing to give benefits of maternity leave (Warnecke 2011). Yet the market economy also brought new opportunities to many women, including waged work in export processing zones (SEZs). To attract foreign direct investment, SEZs are entitled to several government concessions, including evasion of wage and labor laws (Engman et al. 2007). SEZs try to minimize manager-worker confrontations by hiring women, commonly perceived as docile and compliant (Churchill 2004); about 80% of SEZ workers in China are women (Knox 1997).

SEZs and other forms of temporary and informal employment have proliferated due to the end of the lifetime employment guarantee. According to the Ministry of Labour and Security, “informal employment will become the main mode of employment within the next two decades in China” (Cooke 2008: 6). Informal labor fosters economic growth by reducing the scope for costly regulations and benefits applying to formal sector workers. Though the informal sector is very diverse, informal employment is widely associated with low wages and poor working conditions (Cooke 2008). The gendered implications of this are significant, since women constitute the majority of informal sector workers in China (Cooke 2008).[1]

So “while China’s economic and welfare reforms transformed the structure of employment for both men and women, the reforms did serve to proliferate certain types of insider/outsider employment relationships where women are disproportionately disadvantaged” (Warnecke 2011: 12). However, some women have been able to acquire waged work for the first time, and informal employment does help many families who might otherwise be even worse off.

In our view, neither the previous command economy nor the new market-driven economy in China can be characterized as gender equitable. This can be traced to the ways that both Confucianism and neoliberalism have operated in the real world to restrict women’s choices and opportunities. While the ‘universality’ of the command economy period was quite limited with regard to gender, we

wish to rebut the argument that market-oriented economic transitions are unambiguously positive for women, especially in the long run. We note that economic growth is not the same thing as economic development; that examples from many countries show that economic growth does not always 'trickle down' to disadvantaged and minority groups; and that an increased amount of paid work for women does not necessarily lead to female empowerment. Therefore, from a gender-based perspective, bad jobs at bad wages may not necessarily be better than no jobs at all. While informal labor can improve some families' economic situations, institutionalizing such jobs can create a precedent which is difficult to change, especially if gender typing allocates these 'bad' jobs to women.

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[1] It is also worth noting that male informal sector workers tend to be paid a higher wage than female informal sector workers, largely due to occupational segmentation by gender (De Ruyter et al. 2009).

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