

## Women's life in China

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Alice Chun, a musician born in a small village in Guangxi Province, illustrates conditions for women in rural China.

On this forum I have seen occasional requests from western-born Chinese for information or a view on life in China, particularly from the countryside, from the rural China that the west hears so little about. I have tried here to give a picture of the life of women in rural China and what things have been like. Of course things have improved since the Revolution, notably for women's rights but for the majority of women life is still grindingly hard.

One treasure that Chinese women have is their bond of sisterhood as either LaoTang or even more precious as LaoTong and sharing the secret language of NuShu. Here I will give a little insight into the benefits of these blessings.

In the Chinese countryside, there are, maybe, 800 million people, who live on less than \$1 USD a day [1]. In many places, even today, money has no value and a barter economy exists. Upon her marriage, like chattel, a woman passes into her husband's family house. She may never see her own family again. If her in-laws are kind and she can promptly produce a son she will have honour. The cruel reality for many women is the marriage was agreed upon when they were children; perhaps, to settle family debts. The woman's husband may be much older than her. If she can't provide a son she may face beatings and ridicule from her husband and his family. If she has a daughter the baby may be killed at birth because a daughter is regarded as a burden and of no value to the family, except as a source of pleasure to her mother. Female infanticide is illegal in China, but the reality is it still happens. This is a grim reality in many other countries, such as India, Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, India, and Pakistan. [2][3] For millions of women, maybe over half the women on earth, life is worse than slavery.

Rural women do not know love in the way Western women do. They cannot choose their own husbands and intimate relations are not trivial recreational pleasures as in the West, but part of the grim reality of trying to produce a son, possibly with someone they hate. Giving birth can be a painful, primitive experience; the woman has a high chance of not surviving and, if she gives birth to a girl, she may wish she hadn't survived. I speak from personal experience; these circumstances were part of my mother's life and also her mother's.

In 2000, a United Nations report estimated that nearly 80 million females are missing in South Asia alone and attributed this number to sex-selective abortion and infanticide as well as food favouritism. In some parts of China and India [4] there are now eight women to every ten men. The consequences of this situation are painfully obvious. You might expect that market forces would prevail and that women would become more valued but this is never the case. Men always provide the demand, control the supply and do the selling. Female abduction and rape are on the increase. In many societies, once a woman is raped she becomes "untouchable" and her life is ruined. Assuming her own family does not kill her to save the family honour; she has one of two choices: she can become a prostitute or kill herself.

In many countries, "Female Genital Mutilation" (FGM) is practiced, not because of religion, but as part of a strict following of societal traditions. Many women are not regarded as "respectable" unless this is done. I won't go into the details of FGM &ndash; you can look this up for yourself if you have the stomach for it. It ranges from the "mild" to the hideously extreme. [5] This is all done in the name of love and family respectability. Fortunately, FGM was never practiced in China. Our crime was "Foot-binding" and this you can look up too. The cruel practice was lovingly done to little girls, usually before their seventh birthday to make them more "attractive" to men and, consequently, crippled them. In 10% of cases the girl would die of complications such as gangrene and blood-clotting. Mercifully, it was outlawed after the Revolution. [6]

In rural China up to one million women kill themselves every year. They drink insecticides, hang, drown and set themselves on fire. This is not solely attributed to a severe reaction to sexual humiliation, but, at its roots, is due to the despair, grinding poverty, hard-work and, maybe, the cruel treatment endured by women in rural areas. [7]

It is common to hear Chinese women refer to each other as "Sisters." There is a good reason for this. Sisterhood created a significant support network for women in rural regions and gave them strength. The idea of "Sworn-Sisters" or LaoTang became common. A LaoTang relationship between several women was normally part of the preparation for marriage and the sisterhood would be dissolved upon marriage but different sisterhoods could be formed later between married or widowed women.

More precious would be a LaoTong or "Old-Sames" relationship. This was a more rare and formal relationship between women and was exclusive and life-long. Often a LaoTong relationship would be formed when a marriage was contracted between families "in-utero" before the babies were born but both children turned out female against the hopes of their families. Otherwise a LaoTong relationship would be formed through an intermediary like a match-maker much like an arranged marriage. Women of suitable birthdays, ages, backgrounds and birth-signs would be paired this way in a bond of exclusive sisterhood that would last a lifetime and would survive marriage, child-birth and widow-hood. A LaoTong relationship would be rarely renounced or broken.

In some regions women learnt the secret written language of women called NuShu. [8][9] This is the only known language created by women, for women. It allowed women to communicate their innermost feelings to their LaoTong or LaoTang sisters. In 2002, a study indicated suicide rates in rural China outnumber urban ones three to one, and female suicide rates are 25% higher than that of men. [10] However, in regions where NuShu's use was most common, suicide rates were substantially lower. Through NuShu women were able to share their innermost feelings that they would otherwise have to suppress. NuShu made expression possible and living bearable. If you want to learn more about LaoTong relationships and NuShu read Lisa See's book "Snow Flower and the Secret Fan." [11]

Now, I believe there is at least some glimmer of light for women in China. The Chinese government is providing the means for village girls to spend time in industry to complete their education and make some money. The young women work for three years in the large factories in Southern China. When they go back to their villages, they have money, education and honour. They can set up their own small businesses and have material resources to choose their own husbands. For first time in 4,000 years, rural Chinese women have a value in their society and truly "Hold up half the sky."

[1] The Status of Socially Vulnerable Groups in China, In Defense of Marxism, 14th November 2003

[2] Goodkind, Daniel. (1999). Should Prenatal Sex Selection be Restricted?: Ethical Questions and Their Implications for Research and Policy

[3] A. Gettis, J. Getis, and J. D. Fellmann (2004). Introduction to Geography, Ninth Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill. pp. 200. ISBN 0-07-252183-X

[4] Srinivasan, Sandhya. "Laws Fail to Remedy Skewed Sex Ratio

[5] Female genital mutilation, World Health Organization

[6] A lesson on Foot-binding in China, Nancy Miles,  
<http://www.international.ucla.edu/shenzhen/2002ncta/miles/index.htm>

[7] Women Suicides Reflect Drudgery of Rural Life By Antoaneta Bezlova, IPS

[8] NuShu: A Hidden Language of Women, Chiang, 1992

[9] Introduction to the World of NuShu, <http://www2.ttcn.ne.jp/~orie/home.htm>

[10] Bertolote & Fleischmann 2002

[11] Snow Flower and the Secret Fan, Lisa See, Bloomsbury, ISBN 9780747583004

Alice Chun is a musician born in a small village in Guangxi Province on the LiJiang in 1969. She moved first to Zhuhai and then Hong Kong in 1996 and then to the UK in 1997. When not playing violin she can be found "helping out"; in restaurants and working as a dental receptionist.