



Objectification of Women in China. Chosen Examples from Women's Writing

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Abstract

The article presents the problem of objectification of Chinese women throughout past to the present times. Objectification of women in China can be regarded as total phenomenon, since it regarded control over feminine bodies, will and spirit. Since birth, women were strictly controlled and socialised accordingly. According to Confucian principles men were also supposed to show subordination to their fathers, superiors and rulers, however, looking from historical perspective, it is clear that subordination of women permeated patriarchal Chinese society so deeply, that it took the form of objectification that influenced traditions, customs and mentality of the inhabitants of the Middle Kingdom.

Keywords:

objectification of women, subordination of women, China, women in China.

Introduction

Objectification of women is a large-scale phenomenon, present in many cultures, expressed by various practices subordinating women. In this article I am going to write about objectification of a very specific group of women – namely, Chinese women.

I am going to bring examples of objectifying practices taken from women's literature, written by either Chinese women or female writers closely connected to China. The authors come from a wide time span extending from 19th to 21st century, coming from various backgrounds – some of them were born and spent their childhood in China – just like Jung Cheng, author of her family's history *Wild Swans*, an international best-seller banned in the People's Republic of China. Others, like Lisa See, descend from Chinese immigrants, thousands of whom were coming to the USA in the 19th century in search for better lives. Or, like the Pulitzer and Nobel Prize winner, Pearl S. Buck, daughter of missionaries, lived in China for many years, thoroughly observing and describing Chinese society, advocating for women rights, fighting against discrimination and undertaking humanitarian actions.

The work of authors who have themselves been emigrants, or those whose families have experienced the situation of relocation from their original country, can and should be treated as a bridge connecting the double cultural perspective in their narrative. Their writings represent the set of Western values, already internalized by them, but shows that their original ethos still is very important to them – shapes and influences their choices and perception of reality. This double perspective largely determines their reflective and critical consideration of the fate of women in China and is a mediated help for the Western researchers trying to understand the source

culture. Just as Chandra Mohanty recommends – experiences and cultures that the researchers cannot experience or live through themselves, (...) *must be theorized and interpreted within specific societies, both in order to understand it better, as well as in order to effectively organize to change it* (Mohanty, 1984, p. 339). Therefore such novels contain the hidden metacultural voice of the assessment of their own experience that convey information making the research possible.

There are many female authors, that have been writing about objectification of the Chinese women. In this article the reader can find references to works such as *Wild Swans: Three daughters of China* by Jung Chang, *Spring Moon* by Bette Bao Lord, *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, *Peony in Love*, *China Dolls*, *Shanghai Girls*, *Dreams of Joy* by Lisa See, to mention a few.

The first part of this article is devoted to the notion of objectification, thoroughly researched by two philosophers Martha C. Nussbaum and Rae H. Langton, with description of objectification's features as related to the objectifying practices performed in China (and described in the women's writing). Further on, the Reader will find reference to the objectifying social and family roles of women as daughters, wives and mothers, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, and widows, with regard to Confucian philosophy that have been influencing and shaping Chinese society for centuries.

In order to avoid one-dimensional Western assessment of the issue, while maintaining research distance to the presented problem, I am going to combine the perspective characteristic of Western social thought with references to the Chinese cultural tradition.

I believe that this selection of written material is very useful, since it concerns local, contextual analyses and allows avoiding homogenization of the described group, so

the lives of women of China will not create (...) *a false sense of the commonality of oppressions, interests and struggles between and amongst women globally* (Mohanty, 1984, p. 348), but will refer to their particular experience.

1. Definition of objectification

The term *objectification* is prevalent in feminist discourse. The simplest way to explain what objectification is that it occurs when a person is being treated as if she was an object. Thanks to Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin the term *objectification* usually is associated to sexual objectification of women by men – and both of these authors emphasize that this aspect of objectification should be understood as a central problem of feminism, and that this phenomenon should be opposed and fought against (Nussbaum, 1995).

2. Characteristic features of objectification – Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton

Two philosophers, Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton have been researching extensively the notion of objectification. Both of them created complementary list of conditions in which objectification takes place. Objectification occurs when some of these conditions are met. It is not necessary for all of these to be fulfilled, yet they may be combined in variety of manners.

Martha Nussbaum distinguished seven conditions of objectification. These are: Instrumentality. Women are treated as instruments, tools or means serving certain aim. This condition has undeniably been met, given the way Chinese females have been treated for many generations. Main role of a woman have been limited to bearing children – especially sons and heirs supporting patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal social order prevailing in China (Ebrey, 2002, pp. 11–12).

A woman who has not given her husband (or master, in case of a concubine) a male offspring was considered as a failure in the eyes of the family and society. Moreover, a son-less mother should despise her own failure and try to amend for it, by serving her husband and his family, humbly bearing her shame and insufficiency. The need for having male heirs, especially in upper class families, justified polygamy. Man not only could have a number of wives, he could also take concubines and have sex with maids and servants, which made the family relations quite complex and perplexing. (...) *The Chen Family Villa was home to 940 fingers: 210 fingers belonged to my direct blood relatives, 330 fingers to the concubines and their children – all girls – and another 400 fingers to our cooks, gardeners, wet nurses, amahs, maids, and the like.* (See, 2007, p. 46). If the wife had no children of her own, she could raise son of a concubine, who could be given every possible chance to carry on the family traditions. (Ebrey, 2002, p. 103).

Passivity and inertia. Chinese women could not make any decisions concerning their wellbeing or happiness. They were to obediently and meekly follow their superiors. It concerned weighty decisions, like marriage as well as everyday activities. It is clearly seen in the example of Peony (heroine of the novel *Peony in Love* by Lisa See) – whatever the decision her father took about her marriage, she would not express her feelings, but suffer it in silence. *„I'm a girl. (...) I believe in filial duty," I said, "and I will follow the course my father has set for me, but all girls have dreams, even if our destinies are set"* (See, 2007, p. 39). Filial duty (...) *was and still is a value based on strict principles of hierarchy, obligation and obedience. It is no exaggeration to say that it was the very foundation of the hierarchical structure of the Chinese family and thus of the Chinese society as a whole* (Teon, 2016). Filial duty made women passive,

this is why they were to follow the rules, giving up their hopes, dreams and ambitions. There was nothing that they could do:

"You married out," Mama said, in a way that seemed oddly detached. "You go to another village. Your mother-in-law is cruel. Your husband doesn't care for you. We wish you would never leave, but every daughter marries away. Everyone agrees. Everyone goes along with it. You can cry and beg to come home, we can grieve that you have gone, but you – and we – have no choice. The old saying makes this very clear: 'If a daughter doesn't marry out, she's not valuable; if fire doesn't raze the mountain, the land will not be fertile.' (See, 2005, p. 79).

Denying autonomy. For centuries Chinese women were denied possibility of making decisions concerning their lives. Decisions concerning marriage, love and sexual life, and even bodily autonomy (either foot binding practice taking place in the past centuries, or compulsory abortions imposed by the communist regime in more recent times), were made by their superiors: in the feudal era – by the father of the family, and during communist era – by the local party secretary, head of the village or cooperative. Life consisted of constant obedience. Just like Snow Flower's mother was saying during the foot binding procedure: *We must follow the Four Virtues and the Three Obedience's. Remember, when a daughter, obey your father; when a wife, obey your husband; when a widow, obey your son. Your husband is Heaven, she said, quoting the Classic of Filial Duty for Girls (See, 2007, p. 95).*

Interchangeability. If a woman could not bear a male offspring to her husband, it would be expected of him to take another wife or a concubine. Sometimes a man would even take maids to his bed in order to produce desired sons. Philosophy underlying this kind

of action was that if one woman would not fulfil her duty, another would. It was accepted to simply use another tool serving the same function. Exchanging one part of machinery (in this case meaning family and inheritance) does not influence its overall functioning and effectiveness.

Ownership and possession. A woman was a commodity that belonged to her family. After being married, she was removed from her father's custody and transferred like a product to her husband's family. Girls could and would be purchased or sold, if need arose. They were treated as merchandise and sometimes as investment. In times when family had debts to pay, giving the daughter away to the creditor could settle the obligation. This kind of situation is described by Lisa See in her novel *Shanghai Girls* – when Pearl and May learn about their father's gambling debts, that could be paid with his two beautiful daughters:

"I lost to Old Man Louie," Baba grudgingly admits at last. "He'll let your mother and me stay in the house if May marries the younger son and you marry the older son. We'll have a roof to sleep under and something to eat until I get work. You, our daughters, are our only capital" (See, 2009, p. 16).

Violability. Violability seems to be inscribed into the very definition of woman. They are fragile, delicate – due to foot binding practice, they lose their independency. Even few steps are such a painful experience, that they cannot even walk unassisted. Swaying movements, relying on the assistance of men or servants made a woman a fragile, decorative object, valuable and precious, yet very delicate. Possession of such objects defined male's high status in society. Just like art collectors, rich and powerful men would possess a number of delicate wives and concubines that

would please their senses and tastes. Andrea Dworkin writes:

"The Lady, unable to walk, remained properly invisible in her boudoir, an ornament, weak and small, a testimony to the wealth and privilege of the man who could afford to keep her – to keep her idle. Doing no manual labor, she did not need her feet either. Only on the rarest of occasions was she „allowed outside of the incarcerating walls of her home, and then only in a sedan chair behind heavy curtains." (Dworkin, 1974, pp. 130–131).

Another example of inscribing violability and fragility to women can be found in Xue Xinran's book *Miss Chopsticks*: the father of the heroines declares, that women by definition can be compared to a pair of chopsticks – because they can break just as easily as kitchen utensils: (...) *women are merely fragile, workaday tools, to be used and then discarded (Xinran, 2008, p. 1).* Moreover, it seems obvious, that by ascribing fragility to women, patriarchal system made them believe that statement – so they would not dare to seek out their strength.

Denial of subjectivity. A woman is denied the right to decide for herself – because she lacks good judgement. How can a little girl know, that foot binding is actually good for her? This is why others (wiser, older and more experienced) have to make such decisions „for her own good". Peony's mother explains it these words:

Our footbinding helps us to be softer, more languid, smaller." She paused again, and then added, in a kinder but no less adamant tone, "I will show you how this is done. I expect you to do this for your daughter four days from now. Every four days, tighter and tighter. Give your daughter the gift of your mother love. Do you understand? (See, 2007, p. 95).

Choosing husbands for daughters was also the matter appropriate for fathers, who actively participate in social, economical and political spheres of life. Peony from *Peony in Love* did not suspect, that her father might actually have had regard her feelings, since majority of Chinese fathers were gain oriented and did not hold their daughters in such esteem as to incline to their hearts' desires.

The above list of seven characteristics of objectification has been extended by philosopher Rae H. Langton, who added three more traits. In her opinion, Nussbaum's description of objectification will make a full picture only after we add the following features:

Reduction to body. That condition is undoubtedly met: women in China can be seen as reduced to their bodies according to their utility: their bodies have to serve one purpose: bearing sons.

We women are expected to love our children as soon as they leave our bodies, but who among us has not felt disappointment at the sight of a daughter or felt the dark gloom that settles upon the mind even when holding a precious son, if he does nothing but cry and makes your mother-in-law look at you as though your milk were sour? (See, 2005, p. 59).

Reduction to appearance. Females should be pleasing to the eye. Thus life in the female pavilions was mostly devoted to taking great care of beauty, designing new hairdos, arranging clothes and jewellery in exquisite combinations. Ladies were speaking in a delightful, sweet manner. Women with bound golden-lily feet were walking in a swaying manner, emphasising their frailty. The foot binding practice served purpose of proving the high status – both of the bride's family (who managed to bring up a delicate lady) and

the bridegroom's family (who could afford to have a woman unable to do chores and physical work):

Foot size would determine how marriageable I was. My small feet would be offered as proof to my prospective in-laws of my personal discipline and my ability to endure the pain of childbirth, as well as whatever misfortunes might lie ahead. My small feet would show the world my obedience to my natal family, particularly to my mother, which would also make a good impression on my future mother-in-law. The shoes I embroidered would symbolize to my future in-laws my abilities at embroidery and thus other house learning. And, though I knew nothing of this at the time, my feet would be something that would hold my husband's fascination during the most private and intimate moments between a man and a woman. (See, 2005, p. 34).

Muting and silencing. Even if women dared to complain and express their dissatisfaction and unhappiness, they would be silenced, and their opinions not taken seriously. When Jung Chang's grandmother learned that her father arranged for her to become General Xue's concubine just a few days before the arranged liaison, she:

bent her head and wept. She hated the idea of being a concubine, but her father had already made the decision, and it was unthinkable to oppose one's parents. To question a parental decision was considered unfilial and to be unfilial was tantamount to treason. Even if she refused to consent to her father's wishes, she would not be taken seriously; her action would be interpreted as indicating that she wanted to stay with her parents. The only way to say no and be taken seriously was to commit suicide. (Jung Chang, 2003, p. 13).

As it was mentioned before, it is enough if only one or some of these characteristics occur in order to speak about objectification. But it is clear, that women of China suffered the whole range of objectifying practices, and all of these characteristics have been taking place.

3. Factors determining objectification of women in China

Objectification of women in China can be regarded as total, since it included control over feminine bodies, will and spirit. Since birth, women were strictly controlled and socialised accordingly. What influenced such subordination of the female population? We may distinguish four following factors: environment, expectations, education and tradition.

Environment. By environment I understand society and family (influenced by society), financial status of the family and social class. All of these contributed to and facilitated objectification of women. Society approved of restricting women to the female pavilions, and thus imposed certain roles upon them, so they would be able to devote their energy and time only to activities allowed to and proper for women. Since women would not have access to hunting equipment, but to needles and thread, they would make embroideries; ladies with tiny bound feet, incapacitated of physical activity and work would have devote their life to childrearing and childcare, intrigues and competition for being favourite of the husband (or master). (...) We entered this house as wives, playthings, entertainment, and servants (See, 2011, p. 416) recalls Yong from the Green Dragon village, who as one of many wives, had to agree with the fact, that despite marrying out of love she would have had to share her husband with other women.

Expectations. In Chinese society men and older generations had considerable power over women and younger generations (Ebrey, 2002, p. 12). Girls and women were subordinate to the whole hierarchy consisting of older women and, ultimately, men. Even if loved and cherished, daughters were expected to marry men chosen by their fathers, become concubines to important men, accept being sold as maids or courtesans, in other words – sacrifice their happiness and lives to the benefit of their families.

Education. Women were not educated for their own merit, education was understood rather as a form of investment: the higher the price on the marital market, the better. Certain qualities and education were favoured, but a wife should have never exceeded her husband's learning and knowledge. Jung Chang describes how her great grandfather, wanted his daughter to be trained as a lady or a high-class courtesan, therefore:

Scorning the received wisdom of the time – that it was virtuous for a lower class woman to be illiterate – he sent her to a girl's school that had been set up in the town in 1905. She also learned to play Chinese chess, mahjongg, and go. She studied drawing and embroidery. Her favourite design was mandarin ducks (which symbolize love, because they always swim in pairs), and she used to embroider them onto the tiny shoes she made for herself. To crown her list of accomplishments, a tutor was hired to teach her to play the qin, a musical instrument like a zither (Chang, 2003, pp. 6–7).

It is important to mention, that education of men who studied overseas finally influenced emancipation of women and helped to prepare ground for freeing them from many inhibitions. After returning to China from abroad,

such men, when becoming husbands and fathers often forbidden practices, such as foot binding, imposed by tradition on their wives and daughters. Men started the anti-foot binding movement (...) by founding so-called natural feet societies in which they enrolled their daughters or to which they swore allegiance by refusing to marry, or have their sons marry, women with bound feet (Dooling, 2005, p. 21).

Tradition. Life according to four virtues and three obediences. Tradition was held in high esteem: living the way ancestors did, doing things the way they have always been done – was certainly valued. Tradition tied women to their families, and made them servants whose only objective was obediently fulfilling the needs and demands of their elders.

According to the principles of Confucianism, a woman should follow the path of four virtues, and thus she should:

- ▶ lead a moral life,
- ▶ distinguish herself by a proper speech, modest manners and appearance
- ▶ be diligent at work.
- ▶ In addition, by complying to the rule of filial piety she should also follow the order of three obediences. It means that she should show obedience three times:
 - ▶ first, as a daughter to her father,
 - ▶ then as a wife to her husband,
 - ▶ and finally – as a widow – to her sons.

One could say, that it should not be surprising, given the fact that Confucianism, provided a view of the cosmos and social order that legitimated the Chinese patriarchal society and family system. (...) Confucian emphasis on obligations to patrilineal ancestors and Confucian exaltation of filial piety contributed to a moral order in which families were central to human identity and to a family system organized hierarchically (Ebrey, 2002, pp. 11–12) where women and young people were subordinated to older

generations and older men. In the light of the Confucian principles men were also supposed to show subordination to their fathers, superiors and rulers. However, even the smallest and lowest ranking men were superior to women.

4. Women's place in the family order

The history of Chinese women is related to the history of the Chinese family (Ebrey, 2002, p. 7). Lives of women were shaped by (...) elements of family and marriage practice, such as the age at which they married, how their spouses were selected, where they lived after marriage, their access to property, the choices open to them if widowed, and the like. (Ebrey, 2002, p. 7). Moreover, the concept of filial piety permeating Chinese society and rule of three obediences limited women's subjectivity and decision making. Serving the family, was the main objective and duty of a faithful daughter, obedient wife and honourable widow. In this paragraph I am going to describe duties and expectations put on daughters, wives and mothers, daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law and widows.

Daughters. Since their birth daughters were traditionally treated as „useless branches“, bringing their families nothing but source of sorrow and exertion. Since it was important to marry daughters off, they were not expected to stay in their natal houses. Thus the efforts parents would put in upbringing their daughters and preparing dowries would finally merit their husbands' families. (...) *We love our parents because they take care of us, but we are considered worthless branches on the family tree. We drain the family resources. We are raised by one family for another* (See, 2005, p. 59).

If not successfully married, daughters could also be treated as a form of commodity, often they were sold as concubines or maids to wealthier families, or as prostitutes to pleasure houses.

If the family fell into trouble, parents would get rid of their daughters (as if they were unnecessary ballast), thus female infants were often killed. Female infanticide (...) *was extremely prevalent in the Song Dynasty – being greatly influenced by the philosophy of Neo-Confucianism which denied women basic human rights, including the right to live* (See, 2005, p. 59). In *The Good Earth* Wang Lung's wife, O-lan, got pregnant and gave birth to a daughter during terrible famine. From the bruises on the infant Wang saw that O-lan has strangled the baby because she could not feed her (Buck, 2005). Female infanticide in the areas stricken by natural disasters or poverty led to shortage of girls on the marital market. The same problem is noticed nowadays, since the one-child-policy imposed on a deeply patriarchal society led to extremely large number of aborting female fetuses.

Daughters could also have been sold as if they were merchandise: as servants, maids or slaves, and from that moment their fate would completely depend on the new family that bought them. Plum Blossom, a slave girl living in the house of Chang family, after being promised as a concubine to Old Yeh laments:

Even after my father sold me and sent me away, I dreamed every night that if I were good-natured and worked hard the Matriarch would wed me to a young artisan from town or to the son of a clan retainer. I dreamed that we would be well matched and have sons. I would have a home and my rightful place as a daughter-in-law, wife and mother (Lord, 2004, p. 17).

Wives and mothers. Young wife entering her husband's family had two important tasks. One of them was to bear sons – since her position depended on her ability to do so and numbers of sons she could give to her husband's clan. If she failed to fulfil this obligation,

she was losing her social value and place in the family hierarchy. The other task was to loyally serve his husband and his parents. As Snow Flower puts it:

My duty as my husband's wife was to his parents above all else. To serve them did not just mean bringing them tea in the morning, washing their clothes, or accepting criticism with a smiling face. Serving them meant that I should esteem them above everyone else – above my parents, above my husband, above my children (See, 2005, p. 180).

After marriage, young wives could slowly work their way up through the family hierarchy, by trying to win approval of their in-laws, (...) *working within the system and thereby also helping to validate it and reproduce it* (Ebrey, 2002, p. 13). Apart from becoming mothers, they also played active roles in supporting the system:

Mothers trained their daughters to occupy certain statuses in this system, fostering in them the modesty expected of upper-class wives, the charm expected in courtesans, the obedience expected in maids. Women purchased most of the maids and many of the concubines. A wife whose husband took a concubine could to some degree limit or shape her husband's behaviour by arousing fears of what she might do to the other woman if sufficiently provoked (Ebrey, 2002, p. 13).

Wives were not for pleasure – that was the role of concubines. Even though concubines could become considerably powerful, their social status was quite different from that of a wife. As Jung Chang says (...) *a concubine was a kind of institutionalized mistress, acquired and discarded at will* (Chang, 2003, p. 13).

Mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. The relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law often was full of tension and involved conflict. Some mothers-in-law used to tyrannise their daughters-in-law, taking advantage of their hierarchical position which allowed them to do so unrestrained. Daughter-in-law was always subordinate to her mother-in-law, and finally to her father-in-law. Her function was to help her husband fulfil his duties towards his parents. She literally belonged to her husband's family, and had to serve and please her in-laws:

We are told to love our in-laws, but we enter those families as strangers, as the lowest person in the household, just one step on the ladder above a servant. We are ordered to love and honor our husbands' ancestors, so we perform the proper duties, even if our hearts quietly call out gratitude to our natal ancestors (See, 2005, p. 59).

Bound by the concept of filial duty, the husband should always take the side of his mother, not of his wife, because of his obligations towards parents and continuation the family lineage.

Additionally, the mothers-in-law could be seen and act as a guardians of the patriarchal system. As the highest ranking females in the family system, their duty was to maintain the family order, care for the clan's ancestors and keeping their families in good shape. Daughters-in-law could hope to eventually become mothers-in-law and become as much powerful as their own mothers-in-law have been, and continue their tasks.

Widows. A respected and respectful widow should:

- ▶ lead modest and decent life;
- ▶ forget any thoughts of marrying again;

► serve the family, namely her sons, her late husband's male relatives and her in-laws.

Widows were supposed to remain in celibacy after their husbands' demise. A virtuous widow would remain unmarried and continue being of service to her family, her reward was the support the family had given her in exchange. Loyalty towards her husband and her new family should reach extremely high point – in many cases widows preferred death instead of uncertain future:

As a widow, I would have very few options. Since my children were too young to take care of me, my father-in-law could sell me away to another man. Knowing that under those circumstances I might never see my children again, I understood why so many widows killed themselves (See, 2005, p. 175).

It was better to become poor or to die, but remain true to her husband, and to keep her virtue, rather than to bring shame on his memory (See, 2005, p. 175). Those widows, who acted accordingly with these principles would be presented as exemplary to other women and girls, just like Peony's grandmother, whose virtue was praised even by her enemies:

The highest goal a woman could achieve in life was to be a chaste widow who would not accept a second marriage, not even if it meant taking her own life. But my grandmother had done something even more extraordinary. She elected to kill herself rather than give herself to the Manchu soldiers. She was such an exemplary example of Confucian chastity that, once the Manchus established the Qing court, they selected her to be venerated in stories and books for women to read, if they hoped to reach perfection themselves as wives and mothers, and to promote the universal ideals of loyalty and filial piety. The Manchus were

still our enemy, but they used my grandmother, and the other women who had sacrificed themselves during the disaster, to win our respect and bring back order to the women's chambers (See, 2007, p. 45).

6. Ghosts of the past. Questions that remain

Convicted by the patriarchal society to live in the shadow and away from the public sphere, women focused on giving birth and upbringing the next generations subordinated to tradition. Objectified women were diligently safeguarding smooth transition and continuation of patriarchal social order. Chinese social and family system could endure for so many centuries because all men and some women enjoyed some degree of power, and even inferior individuals would become superior (Teon, 2016). (...) *In fact, even the poorest of men in China was a king: a king in his own household. He was nothing compared to the Emperor or a Magistrate, but he, too, had some subordinates who had to serve and obey him: his own children and women (Teon, 2016). Even though (...) sons or daughters-in-law were powerless in their youth, when they grew old their turn came to command. Sons would inherit their fathers' role, and daughters-in-law would become mothers-in-law (Teon, 2016).* Not all daughters-in-law could reach that level of power, yet that was the most they could aspire to be.

When we take a closer look at modern-day China, we may ask ourselves the following question: did socio-political changes in China improve the way of treating women? The answer that comes to mind is not very heart warming though. Despite the historical turmoils, revolutions and overturn of social order the patriarchal and feudal traits still permeate the Chinese society. Fighting the remnants of old regime during the Communist era included compulsory unbinding of crippled *lotus feet*:

women with bound feet were going through a process of slowly unbinding their feet (...) *preventing emotional and physical trauma – which would leave them completely crippled – and allowing the feet to regain their original shape gradually so the women can work in the fields (See, 2011, p. 359).* Unfortunately, in many cases the process was forced abruptly, so the women had no the chance to gain physical strength before being sent to fields. They would be stripped of their bandages and forced to walk and work. Women who fell victims of objectification by the old system were still objectified and blamed for being relics of the hated past.

Objectification of women is also visible in one-child-policy: female foetuses are more likely to be aborted. Moreover, women who got pregnant with second child have often been forced to undergo abortion, even if the pregnancies were already advanced – just like in the infamous case of Feng Jianmei, who has been forcibly taken to a county hospital in Shaanxi Province, by the local officials because she and her husband were unable to pay a 40,000 yuan fine for violating the one child policy. Mrs. Feng, seven months pregnant, was forced to thumbprint an agreement to have an abortion, and then was held down while injected with an abortifacient. Mrs. Feng's husband posted graphic pictures of the aborted girl, thus sparking controversy in China and abroad about forced abortions (Wong, 2012).

Another issue is that after the Communists seized power in China, the party leadership positions have never been open for women:

Not once since the Communists came to power in 1949 has a woman sat on the party's highest body, the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee now led by President Xi Jinping. The 25-member Politburo has just two women, though that is the highest number since the Cultural Revolution, when the wives of the Chinese leader Mao Zedong

and of Lin Biao, his designated successor, were given seats in 1969 (Tatlow, 2017).

Although contemporary Chinese women have successfully entered the paths of career and various spheres that in the past were reserved to men, the society still believes in the idea that unmarried woman is lacking in value. Even if remaining single is their own choice, it is understood that they do not have respect for their parents and therefore do not follow the rule of filial duty. This is the reason why people consider them as outcasts. (...) *In 2007, the ministry of education publicly shamed women who were 27 years or older as "leftover women" (Xuan Li, The Conversation, October 11, 2016).* Some parents get so frustrated with the fact that their children are not married that they keep looking for potential spouses at „matchmaking corners“ like the famous Shanghai Marriage Market, where they put ads describing their daughters – giving information about their looks, job and financial status. Still, more of Chinese women are trying to oppose the tradition of arranged, loveless marriages, choosing autonomy over tradition and advocating for securing women's rights.

Chinese society is still a very conservative one, clinging to outdated rules and customs, oblivious that women are human beings and deserve equal treatment. Although the first feminist and equal rights tendencies in China were voiced more than a century ago, the process of securing women's rights is slow and challenging – just like in other parts of the world, because the real change demands not merely introduction of new laws and regulations, but above all it involves shift in mentality and culture. And that requires change of outdated beliefs, customs and traditions deeply and transparently implemented and shaping opinions and worldview. ☹

1 The Conversation

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Abstrakt

Artykuł porusza zagadnienie uprzedmiotowienia kobiet w Chinach, w oparciu o wybrane przykłady dzieł literackich autorek chińskich, bądź blisko związanych z Chinami. Uprzedmiotowienie kobiet w Chinach można uznać za zjawisko totalne, ponieważ oznaczało pełną kontrolę nad ciałami, wolą i duchem kobiet. Zgodnie z zasadami konfucjanizmu mężczyźni również podlegali swoim zwierzchnikom (zarówno w hierarchii rodzinnej, jak i politycznej), lecz uprzedmiotowienie kobiet przyjęło znacznie głębszą postać przejawiającą się w tradycji, obyczajach i mentalności mieszkańców Państwa Środka.

Słowa kluczowe: uprzedmiotowienie kobiet, poddaństwo kobiet, Chiny, kobiety w Chinach.