

Across the Border

Holding half the sky

by *Erin Renee Wahl*

timbrel connects today's Mennonite women in all our diversity by sharing our stories and perspectives. Through our conversations with each other, we seek to walk more closely with God and to show greater love for self and neighbors near and far.

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The problem with holding up half the sky in Asia is that you get half the blame but perhaps not half the opportunities. The role of females in Asia is a fluid concept that shifts with the tides. The various governments of Asia like to sound generous in regard to women's rights, yet upon closer observation we see that though these rights might technically be given freely, most women either fail to claim these rights or are blocked by the personal or social preferences of the male-dominated world around them.

Asia is historically a patriarchal society. Confucius spoke often of male superiority and dominance over women, to the extent that sons were even above their mothers in the grand scheme of things. Many Asian traditions come from a historical oppression of women in society and sometimes degrading ideals of femininity (for example the Chinese tradition of foot binding).

Poverty in Asia is still widespread and affects people in many ways, but the difference is felt perhaps more by the women of these countries than any other group. In present day China girls are learning the same things as boys, enjoying the same opportunities at study and facing the same problems.

The new generations of Chinese women are concerned with many of the same things that the old ones were, such as husband, child, family, household, and have many new things to worry about such as job, education, finances. After living three years in China I have seen this much: that women are expected to hold up more than half the sky and to remain uncomplaining.

Poverty in ancient China seemed to be a simpler thing. The ordinary people went in and out of poverty as quickly and easily as the changing of seasons, and they were well equipped to handle it with experience and knowledge from past generations.

Of course, in the minds of many foreigners, the most infamous

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time in China's development is that of Mao Zedong and his notorious Great Leap Forward (in which 30 million Chinese starved to death) and the Cultural Revolution. Starting out with good intentions, Mao successfully changed the shape and face of China locally and internationally. His policies and propaganda simultaneously terrorized and brought hope to the people of China and molded the identities of an entire generation. Equally important was Deng Xiaoping's opening and reform, loosening the constraints and shattering the falsehoods of Mao and bringing capitalist ideas to the Chinese people.

Deng Xiaoping's famous quotation: "To get rich is glorious," is often quoted by the younger generations as encouragement for their own ambitions of wealth, power and entrepreneurship. In modern China, all citizens are being mobilized for capitalism, convinced by countless sources that the only way is the wealthy way and the only meaningful future is one in which they can wield power and money with an ease and intelligence that impresses and influences. Along China's prosperous coastline and in its larger cities, wealth seems an easily attainable target. In the countryside and China's western provinces this dream is at times elusive. Although intense poverty exists throughout all of China's provinces, the most extreme cases seem to reside in western China where various factors combine to make life harder for citizens of these areas.

However, in the tradition of women's struggles, things are still not equal for women in Asia and many feel the pressure of the clash of traditional society and contemporary ideals. There is still the pressure for young girls to be married by 30 and pregnant soon after. The pressure to produce a male to carry on the family name, though a bit diminished in recent years, is still present, particularly in rural and poverty stricken areas where men can make the difference between familial success and failure.

Well, I guess we're not so different after all. ☑



*Tongluand Qian
Dao Hu market.*

*Photo by Erin Re-
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