

China

CHINESE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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Sexual violence against women is an enduring social issue and an institutionalised form of violence. It transcends national and cultural boundaries. In the western cultures, violence against women have been attributed to culturally approved use of violence, gender inequality, social isolation and lack of social support. This paper attempts to examine the parallels in the Eastern culture, namely the Chinese culture.

In taking the stance of culturally approved use of violence against women, it is essential to trace the roots of the Chinese value system. Even though the Chinese culture is known for its emphasis on non-violence and harmony, using force against women can be historically rooted in the culture of Confucianism. In historical China, many Confucian classics morally stipulated a subordinate position of women in society. The well-known three cardinal guides stated that the ruler (or emperor) guides the subject, the father guides the son and the husband guides the wife. In addition to the three cardinal guides, women must subject themselves to the three obediences, which dictates that a woman must obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage and her son after the death of the husband. On top of these Confucian norms, every woman was also expected to observe four virtues: morality, proper speech, diligent work and modest manner. Of course Confucianism did not directly provoke violence against women in general or endorse sexual abuse of women, it did however, provide a culture and legal foundation for the institutionalisation of violence against women in the Chinese society. In addition to these guides, obediences and virtues, there is the patriarchal family system to contend with. This combination justified a cultural and moral legitimacy for men to abuse women. For example in historical China, women are severely abused by practices of foot-binding, forced prostitution, child bride and husband's as well as father-in-law's maltreatment and sexual abuse. It is therefore not difficult to understand the violence against women was excused in order to comply with the cultural expectations and cultural codes.

It is noteworthy that women historically had nonexistent sexual rights, as women were selected by the rich as a property, sold off to repay debts and always in marriage, came under the sexual direction and predilections of their husbands. The only sexual right a woman had was to bear children, especially sons, and even this was in obligation to her husband and his family. Any attempt by women to exercise her sexual rights or choice brings about conflict in this very patriarchal hierarchical country. Records dating back to the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) illustrated the conflict faced by the judicial system, when fathers-in-law were reported to have sexually assaulted their daughters-in-law. Most of these cases were only reported to the authorities because death or injury had occurred. A rape victim was expected to resist

throughout the assault and if she did so with too much vigour and injured her senior relative, as a result, she could be criminally liable for unfilial behaviour. In cases involving fathers-in-law and daughters-in-laws, there is an overt conflict for the authorities, as on the other hand, they have to safeguard the status distinction between father-in-law and daughter-in-law and on the other hand reward the courageous defence of female chastity.

In recent years, there have been steps taken to address the formal and informal biased mechanisms. The Chinese government and the non-government organizations (NGOs) have been making changes and progress in several areas (e.g. women's work opportunities, education and sexual harassment laws). In 1997, the All-China Women's Federation, the biggest women's organization in China had gathered huge support for sexual harassment to be included in the Criminal Law, but unfortunately the legislation was rejected. It appears that China's legal system is not ready to include such a law, however, it is still considered progress for the legislative body to be made aware of the sexual harassment faced by women in the country.

There has been increased funding by the Chinese government and United Nations development program to help laid-off women gain employment. The women are educated in new business technology skills and gender sensitive training is provided to employers - that women over 35 are not too old to learn or to be employed for a new job. Another initiative taken by the NGOs and the Chinese government is the compulsory 9-year education for all citizens and there have been programs implemented in some rural areas to ensure that the girl child is not deprived of her equal right to education. However these programs still have limited funding and there are still many rural towns where the girl child does not have the luxury of education. Now, in modern day socialist China, despite the significant gender alterations, particularly the legal status of women, their involvements in the work force and the increase in female political leadership, sexual violence against women is still very often a silent crime.

At this point, it would be interesting to draw the parallels of sexual violence in socialist China and democratic Singapore. Singapore is a Southeast Asian country with the majority of the population from Chinese descent. In terms of the status of women and opportunities available for Singaporean women, it far exceeds the restrictions and inequalities faced by their counterparts in China. However, when you examine the area of sexual violence, you will find uncanny similarities. Sexual violence is also very much a silent crime in Singapore. Unfortunately, there are no reliable statistics on the incidences of sexual violence against women, with the only established service available being the Police rape crisis unit. Despite Singapore being a very progressive society, there are no other sexual assault services or hot lines available. The Singaporean explanation is simple, rape rarely happens in this country (Singapore) and when it does the Police will enforce the law.

As the Chinese Woman's response to rape is locked within the confines of her cultural script, sexual violence, for the most part, remains unreported and unknown. The Chinese woman is confined by a set of historic family relations and obligations, which call for her allegiance to subordinate her own feelings, and protect the collective. She cannot share because to do so would disgrace not just herself, but her family and provide public visibility to a private shame. It is true that official laws denounce rape,

but there is no law or mechanism that provides women with the means to resist the social shaming inherently attached to sexual victimisation. The formal and informal biases and mechanisms are slowly being addressed, however the progress is very much restricted, as it is in Western cultures, by the centuries old perception of male superiority.