

Abstract

The roughly egalitarian position of women in Kelantan, Malaysia, contrasts strongly with the comparatively low position of women in traditional Chinese society. In both societies the statuses of men and women increase with age but while extra-domestic economic activities best account for a gradual increase in the status of middle-aged Kelantanese women, a dramatic improvement in middle-aged Chinese women's status is due primarily to alterations in their domestic situation. The result of these changes reduces the contrast in the position of middle-aged women in these two societies.

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Kelantan Malay and Traditional Chinese Perspectives on Middle-Aged Women: A Diminished Dichotomy

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KELANTAN MALAY AND TRADITIONAL CHINESE PERSPECTIVES
ON MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN: A DIMINISHED DICHOTOMY*

There is a marked disparity between the status of Malay women in West Malaysia and the status of women in traditional Chinese society. A number of anthropologists describe the situation of women in Malay society as one of relative equality (Raybeck 1981; Strange 1981; Winzeler 1974) where women can control important economic resources, participate in important domestic

the circumstances described below, there remain some rural west coast villages, such as Jendram Hilir described by Peter Wilson (1967), which can provide still more supplementary material on the position of Malay women.

The description of traditional Chinese society refers to pre-1911 circumstances, but considerable ethnographic information is drawn from recent studies conducted in Taiwan. There is ample precedence for viewing elements of Taiwanese society, particularly those concerned with family structure, as very similar to such elements in traditional China (Cohen 1976; Freedman 1979; M. Wolf 1972, 1974). Further, a concern with the situation of women in traditional Chinese society has considerable relevance for their current position in the People's Republic. There are clear indications that older customs still influence the position of Chinese women and hinder their full participation in the communist state (Baker 1979:200ff; Parish 1975:615; Parish & Whyte 1978:215).

Kelantan Malay Women

The state of Kelantan on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula is noted as a stronghold of traditional Malay customs and cultural practices that are disappearing from the more developed states in the peninsula. Ethnic Malays comprise approximately 92 percent of the state's population and the great majority of these reside in rural nucleated villages where they practice wet rice agriculture. Their social structure is bilateral and results in the formation of relatively stable kindreds which provide important material and emotional support for members. Most social life occurs within the confines of the rural village and is strongly influenced by cultural values that emphasize the importance of individual dignity and interpersonal harmony (Raybeck 1975). Virtually all Malays are Sufi Moslems and view themselves as sincere participants in the religious system.

The general position of women in Kelantan society is defined by a combination of traditional custom (adat) and the rules of Islam. Elsewhere (Raybeck 1981) I have described the manner in which Kelantanese villagers

equality with that of men. Thus, it is instructive to examine the positions of women at various stages in their life-cycle.

Kelantanese highly value children and refer to them as "the gift of God" (hadiah Tuhan). Families are equally pleased by the birth of a girl or boy, and parents sometimes express a preference that the first-born be a girl who can be of greater assistance in the household and who, when older, may be of greater assistance than a male in the parents' old age (Djamour 1959; Firth 1966). Young boys and girls are initially treated in a similar fashion; but, by the age of six or so, girls will start to assume domestic duties and will be encouraged to remain close to home while boys of this age have no responsibilities and are somewhat freer in their movements.

As girls approach puberty, their freedom of movement is further restricted and they are impressed with the importance of their chastity and of modest behavior. During this period, they are taught that they should exhibit deference to males, including their future husbands, yet they often observe that the behavior of their mothers does not reflect this admonition. A girl's first marriage is usually arranged by her parents, but she may often influence the choice of her spouse and she is almost always able to veto the match if she disapproves. She may disapprove if she dislikes the proposed groom or the proposed post-marital residence. While marriage residence is technically ambilocal, women prefer to be close to their natal family; and most couples establish residence near the bride's parents (Raybeck 1975; Strange 1981:127).

A young bride will generally receive from her parents her brideprice (mas Kahwin) and often an additional sum which she will bring to her marriage along with whatever property she may have inherited. Throughout her marriage she retains her right to the property she brought with her and, should she divorce, she is entitled to her original property and half of everything she and her husband acquired during the marriage. A young wife still has some constraints on her freedom of movement, but she usually takes an early lead in managing the family finances and in selling goods at the local market (Firth 1966; Strange 1981). Thus, while a young wife is ideally expected to be obedient to her husband and to defer to him, her active economic role encourages both her independence and assertiveness in domestic decisions. As Strange has noted, "Both women and men talk about a wife's obedience more than they expect or practice it in the family milieu" (1981:135). As a wife grows older, her participation in village affairs increases, and the restrictions on her movements and activities continue to decrease.

As a married woman approaches middle-age, she usually becomes a more active participant than her husband in several aspects of village social life, particularly in the sphere of economics (Firth 1966; Raybeck 1975; Strange 1981; Wilson 1967). It is she who manages the household finances and monitors the family budget. She also works in the rice fields at time of planting and harvesting, and she may maintain her own garden in which she often raises cash crops for sale in the village market. She may also sell handicrafts that she and her husband have made, as well as other items such as snacks and shellfish. Such economic activity on the part of women is not

confined to Kelantan but is common throughout Southeast Asia (Boserup 1970; Strange 1981; Winzeler 1974). In Kelantan, however, women dominate the marketing and tend to control the distribution of many forms of produce (Firth 1966:116; Strange 1981:198).

A woman's economic activities require her frequent participation in the village market where she encounters other women sellers who provide her with information on such socially relevant matters as prices, local politics, and availability of marriageable girls and boys. A woman's access to such extra-domestic information provides her with a lever with which she can widen her social participation. A wife is often more aware of the intricacies of village affairs than is her husband, and she takes an active role in major domestic decisions involving such concerns as the marriage of children, the purchase of land, and even political matters (Raybeck 1981:16; also cf. Firth 1966:26ff.; Wilson 1969:105). Further, a wife may rely upon members of her kindred for emotional support and for assistance in caring for her children.

A middle-aged woman is not expected to be as modest as a younger woman and is free to travel beyond the village for economic and other purposes. Social visits to relatives in other states may last for several weeks while travel for business purposes seldom takes more than a day. Many Kelantanese women engage in trading operations that require travel throughout the state and, often, across the neighboring border with Thailand. Middle-aged women are also among the most active small-scale smugglers engaged in moving long-grained rice from Thailand to Kelantan (Raybeck n.d.). Such women are also free to pursue other business concerns from which a younger woman would be barred. The most popular coffee shop (kedai kopi) in the village studied was owned and run by a middle-aged woman, although Islamic-influenced village morality holds that it is generally improper for women to frequent coffee shops.

Both older and younger wives may sometimes gain greater freedom through divorce. Divorce is extremely common in Kelantan; and while the rules of Islam make it difficult for a woman to obtain a divorce, there are social mechanisms a wife can employ to force her husband to divorce her (Raybeck 1981:16-17). A divorced woman is free of both parental restrictions and those of her former husband. A divorcee may arrange her own remarriage, and often she establishes a specific contract which assures her of rights she would not enjoy in a standard marriage. Although divorce often frees a woman to take a more active role in village life, younger women usually soon remarry as the status divorcee also carries an undesirable connotation of sexual license and impropriety. Older women, however, may choose to remain single, especially if they have property, kindred support, and adult offspring (cf. Strange 1981:232-33). Rosemary Firth has noted that the single status of older women "illustrates their assertion of their own independence, rather than the casting of them off by the rest of the community" (1966:11).

Despite the highly visible participation of middle-aged women in economic activities, their roles in the religious and political spheres are more circumscribed. Women can arrange for Islamic feasts and other religious events, but they may not publicly participate in them. Similarly, at the

village level it is not considered appropriate for a woman to hold office or to be publicly active in politics. Many middle-aged women, however, display an interest in public politics and a pronounced ability to affect such politics (Raybeck 1981:16).

A Kelantanese woman experiences a gradual increase in status and in social participation from the time of her initial marriage through middle-age. There does not appear to be a marked discontinuity between youth and middle-age. Indeed, as Heather Strange has noted, there is "no view of 'middle-age' as a discrete segment of the life-cycle . . ." (1981:76). The relatively high status accorded Kelantanese women in general and middle-aged women in particular seems best explained by their active economic role in village society (Firth 1966:32ff; Strange 1981:198-99). It also seems likely, however, that as a woman assumes greater economic responsibilities and experiences the demands of attendant increasing participation in domestic decision making and village social life, her personality would become stronger and more assertive as Brown suggests (1982:147). Certainly the most assertive women I encountered in Kelantan were middle-aged or older, and they differed markedly from younger women in this respect. As women age, there also appears to be a lessening of narrowly defined feminine parenting behavior as Brown notes Gutmann would predict (1982:147-48).

Although the circumstances accounting for the relatively high status of middle-aged women in Kelantan supports much of Brown's model, their status does not seem to be particularly dependent on the relationship these women have with their adult children. Since the mother-offspring bond is an important element in Brown's argument, I will discuss it further in the conclusion of this paper.

Traditional Chinese Women

Traditional Chinese society was consistently patricentric. Descent was patrilineal, resident patrilocal, and authority patriarchal. Although China had a complex literate society for thousands of years, most Chinese were illiterate peasants residing in rural villages and engaged in the raising of wheat in the north and wet rice in the south. Their patrilineal rule of descent led to the formation of corporate lineages that often owned land and were among the most influential elements in Chinese social life. While Chinese could and did participate in a variety of religious traditions ranging from animism to Taoism to Buddhism, the dominant values of traditional China focused upon the family and wider lineage. These values were clearly reflected in Confucianism which exalted the importance of the family and described appropriate behaviors for each family member. The belief in and practice of ancestor worship continually emphasized both the importance of maintaining a family line and the importance of males for this purpose.

The general position of women in traditional Chinese society--as defined by kinship rules, Confucian ideology, and the legal code--was quite low (Baker 1979; Freedman 1979:245; Lang 1946; Levy 1963:149ff.; M. Wolf 1974; Yang 1945). A woman was jurally a minor throughout her life and, although she had a right to her dowry, she had no inheritance rights to land (Freedman

1979:258; van der Sprenkel 1977:17) nor did she have much opportunity to participate in economics (Boserup 1970:89; Lang 1946). She was expected to defer to her husband in all domestic matters and was not expected to play any active role in the social life of the village or of the wider society. Arthur Wolf (1975) and others (Freedman 1979; M. Wolf 1971) have argued, however, that the circumstances of women in China were quite varied, and Margery Wolf (1972) has noted that women's situations changed markedly as they passed through various stages of their life-cycle. Thus, as for Kelantanese women, it is appropriate to examine the manner in which the circumstances of traditional Chinese women changed as they aged.

Unlike the Kelantanese, traditional Chinese expressed a strong preference for male children. Males were necessary to perpetuate the family line, to provide for the parents' old age, to worship their spirits after death, and to carry on the economic fortunes of the family. Females, in contrast, were seen as mouths to be fed who contributed little to the future of the family and who left it upon marriage. Both male and female children were loved and treated tenderly (Levy 1963:68; Lang 1946:238), but a family lacking boys or with too many children might actively resent the birth of a girl and give her a derogatory name as a sign of their displeasure (Yang 1945:125). Not surprisingly, boys were generally better nourished and better cared for than girls. Indeed, Ho found evidence for extensive female infanticide in traditional China among both poor and wealthy families (Ho 1959:58ff.). Poor families, concerned with subsistence, might be either drowned or sell a newborn girl to another family or, when she was older, sell her into prostitution (Levy 1963:69). Wealthy families practiced female infanticide to avoid the expense of future dowries (Ho 1959:60).

During childhood young girls often were disciplined with greater severity and frequency than their brothers (Levy 1963:71; M. Wolf 1972:53-79). They were expected to assume domestic responsibilities by the age of five or six and soon learned to defer to all males of the family, even younger ones (cf. M. Wolf 1972:66). As a young girl approached puberty, she was kept under constant observation and her freedom of movement severely restricted. Her marriage was arranged by her parents, who usually attempted to further their interests by making a connection with a desirable family. Unlike her Kelantanese counterpart, the young Chinese woman did not have the option of vetoing the proposed marriage.

As a young bride entered her husband's family, her status in Chinese society was at its nadir: "her marriage cut her off economically and as a legal person from her own family and transferred the rights in and over her to the family receiving her" (Freedman 1979:245). Not only was a young bride required to defer to her husband and his father, she was under the constant supervision of her mother-in-law who often treated her with great harshness. During the first year of marriage a bride's position was very insecure. She could be divorced for barrenness, neglect of her parents-in-law, or simply garrulousness (Baker 1979:45). At the same time, she had no right to initiate divorce; and if she abandoned her husband or repudiated him, she could be legally put to death (Baker 1979:46; van der Sprenkel 1977:144).

The major means by which a young bride might improve her circumstances was to bear a son. Her mother-in-law would be less inclined to beat her severely since the welfare of the child was tied to his mother's health. The production of a male heir also ensured the continuity of the husband's family and may gradually have provided the wife with some leverage in domestic matters. Frequently, her increasing influence exacerbated family tensions, for she became more interested in the welfare of her husband and children than in concerns of the wider family (Freedman 1979:246; M. Wolf 1972). The resulting friction was widely viewed as one of the principal causes of family fissioning, an event that the senior generation attempted to postpone as long as possible.

A wife could gradually improve her situation largely by playing upon the affection of the children, particularly her sons. Margery Wolf, in a sensitive and insightful book, has described the manner in which mothers manipulated the emotions of their children so that the father often was seen as a rather remote and sometimes punitive authority figure, while she was perceived as the confidant and protector (1972:158-170). During the period their children were maturing, many women were able to expand their influence on their husband and his family even though the jural status of wives remained low (Baker 1979:47; Cohen 1976:91-92; Parish and Whyte 1978; Wolf 1972).

As wives entered their thirties, several elements contributed to an improvement in their circumstances, in addition to their influence on their children. They began to receive some status from the ideal kinship rules which defined the hierarchy of family relationships through generation, age, and gender in that order (Baker 1979:16). This advantage could be somewhat muted since the strong emphasis on male superiority sometimes allowed gender to override the significance of age, but the principle of generation was never challenged (Baker 1979:16-17). Although Chinese wives did not take a significant part in economic activities as Kelantanese women do, they did increasingly assume responsibility for household management, particularly when their mothers-in-law became infirm or when their nuclear family established a separate residence (Cohen 1976:60-61, 91-92). In addition, while the male head of the family was supposed to be in charge of ancestor worship, the daily domestic ancestor worship usually was managed by a woman who may manipulate the family's perception of ancestral behavior for her own ends (Freedman 1979:283, 308).

When a middle-aged woman in traditional China became a mother-in-law, her status underwent a marked improvement. She not only continued to influence the behavior and attitudes of her sons, but she controlled her daughters-in-law as well. Further, her influence over her sons became more important as they took on more responsibility for the economic and social welfare of the family. As the family head grew older, he continued to receive respect from his sons, but his authority tended to wane as their's waxed (Baker 1979:38). Margery Wolf has noted that "although young women may have little or no influence over their husbands . . . older women who have raised their sons properly retain considerable influence over their sons' actions, even in activities exclusive to men. Further, older women who have displayed years

of good judgment are regularly consulted by their husbands about major as well as minor economic and social projects" (1972:40). Indeed, as a mother and father age, it was not uncommon for the woman to become the de facto head of the household (Baker 1979:47; Freedman 1966:66-67; Parish and Whyte 1975; M. Wolf 1974:159; Yang 1945:56-67).

A middle-aged woman was capable of playing an active and important role in the social life of traditional China even though her jural status had not appreciably improved. In addition to the greater amount of participation they had in domestic decision-making, older women increased the amount of time they spent in extra-domestic activities (Wolf 1972:38). They might serve as go-betweens, arranging local marriages, and often they became more involved in local religious activities (Wolf 1972:224-25). There are even reports that women exerted significant influence on lineage affairs (Yang 1945:188) and on the social life of their village. Margery Wolf makes it clear that middle-aged women might influence others through their sons and through their own force of character. Assertive middle-aged women developed a reputation for being quite outspoken and could "terrorize the men of their households and their neighbors with their fierce tongues and indomitable wills" (Wolf 1974:157). The concern about such sharp-tongued women was sufficiently common that a book of precepts for local administrators included the admonition not to summon women to court without good reason. This precept was sustained partly by the desire to protect the good name of refined women and partly so that "women who might otherwise become fierce and violent are kept within the bounds of decency and prevented from becoming troublesome, and showing fits of temper" (van der Sprenkel 1977:146).

The authority of a middle-aged woman tended to reach its zenith with the death of her husband. Although widows were supposed to defer to their adult sons, such women often acted as the household head, expecting and receiving the obedience of their offspring (Freedman 1966:66-67, 1979:259; M. Wolf 1972). Many women found themselves widowed in early middle-age often because their husbands were considerably older or because men were exposed to more hazards than were women. Significantly, many widows in Taiwan were reluctant to remarry since this would have meant giving up their children and claim to a share in their deceased husband's estate (M. Wolf 1972). Instead, they could enjoy greater independence and social leverage by remaining single and having virtually unchallenged influence over their children. Arthur Wolf found that over a fifty-year period in a Taiwanese community the great majority of widows over age 30 did not remarry, despite opportunities created by a shortage of women (1975:107-08).

Although a woman in traditional China experienced a gradual increase in status and in social participation following the birth of her first son and continuing through middle-age, her experiences in the roles of mother-in-law and, later, widow usually marked significant and relatively abrupt improvements in her social position. The circumstances accounting for her improved status conform closely to Brown's model, for a woman's social success depended heavily on her ability to influence her adult children, particularly her sons. Further, as Brown would anticipate, a middle-aged woman who had successfully dealt with the structural and interpersonal problems presented

by traditional Chinese society might often develop a stronger and more resourceful personality. Margery Wolf has noted that "the contrast between the terrified young bride and the loud, confident, and often lewd old woman who has outlived her mother-in-law and her husband reflects the test met and passed by not strictly following the rules and by making purposeful use of those who must" (1972:41). As in the Kelantanese instance, there also appears to have been a lessening of narrowly defined feminine parenting behavior as Brown and Gutmann would expect.

Discussion

If we compare the social positions of women in Kelantan and in traditional Chinese society, significant differences are manifest right from birth. While Kelantanese are equally pleased by the birth of a child of either sex and treat them equally, the Chinese express a strong preference for male children and raise boys with greater care than girls. The dichotomy between the positions of women in Kelantan versus women in traditional China is most apparent in early marriage. A young Kelantanese wife begins her marriage with a good social position based on a variety of rights to economic participation and on the support of her family and kindred, while a young bride in China was both jurally and situationally helpless. Traditionally she seldom controlled significant resources and was under the complete domination of her husband and his family. As I have indicated above, this dichotomy diminishes as women enter middle-age in both societies, due principally to a dramatic improvement in the status of middle-aged women in traditional China. Different factors, however, seem to best account for the improved situations of women in Kelantan and in China, and this calls for another look at Brown's arguments.

Brown suggests that, compared to a younger female, a middle-aged woman encounters fewer restrictions and more opportunities for social influence due to the end of fertility, personality changes, a lessening of the demand for stereotyped female-parenting behavior and, particularly, her relationship to her adult children. These reasons fit the Chinese situation very nicely and the single most significant factor in the improvement of a middle-aged woman's status was clearly her ability to influence her adult sons (Baker 1979; Wolf 1972, 1974). Elements of Brown's model also are relevant to the improved circumstances of middle-aged women in Kelantan, but here the factor that best accounts for her better status is a woman's increased economic participation (Firth 1966; Raybeck 1981; Strange 1981).

It is apparent that middle-aged women may encounter the improved circumstances suggested by Brown for different reasons. Yet these differing specific reasons do not lessen the utility of Brown's model since she acknowledges that the combinations of factors impacting on middle-aged women may differ across societies. Furthermore, although the primary reasons accounting for the improved status of middle-aged women in Kelantan and in China differ, they also display an important underlying similarity. Friedl (1975), Sacks (1974), and Sanday (1974) have each argued that women's status in general is heavily dependent upon their abilities to control valued resources, particularly in the public sphere. It seems likely that in

societies such as traditional China where women were barred from public economic pursuits and where adult children constituted a particularly valuable resource for the family and wider kinship group, a mother's ability to control her adult children may have contributed substantially to her status. Conversely, in societies like Kelantan where women can control more classically economic resources, the significance attributed to the mother-adult child tie may well be less. In such a society, a woman can act directly to promote her own interests rather than being constrained to operate indirectly through her children.

Although the bulk of this paper has been concerned with the advantages that can accrue to women in middle-age, I wish to end on a cautionary note. If middle-age tends to lessen the restrictions on women and to provide them with greater opportunities for achievement and recognition, it also can have less pleasant consequences. Middle-age can provide women with a capacity to threaten the ideal system and with the possibility to encounter a greater degree of failure.

Across cultures a middle-aged woman's threats to the ideal cultural system can result in accusations of witchcraft or the evil eye. Ahern notes that the Chinese conceptual system holds women to be ritually unclean and dangerously powerful. A middle-aged woman was seen as losing her reproductive power to do great good while retaining her power to threaten male ideals through pollution (1975) because of her enduring association with birth and with other marginal and transitional phenomena. Even among Malays where women's status is comparatively high, a postmenopausal woman may be referred to as "useless" (Strange 1981:76).

Middle-aged women who experience difficulty in realizing the satisfaction and achievements that are possible for them may become quite despondent. In Kelantan, middle-aged women who were widowed, lacking in financial security and separated from their children frequently fell ill with a psychosomatic complaint which required the performance of an indigenous curing ceremony (Raybeck 1974:240). In China a middle-aged woman's difficulties could have more serious consequences. Margery Wolf (1975) notes that in China women's suicide rate equaled that of men and that women's suicide tended to occur at two crisis periods: first, when a woman was newly married and helpless; second, in middle-age when the appearance of a new bride provided a challenge for the son's affection and made it more difficult to control him (1972:163). Apparently the price of greater opportunities for achievement and recognition is corresponding opportunities for failure and derision.

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