CHAPTER EIGHT

PATRIARCHY IN CHINA

China was once praised as the Asian country where women had made the most advances. Many Japanese observers probably came to hold this opinion because they had received a substantial amount of information on this subject from the Chinese side, particularly during the period of the Cultural Revolution. One cannot help but feel that in many cases the image of China created by this propaganda was accepted with little or no qualification. That being said, it is true that, in terms of participation in social labor, Chinese women have made significant advances in society. More recently, however, this interpretation no longer holds true in a positive way in view of the harsh conditions, including mass layoffs, women workers have had to face.

As discussed in Chapter 2, there are contradictory forces at work when it comes to women advancing in society in socialist societies such as the two we examine. Mobilization of women as workers has raised the problem of a dual burden being placed on women, if compromises are made with patriarchy, and ultimately women may want to stay at home. Therefore, one can see signs of the societies moving into a period subsequent to the disappearance of the housewife in terms of women being active in the labor force. Yet at the same time we see signs of the birth of the housewife, as increasing numbers of women indicate they might want to stay home if their economic situation does not make it necessary. We have also studied the unique mutual interaction of traditional forms of patriarchy with the process of change in each society. Chinese society was influenced by its own type of patriarchy in a way that set it apart from other socialist societies. It was clearly not the case that Chinese society was influenced by patriarchy in the same way North Korean society was.

1. BUILDING SOCIALISM

1.1. From the Soviet Period to the Marriage Law

Like their counterparts in the Soviet Union and North Korea, Chinese revolutionaries, during the initial phase of building socialism, made an effort
to break down the existing mode of family life which served as the foundation of traditional patriarchy. New concepts were strongly advanced and new policy lines were hammered out. Chinese intellectuals had consistently taken up the cause of women winning independence from the old family system since the time of the May Fourth Movement, which began in 1919 as an anti-imperialist movement and extended to a New Culture Movement that challenged traditional values.

This differed from the process of change on the Korean Peninsula, which came under Japanese colonial control prior to the time when criticisms of tradition were launched by persons influenced by Western thought and linked to independent nation building. In the early part of the twentieth century, the thinking in Korea tended to be that “modern equals Japan” because modernity was to some extent brought by Japanese colonial rule. Unlike China, there was a tendency among Koreans with a strong nationalist viewpoint and desire to resist Japanese influence to think of traditional family life as a set of beautiful customs that ought to be preserved. Instead of critically examining their own traditions, the tendency was to make tradition a cornerstone of their national identity—an identity violently suppressed by the Japanese colonial regime.

In China, the tendency among intellectuals influenced by the West was to position opposition to traditional patriarchy at the core of anti-feudal ideology. This was in line with communist policies. In his famous “Report on an Investigation of the Hunan Peasant Movement, March 1927” Mao Zedong said that men were subjected to the domination of three systems of authority, political, family and religious. Women, he said, were additionally dominated by men in the form of the authority of the husband (Mao Zedong 1927). The basic idea was that liberating women from the oppression of the family and their husbands would be a key task in freeing them from the bonds of feudal patriarchy.

This concept was applied in the Marriage Law issued in 1931 by the government of the Chinese Soviet Republic established at the Ruijin Base in Jiangxi province. It granted freedom of choice to marry or divorce and was based on a system of one wife and one husband. The Law banned concubinage, selling wives, and child brides,1 but its most striking characteristic was its authorization of divorce, without requiring specification.

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1 This refers to a system in which a young boy’s parents would find a girl to be his marriage partner, take the girl to be his future bride, and raise the children together. The children would be married when they became adults. It is said that this practice developed to avoid trouble between wives and their mothers-in-law.