

# THE CHALICE & THE BLADE IN CHINESE CULTURE

Gender Relations and  
Social Models

The Chinese Partnership Research Group

Editor-in-Chief : Min Jiayin



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Partnership entails cooperation and respect among people. It involves joining, linking and working together in peace and harmony for the common good of all. The partnership way is a unifying principle, defined by affiliation rather than violence-based ranking that spreads into the mainstream of society.

Partnership requires fairness, consensus, and mutuality, utilizing democratic, participatory decision-making; necessitates active listening, empathic sharing, collective support and encourages growth. It is inclusive and seeks to unify people. In partnership settings, people feel valued, genuinely cared about and safe. True partnership leads to empowerment and self-actualization.

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# PREFACE

*Ru Xin*

The book, **The Chalice and the Blade in Chinese Culture: Gender Relations and Social Models**, written jointly by scholars of the Chinese Academy of Social Science and other academic institutes is off the press, which is a great event in the Chinese academic field. As far as I know, there are very few monographs which present such a systematic study and exploration of the historical changes in relations between men and women and of women's status in Chinese society. Its publication will be conducive to promoting the study of women's issues in China.

The book is characterized by a close combination of historical examination and theoretical research and it studies women's issues by taking into account the entire process of development of Chinese society. The book, therefore, does not proceed from abstract human rights concepts to discuss Chinese women's status and rights, but tries to relate women's issues with the development and changes in the economy, politics, culture, society and family life in China in order to provide a scientific explanation of the evolution of Chinese women's social status. Based on ancient mythology, archaeological discoveries, a vast amount of historical records and rich anthropological data collected by contemporary scholars in the course of field-work among ethnic minority inhabited areas of the country, the authors of the book present a vivid historical picture depicting Chinese women's conditions from ancient times to the present. The historical changes in Chinese women's social status not only reflect the universal laws governing human social development,

but also the unique characteristics of Chinese society itself. I believe that all those readers who care for Chinese women and who are interested in women's issues will obtain reliable information from this work, and thereby have a better understanding of the history and present conditions of Chinese women.

Historically, Chinese women had a splendid past. On Chinese territory, as in other places in the world, matriarchal society existed over a long period of time, in which, as the ancient philosopher Shang Yang observed, "people knew they had mothers, but did not know they had fathers", females enjoyed high status and prestige, and were the masters of the society. With the emergence of slave society and patriarchy, male dominance was established gradually and the concept of man being superior to woman began to become the main theme in gender relations. In feudal society, women's status lowered further and women were subjected to various forms of cruel oppression and restrictions. Since China's feudal rule endured over an especially long period of time, feudal ideology was especially fully developed and the feudal ethical code represented by a Confucian school of idealist philosophy of the Song and Ming dynasties further bound Chinese women with heavy ideological shackles. Only with the upsurge of the modern anti-feudal enlightenment movement did Chinese women begin awakening and put the task of female emancipation on the agenda. However, it was not until the Chinese revolution thoroughly overthrew the semi-colonial, semi-feudal old system and the People's Republic of China was founded that the realization of the liberation of Chinese women became possible in real terms. Today, Chinese women, described as "half of the sky," are playing an important role in all realms of social life and have become a decisive force in building a socialist modernized country with Chinese characteristics. In the millennia old historical development process, Chinese females who once enjoyed the status of masters were reduced to being the accessories of males. Now, they have finally risen from their enduring humi-

liation and have regained their full rights as masters of the society. Of course, this recovery of rights can never be the return of the rights women enjoyed in ancient times, but all social rights and obligations women now share with men on the basis of the new and totally equal gender relations. Dialectically, this may be termed "the negation of negation." As early as the beginning of the last century, people with advanced ideas set women's liberation as one of the goals of social progress. The outstanding utopian socialist François Marie Charles Fourier pointed out explicitly, "the degree of women's liberation is the natural criterion for judging liberation in general". Now the great ideal of this socialist ideological forerunner is being realized in China. If Fourier knew of this, surely he would acclaim it?

As the publication of the book coincides with the Fourth World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing, readers should regard this book as one contribution of Chinese scholars to the conference.



# FOREWORD

*Riane Eisler*

In the Preface to the Chinese edition of my book **The Chalice and the Blade: Our history, Our Future**, I expressed the hope that Chinese archaeologists, folklorists, historians, and other scholars will probe the roots in Chinese culture of the two basic types of social organization that my work identifies: the partnership and dominator models.

I wrote that I could only speculate about whether, as appears to have been the case in the West, there was in China also “a time before the force-backed domination of man over woman and over other men became ‘normal’.” I pointed to suggestions of this in writings such those of Laozi emphasizing the essential need for balance between yin and yang. I also pointed to the continuing veneration in China of female deities as beneficent life-giving and compassionate goddesses. I noted the persistence of much that is stereotypically considered feminine in Chinese culture—all the way from the strong aesthetic sensibilities to the very strong valuing of community, affiliation and piety, which are in the West generally associated with a feminine ethos. And I suggested that perhaps much of early Chinese tradition was in a partnership rather than dominator vein, with the eventual blend of the two models resulting in what has often been described in the West as the “paradox” of Asian culture.

I never dreamed that my hopes that Chinese scholars would investigate these suggestions would be so quickly, so thoroughly, and so elegantly realized. When, following the publication of

**The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future** in China in 1991, the Partnership Research Group was formed, I realized that this was an important step in this direction. But this book, by members of the Chinese Partnership Research Group, exceeds my expectations.

I therefore want to begin by thanking the seventeen scholars from the Institutes of Philosophy, Archaeology, and History, the journal, and the Center for Documentation and Information of the Chinese **Social Sciences in China** Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing University, Beijing Normal University, China University of Political Science and Law, Tianjin Normal University, and Zhengzhou University whose research and writing are represented in this book. I also want to express my appreciation to all those who have given their support to this project, including the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Publishing House, the Threshold Foundation, Elinore Detiger, Robert Graham, and the Board of the Center for Partnership Studies, particularly Dr. David Loye. I especially want to thank Professor Min Jiayin, who has been so instrumental in bringing the Chinese Partnership Research Group together, as without his unflagging efforts this book would not have come into being.

**The Chalice and the Blade in Chinese Culture: Gender Relations and Social Models** is a major contribution to our understanding of the interconnection between the organization of gender relations and the larger social structure. It expands our understanding of history by drawing from a data base that includes the two halves of humanity: women and men. It sheds important new light on the past and present of the hitherto largely ignored female half of humanity. Perhaps most important, it highlights that the way gender relations are structured in both the so-called private and public spheres plays a key role in matters vital for our future: whether a society is more peaceful or warlike, more creative or destructive, more egalitarian or exploitative.

**The Chalice and the Blade in Chinese Culture** traces that relations between women and men in connection with changes in social and ideological organization in China from prehistoric to contemporary times. On the basis of Chinese fairy tales and legends, and archaeological studies of the life style of some ethnic minorities in the south-western mountainous areas of China, it points to the conclusion that in prehistoric China there was a period which may be symbolised by the Chalice rather than the Blade. More precisely, it presents evidence that, as in Western prehistory, there appears to have been in Chinese prehistory a time of Goddess worship and partnership between men and women. While Chinese archaeologists have not been able to find signs of massive intrusions by nomadic groups such as those who in Europe brought with them male dominance, warfare, and strong-man rule, there are indications that the semi-farming and semi-nomadic Han people in the north may have at a certain point shifted to this type of social organization, and that it was through the cutting edge of their blades that the earlier culture was eventually replaced by a more dominator-oriented social and ideological organization.

In short, **The Chalice and the Blade in Chinese Culture** shows that (as I and others have found happened in Western history), the social status of women in China gradually declined over a period of several thousand years, as warfare and autocratic dynasties that ruled primarily by the blade—that is, by the power to dominate and destroy, rather than by the chalice, the power to give, nurture, and illuminate life—gained ascendancy. It also shows other important parallels between Western and Chinese history. For example, it indicates that the Confucian philosophical classics played a role similar to that of the Judeo-Christian Bible in Western history in justifying the ideology of “man is superior to woman” on ostensibly moral/ethical grounds. Similarly, it shows that symbols of the regenerative powers of nature, such as the snake (which periodically sheds and regrows its skin, and which was in Western prehistory

associated with the worship of the Goddess), were also in Chinese history associated with a partnership ethos—as still illustrated in a rubbing from a Han dynasty (206-220 BCE) tomb that shows the first Chinese ancestral couple, Nü Wa and Fu Xi, as intertwined serpents.

Although most of the contributors to this book agree with my conclusion that there was an earlier more peaceful and agalitarian age, there are differences on one important point of interpretation. This relates to the term to describe these earlier societies.

Since my interpretation is that the earlier societies where a Goddess Creatrix was venerated were societies with a high degree of gender equality, with neither women nor men considered the sexual property of the other, I have proposed that the term *gylany* (symbolic of the linking of woman or *gyne* and man or *andros*) is more descriptive than the term *matriarchy*. Indeed, I note that semantically *matriarchy* and *patriarchy* are two sides of the same dominator coin.

Others, however, following the anthropological tradition of Lewis Henry Morgan and Friedrich Engels, prefer the term *matriarchy*. Of these there are also two schools. Some see a somewhat lower status of men, while others see *matriarchy* as describing a society where women and men have equal rights and status.

This question of terminology is far from resolved. For example, the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas uses the term *matristic*. But she also describes the old civilization of Europe with my term *gylany*, emphasizing that this was not a system of autocratic rule by women, but rather a structure in which the sexes are more or less on equal footing. Similarly, in the Goddess-worshipping Indus Valley cultures of India and Pakistan, before these areas were overrun by Aryan or Indo-European male dominant and warlike invaders, the evidence points to an equal valuing of male and female.

This is still an area in the pioneering stages of intensive

research using what I call a gender-holistic methodology. Adding further complexity is that cross-culturally there may be significant regional variations. Nonetheless, what we are learning—and what **The Chalice and the Blade in Chinese Culture** also amply documents—is that the long-accepted view that human history always has been male-dominant and chronically warlike is erroneous.

But **The Chalice and the Blade in Chinese Culture** not only provides invaluable materials for all those interested in a clearer view of our past; it is also a source of hope for our future. For it shows that in China, as in the West, the modern struggle against domination and exploitation—be it man over woman or man over man—is rooted in very ancient traditions from a time when society oriented more to a partnership rather than dominator model.

So it is particularly appropriate that this book's publication coincides with the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women hosted by the People's Republic of China in September of 1995. For the interconnected goals of the World Conferences on Women, beginning with the First United Nations Decade for Women of 1975-1985, are equality, development, and peace—the key configuration of a partnership rather than dominator model of social and ideological organization.

I think this book will be of use to all those who are today in our world working to realise these goals—not only for women, but also for men and children of both genders. It brings still further support for two of the key points of my cultural transformation theory: that the way a society structures the relations between the female and male halves of humanity is central to all aspects of women's and men's lives in both the private and public spheres, and that in this time of social ferment we have the opportunity for completing the shift from domination to partnership as the guiding organising principle in human relations.

Moreover, **The Chalice and the Blade in Chinese Culture**

does this by offering us a veritable feast of information about one of the most ancient and fascinating cultures in the world: a culture that to this day venerates female deities such as Ma Zu, Avalokitesvara, and Guan Yin (Kwan Yin), and has during this 20th century, particularly since the Revolution, made great efforts to reinstate woman to her rightful place of equal rights and status with men.

As the author of **The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future**, as co-director of the Center for Partnership Studies, the U.S. organization which has supported the work of the Chinese Partnership Research Group presented in this book, and as a woman deeply committed to work for a more peaceful, equitable, and sustainable future, I again thank all those who have participated in the creation of this important work.

May 1995

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