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<td>Zhu, Yiyun.</td>
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<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/843">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/843</a></td>
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Women Journalists In China

By

Zhu Yiyun
Women Journalists in China

Women in the Chinese media have long exhibited both talent and competence. They now account for a fair percentage of the profession. According to statistics, of the 400,000 people who are involved in journalism, 190,000 of them, or 47.5 percent, are women. About one-third of the country's 40,000 journalists are women.

Chinese women have come a long way. Formerly merely men's chattel, they now perform the skilled and demanding communication jobs of modern society. They broke into the male-dominated profession as early as 1897. In 1896, China's first journal for women was founded in Shanghai. Among the early pioneers one who won the respect of her male counterparts was Qiu Jin (1875-1907). She advocated the rights and interests of women, and fought valiantly against the imperial rule. She died a martyr in her early 30s.

Women Journalists were also active in the Anti-Japanese War and the Liberation War. Among them was Yang Gang, who worked closely with American writers Agnes Smedley and Edgar Snow. From 1949 to 1955 she was deputy editor-in-chief of Tai Kung Pao. She became chief secretary to the late Premier Zhou Enlai and deputy editor-in-chief of the People's Daily.

New China's first radio announcer who broadcast on Oct.1, 1949 the founding of the People's Republic to the world was a woman, Ding Yilan. The first TV announcer and program director in China was also a woman, Chen Li. The "For Your Information" program she directs is very popular in China today. News photographer Cui Yanming has been highly praised for her documentary "On Changjiang River". She traveled back and forth 1,782 kilometres along the river for 13 months, shooting from a helicopter and interviewing 200 people.

Chinese women journalists today are career-minded, diligent and ambitious. Many of them said they certainly feel as qualified as men, and do not like people calling them Woman reporter. The director of the personnel department at Beijing Daily confirmed
that the ninety women out of 300 workers in their newspaper office fulfill their quotas and contribute quality stories. They do not hesitate to take tough assignments even when they are pregnant or have to attend to household duties.

Some administrators point out that women are especially tactful in reaching people and handling human relationships. They are often able to get the kind of information some men can not. Others comment that women's sensitivity to personality often makes them better observers. They are able to pick up signals that men often don't see, and can thus write fascinating stories. A few women emphasized that child rearing rather than being a drawback, teaches them to listen and to be meticulous and efficient. Ironically child-rearing helps make them better journalists.

The fact that women were in at the start of modern journalism some 90 years ago, however, does not mean they are free of sexual discrimination. Usually women have to work twice as hard as men to gain recognition. Some women have not been accorded what they deserve. While women journalists constitute one-third of the rank-and-file, they make up only 4 percent of newspaper directors and 3.5 percent of editors-in-chief in China.

The reasons for the small number of women at the decision-making level are manifold, historical, social and economic.

China has been under feudal rule for thousands of years. During those centuries, women's place was always around the kitchen stove or simply as decoration. It was only after 1949 in New China that the overwhelming majority of women were encouraged to work outside their homes, and a growing number began to take up journalism which used to be a man's domain. But male superiority still has influence. In the institutes and training classes for journalism, women make up only one-third of the enrollment. Many still think of journalism as mainly a man's job. Recently, some newspaper offices refused to recruit women graduates, thinking the offices would have to bear the burden's of maternity leave and child care problems. Some news directors accept women reluctantly until the women themselves prove they are equally competent. Women journalists get equal pay for
equal work in China, but in some cases not equal opportunity.

Some women, themselves influenced by traditional concepts, tend to accept the image of the "weaker sex". They are not confident of their capabilities and choose a subservient role in the office and at home. Some find it difficult to balance career and family responsibilities. They are torn between work and children, and feel frustrated handling the never-ending household chores. But when they place their career first, they are often driven by a sense of guilt for not paying enough attention to their children. The journalist-wife often has a tough time coping with long absences from home, night shifts and the daily rush. A number have had to drop out in mid-career or break up their marriages. Women in their 30s are the most torn among career women. They have to shoulder burdens left over from the past, while accepting the challenges of the times they live in. Some husbands tend to measure their wives against the traditional standard when women were supposed to be tame, self-sacrificing and submissive. In upgrading their professional skills, it is often the women who give up opportunities like attending night schools.

To help women cope with these problems so that they can play a full part in their professional field, the following measures have been taken:

Social education on sexual equality: Mass media are publicizing the idea that social progress can best be measured by the extent of women's emancipation, that China's modernization program cannot be successful without women's active participation. Films, television shows and news stories feature women journalists as role models. On occasions like the International Working Women's Day, books, magazines and newspapers have highlighted success stories of women professionals. The government sees to it that women enjoy equal job opportunities. The recent issue of not recruiting women graduates is being addressed by the educational departments. To boost women's spirit the national women's network, the All-China Women's Federation, organizes in different parts of the country lecture tours by
outstanding women on their personal experience, to advocate self-reliance, self-confidence, self respect and self love.

Equal opportunity in on-the-job training: Some work units hold training classes or send trainees to take journalism courses in universities, correspondence colleges, TV colleges or evening schools. The Xinhua News Agency has established quite a few training programs for its staff members. It has a journalism institute which provides two-year training program. This year the school received 106 women students or 25 percent of the enrollment. To train senior journalists, the agency sends staff members to Fudan University in Shanghai, to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences for graduate studies, or to journalism schools in other countries. The joint project between Xinhua and the Thomson Foundation in Britain over a period of nine terms has trained 152 students, including 49 women. The students found the courses run by guest professors both exciting and rewarding. Journalists of ethnic groups have also been trained. Some Tibetan graduates of the Xinhua Journalism Institute have become the backbone of newspaper offices in their hometowns. At Beijing Daily, special attention is given to promising women journalists. A few women have been chosen to take a five-year journalism correspondence courses at the People’s University, and have later been promoted to responsible positions on the editorial board. Tuition for this training was borne by the work unit.

Supportive services developed: The modernization program has brought more electrical appliances to homes and helped make life easier. Some newspaper offices provide round-the-clock canteen service and sell half-processed food. They improve day-care centres for children of their employees with subsidies from the administration. Neighborhoods are providing domestic help services.

Organizing for mutual help: To share their common interest and cope with common problems, women journalists got organized in Beijing, Shanghai and Jiangyi Province. The Beijing Women Journalists’ Association has a membership of 5,600 from 75 news media -- newspapers, periodicals, T.V. and radio. Lectures on the ideal of women journalists and on upgrading professional skills have attracted both women and men.
Study tours have been organized to visit cities and the countryside. The association holds fashion shows, concerts, social gatherings and health counselling services. Efforts are being made to set up a nursery and kindergarten. Last year, the association organized exchanges with foreign journalists and press officers in Beijing and received interviewers from the United States, Austria and Japan. To enhance mutual understanding and exchange of professional experience, the members hope to establish wider contacts with their counterparts all over the world.

Journalism in China, once a male-dominated profession, is taking in more and more women. Though having established themselves in the trade, women journalists still face various problems. But looking from another angle, the old-fashioned woman whose sole duty was to bear children and govern domestic affairs can never feel this kind of challenge. For many women journalists, with their achievements in work and recognition from the society, they view a career more important and is worth their whole-life pursuit.

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