



# GIRL power

Young women are at the vanguard of a new revolution in Shanghai.  
But can equality spread to the rest of China?

Report by **CLIFFORD COONAN**



sashays on to the runway, all pink ruffles and girlish make-up. The cameras flash as she struts confidently in front of the most appreciative audience she'll ever have, while other onlookers sip cappuccinos and eat expensive hand-made chocolates. At the end of the catwalk, she is embraced by her beaming, proud mother and the two pose for photographs, more hugs, and then she turns, hand on hip, and walks back down the elevated ramp, disappearing behind a velvet curtain to a ripple of applause.

The princess of the catwalk is seven years old, and this vision of "girl power", China-style, takes place in the brand new six-storey flagship House of Barbie on the Huaihai Road in Shanghai, the most fashionable street in the largest, and by far the hippest, city in China.

Shi Wei has just welcomed her daughter, whom she has given the English name, Angel, off the runway. →

Photographs by QILAI SHEN

# Walk through House of Barbie and you can see young girls picking

# out their favourite dolls – one is blonde and one is Chinese

Shi works for a foreign engineering company and she has no doubt that girls are equal to boys, at least in the cities.

"My friends and my workmates all agree – there really is no difference any more between having a daughter or having a son. Some even think girls are better than boys because they like to dress up their girls and you have to worry less if you have a daughter. In the city there is no such thing as treating women as inferior to men. I have a girl. When I was pregnant I didn't care whether the child was a boy or a girl," says Shi.

It wasn't always like this, and in many parts of China, this vision of equality is a still a long way away. For most girls and young women in China the situation remains grim, but years of economic growth is feeding into a better life for girls, and the upswing in the fortunes of girls and women in China's big cities is very real.

Chairman Mao Zedong famously said, "Women hold up half the sky", but for generations, girls were second-class citizens in China, as farmers in particular focused on having boys (to be tractor drivers, strong workers, etc).

Walk through the House of Barbie and you see young women browsing the Barbie clothes on sale, or young girls picking their favourite 11½-inch doll from the different kinds of Shanghai Barbie on offer – one blonde and one Chinese. Here you get Totally Stylin' Tattoos Barbie – who comes with a set of more than 40 tiny tattoo stickers. In the salon, mums and daughters get facials and manicures (although no tattooist is at work so far) as they chomp on specially commissioned chocolates, mulling perhaps over the day when daughter dearest will be back in the shop to spend £10,000 on a Vera Wang-designed wedding dress. This is "girl purchasing power" in action, and it's very much a reflection of China's growing economic importance in recent years.

Barbie is not the only presence here. On the same street, the Japanese brand Hello Kitty has a flagship store too. Hello Kitty is Japan's ambassador for tourism in China, so it's no surprise perhaps to see a store in the animation star's honour, but it's more evidence of the growing social importance of girl power. When you see the women and girls doing their thing away from the normally dominant male members of the family, it's an amazing reminder of how far the women have come in China. It's even more incredible if you consider that the whole process began not with 10-inch Jimmy Choo heels and Calvin Klein micro-minis, but with dirty overalls and caps with red stars on them, in the factories after the revolution of 1949 which brought the Communist Party to power.

"Chinese women have been involved in social production since the 1950s and 1960s, taking part in physical labour in both the countryside and the cities. They entered factories, and that's where the change in women's status in China began," says Li Yinhe, a professor at the Institute of Sociology at the prestigious Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

During the 1960s and 1970s, women accounted for 30 per cent of college students, while now the figure is nearly half. China ranks 28th in the world in terms of gender equality, and that figure is improving all the time, says Li. "According to my studies, in cities, girls are equal to boys. They enjoy the same treatment as boys.



Above: a girl poses for a photograph at the House of Barbie.

Left: in Chinese cities women are becoming more equal to men.

Previous page: the store opened this year to mark 50 years of Barbie.

Overleaf: Shanghai billboards promote the idea of an independent, empowered woman



They are able to have an independent income when they grow up, and they have the same opportunity of being educated," she says.

Despite the fact that Barbie's improbable physicality is an unrealistic body image for many women all over the world, the doll's role as a working, independent woman has captured imaginations globally, especially in China. For New York-based architect Hayes Slade, who with her husband James designed the House of Barbie, the store embodies a belief in making girls' dreams come true – and that includes dreams of being Lawyer Barbie, Architect Barbie or Astronaut Barbie. "It's the first flagship store on this scale. It's unique to Barbie. Barbie is very Western, very blonde and Mattel's research showed that this was what mothers and daughters in Shanghai were interested in," she says.

Gene Murtha, vice-president for international business development at Mattel, which makes Barbie, says the US toymaker decided to locate in Shanghai because it was the city where the brand was most broadly received among both mothers and daughters.

China is strategically important to them, just as it is for most companies in the retail or export sector these days. As it stands, Asia makes up less than 5 per cent of Barbie's global sales and the House of Barbie in Shanghai aims to boost that figure. The wisdom of locating in Shanghai was borne out by the fact that 50,000 people visited the store within its first 10 days of opening. Mattel expects two million visitors a year to the store.

"There's always been lots to do for the boys and their dads, but not a lot for mothers and daughters," says Murtha. Barbie is all about being an empowered girl, he says. "This is especially true in Shanghai. The Shanghai woman is strong in personality. In the West we've had a couple of generations saying 'We can do anything.' In 1965 Barbie was an astronaut, over 20 years before the first real female astronaut. Barbie says to young girls: 'Girl, you can do anything.'"

While feminism and the women's movement in the United States have achieved many of their goals from the 1960s, the women's rights movement is still in its infancy in China. It is, however, growing as incomes increase. "This building is an incredibly powerful statement. The women's movement is going to happen in China. It will take time to work its way out to the farmers but it will happen," says Murtha. "When we got our research back, Chinese people said: 'Barbie is beautiful. She is noble and virtuous. I want to teach my daughter these values.' We wish we had as clear an indication from Western consumers."

**The** mother-daughter relationship in China has been particularly complicated over the centuries. Take the practice of foot binding, which began during the Song Dynasty (960–1280), supposedly because of a particularly beautiful concubine's ability to walk like a lily on water. Initially, court dancers practised the ritual, followed by the women of the court – until finally foot binding spread from the north of the country until even poor families eager to boost their status succumbed to the trend. Usually a mother would

break her daughter's toes, then bind the feet in long bandages. Every two days, the bandages would be removed and rebound. This would go on for 10 years, from the age of four to around 14.

The Manchu and Qing dynasties were against it, but the idea had taken root in the countryside and it was not until the time of Sun Yat-sen's Republic in 1911 that the practice really began to slow down; and you would be hard-pressed to find any examples post-1949. Like so much of the metamorphosis that has overtaken China in less than a generation, the change in attitudes has been rapid, with prejudices and values held for thousands of years seemingly undone in a few short years.

China has operated strict family planning rules for the past 30 years that generally permit couples to have just one child; at most two. The government says the One Child Policy has averted 300 million births. The rural Chinese have traditionally prized their sons because they believe they are better able to provide for the family, work the land, support their elderly parents and carry on the family name – all very appealing factors in a country with little in the way of social security. If a farming family's firstborn is a girl, the couple is allowed to have another baby – a boy or a girl. But the bias towards boys means many parents decide to abort if the unborn child is found to be a girl.

Gender scanning of the foetus is illegal in China but a large black market flourishes, with a scan typically priced at 50 yuan (£5.30) if the child is a boy – and 30 yuan (£3) if it's a girl. Daughters become members of their husband's family when they marry and move away, prompting the saying "Raising a daughter is like watering someone else's fields". The gender imbalance has filled China's classrooms with boys – and packed the orphanages with girls. The preference among rural Chinese for sons over daughters has caused a potentially disastrous gender imbalance in the world's most populous country. Government data showed that of China's 1.3 billion people, 684 million were men and 644 million were women. The ratio of males to females at birth was an alarming 121:100. In Shanghai the ratio is a slightly more comfortable 107:100. The skewed gender ratio is a relatively recent phenomenon – in 1982, the birth gender ratio in China was 108 boys for every 100 girls.

There is already a problem with a rise in the trafficking of women, as well as the sale of women as wives in the countryside, plus a much-feared resurgence in female infanticide. Experts estimate up to half a million children are abandoned each year in China, and 95 per cent of them are healthy girls. However, fearful of armies of "bare branches" – the Chinese expression for unmarried men – wandering the countryside looking for wives, the government has introduced cash incentives to stop farming families aborting baby girls. It has also started a propaganda battle in a bid to change the way people think about girls. The "Care For Girls" campaign in recent years has tried to raise the status of women in society and protect baby girls, and threatens harsh punishment for anyone harming girl babies or using illegal gender selection tests and sex-selective abortions.

You can see signs of this campaign in action in the countryside, where the walls of villages are plastered with the slogan: "Daughters are as good as sons!" The

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propaganda, and the tax incentives, are slowly paying off, but the economic realities that a young woman with an education can earn more in an office in Shanghai or Beijing than her brother could by working on a building site are also doing much to change attitudes. "Nowadays, the pressure is really on the boys. My family has two children, me and my little sister," says Zhang Yang, a 25-year-old postgraduate student at Tsinghua University in Beijing, who comes from Xuzhou, a rural area in Jiangsu Province. "In the countryside, if a family has a girl, they can have another child," she continues. "My sister came, although everyone was expecting a boy. But I feel my parents love us more and more. Girls have a closer relationship with their parents. Also, if I was a boy, my family would have to worry about marriage costs, about buying him a house and his career.

"All my parents care about is the health and happiness of myself and my sister. They do not have to worry too much because in China, men have to provide a house for marriage, and in Beijing, people always say that a man needs at least a house and a car," she says. "In my village, people prefer girls to boys now, because if your family has a boy, you have to save money from the time he is born to pay for his studies and his marriage."

In 1992, I took a train from Chengdu in Sichuan province, sharing a sleeper carriage with a family of three—an 18-year-old and her parents—who were travelling to Guangzhou to settle the young woman into university. She was their only child under the One-Child Policy; the father was inordinately proud that his daughter had made it into university, and he said often how it didn't matter that she wasn't a boy, she had done very well.

Chen Xin, a sociologist with Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, says the status of women definitely improved under Chairman Mao, but then took a turn for the worse during the early period of economic reform and opening up in the early 1980s, when men were deemed to have a better chance of getting a job. "Nowadays, with the economic and cultural development, women are becoming more and more independent. Thus the phenomenon of treating woman as inferior to men is less and less in China now," Chen says.

The boys are feeling the pressure. Li Xuan, 28, an ad man from Shaanxi province now living in Beijing, says there is increased competition because of changing social structures. "It's the law of the jungle. In schools, parents will force boys to study hard, because otherwise they won't get a good job. At work there are higher expectations for men still. They have to have higher salaries than their wives or girlfriends, a house, a car. Sometimes I feel quite depressed as I shoulder too many responsibilities and expectations," he says.

This doesn't bother Shi, Angel's mother, who believes that this idea is only going to grow and grow. "Shanghai is a big city full of people. So if the Barbie House were bigger, it would be even better," she says. Barbie Shanghai is available both as the classic blonde Barbie, or as a Chinese Barbie, though Mattel says the blonde, traditional version is the most popular. Barbie equals aspiration and dreams—increasingly the currency of the New China. The next stage is for girls in the countryside to start fulfilling their dreams and for girl power to go truly nationwide in China. \*

