*Wok & Roll by Peter Kwong, (Frederic) Inter-County Leader*

**The inspiring words of ‘I Am Woman’ still resonate today**

I think it was during my college days when I first heard the song “I Am Woman.” It was written and sung by Helen Reddy, a professional singer from Australia. And I believe that she had another hit song at the same time — “I Don’t Know How to Love Him.”

One couldn’t help but listen to those songs over and over on the radio all day. I liked the melody very much, a catchy tune that was easy to sing along. It also had a strong message, and I would learn more and more about the lyrics as I sang along. However, it would not be appropriate for me to sing it in public. After all, I would not like to give others the wrong perception about my masculinity.

It was at the same time the “women’s lib” movement was going full force; women were fighting for female empowerment, equality and fairness. I found that most intriguing and encouraging, that women were finally strong enough to speak out and to do something about it.

Growing up in an Asian culture, where the male dominates everything, I went along with what the society expected, even though I disagreed with a lot of the rules. Who am I to dare questioning a tradition that had been passed on for thousands of years?

Besides, being a male myself, I have to say that I enjoyed the extra recognition at times. (Well, who wouldn’t?) When my father would tell his associates that he had three sons, they always responded with admiration. “Oh, three boys, how fortunate indeed.”

But it was my mother who cried for days when my youngest brother was born. The nurses who helped deliver the baby just couldn’t understand why, as all mothers would be cheery, proud and joyful giving birth to a son, as that what all families wanted. But my mother said, “I have two sons already, I just want a daughter so we can be bosom buddies.” I felt bad many times that I couldn’t replace her wish. Who in their right mind would and could chat for hours?

Then later, realizing that the same custom had been practiced throughout the world for years, I began to question the reasons and the legality behind it. Yes, males are physically stronger, so they can take over farming, heavy-duty household chores, and be able to lift up a weapon to fight — to defend one’s territory or to attack and control others.

So, what’s the role of females? They had been looked down upon as the submissive ones in any relationship. While the males were out hunting, working in the fields, or fighting, females stayed home to take care of all the household duties, and much, much more. In old China, females were expected to stay home, have children and do whatever it took to keep the household going. The young, unmarried females were expected to help with all the work also; and the wealthy families would have private tutors to home-school the daughters, as they were not allowed to be seen in public. So, the daughters would practice painting, calligraphy, sewing, writing poems and whatever pastime activities.

Little by little, things did improve through the years. My Pao Pao (grandma on my mother’s side), who never went to school and was totally illiterate, ended up running my Kung Kung’s (grandpa on my mother’s side) multi-million-dollar business after he passed away. And my mother, who did manage to attend school during the Japanese invasion and got a decent education, was not encouraged to go further. But yet, her status of being a female still affected her status in the family hierarchy.

When the family decided to sell Kung Kung’s business (which was worth millions then), all the male descendants got a fair share. But my mother and her sisters (the females) were not able to get a single dime. Nope, not even a penny. What a hoot! It would have been nice to get some extra cash, but what to do with it? Well, the thought did occur to me a few times, but what to do if I ever win the lottery? To get an expensive watch? No, I have one that still works. A larger house? No, enough maintenance already for the one we have. A fancy car? No, with my driving record, they probably will find me and the new car in a ditch somewhere.

Yes, I do feel sorry for my mother sometimes, but she couldn’t care less about the inheritance, so why should I?

Back in the Qing Dynasty, there was a custom that the young girls should have their feet bound, and that just irks me to no end. In plain English, to bind your feet means to force your normal foot from a size 8 to a size 4. It involved binding a girl’s feet forcefully so that they wouldn’t grow any further, and that the grown part would be forced to shrink. What’s the point of that, you might ask? Well, once your feet became smaller, your stride would be different. You would be walking in smaller steps, trying to balance each pace so you wouldn’t fall. And the movement was considered “articulate and eloquent.” The custom was very popular at the end of the Qing Dynasty (around 1900s). I was actually intrigued and curious watching some elderly ladies “swaying” while they walked. Then I was sick to my stomach learning what took place for them to “undulate.”

Thanks to the American pioneers in the women’s lib movement, the world has started to pay attention to their partners. Yes, they are wise, but it is wisdom born of pain. And oh yes, they can do anything, as they are strong and invincible. My Pao Pao, my mother, my daughter and my wife can vouch for that.

I once saw a poster in a friend’s home. It was titled “Viva Revolucion” (long live revolution) — a picture of a mother holding a rifle with one hand while breastfeeding and holding her newborn baby with the other. Looking at that, all I could say was, “Wow.” I will never complain about cutting my finger while preparing salad ever again.

I am glad that I have the opportunity to hear “I Am Woman” again after all these years. And I am gladder that our partners have come a long, long way since then. Keep going, and keep going. The world has started to listen now.

*“You can bend but never break me*

*‘Cause it only serves to make me*

*More determined to reach my final goal*

*And I come back even stronger*

*Not a novice any longer*

*‘Cause you’ve deepened the conviction in my soul”*

Thanks Helen, for inspiring the world. It is a song that none of us will forget.