The prehistory of China can be traced back to Stone Age when hominids were distributed thinly and organized in small units. This “land of passage” was a Stone Age passageway between the three great empires of the earliest time: Greece, Sumeria, and China.

The cultural history of China is complex, and because China was not a unified entity until the Han period, between 206 BCE and 220 CE and dominated by the contrasting Confucian and Lao Tse (Daoist) philosophies, a panoply of contrasts and contradictions emerged, warred, and finally integrated. This brought both vitality and fragility into the lives of women, which were also complicated by differences of social class and geography.

Many of the sociopolitical dynamics are repeated historically over the past 6,000 years to this very day but it would be an enormous mistake to assume that Chinese women now live in an underdeveloped or retrograde economic and political system. Yet the glass ceiling in contemporary Chinese politics is still as unyielding as anywhere in the Third World. No woman serves in the politburo and the number of women in the National People’s Congress has stalled at about 21 percent over the past 30 years.

**Women and Power in Chinese History**

From 71 BCE to 13 CE Wang Zhengjun, the first empress, known by her imperial title, Empress Xiaoyuan, reigned. Later she became the Grand Empress Dowager Wang, and she wore the crown continuously through the sovereignty of the Emperors Yuan (49–33 BCE), Chang (33–7 BCE), and Ai (7–1 BCE). She managed to place her male relatives in positions of
dominance while maintaining her own authority over all of them through a hundred years, including beyond her own lifetime.

From 45 CE to 23 CE her nephew Wang Mang was regent for Emperor Ping, who died in 6 CE, prompting the Empress Dowager to appoint Wang Mang as an acting emperor for the child Liu Yang, who then died in 25 CE.

Wang had promised to relinquish his control to Liu Yang once he came of age, but then declared that the Mandate of Heaven had called for the end of the Han dynasty and the beginning of his own, the Xin dynasty (9–23 CE). During his reign Wang Mang consolidated territory through wars and military actions that spread from what is now Korea to Vietnam. He acquired his last territory, the Indo-Chinese peninsula, when the ruling Trang sisters of Vietnam rebelled against the Han sovereign in 43 CE but lost to Liu Yang.

This was another interesting phenomenon of leadership by women. But it seems from that time forward, empress dowagers episodically held the reins of power in one or another kingdom in China but never long enough to give their name to an era, as had Wang Mang.

Wang also initiated a series of major reforms, including the banning of slavery; the nationalizing of land in order to equally distribute it among households; and introducing new currencies that devalued the coinage in use.

All of this evoked considerable opposition and led to his downfall following the massive flooding of the Yellow River in 23 CE, which dislodged thousands of peasant farmers. The displaced peasants joined bandit and rebel groups, and eventually an insurgent mob forced its way into the Weiyang Palace and killed Wang Mang.

The phenomenon of female sovereigns had no impact on peasant society anywhere in China. In fact, little of the culture of the aristocracy was emulated among the lower economic classes, except in a few instances, particularly foot binding of girls and women. In those instances it was incorporated into the Confucian paradigm of paternalism-patriarchy and the permitted women’s dominance, which was only in the home.

Famines, floods, and natural disasters, along with a pervasive culture of regional and dynastic tribalism and warfare, contributed to the Asian preference for male offspring. Girl children in this peasant society had potential for financial and political gain only through carefully arranged marriages—preferably as wives and if not, as concubines. In fact, the economic base concubinage originated in traditions and laws that barred women from owning land. Wang Mang may have outlawed slavery but concubinage, prostitution, and the enslavement of women, persisted through warlords, Manchu