WOMEN AND COMMUNIST CHINA UNDER MAO ZEDONG: SEEDS OF GENDER EQUALITY

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The mid twentieth century was a tumultuous and transformative period in the history of China. Following over two decades of civil and international war, Mao Zedong and the Communist Party seized control and established the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949. Mao Zedong's famed political slogan "Women Hold Up Half The Sky"¹ was powerful rhetoric, with the apparent emphasis on gender equality and inferred concepts of equality and sameness. Women did not achieve equality with men, nor did they attain egalitarian self-determination or social autonomy. Mao envisaged "women's equality" as a dynamic force with an indelible power to help build a Chinese Communist State. An in-depth investigation into the social, cultural, and economic roles of women, both rural and urban, illustrates how women inextricably worked within Mao's Communist nation-building efforts to slowly erode gender inequalities. While full gender equality never came to fruition, this era allowed women to experience a broad range of experiences, which ultimately contained the seeds of change toward breaking down gender stratification. Viewed through this lens, a window of understanding opens up about gender dynamics in Mao's China and how the first cracks in gender inequality appeared in China. Perhaps the best starting point is to understand the social status of women in China prior to the Communist Revolution.

Chinese women, not unlike women in most cultures, have historically suffered as a result of their comparatively low status. The Confucian philosophy (551-479 B.C.E) of "filial piety" produced a deep rooted and systematic gender inequality for women in China. The three

¹ Xin Huang, *The Gender Legacy of the Mao Era: Women's Life Stories in Contemporary China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 14.

elements of “filial piety” specified that “women must obey men, citizens obey their ruler and the young must obey the elderly.”² The principles of these three submissions helped maintain the patriarchal social order in China for thousands of years. The Confucian patriarchal structure reinforced abusive practices and traditions such as the sale and purchase of women, female infanticide, and wife beating. Additionally, the practice of foot binding of young women was one of the most pervasive and long-lasting traditions in China. At the age of five or six, young girls would have their feet bound with tight cloth forcing their toes to bend under their feet, causing lifelong deformity. The deformity of their feet had a cascading social and economic effect, causing women to be confined to home and ultimately dependent upon men for their survival. Foot binding was outlawed by the Qing Dynasty in 1902, however the cultural practice prevailed for several decades before it was discontinued. Clearly, Chinese women experienced a long lasting and systemic socially subservient position compared to men prior to Mao Zedong’s Communist takeover in 1949. However, Communist theory provided a different vision of women within society, albeit sometimes theoretical.

Communist theory posited that women’s oppression was the direct result of the patriarchal family structure, which was part and parcel of a structured class society. Ultimately, women’s liberation and familial change depended principally on the socialization of labor relations, including women’s participation in waged labor. A woman would not realize her productive potential unless she was freed from domestic bondage. Marxist solutions to domestic drudgery, along with capitalist exploitation, were a socialized economy that would unshackle women by transferring childcare and housework out of the home and into the public sector.³

² Yuhui Li, “Women’s Movement and Change of Women’s Status in China,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 2000): 30.

³ Donna Harsch, “Communism and Women,” *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism*, ed. Stephen A. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014), 488-504.

Chinese party publications often quoted Lenin: “In order to emancipate women thoroughly and to realize tangible equality between women and men, it is necessary for women to participate in joint production and labor, and then women will stand in the same position as men.”⁴ Chinese communist ideology propagated a challenge to the gender stratification in Chinese society, similar to Mao’s linguistic changes very early in the CCP’s consolidation of power.

In the Communist takeover of 1949, Mao immediately replaced the term *nüren* (literally, female person, women), which privileges gender rather than class and political coding of women, with *funü* (women), the Chinese term used for women, which has strong associations with revolutionary and laboring women. The creation of the category of *funü* was not just a linguistic event but was consolidated through gender-related policies and symbolic representational strategies, such as the first celebration of the International Women’s Day as *funüjie*, which was announced in December 1949, immediately following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).⁵ It was an important symbolic event that was institutionalized to propagandize the important role of *funü* in the social, political, and economic building of the nation. In the context of Mao’s linguistic changes, the promotion of women in political terms indicates the vital importance of women to his Communist Nation building. Mao did not stop at linguistic changes, but also introduced powerful new legislation, which allowed women to work in the midst of this environment to broaden their scope of influence and further disrupt the gender boundaries present at the time.

The Chinese Communist Party adopted one of the most important legislative changes a year after assuming power: the Marriage Law of 1950. Arranged marriage, prostitution, child

⁴ Kathleen M. Moktan and Ramesh Subramaniam, *Women in the People’s Republic of China* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, Programs Department East and Social Development Division, 1998), 14.

⁵ Huang, 5.

betrothal, and concubinage were outlawed according to the Marriage Law. Marriage was to be based on love and mutual consent. Free divorce, free marriage, economic independence, and other concepts that were foreign to the majority of the population became the advocated codes. There were constant and intensive campaigns by the government to educate the population about the Marriage Law. As noted by historian Jiping Zuo, “[t]he main goal, however, was to strengthen the Chinese nation in order to save it from Western imperialism, rather than to enable women to seek individual autonomy.”⁶ The Marriage Law was not instituted around women’s egalitarian rights or gender equality, but was meant to mobilize women to be equal participants in socialist struggles in building the Chinese nation. However, some women did look upon this new law as an opportunity to assert some independence.

For instance, Gail Hershatter, in *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China’s Collective Past*, introduces the reader to Feng Gaixia. In 1949, at fourteen, her parents betrothed her to someone she had never met before. After the Liberation period, Gaixia became an activist and headed the Women’s Federation where she heard about the Party’s state marriage policy. Gaixia’s new knowledge and courage inspired her to break off the engagement, which was met by disapproval by her parents. Gaixia expresses her newfound confidence to break off the betrothed marriage: “But I was not afraid because I was already the director of the Women’s Federation. So I educated him. I told him that I now understand the Marriage Law. Now women are free, and I myself am going to choose the one I love, someone that I can communicate with, share my life with, have a common language with. And in the end I was successful.”⁷ Marriage reform clearly had the potential to transition some of these young women in adulthood and alter

⁶ Jiping Zuo, “Women’s Liberation and Gender Obligation Equality in Urban China: Work/Family Experiences of Married Individuals in the 1950s,” *Science and Society* 77, no. 1 (January 2013): 105.

⁷ Feng Gaixia, interview by Wu Weiyl. Quoted in Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China’s Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 97.

the course of their subsequent lives. In the case of Feng Gaixia, the Marriage Law brought a newfound sense of confidence, free choice marriage, and political participation in building a new society in Mao's rural China.

Additionally, education of both men and women in rural areas was a critical component in Mao's Nation-building program. Hershatter mentions that girls from the Shaanxi village rarely received an education prior to 1949. After Mao's Communist party came into power, cadres set about encouraging illiterate adults, the majority of whom were women, to learn to read. The Women's Federation cadre leader Wang Meihua saw this as a way to mobilize women. In an interview, Wang Meihua noted, "Why did we start with literacy? At that time, families would only let a woman go out of the house if she was going to learn how to read. When women enjoyed more contact with the outside world by attending literacy classes, their thinking became more liberated little by little."⁸ Education and literacy, albeit structured around communist ideology and Maoist thought, provided a new space in the social public sphere for women. The opportunity for women to carve out an area, which was previously off limits, was key to expanding their sphere of influence. Literacy and education was a key stepping stone for any formidable social progression.

Yet, ideology became more radical in the mid-1950s when Mao unleashed the disastrous Great Leap Forward. This sudden push to raise agricultural production included collectivization. As collectivization proceeded, the daily tasks of rural women changed profoundly. Prior to collectivization, many rural women's time was spent on household chores; additionally, women spent their time on spinning and weaving, thereby producing items that could be sold at the local market and for their family's use. Now, women had to assume the role of farmers, with

⁸ Wang Meihua, interview by Wu Weiyi. Quoted in Hershatter, 101.

fieldwork becoming their main activity. Daily life, the gendered division of labour, and associations of community exchanges had all been altered during the process of collectivization. As Feng Sumei recalls during collectivization, “[m]en were digging channels and building reservoirs at that time. Women carried fertilizer, planted potatoes, fertilized wheat – all were done by women. Women suffered more and worked more than men when gathering wheat. Men worked mainly outside. Women not only had to work outside, but also take care of the children, feed the pigs, wash, starch, sew, mend.”⁹ After collectivization, rural women were laborers and earned a wage, which theoretically increased women’s independence within the household. In practice, what essentially happened was that women’s domestic chores became “invisible.” Women not only had to labor in the agricultural sector, laboring in the fields, but also had to maintain all the domestic household chores they had been responsible for prior to collectivization. Ultimately, peasant women tasked with building Mao’s China remained at the bottom of rural society, but did experience a marginally expanded public and economic role within society.

During this collectivization period, work points were used as a method to reimburse the collective workers for their labor. Unfortunately, in many collectives, the worth of a day’s labor in work points was determined not by the task performed or the length of the day, but according to the gender of the person performing the labor. Ma Li clearly describes, “a man doing field labor typically earned ten points per day, whereas a woman earned six and eight. In spite of attention to equal pay for equal work in co-op regulations, and explicit dictum that co-ops should not discriminate against women, it was extremely rare for a women to be paid the same number of points per day as a man.”¹⁰ Women did endure inferior status when Mao and the People’s

⁹ Feng Sumei, interview by Wu Weiye. Quoted in Hershatter, 146.

¹⁰ Ma Li, interview by Wu Weiye. Quoted in Hershatter, 139.

Republic of China (PRC) set about Collectivization and the Great Leap Forward, however, women did expand their sphere of influence outside the domestic and earned a level of independence by being wage earners. Rural women now took important roles in agricultural production within the state. Ultimately, the utility of nation building and implementing socialism was of primary importance for Mao and the CCP, pragmatically setting aside the theory and rhetoric of gender equality. Nevertheless, there is a clear tone and sense of injustice in Ma Li's interview, a sense of injustice that clearly might have stuck with her throughout her life and possibly galvanized her and many other women of that generation to fight for further gender equality in the future. The incremental levels of independence for women would live long in the memory and serve as a foundation for future equality.

In the urban areas, freeing women from family patriarchy continued to be on the agenda of the CCP. The new Marriage Law (1950) and Constitution (1954) continued to espouse women's equal rights with men in political, social, and economic arenas. The literacy campaigns launched between 1952 and 1958 had lifted 16 million women above illiteracy.¹¹ The massive mobilization of female employment in urban areas, which peaked in the late 1950s, continued to expand women's social and economic roles. Furthermore, the mass mobilization of female employment also removed the stigma attached to female laborers for both being poor and breaking gender boundaries. The CCP used its expansive power to move women further into the public arena, creating images of "new women," firmly located in the working class and in close proximity to machinery and technology.¹² The combined efforts of the CCP and Mao in altering gender and class structures around work produced some liberating results for married women in

¹¹ Yu Wei, *Women's Education in China* (Hangzhou, China: Zhejiang Education Press, 1995), 405.

¹² Tina M. Chen, "Female Icons, Feminist Iconography? Socialist Rhetoric and Women's Agency in 1950s China," *Gender & History* 15 no. 2 (2003): 273.

urban areas. In general, dignified employment outside the household provided women with new avenues to elevate their social status and enrich their lives.

Depending on their social location, women derived satisfaction from work for various reasons. Those who had never worked outside the household found that employment enriched their lives and broadened their social circles. Historian Jiping Zuo captures some invaluable interviews with women who lived through Mao's China. Ms. Li, whose husband and father were revolutionaries, grew up in rural Shanxi Province. She later moved to Beijing to join her husband and parents and became a worker in a neighborhood-run tailor shop. She recalled "I only did needle work inside the home after marriage, with no idea what it would be like working outside. I liked working — you talked and laughed with your sister co-workers."¹³ Ms. Li found a new sense of identity by engaging in employment outside the home. Clearly, women created a new space for themselves in the public sphere, which was based on female camaraderie and shared experience in Mao's nation building. These newfound opportunities and involvement in social labor would not be lost and would lay the groundwork and demands for future gender equality and for an evolution of rights within the collective Chinese Communist experience.

The overriding Chinese notion of "rights" was collective by nature and bounded by duties of women and men to the nation, making the meanings of both "gender equality" and "women's liberation" quite different from those in western society. The Chinese expression of "liberation" and "equality" were created by a collection of Chinese experiences in both domestic and international dynamics. Devastated by foreign invasion and internal crises, Maoist nation building was expressed through Communism, focusing on ending class exploitation and private ownership. Mao espoused Communist assertions, whereby Chinese women could achieve their

¹³ Zuo, 109.

eventual liberation only through class struggle and working-class victories. Lisa Rofel aptly states “[t]herefore, it is important to see the relationships between nation–state, class, and gender categories as fluid and mutually constitutive through negotiations in a larger context.”¹⁴ Thus, Chinese women’s liberation projects were not only intimately intertwined with nationalist and class movements, but also served them. On the other hand, by enabling women to transgress gender boundaries, and, more importantly, by ending imperialism and class oppression, the subordination of the women’s movement to larger causes paradoxically heightened many women’s sense of liberation, rather than diminished it. Accordingly, women’s active participation in pursuing gender equality allowed them to fulfill their shared dreams of socialism.

Furthermore, not all attempts to address gender inequality were so restrained and modest. The All-China Women's Federation's official journal *Women of China* provided an ecosystem as a site of feminist contention to reveal gender conflicts within the Party, diverse visions of socialist transformation, and state feminist strategies in the pursuit of women's liberation. The founding of the PRC allowed talented and strong-willed Chinese women, like Shen Zijiu and Dong Bian, to mark the beginning of a long-awaited time when women's liberation would be moved into sharper focus. The mission statement of *Women of New China* made it clear that the magazine aimed to “help its readers correctly and comprehensively understand the way to achieve women's liberation in new China.”¹⁵ It also did not hesitate to call on women's active participation in socialist revolution and socialist construction since this was understood as the

¹⁴ Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China After Socialism* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1999), 154.

¹⁵ Jianmian Hua (“Opening greetings”), *Xin Zhongguo funii*, *Women of New China* 1 (1949): 6. Quoted in Wang Zheng, “Creating a Socialist Feminist Cultural Front: ‘Women of China’ (1949-1966),” *The China Quarterly*, 204 (December 2010): 833.

way to achieve women's liberation. Additionally, it also illustrates communist women's innovative operation within the confines of the male dominated political power centre.

Women of New China was not just a peripheral pamphlet in Mao's Communist China, but it became financially self-reliant in 1953, the point at which the state stopped its subsidies. Once it had its own marketing networks, sales of the magazine rose rapidly from 10,000 copies from its first issue in 1949, to over 300,000 in 1955, and close to one million in the 1960s. By then subscriptions had to be restricted because of a shortage of paper. Some 95 per cent of the sales went to individual subscribers and retail, and the rest went to the government and the Women's Federation system. It ranked among the top four magazines in the Mao era. In February 1967, when the magazine suspended its publication in the Cultural Revolution, the press had a surplus of 600,000-yuan, considerable wealth at the time.¹⁶ *Women of China* provides a window in the past that reveals behind-the-scenes stories, which are crucial to understanding the feminist struggles in socialist China.

From the 1950s and onward, covers of *Women of New China* portrayed an array of images of smiling, rural women of ethnic minority, holding bundles of grain or vegetables, carrying baskets of cotton or dirt, operating tractors or engaging in agricultural experiments, or attending the highest state conventions. Some covers even included women toasting to Chairman Mao at a state banquet. This magazine contributed to the formation of a new symbolic order that unambiguously disrupted deeply entrenched gender, class, and ethnic hierarchies in Mao's China. The consistent appearance of such images on the cover of the magazine portrayed a powerful message that women of the laboring class, or to use the widely circulated term at the time, *laodong renmin* (laboring people), were now the dignified masters of new China.¹⁷ Proudly

¹⁶ Zheng, 833-834.

¹⁷ Zheng, 837.

adorned in peasant outfits when mixing with state officials or urban labor models, rural women exuded confidence and self-assurance. Women clearly worked within the confines of Mao's Communist state building project to expand the confines of gender boundaries.

During the Cultural Revolution in China, which took place between 1966 and 1976, Mao Zedong mobilized groups of devoted young people who called themselves "Red Guards" to carry out his new program. Mao sought to enforce communist dogma and to rid the nation of the so-called "Four Olds": old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas. Women were actively absorbed into the public labor force and were initiated into the highly politicized nature of life. Mao's famous political slogan, "The times have changed, men and women are the same,"¹⁸ continued to be propagated throughout China. Mao's pronouncement was authorization that "...provided women of that era with the possibility to challenge the traditional gendered division of labor and politics. It especially provided new discursive space for working-class women, who were at the lowest level of the social stratum, to express themselves."¹⁹ At this time, the drive toward gender equality was implemented to the utmost, and the former division between domestic and political spheres was removed. Chinese women were expected to play an active role in building the nation.

During the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Mao asserted that women and men were equal in political consciousness and physical strength; however, historians like Wenqi Yang and Fei Yan have propagated the idea that because the focus was on "sameness" of gender, it was not real gender equality. They posit that "[r]eal gender equality requires the recognition, not the erasure or denial, of difference. However, relations between the sexes were framed in such a way

¹⁸ Wenqi Yang and Fei Yan, "The Annihilation of Femininity in Mao's China: Gender Inequality of Sent-down Youth during the Cultural Revolution," *China Information* 31, no. 1 (2017): 63.

¹⁹ Jin Yihong, Kimberley Ens Manning, and Lianyun Chu, "Rethinking the 'Iron Girls': Gender and Labour during the Chinese Cultural Revolution," *Gender & History* 18, no. 3 (November 2006): 629.

that they seemed simultaneously central but also irrelevant to the broader issue of class struggle and socialist development. In this sense, gender inequality was subordinate to politics.”²⁰

However, the suggestion that Mao’s Cultural Revolution ultimately served to restrict the liberation of women because politics came first is too stringent. Historians need to look no further than the pervasive government propaganda images during the Cultural Revolution, which were strong, active “Iron Girls” engaged in physical work. Wang Zheng perceptively states “[t]he images resonated with the images of women as model workers, militant fighters, or political activists in official propaganda. She possessed a redefined ‘femininity’: a revolutionary proletarian womanhood. Being a woman no longer implied traditional femininities associated with fragility or weakness but revolutionary, proletarian force.”²¹ Mao’s Cultural Revolution propaganda focused on women being involved in social, economic, and political spheres, which was paramount to the redefining of Chinese women as *funii*.

Ultimately, our ability to “measure” either the increase or decrease of “gender equality” is extremely fluid and dynamic, being that it is affected by a tremendous number of social, economic, political, and cultural variables. Furthermore, “gender equality,” within the context of a Communist political system such as Mao’s China, appears very differently than the notion of gender equality as observed by a western capitalist nation. As previously mentioned, in Communist ideology women would only stand side by side with men in equality once they fully participated in joint production and waged labor. Firstly it must be ascertain whether women achieved any progress in the area of labor force participation. If this metric is used as an indicator to measure gender equality, China would be very successful; female labor force participation in China increased dramatically after the founding of the People’s Republic and

²⁰ Yang and Yan, 78.

²¹ Zheng, 6.

almost reached the universal level. According to a study by Bauer et al of women who married between 1950 and 1965, 70 per cent had jobs, and, of women who married between 1966 and 1976, 92 per cent had jobs.²² Clearly, women made great strides in waged labor participation from 1950 to 1976, which was the primary benchmark of women's equality under the Chinese Communist Party under Chairman Mao. In order to truly decipher whether women made significant gains in breaking down "gender stratification" in their goals of attaining "gender equality" there is a need to examine some of the variables above.

After twenty-seven years of Mao's leadership gender inequality persisted in China. Men earned more than women for doing the same types of work. Men were more likely to occupy the most desirable jobs, and men's participation outside the home was higher than that of women. Additionally, men had better educational opportunities. Fundamentally, compared to women, men had more access to social resources and had higher socioeconomic status.²³ Despite not attaining full equality, women, both urban and rural, were able to work within the confines of Mao's nation building to expand their spheres of influence. Undeniably, Mao initiated several changes in the PRC that have significantly reduced gender inequality in China, when compared to the past in the thousands of years of Chinese history. Many of Mao's changes were institutionalized from the top and were effective.²⁴ Mao and the CCP have been directly involved in designing many policies and implementing them to protect women and providing them an opportunity to continually change the status quo.

Ultimately, Mao Zedong's proclaimed authoritative rhetoric saying, "Women Hold Up Half The Sky," inferred the breaking down of gender stratification and promoting of equality.

²² Bauer, John and Wang Feng, Nancy E. Riley, and Zhao Xiaohua, "Gender Inequality in Urban China," *Modern China* 18, no. 3 (1992): 362.

²³ Yuhui Li, 38.

²⁴ Yuhui Li, 39.

Women did not achieve equity with their male counterparts, nor did they attain gender equality of egalitarian self-determination. Nevertheless, when Chinese Communism under Chairman Mao is analyzed we discover women, both rural and urban, were able to challenge social, cultural, and economic gender stratification. This essay illustrates the ways in which women inextricably worked within Mao's Communist nation building efforts to slowly erode gender inequalities. Yet, despite the inability of full gender equality to be realized, this era allowed women to experience a broad range of experiences that contained the seeds of change toward breaking down gender inequality. Ultimately, Chinese women under Mao created a more fertile environment so the seeds of equality may continue to grow, perhaps bearing fruit of full "gender equality" in the future.

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