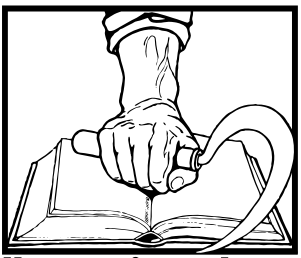
Women in the Chinese Revolution

Cover source: Anti-Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping propaganda poster from 1968 by the Beijing Exhibition Office. Original poster read: "Exhibition to expose the evil deed of China's Khrushchev to sabotage the publication of Chairman Mao's writings"

This work is derived from ***Women in the Chinese Revolution*** originally published in 2004 by New Vistas Publications in India.



NOBODYOWNSLAND

Table of Contents

Part I

Women in the Chinese Revolution

1921-1950

Samyorup

The struggle for the transformation in the status of women in China was closely connected with the struggle of the people of China against feudalism and imperialist control. Their long struggle for self-assertion within the family and society, against patriarchy, for the right to vote, for free choice of partners and divorce, for property rights etc., drew sustenance from the revolutionary movements in China. The movement proceeded along a zigzag path; it was attended with advances and retreats. At times, women's rights movements strengthened revolutionary struggles aimed at fundamental social transformation; at other times, these were fed by revolutionary movements. There were also times, particularly during the Anti-Japanese War (1937-45), when the needs of the national or social revolution took precedence over the cause of the women's movements.

Mao Zedong wrote that the Chinese people had three ropes round their necks, but women had four: political authority, clan authority, religious authority and the authority of the husband. These authorities embodied the whole feudal and patriarchal ideology and the social system. For thou-sands of years, political power in China, whether in slave society or feudal society, had been closely associated with the control of women. Neither did the women have any right over property, nor did they enjoy any independent decision-making power in matters affecting the family and clan.

A woman was subjugated throughout her life to an unending series of authorities: her own mother and father, her husband's mother and father, her husband, and finally, her son. The marriages were blind marriages arranged by family

heads in which neither the groom nor the bride had any voice. Under this arrangement, the groom's family paid a "*body price*" to the bride's family, implying thereby that they are buying the young woman as a chattel and reimbursing her natal family with the "bride price" for the expense of raising her. The situation was such that divorce was next to impossible for an unhappy wife. Even if her husband died, her in-laws retained control over her. If she was allowed to leave her family and remarry again, she would first have to find out a new husband who was prepared to pay the body price for her. But how could she get a new life-partner when free-mixing between men and women was unthinkable in society? If she simply sought to get a divorce and be free, she could not do so because, being economically dependent, she could never pay the body price necessary to secure her freedom. Marriage was such a terrible prospect for women that in some places they formed sisterhoods, composed of maidens who vowed never to marry.

One of the important elements peculiar to the feudal society of China was the custom of foot-binding imposed on the Chinese women in many parts of the country. This custom is attributed to the second ruler of the Tang dynasty, Li Yu (937-978) who is supposed to have compelled his favourite concubine Yaoning to dance on the image of a lotus flower. Footbinding, introduced in the 11th century, spread from the ranks of the aristocracy to those of modest means and much of the peasantry. This operation is performed on the eve of the fifth birthday of girls, by their mothers. The toes are bent under the soles of the feet and the broken feet are then bound with bandages — an operation that lasts 10 to 15 years. This inhuman physical suffering leads to the turning of the young girl into a fetish, an object of love. These bound feet or "*golden lily*" in the eyes of the poets, becomes the erotic part of the female body, so much so that Tang painters depict a woman's genitals but never a crippled foot. After her marriage, this bound foot gains for her the recognition and respect of the in-laws because this is an undeniable proof of her capacity to suffer and obey.

In feudal China, as in other feudal societies, women, particularly rural women, were regarded as an object, whose body and mind were under the control of patriarchy. Confucian ideology perpetuated the domination of men over women. Later, Confucians formulated more codes of conduct for women. How feudal China looked at women is evident from the following formulation; "*Having married a cock she must follow the cock; having married a dog she must follow the dog; having married a carrying pole she must carry it for life.*"

In fact, women constituted so important an element of the feudal system, that any attempt to emancipate women could only result in the entire restructuring of the whole social pyramid and a tremendous change in outlook towards women as also in the correlation of forces struggling for power. **In fact, the history of women's movements in China had always been closely connected with the history of revolutionary movements.** Chinese women took an active role in a large number of rebellions and movements of other types along with men.

There were special contingents of women in the Taiping army during the Taiping rebellion (1851-64) as also among the Boxers during the Boxer rebellion of 1900. While Jean Chesneaux attributes the presence of rebel women in large numbers to the weakening of the feudal structure due to the intensification of the feudal crisis, Julia Kristeva suggests that the daughters of the Taoist Boxers took part in military and political struggles because of the limited freedom accorded to women in non-Han, non-Confucian families. Women took part in the Reform Movement of 1898 which demanded, among other things, the right to education for women and the unbinding of their feet. Bourgeois revolutionary efforts led by Sun Yat-sen also attracted many women like Chiu Chin who published the first "*Women's Journal*", organized the "*Restoration Army*" in Zhejiang, attempted to assassinate the governor and was executed in 1907. **Battalions of women were organized during the Revolution of 1911 when demands were raised for**

women's right to education, "to make friends" to marry by free choice of partners and to participate in government.

After the establishment of the Republic in 1912, a new type of movement developed which gave Chinese feminism its militant character. The activists stood against patriarchy, and fought for the equality of men and women. Influenced by western suffragettes, as also by the fight against a feudal patriarchal society, this movement, urban in nature, drew its followers from such organizations as the Shanghai Social Club for Women's Suffrage, the militant Women's Society, the Female Alliance, the Women's Organization for Peace, and the Women's Citizens' society — all of which formed a coordinating council and prepared a list of objectives which were to be adopted during the May 4 Movement of 1919. **The militancy of Chinese women was displayed in no uncertain degree when some feminists and their supporters, like the women suffragettes of England before, stormed a Republican Parliament in 1913, smashing windows and injuring several guards. The May 4 Movement championed all these ideas and spread them throughout the country.**

The people who gave leadership in the Chinese revolution also took an active part in championing women's causes during the May 4 Movement. The New People's Study Society, which Mao Zedong formed in Hunan, became one of the most radical student organizations, and most of its members eventually joined the Socialist Youth Corps. Early response, even during pre-communist days, to the women's issue, underlined the link between the position of women and the key issues relating to social revolution in China. Some of Mao's early articles on these issues dealt with the suicide of three young girls.

In '*A Critique of Miss Chao's Suicide*', he wrote: "...*A suicide is determined entirely by the environment. Was Miss Chao's original intention to die? No, it was not. On the contrary, it was to live. Yet her final decision to die was forced by her environment.*" Miss Chao's marriage was

arranged by her parents and the match-maker in November 1919 much to her dislike. Her parents refused either to undo the marriage or to postpone the wedding date. On the day of wedding as she was being raised aloft in the bridal chair to be delivered to the home of the groom, she slit her throat with a dagger. Mao called upon women to join the whole human race against cannibalistic feudal morality: "*Since we are all human beings, why shouldn't we be able to vote? And we are all human beings, why shouldn't we mix freely together?*" **While in ordinary circumstances, this incident might have gone unnoticed, during the social ferment and the intellectual awakening of the May 4 Movement it became Changsha's biggest news stories of the year. This suicide was the subject of at least nine impassioned articles by Mao. These are important because the message that gradually emerges out of them is that the movement for women's emancipation is an integral part of the struggle for social transformation.**

The fundamental question was: Should the Chinese Communists recognise and support the existence of a separate women's movement dealing only with their specific demands; or should the women's question be treated as one of the important elements of the broader question of social revolution, and hence the women's movement be under the guidance of the CPC? The formation of the CPC in 1921, and the spread of the revolutionary movement, brought the women's movement to the fore. The communists recognised that women were confronted with some specific problems peculiar to their social position and these made them the most oppressed section among the oppressed classes in feudal China. Thus the battle for women's emancipation was closely tied up with the battle for social revolution in which they fought side by side with men. However, patriarchy was so completely embedded within Chinese society, even within members of the CPC, as the Party was soon to discover, that it harmed joint struggles against common enemies in the future.

The relation between the CPC and the various feminist groups was more of struggle than of unity. Although the

Party leaders recognised their demands for equality as just, these groups, mainly consisting of urban, educated women, were also criticised for being westernised, bourgeois elitists who failed to integrate with the women workers and poor masses, and ignored the need for revolution. These feminists concentrated too much on sexual politics, identified men as the oppressor rather than assailing the ruling classes and the entire man-eating system as the root cause of both male and female oppression.

The first official move of the CPC in this field, in response to the growing solidarity of women, was to set up a special women's department at the Second Party Congress held in 1922 in order to organise and lead women in revolutionary politics. This department was directed by Xiang Jingyu, one of Mao's fellow student-activists from Hunan and the only woman on the Central Committee of the CPC. The Party included in its list of objectives "*the unlimited right to vote for all workers and peasants, regardless of sex*", *protection for female and child labour and the abolition of all restrictions on women.* It also espoused such democratic demands of feminist groups as the right to self-determination in marriage, equal husband-wife relations, equal rights to vote, hold office and education. Xiang was instrumental in bringing large sections of women belonging to these groups within the fold of the CPC, thereby channeling the movement into a socialist direction. She was executed by the Kuomintang (KMT) in 1928. She is still admired as the "*Grandmother of the Revolution.*"

In the early days, the Women's Department's concentration on the task of organising women workers reflected the CPC's urban strategy of revolution as influenced by the Comintern. The first strike by women workers occurred in 24 silk factories of Shanghai in 1922 in which 20,000 joined and demanded a 10-hour working day and 5 cents wage-increase per day. The first rally of women, under party leadership, was held on Women's Day (8 March) of 1924 in Canton, where a group of girl students and women workers raised slogans: *"Down with imperialism", "Down with*

warlords", "Same work same pay", "protection for child labour and pregnant mothers", "Equal education", "Abolish child brides and polygamy", "Prohibit the buying of slave girls and the taking of concubines", "Formulate a child protection law". These anti-imperialist and anti-feudal slogans echoed throughout the country and ushered in a new phase in the women's movement.

During the CPC-KMT alliance (1923-27), two separate women's departments existed in parallel — one of the CPC, the other of the KMT. The KMT-led department had nothing to do with social revolution; it only demanded equal rights for women and freedom in marriage and divorce, abolition of legal slavery of women and girls through the purchase-marriage system, prohibition of footbinding etc. The CPC-KMT alliance was terminated in 1927 by Chiang Kai-shek, who organized one of the most gruesome bloodbaths in which thousands of women also lost their lives. The KMT then tried to re-impose Confucianism through the New Life Movement in the 1930s.

The CPC, or at least a section of it, began to realise the futility of its strategy of urban insurrections based on the Soviet model and turned its attention to the peasantry and peasant women. The failure of the rising of the Shanghai workers, the massacres perpetrated by the KMT in Nanjing, Canton and other places, the failure of the uprisings at Nanchang, the autumn harvest uprising, etc — all having taken place in 1927 — forced Mao Zedong, Zhu De and others to gather on the Jinggang Mountains and set up base areas covering Hunan, Jiangxi and Fujian provinces in Central-Southeastern China.

The primary task of the party and the Red Army in the base areas was to fight off the KMT-led "encirclement and suppression" campaigns, and throughout the Jiangxi Soviet period (1929-34), women in the base areas were on rear-area support for the war effort. Although there was generally no direct participation of women in the war, there were also some exceptions to it. Kang Keqing joined the Red Army in western Jiangxi in 1928 and later married Zhu De. There

were 100 other young women who came to Jiangxi with the Red Army. A regular fighting unit of women was also active in Szechuan, and it later joined Zhang Guotao's army on the Long March. The Party's women's department championed women's rights theoretically for a long time, but it was in a position to formulate and implement a concrete policy only after the Party and the Red Army set up base areas on the Jinggang Mountains.

The section '*Family law*' in the '*Civil Code*' of the KMT upheld the principle of the equality of the sexes and the conclusion of marriage and divorce by mutual consent; this law, as is quite natural, existed on paper only, because such a change in the law is meaningless unless it is accompanied by a genuine anti-feudal struggle, which the KMT was incapable of launching. The communist legislation of the Jiangxi Soviet in 1930 was far more specific in its formulation, and was enforced immediately on millions of men and women settled in the base areas. In his "*Report of an investigation into the Peasant Movement in Hunan*" (1927), Mao stressed the need of three kinds of struggle: against political power, clan power and theocratic power, and in the case of women, a fourth kind, that against oppressive husbands.

As the Chairman of the Jiangxi Soviet, Mao promoted a Marriage Decree (1930), which says: "*...men without wives may take the liberty of finding a wife as quickly as possible and women without husbands may take the liberty of finding a husband as quickly as possible*". In the Plan of Action on the Women's Issue, drawn up at the plenum of the Central Committee of the CPC (3 March 1931), it was stated: "*...soviet political principles must be applied to women in order to destroy the legal norms of the old society, to oppose the exploitative relationships of the feudal family etc., and to guarantee women's equality with men and permit them to acquire civil rights...*" Article 1 of the Land Law stated in reference to confiscated lands of landlords: "*Hired farm hands, coolies and toiling labour-owners shall enjoy equal rights to land allotments irrespective of sex*".

Kristeva points out that the Marriage Resolution (1931) helped eliminate at least the patriarchal authority of the clan system. It authorised free choice of partners, prohibited marriage between relatives through the fifth generation, as well as between so called ‘biao’ cousins (i.e. ‘relatives connected by the women of a generation’) in the maternal lineage — a provision which struck at the system of clan isolation by arranged marriage between relatives. The provision of ‘free divorce’ ensures the economic security of women. The Regulation also abolished the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children.

It is pertinent to note that the Marriage Regulations were passed in the face of stiff opposition from within. Kay Ann Johnson suggests that the passing of the Regulations was partly due to the arrival of the underground wing of the Party from Shanghai, which "*objected strongly to the view and practices of some other Party groups in Jiangxi who favoured the restriction of marriage and divorce rights*". The regulations also made it clear that upon divorce, the woman retained her full property rights, land allotment and equal share of any property. The Marriage Law of April 1934 added more to the Jiangxi document. Marriage and divorce between boys of twenty and girls of eighteen and above were free. Mao insists that these must be registered, for that would serve as the means of protecting women against patriarchal abuses.

This was legal recognition, and a development upon the previous practice introduced by the CPC in the 1920s when "Eight Mutuals" (pledge to love, to respect, to help, to encourage, to console, to have consideration, to have confidence and mutual understanding) served as the basis of marriage among young revolutionaries. The state at the same time assumed the right to intervene in matters relating to marriage in order to avoid anarchy. In one sense, this also implied some sort of tempered sexuality. If the basis of marriage is free choice and the ‘*Eight Mutuals*’, then there was no need to carry on secret love affairs.

In order to assess the impact of these measures one can

refer to the following statement of Mao made in 1934: "*In course of the four and a half years of communist rule, one woman out of one hundred (in the Canton Changgang, district Xingguo) was married three times. Before the arrival of the communists, on the other hand, fifty per cent of the women in the Canton were carrying on secret love affairs. Following the establishment of Soviet power, this figure has fallen by ten per cent.... The reasons for this are: first, the land-reform movement; second, freedom of marriage and divorce; third, the importance of time dedicated to revolutionary activity*". The 1934 law at the same time, prohibited polyandry and polygamy along with marriage between relatives through the third generation, and recognised *de facto* i.e., unregistered marriages. After divorce, children were to be in the custody of the mother and the father should contribute to their support. **It is important to point out that the adoption and enforcement of the policy of freedom in marriage and divorce was never a smooth affair. First, this regulation caused conflicts with the male peasants and partymen whose traditional control over women and wives was thereby threatened.**

The Chinese revolution has proved time and again that the process of remoulding one's thinking is a tortuous and difficult one, that it is not at all easy to fight self-interest, bureaucratic attitudes and patriarchal attitudes within oneself. That it is easier to fight the enemy with the gun than to combat wrong outlooks and practices within oneself. Second, the traditional marriage system was such that the would-be husband had to pay a bride-price to get a wife. There were thus many poor peasants who either could not marry and remained single throughout their lives due to their inability to pay the price, or they could get one, after much hardship. For them, freedom in marriage was welcome because they need not have to pay any bride-price for it. On the other hand, the right to divorce was a matter of great concern, for in that case they might not only lose their wives, but also their wives' land. Such poor peasants as also male middle peasants were probably in the majority in the

base areas.

The peasant resistance was reflected also in the debates over organisation and form. The crucial question was whether there should be separate women's associations or only a separate women's section within the peasant association. The second path was supported by a large number of male communists and even many young women organisers. There were other problems as well. The Regulations advocated free choice of partners. But how could there be the exercise of free choice when in many areas, free mixing among young boys and girls was unthinkable. Moreover, the women organisers also encountered stiff resistance not only from men, but also from older, conservative women. The sight of 'strange' women walking freely about the village, talking to strangers and preaching "*immoral*" doctrines like free love scandalised many villagers. In many places, women organisers had to be withdrawn in the face of conservative opposition, and there were reports about young women being beaten up and even killed by angry members of the families.

Johnson has referred to "excesses" of another kind. Some male cadres criticised traditional restrictions on women as a means to further exploit and sexually abuse women. Some members of the communist youth in the soviet districts of Fujian recklessly forced women to sleep with men under the pretext of combating feudalism. Again, in some areas of Juichin, widows were forced to remarry within five days of a husband's death. Although these deviations were condemned in many Party documents, these also provided the means in the hands of the critics to criticise the movement. Although the women's teams had to make a retreat in some areas, there were also areas were they boldly stood up under the banner of the Women's Association.

It was the struggle for the attainment of women's liberation, not only from the clutches of the landlords, but also from the oppression of their husbands and domestic seclusion. William Hinton, who lived in Long Bow village, observed that many women realised that it was impossible to talk of the liberation of women without

the defence of the soviet areas against the KMT armies and without the successful transformation of society. Jack Belden has given a graphic and moving account of how Kinhua (Gold Flower) — a peasant woman from Hopei, who stood up, with the help of the Women's Association, against her oppressive husband and in-laws; and how her husband was tried in a people's court, beaten up by women for his refusal to apologise for his misdeeds and how, in the new fresh air of freedom, she could move out freely, hold her head high and take part in production. The new meaning of life Kinhua discovered, was shared by many other women in other areas also. **Belden was not alone in thinking that the substitution of pain, anguish and despair of Chinese womanhood by joy, pride and hope was a phenomenon of the most tremendous significance.**

The stage of the anti-Japanese national liberation war after the Long March (16 October 1934 - 20 October 1935) ushered in a new historical situation and the struggle against Japanese imperialism took precedence over the anti-feudal campaign. The struggle launched during the Yan'an phase is one of the bloodiest in the history of the modern world, and peasants were recruited in large numbers to the Eighth Route Army. There were attacks and counter-attacks on both sides, coupled with the KMT-blockade of the red zones. The situation demanded channeling major resources to meet the needs of the war. The liberation of women, particularly the right to divorce, was temporarily suspended because of, as Mark Selden writes, "*its potentially divisive effect*".

In order to meet the growing need for production and make up the shortage of labour, the CPC decided to involve women in production both within and outside the home. Thousands of peasant women were mobilised for part-time weaving on simple looms. This not only helped meet day-to-day needs, but also spread new economic and political ideas throughout the border region and to break down traditional values which impeded development and community action. Women were also organised into local village militia. They gathered intelligence, acted as couriers and occasionally

backed up regular troops.

An important aspect of the 1934 law was that a soldier's wife could no longer obtain divorce without the consent of her husband. Some peasant husbands had complained: "*The revolution wants to get rid of everything, wives included.*" To preserve the morale of the Red Army, a special clause was subsequently included which allowed divorce to wives only if their husbands agreed. The suspension of the struggle for women's emancipation came with criticism from the women themselves.

In 1942, the conflict between Party policy and women members of the Party came into the open with the publication of Ding Ling's article, "*Thoughts of March 8*" (Women's Day). She pointed to the contradictory demands made by the Party on women and expressed her frustration for being at a loss what to do. She wrote: "*If women did not marry, they are ridiculed; if they did and had children, they were chastised for holding political posts rather than being at home with their families; if they remained at home for a number of years, they were slandered as backward. Whereas in the old society they were pitied, in the present one they were condemned for a predicament not of their own making".*

During the zhengfeng, or the rectification movement launched by the CPC in 1942, the Party criticised the demands exclusively relating to women as divisive and detrimental to revolutionary mobilisation. This issue merits particular attention. There was a definite contradiction here between the Party policy and the fight for women's emancipation, as at least a section of the women-activists perceived it. To the Party, during the period of the anti-Japanese war, the principal contradiction changed from one between feudalism and the broad masses of the Chinese people, into one between the Chinese nation on the one hand, and Japanese imperialism and their domestic allies on the other. This necessitated the suspension of the anti-feudal struggle to some extent, as many feudal landowners and the KMT became the allies of the CPC in the anti-Japanese struggle. In

such a situation, according to the CPC's official stand, the struggle for women's emancipation could not proceed at a great pace in the interest of the alliance with the landlords. Secondly, as the peasant men constituted the main fighting force in the national liberation war, the Party could not afford to ignore their opposition to divorce rights.

An important landmark was the first candidates and voters. In 1941, women were elected to fill 8% of the seats in township councils, including over region-wide elections in the base areas in 1941 during which there was a campaign for women's rights. An editorial in the June 20, 1941 issue of Chieh-fang Jih-pao urged women to play an active role in the election movement. Needless to mention, the gains achieved by women were the products of a long struggle against patriarchal ideology as reflected in various forms of opposition from within the Party and people, particularly men. In some places, the women who were most outspoken and acted as organisers, were often denounced as disreputable and immoral because they had broken traditional codes of behaviour, social and sexual. "*The virtuous women were not militant and the militant women were not virtuous*", as Isabel and David Cook noted about women's militancy. **Even within the CPC, the progress in women's liberation was more striking in combat areas were women quickly assumed vital military, political and economic responsibility than it was in the rear areas.** Sometimes, local cadres also raised obstacles, when their personal interests were involved. The cadres either did not implement reforms or put up all sorts of obstacles to their implementation. For the women, they could not enjoy the rights they had already got legally. While the Party policy gave women the right to own land in their own name, many women were unable to realise the full benefits of land reform, for it raised issues concerning women's role within the family and society.

It is interesting to point out that the revolt against patriarchy took many forms. The beating of the oppressive and unrepentant husbands by members of the Women's Association, open trial of husbands or father-in-laws in people's

court, stormy debates at meetings for securing their rights, etc., were some of the new methods to attain non-traditional results. There were also other methods. In village Tinghsu, Shanshi province, elections were held in 1943, but women were not allowed to vote. The women rebelled, refused to recognise the new village chief and demanded re-election and their right to vote. When the men laughed at the idea, the women adopted a traditional method to achieve a non-traditional result. They simply refused to sleep with their husbands. The men surrendered to this kind of pressure and were forced to allow a new election. This method of exploiting the sexual urge of the husbands to realise their demands was, though effective, rather crude. Victory attained thereby could only be temporary in nature unless it is accompanied by ideological persuasion. However, one can also interpret it from a different angle. The women's decision was a negation of marital sexual relationships so long as their just demands remained unfulfilled. The election was an extremely contested one and women were able to capture the office of the Vice-Chief of the village and the office of the head of the Education Bureau.

The broad overturning movement brought for the rural women a new meaning of life. They could now throw out their chests, hold their heads high and looked eye to eye to anybody. Deng Yingchao, one of the leaders of the women's movement, related how the attitude of the rural people towards "body" girls changed: "*It was amusing to watch the excitement when a baby was expected, for children were also given their share and everyone would be hoping the baby would be born in time. The father and grandfather would stand outside asking anxiously, 'Is it born, is it born?' Where once they would have been saying, 'Is it a boy?' It was interesting to notice how the conception of women's inferiority began to disappear. Peasants began to say, Now. Daughters are just as good as sons."*

Deng Yingchao, the wife of Zhou Enlai, had her own story to tell. Like many other women, the May 4 Movement stimulated her to action when her national feelings were

outraged by the presentation of the infamous '*Twenty-one Demands*' to China by Japan. She came out of her classroom at the age of sixteen to organise girl-students and housewives of Tianjin into a patriotic society. She organised the women's movement in Tianjin, published a weekly called Women's Stars, joined the Young Communist League of China in 1924 and became a communist in 1925. She was one of the thirty women who took part in the Long March from the beginning to the end and underwent all the rigours of underground life. During the Long March, they acted as nurses and collected provisions for the peasants, explaining to them what they were and what they stood for.

One of the first acts of the People's Republic of China was the abolition of prostitution in 1949. The Chinese brothels had an existence of 2,700 years far surpassing those in the Netherlands which had the longest period of history in the flesh trade of Europe. The licensed prostitutes — euphemistically called the "*Mist and Flower Maidens*" and the worst victims of social oppression — were treated in the reformatories. There they received education, taught the real meanings of life, the difference between the old and the new society. Zhen Jinyang, one of those oppressed women, while describing her four-month-experience in the reformatory of Dymphna Cusack, said 5that it was "*the happiest time in my life*".

The most important development towards women's emancipation was the announcement of the Marriage Law of May 1, 1950 by Mao. It was the logical culmination of previous regulations and struggles. The general principle is explained in Article 1: "*The arbitrary and compulsory feudal marriage system, which is based on the superiority of men over women, and which ignores the interests of children is abolished. The 'New Democratic Marriage System', based on free choice of partners, on monogamy, on equal rights for both sexes and on protection of the lawful interests of women and Children, shall be put into effect*". **The Marriage Law of 1950 and the later additions to it gave more rights to women than western bourgeois**

law could do. First, it does not recognise the 'head of household', and accords equal status to husband and wife in the family. (Article VII). Second, not only may a women retain her maiden name (Article XI) after marriage, but her children have the right to take her name rather than her husband's. Third, a man does not have the right to apply for divorce during his wife's pregnancy and until a year after the birth of the child but the wife may (Article XVIII). After divorce, the mother normally gets the custody of the nursing of the child (Article XX). Fourth, the housework of the housewife is also considered socially valuable and a form of compensation is also provided by Article X which entitles the wife to an equal share of family property. The Marriage Law popularly known as Divorce Law made divorce very easy. It is granted immediately where both parties agree, and after an attempt at reconciliation if only one party wants it.[*]

That there was a great social demand for divorce, most likely from the side of women, is reflected in the increasing number of divorces over the years following the passing of the Marriage Law. In 1950, 186,167 divorces were registered. In 1951, it rose to 409,500. In 1953, the figure stood at 823,000. After that it rose into millions. The initial spurt in divorce cases was halted in the following years. In a people's commune near Nanjing, named Tong Jin, which had 30,000 inhabitants, there had been only one divorce in eight years following the Cultural Revolution. This was mainly because a new generation had already come up which chose their own life-partners freely and had no reason to quarrel

[*] The 1950 Marriage Law was one of the first replaced in the reform era under Deng Xiaoping. The "Revised Marriage Law" of 1980 brought back many aspects of the Confucian household and further cemented the liberal eugenicist "one-child policy" introduced in 1979. Among other things, rising divorce rates, once viewed as a positive sign of emancipation, became a problem to be legislated against. The conservative "family values" dog-whistle became one enshrined in law, and was fortified in the Civil Code of 2021, which repealed and replaced both laws. — NOL Ed., 2024

over property also. Even if conflicts arose, these could be patched up by mutual discussion or friendly intervention by comrades.

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Part II

Women in Socialist China

"*The emancipation of women and their equality with men are impossible, and remain so, as long as women are excluded from social production and restricted to domestic labour. The emancipation becomes feasible only when women are enabled to take part extensively in social production*". This is one of the best-known passages from Engels' writings on women's liberation. Lenin explained it further when he remarked: " *The main task is to draw women into socially productive labour, to liberate them from 'domestic slavery', to free them from their stultifying and humiliating subjugation to the eternal drudgery of the kitchen and the nursery*".

The New Democratic Revolution of 1949 put an end to the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggle of the people of China and ushered in a new stage of struggle, i.e., the stage of Socialist Revolution. The Marriage Law of 1950, which was introduced by the People's Republic of China was an essential change in the realm of superstructure. It established and implemented, among other things, the principle of free choice of life partners and divorce. However, many things still remained to be done in the realm of superstructure, particularly in the ideas and thinking of the people. The battle against patriarchy did not come to end with the revolution of 1949. The birthmarks of the old society cannot disappear so easily or automatically; what is required is some conscious effort on the part of the people. And that is precisely the reason why Mao had to initiate the Cultural Revolution. In the new situation, some of the old contradictions disappeared, while some others remained; on the other hand, many new contradictions appeared. Some of those questions were directly connected with women's liberation. We will seek to analyse how the struggle for women's emancipation progressed through twists and turns during the period Mao was at the helm of affairs.

Immediately after liberation, women workers were held up to all women as models to admire and emulate. Books, articles and reports in the daily press praised women in industrial production as diverse as textile production and tailoring, coal mining, steel-smelting and engine-driving. In the mid-1950s, however, there was a distinct change in the tone of such literature. Articles eulogising the housewife appeared with increasing frequency. Women's role as a home-maker, wife, and mother received unprecedented attention. The house-wife was shown as contributing to society thro-ugh her husband and family by acting as a sort of (unpaid) service worker for those who participated in production.

At conferences of women's dependents, discussions continued to consider how wives could best maintain their husbands' morale and preserve their strength for their jobs by protecting them from any problems at home. Even the series of fashion and beauty features which appeared in *Women in China* in 1955 can be seen as the same broad movement to 'feminise' women to a reactionary domestic model. This particular aspect of the movement was short-lived and was replaced by the economy drive of 1956-57 when the slogan was ''build the country up economically, manage the household thriftily'. Women were told that if they eliminated waste at the level of the individual house-hold, they would make a great contribution to the national economy. Many speeches at the Third National Congress of Women in 1957 shows that these were supposed to be the concerns of women-work at that time.

At one level, the campaign to confer more social prestige on housewives may be understood as an attempt to raise the sinking self-esteem of housewives who, in the early 1950s began to feel isolated and excluded from the major concern of the new society. At another level, the changes in policy towards women may be seen as an aspect of the struggle between Maoist and Liuist political lines. A women's Red Guard newspaper of 1966 was very critical of the way in which the slogan 'Build the country up economically, manage the household thriftily' had been used. It claimed

that the slogan was based on a line from a speech by Mao Zedong in which he said that the country relied particularly on the women's organisations to promote household thrift, but that it had been taken out of context. In the same speech he had listed many other more explicitly political tasks for the women's movement, yet the phrase 'manage the household thriftily' had been picked out and made to stand on its own as a slogan.

The roots of the campaign to glorify housework actually depended on the objective condition. Unemployment was a major problem in the Chinese cities in the 1950s. It was limited in part by the capital-intensive nature of development, strongly oriented towards heavy industry — a mark of Soviet strategy of development. Residual unemployment was aggravated by sporadic waves of seasonal unemployment. The campaign reached its height when pressure was put even on some employed women to retire. It was argued by some leading members of the Party that just as the old and the sick should retire, so should women with difficulties should retire from workforce. Women who tried to resist returning to housework were criticised. Whatever the reason, this 'cult of the housewife' stood in sharp contrast to Lenin's condemnation of its unproductive, stultifying drudgery and Mao's policy of women holding up 'half the sky'. However, the campaign to induce women to retire was not sustained: it was swept away during the Great Leap Forward.

One of the first steps to attain the goal of women's emancipation was naturally to be their physical participation in the process of production, which would make them economically independent and improve their standing in the cultural superstructure. The question is: were they employed in all those sectors where men were also employed? In fact, the presence of women was felt more in light industry and work of particular types than in heavy industry and all other types. For example, at Beijing No.3 State Cotton Mill, employing 6,400 workers, 70% were women; at Wuxi No.1 State Silk factory, 80% of the workforce is female. But at the agricultural Machinery Factory in Shanxi, only 16% were women,

while only men were assigned to work in the commune-owned coal-mine at a production brigade. This started to change by degrees for the better when women consciously got rid of these shackles. In fact, one aspect of the feudal mentality which held women in subordinate position was the idea that there were certain things which they could not do. The mass entry of women into social production, under the general slogan "anything men can do a woman can do also", is a living refutation of this conception. In Tianjin, for example, women workers in pre-liberation days were mainly employed in textile and light industry. They had in the early 1970s entered areas of heavy industry from which they were formerly excluded, like machine building, power and transport. In the countryside, female participation in agricultural production has helped to undermine such long-held assumptions as that 'potatoes women plant won't sprout' and 'melons women plant are bitter'. Such assumptions, reinforced by patriarchal and clan authority and power, had kept women out of production (particularly in North China) for centuries.

Women in China took great strides in their own liberation from the shackles of their feudal existence and made a tremendous contribution to every stage of the revolution. It is for this very reason that anything, which attempts to hold them back or implies the reversion of their newly-won independence has to be constantly exposed and criticised. The significance of the movement to criticise Lin Piao and Confucius is that it provides a general political context within which this work of exposure can be carried out with intensity, and where political conclusions can be reached. In November 1974, the *People's Daily* published an article by the theory study group of the Tien Chun Commune and criticising group of Beijing and Tsinghua University, which gives some indications of the sorts of issues involved. They write:

"In collective production, some units have not done enough in carrying out the principle of 'equal pay for equal work among the sexes'. This is bound to affect women's initiative in participating fully both in revolution and

production... It should be realised that carrying out the principle of 'equal pay for equal work' is by no means a trivial thing of arguing for a few work points, but a serious issue concerned with the total liberation of women, concerned with firmly applying the economic policy laid down by Chairman Mao, and also concerned with a downright cut-off from the traditional idea of Confucianism.

"In the aspect of family life, the remnant influence of husband authority... is also in existence. Some couples take part in collective production, work together, and yet do not share household work. There is still the phenomenon that 'women go home to cook meals, feed the pigs and shut up the chickens, whilst men go home to smoke their pipes wait for food and drink'. Some even laugh at those comrades who help their housewives with their housework.

"In the aspect of social convention and custom even more pernicious Confucian ideas linger on... For example, preferring a baby son to a baby daughter, sayings like 'more sons, more well-being', 'without sons there is no happiness', 'a family with only daughters is a dead-end family'; the notion that 'marriages must have dowries', 'there is no friendship without money being exchanged' and the idea of 'study to become an official'."

Such ideological struggle generates immense vitality and involvement.

In 1980-81, Margery Wolf visited China, met many women and recorded her observations on the basis of her interviews. In course of her conversations, one teacher of a nursery school in Beijing remarked that it was men, not women, who did all the innovations. While one can accept that men played a dominant role in the majority of these innovations, it is definitely wrong to suggest that women had no role to play, at least in Maoist China. Michael Opper has described in detail how in 1966, a group of 9 enterprising women workers built up a metallurgical factory on their own to produce spare parts for adjoining factories with iron oxide waste. Young Mongolian women of Ushenchao Commune showed remarkable initiative and leadership when they, thr-

ough tremendous effort, halted the desertification of grazing lands by successfully planting sand sage brush in the desert. One can multiply such instances.

As women became actively absorbed in the struggle for social transformation, the idea of a new ‘model woman’ emerged. This new woman, unlike the ‘housewife’ of the 1950s, was not confined to home; she actively takes part in the most difficult and hard work like men. In the vast agricultural tract of Dazhai, there were stories of 23 young girls — popularly called "Girls of Iron" who always undertook the most difficult and arduous tasks.

The question of women’s liberation was closely connected with the question of birth control and family planning. Oral pills, male contraceptives, introduction of a ring made of stainless steel in uterus, nylon intra-uterine devices, and vasectomy are some of the methods which were of use in many areas. The objectives of birth control are tied up with the emancipation of women: with her participation in production and her economic and political equality; with her own raised intellectual level and consciousness; with better health for all, smaller families, and healthy ones, in a society where public spiritedness and a sense of sharing enmeshes every citizen into a collective whole. In this true liberation of woman she has the ability to control her biology, and so birth control becomes part of the total programme of her own total equality.

There is no doubt that there will be no full equality for women without the socialisation of child-care and cooking. Ellen Leopold observes that in many areas this process had started. In the 1970s, as he writes, husbands now do a much greater share of the cooking and child-care. Laundry, bathing, sewing and mending facilities are all collectivised for political as well as economic reasons. Like the state provisions for child care facilities, these services further socialise the formerly private burdens of the individual household. In cities, neighbourhood committees had helped to redirect the focus of many women from household to community management. Problems of the individual family, borne largely by

the wife, have been reformulated as responsibilities of the social collective. Neighbourhood committees pay special attention to single parent families, families with a disabled parent, and to older people living alone. They involve them socially in productive or leisure activities and provide help with domestic chores. But 'serving the people' in this way is not a form of charity that capitalises on the 'natural' disadvantages of some members of the community. It is a conviction that human development cannot help but improve the welfare of the collective by improving the welfare of each individual within it. Neighbourhood committees also organise activities for children after school and during holidays. This often takes the form of productive community work — snow and street clearing, fly extermination, street decorations for local festivals, repair work for revolutionary veterans. Developing a community identity from an early age eliminates the causes of vandalism and public neglect. But at the same time, it also reduces the prolonged interdependence between children and their natural mothers. Chinese children learn early to trust all adults. Socialised virtually from infancy, they do no often display pathological fears of outsiders; adults are simply all 'aunts and uncles'. In this context, western insistence on the exclusive commitment of the mother to the emotional development of her child appears as simply another justification for keeping women at home.

The Chinese have always maintained that the liberation of women couldn't be achieved in isolation, but in a component part of the proletarian revolution. The conflict between sexes is defined as a 'non-antagonistic contradiction' that is one among 'the people' which is to be solved through patient education. The liberation of women is not just the exclusive concern of the women's movement but of all bodies and people in China. The precise nature of the relation of the women's movement to the wider revolutionary movement has tended to divide the women's movement around this question; Which should come first, class struggle or the struggle between sexes? The tension between these two

points of view came to a head on the eve of the Cultural Revolution.

In the early 1960s there was a strong tendency within the women's movement to think of women's liberation as an isolated cause in itself and one in which its members could solve their personal problems, decide their own priorities in public and domestic life and work out their own personal relationships without reference to the form which the political and economic system takes. The critics of this view argued that the women's magazines debated questions such as "What should be the criteria in choosing a husband?" and "What do women live for?" as if the future shape and colour of society were irrelevant and problems were peculiar to 'abstract' and 'above-class' women. They pointed out that if the question of women was primarily viewed as a sex distinction it became entangled in a web of circular arguments founded on their 'natural duties, functions or blessings'. They maintained that though women were especially oppressed and held a separate organisation, women did not form their own class however the term was defined. They belonged to different classes which determined their particular and social attitudes, same as men. That is, there was no viewpoint which was peculiar to men or women. Women, besides being made aware of their own oppression, had also to be aware of their class interests.

The above-mentioned controversy between the primarily bourgeois and socialist points of view on the relevance of political or economic systems for women's complete emancipation culminated in the virtual disbandment of the Women's Federation in 1966-67. During the Cultural Revolution the government set about to involve women directly in the same political and vocational framework as men. Women did play a very significant role in the Cultural Revolution, but there is also evidence that many associations and enterprises felt that so long as overall revolutionary aims were fulfilled there was no need to pay particular attention to the position of women. Since work in every field involved women, it was thought that it would be enough to involve women in every

field! Women in many areas once more felt the need for their separate organisation and it was the recognition of this need that was responsible for this rebuilding of the women's movement in the 1970s. The local women's federations had been re-established with the avowed aims of giving more attention to public and political questions, undertaking political study, participating in class struggle, involving more peasant and working women in their organisation as well as safeguarding the rights and interests of women. By the end of 1973 most provinces and municipalities had held representative conferences in preparation for the Sixth National Congress of Women.

The women's movement in China then was a continuing movement. It was recognised that women had not yet reached a position of equality or developed their full potential. As Mao Zedong, Song Qingling and others made it clear, the need for a women's movement will continue until the social transformation of society was complete. Not only is women's liberation a component part of the proletarian revolution, but they are interdependent. The success of each is seen to be dependent on the achievement of the other. What had been particularly impressive in Maoist China was the constant recognition and consideration given to the position of women at all government levels. In the end, however, it was the struggle within individual families, villages and factories, which could only be carried out by the women themselves, that was the key to their achievements. In this respect, the separate establishment of the organised women's movement, its programmes and work methods, have played a key role in establishing their separate identity and raising the self-confidence of individual women. It was out of this confidence that women had found the strength to exercise their collective will.

The death of Mao in 1976 was followed immediately by the arrest of Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan and Wang Hongwen, who were denounced by the new leadership as the 'Gang of Four', but who, in reality, constituted the core of the revolutionary headquarters within the CPC.

While still paying lip-service to Mao Zedong Thought, the new leadership sought to undermine the gains attained in course of the struggle against capitalist restoration under Mao's leadership. Besides other changes in the economic and political spheres, the reactionary rulers of China under Deng Xiaoping, sought to negate all those gains that directly affected the status of women. Contrary to the practice of involving women in all kinds of work without neglecting their physiological problems, the new leadership started to shift women to office work and also those which required lesser skill. Delia Davin ('China Now', March-April 1982) writes that women were "*transferred from the task of driving trains to 'more appropriate' office work in the railway bureau. Women as a group were excluded from skilled jobs which conferred higher wages and status to less skilled jobs which offered low wages. The signs of job-stereotyping were noticeable in other areas also. In the textile and handicraft industry, even in factories where the vast majority of the workforce was female, the supervisor tended to be male. Many ads. conveyed stereotyped images of women as housewives and mothers — reminiscent of the 'cult of the housewife' of the 1950s — the only people likely to operate washing machines, or as rapid decorative consumers of cosmetics and other luxury items. There were calendars, which exclusively portrayed women from classical beauties of history to modern young women with perms and westernised features*".

Men outnumbered women even at the stage of primary school but the inequality sharpened as one moved up the system and was greatest in elite institutes. Stereotyping images of girls was noticeable in children's books, for example where girls were portrayed as playing with dolls while boys handled action toys or girls didn't know what to do in some situation and boys gave the lead. kindergarten performances showed the same tendency by casting all the boys as drivers and all the girls as passengers or getting the girls to nurse their dolls while their boy-husbands go out to work.

Cultural forms are being used to spread decadent feudal and bourgeois values. ‘Beijing Review’ reported that a Japanese film ‘Yearning for Home’ was shown on TV throughout the country. The film depicted the lives of Japanese prostitutes in South-east Asia during 1900-1930. Replying to the criticism of those who said that certain parts of the dialogue and plot reflecting scenes in the brothel would “have a bad influence among the young people”, Beijing Review bluntly stated that “it is not safe to keep people in a safe”. The Beijing Opera returned to the old themes and started staging old bourgeois operas like ‘The Drunken Concubine’, which is about the emperor and his concubines. The patronage of decadent culture and bourgeois values was particularly noticeable in November 1980 when a semi-official exhibition of paintings was held in Beijing, many of whose exhibits were erotic female nudes. Preference for a male child has once again reared its head especially in the rural areas with negative consequences for the girl child. The women of China whose struggle for self-assertion and emancipation had been proceeding along a zigzag course along with the consolidation of socialism during the Maoist era was stalled, and the bourgeois leadership that seized power seeks to re-establish the old social order with all its muck, bloodshed and dehumanisation.

Mao once remarked that even if capitalism was restored in China, those forces would not be able to live in peace. Will the people of China allow the present ruling clique to turn their beloved country into an El Dorado to be ravaged by foreign imperialism and domestic reaction, or will they rise up in the true Maoist spirit, bombard the headquarters of reaction and the hawkers of death, and recapture political power to march onward resolutely and build up a truly socialist society? Let the East wind again prevail over the West wind. Let the people of the world respond to the great call Mao gave in 1970: "*People of the World, Unite and Defeat the US aggressors and all their Running dogs*".

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Originally published in India in 2004, this work examines the struggle for women’s liberation during and after the Chinese Revolution. While this obviously meant struggling against bourgeois and feudal forces, this also meant struggling against those within the Communist Party who failed to overcome chauvinistic attitudes towards women. These struggles have clear and important lessons to teach us in the continuing struggle for women’s liberation, where today we still face a virulently patriarchal society which breeds chauvinistic sex-pests and entitled creeps, even within the worker’s movement.