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Review Article

**The Chinese Socialist Revolution
and the Status of Chinese Women¹**

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The impact of Chinese revolution on Chinese women has attracted many Western feminist scholars' attention. Whether the socialist revolution has liberated Chinese women or not is a question of great importance to those who are concerned with not only the interests of womankind but also the development of feminist theory. Likewise, Western feminist studies on Chinese women are of great interest to Chinese women who share the same concerns. In this article, four Western scholars' works will be discussed from a Chinese woman's perspective with an attempt to begin a dialogue between Chinese and Western feminist scholars.

Feminism and Socialism in China by Elisabeth Croll (1978), Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China by Judith Stacey (1983), Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China by Kay Ann Johnson (1983), and The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women 1949-1980 by Phyllis Andors (1983) are selected for this study because they share a common theme, that is, the relationship between the socialist revolution in China and the role and status of Chinese women. Despite the common theme, the four authors differ in their focuses, arguments, interpretations and styles, though many issues they examine are the same, such as, the policies of the Jiangxi and Yanan, land reform, the Marriage Reform Campaign of the early 1950s, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the Campaign to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius.¹

Tracing the development of the Chinese women's movement, Croll presents a saga of the emancipation of Chinese women during the last one hundred years. With rich documentation, she carefully examines the relationship between feminism and socialism against different historical contexts and analyzes their impact on the role and status of

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Chinese women. The Chinese women's movement, as Croll demonstrates, has experienced major changes in its constituency, demands and goals. The early feminists, predominantly urban, middle and upper class, educated women, emerged from the historical high tide for "national salvation" at the beginning of the twentieth century. With strong patriotic sentiment, they actively participated in the 1911 Revolution and the May Fourth movement. Greatly influenced by Western ideologies, especially the women's suffrage movement in Europe and the United States, Chinese feminists began to organize their own suffrage movement and raise demands for women's equal rights.

However, the tiny minority of feminists were soon disillusioned by the contemporary political structure and their own ability to improve the situation of women. A major division occurred, with one group concentrating on social welfare and self-help activities, and another being determined to search for alternative political structure which would provide broader political solution to women's oppression. Many in the latter group joined the new-born Chinese communist party, who actively pushed the women's movement in alliance with labor and peasant movements in the National Revolution between 1925 and 1927. These future leaders for both the Communist revolutionary movement and the women's movement believed that "the redefinition of the role and status of women required changes in the total socio-economic structure of society which in turn required the unity of China and above all the ousting of the foreign powers." And they "reject the Western model for the Chinese women's movement." (p. 114)

Croll shows a deep understanding of and sympathy for the ideological framework of the Communist feminists, though she is sensitive to the tension that framework brought to the women's movement. "Which should come first, political or class struggle and establishment of socialism, or the struggle between the sexes or feminism?" (p. 5) Croll examines this tension and describes "an uneasy alliance between feminism and socialism" throughout the history of the women's movement. It is clear that although sexual oppression was experienced by all Chinese women, the issues that were important to the urban middle class women did not all reflect the needs of the urban working class women, let alone those of the rural peasant women. An interesting case is that in Guomindang China new laws regarding women's rights were passed that improved women's legal status. However, "the benefits of the law were confined to a small articulate section of self-supporting and independent women." (p. 156) Women in rural areas, under the bondage of poverty, isolation and illiteracy, hardly had any idea that there were new laws guaranteeing new social, political and economic rights. Even working women in the big cities saw new laws as the prerogative of the rich. "Many would say that new ideas were 'something for the rich people, like modern dress and automobiles.'" (p.174) This case convincingly supports Croll's thesis that significant change in Chinese women's lives depended on broader economic, social and

political transformations.

In the process of the broader transformations, however, sexual and class interests were not always interdependent, rather, they were sometimes in conflict. A prominent example is women's freedom of marriage and divorce. When women activists tried to carry out marriage reform in rural areas, both in the Nationalist Revolution and in the Jiangxi Soviet era, they faced tremendous opposition and the issue threatened to divide the revolutionary force. Croll describes the conflict between the women's movement and the wider revolutionary movement around the divorce issue, and the eventual subordination of women's issues to land reform and the anti-Japanese War. Instead of criticizing the CCP's handling of women issues, Croll emphasizes the complicated circumstances under which the decision was made.

The subordination of women's issues to the demands of the revolutionary movement, a constant theme noted by Croll, does not pose a major obstacle to women's liberation. For Croll, peasant women's active participation in the wide revolutionary movement also had strong emancipatory effect on women themselves. She persuasively demonstrates that women's contribution was indispensable to the success of the revolution, women identified their self interest with land reform, the anti-Japanese War and the fight against GMD armies, and more importantly, women gained confidence, self-respect and a new positive view of womanhood through their own heroic revolutionary activities. In Croll's view, women are active agents in transforming the Chinese society and meanwhile they themselves are more or less transformed by the process. This is a very sensitive appraisal of both women's role in the revolution and the revolution's effect on the consciousness of Chinese women, an appraisal which is lacking in Stacey's and Johnson's work.

Croll's sensitivity to the issue of women's consciousness is also revealed in her emphasis on the impact of CCP's propaganda. She presents many influential plays with positive portraits of female role models in the revolution and post-revolution eras. The CCP's ideological propaganda in the forms of play, film, opera, folk song was very effective in combatting the traditional negative views towards women, and very significant in raising both men and women's consciousness of gender equality, especially considering the fact that a large percentage of the population was illiterate. The effect of the ideological propaganda in artistic forms on transforming Chinese people's outlooks on class and gender issues is no less powerful than that of the American media on promoting or reenforcing sexism and consumerism in American culture. Croll makes a special contribution to understanding Chinese women's lives by examining this important aspect.

The history of the Chinese women's movement, as presented by Croll, illustrates a unique case in which feminists joined the Communist Party fighting both for the national liberation and women's liberation. Croll demonstrates effectively how the

historical circumstances led to this double struggle. However, she regards the Women's Federation as a separate force continuing the women's movement in the post-revolution era, which is questionable. Once the CCP controlled the state power, the Women's Federation became an organ that specialized in implementing the government policies for women. Although it has been possible for the WF to take some actions on their own initiative, it has never been an autonomous organization. Strictly speaking, since 1949 there has been no women's movement if we define it as a social movement outside of the government control. However, there have been campaigns for women's interests in line with the government policy. Will an independent women's movement emerge in the future? From a post-June fourth perspective, it may be possible when different interest groups come forward to strive for a pluralistic, democratic society. Only then will Chinese women be able to legitimately demand their self interest on their own initiative. Conceivably, this will be a long process of political and ideological transformation which requires a better understanding of the gender issue and a new appraisal of the Western "bourgeois" feminism by Chinese women and men.

Feminism and Socialism in China is extremely rich in historical, literary and anthropological sources, which contributes greatly to the high quality of the book. However, the author is obviously limited by the nature of the sources for the post-revolutionary period. Then she has to rely on a very unreliable source -- newspapers and magazines published in the PRC. This leads to her erroneous assessment of the Campaign to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius. Although some of the rhetoric of the Campaign was in favor of promoting women's status, most Chinese understood that the Campaign had little to do with the Party's effort to address the gender issue; instead, it was part of the continuing power struggle behind the scene. The same weakness can also be found in other three scholars' works, which testifies to the difficulty the Western scholars face when trying to study a closed society.

Contrary to Croll's sympathetic account of how the revolution changed the lives of Chinese women, Stacey presents a critical feminist view of the Chinese revolution. Focusing on the relationship between the CCP and the patriarchal family, Stacey argues that to win the support of peasants for people's war, the Party had to give up the commitment to gender equality but conform to the peasant restorationist vision of family revolution which led to the establishment of a new democratic patriarchy. She defines this new democratic patriarchy as "a patriarchal system whose gender and generational relationships were reformed substantially at the same time that patriarchy was made more democratically available to masses of peasant men." (p. 116)

As evidence to support her thesis, land reform turned out to be a passage toward this new democratic patriarchy as the majority of male peasants became the heads of private peasant economy; the Party's effort of collectivization of the rural economy only consolidated the peasant patriarchy as the individual household was still the basic

economic unit and women had no control over their income from their participation in production; the Party's military policy, by excluding women from the combat force, made a military fraternity the basis of male authority in China; and the family policy complemented land reform and "redistributed amongst the peasants the means of access to patrilocal marriages." (p.190) In sum, the revolution failed to liberate Chinese women because the Party strived to preserve a patriarchal family unit.

Stacey's feminist critique adds a strong gender dimension to the evaluation of the Chinese revolution, which is quite enlightening. But, ironically, if we also examine her work with a gender perspective, many questions occur. What was the role of women in the revolution? We see in Croll's rich documentation that women's participation was very important to the success of the revolution. Then why did women support the revolution if the Party was just eager to appeal to male interest? Did women have self-interest in the revolution? More specifically, did peasant women see their own interest in land reform and consequently in the "restoration" of a peasant family economy? Interestingly enough, Stacey has a ready answer to this last question: "For the majority of peasant men as well as the masses of peasant women, the right to family security was a more precious goal than the freedom to divorce." (p.172) In other words, the peasant women also cherished the security in the "patriarchal" family regardless of its oppression. If that is so, how can the Party's effort to make the patriarchal family available to peasants be regarded as just an appeal to male interest? Stacey is correct to observe that "The new, pro-family stance of the Chinese Communists reflected cumulative experience with rural revolution, during which the party learned to shape its socialist objectives to accommodate the restorationist ones of the peasantry." However, the "peasantry" should include peasant women. It seems that Stacey's feminist position makes her unwilling to admit that women can also be supporters of patriarchal system, though it does not prevent her from portraying Chinese women as passive victims of the Party's policies.

Another weakness in Stacey's work is the vague definition of patriarchy. She assumes a universal patriarchy and applies the concept freely to the Chinese situation. As a result, Chinese cultural specificity is lost in her analysis, or examples are indiscriminately described as patriarchal. In several places, she makes far-fetched criticism of "patriarchy." Correctly pointing out the case in which some women of the wealthy class became the victims of class struggle in land reform and were subject to sexual violence, Stacey goes on to claim that even Mao denied that rape was going too far. The quotation from Mao's works does not prove her accusation. What is more, in a patriarchal culture that placed extremely high value on female chastity, it is hard to imagine that any political leader would publicly condone rape. Another example is where she interprets the sent-down youth program as "the business of redistributing women to China's rural patriarchs." (p.243) While it is true that many urban young

women were sent down to the rural area, the percentage of female was lower than that of male, as many urban parents feared that their daughters might not be able to endure the hardship of the rural life. Moreover, as Chinese women generally want to marry up, many fewer urban educated women would like to marry peasant men who had lower social status and educational level than urban men would do to peasant women. After the government allowed unmarried sent-down youth to return to the cities, the big cities faced the problem of "surplus old maids," which testifies to the above fact.

Stacey's weakness in grasping Chinese culture, ironically, makes her insights more impressive. Her identification of a "public patriarchy," for example, has significant theoretical implications. She accurately points out that "the PRC made a new 'public patriarchy,' in which Communist party leaders assume the paternal role, integral to its civic society." (p.227) And "there are two key dimensions to this 'public patriarchy:' the formal subordination of mass organizations to the CCP and state supervision over personal life." (p.228) Although Stacey examines the function of the 'public patriarchy,' more questions on its impact on the gender relationship can be asked. How does the CCP's paternal role affect male heads of the families? Is it possible that the Party's dominant role reduced the male heads' autonomy and weakened their power, which in turn narrowed the power gap between men and women? Is there any correlation between the higher level gender equality in the cities and the fact that urban dwellers' life and work are more tightly controlled by the state, specifically, their working units? Many more questions can be formed by reading Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China, which is the unique value of the book.

Examining the CCP's policies concerning women in the revolution and post-revolution eras, Johnson covers the same time period as Stacey and also focuses on rural China. Johnson presents a view similar to Stacey's: that the CCP gave up the commitment to gender equality and left a traditional family system intact. But in making her argument, Johnson emphasizes the cultural perspective and provides more evidence. She carefully compares the Party's policies in different periods and convincingly argues that as the Party moved its base from cities to Jiangxi and then to Yanan family reform and women's rights were gradually dropped from its agenda. After the Yanan era, women's emancipation through participation in social production became the only way that the Party could perceive.

Johnson's analysis of why the Party shifted away from the May Fourth ideology of gender equality is: one, the CCP incorporated a large rural male constituency whose restorationist view of family contradicted the family reform ideas of feminists; two, the Party adopted the orthodox Marxist theory that women's economic activities outside the family would eventually liberate them from their subordinate status; three, the CCP leaders, including the leaders of the women's movement, were "culture blind"--they failed to see that Chinese women's subordinate status was rooted in the kinship system

and family structure. Actually, the last point is her central argument and it is stressed effectively throughout the book. She deplores the fact that the Party missed many opportunities to attack the kinship system and change the patrilineal and patrilocal social structure due to the Party's cultural blindness.

Perhaps not only Marxist theory on women's role "reinforces blinders to these crucial features so strongly embedded in Chinese society and culture." (p.232) Marxist class analysis also has the same effect. Since the CCP leaders adopted a class analysis to achieve a class realignment in the political struggle, it was difficult for them to look into the distinctive Chinese social structures that Marx did not explain. With a class analysis, the logic is that after overthrowing the exploiting class, the oppressed class would become masters. Women, belonging in the oppressed class, would certainly achieve equality. The class analysis also legitimized the Party's downplay of gender issue and avoidance of gender conflict.

The awareness of a distinctive Chinese culture allows Johnson to observe gender behaviors beyond a rigid feminist notion. Using Margery Wolf's concept of "uterine family," she analyzes female conservatism which is exemplified by the fact that many older women were strong opponents of marriage reform. Johnson points out the irony that "women, through their actions to resist passivity and total male control, became participants with vested interests in the system that oppressed them." (p.21) But she does not address the thorny problem: when women identify their interests with the traditional family system, how can a feminist attack avoid jeopardizing women's interests and win their support?

When Johnson effectively proves the fallacy of the Marxist theory on women's economic role, she tends to interpret the economic determinism too narrowly. It is true that women's participation in the social production will not automatically result in women's emancipation. And it is also true that patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocal social structure is the key to women's oppression. But how to change this structure? Will political and ideological campaigns be sufficient to solve the problem? Isn't the Chinese kinship system and family structure associated with a static isolated small peasant economy? The huge transformation of social organization is most likely to occur when the economic pattern changes on a large scale. In this sense, it might be the CCP's inability rather than its unwillingness that prevented it from launching a frontal attack on the traditional family structure since eighty percent of Chinese population still engaged in the traditional pattern of economy.

The past decade's economic reform demonstrates that a free development of peasant family economy would change the economic landscape more rapidly than the state controlled collectivization would do. This fact may discredit the theory that the restoration of peasant family economy necessarily consolidates the patriarchy. However, as Johnson's critique of Chinese rigid residence policy indicates, a precondition of

shattering the patriarchy system along with economic forces is to allow social mobility. When we advocate a large scale socioeconomic transformation, it is important to note that a free economy may accelerate the demise of patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocal system, but it may also cause large scale social dislocation in which many women may become victims. To mitigate women's misery in the process of social transformation, Chinese feminists should actively arouse the societal awareness of the gender issue and beware of any state policy that deliberately or inadvertently victimizes women. In this respect, Stacey's and Johnson's critiques of the CCP's policies provide an excellent example.

Johnson's work on the whole is based on abundant evidence and careful analysis, but her interpretations of the political campaigns in the post-revolution era reveal the common weakness shared by the other authors, that is, relying too much on the Party's rhetoric rather than the social reality. It is not clear how women's lives were affected by those campaigns, or how gender relationship was changed by them. A question neglected by all the authors is: what did the incessant class struggles mean to women? One obvious consequence was that some social groups were identified as class enemy. Some of them were classified according to their economic status, like landlords and capitalists; others were labeled as class enemy because of their political views, like counterrevolutionaries, rightists. The class enemy was mostly composed of males as they were more active in political and economic fields. Thus the most cruelly discriminated social group in China was not women. It will be interesting to analyze this fact from a gender perspective. And to understand women's status better, it is important to examine the dynamic and dialectic gender relationship.

Like Stacey and Johnson, Andors exposes women's subordinate status in socialist China. Unlike them, Andors examines the effect of the Party's policies on both rural and urban women, as a result, she sees more positive changes in women's lives. The contrast between urban and rural women brings Andors close to Marxist economic theory. She emphasizes the importance of women's participation in social production as she observes how economic activities outside the family improved urban women's status. And she supports the Western modernization theory that women's improvement depends largely on economic development.

In her analysis, Andors is sensitive to the uneven development between rural and urban areas. When industrialization provided urban women opportunity of employment, education and improved material life, rural women were disadvantaged by poor rural economy and oppressive traditional roles. The pattern was further differentiated within urban and rural areas, which means Chinese women experienced different level of change and improvement. The solution to this problem, as Andors suggests, is to develop the economy and to carry out ideological campaigns.

In principle, her solution is sound. But the specific means she advocates is

problematic. Andors regards collectivization as the route to rural women's emancipation and highly evaluates the Great Leap Forward as it promoted women's participation in the public sphere. It seems that she is enchanted by the progress the GLF made in women's social status, but she neglects the huge economic and human cost of the GLF. The drastic push to collectivize the rural economy literally destroyed agrarian production. Combined with other factors such as natural disasters, in the following three years, thirty million people died of starvation. Conceivably, most of them were women. As was shown above, large scale collectivization of peasant economy has been proved not to be in the best interest of either male or female peasants.

Likewise, Andors' endorsement of political campaigns reveals her one-sided view again. Although it is true some of the campaigns widely spread the concept of gender equality, in most cases they created tension in the society and made numerous victims. An irony can be found in the history of PRC's class struggle: women as an oppressed group might benefit from the ideological attack on restrictive traditional values and cultural norms, but meanwhile, individual women's lives might be severely affected by the cruel class struggles. The complicated social reality in China requires us to consider many aspects of women's lives before drawing conclusions.

With their strengths and weaknesses, all the works discussed here are valuable to anyone concerned with feminist issues or Chinese women's history. The four authors have provided important lines of inquiry for us to pursue further. For instance, we agree with Elisabeth Croll that the struggle for Chinese women's liberation was combined with the struggle for Chinese national liberation and circumstances required the subordination of the former to the latter if the two were in conflict. But when the historical circumstances have changed, will the subordination of gender issue still be justified? Without a national crisis and the storm of class struggles, the gender issue may become prominent in China and an independent women's movement that promotes and consolidates women's gains in all aspects of social life may not only be necessary but also possible. The rapid growth of women's magazines, study groups and associations in the past decade has shown the sign of this trend.

The patriarchal family, as Stacey and Johnson maintain, is the key to women's oppression. Will a frontal attack be feasible and effective in the Chinese cultural and economic context? With the economic reform, families have again become units of production in rural areas. Unity and cooperation between male and female family members are crucial to the family economic prosperity and to individual family members' well-being. In urban areas the political vicissitudes and economic scarcity have made family a real refuge and welfare institution for both men and women. In either case it is hard to imagine that Chinese women would desire a frontal attack on the family for the sake of gender equality. Moreover, the greatly improved gender relationship in the urban families demonstrates that social reorganization brought by

economic development can effectively weaken the patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal system. Andors' work testifies to this point. The solution to women's subordination, then, seems to lie in the prospects of China's economic development.

Emphasizing the importance of economic development, however, does not mean that Chinese women have to wait passively for economic forces to push them forward. As a social agent, they have played an indispensable role in both the revolution and post-revolution era. With their improved social status and greater involvement in socioeconomic life, it is conceivable that Chinese women will play a more important role in China's future development. But history has proved that women's contribution to the society and family does not automatically guarantee their equal rights in both public and private spheres. Therefore, it is extremely important for women themselves to realize that they are a crucial social force that should not be belittled and that they are entitled to any rights that men enjoy. In other words, only when women have a high gender consciousness will they be able to actively struggle for and achieve gender equality in the process of socioeconomic development. In raising gender consciousness, feminist ideology is a must. Again, we agree with Andors' suggestion that ideological campaign is important to improving women's status. Before an independent feminist campaign becomes feasible, Chinese women may have to explore a variety of ways to promote gender consciousness and to spread feminist ideology. In this process, it is always necessary to remind ourselves of the issues that concern Chinese women most; of the diversified interests among different groups of women; and of the Chinese cultural specificity. Western scholars have sharply pointed out the limits of Chinese women's liberation, now it is Chinese women's task to carry on the unfinished women's liberation movement.

Note

1. I disagree with Emily Honig who thinks Stacey, Johnson and Andors all argue that the CCP failed to liberate Chinese women because the Party did not have the commitment to gender equality, and "the bottom line for the Party, in a sense, was to preserve the patriarchal family." At least, it is not the view of Andors who even seldom uses the term patriarchy, rather, she makes a distinction between "the traditional extended family" and "the nuclear family." See, Andors, p. 34, and Emily Honig, "Socialist Revolution and Women's Liberation in China--A Review Article," Journal of Asian Studies XLIV, no. 2 (February 1985): 329.