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# Creating a Socialist Feminist Cultural Front: *Women of China* (1949–1966)

Wang Zheng\*

**ABSTRACT** This article is a study of socialist feminist cultural practices in the early PRC. It investigates stories behind the scenes and treats the All-China Women's Federation's official journal *Women of China* 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. A close examination of discrepancies between the covers and contents of the magazine explicates multiple meanings in establishing a socialist feminist visual culture that attempted to disrupt gender and class hierarchies. Special attention to state feminists' identification with and divergence from the Party's agenda illuminates a unique historical process in which a gendered democracy was enacted in the creation of a feminist cultural front when the Party was consolidating its centralizing power. The article demonstrates a prominent "gender line" in the socialist state that has been neglected in much of the scholarship on the Mao era.

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This article is part of a large project on feminism in the People's Republic of China. Focusing on the flagship publication of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), *Women of China*, during the first 17 years of the PRC, I intend to recapture a past that had barely any chance to become known to the English-speaking world before it was "forgotten" in China.<sup>1</sup> The article does not claim to be a comprehensive study of the magazine, which published 238 issues by the end of 1966.<sup>2</sup> Rather it highlights a few of its features to illustrate socialist state feminists' cultural practices in the socialist revolution. The term "socialist state feminists" refers to women Communist Party members in powerful positions who consciously promoted women's empowerment and equality between men and women. Although many of these women may never have defined themselves as "feminist," I use the term to distinguish them from Communists who had little commitment to gender equality, to establish a

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1 The CCP's joining global capitalism has significantly relied on erasure of a socialist past in the public discourse. The extravaganza at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games explicitly demonstrated this.

2 Hou Di, deputy editor-in-chief of *Women of China* in the Mao era, remembers that the magazine suspended publication after February 1967. But the electronic collection of the magazine does not include the two issues in 1967 and I have not found them in any libraries.

feminist genealogy in 20th-century China and to locate their activism in the context of global feminist movements.

Going further than previous scholarship on literary and visual representation of gender and class in popular arts and media of the Mao era,<sup>3</sup> this study extends a gender lens to the historical process of producing symbols, icons and discourses in the production of “CCP propaganda” or “Maoist gender discourse.” Aiming to address the concealment and erasure of a socialist feminist history, it treats *Women of China* as a dynamic site of feminist contention through revealing the behind-the-scenes stories that were crucial to understand feminist struggles in socialist China. It uses interviews with eight retired senior officials of the ACWF and three generations of editors of *Women of China* conducted in Beijing from 2006 to 2010, in addition to memoirs and biographies of women in the CCP published in the past two decades in China. Internal documents compiled by the ACWF since the late 1980s also provide indispensable contextualized information on the internal workings of the ACWF and the relationship between this gender-based mass organization and the Party.

Socialist state feminist practices express both identification with and divergence from the male-dominated power centre. Close attention to the ways in which state feminists identified with the Party Centre’s agenda, quietly diverged from its imperatives or openly challenged sexism in the Party may help us understand how gender functioned in socialist state and ideological formation. This study is therefore an effort to redefine the Communist Party and socialist revolution by bringing women back to the centre stage. Communist women’s innovative operation *within* the political system challenges the widely held assumptions of a “totalitarian state.” Indeed, precisely because of their faithful adherence to the Party’s mass line (*qunzhong luxian* 群众路线), state feminists effectively created a public space that enabled diverse voices of women and men from different social and geographic locations to be heard. Their identification with the Party Centre could simultaneously empower and constrain them, a contradictory reality underlying their innovative strategies to realize their visions of women’s liberation in the construction of a socialist China. Understanding their strategies and visions, I argue, holds the key to a fuller picture of the early PRC.

*Women of China* epitomized the complexity of socialist state feminist endeavours in multiple dimensions. It allows us to trace tension and contention between state feminists’ persistent preoccupation with women’s liberation and the Party Centre’s rapidly shifting priorities in political, economic and military affairs, and between state feminists’ attempts to follow the Party’s agenda and their efforts to meet the demands of women of diverse social backgrounds in the socialist revolution. This article tackles the complicated entanglement of

3 See Tina Mai Chen, “Female icons, feminist iconography? Socialist rhetoric and women’s agency in 1950s China,” *Gender and History*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2003), pp. 268–95, and Harriet Evans, “Comrade sisters’: gendered bodies and spaces,” in Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald (eds.), *Picturing Power in the People’s Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), pp. 63–78.

webs of relations and dynamic interplays of contradictions by focusing on the key players in the magazine, the shifts in its contents and the themes of the covers. Life stories of leading figures of the magazine are highlighted to add a personal dimension to their revolutionary performances. Special attention is paid to the discrepancies between the contents characterized by changing themes and formats as well as a multiplicity of voices, and the cover images representing consistent themes. The meanings of such discrepancies and disconnections present a key puzzle in my investigation of socialist state feminist efforts to build a feminist cultural front.

### Leading Actors behind the Scenes

*Women of China* was the only national women's magazine to circulate continuously during the years before the Cultural Revolution.<sup>4</sup> The magazine first appeared in Yan'an on 1 June 1939 when the Communist Party was engaged in the resistance against Japan.<sup>5</sup> It suspended publication in 1942 but was revived in July 1949 as *Women of New China*, under a resolution of the First National Congress of Chinese Women on the eve of the founding of the PRC.<sup>6</sup> The magazine's editors in Yan'an and after 1949 were mainly from the cohort who joined the Communist Revolution in the 1930s. *Women of New China* was officially affiliated with the newly established All-China Women's Democratic Federation (ACWDF).<sup>7</sup> A member of the Executive Committee of the ACWDF and Director of the ACWDF's Propaganda and Education Department, Shen Zijiu 沈兹九 (1898–1989), was appointed the revived magazine's first editor-in-chief.

Shen belonged to the May Fourth generation. From a comfortable business family in Hangzhou, she attended the Provincial Girls Normal School in Zhejiang and taught in an elementary school after graduation. She married at 17 and had a daughter, but her marriage soon ended in tragedy when after graduating from the Philosophy Department of Beijing University her young husband died of typhoid during a visit home. Shen rejected the confinement of widowhood in her husband's wealthy family, and in 1921 went to study in Tokyo, leaving her daughter with her mother. She returned to China in 1925 where she continued to pursue an independent career by taking on teaching positions in Huangzhou. However, she found her identity as a "little widow" continued to attract

4 After the founding of the PRC, over 30 newspapers included a women's supplement and some local Women's Federations also began to publish women's journals. These publications had localized circulation and various durations of existence.

5 *Zhongguo funü zazhi jianjie (A Brief Introduction to Women of China)*, internal circulation of memoirs produced by the Press of *Women of China*, 1999. It is a CD without page numbers.

6 *Women of New China* was changed back to *Women of China* in 1956.

7 The name reflected its membership of the Women's International Democratic Federation. It changed to the All-China Women's Federation in 1957 at its third National Congress.

unwanted attention so she decided to “overthrow the arch of chaste widowhood” by a second marriage.<sup>8</sup>

Shen Zijiu’s second husband was an official whose gender prejudices became intolerable to Shen and she ended her marriage in 1931.<sup>9</sup> Up to this point, Shen had consistently pursued May Fourth feminist ideals of gender equality and women’s liberation by insisting on equality in marriage and maintaining an independent career. Her failed second marriage, the Japanese invasion in 1931 and the bankruptcy of her father’s silk company prompted her to look for a new direction in life. She went to Shanghai where she was hired by Zhongshan Culture and Education Institution to translate Japanese articles for the journal *Collection of Current Affairs* (*Shishi leibian* 时事类编). She shared a rental house with her film director brother Shen Xiling 沈西苓 and extended her circle of friends, most of whom were left-oriented young intellectuals and underground Communists. After a year working as a translator she was invited to edit *The Women’s Garden* (*Funü yuandi* 妇女园地), a newly created weekly supplement of the Shanghai News (*Shen bao* 申报). This new position marked a turning point in Shen’s life.

In the initial issue of *The Women’s Garden* published on 18 February 1934, Shen revealed her discontent with the outcome of the May Fourth feminism to which she had adhered. Alongside her criticism of emancipated and intellectual women for their concerns with modern trends, love and the arts, her descriptions of the hardship suffered by rural women and female factory workers expressed a strong sympathy with women of lower classes. *The Women’s Garden*, she stated, was a space for women to raise their demands and to pour out their sufferings. Shen soon found herself busy receiving young women visitors who wanted to contribute to this work and, supported by their links with the underground Communists, she moved on to found the magazine *Women’s Life* (*Funü shenghuo* 妇女生活) when the weekly supplement was suspended by the Nationalist government in 1935.<sup>10</sup>

*Women’s Life* swiftly made Shen Zijiu a celebrity. As a leading activist in mobilizing women’s participation in the national salvation movement, she attended the 1938 Lu Mountain meeting of women organized by Song Meiling 宋美龄, after which she became head of the cultural affairs group in the reorganized New Life Movement Women Supervision Committee. In this role, she

8 Shen Zijiu, “Nuola zuotanhui” (“A symposium by Noras”), in Dong Bian, Li Suzhen and Zhang Jiafen (eds.), *Nüjie wenhua zhanshi Shen Zijiu (Shen Zijiu, a Woman Fighter on the Cultural Front)* (Beijing: Chinese Women Press, 1991), pp. 234–38.

9 Years later Shen recalled an argument between them. “When he failed to win the argument, he angrily uttered, ‘A woman should not talk so much. A talkative woman is a woman with a long-tongue [fond of gossip].’ What an insulting remark!” *Ibid.* p. 236.

10 See a memoir by Shen’s daughter, Zhang Lüyi, “Ta zhaodaole yao zou de lu” (“She found the road she had been looking for”), in Dong, Li and Zhang, *Shen Zijiu*, pp. 204–14. For a discussion of *Women’s Life*, see Louise Edwards, *Gender, Politics, and Democracy: Women’s Suffrage in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008). The author does not discuss the fact that this influential women’s magazine in the Nationalist controlled areas was actually affiliated with the CCP and many CCP writers were frequent contributors.

became involved in promoting a coalition of women of different classes and political persuasions for the resistance, and in running literacy classes and political training workshops for women factory workers. Shen formally joined the CCP in 1939 and in 1940 Zhou Enlai, having decided to maintain her public identity as a non-partisan social activist, assigned her to assist Hu Yuzhi 胡愈之, a renowned writer, translator and journal editor and a CCP member since 1922, working among overseas Chinese in Singapore for the resistance war. Shen married Hu and during the post-war years the couple worked together to set up the South Sea Press, publishing progressive journals to reach overseas Chinese. They returned to China in 1948. Shen became editor-in-chief of *Women of New China* and her husband was appointed the first director of the State Publishing Bureau in the PRC.<sup>11</sup> Lending much prestige to the new magazine, Shen's appointment guaranteed the transmission of a feminist heritage originating with the May Fourth era.

*Women's Life* also introduced many middle and high school girls to the CCP, some of whom became Shen's colleagues in *Women of New China* and the ACWF after 1949. Among them was Shen's successor in the magazine, Dong Bian 董边 (1916–98). Discrimination and mistreatment accompanied Dong's childhood. The third daughter of a small landlord in Shanxi province, she was blamed for her family's misfortune to fail to produce a son. She started to work in the fields and do chores at home at the age of five. After four years' elementary school, Dong staged a hunger strike to protest against her father's decision not to allow her to continue her education. Her father relented and she went on to complete her primary and middle school education in Xin county. As the only girl in her class, she went alone to Taiyuan to take high school entrance exams and was accepted by Taiyuan Girls High School, an elite school in the capital of Shanxi province. The quiet poor student from a small village excelled in her class and she dreamed of going on to Beijing University and, like Shen Ziju whom she had come across in the pages of *Women's Life*, of becoming an educated independent woman.<sup>12</sup>

The Marco Polo Bridge Incident in July 1937, a crucial event that drove numerous young students out of schools and into the resistance to save China, decisively changed the course of Dong Bian's life. Intellectually and politically stimulated by the feminism and nationalism advocated in *Women's Life*, she joined the Eighth Route Army in 1938. She stayed in Yan'an for eight years and excelled as a student at the Women's University and Yan'an University.

11 For more information on Shen Ziju, see Dong Bian's essay "Keqin kejing de Shen dajie" ("A sister worthy of friendship and respect"), in Dong, Li and Zhang, *Shen Ziju*, pp. 158–65. The volume contains many essays written by former readers of *Women's Life* who became CCP officials.

12 For Dong Bian's life, see her daughters' memoirs "Tian Jiaying de haizi huiyi muqing-Dong Bian" ("Tian Jiaying's children remember their mother Dong Bian"), *Yanhuang chunqiu*, Vol. 12 (1999), [http://www.gmw.cn/content/2004-11/21/content\\_133330.htm](http://www.gmw.cn/content/2004-11/21/content_133330.htm), accessed 1 March 2010; and "Dong Bian yi Tian Jiaying zai Yan'an de rizi" ("Dong Bian remembers Tian Jiaying in Yan'an"), *Dangshi bolan*, Vol. 2 (2010), [http://news.ifeng.com/history/zhongguojindaishi/detail\\_2010\\_04/27/1461088\\_0.shtml](http://news.ifeng.com/history/zhongguojindaishi/detail_2010_04/27/1461088_0.shtml), accessed 15 May 2010.

She was selected to work in the Party Central Political Research Office in 1941, the only woman researcher in her group. There she met Tian Jiaying 田家英 (1922–66), a talented young writer and recent divorcé from Chengdu. Dong and Tian’s romance was nurtured by their shared political and intellectual concerns, and when Tian proposed to Dong, she raised three conditions before agreeing to marriage: “First, family affairs should be decided by the woman; second, help each other and progress together; third, feelings for each other should not be estranged because of transfer of posts.” Tian accepted all three conditions and they married in 1942. Tian kept his promise, and when Dong decided in 1944 to leave her new-born son with a village woman in order to pursue her work, he agreed to her decision.

Dong was assigned to various posts in charge of local district Party branches or land reform work in the Jidong area of Henan province, separated from Tian for three years. At the end of 1948 they reunited in Xibaipo, the new location of the CCP Central Committee. Tian was assigned a new post as Chairman Mao Zedong’s secretary, and Dong was assigned to study at the Party’s school. However, with her activist commitments, Dong wanted to engage in grassroots work, and the opportunity came when Deng Yingchao issued her an invitation.<sup>13</sup> Dong was assigned to the editorial of the new magazine *Women of New China* and, tutored by her idol Shen Zijiu, swiftly rose to the position of deputy editor-in-chief. After Shen was transferred to the Chinese Democratic Alliance in 1956, Dong became editor-in-chief, a position to which she devoted unswerving energy until 1966.<sup>14</sup>

During her 17 years’ tenure in the magazine, Dong Bian wrote numerous articles, initially under her own name but then, as was standard practice at the time, anonymously as part of the “the editorial group” or “reporter of the journal” after she became the deputy editor-in-chief. Shen Zijiu’s name also only appeared once as an author in an early issue. In an era when being an anonymous hero was the promoted behavioural norm, Dong remained unknown to the general public. In any case, fame and fortune were not in her vocabulary. Writing editorials and essays for publication or drafting work reports for the ACWF were simply part of her responsibilities. She was also extremely frugal in her lifestyle, for example preferring to take the bus to work rather than the chauffeur-driven car to which as an official she was entitled.<sup>15</sup> Her “Yan’an-style”

13 See “Tian Jiaying’s children remember their mother Dong Bian.”

14 Dong’s two daughters, Zeng Li and Zeng Zi, could not recall any occasion when their mother took them to parks, shops or hospitals. It was always their father who took them out. Respected by her husband, Dong also enjoyed the institutional childcare support assigned to official families, with a Manchu woman undertaking domestic responsibilities. I interviewed Zeng Li and Zeng Zi on 25 June 2010. During the last ten months of her life, Dong Bian was hospitalized and cared for by her daughters. It was then she related her life story to them. The characters of the daughters’ names, *zili*, mean “self-reliance.”

15 Dong Bian’s colleague, deputy editor-in-chief Hou Di, related details of Dong’s frugality in my interview with her on 1 July 2010. Hou Di’s memoir of Dong Bian, entitled “Ren buyiding weida, dan keyi gaoshao” (“One does not have to be magnificent but can be noble”), is published in *Women of*

leadership brought huge savings to the press of *Women of China*. She was also responsible for initiating the compilation of the history of the Chinese women's movement by the ACWF after the Cultural Revolution. She edited many volumes of memoirs of "elder sisters," the Communist women leaders of the first cohort who died in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Her extraordinary efforts for these publications in her old age demonstrated her determination to produce a women's history of the Chinese revolution. However she never wrote a memoir of herself. Self-effacement, a characteristic "virtue" of Dong Bian and many other Communist women leaders, contributed to the concealment of these important historical actors.

### Making a Popular Women's Magazine in Socialist China

For these activists, the founding of the PRC marked the beginning of a long-awaited time when women's liberation would no longer be put on the back burner. 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."<sup>16</sup> It also did not hesitate to call on women's active participation in socialist revolution and socialist construction since this was understood as *the* way to achieve women's liberation. With the double theme of "participation" and "liberation," adopting the Party's mass line as the guiding method, the magazine soon evolved into a public forum for state feminists to express their visions of a new socialist China as well as a major site for their discursive practice in the pursuit of women's liberation.

Shen Zijiu played a major role in fashioning the socialist feminist magazine in its initial stage. It was Shen who insisted that the magazine be financially self-supporting. In her memoir, Dong Bian reveals that Shen was discontented with the initially stagnant sales of the magazine when the People's Press managed its publishing and marketing.<sup>17</sup> Establishing a financially independent Press of *Women of New China* thus suggested Shen's vision of a women's cultural space exclusively run by the ACWDF, not bogged down by other state-run institutions that were beyond their control. *Women of New China* 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 for 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

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*footnote continued*

*China*, December 2001, pp. 16–18. An unabridged version of the memoir has this story of Dong Bian refusing to take a car.

16 "Jianmian hua" ("Opening greetings"), *Xin Zhongguo funü* (*Women of New China*), No. 1 (1949), p. 6.

17 See Dong Bian, "A sister worthy of friendship and respect."



the rest went to the government and the Women's Federation system. It ranked among the top four magazines in the Mao era.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

What accounted for this rapid increase in circulation during the pre-Cultural Revolution Years? What mechanisms were set up to promote the magazine's popularity besides its effective marketing? Changes in the content suggest editors' constant exploration to extend its influence. At the founding of the PRC, 95 per cent of women in China were illiterate. Constrained by this reality, the magazine set out to target two groups of women: those with a middle-school education and above and government officials at the county level and above. Although it was primarily designed as a vehicle for women officials to exchange their experiences in women-work,<sup>20</sup> the magazine also emphasized educating literate women and transforming them into new women in socialist new China. In order to expand women's intellectual horizons and transform their world views as well as way of living, *Women of New China* allocated significant space to domestic and international political affairs (activities of the Women's International Democratic Federation were highlighted to connect Chinese women with the international women's movement and to forge global sisterhood),<sup>21</sup> Marxist theory and Chinese women's history, in addition to brief reports of how women workers, peasants or urban women students took the new road of becoming socialist new women.

This pedantic or even dogmatic form of education might be adequate for the already "converted," that is, women CCP members in official posts who were

18 The other three were *Xuexi (Study)*, *Zhongguo qingnian (Youth of China)*, and *Remin wenzue (People's Literature)*. Hou Di, "Nanyi wangque de naduan lishi" ("Unforgettable history"), internal collection of memoirs produced on a CD by the Press of *Women of China* in 1999. *Xuexi* was renamed *Hongqi (The Red Flag)* in 1958 and *Qishi (Seeking Truth)* in 1988. See <http://info.information.taojinmen.com/258861/269425>, accessed 22 January 2010.

19 The price of a copy of the magazine at the time was 12 Chinese cents. The market success in the socialist period was not so much profit driven since none of the members of the press benefited financially. One male editor complained to me that those elder sisters (leaders) were so frugal that they sat on the huge surplus without even purchasing a car for the press in all those years. They could have easily afforded 20 cars at the time, but instead, everyone had to either ride a bike or take a bus.

20 By 1953 there were 40,000 women officials in the Women's Federation system nationwide. For an examination of the WF's institutional development in the 1950s, see Wang Zheng, "State feminism? Gender and socialist state formation in Maoist China," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2005), pp. 519–51. The number rose to 60,000 in the 1960s and 90,000 in the 21st century. The total number of women officials in the PRC was 150,000 in 1951 and 764,000 in 1956. See Dong Bian, Cai Asong, and Tan Deshan (eds.), *Women de hao dajie Cai Chang (Our Good Elder Sister Cai Chang)* (Beijing: Party Central Archives Press, 1992), p. 80.

21 The ACWDF became a member of the WIDF in 1949. Practices initiated by the WIDF became part of the political culture in the PRC, such as the annual celebration of International Children's Day on 1 June. More importantly, in the Cold War era when China had few diplomatic relations with the West, the ACWDF became the most important international channel for the Chinese government, largely via the WIDF, and organized many international cultural exchanges. The international dimension of the ACWDF, an untold story, forcefully challenged the commonly held notion of "China's isolation" in the Mao era. For a study of the early years of the WIDF, see Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War paradigms in the Western historiography of transnational women's organizations: the case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)," *Women's History Review* (2010).

expected to use the magazine as teaching material in training women in diverse locations, thus repeating the format of *Women's Life* that targeted urban educated women in the 1930s. The urban focus, though, had a different historical context now that the Party was shifting its attention from rural-based warfare to urban-based industrialization. The magazine's mission statement reflects the Party's agenda by centring on the importance of women workers and urban industry.

However, these urban-focused editorial policies were soon questioned by readers of the magazine. In response to a request for feedback, the Advocacy Department of the Shan-Gan-Ning Women's Federation sent in two letters that were published in the May 1950 issue. A large-size font in bold in the contents highlighted the special column "Critical views of *Women of New China*."<sup>22</sup>

The first letter, signed by the Advocacy and Education Department of the Shan-Gan-Ning Women's Federation, stated that in order to provide suggestions for *Women of New China*, the Department hosted a special meeting to collect feedback from all women officials. At the top of the list of nine concrete suggestions is a critique of the journal's urban orientation. "The allocation of the space in the magazine tilts more towards the urban than the rural. We hope you will try your best to increase space on the rural without neglecting the urban work." More impressively, the letter devoted a large part to describing how the Department reviewed its own work and found its own faults in reporting rural and ethnic minority women. The Department had only contributed four reports on women in the north-west region, and of these "not even a single report was on rural and ethnic minority women in the north-west region. We have to seriously admit our own responsibility for this shortcoming." To redress this problem, the Department set up mechanisms such as submitting one contribution to the magazine each month on women in the north-west region, and developing a grassroots network of correspondents in the whole region to enable adequate reporting of rural women, in addition to plans of active involvement in marketing the magazine.

The second letter signed with a single author's name, Li Qiyang 李屹阳 (1918–), gave a detailed analysis of the magazine's column on texts for teaching literacy to workers and peasants. The author pointed out that the texts were detached from rural women's lives and the explanation of large political concepts were probably suitable for women officials but beyond the comprehension of women with little education. "In short, the literacy texts for workers and peasants are not suitable for the rural society. But in today's China the great majority of Chinese women are rural women. I think in the future it would be best if popular teaching texts in *Women of New China* take into consideration the great majority of women in the country."

Li Qiyang, 32 years old in 1950 and a Party member for 13 years, had worked for a long time among rural women in the north-west region including Yan'an

22 *Women of New China*, Vol. 11 (1950), p. 46.

and was the director of the Advocacy and Education Department of the Shan-Gan-Ning Women's Federation (soon renamed North-west Women's Federation). It was apparently she who organized the meeting to review their own work on the representation of women in the region under their jurisdiction and made effective plans and suggestions for improving both *Women of New China* and the work of her own Department. In 1951 Li also founded the first women's pictorial in the PRC, *The Northwest Women's Pictorial*, targeting illiterate rural women. Rural women could barter one egg for one copy of the *Pictorial*. In 1952 she was promoted to the position of interim director of the Advocacy Department of the ACDWF, suggesting that the editors of *Women of New China* appreciated both her constructive suggestions and her work in the North-west Women's Federation. In any case, it was Shen Zijiu who had introduced the high-school graduate Li Qiyang to the Communist camp of resistance back in 1937.<sup>23</sup>

What is especially notable here is that the leadership of the magazine initiated the solicitation of readers' criticisms prior to the Party Centre's similar action. The CCP Central Committee issued a formal decision on 19 April 1950. "The Decision on Starting Criticism and Self-criticism in Newspapers and Journals" pointed out that the Party held political power across the entire country, but that shortcomings and mistakes in its work might very easily jeopardize people's interests: its leadership position could induce conceitedness, and result in rejection and suppression of criticism. Therefore, the Central Committee decided to call for people's open criticism "of all the mistakes and shortcomings in our work in all the public occasions among the people and masses, especially in newspapers and journals."<sup>24</sup> It is unclear if the top Party leaders got the idea from their wives in the ACDWF who had started such action four months earlier. However, the editors of *Women of New China* felt it necessary to emphasize that they had started the review process long before the Party Centre's decision. The August 1950 issue included a "One-year summary of *Women of New China* monthly journal" by the editorial board. It stressed that editing a magazine for such a diverse readership was very challenging, and the editors knew they must have many shortcomings. Therefore, "before April this year we had already arranged review work." Now following the Party's decision, they decided to engage in a more thorough process of criticism and self-criticism. The summary was a

23 Li Qiyang's transfer to Beijing was because of the transfer of her husband who was then Xi Zhongxun's secretary. Li became the deputy governor of Gansu province in 1980 and retired in 1988. She has published two highly informative memoirs, *Huanghe dongliu (The Yellow River Running East)* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2003), and *Xibei liuyun (The Northwest Drifting Clouds)* (no publisher, which means it is not an officially registered publication, 2008). When I interviewed Li Qiyang in the summer of 2010, she could not remember writing the article, though she had a distinctive memory of creating the *Western Women's Pictorial*.

24 For the CCP's decision, see "Zhongguo gongchandang dashi ji - 1950" ("Major events of the CCP - 1950"), <http://news.enorth.com.cn/system/2006/06/19/001334591.shtml>, accessed 24 January 2010.

product of this process.<sup>25</sup> The case demonstrates that these state feminists were far from passive followers of the Party Centre. In their devotion to the cause of women's liberation their agency and initiatives often placed them in the vanguard of the Party. The Party's decision in 1950, however, also reflects the ethos in the CCP at the initial stage of its tenure as a state power holder.

The most visible improvement of the magazine following Li Qiyang's constructive criticism is expressed in the appearance of rural women on the cover. Before the May 1950 issue there had been no cover images representing rural women. But afterwards images of rural and ethnic minority women exceeded images of women workers, becoming the most prominent cover themes throughout the Mao era. This shift in representational orientation, preceding the central government's shifting attention to rural collectivization, demonstrates the advocacy of lower-ranking women officials in the cultural representation of women in the periphery. Although illiterate rural women and women who belonged to ethnic minorities were unlikely to read the magazine (let alone submit their opinions), local women officials did keep these women's interests in mind.

From June 1950 on, the covers of *Women of New China* portrayed an array of images of smiling rural and ethnic minority women 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 and even toasting Chairman Mao at a state banquet. This contributed to the formation of a new symbolic order that unambiguously disrupted deeply entrenched gender, class and ethnic hierarchies.<sup>26</sup> The constant appearance of such images on the cover conveyed a powerful message that women of the labouring class, or to use the widely circulated term at the time, *laodong renmin* 劳动人民 (labouring people), were now the dignified masters of new China. Proudly adorned in peasant outfits when mixing with state officials or urban labour models, rural women exuded confidence and self-assurance. There was no trace of anxiety of being seen as "backward" or "rustic" (土). Rhetorical schemes of "othering" by the urban elite would not become dominant until the post-Mao era when class realignment was in motion and modernity was redefined as Westernization. The images of rural and ethnic women prominently presented in the official media are historical evidence of a time when socialist state feminists were striving towards their Communist goal of eliminating gender, class and ethnic inequalities in China.

To increase the appeal of the magazine, the editors also set out to organize three groups, or in their term "three troops" (*sanzhi duiwu* 三支队伍). The first

25 *Women of New China*, Vol. 13 (1950), pp. 14–15.

26 Ellen Johnston Laing alerted me to the fascinating pictures on the covers of the first volume of *The Ladies Journal* in 1915. Twelve paintings capture a range of women's work within and outside the domestic setting, including one of a woman picking mulberry leaves and two others picking tea-leaves. The pictures have vastly different significance from those in the Mao era. No class or urban/rural distinctions are suggested as they prominently extol women's virtue of diligence. The contrast between the cover images of two mainstream women's magazines in the 20th century vividly conveys the drastic social, political, economic and cultural changes that have reconfigured gender in China.

was the troop of correspondents. *Women of New China* expanded its local networks of correspondents to include women and men working at the rural county cultural centres. By August 1950 there were already over 1,300 correspondents nationwide. To raise the quality of reports from the grassroots, the magazine ran periodic training workshops. The second was the troop of readers. With the assistance of local Women's Federations, editors regularly hosted meetings of readers' groups in urban and rural areas to hear readers' feedback after the publication of each issue. The third was the troop of professional writers and artists. The magazine regularly solicited literary and art works from renowned professional writers and artists to enhance its appeal; cartoons, for example, emerged in 1955 as a welcome device for criticizing erroneous ideas and practices. The magazine's prestige is shown by the frequent contributions from famous writers and artists. Literature editor Duan Yongqiang 段永强 (1932–) proudly recalls how easy it was for him to solicit articles from famous writers,<sup>27</sup> and art editor Shi Yumei 时玉梅 (1925–) who graduated from the Central Arts Academy fully utilized her social network to solicit top artists' paintings sometimes without having to pay.<sup>28</sup>

To guarantee the magazine's connection with the masses, a group of four editors was responsible for compiling summaries from readers' letters each month as the basis for editorial decision-making for the following issue. About 80 per cent of the space of each issue was designated to readers' letters and contributions from local correspondents and professional writers who produced short stories and biographies of heroines. The remaining 20 per cent was for editors' articles. Editors were also required to do fieldwork in rural villages and urban factories periodically, in line with the Party's tenet "from the masses and to the masses."<sup>29</sup> Hou Di 侯狄 (1924–), who joined the editorial board in 1954 and became the deputy editor-in-chief in 1956, remembered what Dong Bian often emphasized:

Our editorial board is like a processing factory. The raw materials are in the life of the masses, which are endless and abundant. As long as we have sharp eyes, quick hands and fast legs, we will be able to obtain them. Then with elaborate design and dexterous making by our editorial board, the processed "products" will be lively, vibrant, refreshing, and will meet readers' demands.<sup>30</sup>

In my interviews with Hou Di over a span of three years, she never failed to emphasize the mass line and attributed the popularity of the magazine to editors' persistent pursuit of "making the magazine close to the life of the women masses."

A major innovation in engaging a broad range of women readers occurred almost by accident. In 1954, Shen Zijiu, reading through submitted articles, found one reporting on the suicide of a woman official. Yang Yun had been

27 Interview with Duan Yongqiang, 18 July 2007.

28 Interview with Shi Yumei, 20 July 2009.

29 In the one-year summary published in August 1950, the editorial listed their weakness of connecting with the masses as the major problem and designed plans to address it. For readers' suggestions for improvement of the magazine, see also issues Nos. 11 and 16 in 1950.

30 Hou Di, "Nanyi wangque de naduan lishi" ("An unforgettable period of history"), in the electronic collection *Zhongguo funü 60 zhounian jinian (Remembering 60 years of Women of China)*, compiled by the Press of *Women of China*, 1999. Internal circulation.

separated from her husband by ten years of war, and committed suicide when she eventually found her beloved husband only to discover that he had just remarried. Shen decided to create a forum discussing “Why did Yang Yun commit suicide?” as a way to guide women towards a revolutionary outlook on marriage and the pursuit of the revolutionary cause. Publicizing a Party member’s suicide was unprecedented in official magazines. Readers responded with vehement and diverse opinions on Yang Yun and her husband and sales rocketed from 117,000 to 340,000 copies during the five months when the debate was going on.<sup>31</sup>

Once the format of inviting readers to participate in debate had proved an effective way to extend the magazine’s influence, the themes were not limited to shaping women’s revolutionary outlook. A few months after the conclusion of public discussions on the suicide case, Hou Di, then the head of the editorial group for readers’ letters, brought to the attention of the editorial committee a letter from a woman teacher Liu Lequn 刘乐群 condemning her high-ranking official husband’s affair with a young woman. Liu’s case could be characterized as representative at a time when many male Communist officials were busy changing wives after they entered urban areas (replacing old with young, rural with urban and illiterate with educated women). Hou Di, at the time 31, and her colleagues of the same cohort “all felt the tendency repulsive.” She explained in the interview: “In the base areas the gender ratio was sometimes one woman to 100 men. So those men would feel lucky to just get hold of a woman. But upon liberation they wanted to change wives. We in the editorial committee sneered at the phenomenon as ‘replacing a donkey with a horse (*qi lü huan ma* 骑驴换马).”

This sentiment was also shared by the senior cohort. After verifying the validity of Liu Lequn’s accusation, Shen Zijiu approved the exposé to be the focus of a daring forum “Why was our conjugal relationship broken?” in order to “educate people to establish Communist morality in marriage and family.”<sup>32</sup> But when the husband Luo Baoyi 罗抱一 learned of this, he pleaded with the editors not to publish Liu Lequn’s letter, promising that he would not divorce her. The top executive official of the ACDWF, Zhang Yun 章蕴 (1905–98) had a meeting with Liu Lequn and said that the ACDWF would leave it to her to assess if her husband genuinely wanted to fix their marriage or if this was just a ploy to avoid the exposé. Liu decided that it was the latter. Consequently, the sensational forum featuring Liu’s original letter appeared in the November 1955 issue.

Readers’ response was phenomenal. The number of letters soared from around 4,000 to over 8,000 each month over the eight months of the forum, and sales totalled over half a million in 1956. One thousand copies sold out instantly in front of a department store in Wangfujing, the heart of the business district in

31 Yang Yun, “Shen dajie jiaowo ban kanwu” (“Sister Shen taught me how to run a magazine”), in Dong, Li and Zhang, *Shen Zijiu*, pp. 166–78. Yang Yun (not to be confused with the woman who committed suicide) was in charge of the editorial group for political education in the mid-1950s. In this essay she gave a detailed account of how Shen made the decision to start this forum and taught her how to select and organize readers’ letters in order to incorporate readers’ views.

32 See Dong Bian, “A sister worthy of friendship and respect,” p. 162.

Beijing, when a shop clerk loudly hawked that *Women of New China* had printed a story on the morally degenerate assistant to the Minister of International Trade.<sup>33</sup> When asked if they had any apprehension about criticizing a prevailing phenomenon among high-ranking male officials, Hou Di replied: “No. We were young and simple-minded. Unlike people today worrying about this and that, we just wanted to speak out against whatever we thought was wrong. We were bold and fearless.”<sup>34</sup> However, they also used careful strategy. The editors solicited strong support from high-ranking male officials who had stable marriages and resented the tendency to change wives since it tarnished the image of the Party. The forum included essays by Xie Juezai 谢觉哉, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and Xie Xuegong 解学恭, the Party Secretary of the Ministry of International Trade where the accused husband worked, condemning “bourgeois individualism” and calling for Party members to uphold “Communist morality.” To obtain a contribution from the Chief Justice, an editor waited at the gate of the Supreme Court for hours until he stepped out of his office.

Rather than a one-dimensional tool for educating women to form a socialist outlook, the exposé of a male official’s affair highlighted another dimension of the magazine. It demonstrated how state feminists used the dominant political language (in this case “Communist morality education”) to shift the magazine’s target of education and legitimize their gender critique of what was quite a prevalent sexual practice among male officials. This manoeuvre revealed the continuation of the gendered tensions in the Party that had been generated by the new Marriage Law of 1950. Many Communist women had feared that the new law’s radical clause of unconditional divorce would put their marriages in jeopardy; in conditions of gender inequality and double sexual standards, freedom of divorce was more likely to benefit men with power and money and place divorced women in a predicament. The trend for male officials to “change wives” in the early 1950s proved the validity of their fear.<sup>35</sup> Although the editors involved in the exposé all had stable marriages, their enthusiastic participation in the forum demonstrated their resentment of the Party’s double standards of sexual morality. Their tactful yet conservative appeal to “Communist morality” expressed their desire to exercise some leverage in a system of unequal sexual power relations.

### “Educating Society about Women”

In sharp contrast to the shifting themes and multiple voices of the contents, the covers of *Women of China* presented a consistently stable theme throughout the 1950s and 1960s: the celebration of women’s work in all walks of life. Placing

33 The detail and stories behind the scenes were provided by Hou Di who was promoted to deputy editor-in-chief in the summer of 1956. See Hou Di, “An unforgettable period of history.”

34 Phone interview with Hou Di, 16 March 2010.

35 For an early discussion of this, see Delia Davin, *Woman-Work: Women and the Party in Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp.102–05. For a detailed description of CCP women’s debates over divorce when drafting the Marriage Law, see Jin Feng, *Deng Yingchao Zhuan (A Biography of Deng Yingchao)*, Vol. 2 (Beijing: People’s Press, 1993), pp. 457–61.

working women in the centre of visual representation of socialist women has multiple meanings. It suggests the identification of women with the project of socialist state building by highlighting their diverse public roles, celebrates their contribution to socialist construction, and by extension glorifies and elevates the work they perform, no matter how ordinary, thus raising them to the rank of the leading class of the socialist polity.

The magazine's cover images of urban women during the 1950s depict them almost always in roles previously associated with men. They include the first woman locomotive operator Tian Guiying 田桂英, the first group of women pilots, a housewife-turned-brick layer, a ship's captain, a shipping company's electrician, the head of a shift in a power distribution station, and so on. These images can be interpreted in several ways. First, as Tina Mai Chen has argued, images of seemingly emancipated women were invoked to symbolize broader transformation in the new socialist China.<sup>36</sup> Second, they can be understood as a means to inspire women readers to move beyond their familiar domestic environment to participate in industrialization. However, when we look more closely at the political and economic context in which these images were produced, a very different interpretation emerges: that they were part of a concerted effort by state feminists to challenge sexism inside and outside the Party.

In the early 1950s the economy was only just beginning to recover from the devastation of wars and depletion of capital. The unemployment rate was high. Urban unemployed women, especially the lower classes who desperately needed a wage to support their families, wanted to be gainfully employed in socialist construction.<sup>37</sup> However, the road to women's liberation was blocked by Communist officials. The problem was so rampant that Deng Yingchao had to make a strong appeal to the Party Centre to redress it. At a national conference on ideological work hosted by the Central Committee in July 1951, Deng pointed out the seriousness of "feudal thinking" that was often reflected in the minds of Party members and officials.

The primary view is that "women can do nothing." [People with such a view] use every possible means and from every possible aspect to restrict women. Its manifestation in society is discrimination against women, or using all kinds of excuses to refuse or restrict the opportunities for women to participate in employment or education. They would even distort government policies and decrees in order not to give women equal rights.<sup>38</sup>

To address this grave situation, Deng proposed that the Party's ideological work should "use Marxist Leninist theory and Mao Zedong thought to engage

36 Tina Mai Chen, "Female icons, feminist iconography?"

37 For a discussion of the role of urban domestic women in socialist state building in the early 1950s, see Wang Zheng, "Gender and Maoist urban reorganization," in Bryna Goodman and Wendy Larson (eds.), *Gender in Motion: Divisions of Labor and Cultural Change in Late Imperial and Modern China* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), pp. 189–209.

38 Deng Yingchao, "Guanyu funü xuanchuan jiaoyu wenti" ("On the issue of women's advocacy and education work"), in Chinese Women Cadre School (ed.), *Zhongguo funü yundong wenxian ziliao huibian* (*An Anthology of Selected Source Materials on the Chinese Women's Movement*) (Beijing: Chinese Women Press, 1988), p. 115.



in the struggle against feudal thinking, against its various forms of restricting and confining women, resolutely break the notion that ‘women can do nothing,’ and replace it with the view that ‘women can do everything.’” She emphasized that such educational work should first be conducted among Communist Party officials:

Only after the feudal remnants among the officials are eradicated, will they then be able to play a better leading role among the people, and will they be able to effectively implement the Party’s policies on the women’s liberation movement, to bring into play boundless initiatives of the women masses and enable them to participate in all kinds of construction work for the people’s motherland.<sup>39</sup>

The sharp critical tone illuminates the prestige Deng herself enjoyed as a senior Party member and wife of Premier Zhou Enlai. However her critique demonstrates the fissured nature of the Party. Although conceptually women’s liberation had been on the Party’s platform from its inception, institutionally male officials blocked women’s entry into the public domain. Obviously, the deeply entrenched gender regime based on differential labour and the spatial division between men and women did not evaporate upon the CCP’s assumption of state power. On the contrary, as Deng exposed, the gender regime remained entrenched in the minds of many CCP officials. A cartoon in *Women of China* in 1956 entitled “Three women are not as good as one man” vividly captures how women often encountered dismissals. An arrogant male official tells the first woman: “You have too much housework. You should resign and go home!” He says to the second woman holding a sick leave request: “No, you cannot ask for rest. You should resign!” To the third woman who is pregnant, he says: “Pregnancy affects production. You should resign!” He is finally relieved when he succeeds in maintaining an all-male working environment. “Now we can guarantee our work.”<sup>40</sup>

It was during this important talk that Deng Yingchao articulated a tenet that would become a guideline for the ACWF’s advocacy: “Educating women about society and educating society about women.” Party officials became an important part of “the society” that state feminists proceeded to educate and transform. It was obviously a difficult mission to accomplish judging from the many exposés of discrimination against women published in *Women of New China* in the first half of the 1950s. On 6 March 1957, Deng went to the CCP’s national conference on ideological work to call again on Party officials to “establish the notion that the whole Party should be involved in women-work; to establish the notion that ‘women can do everything’ in ideological and educational work.”<sup>41</sup> At this time state feminists still had to fight hard battles to crack open male-dominated gainful employment for women, especially lower-class women. As observed in recent

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Women of China*, Vol. 8 (1956), pp. 8–9.

41 Office of ACWF (ed.), *Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui sishi nian (40 Years of the All-China Women’s Federation)* (Beijing: Chinese Women Press, 1991), p. 94.

scholarship, for many women the Great Leap Forward in 1958 was a watershed in Chinese women's liberation.<sup>42</sup>

The intense gender struggle depicted by Deng Yingchao, in the form of a teleological battle between rising socialism and declining feudalism, cautions us to learn to decode feminist language in order to trace state feminists' discursive manoeuvres. "Feudalism" was one of the three "big mountains" that the CCP avowed to overthrow. After 1949 it could claim the accomplishment of toppling the other two, "imperialism and bureaucratic capitalism," and Deng legitimately highlighted the remaining one. However, her usage of the word "feudalism" in this context was similar to what we mean today by a combination of "sexism," "patriarchy," "masculinism" and "misogynist." Once this is understood, socialist state feminist texts can be read in a different light. Rather than deviating openly from the Party line, state feminists invoked an item high on the agenda of the Party, anti-feudalism, to legitimize their gender-specific claims. It is in such simultaneous congruence of rhetoric and deviation in meaning that state feminists were most effective in inserting their own agenda or transforming and expanding definitions of Party lines. The rapid adoption of "feudalism" (*fengjian zhuyi* 封建主义), "feudal thinking" (*fengjian sixiang* 封建思想) or the abbreviation "feudal" (*fengjian* 封建) with a gender inflection in everyday speech even by illiterate rural women attested to the considerable success of state feminists' strategy in the socialist state propaganda.

Deng's talk as well as many articles and cartoons in the magazine indicate that images of women breaking gender barriers in employment were a representational device of state feminists to "resolutely break the notion that 'women can do nothing'." The cover of the magazine was a cultural forum in which state feminists deliberately engaged in a gender struggle when they represented women as versatile and capable socialist constructors. This understanding helps explain the huge discrepancy between a single-minded focus on celebrating women's accomplishments in social production and the diverse subjects responding to women's needs in daily life in the contents of the magazine. On the cover images child-care, care for the old or serving food were rare. When they did appear, such images always depicted women in the context of collective facilities such as daycare centres or canteens, mostly in the Great Leap Forward. They expressed socialist feminist advocacy of socialization of housework.

When I asked Hou Di why the covers never showed women's domestic life during the Mao era, she replied instantly: "At that time we never thought about that. It is hard to imagine how low women's status was at that time!" She recalled a letter from a reader who challenged the magazine's propagation of equality between men and women by saying "women are like flying a kite under the bed" (that is as high as they can go). "That saying incensed me so

42 Kimberley Ens Manning, "Making a Great Leap Forward? The politics of women's liberation in Maoist China," *Gender and History*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2006), pp. 574–93.

much,” Hou Di emphasized, “that I still remember it clearly today.”<sup>43</sup> So much was at stake in visually representing women that the editors used the precious space of the cover as a window display to convey the important message “women can do everything, and do well in the public arena!” This motive was also behind their decision to use photographs for the covers, a practice conspicuously different from other journals at the time. In Hou Di’s words: “Real people and real deeds have stronger impact on people in our advocacy.”

Hou Di’s unhesitating reply that the editors had never thought about visually representing women in a domestic setting deserves further probing. At one level, it illuminates the primary understanding of women’s liberation by this cohort of state feminists. Women’s liberation, according to Engels, was based on women’s participation in social production in an economic system of public ownership. In the past three decades feminists both inside and outside China have criticized the applicability of this simplistic thesis to the practices of Chinese women’s liberation in the Mao era. However in the specific cultural context of new socialist China, socialist state feminists confronted two interlocking imperatives: the move from the control of private ownership of a conjugal family to an autonomy enabled by financial independence through socialized productive work, and a revolution to destroy a gender regime based on the spatial differentiation of *neiwai* (inner/outer). Socialist public ownership did not automatically undo gender segregation. Male officials blocking women’s entrance into the public domain had less to do with economic profitability than with maintaining the gender order. In other words, a Marxist project of women’s “participation in social production” generated powerful locally grounded dynamics and resistance. Lacking analytical tools other than the all-encapsulating term “feudalism” to confront mounting challenges and obstacles, socialist state feminists forged ahead with their innovative daily practices, including grabbing any representational space available to propagate women’s accomplishments in the public arena.

The radical implications of repeated visual representations of labouring women can be further explored with reference to recent scholarship on women and gender in China. Joan Judge locates the disruption of “the regime of feminine virtue” of the Qing Dynasty at the turn of the 20th century when women of the elite class ventured outside the domestic confines by attending girls’ schools, going abroad and becoming involved in revolutionary activities. The public appearance of elite women changed the gender norm that associated chastity, the highest virtue for women, with domestic seclusion.<sup>44</sup> Louise Edwards demonstrates how elite women used their privilege of education to legitimize their demand for equal rights to political participation in the first part of the 20th century, since historically the right to rule was linked with the privilege of education of male literati.<sup>45</sup>

43 Phone interview with Hou Di on 10 December 2009. The reader’s letter was published in Vol. 7 (1963).

44 Joan Judge, *Precious Raft of History: The Past, the West, and the Woman Question in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

45 Louise Edwards, *Gender, Politics, and Democracy: Women’s Suffrage in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

These and many more works on the Republic era have shown clearly that women of the elite class successfully challenged gender segregation, gaining respectability in public domains in metropolises. But for lower class women, both rural and urban, the gender regime of feminine virtue continued when the PRC was founded. As Gail Hershtatter and Lisa Rofel demonstrate, performing manual labour outside the home, either in the fields or in the factory, jeopardized a woman's chastity and reputation.<sup>46</sup> Within this context, the meanings of socialist state feminists' exclusive visual representation of labouring women in the public domain become clearer. It manifests their keen sensitivity to what trapped the great majority of Chinese women: an intertwined regime of gender and class that placed women doing manual labour outside the home at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Thus it was inconceivable for that cohort of feminists to use images that located a woman *inside* the home as a signifier of women's liberation.

### Meaningful Discrepancies

The gap between the contents and the cover of the magazine had another dimension. The cover did not always keep pace with the political tempo while the contents generally followed the Party's imperatives by assigning at least an editorial in each issue to discuss the main government decrees. An example of visible dissonance can be found in 1957. The Anti-Rightist Campaign charged ferociously through urban China beginning in mid-May 1957. On 22 May, the ACWF held a meeting to inform all the officials and staff in the headquarters of the significance of the campaign.<sup>47</sup> The cover of the June issue belied this new political agenda, featuring a baby girl looking at a little chick. The ACWF followed the Women's International Democratic Federation decision to make 1 June International Children's Day in China, and the June cover of a baby was also an indirect expression celebrating motherhood.

If the June cover had an uncompromising prerogative, what about the following issues when the Anti-Rightist campaign intensified? The cover of the July issue portrays a smiling woman hairdresser serving a young girl. Readers would have been totally unprepared for the intense animosity and harsh condemnation of rightists in the contents. Throughout the political storm of the campaign, the magazine steadfastly adhered to its principle of visual

46 Gail Hershtatter, "Local meanings of gender and work in rural Shaanxi in the 1950s," in Barbara Entwisle and Gail E. Henderson (eds.), *Re-Drawing Boundaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 79–96, "The gender of memory: rural Chinese women and the 1950s," paper presented in the colloquium series of the Program in Agrarian Studies, Yale University, 17 November 2006, and "Virtue at work: rural Shaanxi women remember the 1950s," in Bryna Goodman and Wendy Larson (eds.), *Gender in Motion: Division of Labor and Cultural Change in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Lanham: Rowland & Littlefield, 2005), pp. 309–28. Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

47 Office of ACWF, *40 Years of the All-China Women's Federation*, p. 97.

representation, celebrating women role models or ordinary women living a new life. Only the cover of the November issue diverged from this theme. It is a painting of a Russian girl and a Chinese girl jointly saluting the image of Lenin to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. The cover's attention to the international political events makes the indifference to domestic politics even more puzzling.

The art editor Shi Yumei solved the puzzle when I asked her about the editorial decisions that led to the cute baby picture in June 1957. First she told me proudly that she took the picture and the baby was her neighbour's child. Then I questioned further:

Wang: It was June 1957. What did the editors-in-chief say since they made the final selection on cover images?

Shi: Oh, the leader [Dong Bian] dashed to the picture, saying excitedly "that's it, that's it!" The leaders totally adored the picture.

Wang: But it was 1957 and the struggles against the rightists were intensified. Didn't the magazine have to follow the political issues of the day?

Shi: Well, to tell you the truth, at that time I did not like those struggles. I have an art background and my job was to make the magazine aesthetically appealing. My top priority was to give beauty to the magazine. Matching political tempo was not so high on my agenda. If you had class struggles and fighting on the cover, people would not like it and would not buy it.

This instance of the omission of a rampant political campaign in the magazine's visual representation thus largely reflects Shi Yumei's personal tastes and political position, which were shared by the editors-in-chief who had the final say on the cover. It is worth noting that the absence of the anti-rightist campaign was also a feature of the covers of *Youth of China*, the Communist Youth League's journal, though its covers generally demonstrated a conscious effort to follow the Party's main agenda.

Meaningful discrepancies can be found between the covers of *Women of China* and those of *Youth of China*. The covers of four issues of *Women of China* in 1952 used a sketch in charcoal portraying the trio of the worker/peasant/soldier, a familiar subject in a familiar format. However, all three figures on the covers of *Women of China* are female. The absence of men in this otherwise familiar trio reveals a clear feminist rejection of male-centred visual representation in socialist China. The trio in *Youth of China* are usually men and if a woman is included she unfailingly represents the peasant, standing either on the side or behind the male worker.<sup>48</sup> Her gendered subordination is conveniently deployed in representing the subtle hierarchy among the leading classes of the proletarian socialist state. The image was so prevalent and pervasive that no one could imagine what it would look like if a woman replaced the male worker who was always positioned in the centre. Hence the all-women trio on the covers of *Women of China* represented a significant feminist challenge to the hegemonic symbol of the Mao

48 The same point was made by Evans, in "Comrade sisters," p.72, with reference to posters of the Mao era.

era, a symbol that simultaneously signifies a conscious transformation of the class order and an unconscious continuation of gender hierarchy.

Further evidence of a Chinese socialist feminist consciousness comes from photographs of women militias on the covers of both magazines. Such pictures became popular after the publication of Mao's poem on women militias in 1961. The militia photographs in *Youth of China* always portray the women under the guidance of men, highlighting their subordination.<sup>49</sup> But covers of *Women of China* consistently place women militias in the centre and autonomous. When I showed the images from *Youth of China* to Shi Yumei, she responded immediately, "Hmm, giving prominence to men again. I would never select such a picture. And even if I did, our leader [Dong Bian] would never approve of it. Our magazine is *Women of China*. We gave prominence to women. On this issue we [Shi and Dong] held identical views."

Before the Cultural Revolution, editors of *Women of China* controlled the magazine as their turf, a space where they created a distinctive socialist feminist visual culture. It was not until the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in mid-1966 that they discontinued the representational device of extolling women's diverse accomplishments. When I asked Shi Yumei why Chairman Mao's images replaced women labour models, she replied: "For the sake of safety. Even top Party leaders were frequently condemned. We could not guarantee [the political stability of] any labour model. So it was the safest thing to do to put images of Chairman Mao on the cover. Besides," she added candidly, "I very much worshipped Chairman Mao, too. I had experienced the old society and was very grateful to him for the changes in new China, despite my own political frustrations."<sup>50</sup> The monopoly of Chairman Mao on the cover, a prominent example of how state feminists followed the political norm of the day, announced the collapse of the feminist cultural front created by state feminists of the ACWF.<sup>51</sup>

### Conclusion: State Feminists and Gender Democracy

The dazzling world and domestic events of the first half of the 20th century brought two generations of talented and strong-willed Chinese women into the Communist camp, as the stories of Shen Zijiu and Dong Bian illustrate. With the victory of the CCP, these women revolutionaries became state architects who shaped the configuration of a new socialist China. The creation of a socialist

49 The evidence of gender bias in the covers of *Youth of China* does not mean that the journal never used any women-centred images. It was the inconsistent practices that most clearly reveal its editors' unconscious gender bias.

50 Shi Yumei was never able to join the Party because her father had been a Nationalist army officer. Her problematic political background sometimes hindered her work: e.g. she could not interview or photograph high officials.

51 Feminist culture entered the more prominent mainstream media in the form of "model operas" and in newspapers such as *People's Daily* in the Cultural Revolution.

feminist cultural front, *Women of China*, was only one area of their massive engagement in a grand project of transforming the Chinese people, society and culture. The micro case, however, epitomizes the complexity of socialist state feminists' multifaceted endeavours.

The goal of revolutionary transformation was not the same for all the revolutionaries. Communist women's personal experiences in a patriarchal culture decisively conditioned their passionate pursuit of a revolutionary transformation of gender hierarchy. The egalitarian principle of the socialist state was in accordance with state feminists' pursuit, although it became their responsibility to include gender equality in the socialist state conceptualization and practices. A thorny situation arose in their revolutionary efforts: state feminists' pursuit of women's liberation very soon brought them into conflict with masculine power within the Party. Battling against "feudalism" and upholding "Communist morality," state feminists did not hesitate to include male Party officials in the targets of their feminist cultural transformation. They effectively deployed the Party's ideology and agenda as discursive resources in their gender struggles. In such manoeuvres they also redefined and transformed the Party's ideology and agenda.

The state feminists' simultaneous involvement in the Party's political imperatives and discrete pursuits of a feminist transformation were often entangled messily in contradictions and tension in their daily work as Communist officials. Their discursive strategy of camouflaging their gender-specific struggles with dominant Party language further shrouded their distinctive feminist initiatives and agenda. To delineate Chinese socialist state feminists' manoeuvres requires a gender-sensitive conceptualization and an ethnographic approach. Stories behind the scenes enhance the ability to decode key words and tease out concrete gender conflicts from multiple sources. It is my emphasis that to achieve a more complex understanding of the internal workings and dynamics of the socialist state, we must pay close attention to state feminists' visions and strategies, and the differences they made. I believe that bringing their historical activities out of concealment (which was partly a function of their strategy, partly a result of their self-effacement and partly an effect of gender bias in knowledge production) would alter the picture of socialist China constructed by the academic mainstreams both inside and outside China.

This discussion of state feminist practices in *Women of China* has highlighted the role of the Party's mass line. Developed during the Communist Revolution as an effective method for the CCP to connect with and represent the interests of the masses, the mass line continued to be emphasized by the Party after it became the state power holder. State feminists' faithful implementation of the mass line resulted in the increasing popularity of *Women of China*. Their innovative exploration of means to connect with diverse groups of women marks a unique feature of socialist China: the practices formed in the grassroots social movement co-existed with the bureaucratization of the Party. State feminists' practices of the mass line enabled the democratic participation of socialist citizens, especially previously marginalized and disadvantaged women, in the formation of a women-

centred discursive space close to the power centre, at a time when the Party was consolidating its centralizing power. These parallel developments were the social reality experienced by socialist citizens. They were also vividly captured in *Women of China*, a rare window for us to access multiple contradictions, conflicts and contention in the radical social experiment among the largest population of the world.