
17. From Xianglin's Wife to the Iron Girls: the politics of gender representation

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The six-decade history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has witnessed drastic changes in gender discourses and practices. Contentions over gender norms and gendered power relations have intimately interconnected with political, economic, social and cultural changes, constituting a prominent realm of power struggles entangled with shifting class alignments and infused with ideologies vying for dominance. While the lives of women and men have been deeply implicated in such a realm of power that generates conflicting and contradictory gender prescriptions and regulations, its very pervasiveness poses challenges to analytical scrutiny. This chapter focuses on the politics of gender representation to narrow down the vast field of gendered power struggles in the PRC¹ while presenting a historical narrative with some coherence over grave historical ruptures in the past six or so decades.

Selecting two well-known signifiers of historically distinct gender discourses in the PRC, *Xianglin's Wife* and the *Iron Girls*, I trace the historical processes through which these gendered symbols were produced and investigate the changing political contexts within which their meanings were contested and altered. Examining multiple forms of artistic representation of *Xianglin's Wife*, a quintessential victim of 'feudal oppression' originally portrayed in a classic New Cultural literary text of the 1920s, I establish a tangible linkage between May Fourth feminism and socialist state feminism by identifying specific cultural producers and analysing their agendas. The heritage of May Fourth feminism in the socialist period has rarely been noticed in Chinese scholarship on the PRC, which reflects a reductionist tendency as well as gender bias in studies of socialist China.² Bringing *Xianglin's Wife*, which was a household name in the PRC, into analytical focus, this chapter examines gender politics in socialist feminist cultural transformation in the early PRC and presents a reinterpretation of the socialist period from a gender perspective.

While the symbolic meanings of *Xianglin's Wife* have remained more or less consistent, the drastic changes in the symbolic meanings of the *Iron Girls* offer a highly productive site for an exploration of historical ruptures in the short history of the PRC. The *Iron Girls* were not fictional figures but real young women who took on physically demanding work in either agriculture or heavy industry during socialist construction. This name was initially chosen by a brigade of adolescent girls in a model village of collective agriculture, Dazhai. The *Iron Girls Brigade* was emulated nationwide from the mid-1960s, when it was promoted by the socialist state, and then denounced soon after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. Glorifying or demonizing *Iron Girls* epitomizes entangled ideological and political struggles in both the socialist and post-socialist periods. Delineating the complex contests behind contending representations of the *Iron Girls* allows me to probe the production of dominant discourses in changing

political milieus. The Chinese elite's condemnation of this socialist symbol of working-class women emerged immediately after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) decided to abandon the socialist planned economy and socialist equalitarian ideology, providing a revealing case of how class and gender power relations started to shift in the collaboration between the educated elite and the state.

Ultimately, my interrogation of the construction and deconstruction of Xianglin's Wife and the Iron Girls as cultural symbols illuminates the politics of post-socialist knowledge production through a double lens of gender and class. I argue that denigrating and erasing a socialist feminist history with a May Fourth feminist heritage premised on cultural transformation was an integral part in the production of a post- (and anti-) socialist hegemonic discourse that enabled China's dramatic turn to capitalism, a process marked by the naturalization, legitimation and reproduction of class and gender hierarchies.

XIANGLIN'S WIFE: TRANSMITTING A NEW CULTURE AGENDA

The emergence of Xianglin's Wife as a quintessential symbol of victims of feudal oppression in the dominant gender discourse of the socialist period has a complicated history. Xianglin's Wife is the protagonist in the short story, 'New Year's Sacrifice', written by the prominent May Fourth New Cultural writer Lu Xun (1886–1936) in 1924. A widow who ran away from her mother-in-law's scheme to sell her into a second marriage, Xianglin's Wife worked as a servant for a wealthy family before she was kidnapped by men sent by her mother-in-law. After resisting capture through a futile suicide attempt, Xianglin's Wife accepted the second marriage, even though it stigmatized her as an unchaste woman according to the gender norms of her time. After a few years of married life, new tragedy befell her: an illness killed her hardworking husband, and a wolf devoured her young son. She returned to her old master's home to resume her service, only to find that as an unchaste widow who had lost two husbands she was forbidden to serve food at the New Year's sacrifice. Even her devoted Buddhist practice could not cleanse her unclean soul. Driven to insanity, she became a homeless beggar and died in the street on a snowy New Year's Eve.

Lu Xun created the poignant fictional character as an indictment of the inhumane cultural norms and oppressive institutions that were seen as characteristic of Chinese society, a typical critique launched by a leading cultural rebel during the May Fourth New Cultural era (1915–1925). Victimized women and oppressive gender practices served as common literary tropes in New Culturalists' writings, becoming a hallmark of their feminist stance. Critiquing gender oppression under the 'old' Confucian culture was a major performative act constitutive of a 'new' identity of modern intellectuals for that generation's educated elite. Similar or even sharper feminist critiques of Chinese patriarchal culture had been articulated by a leading feminist, He-Ying Zhen, at the end of the Qing dynasty.³ Now, with the New Culturalists' discursive power, critical feminist voices entered the mainstream discourse of the early Republic era. Denouncing a patriarchal gender system based on *nan/nü* (male/female) the differentiation between men and women, became a prominent theme in the elite's pursuit of modernity through most of

the twentieth century. *Xianglin's Wife*, who was mired in 'traditional' cultural practices and social institutions, represented cultural radicals' burning desire to create a new culture in an ancient land.

Lu Xun's short story was first turned into a performance in 1946, when underground CCP members in Shanghai worked with left-oriented artists to stage an adaptation of 'New Year's Sacrifice' called *Xianglin's Wife* as a Yue opera, a form of opera that originated in Shengzhou, Zhejiang Province.⁴ As a commemoration of the tenth anniversary of Lu Xun's death, the Yue opera *Xianglin's Wife* became a rallying point of left-wing artists in Shanghai when they were facing intense persecution from the ruling Nationalist Party. In the context of the political battles between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party in the post-World War II period, the staging of the Yue opera *Xianglin's Wife* gained new political meanings of resisting Chiang Kai-shek's dictatorship and critiquing social ills under the reign of the Nationalist Party. In 1948 the Yue opera *Xianglin's Wife* appeared on the silver screen for the first time, indicating the success of its adaption of Lu Xun's famous short story.

After the PRC was founded, many adaptations of 'New Year's Sacrifice' were performed by local operas. The Yue opera *Xianglin's Wife* went through several revisions, gaining increasing popularity. Once the CCP was the state power holder, production of local operas based on Lu Xun's short story were no longer gestures of political protest. Rather, many leading CCP cultural producers were expressing their youthful New Culture visions with their newly acquired political authority and material resources in the socialist state. Among the cohort of CCP artists who had been baptized in the New Cultural movement, Xia Yan (1900–1995) played the most prominent role in continuing New Culture agenda and transmitting New Culture feminism via film production in socialist China.

A prolific essay writer, screen playwright and translator, Xia Yan had demonstrated his interest in feminism since the 1920s by contributing many essays to women's magazines and translating socialist feminist texts, including August Bebel's *Women and Socialism* (1879 [1910]). Before the Nationalist government's official ban on left-oriented books and authors in 1934, *Women and Socialism* had already gone through several printings. It soon became a foundational text for the development of socialist feminism of the CCP. In 1954, Xia Yan became the top official of the film industry of the PRC. His record as the underground CCP leader of a group that infiltrated the Shanghai film industry in the early 1930s made him well qualified for this position. He managed to continue writing scripts while leading the development of China's film industry. The first screen script he produced after he became the Deputy Minister of Culture was his adaptation of 'New Year's Sacrifice'. The decision to produce a feature film based on Lu Xun's short story was made to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of Lu Xun's death.

The first feature film in colour produced in China was an instant hit on its release in 1956. Directed by the talented Sang Hu (1916–2004), who had risen to fame before 1949, and with a top-ranked cast, the film won a special prize at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in Czechoslovakia in 1957 and a Silver Cap prize at the Mexico International Film Festival in 1958.⁵ The wide circulation of the film made *Xianglin's Wife* a household name in the PRC. The high illiteracy rate in the 1950s made printed media an ineffective way of reaching the masses. But the general public could easily recognize an oppressed woman in feudal society, brilliantly portrayed by the famous movie star Bai Yang

(1920–96). Xia Yan's adaptations of 'New Year's Sacrifice' and other literary classics of the New Culture period provided a concrete link for the transmission of the New Culture heritage of feminist critiques of Chinese patriarchal culture into the public discourse of the PRC.

Making a cinematic adaptation of a New Culture classic in socialist China was not only a matter of artistic creativity. The changed historical context demanded reworking the New Culture text, which could alter its meanings. As a renowned New Culturalist who had an intimate knowledge of Lu Xun and his works, as well as the historical and cultural context of his literary creativity, Xia Yan strove both to be faithful to the original story and to address the demands of the contemporary period. A prominent change in socialist cultural production was in the representation of women. In New Culturalist literary representations, the trope of women victims had been deployed to express modern elite men's condemnation of feudal culture. Now, with the participation of Communist women, socialist cultural production developed very different artistic representations of women. Upon the founding of the PRC, one of Xia Yan's predecessors, a dynamic feminist leader of the film industry, Chen Bo'er (1907–1951), had pioneered a paradigm of Communist heroines based on life stories to celebrate women's contribution to the Communist Revolution and the founding of the PRC. Full of agency and political consciousness, revolutionary heroines in socialist films were antithetical to Xianglin's Wife, a quintessential image of the abused and powerless woman who suffered under feudal oppression. The new paradigm was in accordance with the CCP's line in cultural production, articulated in Chairman Mao's Yan'an talk in 1942: that is, representing the workers, peasants and soldiers as major historical actors, although the general principle was ungendered in Mao's formulation. Devoting substantial state resources to the production of such a symbol of women's oppression as Xianglin's Wife was anomalous in that context. Some justifications were necessary even with the legitimacy lent by the film's commemoration of Lu Xun's death.

As the top official of the film industry, Xia Yan was keenly aware of the paradigm shift in visual representation. In fact, the whole film industry had recently emerged from a severe political crisis. Indeed, the first political campaign in the cultural realm was launched by Mao's critique of the film *The Life of Wu Xun*, based on a late Qing historical figure, which was released in 1950 in Shanghai when Xia Yan was in charge of cultural production in the city. Mao criticized Communist leaders for applauding a film that represented a supporter of feudal rulers instead of extolling the new class forces, new characters and new ideas that fought against the old socio-economic systems and political culture.⁶ The critique of *The Life of Wu Xun* in 1951 had frozen film production for almost two years as confused cultural producers were frantically reviewing their own aesthetic standards and political positions in order to adjust to the demands of socialist cultural production (Wu 1993: 79–227). Although Xianglin's Wife was not a supporter of feudal rulers, but rather a victim of the feudal society, the theme had nothing to do with 'extolling new class forces' as Mao advocated. It required political courage for the new Deputy Minister to take on the task of making *New Year's Sacrifice* in 1955, the first adaptation of a modern literary classic in socialist film. Understanding the political context is crucial to our understanding of the changes Xia Yan made in his adaptation.

Three important changes are relevant to this discussion. First, the film presents an honest, kind and hardworking man as Xianglin's Wife's second husband, He Laoliu.

After Xianglin's Wife's suicide attempt failed at her wedding, she was touched by He Laoliu's kindness and gave up her resistance. In the original story, Xianglin's Wife hinted that her second husband took her by his superior physical strength, which led to her final submission. Xia Yan's explanation for the alteration was that he wanted to portray some 'sympathy and understanding between the poor'. Her momentary enjoyment of a good marital life, in Xia Yan's view, would contrast more sharply with her subsequent tragedy. Besides, Xia Yan revealed, 'I think it would be difficult to depict his "physical power" on screen. It could easily appear vulgar; and it would impair the character of an honest and kind hunter, He Laoliu' (Xia 1996: 712). The erasure of sexual violence committed by a poor man reveals not only Xia Yan's artistic taste but also his political astuteness. Xianglin's Wife could be presented as the victim of feudal systems, but not of the sexual violence of a proletarian man. Rather, socialist cultural representations should highlight the fundamental goodness of labouring people. Operating within the political parameters of the time, the film reduced the penetrating sharpness on the relationship between gender and class in Lu Xun's original story, but simultaneously advocated new ideals of marital relations.

The second major change was that Xia Yan added a dramatic act of resistance by Xianglin's Wife that was not in the original short story, to suggest this downtrodden woman's revolt against the oppressive institutions. In the film, after Xianglin's Wife had realized that donating her hard-earned money to the Buddhist temple did not help to wash away the stigma of marrying twice, she chopped the threshold of the temple with a knife in desperate indignation. This addition became highly controversial among film critics, who argued that such a rebellious action did not follow the logic of the protagonist's character and instead reflected the playwright's political considerations. The criticism implied that Xia Yan followed the rising paradigm in socialist cultural production that extolled oppressed classes' agency and rebellious spirit at the expense of realism. It certainly revealed some critics' belief that for a lowly woman like Xianglin's Wife, an expression of revolt was inconceivable. Answering this criticism in an essay published in the magazine *Chinese Films* in 1957, Xia Yan explained that the resistant act was not his invention. It had first appeared in the film of the Yue opera *Xianglin's Wife* in 1948, and then in many other local operas on stage as well. This evidence implicitly refuted the charge that he was conforming to the socialist principles of cultural production by adding the act of revolt. More significantly, he emphasized that when he had watched those operas, the scene of Xianglin's Wife's rebellion never failed to move him, which was why he decided to keep this scene in his film adaptation. He cited a passage from Lu Xun's original story depicting Xianglin's Wife's ferocious physical fight against her kidnappers that ended with her banging her head into the corner of a table in a suicide attempt, which he argued showed that Xianglin's Wife's rebellious character had been depicted in the original story. He contended that 'On the surface, Xianglin's Wife is obedient, timid, and believing in gods and ghosts. But these should never become the grounds for one to conclude that a timid soul would never have thoughts and commit actions of revolt' (Xia 1996: 711).

Xia Yan perceived correctly that at the heart of this debate was the question of whether an oppressed woman like Xianglin's Wife was capable of any expression of agency. He obviously differed from some of the male critics in his cohort. His prolific literary production consistently demonstrated his appreciation of strong female characters. In an essay

on Chinese women written in 1944, he explicitly stated that from his early childhood on he had been attracted to heroines who violated gender norms in Chinese operas and literature, and was impatient with passive or conformist female characters (Xia 1996: 644). Although Xianglin's Wife's resistance to a second marriage could easily be interpreted as her thorough conformity to the gender norm of chastity, Xia Yan's decision to take it as an externally meek woman's expression of her strong character did not depart from Lu Xun's multifaceted depiction of Xianglin's Wife.

Still, Xianglin's Wife was not a revolutionary heroine, and the story certainly did not celebrate women's agency even with the addition of the act of revolt. What was the justification for the cinematic production of *New Year's Sacrifice* in socialist China? The third major change reveals some clues to the answer. Xia Yan added a voiceover by a male narrator at the beginning and end of the film, who was not the authorial 'I' in Lu Xun's story. When the opening scene of a rural mountain area unfolds, a male narrator's voice emerges: 'For the youth today, the story happened long, long ago. It was more than forty years ago, around the time of Xinhai Revolution, in a mountain village of east Zhejiang.' Explaining the story's historical context and location in plain language was Xia Yan's strategy to make the film accessible to the large audience who had not read the story, especially those who were illiterate. The second time the male narrator's voice emerges is when the final scene depicts Xianglin's Wife collapsing in the snow: 'A diligent and kind woman, Xianglin's Wife dropped dead after having endured numerous miseries and mistreatments. This happened over forty years ago. Yes, this was an event in the past. Fortunately, those times have finally passed and will never return.'

Conflating a literary fiction with a historical event, the narrator cum screenwriter presented a visual memory of what constituted the 'old' feudal China to the younger generations who were thought to be ignorant of the gender and class oppressions of the past. But the conflation was inconsistent with Xia Yan's decision not to include Lu Xun, the writer, in the adapted film as the short story did. He decided to drop the first-person narrative structure in his film adaptation 'because if Mr Lu Xun appeared in the film, it would cause confusion between real people and events and fictionalized literature' (Xia 1996: 709). The tension in his representing Xianglin's Wife as simultaneously both fictional and real reveals the complex goals of this Communist artist who wanted to create an artistic film that had high educational value for the masses. Adding an upbeat voiceover to the film's tragic ending left ample room for interpretation.⁷ Taking it at face value, we may say that the superfluous comment on the visual image was meant to remind the audience that the CCP was the liberator that ended the misery of Chinese women, thus lending legitimacy to the Party's rule. With the wide circulation of the film *New Year's Sacrifice*, Xianglin's Wife was solidly established in the public discourse as the symbol of women's oppression in 'the old feudal society' or 'before liberation', two common phrases demarcating the historical era before the CCP took state power in 1949. In this sense, we may say that Xia Yan made a major contribution to the hegemonic gender discourse in the Mao era that represented Chinese women as victims of a feudal society who were liberated by the CCP in 1949. As feminist scholars outside China have correctly argued, portraying Chinese women before 1949 as mere victims of feudal oppression erased women's agency as well as their crucial economic, social and cultural contributions throughout China's long and complex history.⁸

A rich and powerful literary text visualized by such sophisticated artists as Xia Yan

and other filmmakers, however, necessarily contains multiple complex meanings. The film does more than inscribe a vivid image of an oppressed woman of the old feudal society in the public's mind. It illustrates in painstaking visual detail what the abstract term 'feudalism' meant, and in what specific ways and sites the oppression of labouring women was enacted. Indeed, the film could be read as a didactic visual text to teach the general public what institutions, social norms and power relations were feudalistic and were responsible for Xianglin's Wife's tragic life. Arousing emotive sympathy from the audience necessitates a rational rejection of all the inhumane institutions and practices so powerfully represented in the film.

The film's passionate indictment of feudalism, in fact, makes Xia Yan's Pollyanna-like declaration that all those inhumane practices had now entirely vanished sound highly disingenuous. To say the least, as a high official of the CCP, he would have an intimate knowledge of the ferocious patriarchal resistance to the implementation of the new Marriage Law drafted by state feminists and passed in 1950. In 1953, an investigation by the Ministry of Justice estimated that nationally, 70 000 to 80 000 women had 'been murdered or forced into suicide' annually since 1950 as a result of family problems and mistreatment.⁹ Many women were persecuted and punished either by their husbands' families when they demanded a divorce or by their natal families when they resisted an arranged marriage. In the early 1950s, when a feminist marriage law profoundly shook the patriarchal society and exposed the persistent power of deeply entrenched patriarchal institutions, norms and practices, the decision to make a film of *New Year's Sacrifice* had more implications than simply commemorating Lu Xun. Fundamentally, it was a camouflaged attempt to continue the feminist agenda of anti-feudalism rather than a celebration of the CCP's supposed eradication of feudalism. The film introduced to the general public a highly gender-inflected definition of feudalism and confirmed the legitimacy of a feminist agenda of transforming a patriarchal culture in the PRC. The feminist significance of the symbol of Xianglin's Wife can be found in state feminists' frequent invocations of the term 'remnants of feudalism' in their speeches and publications when insisting on the necessity of a continuous struggle against misogynist and discriminatory gender practices in socialist China.¹⁰

The tremendous popularity of *New Year's Sacrifice* effectively exerted its discursive power to represent the oppression of labouring women as the Other of socialism. A poignant condemnation of a feudalist past was in this sense simultaneously a clear demarcation of what a socialist today was not – or should not be. Xianglin's Wife discursively delegitimized any ways in which the experiences of women under socialism resembled hers. The feminist implications of a transformative Xianglin's Wife cannot be recognized in the popular, yet crude concept of 'the Communist Party's propaganda' for understanding socialist cultural production. Assuming a monolithic entity called the Party that monopolized the cultural apparatus in the service of an authoritarian state, this stereotypical concept glosses over the complex political agendas of cultural producers while dismissing all efforts at cultural transformation, including those by socialist feminists. This re-examination of the political significance of socialists' reproduction of the New Culture movement's symbol of women's oppression in feudal society suggests complex dynamics in cultural representation. Now I turn to those dynamics as they shaped contentions over the symbol of women's liberation in socialist society, the Iron Girls.

THE IRON GIRLS: AN UNSTABLE SYMBOL OF CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

A glorified term widely disseminated in the official media from the mid-1960s to 1976, the 'Iron Girls' came to symbolize the masculinization of Chinese women by Maoist gender policies immediately after the CCP's Third Plenary of the Eleventh Congress in 1978, a political event that marked the end of Maoist socialist revolution. Responding to the CCP's call for ideological emancipation, Chinese intellectuals and artists began to voice their condemnation of the Cultural Revolution and the CCP's 'ultra-leftist line' with a proliferation of literature, films, artistic performances and polemical essays. In 1979 a comic dialogue performance entitled *The Iron Girls* gained instant popularity as it relentlessly mocked those young women who had excelled at physical labour and enjoyed prominent media attention until the end of the Cultural Revolution. Attacking a model of socialist womanhood that was promoted by the state powerfully demonstrated the spirit of ideological emancipation from the constraints of the Mao era. Signifying a dramatic shift in the public discourse of women's liberation, the comic dialogue ushered in a powerful backlash against the official gender ideology of equality between men and women in the socialist period, and advocated the replacement of so-called gender sameness with gender differentiation (Honig and Hershatter 1988: 23–31).¹¹ Gender again loomed large as a pivot at a major historical turning point.

Why did the Iron Girls become one of the first targets of post-Mao condemnations of the Cultural Revolution and the socialist state? A review of the rise of the Iron Girls illuminates the complex entanglement of gender, class, conflicting visions of Chinese modernity, and power politics in the PRC. The first Iron Girls Brigade appeared in Dazhai, Shanxi Province, in 1963 when the village suffered severe destruction by a flood (Sun and Liu 2008).¹² Twenty-three adolescent girls ranging in age between 13 and 16 formed a youth task force to join male villagers, old and young, in salvaging crops, rebuilding collapsed cave houses and restoring destroyed terraced farmland around the mountain village. On an exceptionally cold day when they were fixing the terraced land, their village head, Chen Yonggui (1915–86), told the girls to go home early. But the girls replied, 'Since the men do not go home, we will not go home, either. Why should we go back first?' Their strong determination and their remarkable ability to endure hardship won them a compliment from Chen Yonggui: 'You girls are made of iron!'¹³ The praise circulated among the villagers, and the girls proudly named themselves the Iron Girls Brigade.

Long recognized as a local model village in socialist collectivized agriculture, Dazhai rose to national prominence in 1964 after the Shanxi provincial head reported to Chairman Mao on Dazhai's stunning accomplishments. Mao was deeply impressed with Dazhai farmers' self-reliance in transforming the poor mountainous village into a thriving collective community without material support from the state, as well as the remarkable leadership capacity of their illiterate leader, Chen Yonggui. Mao announced that developing agriculture should rely on the spirit of Dazhai, that is, self-reliance (Sun and Liu 2008: 127, 129). When Dazhai became the national model for agriculture, it was featured in national publicity. The stories of the Iron Girls Brigade played a prominent part in these depictions. The 17-year-old brigade leader Guo Fenglian instantly became a

national celebrity, and photos of energetic adolescent girls engaging in various physically demanding farming tasks defined the phrase ‘Iron Girls’ in the public mind.

Official publicity praising rural women’s extraordinary productivity had been a prominent theme since the early 1950s. Socialist state feminists played a pioneering role in using media to acknowledge rural women’s contribution to socialist construction and to promote women’s entrance in traditionally masculine spaces and occupations. Before the emergence of the term ‘Iron Girls’, women’s task forces in rural collective agricultural work commonly adopted the names of legendary heroines who had excelled in the performance of male roles, mostly in military affairs, such as Hua Mulan and Mu Guiying. This practice was often reported by *Women of China*, a magazine run by the All-China Women’s Federation.¹⁴

As Gail Hershatte’s work on rural women in northern China during the 1950s demonstrates, poor women often had to take on tasks normally reserved for men when able-bodied men were drafted in large numbers in times of war.¹⁵ But, because traditional gender norms associated women’s domestic seclusion with chastity, poor women who had to work in the fields were doubly degraded by the intertwined social hierarchies of class and gender. Across China’s vast geographic area and its diverse ethnic cultures, the gender division of labour varied tremendously. But physical labour performed either by women or by men historically marked a lower class standing, especially among the majority Han Chinese.

Socialism transformed the meanings of women’s involvement in agricultural work by glorifying their participation in collectivized agriculture, and rewarding those who demonstrated the capacity and skills to take on tasks that were locally defined as male. State endorsement and promotion combined the state’s need for female labour in rural development with the socialist feminist vision of breaking down gender barriers and transforming gender hierarchies through women’s full integration into all spheres of life. Mobilizing rural women’s participation in agriculture was a key pillar of state policy, especially during the Great Leap Forward when many rural men moved into industrial work. As Hershatte emphasizes, rural women’s labour continued to be an indispensable part of socialist construction through the Mao years, as well as the foundation of economic growth in the post-Mao era. In short, by 1963 rural women commonly took on strenuous physical labour without being stigmatized, and this important aspect of rural women’s lives entered socialist cultural representation in a way that celebrated their agency as well as the value of their contribution.

Dazhai had historically been afflicted by wars, so there had been a persistent shortage of able-bodied men since the war of resistance against Japanese invasion. One of the Iron Girls, Jia Cunsuo, recalled:

Why were the Iron Girls so famous? What happened to male youth? Historically Dazhai had a situation of a flourishing yin and a weak yang. It was all caused by history. Those whom the Japanese killed and drafted were all young men. After the liberation, those who joined the army or went out to work were also mainly male comrades . . . Therefore, female comrades in Dazhai seemed more prominent than male comrades. Actually, most male comrades left the village for employment outside. (Sun and Liu 2008: 89)

In this village women had long been playing the major role in farm labour as well as all kinds of economic activities in and outside the household.

The remarkable strength and tenacity that Dazhai women exhibited in performing physically demanding farm work made a vivid impression on county officials who had been required to work in the fields for one month each year during the 1950s. Zhao Mancang recalled leading a team of male county officials in 1959. They followed men in the fields for about ten days but then became physically unable to continue. So Chen Yonggui suggested that they move to work with women. 'Originally we thought working with women in the fields would be less strenuous,' Chao recalled:

but actually women's labor was more intense . . . Dazhai women had a particular habit while working in the fields. They did not talk and often went on without any break. So following women in the fields for one week was even worse than before. Some in our team had such severe bodily pains that they could not sleep at night. Our county judge did not even have the strength to hold his bowl after a day's work in the fields. He dropped his bowl in the canteen. (Sun and Liu 2008: 235)

Performing challenging physical labour in the fields was the norm for Dazhai women who were responsible for their family's survival in the poor mountainous area. Decades later, the leader of the Iron Girls Brigade, Guo Fenglian, recalled their goals at that time: 'To work hard to produce more grain so that we would be able to fill up our stomachs; and that would also be our contribution to socialism.'¹⁶

What made the Iron Girls special was the national attention bestowed upon them by the socialist state. In line with the socialist feminist goal of transforming gender and class hierarchies, Guo Fenglian was rapidly promoted, especially after the Cultural Revolution began. When the head of their village, Chen Yonggui, was promoted to be the Vice-Premier of the State Council, Guo succeeded him as the head of Dazhai in 1973 and then was placed on the county, provincial and national leading bodies. She was received by Chairman Mao three times and met Premier Zhou Enlai many more times. Letters of admiration from all over China flooded her home, and she had to ask her team members to join her in replying to each of them. Signifying the new, socialist identity as a rural woman who was no longer confined by her traditional kinship obligations or her lowly peasant social position, but defined by her superb contribution to collective agriculture and her excellent leadership capacity, the Iron Girl Guo Fenglian became a symbol of rural women's double liberation from gender and class constraints and the antithesis of Xianglin's Wife, the symbol of women's oppression in feudal society. Other groups of women, including those in industry, emulated the Iron Girls Brigade (Jin 2007),¹⁷ consolidating the theme of challenging gender boundaries and transforming gender and class hierarchies that had been promoted by socialist state feminists since the founding of the PRC.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her famous essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', delineates the power dynamics involved in 'muted women's' entry into the system of signification and suggests the many barriers that subaltern speech encounters (Spivak 1988). The representation of Chinese rural women in the socialist period also involved multiple power relations and heterogeneous agendas. While I do not claim that socialist representations of rural women conveyed the unmediated voices of subaltern subjects, I do contend that the positive representation of labouring women in the official media empowered women who had previously been absent from cultural representations of China's drive for modernity. The difference between the image of a female victim of

feudal oppression like *Xianglin's Wife*, which stood as the Other of the modern, and the Iron Girls, who signified women's agency and prominent role in a socialist society, is significant. So is the fact that the story of *Xianglin's Wife* was written and rewritten by men to represent their desire to modernize Chinese society, while the Iron Girls inscribed rural women's bodies with socialist collectivism and socialist feminist ideology. The representation of the Iron Girls embodied new socialist feminist gender subjectivity in the pursuit of socialist modernity. The transformation in socialist cultural representation and gender practices is most visibly displayed by a juxtaposition of the two cultural symbols: *Xianglin's Wife* and the Iron Girls.

GENDER AND CLASS IN POST-SOCIALIST CRITIQUES OF SOCIALIST WOMEN'S LIBERATION

The post-socialist discursive shift from glorifying the Iron Girls as a model of working-class women's capability and strength to disparaging them as a disreputable symbol of women's masculinization is a visible manifestation of a profound political rupture. Yet in the name of condemning the Maoist 'ultra-leftist line', the attack on the Iron Girls conceals the intense contentions over gender and the class realignment that marked China after 1979. Seemingly initiated by intellectuals and artists on their own, the attack on the Iron Girls was nevertheless a response to political changes mandated by the Communist Party's Central Committee. Deng Xiaoping's call to 'thoroughly negate the Cultural Revolution' and abandon rural collectivization, including the flagship village of Dazhai, gave a green light to the expression of such gender sentiments against socialist feminist pursuits. At no time did the party condemn the Iron Girls, although Guo Fenglian was removed from all her leading positions in 1980 as an implementation of the 'thorough negation' of the Cultural Revolution and disappeared from the limelight for almost two decades.¹⁸ The choice of a specific gendered target and the denunciation of women's masculinization were certainly creative works of the intellectuals of the post-Mao era. What motivated their particular discursive manoeuvres in that social-historical context?

The image of the Iron Girls aroused fear and anxiety in many urban elite men. As the man in the comic dialogue *The Iron Girls* declared, he would never dare to marry an Iron Girl because he would be afraid that she might flatten him with a random swing of her overdeveloped biceps (Honig and Hershatter 1988: 25).¹⁹ Proclaiming their aversion, rather than attraction, to the strong women depicted in socialist visual and literary culture soon became a popular theme in urban men's writings. Literary men would proudly confess that while watching socialist films or reading socialist novels they had never been attracted to the revolutionary heroines who could perform extraordinary tasks but whose sexual appeal was downplayed. Instead, they found themselves attracted to the sexy female spies or other counter-revolutionaries, which made them feel uncomfortably guilty. One even claimed that being unable to openly express his attraction to sexy women, who were represented as reactionaries or degenerates, was a form of sexual repression by the socialist state (Hinton 2003).²⁰

Historians Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter point out in their study of changing gender discourses during the 1980s that the backlash against the Iron Girls was partly 'man-made'. A group of male scholars attending a meeting on the status of women in

1986 declared themselves particularly revolted by the idea that women should be masculinized and become 'iron woman'. According to these male scholars, 'A woman who becomes masculine is a mutant. Capable women should be different from men. They have their own special charm, for example exquisiteness and depth of emotions, and well-developed imagistic thinking' (Honig and Hershatler 1988: 25). Urban educated men's heterosexual desire was not merely unfulfilled but seemingly threatened by prevailing images of strong women who could outperform men. Condemning the Iron Girls is thus only a sign of the entangled dynamics of sexual, gender and class politics set in motion by socialist revolution. In contrast with elite men's call for strong women 'with the character of men' in their pursuit of modernity at the turn of the twentieth century (Liu et al. 2013: 250), we may treat late-twentieth-century elite men's openly articulated fear of strong women as an index of historical change in which a critical mass of strong women emerged in the public realm rather than merely existing in men's fantasies about modern women.

Elite men's critique of socialism's masculinization of women went hand in hand with a widely circulated claim that men had been emasculated by the socialist state. Literary scholar Xueping Zhong, in her path-breaking study of Chinese elite men's representation of masculinity in the 1980s, analyses the myth of *yinsheng yangshuai*, that is, a widespread discursive construction of a 'women-are-too-strong-and-men-are-too-weak phenomenon' and identifies a male 'marginality complex' (Zhong 2000). In the 1980s, literary men's writings centred on their painful experience of 'castration' by the Maoist regime, which made intellectuals 'impotent' politically, economically and sexually (Zhong 2000). Male intellectuals' protest against a Maoist authoritarian political system was often charged with sexual imagery, and pursuing sexual potency became a major performative act in the effort to achieve a masculine identity. In fact, because the Maoist state monitored the sexual mores of citizens, taking on a sexual libertarian stance also indicated an avant-garde, anti-authoritarian and anti-socialist position. Elite men's newly found freedom of heterosexual expression was never free of gender ideologies, however. Absent any serious challenge or any critical framework to examine the nature of their assertion of masculinity and prescription for femininity, Chinese male intellectuals reproduced problematic gender discourses that had been rejected by Chinese feminists at the turn of the twentieth century. Ironically, with the mandate of dismantling Maoism in the name of moving China towards modernity, elite men's blatantly misogynist language and sexist proposals were justified as a progressive stance against the so-called ultra-leftist imposition of gender equality on the Chinese people by an authoritarian regime. Literary men's condemnation of the putative masculinization of Chinese women and assertion of a naturalized masculinity charged with sexual potency as righteous moves redressing the ills of the socialist state soon extended from the cultural realm to economic fields when a state-commanded market economy accelerated.

Starting in the 1980s, many male sociologists and economists engaged in concerted attacks on equal employment policies and promoted a restoration of gender differentiation (*nannü youbie*), which posits that women's roles as mother, wife and daughter are expressions of their 'natural femininity' (Meng 1986).²¹ The double deployment of a key principle in Confucian social hierarchy – that is, gender differentiation, and a Western sexological notion of an essentialized 'femininity' translated into China in the early twentieth century – epitomizes the reactionary outlook of many male intellectuals

in the late twentieth century. But these conservative and outdated gender ideologies were repackaged as bold challenges to an egalitarian socialist state ruled by the dictator Mao, gaining them an avant-garde status in 'ideological emancipation'. In an article published in the prestigious academic journal *Sociological Studies*, Zheng Yefu argued that contemporary China is falling far behind developed countries in terms of the level of a knowledge economy in determining power and productivity, as well as the level of social and material wealth. However, Chinese women's liberation surpassed all countries in the world in terms of women's equal employment and equal pay. Deploing this strange situation, Zheng offered a critique that condensed key elements in the backlash against socialist women's liberation:

The immediate consequence of such an 'outpaced' (chaoqian) women's liberation that deploys administrative power is messed up family relations . . . We have failed to explore a new gender division of labor in family life because, through supporting the weak and suppressing the strong, a strong administrative power has interfered and destroyed the normal division of labor between the strong and the weak in family. It has even made the weak mistakenly think they are not weak, but made the strong lose confidence in themselves. Ultimately, it has deprived Chinese society of 'real men.' . . . A women's liberation promoted by politics has also made China lost its own females [*sic*]. (Zheng 1994: 112)

Zheng Yefu was among a large number of vociferous male intellectuals who expressed strong interest in reviving 'normal' gendered power relations that had been disrupted by socialism. Widely circulated arguments condemning gender equality include: 'equality of outcome should be the natural consequence of equality of opportunity and its realization should not rely on social movements' (Pan 1988); socialist women's liberation 'outpaced' the low level of productivity; because women's physical characteristics made them less adaptable to various job requirements, excessive employment of women reduced enterprise efficiency; the helping that women took from the socialist 'big rice pot' exceeded the value of the quantity and quality of their work (Chang 1988); the 'egalitarian' ideal of equality between men and women violated the law of value, thus it ought to be abandoned in the commodity economy; a new equality between men and women should not be expressed in rights and distribution but should be in the exchange of value between men and women; females could best express their values in the service sector, as secretaries and in public relations (Zhang Xiaosong 1988); the role of men was suppressed in exchange for a relative increase in women's status; for the sake of national development, Chinese women should learn from Japanese women to return home and sacrifice themselves for the nation.²² Male elites' concerted demand to restore pre-socialist gender norms compelled a male sociologist, Pan Suiming, to give this explanation: 'Since 1980 the society has promoted a good-wife-and-virtuous-mother and harmonious family ideal because during the past thirty years, especially under the societal attack in the Cultural Revolution, Chinese men tenaciously guarded the family and protected women; now they request compensation from women' (Pan 1987).

Just as Xueping Zhong's analyses of novels written by men in the 1980s demonstrate that critiques of the authoritarian state were saturated by men's desires for a problematic imagined masculinity, condemnations of socialist equalitarian ideology and gender equality policies by male sociologists and economists were also unavoidably charged with their desires to restore elite men's gender and class privileges. Pan Suiming's

self-aggrandizing claim for 'compensation' from women for men's gallant deeds under socialism presents a rare contradiction to the usual bemoaning of the loss of masculinity. That view was expressed unambiguously by Zheng Yefu, who used the US economist George Gilder's (1981) *Wealth and Poverty* to echo his own ultimate concern: 'In the welfare culture, money has become not something earned by men's hard work but a right to women offered by the state . . . Nothing can be more damaging to men's value than increasingly recognizing that his wife and children could live better without him.' Resisting the 'damage' inflicted by a socialist welfare state legitimized a righteous condemnation of a draconian form of women's liberation that 'beat men back into the family to become "housewives" and drove women into society to become "strong persons," and eventually destroyed men's masculinity and women's tenderness, degenerating both into a "neutered" or "asexual" state' (Zheng 1994: 111). Restoring women to domesticity would not only improve productivity but, more importantly, guarantee the strengthening of masculinity.

The dominant masculinist sentiment unabashedly propagated since the 1980s advocates the revival of Confucian spatial gender differentiation: men should manage 'the outside' or public space, while women are in charge of 'the inside' domestic space. This end would be accomplished by removing women from gainful employment and sending them back to the kitchen. According to its advocates, the proposal to rearrange the gender order is not only crucial to restoring men's and women's innate human natures, but also promises to enhance China's potency in the world. 'Where are the Masculine Men', the theme song of a popular TV show *An Overview of Shanghai Husbands* written by a famous male playwright, Sha Yexin, in 1990, declared that taking on any household chores diminished Chinese men's masculinity. 'If a country has no masculine aspiration, how can it shake the world?' (Wang 1991: 17). Thus, the rise of China is premised on 're-feminizing' Chinese women whose 'natural femininity' was tragically destroyed by socialism. While none of these intellectuals had any concept of gender as an analytical category, their grand schemes of a powerful China were nevertheless imbued with gender ideologies. Professing similar nationalist sentiments, Chinese male elites at the end of the twentieth century rejected the vision of Chinese modernity with gender equality at its core, which their forefathers had advocated a century before. A new nationalist dream modelled after the superpower, the United States, was charged with a desire for a hypermasculine sexual and political potency, as well as for gender privileges as male elites eagerly immersed themselves in global capitalism. As an inconvenient symbol that signified the dismantling of both gender and class hierarchies, the Iron Girls acutely disturbed this elite masculine dream, so it was abandoned together with an equalitarian social and economic system permeated by socialist feminist practices.

Perplexingly, some urban women intellectuals also condemned the Iron Girls and Chinese women's masculinization, although their critique of socialist women's liberation was not a wholesale negation. Urban educated women in the late twentieth century generally insisted that Chinese women were more socially advanced than women in Western capitalist countries and admitted that they were the beneficiaries of socialist gender equality policies.²³ Their critiques centred on the measurement of women's liberation against male standards, as the often-quoted saying of Mao illustrates: 'The times are different now. Whatever male comrades can do, female comrades can do, too.' As these women saw it, socialist gender equality was defined as gender sameness to the extent that

women's 'natural femininity' was suppressed. As a consequence, women were no longer feminine, but became desexualized and neutered. Moreover, what injured delicate female bodies was not only the double burden of paid labour and household chores but also the demanding – and demeaning – physical labour required of women as epitomized in the campaigns promoting emulation of the Iron Girls.

A popular short story by a woman writer, Zhang Xinxin, entitled 'Where Did I Miss You?' and published in 1981, depicts an urban educated woman's painful realization of her 'masculinization' through the eyes of the man she loved but failed to attract. In this story of complex and contradictory meanings, the author unambiguously attributed her process of 'masculinization' to her social experience of shouldering multiple responsibilities and performing physically demanding work in a rural village. Contrary to Pan Suiming's claim that men gallantly protected women, Zhang deplors the lack of 'strong men'. Alluding to her experience of being sent down to a mountain village during the Cultural Revolution, Zhang gave these vivid flashbacks as the protagonist reviewed her 'masculinizing process':

She carries water on the tortuous path by the mountain cliffs, and a little imbalance would spill the water into yellow dirt without any trace . . .

She carries a gunnysack over fifty kilos heavy toward a stack, moving up step by step with all her efforts, with her teeth set . . .

In a decade when one was most attentive to one's appearance she only had a few blue clothes to change; and worrying about growing increasingly busty, she deliberately folded her shoulders. (Zhang Xinxin 1981)

If Guo Fenglian and her team members were reading these memories in 1981, they would recognize them as a realistic description of their daily hard work and poverty during the 1960s. Guo Fenglian even did not have decent clothes without patches in 1965 when Premier Zhou Enlai made the first visit to Dazhai. She had to borrow a new blouse from her friend in order to host the national leader. These Iron Girls might also agree with Zhang's description of the sexual norm at the time, which reflected a traditional notion of women's chastity that demanded concealing both women's bodies and their expressions of sexuality. But they would not imagine the cultural meanings Zhang gave to these realistic 'flashbacks', although their meanings and implications would nonetheless be instantly recognizable to urban educated women.

Literary scholar Li Xiaojiang articulates the significance in such literary representations:

The image of masculinized women often appears in contemporary women writers' works. They do not eulogize it, but express their secret anguish. On the one hand they interrogate the tendency toward women's masculinization; and on the other hand they imply condemnation of the ultra-leftist ideologies and an era of no-females. (Li 1988: 32)

Here we discern a criticism shared by women and men writers of the supposed 'ultra-leftist masculinization of women'. In strikingly similar language to that used by Zheng Yefu, Li follows Zhang's argument to critique the 'damage done to a whole generation of women' in a 'twisted era'. The similarity stops there, however. The damage to women was not to their sense of value, like the damage to men's self-esteem in Zheng Yefu's portrayal. Rather, it was that 'women experienced their adolescence without youth, and experienced

a hardened life without pursuing beauty and without experiencing tenderness. Now the loss of youth and emotional life was imbedded in their deep psychological structures, affecting their courtship, marriage and even family life' (Li 1988: 103).

Educated women's critique of socialist women's liberation, interpreted as 'native women's voices', has gained wide circulation among feminist scholars outside China, especially among those in the field of China studies, since the 1990s. Feminist academics in the US were making conscious efforts to deconstruct Euro-centric or US-centred knowledge production, paying special attentions to the voices of 'Third World women'. Informed by post-colonialist critiques, this well-intentioned feminist agenda overlooked the specific historical context within which women's 'native' voices were articulated and the locally situated power relations in knowledge production in the so-called Third World. With neither a critical awareness of the historical context in which the Chinese elite produced knowledge, nor a critical framework to delineate the intense class reconfiguration going on in China's historical turn from socialism to capitalism, a feminist respect for what were imagined as native voices from the Third World led to an uncritical facilitation of the global circulation of urban educated women's critiques implicated in masculinist discursive manoeuvres. The thesis that women have been masculinized by a state-led strategy for women's liberation that adopted male standards became an accepted truth both inside and outside China, constituting a major theme in the public memory of socialism. English-language scholarship on women in China often adopted problematic terms such as 'gender erasure' and 'the masculinization of Chinese women' to define the effects of socialist gender policies, rather than treating them as signs of discursive manoeuvres that emerged in an era of intensely contested power relations between and among gender and class that needed to be unpacked and interrogated.²⁴

What was the historical context within which some urban women literary scholars and novelists embraced the notion of masculinization? On what grounds can I claim that these concepts were an urban elite's discursive construction? The original *Iron Girls*, Guo Fenglian and her team members, have never used the term 'masculinization' to describe the effects of their heavy manual labour. In fact, agriculture in China has long been feminized, in the sense that women have constituted the major labour force, beginning with the Great Leap Forward and continuing into the twenty-first century as large numbers of able-bodied rural men have migrated to cities or joined the military. Women shouldering physical labour in the fields as well as domestic toil has long been a norm of Chinese rural society in the PRC. Their physical labour has been associated with their earning capacity (earning more or fewer work points in the era of collectivization, or producing more or fewer agricultural commodities in the recent era of privatization and marketization), and hence an important factor contributing to their family's financial status, rather than their gender identity.²⁵ Rural women and men have never worried that women would be masculinized by performing physical labour, even though they have increasingly taken on previously male tasks out of sheer necessity in a changing economic environment.

Indeed, the evidence shows that rural women have continued to express their pride in being able to do 'whatever men can do', in total unawareness of the urban elites' discourse of masculinization. A 1995 feminist intervention project in Yunnan distributed digital cameras to village women so that they could take photographs of scenes and subjects that interested them. The resulting photo album powerfully conveys Yunnan rural women's

demanding physical work in both agricultural production and domestic reproduction. Most agricultural tasks women performed in this region demand great physical strength but are obviously regarded as women's normal work. The captions of several photos specifically note that now women can do things that previously only men were allowed to do, such as fishing, threshing grain and driving an ox cart. There is no trace of worrying about being masculinized, but full recognition of rural women's hardship, endurance and tremendous contribution to the rural economy and family livelihoods (Ou 1995). The outcry against women's masculinization by taking on men's jobs definitely was not shared by, or even transmitted to, millions of rural and urban Iron Girls.

Even more revealingly, urban elite women and men have not expressed any concern about rural women's 'masculinization' during the accelerated feminization of agriculture in recent decades, with the privatization of rural economy and out-migration of rural men. The silence on rural women's burdensome responsibilities in a privatized economy contrasts sharply with the outcry against the 'masculinization of women' by the socialist state policy of gender equality in the 1980s. This odd contrast has two possible explanations. First, the intensity of rural women's physical labour may never have been the concern of those urban elite who worried about women's masculinization, so there is no contradiction in their current silence. Second, the thesis of the masculinization of women was situated in the political context of anti-socialism, and the decisively changed political and economic milieu in twenty-first century China had eliminated the motivation to continue this discursive device. In any case, the 1980s discourse protesting against the masculinization of Chinese women should be situated and interpreted in relation to early debates regarding gender and class relations in the elite pursuit of modernity.

Chinese women's bodies have always been a focal point of elites' contention at moments of drastic social change. From the late Qing reformers' agitation against foot-binding, the early Republic-era feminists' endorsement of physical education as a way to strengthen women's bodies, the 1930s feminists' and nationalists' advocacy of robust beauty, to the PRC socialist state feminists' promotion of strong, heroic women that culminated in the celebration of the Iron Girls in the mid-1960s, physically strong women remained the ideal type in dominant discourses of Chinese modernity. Moreover, after the initial eugenic emphasis on producing healthy sons, the primarily rationale for building up women's physique was to enable them to enter what had been exclusively men's world, according to the historical convention of gender segregation that prevailed in 'respectable families'. If qualms about women's 'masculinization' were expressed after this alien term entered Chinese via the translation of 'Western scientific knowledge' in the early twentieth century, they never became widespread or serious enough to appear in the dominant discourses.²⁶

What, then, made the post-Mao urban elite women reject this heritage by deploying a pseudo-scientific and essentialist notion of sex to disparage women's performance of physically demanding tasks? If the discursive device was directed at an authoritarian state's monopoly of gender policies, why were other lines of analysis of the shortcomings of socialist women's liberation foreclosed? What political context enabled this particular critique, rather than other narratives about socialist women's liberation that were available at the same time, to gain traction domestically and transnationally? We must take a closer look at the political context of women intellectuals' discursive practices at that time.

Women intellectuals in the 1980s certainly shared the political agenda of deconstructing the Maoist state with their male counterparts. The 'ideological emancipation' campaign was a discursive manoeuvre by which post-Mao intellectuals broke free from a class categorization that had placed intellectuals among the 'class enemies' during the Cultural Revolution. Critiquing the CCP dictatorship under Mao became a material passage to social ascendancy for many senior or newly minted intellectuals, who offered various proposals to steer China away from authoritarian socialism. While their condemnations of the damage caused by Mao's (mis)use of class in political struggles were mostly pertinent, their total rejection of the utility of class as an analytical category for examining deeply entrenched social hierarchy and power relations in Chinese society, coupled with their passionate commitment to demolishing an equalitarian ideology and redistribution system, reveals their class standing and their desire to revive intellectuals' privileges as a social elite. In place of the now notorious Maoist class struggle, intellectuals propagated a myth of a value-free scientific knowledge as the panacea to cure the ills of a socialist system and to move China onto the track of 'global' – or, rather, capitalist – modernity. Demonstrating their full collaboration with the new CCP leadership's agenda to depoliticize a severe political rupture, intellectuals' massive deployment of 'scientific theories' in all fields successfully reinstated their elite position as experts, while camouflaging a historical process of class realignment replete with power dynamics of gender and ethnicity.²⁷ It was against this particular background that naturalizing femininity and masculinity emerged as a scientific truth from biology and psychology (constituted largely of translated texts published before 1949 and discredited in the West in the second half of the twentieth century) that would help the Chinese to recover the 'human nature' that had been distorted by the Maoist dictatorship.

For some women intellectuals, theorizing a biologically determined femininity prior to and beyond the realm of the social and political was also a political strategy to detach gender issues from a Maoist class analysis. Masculinist authority in the CCP did use a Maoist class label to denigrate or suppress state feminists' concerns over gender inequalities,²⁸ although in the post-Mao conceptual framework of a party-state such contentions went unrecognized. But by condemning the party-state's suppression of gender issues with a theoretical pillar of a naturalized femininity, women critics produced a discourse of universal womanhood bound by biology. Joining male intellectuals in abandoning class as a valid analytical category, women intellectuals also had no qualms about presenting natural femininity as well as their discursive claim on it as free of class inflection. The hallmark of achieving this natural femininity, however, was a rejection of masculinization symbolized by the Iron Girls whose rural and working-class identity was openly displayed.

Women intellectuals' complicity with male elites in redefining the Iron Girls as the symbol of socialist masculinization of women did not simply pry open a discursive space to discuss gender issues free from Maoist class hegemony. It also became part of the process of class realignment at that moment of profound political rupture. Class tensions and power dynamics in the socialist period were conveniently glossed over by a 'scientific' accusation of masculinization. Urban elite women's aversion to the recent experience of being sent to villages or factories to take on manual labour found an elevated feminist expression in denouncing the patriarchal socialist state's suppression of women's femininity and erasure of gender difference. The ability to claim a delicate and tender natural

femininity has signified a privileged social status that shields a woman from physical labour, conventionally a prominent marker of lower-class status. Co-opted by a market economy, that naturalized femininity has been expressed in women's ability to consume dazzling feminine products. In post-socialist China, gender differentiation has resumed its historic function as a marker of class distinctions.

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When being interviewed by a Beijing TV talk show host in 2012, Guo Fenglian, now the chief executive officer (CEO) of Dazhai Conglomerates with assets of over 1.7 billion yuan, attempted to refute urban elites' denigration of the Iron Girls by saying, 'We are also made of flesh and bones, not iron.' She never deploys the term 'masculinization', which meaningfully signifies her rural identity or her conscious rejection of the hegemonic gender discourse in the post-socialist era. With an ironic twist, the Iron Girl who was silenced for over 20 years has returned to the limelight with a new identity as the CEO of a major enterprise. Owing much to the cultural capital of Dazhai gained in the socialist period as well as to her personal reputation and leadership capacity honed since her adolescence, Guo led Dazhai from a rural village of collective agriculture to a diversified conglomerate owned by Dazhai villagers collectively. Hailed by the media as accomplishing a 'magnificent turn from an Iron Girl to an Iron Lady',²⁹ Guo's success in the market economy enabled her to resume her membership in the Standing Committee of the National Congress and gain discursive power in an era when power is the prerogative of the rich.³⁰ In interviews on TV and in print media, she has consciously utilized her regained discursive power to inform the public of the glorious history of Dazhai's collectivization and the Iron Girls' tremendous contribution to the village's development. Even when the young TV host, cast in the typical image of sexualized modern femininity, exclaims with a tinge of condescending sympathy about Guo's hardened and coarse hands, Guo is not apologetic about this proof of the hard physical labour she performed in her youth. With full dignity and pride, she presents a powerful narrative of a meaningful youth among the Iron Girls.³¹ The re-emergence of the real Iron Girl with discursive power presents a significant crack in the long-solidified discursive sediment regarding the 'socialist masculinization of women'.

By the time Guo Fenglian reappeared in public, both gendered discursive terrains and social practices had changed in significant ways. Gender differentiation has become the hallmark of a market economy in which abundant feminine commodities lavishly package a hegemonic modern femininity embodied in omnipresent images of young sexy women celebrities. Gender differentiation has also been prominently displayed in gender stratification in employment, with millions of young rural women at the bottom toiling in sweatshops for the global market, and men dominating managerial positions. While a rapidly expanding and feminized service industry has provided new employment opportunities, the lack of opportunity for women to rise to positions of power and wealth has led to a dramatically enlarged gender gap in average incomes. The ratio between women's and men's incomes has declined from 0.84 to 1 in 1988, to 0.65 to 1 in 2011; women now earn just two-thirds of what men do.³² Although the result of complex factors, the increasingly gendered class disparity indicates the concrete socio-economic effects of

the elite's discursive demolition of socialist gender equality ideology and practices since the 1980s.

The masculinist discursive manoeuvre in the 1980s also paved the way for the emergence of a hegemonic masculinity in China's merger with global capitalism. The rapidly rising economic power of China has relieved the male elite from its previous inferiority complex. The dramatic amassing of power and resources in the hands of elite men – party and state officials, entrepreneurs and intellectuals – has made the elite men's dream of 'potency' come true. One visible indicator of masculine potency is the booming sex industry, as well as the new norm (or rather a revival of polygamy) of keeping multiple mistresses as a sign of success. Such expressions of hegemonic masculinity in contemporary China inadvertently acquired negative connotations through Xi Jinping's recent anti-corruption campaign. All fallen officials are exposed as possessing not only massive amounts of wealth but also numerous women. Male commentators, either from the right or the left, all express a sense of disgust toward those corrupt officials. But relevant questions about the formation of this type of hegemonic masculinity have not yet emerged in any analysis of the pattern of corruption among male officials.

Critical reviews of the intense discursive struggles in the 1980s have recently emerged among some Chinese literary scholars. While examinations of the shortcomings of intellectual debates and agitations in the 1980s express serious efforts to engage with intellectual legacies of a recent past, it is still rare to see a self-reflective interrogation of the politics of post-socialist knowledge production in and outside China with critical lenses of both gender and class (Zha 2006).³³ To open up that line of inquiry, this chapter has examined the politics of making cultural symbols of *Xianglin's Wife* and *the Iron Girls* to illuminate a history of intense discursive struggles that were professedly over visions of modernity, but were replete with power dynamics of gender and class. The impressive success of elite men's discursive manoeuvres at the historical turn from socialism to capitalism is evidenced in the fact that severe class and gender polarization is the hallmark of China today. A critical review of the rise of hegemonic discourses in post-Mao China is therefore imperative.

NOTES

1. Gendered power struggles can take place in high politics, within the party's power structure, in the processes of state formation and the formulation of laws and public policies, as well as in everyday life, ranging from education and employment, and the gendered division of labour in production and reproduction, to the decision to keep or abort a female foetus. They can be manifested intensely in organized feminist activities, either within or outside the official system, on or off the internet, and within or outside the media's attention.
2. In the English-speaking academy, the relationship between feminism and socialism in China became a focus in feminist scholarship in the 1970s. Davin (1976), Croll (1978), Johnson (1983), Stacey (1983) and Andors (1983) all recognized the legacy of May Fourth feminism for the Chinese Communist Party and in the Chinese Communist Revolution. But none of these works has been translated into Chinese. The marked lack of interest among Chinese academics in these feminist scholarly works is symptomatic of an intellectual aversion to the whole subject of the Chinese revolution, compounded by a reluctance to approach the subject from a feminist perspective. Overall, these works share a critical assessment that the CCP did not do enough to liberate Chinese women, which presents a sharp contrast to the dominant assessment produced by the post-Mao male elite: that Chinese women's liberation under the CCP had outpaced what the material condition permitted in that historical era, that is, the CCP overdid it.
3. See Liu et al. (2013).

4. Jin Jiang's work on the history of Yue opera gives a detailed account of the adaptation of Lu Xun's short story to a Yue opera. See Chapter 4 in *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009. My translation of the character Xianglin Sao differs from hers as Xianglin was the name of her husband and the nameless character only acquired a name as Xianglin's Wife. Lu Xun's penetrating understanding of Chinese gender system was also expressed in the naming of his character. Also see <http://www.yizhuge.com/nwxq2.asp?ID=7> (accessed 23 August 2013). The Yue opera is one of many operas based on local dialects in China. Yue opera was the first to adapt Lu Xun's short story, as his hometown is in Zhejiang and the story was situated in his hometown. If the short story had an audio version, Xianglin's Wife would speak the Shaoxing dialect on which the Yue opera developed.
5. <http://i.mtime.com/4020546/blog/7374617/> (accessed 15 August 2014). To view the film online, access <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3gX14Zw6HU>.
6. The film's portrayal of Wu Xun is much more complex and subtle than characterized by Mao. The director of the film added many scenes to depict Wu Xun as a man of a low class who did not identify with the dominant Confucian values. It is very likely that Mao did not finish the long film in which scenes of Wu Xun's refusal to identify with the ruling class were concentrated in the last half hour.
7. Contemporary critics think the voiceover is an evidence of Xia Yan's sacrificing artistic standards in compliance with the political demand of the time. See Wei Jiankuan, 'Xia Yan xiansheng gaibian Zhufu de baibi' (Failures in Xia Yan's adaptation of *New Year's Sacrifice*), <http://www.xixingcun.com/dushu/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=11294>, accessed 18 August, 2014.
8. This critique of the May Fourth New Culturalist portrayal of women as victims of feudal society was first made in Ko (1994); see her introduction for a critical analysis of the rise of the 'May Fourth story' of the Chinese tradition. See also Wang (1999) which also challenges the CCP's dominant representation of women pre-1949 as victims without agency.
9. For a detailed study of the implementation of the 1950 Marriage Law in the PRC in English, see Johnson (1983: esp. 132). For Chinese studies and sources on the contentions over of the Marriage Law, see Deng (1993b), Duan (2000: 119–121), Huang (2004: 33–54), Deng (1988: 49–54) and Luo (2007: 427–428).
10. For analyses of socialist state feminists' deployment of the concept of feudalism, see Wang, Z. (2005: 519–551) and Wang (2010: 827–849).
11. Honig and Hershatter (1988) vividly capture the discursive shift in that historical moment; for their discussion of the Iron Girls, see pp. 23–31.
12. The most valuable source material on the history of the Iron Girls Brigade in Dazhai is in a two-volume collection of oral histories of 150 villagers (Sun and Liu 2008). Several websites also provide valuable visual and written sources on the leader of the Iron Girls Brigade, Guo Fenglian: <http://space.tv.cctv.com/video/VIDE1229948499008452>; <http://tv.sohu.com/20130510/n375487819.shtml>; and <http://www.globalview.cn/ReadNews.asp?NewsID=24337>.
13. CCTV (2009); see also, Sun and Liu (2008: 99, 102–104).
14. See Bao and Gao (1958: 4), Jing (1958: 5) and Corresponding Group of the Xu County Committee (1958: 3).
15. Hershatter (2011). The renowned poet in the Tang Dynasty, Du Fu [杜甫] (712–770), wrote about how robust women ploughed the fields in the times of war. See Binche Xing [兵车行], <http://www.interactive.tech.ca/ref/baijia/dufu.htm>.
16. See CCTV talk show featuring Guo Fenglian, <http://tv.sohu.com/20130510/n375487819.shtml> (accessed 20 September 2013).
17. Jin presents the mixed assessments of former participants. Complaints of damage to some women's health because of heavy physical labour were common, especially in urban industries. Yet Jin emphasizes that the spirit of the Iron Girls, taken as a challenge to traditional gender divisions of labour, was emulated by many women of that generation, including those who did not join Iron Girls brigades.
18. See http://www.china.com.cn/economic/zhuanti/xzgjjsn/2009-07/24/content_18200659.htm and <http://tv.sohu.com/20130510/n375487819.shtml> (accessed 13 May 2014). The course of Guo Fenglian's career constitutes a fascinating account of China's history over the past five decades.
19. Guo Fenglian, however, had many suitors, including some men who were urban residents. Some Iron Girls of Dazhai even married men from other villages who came to live there, reversing the usual pattern of patrilocal residence.
20. See the interview with a male writer in the documentary film *Morning Sun*.
21. This summary of public debates and surveys on women's roles comments that women confront three choices: the choice of the state that requires women's contribution to the society; the choice of men that demands women's good appearance, gentle personality and strong ability in domesticity; and women's own choice. The author emphasizes that many women's rejection of just being a good wife and mother is in sharp conflict with men's expectations. For a discussion of increasing gender conflicts in the economic reform, see Wang (2003).

22. At a banquet during my lecture tour in China in July 2013 my host, a high-level male university administrator, asked me to explain 'gender studies'. After hearing my brief explanation, he offered his solution to tensions in gender relations: 'To maintain harmony and balance in conjugal relations, wives should return home and their salaries should be paid to their husbands.'
23. For an early examination of how socialist women's liberation benefited women, written by one of the beneficiaries, see Li (1988). Her assessment shares the prevailing male intellectuals' concept that the level of women's liberation outpaced socio-economic conditions, and that gender equality was bestowed on Chinese women by the state.
24. Examples of English-language scholarship that circulated the thesis of 'the masculinization of Chinese women' include Yang (1999), Cui (2003) and Yang (1997).
25. Rural men highly value women with a strong physique. In some rural areas in Fujian, bride price was determined by her body weight, a practice that persisted even through the Cultural Revolution.
26. For discussions of changing gender discourses in the twentieth century China, see Ko and Wang (2007).
27. For a critical examination of the relationship between the post-socialist ascendancy of the discourse of 'scientific modernity' and the rapidly increasing political power of scientists, see Greenhalgh (2008).
28. See Wang (2006) and Wang (2010).
29. The 'Iron Lady' was a nickname for the UK Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher.
30. Guo Fenglian was first appointed to the Standing Committee of the Fifth National Congress in 1978. She was removed from all her official positions in 1980 after Deng Xiaoping's decision to abandon collectivization of the rural economy. She resumed her membership of the Standing Committee of the National Congress in 2003.
31. <http://tv.sohu.com/20130510/n375487819.shtml> (accessed 20 August 2014).
32. <http://www.wageindicator.cn/main/salary/753759735de58d445dee8ddd> and <http://www.baike.com/wiki/> (accessed 25 August 2014).
33. The literary scholars and artists included in the volume present fascinating memories of and comments about what they experienced during the 1980s. Tellingly, neither gender nor class is deployed as an analytical category in their narratives.