

# Communism and Gender in China<sup>1</sup>

WANG ZHENG

University of Michigan, USA

As depicted in most scholarship on socialist China, the socialist state appeared as a paradoxically “women-friendly” patriarchal party-state that sporadically promoted gender equality. An adequate understanding of Chinese communism has to integrate knowledge of socialist state feminists who fought on multiple fronts as Communist Party members towards an egalitarian vision of a socialist modern China premised on *nannü pingdeng* (男女平等) – equality between men and women.

The concentration of revolutionary women and men from diverse backgrounds in a political party formed amidst the cross-currents of feminism, socialism, Marxism, nationalism, liberalism, and anarchism in the early twentieth century and shaped by decades of military combat, political strife, and violent suppressions by their enemies, including imperialist colonizers, Japanese fascists, and the Nationalist government, necessarily constituted extremely complex historical legacies and messy interpersonal networks. Passionate revolutionary women and men with firm convictions, though diverse visions of a modern socialist China, shaped the complicated dynamics and multifaceted struggles in the Chinese Communist Party’s highly volatile and historically contingent experiment of establishing a socialist state.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted with permission from Wang Zheng. *Finding Women in the State: Feminism and Revolution of Culture in the Early People’s Republic of China (1949–1964)*. University of California Press. In press.

## WOMEN AND CHINESE COMMUNISM

In the course of the Communist Revolution before it won state power in 1949, tens of thousands of women from diverse social backgrounds joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The first cohort joined the CCP in the 1920s. Most early Communist women were urban-based educated feminists of the May Fourth generation, and some were women factory workers active in the CCP-led workers’ movement. Many in this cohort died either in the Nationalist Party’s hunt-down of Communists after the break-up of the first United Front between the CCP and the Nationalist Party (1924–1927) or in the subsequent military battles. The survivors of this cohort served in various official posts at the national level in the early People’s Republic of China (PRC). Two CCP women from this cohort, Cai Chang (康克清) and Deng Yingchao (邓颖超), became founders and leaders of the All-China Women’s Federation, a women’s rights organization established in 1949.

The second cohort was mainly comprised of rural women who joined the Communist Revolution when the CCP established its rural military bases after the break-up of the first United Front. CCP membership swelled from over 40,000 in 1928 to over 300,000 in 1934. Many rural women were involved in guerrilla warfare and the Soviet-style local government in the CCP bases in southern and central China. After the CCP’s military defeat by Nationalist Party (GMD) forces in 1934, however, only 10 percent of the Communist troops survived the brutal ordeal of the two-year-long retreat and relocation, which Mao Zedong later named “the Long March.” Among the Communist women who survived the Long March and reached the

CCP's new bases in the northwest, several rural women guerrilla leaders from the second cohort rose to leadership at the national level, including Kang Keqing (康克清), who became the vice chair of the All-China Women's Federation in 1957, and the chair from 1978 to 1988 (Young 2001).

The third cohort joined the CCP in the war of resistance against Japan's invasion, especially after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937 when Japanese troops attacked China proper. Patriotic zeal for national salvation as well as dislocation caused by the war drove hundreds and thousands of urban students and young professionals to the CCP bases established in peripheral rural areas after the Long March. A desolate rural town in the northwest, Yan'an, became the CCP headquarters during the resistance war period, attracting many left-oriented urbanites. The party membership expanded dramatically from about 40,000 in 1937 to over 800,000 in 1940. In this cohort, some urban celebrities, such as Chen Bo'er and Shen Zijiu, took on leading official posts in various branches of the central government of the early PRC. In most cases, educated women in the third cohort became officials at provincial or municipal levels, and rural women with little education staffed the county governments or held lower level posts in the early PRC.

The fourth cohort joined the CCP during the civil war between the CCP and the GMD in the late 1940s, after Japan's surrender. This cohort was more diverse, including urban young students, factory workers, professionals, and rural women in the old CCP base areas and newly occupied regions. Many in this cohort staffed the new socialist state's local governments, as well as women's federations at the urban district, street, rural county, or township level. By the time of the CCP's victory in 1949, its membership had expanded to 4.49 million, of

whom 11.9 percent were women. Integrating these 530,000 CCP women in our understanding of socialist China is a crucial step towards engendering the Chinese revolution, an agenda proposed by the late historian Christina K. Gilmartin (1995) in her work on radical women of the CCP in the 1920s, which has remained largely unfulfilled.

Women who joined the CCP out of conviction expressed their conscious rejection of a conventional life for women of their time. By 1949, given that 90 percent of Chinese women were still illiterate, educated women were predominantly from families with some degree of social privilege. Their choice to risk their lives by joining an embattled political force, either to pursue an idealistic dream or to escape from predicaments in their personal life, or both, indicates the presence of a clear political consciousness and commitment, as well as strong will and inclination for action.

#### FEMINISM AND CHINESE COMMUNISM

Feminism was one of the many ideologies embraced by educated Chinese in their pursuit of modernity and rejection of an ancient dynastic system since the turn of the twentieth century. Just as the imagination of a modern China has never been singular, feminism has also been understood in diverse ways that, nevertheless, express a shared concern with gendered social arrangements. At the turn of the twentieth century, anarchist, socialist, liberal, evolutionary, eugenic, and nationalist positions shaped various feminist articulations. In their proposals for changing gender hierarchy rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy and gender norms based on Confucian ideals of gender differentiation and segregation, feminists expressed different imaginings of a better future: a more humane society that centered

on social justice and equality, a modern society that allowed individuals to break away from the constraints of Confucian social norms embedded in kinship relations as well as the control of an imperial polity, and/or a stronger nation that turned China from being the prey of imperialist powers into a sovereign state. Regardless of their diverse political positions, reformers, revolutionaries, professionals, and educated women and men from elite social backgrounds who embraced various versions of feminism agreed on the necessity of changing gender practices in transforming their ancient civilization, which had fallen into deep crisis in a time of imperialist and colonialist expansion. The confluence of diverse and often contradictory ideas and practices rapidly made a neologism a key phrase in twentieth-century China: “equality between men and women” (男女平等), a Chinese rendition of the English phrase “sexual equality” that had been circulating globally since the late nineteenth century. Signifying a conscious rejection of the foundation of Confucian social order prescribing *nannü* (men and women) distinction, 男女有别 and *nannü youbie* (differentiation between men and women), 男女平等 *nannü pingdeng* (equality between men and women) became a badge of modernity adopted by social groups and political parties that attempted to assert a progressive identity. A powerful promotion of and identification with feminism transformed the subjectivities of a small group of educated Chinese women and men to various degrees in the early part of the twentieth century.

Amidst the rapidly shifting political and cultural cross-currents in China, informed by global socialist and feminist movements, the CCP endorsed “equality between men and women” in its platform from its inception in 1921. In fact, its founders, such as Chen Duxiu (陈独秀) and Li Dazhao

(李大钊), had been among the most vocal advocates of feminism in the New Culture Movement before they turned their attention to organizing a Marxist party. The birth of the New Culture Movement was marked by Chen Duxiu’s publication of *The New Youth* magazine in 1915, which rapidly became a rallying point for cultural radicals aiming to transform the dominant Confucian morality and cultural practices in order to modernize China. Gender hierarchy and differentiation were highlighted as the quintessential symbol of the backwardness of Confucian culture – defined as “feudalist” – in much of the New Culture intellectuals’ critiques. Feminism was enthusiastically embraced as a powerful weapon to combat “feudalism” that had dominated China for millennia.

The small circle of cultural radicals rapidly expanded its social and intellectual influence after May 4, 1919, when college and secondary school students spearheaded a nationwide patriotic movement. Ignited by the treaty signed by world powers at the Versailles Conference which transferred all of Germany’s rights in Shandong Province to Japan after World War I, the May Fourth Movement, with passionately anti-imperialist male and female students as major constituents, became a powerful vehicle that carried the New Culture’s advocacy of anti-feudalism, including the promotion of feminism, into mainstream urban society. The confluence of the New Culture and May Fourth movements (1915–1925) sprouted an organized feminist movement that peaked in 1922, and many May Fourth feminists later had important roles in China’s political, social, and cultural transformations. From the two cohorts – the older New Culturalists and younger May Fourth Movement participants – emerged a small group of men and women, disillusioned with the Western liberal but imperialist powers, who formed the Communist Party to pursue a socialist

modernity modeled after the newly founded Soviet Union.

Fighting for female constituencies through feminist organizations in the early 1920s, leading feminists in the CCP defined feminists who did not embrace the Communist Revolution as Western, bourgeois, and narrow feminists, turning the word “feminism” 女权主义 *nüquanzhuyi* into a negative one in the CCP’s discourse. Nevertheless, feminists in the CCP inherited and revised May Fourth feminist agendas of women’s liberation in the course of the Communist Revolution. Replacing the discredited word 女权 *nüquan*, which carried multiple meanings including women’s rights, women’s power, and feminism, the term 妇女权利 *funü quanli* (women’s rights) gained unchallenged legitimacy in the CCP, and CCP members’ activities centering on promoting *funü quanli* and mobilizing women for the Communist Revolution, named “women-work” 妇女工作 *funü gongzuo*, was institutionalized in the CCP since the early 1920s. Managed by a women’s department or a women-work committee in various periods, women-work was a major platform for CCP feminists engaged in pursuing gendered social justice and equality as well as an important branch of the CCP specialized in mobilizing women’s participation in the Communist Revolution.

The CCP feminists’ firm identification with the party’s ultimate goal had complex consequences. Most significantly, the victory of the CCP enabled them to wield the socialist state power to materialize their feminist dreams. The numbers and power of Chinese socialist state feminists of the early PRC were arguably unprecedented in feminist histories of the world, as a consequence of a historically specific Communist Revolution in the world’s most populous nation. The first National Women’s Congress, organized by the CCP feminists in March 1949, was the first national conference of any social groups convened in

anticipation of a transfer of political power to plan for action in a socialist China. It resolved to set up a national women’s organization, All-China Democratic Women’s Federation (ACDWF; its name was changed to All-China Women’s Federation in 1957, hence ACWF), an umbrella organization that horizontally united all pro-CCP women’s organizations, and an official institution that vertically reached all women down to the rural villages and urban neighborhoods nationwide. State feminists made this major move when the top CCP leaders were preoccupied with the political takeover and military maneuvers to drive the remaining Nationalist Party forces down to the south.

Two months after the founding of the PRC, one of the first international conferences of the new socialist China was convened in Beijing on December 10, 1949. The All-Asian Women’s Congress, attended by 197 representatives from 23 countries, was organized by the ACDWF in its new role as a member of the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF). Hosting an international conference on women before the PRC established any diplomatic relationship with any nation except for the Soviet Union indicated the CCP leadership’s full support for this initiative. The event not only demonstrated state feminists’ conscious efforts to merge the women’s movement in the PRC with socialist women’s movements globally, it also revealed the crucial role the ACDWF played in the new socialist state’s efforts to establish international connections.

#### ROLE OF THE CHINESE COMMUNIST STATE IN RESTRUCTURING GENDER RELATIONS

In late September 1948, before the CCP headquarters moved to Beijing, the Central Committee of Women-Work was assigned a task, to draft a marriage law for the new

socialist China. Chairing a group of six CCP feminists of the first three cohorts, Deng Yingchao provided a strong leadership in drafting a feminist law, the first law passed in the PRC. A central debate concerned the freedom to divorce. Some CCP women officials supported restrictions on divorce in order to deter male CCP officials from replacing their old wives with young, urban, educated women. Deng Yingchao insisted on removing restrictions on the ground that the law should prioritize the interest of the vast majority of women, that is, rural women. Poor rural women who were sold to men or endured an abusive marital life needed a divorce law that could assist their escape from their predicament.

The 1950 Marriage Law stipulated women's autonomy in marriage and divorce, as well as equal rights. The radical feminist law is a quintessential case of how CCP feminists used state power to dismantle an ancient marriage institution based on parental authority to arrange marriages for children, as well as many customary marriage practices that were against women's will, and treated women as property of men. The ACDWF, coordinating support from multiple branches of different levels of government, turned the promulgation and enforcement of the Marriage Law into a powerful mass campaign promoting women's equal rights and personal freedom, ideas they inherited from May Fourth feminism. The May Fourth agenda of anti-feudalism in the expression of women's equal rights and independent personhood was most widely circulated among the vast population in this period to the extent that the Chinese term "feudalism" (封建主义) has become a gender-inflected key word encompassing everything we today call sexism: masculinism, patriarchy, male chauvinism, and/or misogyny. "Equality between men and women" and "women's liberation," popularized via state-owned media and

cultural production, became household slogans intimately connecting gender equality with the authority of the new socialist state. The feminist law promulgated with socialist state power effectively transformed not only the marriage institution, but also gendered cultural practices and discourses.

#### MASCULINISM AND PATRIARCHY IN CHINESE COMMUNISM

Feminist CCP members have existed in a contradictory political environment. Ideologically, the party's platform has endorsed a feminist pursuit of gender equality and upholds "equality between men and women" as the law of the land. The Constitution of the PRC grants legitimacy for feminist expressions and actions in the official system. Institutionally, however, the various administrative levels of the CCP's leadership have always been predominantly occupied by men, many of whose subjectivities seem to have been shaped by a pervasive patriarchal culture rather than fundamentally transformed by feminist and socialist principles of eliminating all hierarchies. In practice, the presumptions and power dynamics of male supremacy could overrule the ideological and legal legitimacy of feminist actions. A masculinist in a position of authority could easily tell a woman official who proposed action on behalf of women's interests that he also believed in the importance of this issue, but more important and larger issues deserved the government's resources and energy. The ACWF, after all, was organized as a party-led mass organization rather than an executive branch of the government, although everyone in the Women's Federation is also on the government payroll. The distribution of power between this gender-based mass organization and the government was a contested matter in the new socialist state. The subsequent institutional marginalization of

Women's Federation officials has conditioned the routine experiences of feminists in the CCP that women-work was of lesser value, except for those moments when some item on the Party Central's agenda required that women be mobilized or attention be paid to gender equality.

A major erasure of state feminists arose in the production of historical knowledge of socialism since the late 1970s, when the CCP began to depart from the socialist course after Mao's death in 1976. In Chinese intellectuals' concerted critique of the CCP's crimes under Mao Zedong's dictatorship, the socialist period was mainly described through condemnations of the ills of that era, and Mao became synonymous with socialism. This antisocialist discourse is both grossly reductive and openly masculinist. In postsocialist intellectuals' efforts to dismantle both the CCP's authoritarian rule and socialist egalitarian values and practices, the mainstream gender ideology and practices of the socialist period that promoted equality between men and women were characterized as the Maoist state's imposition of gender sameness, a crime of the CCP that distorted women's natural femininity and masculinized them. Restoring gender differentiation was promoted by both of the urban elite's conflicting proposals: embracing a Western capitalist modernity symbolized by sexualized and commoditized women in advertisements; or reviving a Confucian tradition by retrieving "Oriental women's traditional virtues." Rearranging gender practices became a prominent theme in elite proposals to undo socialist modernity. The vehemence with which these ideas were advocated was strikingly similar to their forebears' passionate agitation for change in gender practices at the turn of the twentieth century, though pointing towards a reverse direction in their imagining of a gendered future. As many scholars have observed, this initiative constituted an open and powerful

backlash against the gender policies of the socialist period.

At the Fourth UN Conference on Women hosted by the Chinese government in 1995, China's then-president, Jiang Zemin, gave a welcome speech that did not attract much public attention. The following year, on March 8, International Women's Day, the *China Women's News* published by the ACWF reprinted Jiang's speech. It chose one sentence to stand as the title, "Equality between Men and Women is the Fundamental State Policy in Promoting Social Development in Our Country," and framed it as a new official decree from the CCP's top leadership. Reporters from the newspaper interviewed heads of provincial governments and ministers of various branches of the central government asking what concrete measures they had taken to implement this "fundamental state policy." By continuously publishing interviews in which officials felt obliged to say something about equality between men and women, the state feminists created an illusion that a political campaign to advance this policy was going on. Although this strategy encountered resistance when some male officials insisted on seeing the official decree announcing this "fundamental state policy," state feminists forged ahead, disguising their own initiative as if it were merely an effort to implement existing principles. Equality between men and women as the fundamental state policy was finally written into the Law of Protecting the Rights and Interests of Women in 2005, and it appeared in the Work Report of the CCP 18th Congress in 2012.

The ACWF embodied a dilemma emerged since the early days of the CCP: the institutionalized women-work in the CCP, a prominent progressive stance superior to those political parties or forces that totally exclude or ignore women, was turned into a marginalized enclave of feminists within the

political system. State feminists had to fight for political and material resources as well as recognition of women's interests and rights from an internally structured disadvantaged position. The tactic of self-effacing public representation of the ACWF's work similarly emerged in CCP feminists' long experience of operating in a male-dominated party that often created a perilous political environment for feminists.

Historically, the label of "narrow bourgeois feminism" was used as a political club to beat down those outspoken CCP feminists who insisted on the priority of women's interests or raised a critical voice against male chauvinism in the CCP. In this historical context, camouflaging their feminist agenda with legitimate, seemingly ungendered party slogans and attributing their own accomplishments to the "wise leadership of the Party" were, and still are, the hallmark of their public statements. Not only did this maneuver claim legitimacy for their actions by appealing to the authority of the party, it also publicly acknowledged their role as dutiful subordinates to the Party Central, or to the various administrative levels of the Party Committees, which were the immediate supervisors of the women's federations. In sum, a women's organization that aimed to transform the gender hierarchy nevertheless staged a gendered performance in accordance with prevailing gender norms that extolled the womanly virtues of modesty, hard work, self-effacement, self-sacrifice, and a lack of desire for power and fame. Acting in accordance with this gender script could most effectively ease the possible irritation or even resentment of male authorities. By glossing over their struggles behind the scenes, this self-effacing rhetoric ensured that these dynamic women leaders were, and remained, unknown to the public. Receding into the shadows, socialist state feminists contributed to the

myth of a monolithic patriarchal party-state that sporadically showed benevolence to women.

In many political storms after the founding of the PRC, state feminists were sometimes the targets of deliberate suppression or the inadvertent casualties of power struggles. Even when they were not affected personally, their feminist agenda would often be brushed aside by imperatives from the Party Central. Achieving women's liberation in an actual socialist state proved to be far more complicated than what was conceptualized in theory.

Though never in the center of the political power of the CCP, the first generation of state feminists simultaneously enjoyed tremendous institutional and informal power gained from their seniority in the party and suffered from deep entanglement in the political system. Their empowerment as state feminists came at a price: serious constraints resulted from their being an integral part of the CCP, whose male-dominated leadership's embrace of gender equality was often conditional and instrumental and whose preoccupations could be detrimental to women's interests.

Postsocialist Chinese intellectuals' condemnation of Mao's dictatorship consolidated a lingering Cold War paradigm of a "totalitarian Communist party-state" in the field of Chinese studies in the United States. By ignoring fissures, contradictions, gaps, and conflicts inherently embedded in the socialist state formation, and by assuming the impossibility of expressions of feminist agency in the male-dominated power structure, a masculinist fixation on power struggles among top male leaders in high politics has effectively worked to erase feminist contentions in the socialist state. At the same time, feminist criticism of a centralized socialist patriarchal state has also become a blindfold that prevents us from seeing subversive women in the state and from exploring theoretical implications

of gender transformations and feminist possibilities generated in the process of building it. As a result, the gendered internal workings of the “party-state” remain unexplained, inside feminist agitators are unknown, and conventional assumptions persist.

SEE ALSO: Feminism, Chinese; Gender, Politics, and the State in East Asia; Women’s and Feminist Activism in East Asia

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