

Women in China during the Cultural Revolution:

True Liberation?

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Perhaps no societies in history experienced such sweeping and rapid changes in their established ideas and practices concerning gender as those that underwent Communist revolutions in the 20th Century. In countries such as China and the Soviet Union, women were suddenly thrust into areas of society in which they had previously had almost no participation or influence. While progress in most Western capitalist nations was slow and steady, tip-toe by tip-toe with the occasional giant step, women in Communist countries found themselves heavily involved, almost overnight, in areas that had previously been male dominated. Furthermore, they were expected to make significant, almost immediate contributions to party and nation, and from the classroom to factories, from “people’s” assemblies to the front lines, they answered the call heroically. Some of this was to be expected, since the rhetoric of Communism certainly had the liberation of women as one of its themes; but did these revolutions fully deliver the promises of their rhetoric? How much did they really liberate women? This paper looks at Communism in China as a case study, specifically the period of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-76) since the greatest changes in Chinese society occurred during that period, and asks the question, were women really “liberated” and if so, to what extent?

The Cultural Revolution was a time of sweeping reform intended to bring the socialist paradise that much closer to fruition. While some of the publicized gains were important, they were more than negated by the disasters of senseless destruction, conflict, torture, and death suffered by millions. The majority of Buddhist temples were destroyed or heavily damaged; those peasants who had a little more than the rest were persecuted mercilessly as “class enemies;” young children who turned their own parents in as

“counterrevolutionaries” were lionized in the press; and mobs of middle-schoolers hunted down their teachers and principles and beat them furiously, often to death. Society was turned upside down and inside out, and law and order in many parts of the country gave way to total anarchy.

The story for women during this period is likewise complicated; some of the gains made by women were quite significant, even unprecedented in Chinese history, yet at the same time fundamental issues central to the advancement of women in China were either ignored or even made worse.



Figure 1 "In Following the Revolutionary Road, Strive for an Even Greater Victory." Note all the "Little Red Books" being held on high and how Mao himself is the sun.

Central to this story is the then-Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao Zedong. After all, megalomaniacal Mao was the leader and hero of China who had helped to defeat both the Japanese in 1945 and Chiang Kai-shek's corrupt Nationalist regime in 1949, after which he had brought the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to the helm of the Chinese state. In the first few years of his rule he even beat back U.S. Gen.

¹ Shanghai Publishing System Revolutionary Publishing Group. "In Following the Revolutionary Road, Strive for an Even Greater Victory" (在繼續革命的道路上奪取更大勝利 Zai jixu geming de daolu shang duoqu geng da shengli) 1970, Shanghai. [Huntington Archive](#), Ohio State University of the Arts, Columbus, Ohio.

Douglas MacArthur's UN forces out of northern Korea during the Korean War, a success which shocked the world and galvanized the Chinese people behind their leader. Yet after the Korean War ended in stalemate in 1953, moderate progress in China was swept away by Mao's disastrous "Great Leap Forward" (c. 1958-60) Campaign. This campaign, a series of economic policies largely concocted by Chairman Mao himself and based on ridiculous logic, untested theories, and terrible economics would cause one of the worst famines in history. Tens of millions perished directly as a result and the economy was in shambles, so Mao found himself edged out of the leadership of his party by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping (The same Deng Xiaoping, who, as leader of China in 1989, ordered the Tiananmen Square crackdown on student protesters).

All of this was done, of course, behind the scenes, since the "Great Leader" was the icon of China. So he was certainly not publicly blamed for the "Great Leap Forward;" he remained untouchable. While not making senior policy decisions, Mao very much remained omnipresent, a cultural figure larger than any single pop-culture figure in the history of the United States, comparatively speaking. He began to view himself as a "Leftist," while Deng and Liu were "Rightists" and he soon began plotting ways to regain his power. He would take his ideas directly to the people and a great



"Cultural Revolution" would rise from the ground up and sweep the rightists away.

²Figure 2"Completely Smash the Liu-Deng Counter-Revolutionary Line" Note "The Little Red Book" in the arms of the smasher.

² Unknown artist 作者不明. "Completely Smash the Liu-Deng Counter-Revolutionary Line." 彻底粉碎刘邓反动路线 Chedi fensui Liu Deng fandongluxian, c. 1967, Hebei Province. [Huntington Archive](#), Ohio State University of the Arts, Columbus, Ohio.

Figure 3 “Let Philosophy Be Transformed into a Sharp Weapon in the Hands of the Masses.” Note the prominence of Mao’s “Little Red Book;” Mao’s thought is supreme and omnipresent.³

It was a movement that was characterized by attacking individuals and groups, institutions and mindsets. Mao attempted to create an entirely new culture among the masses, a culture of wholly radicalizing the agenda and creating an



atmosphere of perpetual “class struggle.” Nothing was sacred during this period as the goal became to both figuratively *and* literally “smash the old world.” Feudalism, Confucianism, Buddhism, family bonds, and especially “class enemies” were targeted for what seemed, at the time, to be total destruction. As part of destroying the bonds of the old, a major target was the traditional relationship of men and women in which women, for centuries, had been relegated to a dramatically inferior position to that of men. Following the line of the traditional philosophy of Marxism, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) claimed itself to be *the* liberating organization for women, and Mao had always aligned himself with the cause of women. In fact, Shelah Gilbert Leader opens an article for the journal *World Politics* noting that “Before Mao Zedong joined the Communist Party, he had committed himself to the cause of Chinese women.”⁴

In “The Little Red Book,” a collection of quotes of Mao Zedong’s taken with the seriousness that the Bible would be at a religious revival, *a book considered itself to be sacred*, there is a chapter simply entitled “Women.” Within the chapter are Mao-isms

³ Unknown artist 作者不明. “Let Philosophy Be Transformed into a Sharp Weapon in the Hands of the Masses” (讓哲學變為群眾手裡的尖銳武器 Rang zhexue bianwei qunzhong shouli de jianrui wuqi) c.1971, Tianjin. [Huntington Archive](http://www.huntingtonarchive.org), Ohio State University of the Arts, Columbus, Ohio.

⁴ Leader, Shelah Gilber. “The Emancipation of Chinese Women.” *World Politics* 26.1 (1973) : 55. <http://www.jstor.org> (12/02/03)

stating such positions as “Enable every woman who can work to take her place on the labour front, under the principle of equal pay for equal work. This should be done as quickly as possible,⁵” and

In order to build a great socialist society, it is of the utmost importance to arouse the broad masses of women to join in productive activity. Men and women must received [sic] equal pay for equal work in production. Genuine equality between the sexes can only be realized in the process of the socialist transformation of society as a whole.⁶

As part of a book that was carried by virtually all young people of the time, whose contents could be used to justify almost any action, this passage certainly had more than just a little influence on the minds of those who would grow up with it as a daily part of their lives. ⁷



Figure 4 “The Radiance [sic] of the Red Sun Warms Many Generations” Note the little red books on the students’ desks, the presence of young girls in the classroom, and the portrait of Mao above the chalkboard; it is Mao’s radiance coming from his “Little Red Book” which warms the generations.

The rhetoric of the CCP was hardly just mere words, either, for Leader and many others argue that “it is clear that at least some impetus for the reforming zeal of the party leaders stems from their deep and abiding sympathy for the plight of Chinese women.”⁸

⁵ Mao, Zedong. *The Little Red Book*, as presented at <http://www.morningsun.org> (12/02/03)

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Kang, Zuotian 亢佐田. “The Radiance of the Red Sun Warms Many Generations” (紅太陽光輝暖萬代 / Hongtaiyang guanhui nuan wandai) 1972, Tianjin. [Huntington Archive](http://www.huntingtonarchive.org), Ohio State University of the Arts, Columbus, Ohio.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 59

Yet there were deep divisions in the top Chinese leadership as to how to set about liberating Chinese women.⁹

In fact, the leadership, Mao included, flip-flopped numerous times, going back and forth between a “socialism and feminism hand-in-hand,” one in the same or complementary, to a view that the two were competing and that feminist issues had to be subordinated. Even within each position there were numerous inconsistencies, and women of the period were told one year that they had but one final task blocking their freedom only to be told the next year that there were new obstacles that would delay their full liberation. The official line went from telling women that the traditional Chinese family as an institution was the major obstacle,¹⁰ then it was the socialization of housework which could not occur until full socialization of industry and agriculture had occurred, then the “key” was joining the labor force, then it was simply fostering a healthy household that would bring liberation...¹¹ Soon it was back to the labor market, then back to motherly duties again, then on to “happy marriages,” all in the space of roughly ten years.¹²

It was 1964 that made it obvious for the first time, however, that feminist issues as a stand-alone topic would actually be viewed as counterrevolutionary. The editor of one of the most prominent women’s magazines in China, *Dong Biang*, was dismissed for having allegedly focused too much on women’s issues at the expense of the larger cause of the proletarian socialist revolution. This was timed with the release of a pamphlet

⁹ *Idid.*, 56

¹⁰ Thakur, Ravni. *Rewriting Gender: Reading Contemporary Chinese Women*. London: Zed Books, 1997. 43, and Leader, 58

¹¹ Leader, 63

¹² *Ibid.*, 64- 70

telling the masses that love in a marriage should be based on mutual political belief and that the attitude of the husband mattered more than his actions.¹³

What was actually happening was a battle within the CCP leadership between the more conservative “Rightists” (desiring to imitate aspects of the Soviet model, which only encouraged moderate changes in the family system in Russia) headed by Liu Shaoqi with Deng Xiaoping as second in command, and the more radical “Leftists” headed by Mao himself. Mao had earlier pioneered a revolutionary law allowing women broad divorce rights during the Korean War years, right after rising to power. Unfortunately, this effort had generated a terribly violent backlash from the peasantry, still constrained by Legalism (which had at its core a culture of severe punishment) and Confucianism (which emphasized five sacred social bonds, among them the extreme submission of women to men). Relatives torturing or murdering a woman who had attempted to exercise her new right was not uncommon, and the law was never accepted as legitimate by the masses. Starting in 1953, divorce became an option only in the most extreme of cases. The failure of this campaign to “smash feudal marriages” was symbolic of many of Mao’s other policies of the 1950’s in terms of success, and these disasters, especially the colossal failure of the “Great Leap Forward,” were what led to the internal soft coup against Mao, the withdrawal of the more radical agenda, and the ascendancy of Liu’s more moderate agenda. Where Mao had made a noble but disastrous effort to free women from some of the unfair hardships they suffered, under Liu’s leadership, the major issues important to Chinese women were continually pushed to the side.¹⁴ The

¹³ Croll, Elisabeth. *Feminism and Socialism in China*. London,: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1978. 307, and Leader 70-71

¹⁴ Leader 58-63, and Thakur, 47-52

CCP had “waver[ed] from its own ideological understanding of women’s liberation” and had “bowed to historical expediency.”¹⁵

Yet Mao and his faction were hardly ready to concede defeat. He would encourage a grassroots nationwide movement, which would begin in 1966, to be known as the Cultural Revolution. A major reason for this initiative was to undermine the increasing influence of Liu’s growing, rising faction. Having lost control of the CCP organs of power after the “Great Leap Forward,” Mao was appealing directly to the



masses to promote his reforms and to undermine Liu.

¹⁶Figure 5 “Let New Socialist Culture Occupy Every Stage.” Here we see “Madam Mao”- Mao’s wife- with “The Little Red Book” in hand and a host of artistic images in the background. Hardly limited to the classroom or newspapers, Mao’s thought permeated popular culture in a way that is hard to imagine today, filling movies, music, literature, operas, ballet, poems, all kinds of art. “Madam Mao,” or Jiang Qing, herself authored many such works, including several now famous Chinese operas.

The Cultural Revolution started off without the appearance of a major disaster, with the premise of “heighten[ing] class consciousness and involve[ing] as many as possible in political affairs.”¹⁷ One of the most active ways of bringing new people into the political process was the promotion by Mao of the Red Guards. The “Red Guards”

¹⁵ Thakur, 50

¹⁶ Central Academy of Fine Arts Revolutionary Alliance (Hong Qi) (中央美术学院革联(红旗)). “Let New Socialist Culture Occupy Every Stage.” (让社会主义新文艺占领一切舞台/ Rang shehuizhuyi xin wenyi zhanling yiqie wutai) 1967, Beijing. [Huntington Archive](http://www.huntingtonarchive.org), Ohio State University of the Arts, Columbus, Ohio.

were dubbed by Mao himself as the protectors of (his) Revolutionary ideology, and were dubbed by their own schools as his very protector. Basically, all university and high school students and even many under the high school level became Red Guards.¹⁸ It



¹⁹ Figure 6 “Furiously Criticize (Confucius’) ”Restrain Yourself and Return to the Rites” and Grasp Your Gun Firmly.” Note the soon-to-be Red Guards’ militarism: the rifles, the dress code, the formation. How young they appear to be and that the women are separate and kneeling are also notable. It could be that they are simply shorter and are thus kneeling; perhaps this scene was based on a real meeting. Yet it could also inadvertently signify some of the gender disparity and gender inequality.

was not terribly different from the Hitler Youth movement. These young boys and girls had been learning since they started school about the glories of Mao and the Communist

¹⁷ Croll, 310

¹⁸ Jing, Lin. *The Red Guards’ Path to Violence: Political, Educational, and Psychological Factors*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991. 4

¹⁹ Unknown artist 作者不明. “Furiously Criticize (Confucius’) ”Restrain Yourself and Return to the Rites” and Grasp Your Gun Firmly.” (狠批 “克己復禮” 緊握手中槍桿/ Henpi “kejifuli,” jinwo shouzhong qianggan) c. 1974, unknown place. Huntington Archive, Ohio State University of the Arts, Columbus, Ohio.

Party, had been virtually brainwashed to eat, drink, and breathe Mao and his ideology. Daily conversation involved quoting from Mao's little red book. In some ways, this was good, for his philosophy was very empowering and encouraging to women. It created a cultural atmosphere unknown in most if not all of Asia previously. Recalls one man who was a teen at the time:

My first girlfriend left me, probably because I was too unstable. Later, I found another girlfriend. She was the daughter of a revolutionary martyr, and big and strong. She told me she worshipped me. In those days girls behaved like men. If they acted like ladies, they must be bourgeois decadents. They used vulgar language and went around with their sleeves rolled up. That was the right way to be. The girls *did* look valiant and brave, pretty nifty.²⁰

This tale is being told by someone who was a senior Red Guard, and the tone is unmistakably admirable, almost wistful. The fact of the matter was that women made up



a majority of the Red Guards, as the men of the time were more employed and had the Army to join, so many, many young women joined. The rest of the Red Guards was the entire student body of

²¹Figure 7 “This Time It is Essential that the Great Cultural Revolution of the Proletariat Immediately Move to Strengthen the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, Guard Against the Restoration of Capitalism, and Establish Socialism.” Here we see Mao thronged by young, tremendously enthusiastic Red Guards, many of them women.

²⁰ Feng, Jicai. *Voices from the Whirlwind: An Oral History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. New York: Patheon Books, 1991. 95.

²¹ Hou, Yimin 侯一民, Deng, Jieun 鄧潔寸, Jin, Shangyi 靳尚誼, Zhan, Jianjun 詹建俊, Luo, Gongliu 羅工柳, Yuan, Hao 袁浩, and Yang Lingui 楊林桂. “This Time It is Essential that the Great Cultural Revolution of the Proletariat Immediately Move to Strengthen the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, Guard Against the Restoration of Capitalism, and Establish Socialism.” (這次無產階級文化大革命,

China, from which women were not excluded but fully included. With over 100 million students that would come of age during the Cultural Revolution, one can begin to imagine the scale and passion that this movement entailed.²²

In fact, they would eventually bring the state to its knees. The Red Guards took their cues directly from Mao's speeches and *pronunciamentos*, getting their authority from the man who was, to the people if not the CCP leadership, the highest authority at the time, a God among men. Combined with their education this filled them with a strength of conviction that was, flatly put, dangerous, and with no real formal organization, they basically terrorized the country for years. At times the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had to be brought in to suppress them. Anyone who wanted to be a Red Guard, save for certain special "class enemies," could do so if they were of high school age, and many times that restriction was not even applied. With no central organization in this spontaneous mass movement, disputes often led to factionalism which eventually led to open warfare: high-schoolers fighting each other and sometimes the even the army all over China, and all armed with modern weapons. Mao and his faction supported his Guards against the Liu-sent PLA and it seemed as if all of Chinese society, with children torturing their teachers, brothers, sisters, and parents to root out "class enemies" and "counter-revolutionaries," was dead.²³ In fact, the US Senate

對於鞏固無產階級專政，防止資本主義復辟，建設社會主義，是完全必要的，是非常及時的。 / Zheci wuchanjieji wenhuadageming, duiyu gonggu wuchanjieji zhuanzheng, fangzhi zibenzhuyi fupi, jianshe shehuizhuyi, shi wanquan biyaode, shi feichang jishide) 1976, Beijing. [Huntington Archive](#), Ohio State University of the Arts, Columbus, Ohio.

²² Jing, 4.

²³ *Ibid.* 5



Committee on Foreign Relations' Chairman J.W. Fulbright remarked during a 1972 hearing that China was "almost like a dead society."²⁴

²⁵ Figure 8 "Women Can Hold up Half the Sky; Surely the Face of Nature Can Be Transformed." As this poster clearly demonstrates, the propaganda of the time was very encouraging to women.

In virtually all accounts, there was little or no distinction in behavior of the Red

Guards by gender. Women took up a good many of the leadership positions in the Red



Guards and made up more than half the foot soldiers, so their part cannot be discounted. At the very least, young Chinese women of the Red Guard era were liberated in their own minds to the point that they had both the capability and inclination to be as brutal as any of the men in Chinese historical tradition had been. How much they had to be

²⁶Figure 9 "Destroy the Old World; Establish the New World." Note the violent imagery and the crucifix, Buddha, and classical Chinese texts about to be smashed.

²⁴ Schoenhals, Michael, ed. *China's Cultural Revolution, 1966-1969: Not a Dinner Party*. London: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1996. 283

²⁵ Wang, Dawei 王大為. "Women Can Hold up Half the Sky; Surely the Face of Nature Can Be Transformed." (婦女能頂半邊天 管教山河換新顏 /neng ding banbiantian, guan jiao shanhe huan xiyan) 1975, Tianjin. [Huntington Archive](http://www.huntingtonarchive.org), Ohio State University of the Arts, Columbus, Ohio.

indoctrinated to get to that point is a matter of debate for anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists, among others, but the fact that they did get to that point is established. Mao, at least in this regard, had succeeded in “smashing the old world” for that generation of young women as far as political participation, at least at lower levels if not the party leadership, and as far as violent behavior differentials between the sexes.

Precisely as Andors notes, “It is clear... that to be a rebel student or an intellectual was a legitimate role for women...”²⁷ It was almost as Mao himself said, “The times have changed, men and women are equal. What men can do, women can do too.”²⁸

The situation with the Red Guards was symbolic of a larger trend, pushed heavily by Mao, of bringing women into the political and economic process more, including expanded leadership and labor access. It was during this



Figure 10 “Woman's Artillery Squad.” The Cultural Revolution provided women in China with radical opportunities unimaginable decades before.²⁹

period that women came to dominate light industry,³⁰ and there was quite a notable increase in women’s political participation as well; one foreign observer returning to a

²⁶Unknown artist 作者不明. “Destroy the Old World; Establish the New World.” (打碎舊世界 創立新世界/ Dasui jiu shijie, chuangli xin shijie)1967, Beijing. [Huntington Archive](#), Ohio State University of the Arts, Columbus, Ohio.

²⁷ Andors, Phyllis. *The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women: 1949-1980*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983. 105

²⁸ Croll, 312

²⁹ Ding, Zhuang 丁壯 and Yao Zhongyu 姚中玉. “Woman's Artillery Squad.” (女炮班 /paoban) 1974, Shanghai. [Huntington Archive](#), Ohio State University of the Arts, Columbus, Ohio.

small rural village after a long absence noted that one of the greatest differences was the rise in attendance of women at local political meetings.³¹ “There is plenty of evidence,” notes Croll, “to suggest that women played a significant part in the events of the Cultural Revolution on a national and local level.”³² Popular media encouraged this with editorials, and reinforced it when it did happen with glowing press and media coverage.



³³ **Figure 11 “Struggle to Increase the Mechanization of Agriculture.” While the CCP clearly made an effort involve more women in civil society, it was usually with an eye to some sort of larger purpose.**

At the same time,

“While the media glorified women’s public roles as proletarian fighters,” writes

Emily Honig, “their domestic roles and responsibilities were left unexamined.”³⁴ Andors points out the same disparity, noting that women’s concerns were considered “largely marginal.”³⁵ Croll sees why when he writes that China’s “incorporating women’s interests in broader class definitions and the wider political aims of class struggle” was what pushed them to a lower level.³⁶ Thus the melding of feminist issues into a part of something deemed larger perpetually made them second-tier ones. In addition, just

³⁰ Andors, 106

³¹ Croll, 312-313

³² *Ibid.*, 314

³³ Beijing 76 Revolutionary Commission. “Struggle to Increase the Mechanization of Agriculture.” (为加速实现农业机械化而奋斗/ Wei jiasu nongye jijiehua er fendo) 1971, Beijing. [Huntington Archive](#), Ohio State University of the Arts, Columbus, Ohio

³⁴ Honig, Emily. “Maoist Mappings of Gender: Reassessing the Red Guards.” *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*. Susan Brownell and Jeffery N. Wasserstrom, ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. 255

³⁵ Andors. 123

³⁶ Croll, 314

because the state encouraged female participation does not mean that the population as whole embraced their sisters who were trying to become more active.

Clearly, the official ideology of the time promoted the abilities of women and stressed the importance of incorporating them into society, into “The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” but this was always in the context of the Chinese state’s larger campaign of class struggle and revolution; there was little specifically feminist about the agenda, as women’s issues were left by the wayside. The Chinese state advocated a sexually egalitarian social policy of letting both sexes offer their services to the CCP and towards furthering the worldwide proletarian revolution by building socialism in China. Leader is wholly accurate, then, when she notes that the CCP’s attitude towards women “has always been subordinate to economic and political priorities.”³⁷

The Cultural Revolution, another of Mao’s disasters, continued until his death in 1976, and while much remained to be done for women, the breaking down of institutional barriers (an understatement for the Cultural Revolution) was accomplished. Though “the Cultural Revolution created ideological and institutional opportunities for a potentially more favorable context for women’s progress,” it remained “a context in which women found change difficult and in which past influences [and their hold on the Chinese population] remained powerful.”³⁸ A nation and a culture could not be changed overnight simply because a leader had declared it so. To be sure, Mao had genuine intentions to liberate women, just as his other ideas were genuine for China, but their implementation remained problematic. Concluding, Leader states that Mao learned the hard way “that sexist beliefs and values persist in the face of economic, social, and

³⁷ Leader, 79

³⁸ Andors, 123

political change... [that] a meaningful liberation of women cannot be imposed from above.”³⁹ Like most of his ideas, then, Mao’s plans for liberating women broke like water before the hard wall of reality and succeeded only partially. Yet the legacy of mental liberation for women is evident today in the sense that the emerging generation of Chinese have parents, born of the Cultural Revolution, whose views on women and the world were pushed, if not forced, to a new standard; a standard that, in the context of recent Chinese history, still marks significant progress for women despite all of its problems and complications.



農奴女兒上大學

⁴⁰Figure 12 “Tibetan Woman Goes to University.” Despite the many horrific problems of the period, scenes such as this, even if not as widespread or as common as propaganda suggested, were still positive milestones for China and especially Chinese women.

³⁹ Leader, 79

⁴⁰ Pan, Shixun 潘世勛. “Tibetan Woman Goes to University.” (農奴女兒上大學/ Nongnu er shang daxue) 1973, Tianjin. [Huntington Archive](http://www.huntingtonarchive.org), Ohio State University of the Arts, Columbus, Ohio

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