

## 51

## 妇女解放

## Women's Liberation

WANG Lingzhen

**D**ifferent from the concept of women's liberation articulated and practiced within the capitalist system—which focuses on middle-class individualism, female independent consciousness, and equal political and legal rights between men and women—socialist women's liberation aims to dismantle the capitalist political-economic structure that (re)produces not only gender hierarchy, but also class, racial, and regional inequalities. The socialist theory of women's liberation does not separate women's issues from other structural inequalities, arguing that women's oppression cannot be resolved if political-economic oppression continues. As an extraordinary feminist movement that eventually helped establish a socialist country where gender and class equality became the norm, Chinese socialist women's liberation particularly promoted an integrated, proletarian-oriented, and mass-participatory approach to the women's movement. In addition to class revolution and anti-feudal cultural revolution, Chinese socialist women's liberation is tied to the modern third world national independence movement and international socialist anti-imperialist endeavours. It endorses historical materialism, questioning any ahistorical naturalisation or culturalisation of women's oppression. Women's liberation, according to socialist theory and practice, is a long and complicated process because it is interlocked with liberation of all social subjects, which would amount to a total dismantlement and transformation of capitalist and other forms of patriarchal socioeconomic structures at both local and global levels.

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, socialist feminist practice in general—and Chinese socialist women's liberation in particular—have been challenged by feminist scholars in both the West and China. Western Cold War ideology combined with the Western post-Second Wave feminist, especially radical feminist, repudiation of Marxist theory and the left-wing movement in the 1970s have played a powerful role in (re)orienting Western scholarship on women's liberation in the Chinese Revolution.

In the Chinese context, the new ideology of economic reform implemented by the Party-state toward the end of the 1970s also, in its apparent de-legitimisation of the Cultural Revolution, swept aside some central socialist principles, including gender and class equality. The rise of the neoliberal trend of governance among both developed and developing countries—as well as the global intellectuals' general (re)turn to depoliticised cultural and 'bourgeois' values such as individual liberty, privacy, and justice in the 1980s—further undermined and discredited the socioeconomic and political achievements of socialist women's liberation in history.<sup>1</sup>

In this neoconservative and market-dominated transnational context, Western feminist scholarship started asking the question: 'Did socialism liberate women?' Or, more directly: 'Why has socialism not liberated women in China?'<sup>2</sup> This quickly developed into a new scholarly trend, reversing the general direction of Western Second Wave feminist socioeconomic engagement in the 1960s and 1970s, especially retreating from its structural critique of capitalism. Whereas some scholars have argued that this reversal from idealisation to denigration of socialist China reflected more the changes in Western politics than anything directly to do with China,<sup>3</sup> the rhetorical question of whether socialism can liberate women became transnational and pervasive in the 1980s and 1990s, and much feminist research in the United States and in China 'has directed itself to this question.'<sup>4</sup> This new trend by no means suggested a historical and geopolitical inquiry into the meaning and process of women's liberation in the Chinese Revolution. On the contrary, it worked to interrogate the socialist theory and practice of women's liberation from liberal, individualistic, separatist feminist and Cold War standpoints generated and practiced in the capitalist system. That is to say, the integrated, proletarianised, and institutionalised approach of Chinese socialist feminism to women's issues was dismissed as non-feminist both outside and inside China in the 1980s because it does not promote individualistic, autonomous, and essential female cultural values.

Starting from the early 1990s, when the end of the Cold War showcased the triumph of Western capitalism, accelerating the development of global neoliberalism and the transnational market, women's status and the feminist emancipatory vision of women's liberation have steadily deteriorated. At the same time, however, brought together by transnational capitalist forces, particularly the multilevel crisis produced by neoliberalism and marketisation at the global scale, feminist scholars and activists around the world have begun to probe the dangerous liaison between contemporary (post-Second Wave) feminist practices, neoliberalism, and free market fundamentalism.<sup>5</sup> This served to reactivate the socioeconomic insight and international legacy of the Second Wave feminist movement, particularly socialist feminism.<sup>6</sup> At this critical juncture, it is important to reassess the history and legacy, as well as the limitations of Chinese socialist women's liberation to renew systematic critiques of capitalism, to restore the integrated socialist emancipatory vision of the future, and to forge a transnational feminist alliance to confront global neoliberalism. A critical revisiting of the socialist theory and practice of women's liberation in history should also inspire us to combine feminist concerns of culture and ethics with political-economic structural practice, projecting an alternative model for the post-Cold War world.

### *How Chinese Socialist Women's Liberation Came to Be*

The global spread of Western feminisms in the late nineteenth century, especially across China and other third world countries, was a direct result of Western imperialism, capitalist expansion, and colonial modernity. Not all feminist ideas and practices, however, would take root and grow under local conditions. A variety of feminisms, including liberal, anarchist, evolutionary and eugenic, and Marxist, appeared during China's transition from a dynastic system to a modern nation-state, yet only those feminisms that were institutionalised locally, or Sinicised through political, social, and economic practices, would become an integrated force in modern Chinese history.

Chinese socialist women's liberation developed from urban liberal and Marxist feminist discourses of the May Fourth Movement, embracing both individualist and socialist ideas about women's liberation.<sup>7</sup> As a critical cultural discourse, Marxist feminism in the early May Fourth Movement called for women's participation in social production and political governance; the abolition of private property ownership and capitalism; transition from a middle class (bourgeois) women's rights movement to working class women's economic and gender liberation; and socialism as the sociopolitical foundation for women's liberation.<sup>8</sup> It was, however, not until the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in July 1921 that Marxist and feminist ideas were adopted by a political organisation that unequivocally committed itself to socialist feminist practice.

The CCP, at its Second Congress in 1922, passed a 'Resolution on the Women's Movement,' formal guidelines for organised feminist activities that highlighted the Chinese women's movement as an integral part of broader proletarian liberation as well as anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggles.<sup>9</sup> The Party continuously pursued this basic policy of uniting struggles for women's liberation with the socialist revolutionary movement.<sup>10</sup> This theoretical and political clarification distinguished Chinese socialist feminism from all other feminist discourses imported into China at the time and paved the way for the institutional integration of Chinese women's liberation into the Communist Revolution. The Chinese socialist women's movement continued developing throughout the 1920s, directly engaging with the anti-imperialist movements, labour movements, and the Northern Expedition (1922–27), during which the Nationalists formed the First United Front with the CCP to exterminate regional warlords and reform political and economic institutions. In 1925, at the Fourth CCP Congress, a new 'Resolution on the Women's Movement' was stipulated, stressing the central role of women workers and peasants in Party-led women's movements.<sup>11</sup> In 1927, however, the Nationalists and the CCP split violently. The subsequent terror inflicted upon the CCP and women activists marked a dramatic turn in the history of socialist feminism in China.

The late 1920s witnessed the Party's most significant theoretical and practical transformations, including serious reflections on its feminist policy and affiliations. The CCP repositioned itself in relation to China's large rural populations of women, rather than solely urban-based women workers. As part of the general Sinification of Marxist theory, this reflexive change ultimately reoriented Chinese socialist women's liberation.

Mao Zedong's 1927 'Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan,' provided the initial and most important theoretical argument for both peasant revolution and socialist feminism in the Chinese context. In this document, Mao famously described how Chinese men (peasants) are oppressed by political authority, clan authority, and religious authority, while women, in addition to these three authorities, 'are also dominated by men [the authority of the husband]'. The political authority of the landlord, according to Mao, underpinned the three other systems of authority. Therefore, dismantling these economic relations and overthrowing the power of the landlord marked the first step in the process of breaking down the traditional social system. For the first time in Chinese history, peasant women were represented as those most oppressed in China's political, economic, religious, and social systems, and were tied explicitly to the Chinese communist revolutionary cause. Moreover, being the most subjugated group, peasant women, together with peasant men, were perceived as historical agents in the proletarian revolution that would bring structural changes to China.

In 1928, the Sixth CCP Congress passed a resolution prioritising the development of a peasant women's movement. According to this resolution, because female peasants remained at the bottom of China's rural socioeconomic system, the CCP must 'recognise that peasant women were the most active revolutionary force' and therefore must recruit them into general peasant organisations.<sup>12</sup> The recognition among CCP leaders of the potential power of peasant women helped establish women's liberation as a core component of future communist revolution.

By the time the Jiangxi-Fujian Soviet Republic, a Chinese communist base, was established in 1931, certain CCP members had formed a relatively coherent platform to address the combined issues of nationalism, class, and gender in the Chinese context, while keeping with general Marxist tradition. At this early stage, women's liberation began to be systematically institutionalised and integrated into the Chinese Communist Revolution. First and foremost, the Soviet Republic's Constitution, proclaimed by the first All-China Congress in Ruijin, Jiangxi, guaranteed equal rights for the working masses and the complete emancipation of women:

All workers, peasants, Red Army soldiers, and all toilers and their families, without distinction of sex, religion, or nationality shall be equal before the Soviet law, and shall be citizens of the Soviet Republic.

It is the purpose of the Soviet government of China to guarantee the thorough emancipation of women; it recognises freedom of marriage and will put into operation various measures for the protection of women, to enable women gradually to attain the material basis required for their emancipation from the bondage of domestic work, and to give them the possibility of participating in the social, economic, political, and cultural life of the entire society.<sup>13</sup>

The Soviet Republic also established concrete laws to enforce equality in status and participation. These new legal codes 'specifically affected the position of women in marriage and the family, and in their relationship to the land, the factory, and new

political institutions.<sup>14</sup> For the first time in modern Chinese history, women's social emancipation was promoted together with their economic and material emancipation. Implementation of these newly established laws was particularly emphasised, as the CCP fully understood 'it was not enough just to introduce new legislation, it had to be put into practice.'<sup>15</sup> Special women's departments were established in all Party organisations, along with local women's congresses to preside over women workers. Literacy classes and training courses were provided as well, to coach women activists in leadership techniques and to break down traditional gendered divisions of labour. Such opportunities enabled a significant number of women to step out of their homes and, for the first time, participate in political and economic activities.<sup>16</sup> In short, the CCP's policies of 1931 and their implementation set the course for the institutionalisation and integrated development of the peasant women's movement in the soviet areas.<sup>17</sup>

During this same Soviet Republic period, the CCP also developed intensive, periodic mass campaigns to directly confront local resistance to the women's movement reinforcing its institutionalisation. The Jiangxi Soviet's particular circumstances—that is, the establishment of a radically new and modern political power base in an underdeveloped and relatively isolated agrarian area—were extremely irregular. Deeply ingrained Confucian family values rendered certain feminist ideas, especially women's freedom to marry and divorce, completely alien even among peasant women themselves. The offensives of the Nationalist Party military further prevented long-term and orderly education and implementation of socialist feminist policies. As a result, short-term, intensive political campaigns and mass mobilisations were adopted as revolutionary practices, especially during politically and militarily unstable periods (see Li's essay in the present volume).<sup>18</sup> This mass mobilisation approach developed into the mass line organisation and governance of the late 1930s and 1940s, a signature style of CCP leadership, which continued into the socialist period (see Lin Chun's essay in the present volume). Chinese socialist feminist institutionalisation from early on was accompanied by this unique mass mobilisation approach. Periodic mass campaigns might appear temporary and informal but in fact played a critical role in spreading socialist feminist ideas, challenging traditional gender perceptions among the rural masses and mobilising women to participate in the Party, politics, and production.<sup>19</sup> In addition, mass campaigns also resulted in the CCP recalibrating political ideology and organisational tactics in response to inspiration from the masses.<sup>20</sup> They further helped the CCP battle dogmatism, bureaucratism, and commandism within the Party, adjusting and revising its policies based on concrete historical situations.

Socialist feminist practice in the Jiangxi Soviet Republic was in many aspects experimental, testing an array of ideas, policies, legal implementations, and local conditions in a particular rural area of southern China. Nevertheless, the Republic's multilevel, institutional, and mass configuration created a model for feminist practice in socialist revolution that would continue after the People's Republic of China was established in 1949.<sup>21</sup>

The recognition of the critical role of rural women in socialist revolution catalysed the Jiangxi Soviet's integrated institutionalisation of socialist feminism and the CCP's mass line, leading to the Party's continued reflections on and revisions of its policy and practice of the women's movement. To a large extent, Chinese women's liberation became a crucial criterion for the CCP to measure the effect and success of Chinese

socialist revolution. In 1931, the Party conducted an extensive assessment of the women's movement in the Soviet area and discovered a great number of issues caused mostly by the reluctance of local intermediate and lower-level leadership in promoting the interests of peasant women, as well as their political and economic participation. New policies were thus implemented to change the situation, including the facilitation of better organising and recruiting of women into local leadership positions.<sup>22</sup> In 1934, Mao Zedong, after investigating women's work in the Zhongyang district, criticised the local record. He concluded that women's specific interests were ignored in the general policymaking, and attention to women's education was insufficient, particularly with regard to efforts to explain new policies to peasant and working women. Mao then offered concrete suggestions for better attending to local women's needs and connecting their interests to other political problems.<sup>23</sup>

From 1937 to 1941, the women's movement in the more conservative and less developed northwestern Shan-Gan-Ning Border Region experienced certain setbacks. With the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War (7 July 1937) and the subsequent formation of the Second United Front (1937–45) between CCP and the Nationalist Government, the overall revolutionary policy prioritised the war effort as well as the unification of different social classes and forces.<sup>24</sup> In the late 1930s, however, the CCP already noticed stagnation in women's work and a 1939 Party resolution made an urgent request to recruit more women:

Women constitute half of the population of China. Without women's participation in the revolution, the revolution cannot succeed. The number of women workers in the Party is too small at present, primarily because not enough attention has been paid by the Party. The Party must today emphasise the task of absorbing into its ranks revolutionary peasant women and women intellectuals in great numbers ... .<sup>25</sup>

By mid-1941, Party leaders had discovered more problems in the women's movement and the 1941 elections in the Shan-Gan-Ning Border Region were consequently coordinated with a campaign for women's rights. On 26 February 1943, as a part of both the Rectification Campaign against Dogmatism within the CCP and the CCP's effort to deploy the mass line approach to revolution, the Central Committee issued a new policy for women, actively addressing the existing problems and mobilising women to participate in economic production and war efforts. As Patricia Jackal wrote: 'There was a consistent effort throughout the Yan'an period to move women toward equality by bringing them out of the confines of their traditional lives and, in each stage, involving them in larger groups with broader concerns.'<sup>26</sup> The CCP's continued reflection and revision of its revolutionary and feminist policy showcased the Party's recognition of the indispensability of the women's movement to the overall revolution. The integration of women's work into the socialist revolution was thus key to advancing both Chinese women's causes and communist revolution in modern China.

*Interdependence between Chinese Socialist Revolution and Women's Liberation*

One fundamental topic that deserves additional emphasis in a critical review of Chinese socialist women's liberation concerns the interdependence and integration of the socialist revolution and the proletarian women's movement in modern China. This interdependence does not simply reflect the Marxist theoretical proposition that women's liberation is part of the overall proletarian revolution; more importantly, it reveals the broader geopolitical and socioeconomic condition that entailed the mutual support between Chinese socialist revolution and feminism for their survival and future success. Of all the major, modern revolutionary ideas introduced to rural China by the CCP in the late 1920s, feminism and women's liberation appeared most alien to Chinese peasants, both men and women.<sup>27</sup> In the context of long-standing Confucian traditions, a devastated rural economy, and geographical and social isolation, granting women equal rights to social and public production, political participation, and governance was extremely radical. Local resistance first appeared as early as the beginning years of the Jiangxi Soviet period.<sup>28</sup> Adjustments to the implementation of socialist feminist policies were not a choice or bargain the CCP negotiated, but rather the only option presented by the historical reality. This conflict clearly demonstrates how gender issues and feminist questions cannot be addressed in isolation from other social, political, and economic conditions. In the China of the 1920s to 1940s, especially in rural areas, to stress the 'independence' and 'autonomy' of feminist movements would further estrange feminism from local populations, destining women's liberation to failure from the start.<sup>29</sup> The integration of feminism into the Chinese socialist revolution, class struggle, nationalist revolution, and economic development, proved essential to the survival of feminism in the Chinese context.

The other side of this interdependence requires emphasis as well. The success of the Chinese socialist revolution would be inconceivable without the CCP's rigorous feminist policies and practice. Fully aware that the revolution needed both peasant men and women, rural-oriented CCP leaders at the turn of the 1920s and in the 1930s did not position themselves as external liberators of rural Chinese women. Rather, they reenvisioned male and female peasants as the Party's core revolutionary subjects. As Kathy LeMons Walker points out: 'The new direction in the women's movement was an essential part of the Party's general effort to integrate itself with the rural populace.'<sup>30</sup> Chinese socialist revolution would not have succeeded without the CCP's dedication to socialist women's liberation. Those who argue that the CCP simply compromised its feminist stance when conflicts arose with (peasant) men have ignored the crucial fact that neither class nor gender was dispensable for the Chinese socialist revolution. Class and gender equality constitutes the very goal of socialist revolution, and peasant and working men and women served as the central force in carrying out the revolution. A CCP document published in 1930 explicitly argued for the Chinese women's movement as 'an indispensable arm of the revolutionary struggle as a whole.'<sup>31</sup> Pressured by national crises, the Nationalists' military offensives, and conservative forces in various areas, the CCP sometimes had to 'compromise' on both class and gender issues, but such manoeuvrings do not suggest fundamental concessions.<sup>32</sup>

In practice, it was the CCP's dogmatic faction, which ignored Chinese conditions by stubbornly insisting on Marxist theories of urban working class struggle and Russian experiences, which had risked destroying the revolutionary force in the Jiangxi Soviet.<sup>33</sup>

While illustrating the interdependence between Chinese socialist feminism and socialist revolution, I also want to highlight the fact that Chinese socialist feminism had its own limitations. Theoretically, international socialist feminism has been both enabled and constrained by Marxist theory on gender, which stipulates that social production is key to women's liberation and that the elimination of private property would automatically address both class and gender issues. As feminist scholars have already pointed out, structural transformation brought about by the capitalist mode of production did challenge and shake the traditional gender division of labour, but it generated a new public form of patriarchy and a different gender division of labour.<sup>34</sup> Even in the socialist period after the completion of nationalisation and collectivisation, traditional ideas and practices, although much reduced in the urban public and official space, remained active in some private and local rural areas. At the same time, Marxist theory's dismissal of women's roles in reproduction and domestic labour led to gender blindness in its materialist approach to history. This theoretical oversight resulted in the lack of adequate policies to address women's double burden in socialist society. Finally, Marxist theory, based on the European model, is limited in providing guidelines for anti-colonial, socialist, and feminist revolutions taking place in third world areas.

In the context of the Chinese socialist revolution, the combination of an underdeveloped agrarian economy, a largely illiterate rural population, and a deeply entrenched Confucian culture, all in a semicolonial state with endless wars and military conflicts, presented considerable local challenges to feminism in practice. The CCP encountered various kinds of obstacles and resistance including from its own members when it implemented certain policies to forward the women's movement. Clearly, feminist practices do not transcend their historical conditions, nor can they stand alone, independent from China's political, socioeconomic, and cultural transformations. Many of the limitations of socialist feminism, including those occurring in Mao's China, are tied to the limits of China's socialist revolution and the overall socioeconomic and geopolitical conditions. The idea that feminism(s) should independently address a universal set of issues across the globe, and the assumption that socialist revolution should solve all 'women's questions' raised from the universalised Western perspective regardless of historical conditions, only manifest an imperialist Cold War stance in transnational studies of women and socialist revolution.

### *Nationalisation of Gender Equality and Mainstream Proletarian Feminist Culture*

With the consolidation of the communist victory in China after 1949, socialist women's liberation evolved into an officially promoted and mass participated mainstream discourse and practice. On 24 March 1949, shortly after the CCP took control of Beijing, the First Chinese National Women's Congress convened, and the formation of the All-China Federation of Democratic Women (ACDWF, later changed to ACWF in 1957) was announced. The Marxist materialist view of women's liberation, which espouses women's direct participation in social production, constituted one of the central principles of socialist China's feminist policy.<sup>35</sup> Radical changes also followed

the state's nationalisation of gender and class equality, as well as the redefinition of women's roles as socialist subjects in the early 1950s. More critically, Chinese socialist women's liberation constituted a central force in advancing all aspects of the newly established socialist system. In addition to guiding the promulgation and implementation of new marriage laws (1950–53), and championing multidimensional gender equality and women's special interests, socialist women's liberation also integrated itself into other major state movements, such as land reform and collectivisation (1950–53), the Korean War (1950–53), early industrialisation (1950–55), literacy campaigns (1950–56), and the Great Leap Forward (1958–62). In 1955, Mao Zedong put forward the slogan 'Chinese women can hold up half the sky.' The interconnectedness between feminism and other socialist practices also resulted in the emergence of a politically constructed proletarian public space that was essentially, and simultaneously, feminist and socialist.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom arising in the 1980s that claims Marxist or socialist feminism promotes socioeconomic redistribution and class equality at the expense of gender and cultural issues, Chinese socialist women's liberation not only achieved socioeconomic gender equality but also sustained the blossoming of socialist feminist mass culture. Socialist feminist culture explicitly targeted feudalist and capitalist patriarchies and Chinese traditional culture, transforming social ethics and constructing proletarian and socialist female model figures in 1950s China and beyond.

Chinese socialist feminist culture belonged to the political mainstream but grew from diverse international and domestic influences, changed over time, and produced various representations and aesthetics.<sup>36</sup> In the widely circulated journal, *Women in China* (*zhongguo funü*), published by the All-China Women's Federation, socialist women articulated varying senses of agency and critical concerns, incorporating and transforming the May Fourth and left-wing feminisms.<sup>37</sup> But variations in Chinese socialist feminist culture do not suggest a lack of a coherent, central agenda. The idea and practice of 'proletarianisation' distinguished Chinese socialist feminism from earlier Chinese feminisms, as well as from feminism practiced in other countries.<sup>38</sup> Socialist public representation of new roles for working class women, such as tractor drivers, train dispatchers, and high pressure welders, illustrated 'the arrival of a socialist modernity contingent upon shattering the fetters of Confucian, feudal, and capitalist worldviews and their attendant patriarchal forms.'<sup>39</sup> The first group of working class women who embodied socialist gender equality, empowering themselves with modern knowledge of heavy machinery, also brought socialist Chinese women to 'the forefront of new national, international, and world orders.'<sup>40</sup>

It is true that despite the abolition of private ownership and strong cultural campaigns against patriarchy, certain gender and class issues remained in socialist China. But this truth should in no way cancel out the extensive and unprecedented progress made in women's and proletarian liberations in world history. The development of Chinese socialist feminism in the post-1949 era was naturally a complex process, continuously manifesting a geopolitically constrained, socioeconomically conditioned, and culturally negotiated practice. Not all initiatives succeeded. The Cold War economic and technological sanctions launched against China, for example, directly led to structural inequality between rural and urban areas and the persistence of certain gendered divisions of labour.

Socialist China's experience has clearly illustrated that women's liberation can by no means be achieved overnight or independently. The historical limitations of Chinese socialist feminism called for a continued, integrated, and expanded revolution even after the establishment of a socialist system. Today, as feminist movements have moved to restore a structural assault on the capitalist socioeconomic system, to forge transnational alliances over different geopolitical regions, and to develop an integrated emancipatory vision and approach, the practice of Chinese socialist women's liberation—both its achievements and limitations—can offer us critically relevant insights and alternative imaginations.

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