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HALF THE SKY, OR HALF A LIE? UNFULFILLED PROMISES TO WOMEN IN REVOLUTIONARY CHINA

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"Train quickly to become the vanguard of the people, To wipe away the old ways....Accomplish the Socialist Revolution, you great women!"
(Croll 1978, 132)

INTRODUCTION TO CHINESE FEMINISM IN REVOLUTIONARY CHINA

When the Qing dynasty fell in 1912, Chinese Nationalist and Communist forces fought to gain power. Both groups recruited heavily among women and peasants—indeed, anyone who could stand to gain from a disruption of traditional power distribution. By 1915, women's emancipation became a central issue in Chinese politics, and it remained primary throughout the May Fourth Movement from 1917–1921 (Lan and Fong ix). Women were promised education, love in marriage, value in family life, an identity in society, and emancipation. Mao Zedong, lifelong leader of the Chinese Communist Party, summarized the essence of this movement with the statement "women hold up half the sky!" It was a time of upheaval for all of China, but particularly women.

The early and mid-1900s saw unprecedented dialogue regarding the "women question" in the form of speeches, publications, programs, and laws which championed equality for women. However, despite these promises, women never became "comrades of equal rank" within the party hierarchy during Mao's lifetime, and were often criticized for "placing feminist goals above Communist wartime priorities" (Wolf 16; Coser 992). I believe there is evidence that women's emancipation was used as a tool to aggregate power by revolutionary leaders of the early and mid-1900s. For example, the tragic lives of female martyrs like Zhao Wuzhen and Li Chao (victims of forced marriage) were repeatedly used to motivate women to support socialism without necessarily delivering on feminist promises. Given the important role that women played in the revolution, specifically in the Long March, factory production, and political mobilization, the question remains whether political leadership of the time truly valued women's emancipation or intended to deliver upon their promises.

From 1900 - 1976, the "women question" was a central point of debate in Chinese revolutionary politics. It was raised by the May Fourth movement and openly discussed by government officials and revolutionaries on both the Nationalist and Communist sides. Such rhetoric galvanized and motivated women to be politically involved. However, when Communist forces came to power, women's issues were postponed in favor of other socialist issues of the time. This paper explains how feminism was used as a tool to mobilize women in the early 1900s, but was sometimes abandoned to focus on other socialist priorities.

ABSTRACT

As a socialist government, China has historically claimed to prioritize the emancipation of women. However, China's government is also known to be oppressive and limiting of all its citizens. This paper explores whether feminism was used as a tool to mobilize women to participate in the Chinese Civil War and Cultural Revolution without delivering on the promises it made to women. In this paper, feminism is defined as advocacy for economic, political, and social equality between the sexes. Using original texts, contemporary news articles, and propaganda, I will evaluate what promises were made to women, how these motivated women to participate in the Civil War, and how well these promises were kept.

In summary, this paper asks: what is the relationship between revolutionary Chinese feminism and abuse of power? More specifically, how did commitment to women's rights influence female support of revolutionary movements and actual gender equality in Chinese politics? My expectation is that I will find that the Communist and Nationalist leadership's stated commitment to women's rights increased female support of these parties in the early and mid-1900s, but that these commitments were not fulfilled. Therefore, there was not a proportional increase in actual gender equality at the end of the Maoist phase. If the Communist and Nationalist leadership's rhetorical support of women's rights increased female support, but did not deliver, then I suggest that feminism was used as a manipulative tool in order to galvanize support during the War without intent to deliver on such promises.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND LITERARY FRAMEWORK

My research question is based primarily on three theoretical ideas: first, deception is a form of corruption and an abuse of power. Next, individuals join political movements because of rational incentives, and finally, the support of women is necessary to win a war.

While corruption can be difficult to pinpoint, it can be broadly defined as "wrongful exercise of public duty in any community" (Philp 1997). This public duty is determined by "standards of behaviour that are required to be observed by public officials" (Philp 1997). This paper is written under the assumption that following through on political promises is an integral part of a properly functioning government. Intentional failure to do so is deception, and therefore a form of corruption and an abuse of power.

The second theoretical foundation is essentially a form of rational choice theory. Rational choice theory attributes participation in political revolution to competing sanctions, rewards, and norms, often independent of cultural influences or historical institutions (Brittanica Academic, "Political science"). Rational choice theorists assert that political movements "cannot assume automatic mobilization based on pre-given loyalties;" instead, they must work to generate "commitment to their cause and to their chosen means of reaching their goals" (Hirsch 384). Indeed, no rational actor would choose to participate in a political revolution or any kind of collective good "unless selective incentives persuade them to do so" (Klandermans 2001). We must assume that women act as individuals interested in their own political survival. Women may have contributed to the Chinese Civil War because they wanted to "claim more complete female citizenship and increased postwar equality" (Jensen xi).

However, it is important to note the significance of revolt as a rational choice. Being a revolutionary came with high costs. It was a risky political activity, not one that women would engage in lightly. Supporting revolutionary forces was much more costly than many political movements. Through this lens, we begin to understand the great significance of female involvement in the revolution:

their situation must have been dire in order to be attracted to a perilous and unpredictable revolutionary cause.

Other theories describe the necessity of female support in political upheaval. In wartime, women are needed for economic, social, and organizational reasons. The mobilization of a nation for war generates “direct needs for women’s labor in industry, agriculture, and the military,” as well as “organizational skills in voluntary organizations and management” (Jensen viii). Indeed, even US president Woodrow Wilson stated the necessity of female support; he worried that “women.... might constitute a subversive element in the nation, detrimental to wartime unity and the smooth functioning of selective service” (Kennedy 4). It is clear that women are generally considered necessary to the functioning of war or political movements, either because of their potential as a source of support, or at the very least to avoid subversion. Thus, it is clear why women would be an appealing source of support for burgeoning political groups as the Qing dynasty fell.

Other literature explains the starting position of women when the Qing dynasty fell. In the early 1900s the state of women was bleak. Female daughters were killed or sold to be child brides or caretakers of infant husbands (Young 134). Chinese women were completely helpless to pursue education, choice in marriage, or other basic freedoms. Investment in female education was considered wasteful (Young 135). One Chinese woman recalled, “Women had no status. They were at the lowest level of society, doing household chores, home labor” (Young 135). Many men languished indoors and smoked opium, while women were left with heavy agricultural and household work. Women did not have property rights or political opportunities (Young 156).

At age seven or eight, many girls’ feet would be bound. One woman recalled that she had once been an active child, but after her foot binding, “my free and optimistic nature vanished.... my feet felt on fire and I couldn’t sleep; Mother struck me for crying.... I tried to hide but was forced to walk on my feet....” (Croll 19). Women were considered nameless or nonexistent. When the men of the house were absent, women at home would reply to visitors, “No, there’s nobody in’-- given by the housewife herself!” (Croll 18). Another woman explained, “One time I was told to go to a [Communist Party] women’s meeting. At the meeting they asked what my name was. I said, ‘I don’t have a name.’ I never had a name before that!” (Young 138). As the Chinese Nationalist Party and Chinese Communist Party came to power, the state of women was ripe for change and the rhetoric of the Chinese Communist Party had an almost intoxicating appeal. The stage was set for the recruitment of women.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

COMMITMENT

First, I outline the promises the Communist and Nationalist leadership made to women, or in other words, ways the Communist and Nationalist leadership committed to emancipate women. These fall under five main categories: love in marriage and family, a role in the revolution, women’s education, emancipation, and social activism. These commitments are reflected in the following excerpt from the First National Party Congress in 1924: “in law, in commerce, in education and in society, the principle of equality between the two sexes shall be recognized and

the development of rights of women was to be promoted” (Croll 122). Similarly, the First Congress of the Chinese Soviet Republic in 1931 stated: “It is the purpose of the Soviet government of China to guarantee the thorough emancipation of women; it recognizes freedom of marriage and will put into operation various measures for the protection of women, to enable women gradually to attain to 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” (Young 255). Ostensibly, the Soviet government of China was committed to this goal.

Women’s rights pertaining to love in marriage were prominently discussed by Chen Duxiu, the eventual secretary-general of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, Yun Daiying, an early leading member of the Chinese Communist Party, and Mao Zedong, the supreme leader of the Chinese Communist Party throughout his life (Lan and Fong xxxviii). In 1916, Chen Duxiu wrote a piece in revolutionary publication *New Youth* criticizing traditional Confucian mores. He claimed that “The fundamental principle of economic production is individual independence.... the independence of the individual....and the independence of property in the economic field bear witness to each other” (Lan and Fong 5). He claimed that as long as traditional China remained, women would be unable to be heard outside of their homes and controlled by men.

Yun Daiying also wrote about the rights of women. He claimed that “husbands and wives should have the freedom to divorce if they feel that divorce is necessary” (Lan and Fong 31). He argued for the emancipation, writing that “when women are completely emancipated, have economic independence, and do not suffer from domestic burdens,” they will not have to rear children solely to “avoid scorn” (Lan and Fong 32). Like Chen, Yun spoke of an emancipated society for women contingent upon economic freedom. Ye Shengtao, eventual Communist vice-minister of education, and Wang Huiwu, Legal Committee member of Central Government, also wrote about the necessity of liberating women from abusive and constrictive marriages in order to achieve emancipation. Other revolutionary writers, such as Lu Xun, Zhang Weici, B.E. Lee, Lu Qiuxin, Tang Jicang, and Yang Zhihua also penned essays which suggested to women that there was to be a new society based on new ideology which gave women rights.

Mao Zedong himself wrote several papers about the status of and discrimination against women, giving women a reason to hope. Mao wrote a few papers about one Miss Zhao, who committed suicide en route to an arranged marriage she could not accept. As she was carried to the home of her future in-laws, she took a razor from her stocking and slit her own throat. In speaking of this incident, Mao wrote, “Although Miss Zhao lived for twenty-one years in a family that did not allow her to have a personality,....in that last brief moment....her personality suddenly came forth....the snow-white knife was stained with fresh red blood.... with this, Miss Zhao’s personality also gushed forth suddenly, shining bright and luminous” (Lan and Fong 80). Mao’s writing suggests that the abolition of tradition could allow women to have both freedom and personality, and if not the former, an honorable death as a martyr for the cause of freedom. Mao also wrote of this event, “There is only one general answer, that men and women are extremely segregated, that women are not allowed a place in society.... how could Miss Zhao have done anything else but commit suicide? Alas for Miss Zhao! Alas

for the evils of society?” (Lan and Fong 87-88). Mao Zedong published several essays relevant to women’s rights, particularly in marriage.

Deng Enming, a founder of the Jinan communist cell, published on the matter of women’s education. He wrote, “Ever since the new tide of thought swept over China, the woman question has received a great deal of attention...[but] how is female education in Jinan, the cultural center of Shandong?” (Lan and Fong 136). The rest of his piece evaluates the quality of schools, faculty, curriculum, and administration. As with other champions of women’s education at the time (Deng Chunlan, Xiang Jingyu, Tao Yi, Bing Xin, Wang Jingwei, and Shao Lizi), he publicized the Communist commitment to female education and reform.

In terms of female emancipation, Communist leaders of the time aimed to transform women’s lives through education and employment (Lan and Fong 147). Lu Yin, a well-known writer and May Fourth activist of the time, sang the praises of constructing a Women’s Improvement Society in order to help women to have a consciousness and employable skills. May Fourth advocate Zhou Zuoren claimed that emancipating Chinese women was essential to modernizing China (Lan and Fong 148).

In order to ensure political support from women, Chinese Communist Party leaders chose to participate in and integrate with existing women’s organizations. As a result, “prominent male Chinese Communist Party members became active in publishing and making speeches to women through the existing channels,” as seen by the speeches and publications mentioned previously (Edwards 144). The Chinese Communist Party also formed a women’s rights league and hoped such a women’s committee could “encourage participation from women” (Edwards 144). In other words, the Chinese Communist Party was attempting to “arouse and organize women as a separate category” (Croll 121). American journalist Anna Louise Strong interviewed girl propagandists who travelled with the Nationalist army to organize women. One explained to her that the girls would “explain first the difference between the northern troops and our revolutionary forces. We tell them we came to save them from oppression....” (Croll 128). Thus, the Chinese Communist Party attempted to establish themselves as the path forward for women.

WHY WOMEN WERE NEEDED

There would not have been any purpose in recruiting women were they not important in winning the revolutionary cause. Mao Zedong himself stated that women formed “a vast reserve of labour power which should be tapped in the struggle to build a great socialist country” (Croll 238). The Communist Party formally adopted a resolution regarding women, saying, “Efforts must be made to increase women Party members and to develop leaders for the women’s movement” (Croll 127). From 1920 to 1925, there was a massive mobilization of women in Shanghai, Beijing, and southern China. After this occurred, women were so numerous that “neither party could ignore them,” particularly the Communist party as it sought to foment class consciousness and mobilize large swaths of the population (Edwards 141). Women were intent upon “ensuring that each party’s political machinery did not use women’s rights as.... a bargaining chip to win other political goals” (Edwards 141).

As a result of these efforts, women joined and supported revolutionary causes in droves. They joined the Long March, and helped by working in factories, publishing writings, and mobilizing their families. There are stories of women enlisting in the Red Army, “leaving children behind with peasant families, crossing glacier mountains in the

third trimester... leaving babies where they were born, or carrying them along a day or two after birth” (Young 131). Women sacrificed a great deal to support the party.

FEMALE MOTIVES

There are countless personal accounts which explain why women were motivated to support the revolution. Generally speaking, women believed their circumstances could be different if there was a revolution. One poster pasted in a wall in Hubei read,

We women of Hubei for several thousand years have suffered under political, economic and legal oppression. Propriety, traditions, and all sorts of social customs have bound us. Long ago we lost our rights as humans....Now that the revolution has extended to Hubei, and the national government committees have come, we want to welcome them, because they are the people’s officials, because they have given the people freedom from suffering, and because they seek the people’s good....we believe that they will give us economic and political equality with the men, that they will revise the unequal laws, and that they will do away with all laws that harm or hinder women, and will protect the rights of women....this government can help women to have utter equality, economically, politically and legally with the men. Fellow women of Hubei! This is our chance.... (Croll 129).

The daughter of an official, Xie Bingying, related that one of her classmates made a speech saying: “Since the government gave an equal chance to the girls, enabling us to work for the nation and for society, it has been a blessing to women” (Croll 132). Clearly, women believed they had a chance to change their circumstances through the revolution.

The revolution created hope among women. One revolutionary named Li Yanfa explained why she joined the army: “To go find food to eat. There was no food at home...I carried pails of water on a shoulder pole for the five families [and my in-laws] They fed the dog sweet potato leaves mixed with the rice that had stuck to the pot and some water. After the dog ate, I would eat what was left” (Young 137). For many, the revolution represented a chance at recognition and societal legitimacy, an excuse to be unsubmitive and independent, an opportunity to seek “freedom from exploitation and abuse at home, the hope of escape from the chaos of poverty into the safety of a secure, regimented environment with enough food to eat,” and finally “a way to avoid marrying into a strange family or remaining an unmarried, unpaid worker on the lowest rung of the family ladder....for the educated and educable, it was an exciting way to fight for social justice and work for national sovereignty” (Young 138; 133; 131).

Women also supported the revolution in hopes of a “revolutionary change in gender politics led by the new government’s policies” (Edwards 177). Women in Shanghai issued a manifesto similar to that in Hubei, crying, “If we really wish to free China and throw off the yoke of slavery, we must join in the grand revolutionary movement. We must not be passers-by.... we must consider ourselves crusaders in the overthrow of imperialism and militarism.... Dear sisters be quick and join our revolutionary army” (Croll 116). Factory women stated, “We expect the Nationalist Government to make the factories have school for us to learn in and also a special room to feed babies in. And hospital care when we are sick, because we are too poor to pay a doctor. And also vacation with pay before and after babies are born” (Croll 143).

FAILURE TO DELIVER

The Chinese Communist Party and Nationalist governments failed to deliver on many of their promises. This section of the paper provides examples of instances where revolutionary governments could have, but chose not to deliver on their feminist promises.

In the early years of the Chinese Communist Party, the government publicly tolerated women's suffrage, but in private, many Chinese Communist Party officials had "strong reservations" about it (Edwards 148). However, many others saw Communism as the "most important step towards women's emancipation," and "a panacea for women's problems" (Lan and Fong 184). Chen Duxiu wrote, "We cannot divide the women question piecemeal, into issues of education, jobs, social interaction, etc., for our discussion. We must take socialism as our sole guide" (Lan and Fong 217). He made similar statements when presenting before the Guangdong Federation of Women's Circles, extolling the necessity of focusing upon socialism (Lan and Fong 184). The goal of Communist leaders of the era was to liberate women from patriarchal domination, foot-binding, and home confinement, but only as a byproduct of socialism (Lan and Fong 185). In this way, government leaders failed to make women's emancipation a priority in a realistic way.

Indeed, most of the promises made regarding the future of women were inextricably tied to supporting socialism. In 1921, Chen Duxiu argued that "the women question will be fundamentally resolved only when socialism arrives" (Edwards 147). While this assertion was made six months before the Chinese Communist Party was formed, it primed the pump for female support for the organization. By convincing women that emancipation from gendered discrimination was tied to the success of socialism, they ensured support for their other political goals. He Xiangning, a Central Executive Committee member, described the ultimate purpose of the Women's Department as a method of "drafting women into active participation in the Revolution," which defined women's issues as secondary to the goals of socialism (Croll 123).

Furthermore, there were times when Chinese governments acted in direct opposition to the rhetoric they had previously espoused. For example, in March of 1912, the Provisional Constitution under Sun Yat-sen "implicitly excluded women" (Edwards 67). When the United Front (the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist party together) formulated a national constitution in 1924, Article 14 within it dictated that only men be enfranchised (Lan and Fong xviii). After 1927, when relations between the two parties deteriorated, May Fourth feminist programs "lost their political backing" almost completely as parties did not want to risk further instability (Lan and Fong xxii). In 1943 the Party decided not to discuss women's social and political inequality, instead claiming that women must "make their own way by proving that they could contribute to production equally with men... [while bearing] the truly heavy burden of their traditional roles" (Wolf 17). Indeed, women who sought to maintain feminist dialogue were accused of "neglecting the class struggle" (Wolf 17).

Over and over, Chinese political leaders made sure that feminism did not jeopardize primary goals; they saw it as a deviation and a tangent (Edwards 141; 146). In 1927, the Women's Bureau reported to the Central Executive Committee that the women's movement would "not be much use in the real revolutionary battle front" (Edwards 148). Communist women were instructed to "establish themselves at the center" of women's organizations, but to avoid being "absorbed" by them (Edwards 145). Under the United Front, "priorities were clear. Revolution and a unified China first

and women's freedom second" (Croll 124). Women's issues received less support and attention from the government (Croll 144). This is perhaps due to the fact that women's involvement "antagonized" their husbands, and permitting foot-binding and spousal abuse was preferable to antagonizing "peasant supporters of the Red Army" (Coser 992). The government prioritized the persuasion of the male community of Chinese Communist Party benefits instead (Wolf 19). As a result, when women's associations introduced daycare or intervened in forced child marriages, the director of the Chinese Communist Party women's movement openly criticized such associations "for placing feminist goals above Communist wartime priorities" (Coser 992).

However, the motivation to include women in the social movements of the time was not purely for feminist reasons. One justification for providing education to women was to "liberate the individual energies of men," seeing as China could "never become strong while in each generation boyhood years were predominantly spent in the company of ignorant and crippled womanfolk" (Croll 45). Thus, it is no surprise that the Chinese Communist Party delayed female emancipation in a variety of ways after it came to power. One of these was divesting from predominantly female industries in the mid-1950s, and instead promoting an ideal of the "socialist housewife" —a woman who "managed a household well, ensured harmony among family members, and brought up children conscientiously" (Bailey 112). Indeed, even as prominent women like Ding Ling led public relations and writing for the Chinese Communist Party, and women were "interpolated into the new Maoist representational order," women still faced discriminatory treatment regarding sexual norms (Barlow 192).

All this may not have been completely conscious. Patriarchy was deeply entrenched in the thoughts and behaviors of policymakers. When the particulars of land reforms were not completely apparent, cadres relied upon the status quo to fill in the blanks. Land ownership reforms dictated that women be equal before the law in owning land, but in practice, female land ownership actually became a new part of marriage negotiations. When women owned land, it remained difficult for her to "hire labor, sell, lease or trade her land." If the woman instead wished to "trade her land for some in her new husband's village," the land became a *de facto* portion of her bride price. Some villages circumvented this baffling predicament by "simply refusing to give families any land allotments for unmarried girls," and "patrilineal, family-oriented traditions filled the gap of interpretation" (Johnson 112). Unfortunately, the Chinese Communist Party "failed to deal with the actual conditions and attitudes which held women in an inferior position" (Wolf 16).

Indeed, women were expected to fulfill both their revolutionary roles and their traditional duties. When activist Ding Ling criticized this, she was told her views were "now "outdated," "harmful to unity" and unnecessary.... since "full sex-equality had already been established. "Ding Ling was relieved of her political responsibilities for two years" (Johnson 74). In essence, women were mobilized for production, but any woman who complained was accused of putting feminism before the struggle (Wolf 17). Women were encouraged to speak out against landlords, but specifically warned not to let women's special problems "interfere," and marriage reform was to be "mentioned and forgotten" while land reform work continued (Wolf 18). Scholar Margery Wolf wrote, "whatever women's legal rights, their actual control over the means of production or even over their own bodies did not change....as a result of land reform" (Wolf 19). Finally, when the first Five Year Program was introduced, the role of women within it was mostly household work in "constructing a socialist society" (Wolf 21).

Discrepancies in power in society were also made evident on the political stage in terms of representation. Female representation in the National People's Congress during Mao's lifetime peaked at 25% in 1975, one year before he died (Zheng et al.). Despite rhetoric of equality for women, the glass ceiling remained. Such examples of delays in fulfilling the promises made to women during the rise of the Chinese Communist Party abound. There is no shortage of evidence that despite the benefits the Chinese Communist Party enjoyed due to the support of women, it repeatedly failed to deliver on the promises it made to attract women in the first place.

CONCLUSION

From 1900 - 1976, the "women question" was a central point of debate in Chinese revolutionary politics. It was raised by the May Fourth movement and commonly discussed among government officials and revolutionaries on both the Nationalist and Communist sides. Such rhetoric galvanized and motivated women to be politically involved. However, women's issues ultimately took a backseat to other socialist issues of the time. Some scholars believe that this was the intention throughout the early and mid-1900s. I believe the answer was more subtle. Just as Communists allied with Nationalists for a United Front from 1924 to 1927, the Chinese Communist Party ultimately viewed feminism as a necessity for a successful socialist revolution; unfortunately, most leaders lacked a real commitment to the feminist cause (Edwards 141). For many, the "women question" was a positive externality that would be solved as a fruit of socialism. Written accounts suggest that some leaders of the revolution, such as Chen Duxiu and Mao Zedong, truly believed in feminist principles. However, there were not sufficiently large numbers of government officials with such a commitment to enact real change in the long term. It appears that for most, "the chief and immediate aim of China" was "the achievement of national unity and national independence," and women's achievement could at best be a small part of such an achievement (Croll 121).

Despite the hardships that women suffered as activists in the revolution, few expressed "regrets over their initial decision to join the revolution," or awareness of the irony of escaping patriarchy under the Qing emperor only to experience it working tirelessly under Nationalists and Communists (Young 140). Political and social upheaval was an opportunity for women, and in some ways, their participation was empowering simply because they chose to do so. While some might claim they were exploited, there is no doubt that revolution was what countless women chose, lived, and died for.

I believe I have found evidence that Chinese leaders promised political, economic, or social gender equality, that women joined the cause for these reasons, that revolutionary movements benefited from the support of women, and that both parties ultimately chose not to fulfill their original promises. It is amply clear that the Chinese Communist Party was not unduly concerned with women's emancipation beyond its utility in production, and this is made evident both by internal party rhetoric and the implementation of law.

It is important to recognize the improvements that were made under the Chinese Communist Party, even as it repeatedly sidestepped the gender question in later years. Ultimately, I believe it is this trend which determined the success of solving the "women question" in China: the repeated postponement of gender equality as a priority (Wolf 26). One must hope that in coming years, governments around the world will have renewed commitment to gender equality, and resist the temptation to require women to sacrifice emancipation for so-called national goals.

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