

Holding up Half the Heavens: The Effect of Communist Rule on China's Women

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore what women's lives were like in China before Communism, during Communism, and what they are like now. The paper begins with a discussion of oppressive practices employed against women in pre-communist Chinese society, such as footbinding, the taking of multiple wives, the use of concubines, and prostitution. It goes on to analyze Chairman Mao's philosophy towards women, how and why he changed the status of women in China, and whether or not the changes he attempted to instate survived after his lifetime. Clear examples will be shown to prove that they did not.

Stories. Everybody's got one. Each person's face, each person's biography – they all combine in red and black and green and white to make up the tapestry that is history. This paper is about those stories. It's about the stories that are told by the women of China. They are stories that throb with pain, with joy, with passion and with suffering. In their stories, one can hear the echo of one's own friends and family, even here in America. Their words echo in a friend's eyes as she talks about the shame she felt over being raped. Their words echo in the strength of the mother who takes her children and leaves her abusive husband. Their words echo in the pride felt by their children, male and female, who graduate from colleges every year in countries miles away, in a world they never dreamt of.

There is a long tradition of male oppression in China. This paper begins with an exploration of how that oppression was carried out against women. Then, it will move into a discussion of how Mao Tse-Tung and the Communist party tried to change the status of women in Chinese society. In some ways he succeeded, in others he did not. The Communist party is often criticized for its tactics and the affect it had on China overall. These criticisms are valid. However, they do not change the fact that the station of women in Chinese society vastly improved during the Communist regime. As much as Mao was a villain of history, that does not erase the improvements he made for women. While he may have subsequently made *very few* positive contributions to Chinese society as a group, he did make one, and that one affected an entire gender. This paper will go on to discuss what became of women after Mao, what their lives are like today, and whether his ideals outlasted his life. The lives of Chinese women changed significantly immediately after Communist rule began, and most of these changes were to their benefit.

The first vehicle of oppression in pre-Communist China to be examined is footbinding. Footbinding was a custom introduced in the eleventh century, first practiced by the wealthy, and later by the peasantry as well. When a girl reached approximately three years of age, her mother would

wrap her feet with bandages so all toes except the big one were tucked under the sole of the foot.¹ The bandages were left on and tightened nightly, in order to keep the feet small. Eventually, the big toe and heel were brought together, bending the arch, causing "constant pain and hindering free movement" (Spence 20). The binding caused the flesh of the woman's foot to rot and her bones to break, toes sometimes dropping off (Kristof 213).

The optimal length for a woman's foot was 3 inches, and even as late as the 1920's foot binding was considered essential for a woman to be considered eligible for marriage (Spence 20). When a woman was to be married, the first thing the bridegroom's family would look at was her feet. "The mother-in-law would lift the hem of the bride's long skirt, and if the feet were more than about four inches long, she would throw down the skirt in a demonstrative gesture of contempt and stalk off" (Chang 24). The sight of a woman hobbling along on her "three inch golden lilies" was supposed to have an erotic effect on men, who would be touched by her apparent helplessness. Even later in life, if the bandages were removed, the pain was still excruciating. Sheryl Wudunn writes "When Grandma moved to Canada with my grandfather in the 1920's, she unbound her feet, but it was too late: They had turned into flat, stubby blocks" (Kristof 213).

Women were also oppressed through their relationships with men. Within society, women had few alternatives as to what roles they could play. The main options available were those of the wife, concubine, or prostitute, each role successively less desirable. A wife had no power over her own life; her husband's decisions were her own. She was forced to be completely subservient to her husband's family, kowtowing to them every morning. Kowtowing is a Chinese gesture of submission wherein one individual prostrates his or her self

¹Please note here that it was the *mother* who inflicted this on her daughter. This says quite a bit about how women treated one another in pre-Communist China. They adhered strictly to the rules of culture, and even if they felt loyalties to each other they would still inflict pain when social customs mandated it.

before another. She also could be subject to her husband's other wives if he had any (Chang 39, 46). Love was not lost between women in Chinese society; wives could be very cruel to one another. Even the first wife, whose ranking was higher than any subsequent wives, was still subject to both the demands of her mother-in-law and society. The stipulations put on her by her culture were much the same as they were in many other cultures: "looking after a household, cooking and sewing, flower arrangement, embroidery" and, above all, to obey, without question (Chang 70).

A concubine, a formal mistress used by a man for sexual pleasure and to produce children, had even less power than a wife. They were abused by the wives and could even have their own children taken away from them by a barren wife. Jung Chang is a writer who currently lives in London, but grew up in China during the Cultural Revolution, a period of time when many people were falsely persecuted for being anti-communist. In her book *Wild Swans*, she writes of her grandfather falling ill:

My grandmother was terrified. As a concubine, her whole future and that of her daughter were in jeopardy, possibly even mortal peril. She had no rights. If the general died, she would be at the mercy of the wife, who had the power of life and death over her. She could do anything she wanted - sell her to a rich man, or even into a brothel, which was quite common (38).

Prostitution was another option available to women (or rather to the father or mother who would decide their daughter's fate), especially to those in the peasantry. In the late 1940's, the Chinese economy was depressed. However, one trade was prospering: trafficking in young girls for brothels. Cities were filled with beggars offering their children in exchange for food. Chang writes of a "desperate woman" her mother saw outside of her school when she was a child. For days the women stood with her child, who wore a sign that said, "Daughter for sale for 10 kilos of rice" (Chang 97). Female children were sold by peasants into the cities. The rationalization was that even if they ended up in brothels, it was okay...at least the child was alive and the family had one less mouth to feed. Estimates of the number of prostitutes, ranging from those who rode to their clients' homes in limousines to country women who worked out of temporary sheds, in Shanghai run as high as 100,000 (Spence 14, 84). Abuse of these women was even worse than that of wives or concubines. When the Japanese occupied Nanking in 1938, they also used prostitutes (in comfort houses) whom they referred to as public toilets. Far from being "houses" of "comfort," many women in them starved to death or committed suicide rather than choosing to be imprisoned (Chang 53).

This was the situation for women in China before Communism. They had very few choices in their lives. They could be forced to become prostitutes, concubines, or wives, and regardless of what they became, they could still be made to suffer at the hands of one of the many people who were more powerful. But what did Mao, as the leader of Communist China, do for them? What did he do for China? For China, the answer is nothing very good, in light of the fact that millions of Chinese starved or were executed as a result of his misguided policies. Even the supposed "golden age" of the Communist Party started with a blood bath in the

early 1950's. In a 1957 speech, Mao described the killings that took place from 1950 to 1952: "Basically there were no errors; that group of people should have been killed. Seven hundred thousand were killed...since last year, we basically haven't killed people; only a small number of people have been killed." It's been estimated that during Mao's "benevolent period," from 1948 through 1955, 4 million people were executed. The killing in China slowed, but the campaigns were only beginning. In 1957 the Anti-Rightist Campaign took place, and 552,877 of China's brightest communists were denounced and imprisoned as rightists, or people who did not support Communism. Tens of thousands starved in prison camps. Ironically, in all but ninety-six of these cases, the rightist label was removed from people who had already spent years suffering and had died (Kristof 64-66).

1958 brought Mao's Great Leap Forward. Instead of catching up with the West, as Mao hoped it would, China endured one of the worst famines in its history. Peasants lived by eating bark and leaves from trees. In some places, life was better under the old landlord system, where peasants were forced to give nearly all their money to landlords for rent and spent their lives as near slaves of the landlords. At least under the landlords they had a little food; during the Great Leap Forward they had none. Parents had to choose which of their children would eat and survive (Kristof 66). When parents had to choose between letting either their son or daughter starve, girls often lost out to their little brothers (Kristof 232). This could partially explain China's current unusually low female population. During the Great Leap Forward, roughly 5 percent of China's population died, or about 30 million people. Neither by war nor natural disaster have so many people died in one country before (Kristof 66).

Despite all the criticisms leveled at Mao, it cannot be denied, though, that the status of women was radically improved by the Communist regime. Clearly, Mao was a poor leader for the 30 million people who starved to death during his regime. He did, however, raise the status of Chinese women. The idea of equality for women fit into his broader ideology of equality for the oppressed people of China. In his "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan," Mao spoke of overturning all authority, not just the patriarchy. He said, "These four authorities - political, clan, religious and masculine - are the embodiment of the whole feudal-patriarchal ideology and system, and are the four thick ropes binding the Chinese people, particularly the peasants" (Tallmo 2). He also needed to mobilize women into the work force, if he was to catch up with western technology during The Great Leap Forward: "China's women are a vast reserve of labor power," he said (Tallmo 1). He thought China's then enormous population of women was crucial to national advancement, but they needed equality if they were to be utilized in the work force.

In the early 1800's, China's Confucian scholars had already been pleading for greater sensitivity for women (Spence 139). Foot binding had, for the most part, faded out by 1949, but Communists continued to press for more rights for women. Mao initiated a new marriage law that forbade arranged marriages, encouraged free choice of spouses, and stopped "all purchase and sale in marriage contracts." Divorce was also made easier, to be granted at the request of either spouse. He said, "On questions concerning divorce,

it becomes necessary to protect the interests of women and place the greater part of the obligations and responsibilities entailed by divorce upon men" (Spence 376). Groups of men pledged not to marry women through arranged marriages or based on bound feet. Wives were promised the right to divorce freely and "run their own lives;" women who were not married were promised that they would not be sold into marriage and were protected from arranged marriages (Spence 114). Child marriages were forbidden. Neighbors knocked on the doors of wife beaters to scold them (Kristof 213). In these ways, the status of the Chinese wife was greatly improved.

The station of prostitutes was also enhanced by the Communists. Jung Chang writes of her father's Communist group coming in and taking over a town, decreeing "the release of all prisoners, the closure of all pawnshops...brothels were to be closed and prostitutes given six months living allowance by their owners" (121). From the start, Mao accented equality between the sexes. Power should be shared equally, he said, and women would hold up half the sky (Kristof 213). He outlawed prostitution and the use of concubines. Through the Women's Federation, a communist organization devoted to women's affairs, women helped shut down brothels and free concubines (Chang 129). Mao involved women in the actions taken for their betterment and remedied situations that many were forced into without their consent.

The way in which pre-Communist women treated one another, whether as fellow wives, in-laws, or as mothers and daughters, left much to be desired. Mao helped change that as well. Women entered the work force together as the party encouraged them to do things they had never done before, such as becoming officials or running factories. The number of women in the work force soared, from 600,000 in 1949 to more than 50 million today. Currently, 82 percent of working age women hold jobs in the cities of China (Kristof 213-214). Women had new independence and self-confidence, along with new educational opportunities, as more women were encouraged to go to school, even in the peasantry. For the first time in Chinese history, women were seen as more than cattle or walking reproductive organs. Mao made this possible. Mao made many mistakes as a leader, but the fact that he improved the status of women in China is undeniable.

Jung Chang also talks about the Women's Federation, which was started by the Communist Party. Her mother worked full time for this organization, which dealt specifically with women's issues:

It supervised the freeing of concubines and shutting down brothels, mobilized women to make shoes for the army, organized their education and their employment, informed them of their rights, and helped ensure that women were not entering into marriages against their wishes (129).

Would women have worked so diligently for the welfare of other women in the old China?

The Communist Party could not change all minds, however. Chang writes about an incident involving her mother's boss, Mrs. Ting, and her father in which Mrs. Ting tried to se-

duce her father, while her mother was away giving birth to his son (Chang 185-187). The fact that Mao was unable to change Mrs. Ting and other women like her does not undermine the fact that he was able to change many minds. Factories and offices were encouraged to improve, and sexual differences were minimized, with everyone in the same blue or gray jackets. Cat calls would have been considered unrevolutionary and detrimental to the cause of communism (Kristof 214).

Mao could change laws, but he could not change hearts. As China moves into a free market economy, primarily under the more capitalistic leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the standard of living has risen, but with that has come the resurgence of old problems for women. The male dominated Chinese society has returned, but is now coupled with the sexist features of Western society. Advertisers have quickly learned that the best way to market a product is by using young, scantily clad women. Pornography and prostitution are quickly spreading throughout China, and bosses have begun to hire pretty young women "as ornaments or playthings." Women have greater economic opportunity, but they are facing increasing amounts of discrimination. They can find work, but it is usually a job that no one else would want. Only one-third of the students at universities are women (Kristof 214-216).

The worst aspect of all this is the fact that women themselves are now being viewed as a marketable commodity. Starting in the 1980's, con-men began moving into rural areas asking girls if they wanted to come work at a factory in the city. Once they get the women on the bus, they often beat and rape them, making them feel as though they are now unclean, and that no man will marry them. Then they take the women to a remote town where there are no females eligible for marriage. There they are sold as brides to the highest bidder. The women are trapped; many times they do not even know where they are. If the purchased bride tries to escape her husband, his neighbors, sympathetic to a man who spent "hard earned" money on kidnapping a bride, will alert the husband and have her brought back. Husbands will beat, tie up, and even blind their wives to keep them from escaping. This fact indicates how wide spread this problem is: from 1989 to 1990, over 10,000 women and children were rescued by the authorities (Kristof 216-218).

Another alarming reversal of the Communist Party's feminist laws is the re-emergence of female infanticide, the murder of female babies. The Communist party outlawed infanticide in 1949, after which censuses show no sharp decrease of infant girls, until the 1980's (Kristof 227). Part of the reason for the sudden drop in female babies is China's new family planning laws. Most families are allowed to have only one or two children by law to help reduce population size. Couples must strictly adhere to this law or risk having their homes knocked down, paying huge fines, being sterilized, or facing the abomination of a mandatory abortion. For the average Chinese couple, a male child is more desirable for a number of reasons: Lineage passes down only through the males, boys are more adept at field work, and peer pressure is high to produce a male. "A woman will be scolded by her mother-in-law until she produces a son, and she may even be divorced by her husband if she does not" (Kristof 228). With all the pressure to have a boy, it is not surprising that there are an estimated 1.7 million fewer females in China

than there should be statistically (Kristof 229).

The new technology that is being introduced to China is also conspiring against female babies and erasing much of the progress the Communist party made in favor of women. As early as 1979, China began importing and manufacturing ultrasound scanners. By 1990, there were an estimated 100,000 in operation around the country (Kristof 229). These scanners are being used to detect the sex of the fetus while it's still in the mother's womb. Many couples, upon finding that they are expecting a little girl will promptly request an abortion. Peasants love the new age of ultrasound: "Everybody has boys now. Last year we had only one girl born in the village - everybody else had boys" (Kristof 230).

The practice of learning the sex of a fetus and terminating it on the basis of that sex is officially illegal, but with the emergence of a free market economy has come the need for private practicing doctors, and even state run hospitals, to raise funds. Often, these doctors and hospitals are willing to skirt the law for bribes from couples wishing to learn the sex of their babies. No one's stopping to ponder what effect the surplus of males will have on society. No one seems to be wondering what China will be like when one-fifth of Chinese men never marry. All told, there are at least 30 million missing women in Chinese society (Kristof 230-231). Whether they were killed in the 1930's and 1940's as infants, or starved to death in the 1958-1961 famine when their parents fed their younger brothers instead of them, or were aborted in the last twenty years as a result of ultra sound, they are missing and that will ultimately have a detrimental effect on Chinese society.

Communist rule in China had an obviously positive effect on the status of women in Chinese society.

Before Communism, women were treated like livestock or sperm receptacles. They were forced to undergo excruciating rituals, were beaten, and forced into lives they did not want. With Mao's philosophy of equality and the Communist Party, they were liberated: freed from foot binding, prostitution, arranged marriages, spousal abuse and child marriages. Mao worked to change Chinese society, and although he made many inferior decisions as the leader of China, he did elevate the station of women by changing laws and customs in China. With the loss of power of the Communist Party and under former leader Deng Xiaoping, China has seen all the trappings of "the bad old days" come back. Women are being sold as brides, used as sex objects, denied opportunities, and killed in a modern day game of seek and destroy infanticide. The faces of Chinese women, the faces of Chinese future history, are once again battered and bruised.

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