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Keys to Women's Liberation in Communist China: An Historical Overview

By Jinghao Zhou¹

Abstract

Has the Communist Party of China (CPC) fully liberated Chinese women? Is the leadership of the CPC the key to Chinese women's liberation in the twenty-first century? The CPC has tried to convince the Chinese people and international society to believe that the answer is positive. Having examined the status of Chinese women from an historical perspective, the author has reached the conclusion that women's problems in present-day China are not only serious but also structural. It is impossible for Chinese women to fully enjoy women's rights within the current communist system. The future of women's liberation largely depends on women's own efforts combined with the process of China's modernization and the urgent need for democratization.

Key Words: Chinese Women, Women in Communist China, Chinese feminism

Introduction

The Communist Party of China (CPC) has persistently declared that the CPC is the sole savior of Chinese women's liberation, and that Chinese women will not achieve a full liberation without the leadership of the CPC. This article rebuts the party's fantasies and attempts to address the following questions: Have Chinese women fully enjoyed women's rights in communist China? Is it possible for Chinese women to be fully emancipated within the framework of the communist system? This author has viewed women's liberation as part of China's modernization and democratization, and reached the conclusion that a full liberation of Chinese women does not rely on the party's salvation, but on Chinese women's own efforts and China's democratization. The keys to the liberation of Chinese women are to nurture Chinese women's self-consciousness, increase their participation in productive activities, perfection of the legislative system, development of independent women's organizations, and enhancement of women's educational level.

Chinese Women in Pre-communist Era

China is one of the oldest countries in the world, known as a Confucian society. The basic characteristic of pre-communist society was that the highly centralized political system and patriarchal system worked together. Although in the old society, both Chinese men and women were deeply oppressed by the "Three Mountains," i.e., feudalism, bureaucratic capitalism, and imperialism, Chinese women were at the lowest level of the society. The four powers of the society—the authority of the clan, the authority of the divine, the authority of the husband, and the authority of political power—sustained the social structure. Unarguably, Chinese women suffered the most from the male-dominated culture, prejudicial legal system, inhuman ethical code, and patriarchal social structure, which reinforced men's political power, physical power, and psychological power over Chinese women. For more than 2,000 years, the double chains—footbinding and inhuman ethical codes—confined Chinese women to the domestic sphere. Before marriage, women as daughters were the property of their parents; after marriage, women as wives were subject to the authority of their husbands; and after their husbands died,

women as widows were required to obey their sons or mothers-in-law. Traditional ethical codes, such as the Four Virtues—proper speech, modest manner, diligent work, and filial piety — were social shackles to prohibit strictly Chinese women from social activities, and furthermore, required Chinese women to be good daughters, good wives, and good mothers-in-law. All rights, such as property rights, divorce rights, work rights, educational rights, and political rights, were actually Chinese men's rights. Chinese women even had no right to marry the person they loved, or to divorce. In a Chinese saying, if you marry a chicken, you must stay with the chicken; if you marry a dog, you must obey the dog.² Chinese women only played a very marginal role before the Revolution of 1911,³ because they were “eternally oppressed, powerless, passive, and silent.”⁴

Influenced by Western cultures and revolutions, the Chinese people were gradually awakening to issues of gender equity in the second half of the nineteenth-century. Although some female writers, such as Yu Chen-hsieh (1775-1804), Yuan Mei (1716-1804), and Li Ju-chen (1763-1830), were Chinese feminists,⁵ the issue of women's liberation was raised in modern sense by Chinese male reformists, such as Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and Liang Qichao (1873-1929), who were the pioneer advocates for women's rights. Kang Youwei promoted radical change in China, advocated the abolition of private property and families, and proclaimed a constitutional monarchy. Liang Qichao was a more influential political scholar and inspired Chinese intellectuals for a generation with his writing. They put women's liberation in the nationalist context and insisted that Chinese women must be strong if China wanted to be strong. That is why they focused on the campaigns of women's education and the freedom of marriage. Unfortunately, they only relied on government reform and hoped the government could play a key role in liberating Chinese women. After the Hundred-Day Reform Movement failed (1898), the prospects of women's liberation vanished. The Chinese revolution of 1911 had overthrown the last Chinese emperor—the symbol of the Chinese feudal system, and indicated that China had entered into the era of the republic. However, the revolution actually only changed a top leader of China, but it did not touch the grassroots of Chinese society. After the revolution, the foundations of Chinese society remained the same. The status of Chinese women had not been changed at all.

The May Fourth Movement of 1919 is the first great cultural movement of modern China, which greatly enlightened Chinese women in a cultural framework. The May Fourth Movement of 1919 was directly triggered by the Paris Peace Conference. On 30th April 1919 Woodrow Wilson, Lloyd George and Clemenceau decided to transfer all of Germany's interests in the Shangdong province to Japan. When Chinese students heard the decision made by the Conference, thousands of University students for the first time in modern Chinese history walked on the street Square to protest the decision, and it finally turned to violence against the corrupt Chinese government. This particular incident is of course a great patriotic moment. However, in most cases, scholars who write about the May Fourth Movement distinguish the incident from the “movement.” According to the Tse-tung Chow, the May Fourth Movement acquired a broader meaning and “covers the period roughly from 1917 through 1921.”⁶ During the May Fourth Movement, by attacking traditional culture and Confucian ethical codes, Chinese women began raising their own voices, and increasing numbers of Chinese women devoted themselves to the women's movement, joining anti-imperialist marches, boycotting Japanese products, calling for national awakening, promoting women's

suffrage, denouncing footbinding, sex segregation, the inhumanity of arranged marriages, and the poor quality of women's education.⁷ In this sense, the May Fourth Movement was the first meaningful women's movement in Chinese history. However, the impact of the May Fourth Movement on Chinese women was limited. First, the May Fourth Movement was male dominated. The main public discourses on Chinese women were conducted by Chinese men,⁸ who actually failed to "consider women subjectively in their writings."⁹ Secondly, Chinese feminists at that time only employed nationalism and Western feminism to promote the women's movement and did not establish their own feminism. Thirdly, the deepest roots of women's oppression—the highly centralized political and patriarchal systems—had not been discussed because the May Fourth Movement was a cultural movement by nature. The focal points of women's liberation in the May Fourth Movement were "female chastity codes, women's education, and the inhumanity of arranged marriage."¹⁰

The establishment of the Republic of China (1912-1949) was a significant step toward women's liberation. After the republican government settled in Nanjing in 1927, the Chinese government made some efforts in improving women's status. The government introduced some legislation, offering Chinese women more legal rights in education, marriage, education, and property. In the 1930s, the new government established legislation to grant women property and marriage rights. Meanwhile, many women's organizations campaigned for women's liberation in public squares and called for changes in the social status of Chinese women, educational opportunities, and the elimination of concubines, prostitution, and feudal marriage in all forms. However, the new government had no intention of fundamentally changing the patriarchal system. In addition, all institutional reforms were hardly put into practice in most rural areas. Therefore, women's liberation in the Republic Era actually achieved limited success and in some regions, none at all.

Is Women's liberation a Valid Issue in Communist China?

The Communist Revolution of 1949 in many respects brought Chinese women to a new stage of women's liberation, although as I will point out throughout the paper, many of the gains were largely theoretical and contradictory. Since the CPC was established in 1921, for its political crusade, the CPC has advocated that women must be liberated from the "Three Mountains." In order to win the communist victory, the basic strategy of the CPC was to put into practice the freedom of marriage in order to get maximum support from the Chinese people, including Chinese women. The CPC paid particular attention to the women's movement because it viewed Chinese women as a vast reserve of labor and saw that "the family must be changed."¹¹ The CPC also strongly encouraged Chinese women coming out of the home to join the communist revolution. However, because the CPC never established government authority in a single city before 1949, only a small percentage of Chinese women enjoyed women's rights in the liberated regions.

After the CPC came to power in 1949, women's status was improved in many aspects under the Mao regime. Under the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, Chinese women and men enjoyed the same rights in every sense and had equal personal dignity. Three revolutionary changes were especially important to Chinese women. First, the Marriage Law of 1950 granted women freedom of marriage and divorce. Second, based on the Election Law of PRC of 1953, Chinese women have the

same rights as men to vote. Third, Chinese women the right to possess or inherit property equal to men. The new government also launched the land reform movement and distributed land to peasants, including female peasants. The party encouraged Chinese women to step out of their homes and participate in social production. That is, to participate in the creation of a new society built on the principles of socialism. In 1957, about seventy percent of rural women and about 3.286 million urban women engaged in productive activities. In premodern China, education was a wealthy family's privilege. Ninety percent of Chinese women were illiterate before 1949. By 1958, 16 million women learned to read, and became literates. In addition, since the CPC came to power, prostitution and concubine have been out of the law. Therefore, the Chinese government has declared that "Chinese women have achieved truly historic advances toward the goal of "equality, development and peace."¹²

Given this historical background we can now turn to the present to ask: Is the slogan of women's liberation still valid if the CPC has achieved brilliant achievements in liberating Chinese women? Can the CPC guarantee Chinese women the full enjoyment of women's rights in the current political system? To answer these questions, it is necessary to examine the issue of Chinese women's liberation in a global context, and to examine women's situation in present-day China. The international women's human rights movement has pressed human rights bodies in the United Nations to recognize that women's rights are indeed human rights. After World War II, the United Nations took the initial step to proclaim the Universal Declaration of Human Rights "as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations."¹³ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with thirty articles, succinctly outlines the basic principle of human rights, and requires all nations to "place social, economic and cultural rights on the same level as civil and political rights."¹⁴ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights could be considered an international guideline for women's liberation in the period of time from 1948 to 1978. However, women's rights were not fully addressed in all their various manifestations until the adoption by the General Assembly in 1979 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Entered into force in 1981, the CEDAW set forth an international standard for women's rights and liberation. Consisting of a preamble and 30 articles, it is often described as an international bill of women's rights. The document specifically discusses all forms of discrimination against women, provides the basis for realizing equality between women and men, and insures women's rights, including the right to marriage, property, employment, education, nationality, health, and to vote, etc. Inspired by the CEDAW, many governments have enacted legislation to promote equality between women and men, establish national machineries to ensure the mainstreaming of the perspective of gender equality in all spheres of society, undertake a series of measures to protect women's rights, including legislation and temporary special measures, and end discrimination against women in all forms.

However, for many decades, the CPC has resisted applying both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the CEDAW into practice, and even refused to discuss human rights issues in China. Human rights, feminism, and women's rights were regarded as Western capitalist concepts and spiritual pollutions. From the CPC's viewpoint, promoting the international community's standards of women's rights is a great threat to the leadership of the CPC. The main arguments for the CPC in rejecting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the CEDAW were: First, China

maintains a socialist political system, and the CPC is the sole leadership of the socialist country. Women's rights must be practiced under the leadership of the CPC. Second, the goal of Marxism, interpreted by the CPC, is to emancipate all humankind, but the idea of human rights is to meet the needs of individual egos. Third, China is a developing country and the first priority is to improve the living standard of the Chinese people. Fourth, China having no such tradition in practicing human rights is unable to implement such practices because its population of 1.3 billion is comprised of 70 percent of uneducated peasants,

The Chinese government gradually changed its tone toward women's rights, after China launched the Reform Movement. In 1995, China hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The Declaration of the Fourth World Conference on Women recognizes women's rights as an inalienable and integral part of all human rights; determines to empower and advance women's rights, including the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, and participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society; reaffirms the right of all women to control all aspects of their health; eliminate all forms of discrimination against women; promotes women's economic independence; and ensure women's equal access to economic resources, including science and technology, vocational training, information, communication, and markets.

However, there is still a large gulf between the Chinese government's words and deeds. A crucial problem is that the law in China has remained a tool of the party's policy, rather than an independent arbiter. There is ample evidence indicating that Chinese women's situation has been getting worse since the reform movement began. None of the scholars disagree in that regard, and even the Chinese government has acknowledged that "the condition of Chinese women is still not wholly satisfactory. There exist various difficulties and resistance which have prevented the full realization of equal rights to women with respect to their participation in political and government affairs, employment, access to education, as well as marriage and family."¹⁵ However, there are fundamental differences regarding the following questions: In what ways, have Chinese women's status improved? Why have Chinese women not achieved full liberation? How can Chinese women reach the goal of women's liberation?

First of all, it is necessary to point out that the term "women's liberation" is a "by-product of the development of society"¹⁶ so that, in spite of the restrictions imposed by the CPC, concepts of women's human rights are bound to enter into women's discourse. However, the direction and evolution of this discourse is indeed linked to the CPC. The communist political system is anti-democratic in nature. Under the leadership of the CPC, it will be impossible to open up civil society to develop an independent women's movement in China. Some Chinese scholars argue that "the status of Chinese women in social life and the level of recognition by society has been relatively high" as "compared with the status of women in the West,"¹⁷ because Chinese women and men have equal rights legally and practically.

However, it is meaningless for women and men to have equal rights, when both men and women are abused by the Chinese political system. According to some Chinese scholars, the essential standard for women's liberation is "human freedom and overall development," where by "women's liberation is both a social issue and an individual one."¹⁸ The concept of "overall development" covers many areas, including personal, material, and spiritual life as well as legal rights to employment, property, political participation, education, and religion. By using this definition to examine the

level of women's liberation, it is undeniably true that the status of women in China has decreased in some spheres, especially in education, social welfare benefits, employment, and political participation. Some scholars observe that "the Chinese revolution merely reconstituted gender inequality in a different form,"¹⁹ because the communist revolution of 1949 in essence was a peasant revolution. The victory of communism actually meant that the patriarchal tradition prevailed again in China. The CPC resisted political changes and tried to protect the interests of the ruling class. For example, to gain productive forces, the government initially promulgated the marriage law of 1950 to liberate women from the shackles of arranged marriages. However, the party's efforts were confronted by strong resistance from peasants and peasant-minded leaders. To retain the support from peasants, the CPC sacrificed women's interests and surrendered to the peasants without hesitation.

The party made only some efforts in women's liberation only "for a brief period in late 1952-53."²⁰ To get popular support, the party launched a land reform movement which distributed land to peasants including women. But not long after Chinese women had the right to possess land, the new government in 1953 launched the collective movement that collectivized peasants' land into Soviet-style collective farms. Consequently, the Great Leap Forward and the Commune Movement resulted in the collapse of the Chinese economy and a great shortage of food. At least 10 million Chinese people starved to death in the early 1960s. The party did not draw a lesson from the cost. Instead, Mao called for another political and ideological campaign—the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), that brought China into unprecedented and overall chaos. Obviously, it is a misconception that the CPC has been devoted to Chinese women's liberation from its inception of the CPC to present. The truth is that the CPC never had a strong commitment to women's liberation.²¹

Because the practice of communism failed at all levels under the Mao regime, to retain its power, in 1978, the CPC had no choice but to campaign for the reform movement, which is widely viewed as the second communist revolution and a great contribution to women's liberation in Chinese history. Over the past two decades, China has achieved the fastest economic growth rates in the world. On the one hand, the development of the economy has had great impact on Chinese women in releasing women's potential talents, offering women more opportunities for competition in a variety of areas, and providing additional employment opportunities, especially in East coast areas and special economic zones. In the post-Mao era, Chinese "women's awakening consciousness" has been significant.²² On the other hand, the Reform Movement has not always been favorable to women's liberation. It generated great economic impetus and created a large number of wealthy people, but most rich people are male. Some newly wealthy Chinese men used the money for concubinage and prostitution, promoting male dominated culture. Large numbers of rural women are flowing into urban areas looking for new opportunities to improve their living standard, yet they are without residency permits and medical and educational benefits for their children. While economic development creates more jobs for Chinese women, most women can only get entry level jobs. The problem of "same work-different pay" has also arisen.²³ Another serious problem is that women are losing jobs because of the "household responsible system, which idealizes women's roles in the home, but simultaneously expects women to work outside the home. Yet this, combined with the "optimization of labor" idea, which seeks male employees, presents contradictory

expectations for women. The percentage of female officials at throughout the labor force has increasingly dropped. Chinese Women now complain that they have been the last hired and the first to be laid off. In addition, the enrollment of female students has decreased. Thirty-six percent more males than females have a primary school education; 60-70 percent more males than females have a secondary school education; and nearly three times as many males as females have some college education.²⁴ All these problems are not functional problems but structural problems.

The Keys to Chinese Women's Liberation in a Global Context

The history of Chinese women's liberation has shown that the May Fourth Movement is a cultural movement which only focuses on attacking Confucianism, that the communist revolution of 1949 was a great political transformation, which only served the privileges of a small ruling class, and that the reform movement is restricted to the economic arena without political changes. Drawing the lessons from the past three revolutions, in order to achieve full women's liberation, it is clear that Chinese women must fight for women's rights in every sphere of Chinese society, including economic, cultural and political spheres. The key to Chinese women's liberation is fundamentally to remake economic and political systems and to establish a modern democratic society.

Chinese women must nurture their full-self consciousness and understand that women themselves are masters in the process of women's liberation. Women's rights are inalienable rights, which are neither created by any great man, nor bestowed by the CPC. The government and law-makers only legalize and protect women rights. Individuals are at the center of democratic societies, but the Chinese government sees individuals as members of collectives and "views all rights as collectively based."²⁵ In this sense, communist ideology claims that women's liberation depends on the liberation of society as a whole. Therefore, for a long time women's liberation has been regarded a gift from the Communist Party²⁶ and a kind of ambiguous endowment.²⁷ When this ideology was put into practice, the CPC required that Chinese women obeyed the party's policies unconditionally. Some scholars point out that the failure of women's liberation in China is not only because the Chinese patriarchal tradition strongly resists, but also because Chinese women lack gender awareness,²⁸ because Chinese women are required to commit themselves to communist ideology.

Self-consciousness without financial resources, however, does not help women achieve full liberation. In pre-modern China, men were assigned to work in the public sphere and managed all the money they earned. Wives had no rights to use freely the money even if it was necessary. Under these circumstances, wives had to cut off all kinds of social relationships. As a result they would have no place to go in difficult circumstances because they were husbands' accessories. This is one important reason why Chinese women committed suicide in pre-modern China after their husbands had died. Thus financial independence is one of the preconditions for women's liberation. The CPC deserves credit for opening ways for Chinese women to participate in productive activities. The CPC firmly believed that paid employment outside the home was the key to liberating women and building society, assuming that the involvement of women in productive labor was a necessary precondition for women's liberation, and the economic development of the country. At present, Chinese women constitute about 41 percent of the work force. Yet it is also worth noting that under the communist regime Chinese women actually have few choices but to work. First, the husband's income is

not enough to support the family's expenses because labor is cheap in China. Secondly, the tradition that "women are responsible for domestic work and men are responsible for public work" has been rejected by the party's ideology. Instead, Chinese women are saddled with a double burden: a good woman in communist China must be a good daughter, wife, and mother at home, and a good worker in public.

Yet, clearly, involvement in productive labor is not equivalent to women's liberation.²⁹ In addition to the double burden, large numbers of women are doing heavy physical work in the rural areas and cities as well. Not only does this lead to health problems but it constrains Chinese women from the opportunity to fight for women's rights. In modern times, women's liberation relies heavily on development of science and technology in agricultural and industrial modernization, freeing women from heavy physical labor in the fields.³⁰ According to the international standard of women's rights, women should receive equal pay for equal work, have equal rights to choose for the best-paying categories of jobs, and have the same opportunities to be promoted as men. However, because of ownership reform, some employers, especially private companies, view women workers as trouble because they should provide them childcare facilities, pay for their maternity leave, abortion leave, and breast-feeding leave. Thus, employers' costs are higher for female employees, but less profit is received as compared to male workers. In this sense, Chinese women actually have no equal rights for employment.

Chinese women will not achieve full liberation unless the Chinese women's movement becomes an independent force which frees itself from the CPC's control. China has maintained its highly centralized political system since the first emperor Qin Shi Huang (221 B.C.) unified China two thousand years ago. Under a unitary system, one party/one leader controls the entire country, regarding any independent forces as a political threat. Although there are approximately 6,000 women's organizations in China today, all these organizations are controlled by the leadership of the CPC. The largest women's organization is the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), which actually is a branch of the CPC, because the Heads of the ACWF is appointed by the CPC and the task of the ACWF is to implement the party's policy.³¹ Under these circumstances, how can ACWF represent Chinese women's interests and fight for women's rights? It is a misconception that "a socialist ruling party helped women to the extent of establishing and developing a women's organization."³²

Obviously, women's organizations face great challenges in many ways. The most critical challenge is how women's organizations "carry out independent, autonomous and effective work to satisfy the needs of the majority of women."³³ In order to establish independent organizations, Chinese women must have full rights to participate in politics and have more representatives in the government at all levels. Women's political participation is a very important symbol of women's liberation in democratic societies. In China about 95 percent of heads of government agencies and 85 percent of party header and people's organizations are male. Chinese women comprise less than 30 percent of the civil servants in the bureaucracy, 21 percent of the National People's Congress, only one of the 17 Politburo seats, and three of 41 ministerial-level positions.³⁴ Moreover, women's position has no real political power but merely fills quotas—creating the illusion of equality. Women who hold positions of leadership do not necessarily represent the interests of Chinese women, because they are not elected by the people, but appointed by the party/state. Women's organizations won't truly represent Chinese women's interests unless a democratic election system is carried out.

Education is the ultimate source of empowerment for women. Education provides more opportunities for women's employment, enlightens women's self-consciousness, inspires women to fight for their rights, nurtures women's spiritual life, and opens up more channels for women's participation. Although the communist revolution of 1949 made it possible for Chinese women to have formal education, the reform movement has created serious problems in women's education. First, women have especially high rates of illiteracy, seventy percent are female among China's illiterates. Second, there are double standards for admission. In urban areas, women seeking admission to senior high schools must score 10 to 20 points higher on entrance exams than the minimum required of men. Third, women are doubly burdened with both productive labor and housework after China carried out the household responsibility system. This situation forced some female students to withdraw from schools to take care of their families. Fourth, as the economic and educational reforms are expanding, the tuition fees have been increased dramatically. According to an official Chinese report, based on the Standard of the Shanghai Education Department, the tuition fees are as follows: 14,000 yuan for three years of kindergarten, 15,000 yuan for five years of primary school, 30,000 yuan for seven years of secondary school, and 46,000 yuan for four years of college. Therefore, a family needs to pay tuition fees of 105,000 yuan for one child to complete education from kindergarten to college.³⁵ This amount does not include the daily expenses of the student. Compared to Chinese people's income, it is too expensive for common Chinese families to pay for the tuition fees. Due to limited financial resources, most parents prefer to spend their educational investments on their sons. Therefore, the expensive tuition has serious negative impacts on women's education. The government should do more for women's education.

Conclusions

The status of Chinese women has been improved under the communist regime as compared women's status in pre-communist China, but the CPC has had no sincere intention to fundamentally improve Chinese women's conditions. It is impossible to eliminate the roots of women's problems within the communist political system because the ultimate goal of women's liberation contradicts essentially the principle of the CPC. The CPC is anti-democratic by nature. The conclusion offered twenty years ago by Andors, that women's liberation remains incomplete still holds true today.³⁶ The future of women's liberation largely depends on women's own efforts combined with and the process of China's modernization and the urgent need for democratization.

Notes

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