China Papers No. 16 | 2009

Chinese Women:

Move but Not Leap Forward

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ABSTRACT

Chinese women have emerged from an oppressive traditional past from which they were treated as the property of the husbands and pressured to produce sons. Such feudal attitudes were formally challenged when the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949, declaring the birth of the Peoples Republic of China. Women were immediately granted marriage and land rights and official state ideology emphasized the need to dismantle feudal social attitudes and accept the participation of women in the public sphere. While these developments marked an important victory for women's rights in China, proper gender equality did not eventuate. After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the subsequent economic reforms propelled forward by Deng Xiaoping took China in a new direction. While this strategy resulted in clear material gains for China on a whole, gender equality was once again uncompleted. I argue the primary reason for the unfinished liberation of women in both time periods is the secondary nature of women's rights behind that of national production.

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the changing status of Chinese women in the public and private sphere during the 'Mao era' (1949-1976) and in the aftermath of the subsequent economic reforms from 1978. I argue that change has been dictated by the state in patriarchal terms as a result of the productive needs of the nation during these time periods. Ideological and actual liberation of women by way of marriage and land law reform, or mobilization into the workforce has been implemented without the liberation of women as the primary focus. As a result, women failed to achieve that independent liberation in the public and private sphere in the Mao era, despite official rhetoric suggesting otherwise. Likewise, the economic reforms have failed to provide such liberation, despite the removal of certain disadvantages to men and women from the Mao era.

Margery Wolf contends that 'patriarchy was the cultural lens through which Mao and his confederates viewed their work, and for this reason their decisions were time and again warped by the very perspective they decried' (Wolf 1985: 270). Wolf also contends the Chinese state in the time of Mao through to after the economic reforms has demonstrated the compatibility of socialism and patriarchy, and that a perfect form of socialism would not necessarily bring about a 'feminist utopia' (Wolf 1985). Consistent with these arguments, I argue that a socialist and feminist revolution has not taken place simultaneously in China either during the period of Mao Zedong's leadership, or in the aftermath of the economic reforms. This is partly because women's changing status in the public and private spheres has been dictated by a relationship with the means of production. It is also due to the relegating of women's liberation behind state goals of national economic production during both time periods.

My analysis is not intended as an exhaustive account of every positive and negative effect experienced by rural and urban women as a result of state policy during the relevant periods. Rather, I intend to highlight certain changes in the private and public role of women which demonstrate the effect on women's lives when gender equality is articulated by the state as a goal secondary to that of increasing national production.

History and Tradition

While the features of women's lives in pre-revolutionary China have been well documented, it is useful to reiterate common patterns of oppression in order to seriously assess the progress of women's emancipation under Mao, and in the aftermath of the economic reforms. It has been said that a woman's life was little better than that of a slave (Croll 1995). The binding of women's feet was prevalent among the upper classes;

marriages were not based on love or even mutual consent; and infidelity by men was forcibly accepted by women (Brownell, Wasserstrom 2002). A woman's role in life was primarily to bear male children and if she did not fulfil this task she could be severely punished, through being socially ostracized and disgraced (Brownell, Wasserstrom 2002). Women were subordinate to men, although mothers in law had some power over other female members of a family. There were exceptions to this way of life, and certain individuals managed to make their mark in history as celebrated and educated women.

Traditional Chinese society was influenced by an essentially masculine value system developed over thousands of years. This patriarchal system has been well documented in literature on Chinese society (Brownell & Wasserstrom, Wolf et al). Control over the private sphere was essentially held by the male head of household and women were seen as temporary members of their natal families with no rights to property or inheritance. When a daughter married, she generally left her village to join her husband's household, where she would be subservient to her husband and mother-in-law. Confucian ethics accepted the subservience of women to men as natural and proper and it was widely regarded as unnecessary for women to have a formal education (Wolf 1985). Women were not in control of their lives and were oppressed under the social and moral hierarchy of gender relations in traditional China. An unmarried girl was expected to obey her father and brothers, a married woman was expected to obey her husband, and a widow was expected to obey her adult sons. This was known as the "Three Obediences" governing a woman's behaviour according to Confucian ethics (Wolf 1985).

Traditional Confucianism and feudalism reinforced the inferior status of uneducated peasants and women for thousands of years, and as a result, the disparity between the rich and the poor became greater as time went by. The feudal system eventually paved the way for the Communist movement as the Communist Party offered the rural poor peasants access to land and emancipation for women. According to Nancy E. Riley, efforts to change women's lives were begun by the Chinese Communist Party even before they came to national power; advocating for changes in women's position was an important goal of the revolution (Riley 1995). Inspired by the writings of Marx and Engels in Europe, they believed that through employment women would become equal members of society (Riley 1995).

The main feature of the Communist movement was the creation of a Marxist classless society through the redistribution of property and class struggle. In keeping with a collectivist tradition, the Communist Party integrated peasant liberation and women's emancipation into a joint struggle to fight against the intellectuals, landlords and other members of the privileged class (Judd 2002). The May Fourth Movement of 1915-1921 was largely considered to be the first women's movement in China. Communist leaders called

for free choice of marriage and divorce and an end to polygamy and prostitution (Curtin 1975).

Liberation of women from feudal customs and practices was part of an overall ideological rhetoric regarding class struggle delivered to the masses under the leadership of Mao Zedong. Significant progress towards gender equality in the public and private spheres was made in the Mao era in the sense that women were mobilized in unprecedented numbers into paid employment, social attitudes regarding the patriarchal family system were formally challenged, and efforts were made to increase literacy (a particularly female problem).However, due to the patriarchal terms under which these changes were made, the gains for women were limited.

Women and the workplace

The CCP in the Mao era firmly believed that women's emancipation would be realized through participation in paid employment outside of the home. Integration of women into the workforce was regarded as being crucial to enhancing women's social status, and generally dismantling feudal customs and practices. Real gains were made for national production by such integration, which genuinely improved aspects of women's status and quality of life (Wolf, Croll et al). The mobilization of women into the workforce had a significant impact on the rate of national production in many areas, for it gathered in half of the nation's pool of working age talent. For the first time, many women gained some semblance of economic independence and were thrust into tasks to be undertaken in the public sphere. As Margery Wolf pointed out, 'the involvement of women in production was at some points in the last thirty years essential for the economy as well as essential for the good of the women involved.' (Wolf 1985: 64).

However, Margery Wolf goes on to establish that the good of the economy took priority over the good of women's involvement (Wolf 1985). The new status of women in the public sphere was limited by the fact that the number of women the state called on to participate in the workforce was subject to the rate of economic growth and priorities of the CCP. When the state sought a rapid increase in national production through a mobilization of labour power, it praised the liberating effects of being a working woman. For example, The Great Leap Forward of 1958 drew women into the workforce in unprecedented numbers. By the end of the Great Leap Forward, up to 90 per cent of women were earning a wage of some kind (Croll 1983). On the other hand, when it could not accommodate women into production, the state emphasised the benefits to society of women looking after the home. For example, a massive decline in productivity and a national famine followed the Great Leap Forward, and as a result women were encouraged to return to household duties in the 1960s due to unemployment pressures.

This reality was identified by Liu Jieyu (2007) who found that in keeping with Marxist theory, which locates women's problems within class struggle, the state's attempt to uphold women's interests was subordinated to other prioritized efforts in building the socialist nation (Jieyu 2007). A good illustration of this point was during the Cultural Revolution when class issues took precedence and, despite the slogans such as 'women hold up half the sky' and 'what men can do, women can do', hardly any official attention was given to tackling women's issues (Croll 1983).

An obvious limitation is placed on the liberating effect of entering the workforce if it is not accompanied by adequate assistance with domestic duties, by way of spousal contributions, or communal facilities. Otherwise working women will continue to be weighed down by household chores and childcare. Perhaps realising that the lack of such facilities presented a barrier to the equal participation of women in the labour force, and thus a lower rate of national production, the CCP organized the beginning of communal childcare facilities (Wolf, Croll et al).

By 1951, the number of nurseries in the cities had dramatically increased, and for agricultural workers there were seasonal nursery units available that looked after children during the busy farming periods (Johnson 1983). At the time of the Great Leap Forward, it was a priority for everybody to be part of the productive workforce and therefore an attempt was made to communalize living in part to assist women with the shortage of childcare facilities. However, these measures were widely regarded as insufficient and there was a particular shortage of nurseries and nursing units in government offices (Johnson 193). Childcare facilities were implemented primarily in order to ease the private sphere burden of working women, allowing them to work productively in their respective work-units, and only secondarily in order to emancipate women from the (patriarchal) sole duty of household responsibility.

Collective work structures

The role of the collective work-unit during the Mao era had a significant effect in shaping women's lives as it operated as the main authority in the career and personal lives of its employees. Liu Jieyu (2007) examined how women workers fared in the work-unit, to what extent it modified or reformulated pre-revolutionary Confucian ideals, and how gender inequality was created and reproduced under its regime. This is an essential question in assessing women's changing status in the public and private spheres in the Mao era, as it draws attention to the realities of mobilising women into the workforce and the gender relations governing the conditions under which they worked.

The work-unit was the basic unit of social organization with predominant influence over everyday life for women in urban China. They provided lifetime employment along

with services such as housing, healthcare and retirement pensions (Jieyu 2007). It appears the main disadvantageous effect of the collective work-unit for women was the highly personalised and interventionist role that effectively continued the patriarchal function of pre-socialist familial institutions in dictating the life opportunities of women. Moreover, continuing to answer to the male head of the household (and possibly male sons and mothers in law) whilst answering to the collective work-unit created a kind of double bind of authority over women (Jieyu 2007).

As with urban women, rural women suffered negative effects in terms of choice, opportunity, and mobility under state-imposed collective work structures. Agricultural collectivisation was an integral feature of China's centrally planned economy under Mao, and was characterised in part by its stress on the expansion of heavy industry (Johnson 1983). Control over planning and management of production and the distribution of produce were transferred from peasant households to party-led communes (Johnson 1983). The Communist Party considered an advantageous effect of the collectivisation process to be the mobilisation of women into communised agricultural production, enabling them to emerge from the confines of household. However, it has been argued that the positive effects were offset by the constraints placed upon them by the flawed commune system. For example, the remuneration scheme, or the 'work-point' system was structured in a way that meant women frequently earned fewer points than men (Johnson 1983). Moreover, household 'pay' was delivered to the household head, who was generally a male, rather than to individual members (Johnson 1983). Thus although women were working, they were not necessarily receiving economic independence.

The developmental package governing collectivisation also discouraged activities that rural women had traditionally been involved with such as animal husbandry, local handicrafts, and off-farm activities such as small trades and services (Beaver et al 1995). These activities were denounced as 'capitalist tendencies' (Beaver et al 1995). The timetable for farm work set by the collectives was also at a disadvantage to women as it demanded intense physical capability and was inconvenient for family responsibilities which still largely fell on women to maintain (Beaver et al 1995). So while the policy of workforce mobilisation turned women into members of social production, it did little to empower or liberate them, as the official party lines were claiming.

Social identity – the value of women

The Mao era saw a change in public attitude regarding women's social identity and role in the public and private spheres. For example, during the Cultural Revolution, the official state discourse instructed the public to discourage femininity as 'bourgeoisie behaviour' and treat men and women as somewhat 'de-gendered' equals (Lueng 2003). In this sense, social

attitudes regarding femininity changed according to the states prescribed gender construction.

Gender construction during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was largely based on a de-sexualisation of both men and women (Leung 2003). However women were not simply constructed as androgynous beings during this period. Instead there was a definite masculinisation of women, and women were expected to conform to male standards of dress and behaviour. For example, women wore shapeless clothing and were not expected to show overt affection for their families (Lueng 2003). While officially this behaviour could be considered positive in that it helped to erase long held negative gender-stereotypes, women were still held responsible for carrying out the role of mother and wife in the private sphere while maintaining a gender-neutral working role in the public sphere.

According to a personal memoir by Jiang Jin (2001), Mao's leadership was a revolutionary era, marked by a loud voice announcing: 'Times have changed; men and women are the same' (Zhong, Zheng 2001: 100). This simplistic slogan conveyed a message to millions of Chinese women that in this new era men and women were equal. Jiang Jin contends that this rhetorical expression of women's liberation, along with state policy that fostered gender equality, permanently changed feudal social attitudes relating to women's role in society. The new orthodoxy held men and women equal in terms of intellectual competence, political consciousness and physical strength. Therefore, according to Jiang Jin young women who were educated in the Mao era considered themselves equal to men in all areas of society and rejected the identity of a housewife in favour of the gender-neutral identity of a revolutionary youth (Zhong, Zheng 2001: 100).

Furthermore, working women were seen as being part of the great revolution and were thus regarded as rational, public and more important beings (Zhong, Zheng 200). This represented a major shift in the way women were officially valued and suggested they could have a greater role in public life than previously imagined. However, it is important to recognise that the only real alternative to being a housewife was to be a revolutionary youth. Therefore women's choices were still been defined by the state in perhaps a similar way to that in feudal times.

The state ideology of women's liberation clearly had some impact on the social attitudes of both men and women, although it is debatable whether actual gender equality eventuated. According to Jiang Jin, despite a certain shift in social attitudes, the state rhetoric was not successful in breaking traditional gender norms in the private sphere, and women were often torn between the state and the patriarchal family, both demanding loyalty and service. The heroine of the socialist revolution represented in state propaganda was often treated with less enthusiasm in the home, where traditional gender norms prevailed (Lueng 2003).

The male was still usually the head of the house hold in everyway: the most educated, the main breadwinner, the main decision maker, and the "head of the household" on the official residential registration (Leung 2003). Similarly, while many wives worked outside the home, they generally earned less than men and carried on the traditional housewife's role at home. Therefore, a discrepancy of gender ideology existed between the public and private domains. This reality perhaps illustrates the incomplete transformation of social attitudes regarding women's equal participation in the public and private spheres. It also illustrates that women's new public roles were not brought about by women's self-conscious liberation, but by prescription from the state, as a result of the productive needs of the nation.

Education

Just as feudal social attitudes regarding women's proper role in the public and private sphere was seen by the state as a barrier to women's emancipation, so too was the high rate of illiterate women, particularly in rural areas. Formal educational opportunities were traditionally only available to males in China. Officially, little sex-role differentiation existed at the primary level of education, but fewer women were educated at the higher level. However it has been established that the education of girls even at the primary level was considered a waste for many families as they would marry into someone else's family and perform household tasks for which education was not needed (Wolf, Gilmartin, Croll et al). Girls were also expected to perform traditional gendered family roles from an early age, which confined them to the house and eliminated them from full participation in schooling and thus from entry into higher education. It is therefore not surprising that education or 'raising women's quality' (Judd 2002: 20) was viewed as an important component of women's advancement by the state in the Mao era. Campaigns were duly launched to combat the mass illiteracy problem when the CCP came to power. This may have had a positive impact on some young women's lives, particularly those in urban areas. According to Jiang Jin young women were treated equally in schooling for the first time in the Mao era, and were expected to excel in all areas alongside boys (Zhong, Zheng 2001: 100).

Not surprisingly, the drive for women's liberation by way of educational advancement in the Mao era took second place to increasing national production during times of particular revolutionary upheaval such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. As a result, the higher rate of female illiteracy compared with males was neither adequately challenged nor combated. Education for both boys and girls was drastically curtailed during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution with interruptions occurring such as being 'sent down' to the countryside to participate in manual labour and learn from the peasants (Judd 2002). Despite the eventual re-opening of educational

facilities, such experiences undoubtedly reduced the opportunities for Chinese youth of both sexes of that time.

The legal system

Laws regarding marriage and property were also reformed in the Mao era, and women's federations were established to assist in the implementation of these reforms and to articulate women's concerns to the state (Curtin, Croll et al). A significant change in the formal status of women in the private sphere was brought about by the new marriage law in 1950. The new marriage law formally guaranteed women improved rights in relation to property and inheritance, and free choice in marriage, divorce, and custody of children (Curtin, Croll et al). Alongside formal sanction of the law, the CCP launched a campaign to enforce the new law, in particular to convey the message to the population in the countryside where the law was meeting the most resistance (Wolf 1985).

Resistance to the law was based on a number of possible factors. One factor was male resentment of any undermining of their authority. Likewise, it was feared that divorce might run against their economic interests, for through divorce they lost a wife who provided domestic labour and an allotment of property (Wolf 1985). The marriage law was a fundamental step for women's liberation as it outlawed practices detrimental to the emancipation of women such as child betrothal and polygamy, and provided formal acknowledgement of women's right to make decisions about marriage and divorce.

Although the marriage law altered traditional family relations to some degree, it is thought that it only had a partial effect on the pre-existing (patriarchal) family structure, particularly in rural areas. According to Patricia D. Beaver, Hou Lihui and Wang Xue (1995), in the face of resistance to marriage reforms, full implementation of the new marriage law was side-stepped. Furthermore, Beaver et al argue that the CCP's 'blinders to the strength of traditional kinship structures prevented it from seeing or confronting the real impediments to over-throwing patriarchy', and thus were unable to combat resistance to marriage reforms and male control over the household (Beaver et al 1995). The Land Reform Law of the same year saw land redistributed to the peasants, officially without regard to sex, purposefully altering the landlord-tenant system. However, unfortunately for women, land largely remained registered in the name of the male head of the family (Croll 1973). This reality, along with the arguably partial effect of the marriage laws provided for only a limited alteration of women's status in the private sphere in the Mao era.

Political participation

In the Mao era, alongside marriage and property reform, a drive was launched to involve women in the political life of China as part of the general gender equality policy goal. At the lower levels, women's political involvement dramatically increased. Women's political participation was greatly enhanced by the 'cadre management system' under which all Party cadres and government officials were appointed by the state (Zheng 2009). This system took gender factors into consideration when appointments were decided, leading to a significant increase in the number of female cadres, marking a 'milestone in the history of women's political involvement in China' (Zheng 2009). Mandatory measures such as the cadre management system enabled women to participate more fully in the political structures, even if in basic-level positions. The top-down appointment system, especially its quota measures, guaranteed women's political involvement for the first time. Consequently, women's representation in party and government organs at all levels expanded considerably (Zheng 2009).

It was significant however that women were rarely in high level state positions, where state policy was formed, and therefore had little tangible influence on policy decisions impacting on women's lives. Over and above this there was no real democracy functioning so that involvement in politics meant an adherence to Communist ideology as interpreted by Mao, meaning neither male nor female could contribute to the founding ideas upon which policy was made and society structured. Despite achieving basic-level leadership positions, the number of women represented in political organizations remained very low compared with men. One major cause of this was the low percentage of women in the CCP and Peoples Liberation Army, which were the two main leadership selection bodies. In addition, the reality was that there was more emphasis placed on accommodating women into the workforce, as opposed to encouraging women to take on political responsibilities

Family planning

Women's changing status in the private sphere in terms of family planning is perhaps the most striking example of women's liberation coming second to state goals of increased national production. Generally speaking, in determining its policy on the question of birth control, the CCP used population need as the main criteria, rather than the right of women to control their bodies. In the first few years of the CCP under Mao, population growth was not viewed as a problem. When population growth began to surface as an issue, change in policy was ordered and a mass birth-control campaign was launched in 1956 (Wolf, Croll et al). Abortion and sterilization became more easily available, and public health organizations at various levels informed people about contraceptives. While there

was seen to be a demand from women for such devices, there was also some resistance from people who associated children with security for their old age (Wolf, Croll et al).

The birth-control campaign was stalled in 1958 as the Great Leap Forward policy called on women to participate in the labour force, while at the same time reproduce at a heightened rate, as it was believed the strength of China lay in its population (Wolf, Croll et al). After the Great Leap Forward, efforts to educate citizens on methods of birth-control, including the option of abortion, were renewed. Importantly, birth control and abortion were not seen as a mean of freeing women's sexuality as much as a means of population planning. In fact it is largely recognised that the advances women made in marriage and property rights were not accompanied by liberation of female sexuality or family planning (Wolf, Croll et al).

Economic reforms from 1978

Economic reforms were introduced in China through policies stemming from the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party of December 1978 (Beaver et al 1995). The impacts of these policies have been dramatic, affecting virtually every facet of life in China. Economic reforms have brought new prosperity to many in China, but along with new wealth has come renewed discrimination against women. Alicia M. Leung (2003) suggests that gender equality alongside economic reform under Deng Xiaoping should be viewed within the context of traditional Chinese collectivistic culture in which the group takes precedence over individual rights. In this sense, the Communist Party protects women's interests primarily through collective means, for example by raising the overall living standards of all citizens. After all, socialist modernisation necessarily prioritises economic development over the development of women as equal social and political members of society (Leung 2003).

As with the Mao era, the urban and rural reforms (implemented as part of an overall national strategy to move towards a more decentralized and market driven economy) have had both positive and negative effects on women's status in the public and private spheres. As a result of economic reform, urban women have had to operate within a new labour market characterized by competition for positions (Jieyu, Ngai et al). One could argue this has freed women (and men) workers from the power of the Maoist state over their economic choices. However it is also clear that for many reasons the new playing field where women must compete with men for jobs is not even. As a result, women have encountered a number of disadvantages in the labour market in terms of increased discrimination with relation to hiring and promotion, and pressure to withdraw from the workforce as in-work benefits are reduced (Jieyu 2007).

Urban working lives

Without the requirement by the state that a certain number of women be hired, when enterprises take measures to streamline their operations they are more likely to hire men. This is partly because women appear more costly in terms of maternity leave and other general private sphere concerns. According to Liu Jieyu (2007) promotion may be more difficult for women to obtain as senior work colleagues do not want to be seen as favouring, let along being sexually involved, with the women in question. Likewise women are probably at a disadvantage in gaining promotion as it is expected they may not work as hard due to household commitments and an earlier retirement age than their male counterparts (Jieyu 2007). The labour migration of male rural residents into urban areas in search of work as a result of the relaxed migration policy and new labour market has also negatively affected urban women. This is simply because they now have to contend with higher numbers of men for jobs in a labour market pre-disposed to preferring male workers (Jieyu 2007).

Legal obstructions also place women at a disadvantage in the labour market. For example, women are required to retire at an earlier age than men, further curtailing their opportunity for paid employment, and forcing them back into the home to (arguably) help with the care of grandchildren (Summerfield 1994). The reduction of economic support that did exist for working women under the Maoist regime in the form of benefits has also negatively affected women's ability to participate in the labour market. For example, the decentralization of state enterprises and reduction of welfare benefits has drastically decreased the level of in-work child-care assistance, and thus created a working environment more hostile to women's household responsibilities (Summerfield 1994). In-work childcare facilities and medical care have diminished in many enterprises, directly affecting women's economic and political participation in society (Summerfield 1994).

After the economic reforms, which promoted the multi-ownership of enterprise, state-run enterprises faced serious competition from non-state enterprises and their economic performance began to deteriorate. The CCP subsequently decided to reform state-run enterprises by reducing employees (Jieyu 2007). Studies have shown that women workers were particularly disadvantaged as a result of these measures (Jieyu, Summerfield et al). A common means of making women redundant was through external maternity leave and internal retirement policies (Jieyu 2007). Therefore, the dismantling of state enterprises or work-units has had a significant impact on millions of urban workers, and has had a specifically detrimental effect on urban women workers.

Rural working lives

Rural women have too been negatively affected by the male rural-urban labour migration. Song Lina addresses the role of women in rural-urban migration based on a number of surveys undertaken in the area of Handan, and concludes that women are far less active than men in seeking urban jobs (Lina 2000). This may be due to a number of reasons including women's extra family responsibilities. Specifically, it is not always sensible to move an entire family to an urban area as access to housing and schools can be difficult, therefore women have tended to stayed with the family in the countryside (Lina 2000). There is also a higher rate of jobs available in the urban labour market that are considered physically arduous and thus more suitable to men. Futhermore, jobs that require women's labour are usually accompanied by a lower wage, which means women have a lower earning capacity, and thus have a lesser incentive to move from their rural home (Lina 2000).

One of the key disadvantages women have faced as a result of male rural-urban labour migration is the significant increase in women's participation in agricultural work, or what has been termed the 'feminisation of agriculture' (Summerfield 1994). The 'feminisation of agriculture' (Summerfield 1994) has negatively affected many rural women as the shortage of men has confined them to low-level, unskilled farm work, with much less occupational mobility and diversity.

Rural women have also been negatively affected by the re-instatement of a household responsibility system, a system whereby the family has largely replaced the collective work-unit as the means of production. This has negatively affected rural women as it has reinforced the patriarchal notion of a male head of household, and possibly contributed to an undermining of women's economic and decision making power within the household. By the end of 1983, over 97 per cent of all rural households had adopted the 'household responsibility system' (Summerfield, Croll et al). The system re-distributed communal land to individual families to farm under a long term contract with the state (Summerfield, Croll et al). Even though families do not 'own' the land, they decide what to grow and how to market it after fulfilling a contract to provide some basic grains to the state. The radical reform programme of dissolving rural communes and returning to family farming was part of the strategic transition from economic central planning towards marketisation. The aim was to decrease some of the chronic problems of communes including low peasant incentives and stagnant rural production and living standards (Summefield, Croll et al). The new system allows individuals to decide what crops are appropriate for their land and there is a closer link between labour rewards and the efforts of individuals. As with the negative effects of the labour market resulting from economic reforms, the re-instatement of a household responsibility system illustrates the primary importance of economic growth, or needs of the nation as prescribed by the state, at the expense of women's liberation.

Perhaps recognising this, the state has provided some services to facilitate rural women's income-earning ability in the aftermath of the economic reforms. One example is the nationwide project that had run since 1989 named 'Double Learning and Double Competing', run by the All-China Women's Federation along with various other government ministries and organizations (Judd 2002). While not widely regarded as a success in itself, a successful subproject to emerge was the 'Courtyard Economy Project' (Judd 2002). The name of this project was adopted from the sideline activities traditionally performed by women in the courtyard of the household. The project was designed to facilitate the initiation or expansion of existing sideline production, such as handicrafts and small-scale trade.

The scope of women's economic activities has also been expanded through rural specialisation and crop diversification (Judd 2002). Before the reform period, few occupational options existed for rural women besides physically demanding farm work. However in the post-Mao era, there has been a burgeoning of rural industry of which women have participated in, for better or worse. While on the surface this seems positive for women's status in the public sphere, such programmes in the reform period have been criticised as being aimed purely at overall production, without paying sufficient attention to women's needs.

Family planning

The continuation of the one-child policy has negatively affected rural women more so than urban women. This is partly because it has reinforced the preference for sons as it is believed they will be of more help with agricultural work (Summerfield 1994). In addition, as with urban women, it is believed sons will be more able to care for their parents later in life as males are at an advantage in the labour market throughout their life. The result has been an alarming epidemic of 'missing girls', due to infanticide, underreporting of female births, or maltreatment of young girls (Wolf, Croll et al). The one-child policy places the importance of economic population management ahead of women's liberation in terms of reproductive choice and female infant survival. This once again illustrates the primacy of national economic growth over social inequalities.

Political participation

Along with the areas of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defence, the economic reforms have had a profound impact on China's post-Mao political development. Many steps have been taken to restructure the party-state and central-local relations such as the separation of the Party from state functions and political

decentralisation (Croll 1995). This has contributed to the creation of a political environment with enhanced autonomy, more conducive to economic development. The quest for modernisation has worked to the disadvantage of women, as the state imposed structures benefiting their political participation have been removed to allow for greater political autonomy. Two areas of post-Mao political restructuring are the abolition of the Revolutionary Committees and the people's commune system, and the restoration of elections. As a result of these changes, voters were given power to elect cadres from a wider range of candidates, and women's representation in the leadership structure subsequently declined (Croll 1995).

Changes made to China's post-Mao political structures demonstrate how vulnerable women's political achievement was to the withdrawal of state support. The political representation of women has not been particularly prevalent or hopeful in the post-Mao era for a number of reasons. One such reason is that the promotion of local autonomy through political decentralisation and the reintroduction of elections has placed emphasis on 'ability' in cadre selection and provided a gender-neutral justification for the rejection of women candidates (Croll, Judd et al). Official encouragement to get women into politics is also limited. For example while the Women's Federation officially aims at increasing the political involvement of women, its position on, and approach to, the issues is regarded as limited (Croll, Judd et al). Likewise, intellectual women's studies literature on the topic often encourages political independence and self-awareness as more important to enhancing the status of women than becoming an official (Judd 2002). Finally, after years of politicisation in the private and public spheres of society, women (and men) may feel a certain level of political apathy, preferring to focus on private matters. I would argue that political restructuring that has resulted in women's diminished political participation arguably signals a turn away from state support for women's liberation, in preference for somewhat democratizing the political system in order to accommodate economic development.

Social identity – the value of women

Importantly, both rural and urban women have been negatively affected by the re-emergence (or continuation) of pre-revolutionary patriarchal ideals concerning women's place in the public and private spheres of society. Attention to family life, which was officially devalued under Mao, has resurfaced, leading to a commonly expressed social attitude that women should not sacrifice family life for public sphere participation (Leung 2003). Because the family has been reaffirmed as the basic socio-economic unit of society, feudal customs regarding the role of women in the home have been somewhat restored. A debate emerged in the 1980s over the idea of women leaving the workforce and 'returning home', in order to alleviate unemployment pressures on the state (Leung 2003). Likewise,

the growing support for traditional femininity may have devalued women's image as capable leaders in the workforce or political system. Such attitudes have marked a denigration of the intellectual, social and political potential of women.

The disadvantages urban and rural women have faced in both the public and private spheres illustrate the entirely unfinished liberation of women in the Mao era and in the aftermath of the subsequent economic reforms. The disadvantages also illustrate the limited nature of state efforts to reduce social inequalities, partly due to the absolute primacy of national economic growth as a policy goal. As a result of the economic reforms, women have had to contend with a discriminatory labour market; the negative effects of the reinstatement of a household responsibility system; the 'feminisation of agriculture'; the negative effects of the one-child policy; a diminished level of political participation; and a re-emergence of pressure to leave the workforce and solely look after the private sphere.

To conclude...

The status of women in the public and private spheres underwent significant and positive changes during the Mao era. For example, campaigns were launched to combat mass female illiteracy and enforce marriage laws. Most importantly, women were formally granted equal rights under the law for the first time. However, this progress was hindered by the 'patriarchal lens' (Wolf 1985) through which policy on issues relating to women was created. For example, policy on birth control was not constructed with the aim of allowing women the freedom over their bodies, but with the aim of population control, or population enhancement, to build a strong nation. Likewise, state orthodoxy encouraged women to participate in the workforce only at times when the productive needs of the nation so required, and unemployment was not an issue.

As previously established, I argue this is partly because women's changing status in the public and private spheres has been dictated by their relationship to the means of production. It is also due to the secondary nature of women's liberation behind state goals of national economic production during both time periods. As a result, a feminist and socialist revolution did not coincide during the Mao era, and women's liberation did not eventuate, in contrast to what official state rhetoric suggested. The restrictive and dictative nature of the Maoist state, which resulted in un-liberating control over women and their relationship to the means of production, was significantly dismantled in the years immediately following Mao Zedong's death and the subsequent leadership of Deng Xiaoping. However, despite certain advantages of China's economic reform and 'opening up' period for women's liberation, progress continued to be limited by the patriarchal lens through which policy is formed.

Undoubtedly there have been gains overall for women as a result of policies of the Mao era and subsequently by virtue of economic reforms from 1978. Of course, it is also apparent that these gains have been byproducts of a focus on the economic and production needs of the vast and widespread population of an emerging industrial giant. But there have been gains, and real gains nevertheless. And moreover, many of these gains have been permanent and will shape, if not define, future policies that will benefit women for the future in modern China. Perhaps the best example of this is changes in the legal system to which I have referred. Overall however I suggest that all the positives that I have identified in this paper would most likely not have been gained, or may even be diluted, if not aligned with the productive needs of the nation at a given time. Women have therefore moved, but not leaped forward.

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