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China: Gender and Labor

During communist leader Mao Zedong's reign in China, women, especially those of peasantry, were encouraged to take up arms in the spread of communism throughout the country. The establishment of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) brought many ideological changes to China, including ideas promoting women in the workforce, women's access to divorce, and women's representation in demonstrations. However, the Chinese Communist Party did little for advancing women's rights in the long run. Women became patronized by the party propaganda, being portrayed as beauties and prideful, where although women took pride in their work, the reality was that most women were unrelentlessly toiling and did not match up to the image they were given by the propaganda. In other words, although the communist party did some great things for the advancements of women's rights within its time frame, the efforts were not radical enough to instill these ideas into modern times.

With the intense suicide of Miss Zhao, Mao Zedong saw the system of marriage that had been in place to be oppressive, as he wrote within his condolences: "It happened because of the shameful system of arranged marriages, because of the darkness of the social system, the negation of the individual will, and the absence of the freedom to choose one's own mate" (Zedong). From this point, women's traditional stance as a mother, a caregiver, and an object began to shift. The People's Republic of China (PCR) was established, and new laws and thoughts surrounding marriages were created. Women began to have more say in arranged

marriages and were able to file for divorce within marriages they were unhappy in (Lecture 10/19/2021). Since China has a history of ingrained male dominance, this was a great advance for women under communism.

Under Maoist influence, traditional views on how Chinese women should factor into the workforce changed. In regards to labor, women took on both advantages and disadvantages. Under the communist party, both men and women were regarded as equal. That equality led to job opportunities and party education becoming widespread, meaning that the amount of women in the workforce increased, but the type of labor they had to participate in was not always suited for their builds or needs. According to Deng Chunlan, she had access to little education in her past, but with the rise of the CCP, she planned to, “get [her] education up to speed by taking classes at the Advanced Normal School for Women, and [...] to get in touch with like-minded comrades to work for self improvement” (Chunlan et al. 121-123). Through this sentence alone, the freedom women had under the CCP compared to the years before its establishment is evident. Deng Chunlan had the plan to attend a school of higher education and had the freedom to meet with other members of the CCP to improve her education and overall mentality, something that was not often pursued by women in traditional China due to social restrictions.

Women not only had more ability to access the workforce and education, but also had the ability to participate in the countless demonstrations under the CCP. One such demonstration was the May 4th movement. Many female students participated in the demonstration alongside male students to legitimize iconoclasm, the act of rejecting an ‘old’ China and paving the way towards strict modernization. Aspects of traditional China were seen as restrictive, such as how Chinese families restrict young women and how Chinese society restricts the body. From this movement,

cultural developments such as family reform and economic developments such as improvements in workers and women's rights were established (Lecture 10/14/21).

Much of the Chinese Communist Party propaganda related to women at the time was likewise a push towards a new future. Many of the propaganda posters featured women partaking in new tasks, now equal to their male counterparts: attending conferences, getting an education, working outside of the home and fields, for example. Despite "showing women new approaches to, and techniques for the various tasks for which they had become responsible," in certain sectors of the community, there was a lack of female representation and male dominance reigned: "But the appearance of women in cadre-functions remained an exception. On higher and even the highest levels of political and administrative power, women were even less visible" (*Iron Women, Foxy Ladies*).

A majority of the women who were a part of the CCP came from low-income, peasant backgrounds. However, the images that portrayed the working class primarily showed beautiful, smiling, healthy and able-bodied young women. Although there were certainly women of these descriptions who existed in this time, the labor being performed in the images was often hard, toiling work in agriculture and industrialization. Realistically, the women who handled these sectors of labor were less often idealistic model-types who kept up with the latest fashion, but more often those "whose faces and hands had been marked by unrelenting sunshine and hard labor," (*Iron Women, Foxy Ladies*). Although these beautiful images may have been created to attract women to the workforce and, overall, communism, the propaganda created told lies to women on how they would fare under these conditions.

By the 1980s, after Mao Zedong's passing, gender boundaries once again became redrawn and gender equality became a thing of the past (Ibid). All of the work done by the

communist party to promote women's rights essentially became null and thereby reimagined by modern schools of thought.

The Chinese Communist Party attempted to foster a welcoming environment for women to become equals to men. Despite these changes to traditional Chinese culture, the methods of advancement were not always the best. For example, efforts of the CCP subjected women to harsh labor and demonstration conditions in efforts to become 'equal' to men and portrayed women in unrealistic, objectifying manners to promote party populization. In comparison to China years prior, these advancements could be seen as worthy; however, with an ever-changing society, these small inclusions of women into the everyday were nowhere near the development of other countries and modern Chinese society.

Works Cited

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