

The history of feminism and women's movements in China

An Analysis of Advocates, Debates, and Strategies

Monday 21 May 2018, by [SHEN Yifei](#) (Date first published: November 2016).

From the Late Qing Dynasty to the Early Republican Period: The Origins of China's Feminist Movements

The Chinese have traditionally used the yin-yang philosophy to explain the 'natural' phenomena of gender relations, conveniently creating a power relation dominated by the yang, or males. Women were thus subject to a patriarchal social system whereby their activities were limited to the home and designated private areas. With the exception of a few groups of women, most were forbidden from taking part in the public sphere, such as pursuing jobs in government or business.

Familism—putting the interest of the family above those of individual members—dominated the fabric of Chinese society, so women had to conform to the arrangements of the head of the household, whether a father or husband (Shen Yifei, 2013). Women had very limited rights, if any, in the family.

In Confucian, hierarchical society, women's inferiority was firmly established. Dominated by the unchallenged patriarchic discourse, women were men's dependents without autonomy in any aspect of social life and deprived of their 'human rights' as determined by Western feminists such as bell hooks. Feminism was a foreign concept that arrived in late nineteenth-century China, where a patriarchal and hierarchical tradition had no place for the notion of equal rights, let alone women's rights. According to Mizuyo Sudo's textual research, 'Feminism, as a notion, first appeared in 1900 in the prologue to a piece titled "On Interactions between the Sexes" in The China Discussion' (2010: 18). The beginning of China's feminist movement is thus dated to the early twentieth century. This was also a period when China, faced with Western and Japanese economic and military onslaughts, had to open its door to the rest of the world. Thus, at the outset, China's feminist movements, unlike in other countries, were incorporated into the grand cause of national liberation and rejuvenation by male intellectuals.

Women's Rights Advocated by Men

Although the Chinese scholar and philosopher Liang Qichao never used the term women's rights in any of his writings, his arguments for improving women's lot, in particular, abolishing foot-binding and providing women education, attracted attention during his time and exerted great influence on later scholars. [\[1\]](#)

Liang Qichao's lambasting of foot-binding was out of concern that the practice hampered women's development. He observed, 'Young girls are subject to foot binding at school age', which inevitably put them in a 'weakened' position. [\[2\]](#) Girls needed to receive an education, he argued, as a ticket to overcoming their status as 'freeloaders', an idea that he proposed in 1902, along with their becoming 'wealth generators,' whom he believed could invigorate China, transforming it from the poor nation it was. Liang Qichao thought that the strength of a nation depended on the number of people in production and consumption. A nation with more producers than consumers would

prosper, otherwise it was doomed to weakness and poverty. To clarify, he cited thirteen groups of so-called freeloaders, including women, who accounted for more than half of China's population (Lian Lingling, 2011). According to Liang Qichao, China was overburdened by a large group of freeloaders, and to build a stronger nation, it was urgent that women's status be changed.

Also in 'On Women's Education', published in 1897, Liang Qichao emphasized that to enrich the country, it would be necessary to reduce the number of dependents. [3] In addition, girls should be educated to spare them ignorance, which ironically had long been considered a virtue, and make them independent citizens. Maternal education was vital, and prenatal care and advice should be available. The freeloader theory, however, was an arbitrary description of the relationship between population and productivity and a downright denial of the role that women had traditionally played in China's economy. Nonetheless, it had a major impact on the movement of encouraging women to join the workforce between 1915 and 1923, [4] when intellectuals preaching family revolution deemed women's economic independence a key driver for their emancipation (Lian Lingling, 2011). As an unintended consequence, Liang Qichao's views on women—especially that women were not inferior citizens but could be developed and that a nation's strength was in proportion to women's empowerment—exerted great influence on later women's liberation movements in China (Mizuyo Sudo, 2010: 33-35). His view challenged the stereotype that women were inherently weaker citizens, thus making it possible to change their fate, and reflected male intellectuals' prevailing analytical focus on women's economic independence when considering the women's issue as part of the solution to the nation's woes.

The notion of 'women's rights' circulated among the intellectual community during 1902/1903, thanks largely to Ma Junwu and Jin Tianhe. [5] Ma Junwu incorporated the Chinese version of Darwin's thoughts on social evolution in 'On Women's Rights', chapter 16 of his *Translation of Spenser's Work on Women's Rights and Darwin's Work on Evolution*, published in 1902. In his translation and analysis of Spenser's Women's Rights, Ma Junwu echoed Liang Qichao's views by arguing that women were not inferior by birth and that women's status was a reflection of a nation's level of social development. Ma Junwu's views differed from Liang Qichao's, however, on three fronts: he advocated women being subject to rights, equality between husband and wife, and women's participation in politics. They differed even more in their objectives, with Liang Qichao's being the enrichment of the nation and Ma Junwu's being equality between the sexes, which he argued in 'On Women's Rights' should be achieved through a social revolution.

Jin Tianhe's *Women's Bell*, published in 1903, would also shape views on the women of that time. Jin argued that any revolution for civil rights should be conducted in tandem with one for women's rights, that women were the 'mother of a nation', and that everyone was endowed with God-given rights. His view on women's rights centered on women's contribution to the nation as the mothers of its people. He envisioned women being armed with modern ideas and engaged in domestic affairs, including the rearing of future generations, similar to but more specific than what Liang Qichao proposed women's roles should be. His depiction of women as the nation's mother was widely recognized by intellectuals and had great influence on social debates about women's roles. This view would be challenged and dismissed by later women feminists (Mizuyo Sudo, 2010: 33ff).

Thus, China's feminist movement was kick-started and driven by men. Why men? What motivated them? What were the limitations of a feminist movement driven by men?

The earliest proponents of women's roles or rights acknowledged that women were not born weak, but could be empowered by abolishing foot-binding, giving them equal access to education and employment, and by recognizing them as mother of the nation. Prior to the International Workshop on a Century of Women's Rights Development in China, the scholars Wang Zheng, Gao Yanyi, and Liu He (2005) explored why men had been the drivers behind the early twentieth-century women's

rights movement, which culminated with the publication of *Women's Bell*, through an in-depth examination of that history. They argued that this early feminism began as part of China's burgeoning nationalist movement and represented men's imagination of ideal women.

Gao Yanyi (2005) held that *Women's Bell* preaches women's rights from the unchallenged, dominant position of men. Meanwhile, Jin Tianhe divided women into two categories: well educated and ignorant. These two groups, he claimed, 'stood on the opposite sides of tradition and modernity vilifying each other, so much so that our modern history, and even the history of women's development, has had no place for footbinding women, let alone their voices and stance. Their lives, will, desires and thoughts were "represented," drowned or obliterated by Jin Tianhe and his female comrades' (Gao Yanyi, 2005). Such reflections are significant, as this male-dominated feminism remains mainstream in Chinese society, where elite females are viewed as representatives of all women, neglecting the interests and needs of those at the bottom of the social ladder.

Women's Rights Advocated by Women

Many female feminists were exposed to the prevailing, male thinking on women's rights, but they held dramatically different views than their male peers due to different social identities stemming from their various experiences and theoretical footings. When Liang Qichao and Jin Tianhe spoke of women's rights, they were constructing an idealized, future image for women. In contrast, their female contemporaries—among them Lin Zongsu, Chen Xiefen, Qiu Jin, and He Zhen discussed in detail what women should be like in the present or how they could liberate themselves from the existing roles to which they were confined. This signaled a shift in the focus of discussions on women's rights towards how women could obtain their due rights (Mizuyo Sudo, 2010: 80). Moreover, while males invented the mother of the nation role by combining women's natural rights and their expected contributions to the nation, female feminists tended to focus more on gender equality despite some differences among them.

Lin Zongsu generally agreed with Jin Tianhe's argument about women as mother of the nation, but she also insisted that women themselves should fight for their legitimate rights, which she believed included women's assertion of rights vis-à-vis men, the Han people's claim of rights against the Qing Court, and China standing up to Western powers. [6] Her definition of women's rights was thus much broader than those of most male intellectuals.

Chen Xiefen dismissed male-proposed theories on women's rights as 'self-serving', insisting that women strive for their own rights independent of men's assistance and that gender equality be the norm (Mizuyo Sudo, 2010: 80ff). [7] Qiu Jin emphasized that women should be independent and fight for their own emancipation, envisaging an equal role to men, instead of settling for being mother of the nation, in an ultimate effort to save the nation from being enslaved by Western powers. [8]

He Zhen was even more radical in her views, which despite also being geared towards the liberation of women by women rejected any connection between women's independence and their contributions to the nation. [9] She pointed to the hypocrisy of Western versions of gender equality and called for the liberation of women outside the narrative of national interests, loathing the notion of 'female citizens'. She cited three reasons behind male advocacy of women's liberation: following the Western trend, addressing their own financial difficulties, and producing good children for themselves (Mizuyo Sudo, 2005).

These female advocates had an agenda different from their male counterparts despite both recognizing inequality between the sexes and championing the importance of changing the status quo. They focused more on women's immediate rights and interests, such as equal access to education, work, and participation in politics, rather than realization of the ideal women goal or

linking women's development to the future of the nation. Such differences in focus later led to the unresolved debate on what constitutes gender equality. Women's rights movements in China embarked on a bumpy ride from the start.

Women's Public and Private Lives during the Republican Period, 1911-1949

From the late Qing dynasty through the republican period, debates on women's rights revolved around four topics: foot-binding, access to education, joining the workforce, and participation in government. Although male intellectuals had called for abolishing foot-binding and promoted education for women, the vast majority of male scholars showed no interest in campaigning for women taking part in politics. Female feminists championed the cause, but it failed to attract significant attention.

The debate about women in politics grew beginning in 1911. Sun Yat-sen, the first president and founding father of the Republic of China, expressed his support, which was influenced in part by his views on natural rights and women's contributions to his revolutionary cause. [10] Even Western countries, which were hailed as beacons of modern civilization by advocates of women's rights, had nonetheless not yet granted women their natural rights. In the British Empire, France, and the United States, for instance, women were still barred from government. Against this international backdrop, advocacy for women's participation in government and gender equality became a key issue to be considered in building China's state system. The focus of the debate veered towards whether women being in government was good for a 'civilized' country. A correspondent who went by the pseudonym Kong Hai opposed women doing so on the grounds that women were not as knowledgeable as men, that politics was not meant for women, and that it would bring crisis to family life. He tried to prove the legitimacy of gender inequality by citing inherent differences between the sexes. Counterattacks were launched, but in this debate, natural rights theory lost ground to the proposition that women were 'dutybound' to be mothers and wives first if they were to be of any service to the country. After Yuan Shikai took control of the government from Sun Yat-sen in 1912, advocacy for women faltered. [11] Following the establishment of the Republic of China, in 1912, social ideologies became conservative and reactionary. Advocacy for women's participation in politics was rejected and waned, replaced by an emphasis on women's roles as understanding wives and loving mothers in the press (Mizuyo Sudo, 2010: 110-132).

In stark contrast to the divergent views on women's participation in politics, no intellectual, male or female, opposed women entering the labor force, having bought into Liang Qichao's argument for turning freeloaders into benefit generators. Against this background, many professional women were even idolized as 'modern girls'. In the early republican period, women entering the business world were mostly encouraged by nationalism and patriotism. Women sought to open shops and banks of their own to help develop the nation. During 1915 to 1923, the focus of the women's movement shifted to fighting for individual independence, including financial independence. Women in business during this period, still patriotic-minded, focused more on serving the public, especially creating jobs for other women (Lia Lingling, 2011).

In the 1930s, businesses began to employ women to cut costs amid the Great Depression. Women entered professions that had previously been dominated by men, triggering further controversy. At the same time, as intellectuals strongly advocated women's financial independence, objection to women joining the workforce also rose. Opponents doubted women's motivations for finding jobs and expressed concern about the ensuing consequences. Research by Lian Lingling revealed that during the 1930s, women working as shop assistants were considered 'eye candy' and victims as well as threats, because the 'use of women shop assistants not only represented a gender-sensitive form of labor division that threatened to carve up the labor market in a new way, but redefined the roles of the sexes and related social expectations. What followed were anxieties arising out of

uncertain gender relations, and complex gender discourses' (2011: 14).

Despite objections, women entered the workforce in droves, especially in Shanghai. According to statistics for 1930 from the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, 374,117 women were employed throughout China. In Shanghai alone, 188,188 women were part of the workforce, compared to 154,955 males, making women 55 percent of workers. Later, due to industrial restructuring, the proportion of women workers dropped to 43 percent (Chen Yan, 2005). Women could not only be found in the textile and tobacco industries, but also in catering, sales, banking, and foreign trade. Those with educations also entered the health care and cultural fields, education, law enforcement, and legal services, which would not have been possible a decade prior. Jobs provided women with financial resources, allowing them to take the first step towards independence.

Meanwhile, the central government launched the New Life Movement in an effort to reform society and reinvent women's roles. Discontented with an ailing, corrupt society full of lazy and unmotivated youths and adults, Chiang Kai-shek announced the movement in Nanchang on February 19, 1934. A key objective of the campaign was to reinvent women's image through a number of strategies. In a study of the comments and slogans from that period, Xu Huiqi concluded that the government used two approaches to achieve this objective. First, women were made aware of and assigned a major role in the revival of the nation: providing essential services for the functioning of the country. Second, women were given a key role to play in maintaining family life, so vital that the success of the New Life Movement depended on women fulfilling their familial duties (Xu Huiqi, 2011). Emphasis was disproportionately placed on developing women's moral qualities to make them caring, accommodating, and at the same time, dignified and independent mothers. Political participation was discouraged. Praise for women being great mothers lay at the core of the republic's public campaign. Any behavior that deviated from the image of being tidy, clean, simple, plain, swift, and down-to-earth was strictly prohibited, as were fancy dresses, bare legs and feet, and permed hair.

In terms of women's personal lives, most still lived at the mercy of the traditional patriarchy, but a few from the upper class experienced drastic changes. Zhou Xuqi (2005) relayed the following true story from the movement: A modern-minded boy married a traditional girl under pressure from his parents. He encouraged his wife to stop binding her feet, to read, and to follow the fashion, thereby significantly changing her. When he found that his wife, now half-reformed and half-traditional, was still a long way from what he expected her to be, he decided to divorce her. According to Zhou Xuqi, the case of Zheng Zhenxun shows that traditional patriarchy still existed in the prevailing gender relations. The authority of the husband over the wife remained almost intact, and still exerted influence on the marriage relationship in a new era. It found a happy ally in the new theory on women's roles, forming a new type of exploitation of women.

The earlier May Fourth Era (1915-1923) had been a major juncture in China's cultural development, characterized by unprecedented ideological emancipation and awakening. [12] 'Enlightenment of the individual' was the focus of social thought, a development that provided a strong backdrop to women's liberation. Many prominent journals published articles on women, including *New Youth*, *Weekly Review*, *Youth of China*, and *New Trends*. In addition, women founded journals dedicated to women, among them *Labor and Women*, *New Women*, *Women's Magazine*, and *Women's Bell*. Women's groups sprung up around the country (He Liping, 1999). A number of women's organizations, in cooperation with patriotic groups, also played an important role in women's liberation movements, including the Beijing Women's Relief Society, Tianjin Catholic Patriotic Women's Society, Shanghai Women's Federation, and the China Women's Patriotic Society.

Male activists during that period believed that China needed healthy, well-educated women to rear the next generation, arguing that the higher the education women received, the better their children

would connect to the world. There was little talk, however, about helping the women themselves build connections to the world. In fact, male advocates had little interest in helping women achieve autonomy or equality or in dealing with the world. They wanted educated and 'reformed' women to contribute more to the nation. In spite of this, women's awareness of equal rights and independence continued to grow as they participated in the male-advocated movements (Glosser, 2003).

Of all the drivers behind the spread of feminist thought, the natural rights ideology changed women's circumstances in society by legitimizing equal access to work and education—but not equal rights—and freeing them from the cruelty of foot-binding. The individual independence and equality craved by women feminists failed to materialize, however, and would later be dismissed altogether.

The International Environment and Feminism in China

The development of feminism in China followed closely changes in the international climate. The word feminism was first proposed in 1791 by Olympe de Gouges during the French Revolution and referred to 'women's liberation'. In her Declaration of the Rights of Women, de Gouges proclaimed, 'Woman is born free and remains equal to men in rights'. [13] The notion was exported to Japan and from there introduced to China. Another driver of male intellectuals advocating for women's rights resulted from China's changing status in the international community. Jin Tianhe, in writing *Women's Bell*, imagined himself walking the streets of Paris, rather than Beijing. He and his male peers were trying to reinvent a new image for Chinese women based on how they perceived Western women to be.

During the late Qing dynasty and early republican period, there were widespread discussions about modern women versus traditional women. The modern woman was an idealized evolution of the traditional woman, who had been set up as a punching bag by intellectuals proposing certain contributions by women to the nation. Liang Qichao, for instance, in his campaign for women to 'go modern', fulminated against foot-binding, calling it an evil from the past. As a result, the practice was viewed as a symbol of China's decline and barbarity. At the same time, traditional Chinese women were compared not to Chinese men, but to Western women. The most advanced Western powers still practiced a gender-based division of labor, in which Chinese intellectuals found the most convenient empirical evidence for their argument for women's roles as wife and mother. It seemed that reforming and empowering the weakened female population was the same as building a powerful China (Mizuyo Sudo, 2010: 73, 78).

Amid the economic panic created by the Great Depression in the 1930s, Western countries played up women's roles in the household and praised marriage and fertility as a means to boost productivity and reduce unemployment. When this thought spread to China, it was met with fierce resistance among some feminists, but others believed that it could be the prescription for fixing China's existing social and economic problems. Hence the suggestion was made that women withdraw from the workplace and settle into roles of being supportive wives and caring mothers, to ease competition in the labor market and start having children in the interest of their own families and the nation (Lian Lingling, 2011). It was argued that this was not only where women's strength lay, but the most important task they should shoulder.

Female feminists noticed the incongruity between the natural rights ideology and the state system, [14] but were unable to challenge the trend prevailing around the world. The natural rights ideology denied social differences between the sexes, while the division of labor by gender was widely accepted in the Western world, where gender-based roles were regarded as the foundation of a 'civilized' nation (Mizuyo Sudo, 2010: 104). When human rights were championed in China, the notion of gender equality was based on Western practices of the gender-oriented division of labor.

Thus the idealized image of a modern woman in China was put in the mother of the nation framework simply because it was consistent with Western practices.

Theories on Women's Rights

In general, two dimensions of women's roles from the late Qing dynasty through the republican period can be identified (see fig. 1). The first dimension focused on differences between the sexes. Proponents of this approach held that women were different from men because of their maternal role, and their duties as mothers should be emphasized; or that both sexes were the same socially, so women's roles should be modeled on men's; or that individual differences should be celebrated and new roles identified regardless of gender differences.

Liang Qichao, Jin Tianhe, and Lin Zongsu were supporters of the theory emphasizing women's maternal role and differences between the sexes. Ma Junwu and Chen Xiefen also emphasized such differences, but did not mention women's maternal roles. Qiu Jin dismissed the idea of differences between the sexes, arguing instead for women to live up to roles assumed by men. He Zhen supported the third theory, relegating gender differences to secondary status and underlining the independence of women as individuals.

The second dimension focused on the objective of women's liberation, which was either to build a strong nation or individual development. Liang Qichao, Jin Tianhe, and Qiu Jin believed that all women's liberation movements should be geared towards serving the nation, while Ma Junwu, Chen Xiefen, and He Zhen argued that they should be aimed at improving women's lot and welfare.

Figure 1 Perspectives on Women's rights

Perspectives	Objective	For the nation	Individual development
Men and women are different		Liang Qichao, Jin Tianhe, and Lin Zongsu	Ma Junwu and Chen Xiefen
Men and women are the same		Qiu Jin	
Differences between men and women are non-considered			He Zhen

Source: Author (2015)

In general, Chinese revolutionaries during the early twentieth century included changing women's status as part of their effort to reform China. That said, be it abolishing foot-binding or championing women's rights, their ultimate objective was not to make women independent individuals, but supportive wives and caring mothers who could provide good educations for the next generation. Revolution was regarded as a male preserve, and women's initiative were given little attention (Glosser, 2003). That is why Li Xiaojiang called China's early feminist movement 'feminism under patriarchy'. [15] Feminist movements in China were characterized by male domination in almost every respect.

It was thanks to male advocacy that the campaign to abolish foot-binding became a resounding success, and women's rights to education and work were partially realized. Indeed, these changes were conducive to women performing their expected roles as mother of the nation and wealth generators, thus making them beneficial to the patriarchic social structure and the country. Advancements for women stopped at that, however. Efforts at women participating in politics, changing their traditional social roles and the genderbased division of labor, and building new, diversified images failed. When World War II erupted, these movements petered out.

Women's Rights in China since 1949: Ideologies and Practices

Women's rights to education, employment, and participation in politics did not materialize until after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Women's liberation was high on the agenda of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As it was consistent with liberating the Chinese nation from oppression by Western powers, women's liberation was made part of the CCP's national

and democratic revolution against imperialism and feudalism. Thus, women's living conditions and their rights underwent unprecedented changes even without a debate on women's rights.

After the reform and opening up policy got under way in 1978, and Western feminist theories were introduced to China, ideologies on women's rights and gender began to be disseminated to a wide audience. In particular, the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, greatly facilitated the improvement of women's status in China through greater social awareness and establishment of more women's rights organizations. As China transitioned from a planned to a market oriented economy, women's rights evolved along a unique trajectory.

From Marxist Views on Women to the Notion of Gender

In July 1922, the CCP had adopted the Resolution on Women, China's first guiding principle on women's rights, at its second national congress. Developed on the basis of Marxist revolutionary practices in Russia, the resolution laid the groundwork for Chinese communists to explore a proletarian path to women's liberation suited to China's special circumstances, one different from what the bourgeoisie was advocating. It marked the beginning of the application of Marxist ideology to women's liberation in China.

The Marxist view put the blame for women's oppression squarely on patriarchy, regarding it as a root cause of the plight of women. The capitalist system was another culprit because Marxists viewed men's dominance over women as the necessary result of capitalists' control over workers, so the capitalist social structure and interests thus marginalized women's rights. This ideology treated women's oppression as a form of capital's exploitation of labor. Proponents of this theory tried to explore the role of women's paid and unpaid labor in the capitalist economy. They believed that in class-based societies, women's oppression resulted from the economic structure, based on the private property regime, and took the same form as labor's subjugation to capital. As both men and women were oppressed under the capitalist system, society-wide class struggle was required to achieve women's liberation. Thus, women could only realize their due rights when they joined the workforce, as well as class struggles, and liberated the whole of society (Shen Yifei, 2005).

Under the influence of Marxist ideology's view on women, Chinese society embraced the notion of equality between men and women in mainstream discourse. All of China's constitutions after 1949 have provided that women shall enjoy the same rights as men politically, economically, culturally, and in family life. There have, however, been debates on what constitutes women's equality vis-à-vis men. Catchphrases like two famous quotes by Mao Zedong - 'Women hold up half of the sky' [16] and 'Times are different now; women are equal to men and can do what men can' [17] - although overriding discrimination against women and underlining equal access to opportunity, were rough generalizations on gender equality, with little regard to the natural differences between the sexes. Their limitations are obvious.

It was the Fourth World Conference on Women that marked a new beginning for the women's movement in China. It led to the legalization of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), spread such notions as equality between the sexes, women's empowerment, and gender among a Chinese audience, and for the first time included women's rights within human rights, which would provide Chinese feminists with new resources in their discourse and fresh impetus in their campaign to eliminate social mechanisms that would spawn gender inequality in the late 1990s.

Discussion of gender involves not only vocabulary, but also a set of analytical paradigm, tools and frameworks, and research methodologies, including gender awareness, perspectives, analysis, and theories. Simon Bofuma's famous argument that 'women are made, not born', has been gaining currency in Chinese academia (Li Yinhe, 2014). Gender is not simply a means of identifying men and

women through certain cultural symbols, but a set of social norms that defines social status and roles of the sexes. For all the different interpretations of the relationship between the biological sexes and gender by feminists and controversies surrounding gender, ‘the dual changes in perceptions— first from the notion of biological sex to that of gender, then from forces that affect the development of men and women to those that depict their society and cultural prospects in the natural world—constitute a theoretical mark of distinction of contemporary feminism’. [18] Such perspectives allow for close observation and in-depth analysis of the roles of men and women, their division of labor, the reasons behind their differing social statuses, their understanding and interpretations of their own gender, and so-called masculinity and femininity.

Of interest, gender entered the mainstream discourse through an alliance with Marxist theory on women. Chen Muhua (1996), in his interpretation of the relationship between Marxist ideology and women and gender, suggested that the Marxists were looking at women from a gender perspective that focused on equality between the sexes. In subsequent debates, the focus shifted from ‘gender views’ to ‘gender awareness’, which was aligned with gender equality (Min Dongchao, 2003).

In contrast to the concept of gender, feminism, also a Western import, has failed to make it into China’s mainstream discourse. Although mentioned in the press, it is viewed in a negative light. According to Li Xiaojiang, when the word feminism first became known in China, in the beginning of the 1990s, Chinese scholars interpreted it as ‘movement for women’s rights’ (妇女运动), which was later followed by a watereddown version as ‘femininity-related campaign’ (女性相关活动). When discussing the same idea in the Western context, however, commentators would switch back to the original sense (Li Xiaojiang, 1997: 60). In particular, Chinese scholars tended to wed their cautious take on feminism with the Marxist view on women, although their Western counterparts took a dim view of the two theories’ ‘marriage prospects’. Indeed, Chinese scholars’ ready acceptance of the Marxist view on women even baffled their peers in other Asian countries (Du Fangqin, 2002: 39).

Most Chinese scholars today prefer ‘femininity-related campaign’ to ‘movement for women’s rights’ in referring to feminism, because in the media the latter often carries negative connotations of women being somehow masculine or bossy. Scholars who advocated women’s rights and equality and who did not want to be colored by such a stereotype were loath to be called women’s rights activists or feminists (女权主义者). Analysis reveals that the stigma attached to feminism in Chinese mainstream society is what led to this situation. Interestingly, members of a younger generation of activists and scholars are consciously calling themselves feminists, despite being aware of this issue, in an effort to rebuild momentum for a women’s rights movement. For instance, the most influential Weibo account on gender equality is Women’s Voice, founded by a group of young feminists projecting their voices through online interactions with users and holding public events. They emphasize that ‘feminism is just a way of life, not some ideology’, and therefore happily use the term feminism, or ‘movement for women’s rights’, in contrast to the traditional Chinese print media, which uses the watereddown ‘femininity-related campaign’. [19] So the flurry of thought that emerged in post-1949 China—including the Marxist view on women, equality between men and women, gender, gender awareness, gender equality, gender perspectives, and feminism and its different meanings and translations—reflects the complexity of the gender issue in China as well as the controversies surrounding gender equality.

Safeguarding Women’s Freedom of Marriage, Rights to Work, Education, and Participation in Politics through Law

An important means of improving women’s status in China was through legislation. After the PRC’s founding in 1949, women were granted the same rights that men were entitled to by law, largely because women’s liberation was presented as part of the Chinese nation’s liberation. As Du Fangqin (2002: 7) noted, ‘Both the Constitution and the Marriage Law provide that women shall have the

same rights as men politically, economically, culturally, as well as in family life and education’.

In the early days of the PRC, the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference adopted the Common Program, precursor to the PRC’s first constitution, which enshrined women’s equal rights in law, including economic rights. The revolutionized roles and status of women in social life—from family-based workers to social producers—were cemented in the 1954 constitution. The 1950 Marriage Law, which stipulated women’s freedom of choice regarding a partner and freedom to divorce, marked the critical first step towards the abolishment of the oppressive patriarchal system (Evans, 1995).

Land reform carried out that same year gave women equal rights to land tenure, further improving their economic status. In 1951, the Labor Insurance Regulation was promulgated, providing insurance for female employees, followed by an amendment to the detailed rules of its implementation. In 1953, the Election Law was issued, which gave women the right to vote and run for office. In December that year, China’s first grass-roots, general elections were organized nationwide, in which 90 percent of women voted. Women accounted for 17 percent of all elected representatives, including 12 percent of the representatives in the National People’s Congress. Eleven percent of the representatives of minority nationalities were women. These data demonstrate how Chinese women’s participation in politics and social affairs evolved after 1949, [20] enabled by legislation encouraging women’s participation in China’s social and economic development.

The Chinese government not only encouraged women to take up professions traditionally dominated by men, but ensured that they got the same pay for the same work. It issued the Circular on Female Workers’ Maternity Leave (1955) followed by Workplace Safety and Health Regulations (1956). Later, after the start of the reform and opening up program in 1978, a succession of new laws and regulations provided for women’s legitimate rights and interests in employment, including Health Standards for the Design of Industrial Enterprises (1979), Rules on Protection of Female Employees (1988), Regulations on Work Restrictions for Female Employees (1990), and the Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests (1992).

Pregnant and nursing female workers were especially protected. If pregnant, women could opt to do easier jobs and were entitled to 56 days of paid maternity leave, until 1988, when the amount was increased to 90 days. Women in some public institutions were entitled to up to six months or several years of maternity leave. In other places of employment, they were granted nursing leave, and their employer covered all birth-related costs. Many enterprises had shower rooms for female workers, lounges for pregnant employees, a nursery and even a kindergarten. They also gave female workers regular physicals.

In 1994, the Ministry of Labor issued Interim Measures for Maternity Insurance for Enterprise Employees as part of a market-oriented reform of the safeguards for women’s rights. Under the new law, public funding replaced employer payments for female employees’ maternity costs, relieving the financial burden on enterprises and more important, further protecting women’s career development prospects. On July 27, 1995, prior to the Fourth World Conference on Women, the State Council published the Program for the Development of Chinese Women, the first official guideline of its kind in China. The preamble of the program states, ‘Women are a great force for human civilization and social progress, and therefore their development is a major indicator and gauge of social development and progress. It should be the common task of governments at all levels, competent authorities, social groups and all the people to promote the progress and development of women’. [21]

At the Fourth World Conference on Women, China solemnly declared to the world, ‘We are committed to the development and progress of women, and have made gender equality a basic

national policy for advancing social progress'. This declaration, credited as a major contribution to promoting women's development, caused a sensation in the international community and won widespread support. More important, a Chinese version of gender equality gradually emerged through

the elevation of the issue to national policy. It consisted of five major elements:

- gender equality must be based on a recognition of differences between the sexes;
- protection of women's right to all-round development must be made a focus;
- policymaking should be geared towards the protection of women, with full consideration to the development needs of women in different regions and classes;
- women's role in socioeconomic development must be valued, and their talent and creativity must be fully unleashed in China's socialist construction; and
- gender equality must be realized by encouraging women to work and coordinate with men, and women's development and gender equality must take place in the context of coordinated social development.

As economic growth does not amount to social progress, and social progress does not automatically translate into women's development, economic growth and social progress in general cannot be conveniently used as substitutes for women's development. Targeted legislation, policy, education, and publicity are needed to bring about equal opportunity for women in the process of pursuing socioeconomic development (Zhao Jinfang and Yue Sulan, 2008). Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, China has been revising or amending existing laws and regulations on women, although the pace of legislation has slowed. Among them are the revised Law on Women's Rights and Interests (2005), the Regulations on Labor Protection for Female Employees (2009), the third amendment of the Marriage Law (introduced in 2011), and the Domestic Violence Prevention Act (introduced in 2012, adopted in 2015).

With China's market economy continuing to develop and with changes in the social environment, there is room for additional legislation. The existing laws and regulations are not in sync with changing capital-labor relationships and thus do not take into consideration the challenges facing women. As such, they do not fully protect women's legitimate employment rights and interests. For example, there are no provisions for preventing ageism or protecting female employees from sexual harassment and harm. In addition, many existing laws and regulations in China lack implementation mechanisms. Thus although women's rights are enshrined in law, protection of these rights has not fully materialized.

Women's Employment

Chinese women's participation in the workforce has been high since 1949. Under the planned economy regime, an increasing proportion of women joined the workforce, pushing up employment rates. The Marxist theory on women held that 'as long as women are still excluded from production activities, and confined to unpaid household labor, it is and will be impossible to achieve equality between men and women. Women's liberation is possible only when they participate in social production in large numbers, and when household chores take them very little time. The first precondition for women's liberation is that all women return to public labor'. [22] To that end, the PRC made it part of its political principles to encourage employment by women in the public sphere and institutionalized the objective. Such strong support and intervention maximized protection of women's right to work and secured the largest number of women in employment. In other words, women's job opportunities were protected, and so was their income.

Throughout the 1950s, women joined the job market, both in rural and urban areas, in part because of the aforementioned guiding principle and because the newly founded PRC had a significant labor

shortage and needed more workers to build the economy. In the planned economy era, women began to fill positions that had previously been dominated by men. For instance, in rural areas, women were put in charge of cotton production and cotton field management (Gao Xiaoxian, 2005). Women flocked to the labor market largely thanks to the two famous quotes by Mao: 'Women hold up half the sky' and 'Times are different now; women are equal to men and can do what men can'. 'Iron girls' became the personification of these two sentiments.

According to my research on cover stories of the magazine *Chinese Women*, women's employment was so diversified during the 1950s and 1960s that women were represented in such professions as tractor driving, electrical work, and public safety, traditionally preserves of men. Jin Yihong (2006) reminded, however, that women were underrepresented in these fields, and their taking on these new roles did not necessarily signal occupational equality between men and women. [23] Research also suggests that in many cases, the use of iron girls was due to a lack of male workers. Publicity about iron girls was to a certain extent a public relations campaign to mobilize women to take over jobs that had been but were no longer done by men (Han Qilan, 2005).

Whether due to a labor shortage or promotion of women's liberation, women's participation in the workforce reached its highest in Chinese history during the late 1950s, creating at the same time the smallest gap ever between the sexes in employment. In addition, financial independence played a decisive role in improving women's status in China. According to UN statistics, China's ranking was among the highest in terms of gender indices in the 1980s.

As China transitioned from a planned economy, market forces began to play a role in distributing labor resources. Against this backdrop, women entered the workplace in droves, again filling positions once occupied by men and moving higher up the ladder in the corporate world. The market mechanism was a double-edged sword, however, and problems began to emerge with the economic reforms that had begun in 1978.

The first was unemployment. Reform of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) produced a wave of unemployment, and women bore the brunt of it. As many SOEs were privatized, and the job market became increasingly liberalized, an increasing number of employees were made redundant. In urban areas, 70 percent of laid-off workers were women (Keith, 1997). This widespread unemployment among women, known as the 'great drain of female workers', largely affected women who were less well educated (no more than a high school education), middle aged or older, and unskilled. Even if they managed to find another job, the positions tended to be low skilled, low paid, and unstable, greatly reducing the level of women's participation in economic activities.

The second problem was a widening gap between men and women's employment rates (see table 1). Statistics show that during 1990 to 2010, women's employment continued to drop at a higher rate than that of men, and in spite of a substantial increase in women's income, the gap between men's income and women's widened.

Concerning the income gap, by 1999, urban women's income had dropped to 70.1 percent of their male counterparts, down from 77.5 percent in 1990. Rural women's income was only 59.6 percent that of men's, 19.4 percentage points less than in 1990. Statistics for 2010 suggest that most women aged 18-64 fell into the lower middle income or low-income demographic. Among low-income urban and rural dwellers, women accounted for 59.8 percent and 65.7 percent, respectively, 19.6 percent and 31.4 percent higher than men. In the urban and rural high-income groups, women accounted for 30.9 percent and 24.4 percent respectively, both much lower than men. Urban and rural women's annual income was only 67.3 percent and 56.0 percent of their male counterparts, respectively. This pattern was observed throughout China, be it in developed cities, such as Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai, or in the less developed western regions. [24]

Table 1 Employment rate by gender 1980, 1985 and 1990 (%)

	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990	1980	1985	1990
Male	95.0	95.0	95.0	95.0	95.0	95.0	95.0	95.0	95.0
Female	90.0	90.0	90.0	90.0	90.0	90.0	90.0	90.0	90.0

Source: Data from the 1980, 1985 and 1990 Census of China, Beijing, 1991.

Inequality in social security also existed. Women in general were not as well covered by old-age insurance as men. In 2000, in terms of social security coverage, 60.2 percent of urban males had access to medical insurance, compared to 52.3 percent of urban women. In regard to old-age insurance, 65.9 percent of urban men and 60.5 percent of urban women were covered. [25] In 2010, figures suggested that 73.3 percent of urban women had old-age insurance, and 87.6 percent of them had medical insurance, an increase compared to 2000 figures. [26] Currently, the statutory retirement age for men is 60, and for women it is set at 50 (for production jobs) and 55 (for management positions). Both men and women have to make contributions to pension plans for fifteen years before they can receive pension payments, but employers make no contributions for women over 50/55 while continuing to make them for their male employees until they reach 60. This obviously produces a huge discrepancy in entitled social benefits between the sexes.

The third problem was the glass ceiling. Upon the publication of results of a survey on women's status in China on December 1, 2010, Song Xiuyan, vice chairman and first secretary of the Secretariat of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) noted that women in China were still subject to discrimination in employment and job promotion. The survey suggested that men accounted for 80.5 percent of top management positions in public institutions, and everything being equal, 30.8 percent more men received promotions more quickly than women. In businesses, men occupied almost all management positions. [27] Song Xiuyan also emphasized that there had been a reversal in gender equality awareness. Among all top women professionals, 81 percent had a college degree, 7 percent higher than among men. Ten percent of them indicated that they had experienced discrimination in the job market. Based on these data, Song Xiuyan concluded that discrimination against women was evident both in employment and job promotion. [28]

The fourth problem was that the liberalized job market led to undesirable gender patterns in hiring. Having higher proportions of women in employment might seem to point to gender equality, but it disguised that women were increasingly concentrated in low-paying, labor-intensive manufacturing or service industries.

Many women faced problems in terms of job security, basic working hours, compensation, insurance against injuries and occupational hazards, and social insurance. Furthermore, women did not enjoy the same occupational mobility as men.

An example of discrimination against women in employment were calls for women to quit their jobs and return to being housewives. These were not just comments, but actual items on policymakers' agendas. In 1980 in Shanghai at the Workshop on Women's Employment Theories, some participants argued that 'in a country that has a glut of workforce and high rate of unemployment, it is not feasible for all women to work. Both parents working means that children will be deprived of good family education', meaning in short, women should return home (Wen Xianliang, 1995). In Proposals on Developing the Tenth Five-Year Economic and Social Development Plan, published in October 2000, the central government suggested developing a 'phased employment regime' to expand employment and improve social security. [29] It sent a shockwave through Chinese society, triggering widespread debates on phased employment and women leaving their jobs. Later, the concept of 'informal employment' was introduced, which included housekeeping. All this contributed to weakening social security for women and their social value, which was best represented by being formally employed.

According to the third survey on the status of women in China by the ACWF and the State Statistics Bureau in 2010, among the 18–64 female demographic, 71.1 percent worked (60.8 percent in urban areas versus 82 percent in rural environments). In contrast, the employment rate for men of the same age group was 87.2 percent (80.5 percent in urban areas versus 93.6 percent in rural environments). More than 72 percent of women performed most household chores, such as cooking, dishwashing, laundry, cleaning, and childrearing, while only 16 percent of men shared these burdens. Meanwhile, 45.2 percent of women shouldered child tutoring, and 39.7 percent looked after elderly family members, 28.2 percent and 22.9 percentage points higher than men, respectively. As nurseries and kindergartens were increasingly privatized, more and more women took on the job of childrearing themselves, at the expense of their own employment. According to the 2010 survey, 99.9 percent of households with a child under three years of age chose home nursing, and women accounted for 63.2 percent of daytime caregivers in the home. Among 3–10 year olds in a rural setting, 35.9 percent had never been to a kindergarten, primarily because ‘there is not any available nearby’. The employment rate among urban women aged 25–34 with a child under six years of age was 72 percent, 10.9 percentage points lower than women in the same age group without a child. Also, 18.9 percent of mothers sometimes or usually gave up personal development opportunities for the sake of the family, 6.5 percentage points higher than men. Both sexes displayed differences among age groups in their attitude towards work and family (see tables 2 and 3).

Table 2 Believe that ‘men should be in the marketplace and women in the home’, by age group (%)

Age	Men	Women	Perception gap
29 and below	57.4	43.2	13.6
30–39	59.4	48.5	10.9
40–49	61.7	58.5	3.2
50–59	63.0	61.6	1.4
60 and above	64.7	66.8	-2.1

Source: Research Institute of the All-China Women's Federation and the State Statistical Bureau, third survey of the social status of Chinese women, 2010.

Table 3 Believe that ‘it is men's job to support the family’, by age group (%)

Age	Men	Women	Perception gap
29 and below	55.6	45.1	10.5
30–39	58.9	48.8	10.1
40–49	61.3	55.0	6.3
50–59	60.1	56.4	3.7
60 and above	60.1	63.4	-2.8

Source: Research Institute of the All-China Women's Federation and the State Statistical Bureau, third survey of the social status of Chinese women, 2010.

The discussion of women returning home represented a throwback to the logic of the early twentieth-century male-proposed feminist movements, i.e., women's liberation should be in the service of the national interest.

Safeguards and Challenges for Women in Family Life

During the planned economy period, women's roles in the public sector witnessed fundamental changes. Their role in the family also evolved in sync with the government's intervention in family life. During the totalitarian Maoist era (1949–1976), individuals were conscripted from their families for collective work to further the country's socialist causes. The collective or unit (danwei) system provided individuals with lifelong employment, cradle-to-grave social security—including housing, education, and medical care, among other provisions—and more important, many functions assumed by the family. The unit mimicked the structural properties as a family (Li Hanlin, 2004). All in all, an individual's life was closely related to the unit to which he or she belonged, and well-being was decidedly dependent on the collective.

The sociologist Andrew Walder (1986) called this relationship between the individual and the collective 'organizational dependence'. This collective-as-family social structure shifted women's dependence from family and husband to the collective. The collective provided comprehensive social services, but women continued to also perform their roles as caretakers in the family, although not as arduously. In this sense, the Maoist era represented the highest achievement in gender equality in Chinese history. Still, because women's role in the family remained intact, they had to tend to unpaid family chores after they returned from paid work for the collective. Unlike their husbands, for whom being off work meant free time, they assumed dual burdens day in and day out.

Today's employed women are subject to the same competitive pressure in the work place that men face. Rapid social development and a fast-evolving industrial society mean that work is more demanding in terms of quality assurance and complexity, requiring professionals to be more skilled and competent, which in turn demands specialized learning and training. Traditionally, women had been confined to household chores, while men were the breadwinners. This tradition gave men more time to hone their professional and social skills, laying the ground for greater personal development. In contrast, today household chores, childbearing, and child rearing squeeze women's time to work. Women are thus forced to try to strike a balance between their public and private lives. Very few women manage to achieve a good balance, because society is demanding better employees, thus better child development.

Child rearing has in fact evolved into a labor-intensive, time-consuming 'profession' that requires total commitment. Women seem to be receding unawares into their former roles as the good wife and caring mother while also assuming the role of a modern man. These dual roles have created a dilemma that is taking a toll on them physically and psychologically. They question their identity and often have a strong sense of remorse and self-abasement, which in turn hampers development of self-confidence. The gender equality advocated today is different from the Maoist notion of equality between men and women symbolized by the iron girls - the image of which was based on men's social roles - with any improvement in women's social standing and equality coming at the expense of their value to the family. Since it did not fundamentally change traditional gender-based roles, women still had to bear the twin burdens of work and family. [30]

These obstinate values still dominate gender relations today. Conflicts between old and new values and a disconnection from China's social, political, and cultural realities have led today's feminist movements astray. New values force the average woman to succeed like her elite peers on the job market; meanwhile, old values keep her pinned down doing far more household chores than her husband does. Women in search of the sweetness of liberation have instead come to taste the bitterness of unintended consequences, so much so that some find themselves in a more difficult situation than when they began campaigning for women's rights.

The dual burden that women face, with the prevailing perception that they should tend to household chores, suggests that no real equality will be achieved if efforts for their equal rights only emphasize their roles in the public sphere without giving equal consideration to contextual differences, that is, their roles in private, family life and the difference from men's. If 'gender equality' solely means that women should work like men in the public sphere, without requiring men to share duties assumed by women in family life, then it is merely a pseudo equality that hides another form of gender discrimination.

Women's Images

Since the 1980s, hot topics concerning gender issues have included not only employment, but also women's images, or more specifically, femininity and the perception of the 'good wife and loving mother'. The slogan 'To be a woman' appeared in the early 1980s, partly as a reaction to the 'unisex'

period of the Cultural Revolution the decade before. During the Cultural Revolution (1966– 1976), thinking on gender in mainstream politics and the ideology of the revolutionary period were inherited and even pushed to a leftist extreme, that is, focusing on class struggle and viewing men as standard-bearers. Some scholars described the gender relationship during this period as ‘asexuality’, or perhaps more accurately as ‘unisexuality’ or ‘masculinization’. Women were to be the same as men, not only in terms of employment and career, but also in terms of style of dress, behavior, and demeanor, family life, social activities, political rights, and public image. Painstaking efforts were made to eliminate ‘female characteristics’, essentially turning women into men (Du Fangqin, 2003). With women encouraged to dress and act like men, distinctions between men and women became blurred.

Du Fangqin wrote, ‘Reforms and opening up in China have led to less social control and more diversified lifestyles. In this context, an increasing number of urban young people became tired of and rebellious against the “gender equality” formalism promoted during the revolutionary period. But on the other hand, no new knowledge on gender categorization was produced and communicated. Therefore, return to the long-established traditional model became inevitable. Once again people began to pursue “masculinity” and “femininity”, which whipped up the trend of “to be a woman”. What’s more, driven by commercial interests, “femininity” was constructed everywhere and widely accepted’ (2002: 8). The absence of serious reflection on gender culture and the wish ‘to be a woman’ aided the return of the age-old reality of gender inequality, including men’s superiority over women and indifference to the value of women. Also, it helped to legitimize gender essentialism and gender hierarchism (Du Fangqin, 2003). [\[31\]](#)

Unfortunately, at that time, in the early 1980s, both the ACWF and academics prioritized solving social problems cropping up elsewhere and therefore paid little attention to the seemingly ‘automatic’ cultural phenomenon of the return of the traditional perceptions on women. [\[32\]](#) ‘There was no adequate vigilance against and capability to deal with the return of traditional perceptions on women, i.e., the construction of femininity. The academic circle also got stuck with solving realistic problems and put cultural critique and the production and communication of knowledge in an inferior position’ (Du Fangqin, 2002: 8). Consequently, femininity and masculinity again arrived at a binary opposition. Men and women were encouraged to pursue very different things. With the rise of commercialism, women were increasingly objectified in terms of their looks and behavior, which eventually led to a wider gap between the two sexes and contributed in part to increased gender inequality.

Apart from femininity, another focus of the debate has been whether women should aspire to be strong, with a successful career, or a good wife and loving mother. When femininity plays a dominant role, strong women are usually seen as lacking femininity. Women are confronted with the choice of either family or career, and the family must decide to either sacrifice the husband or the wife. In this context, the image of the good wife and loving mother has once again become mainstream thought, influencing women from all walks of life. That adequate institutional protection should be provided for these good wives and loving mothers has been neglected.

Discussion about women’s image has shifted once again from the notion of ‘men and women are the same’ to a binary opposition between men and women. The appearance of large numbers of ‘leftover women’—a term essentially equating women beyond marrying age to food not eaten—has attracted widespread attention as a new development in a drastically changing Chinese society. Scholars have attempted to pinpoint the ideological and economic reasons behind this social phenomenon of well-educated, financially independent, and often attractive women who remain single into their late twenties or early thirties. [\[33\]](#) Many who regard them as a social problem have proposed ‘solutions’. The attention to and stigmatization of these women stem from Chinese society’s perception of marriage as a universal norm (Zhou Songqing, 2010; Chen Youhua and Lu Cheng, 2011).

Leftover women have been constructed and labeled as a special social group. As a symbol, they deprive women of subjectivity. The spouse-selection gradient theory explains why well-educated, high-income, intelligent, and attractive women are left without ideal partners from which to choose: As such women climb higher up the social and economic ladders, they are unmatched by male partners, who are traditionally expected to be at least a degree higher than them in all aspects (Gao Xiujuan, 2011).

Critics lament that men have yet to break free of the old notion that men are superior to women. In a world where women have greater access to more opportunities, it is more difficult and also unnecessary for men to be the breadwinner of the family (Cooper, 2000). One theory holds that controlling thought is a means of practicing power (Phillips Shively, 2008: 6-8), so if women fail to reflect on the gender inequality subsumed in the 'husband being superior to the wife' family model, masculine dominance will continue to persist through the perpetuation of this traditional ideology. The spouses election gradient theory has inspired reflections on the patriarchal society that still exists in China, as it lays bare power relationships within the family. Without a doubt, the notion that men are superior to women has reinforced men's dominance in the household.

China's rapid socioeconomic development has and continues to bring about drastic changes to lifestyles, including the concept of marriage among the younger generation. Modernity has led to diversification and therefore uncertainty, and a wide-scale transition in family models and closeness has become a major symbol of modern society (Giddens, 2009: 197-200). So the phenomenon of leftover women, be it driven by women's reluctance to marry or failure to find a partner if marriage is desired, is in fact a natural result of women gaining more autonomy through economic independence. It is a matter of choice on their part (Gao Xiujuan, 2011; Wang Bin, 2011; Chen He and Ling Jing, 2012).

Much of the discussion and debate on leftover women stems from male-centric perspectives. A large body of analysis has inadvertently or deliberately exposed genderbased roles and the perception of male dominance or masculinity as a social given. In such discussions, causal analysis and a focus on solutions to the alleged problem of being leftover have overshadowed critiques and reflection on prevailing gender inequality. Worse still, such oversight has served to perpetuate the existing notion of gender and hence gender inequality.

Feminist Movement Actors Today

Today, there are two major feminist groups in China: on the one hand, the ACWF and academic groups from universities and institutes focused on research, and on the other hand, social groups working as NGOs and focused on project implementation. The memberships of these groups often overlap. For example, many officials from the ACWF and scholars from universities and gender issue research institutes have participated in extra-institutional feminist movements, which also give support to NGOs working for women issues. Members of the academic groups leverage their social status and networking resources to advise on policymaking and legislation. At the same time, they work with local branches of the ACWF to implement projects and conduct experiments. In this way, they are unsung heroes, contributing to the improvement of local women's lives, while the improvements are publicly celebrated as achievements of the government and the ACWF. They also wield clout over policy development and decision-making, but their roles are most often quiet. Interactions and cooperation among these older generation and experienced feminists provide abundant social and physical resources that are necessary to initiate, organize, and maintain feminist movements as well as forge a stronger foundation for future feminist movements.

One example of women's cross-cooperation is Li Xiaojiang. Li Sipan wrote about her, 'Apart from scholarly research, she did something extraordinary at that time. In 1985, in cooperation with the

local Women's Federation in Zhengzhou, she opened China's first women's homemaking workshop since 1949. Later, she founded the Women's College in Zhengzhou, making herself the first person dedicated to women's education. Li also founded the first non-governmental women's organization since 1949—Women's Society—and China's first women's museum, and translated Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. [34]

The success stories of feminists such as Li Xiaojiang can be hard to trace. When the Fourth World Conference on Women convened, they already held senior positions within the ACWF and educational institutions and had created a strong network of decision-makers and think tank researchers who helped smooth their negotiations with NGOs and the government. Furthermore, to guide feminist movements in China, one must take into consideration the special institutional framework of the country. To conduct in-depth investigations at the grassroots level, one cannot avoid the institutional system. There are six levels in the ACWF hierarchy, and those at the grassroots level provide the only effective way to contact women in rural areas and other communities.

The ACWF, a representation of state feminism, has been leading government-guided feminist movements for decades and has established a network of grass-root organizations and mobilization structures across rural and urban areas of mainland China. Since no other governmental organization has been assigned authority to supervise the federation, its operations are relatively independent. In view of this, some scholars have argued that it is not unreasonable that the ACWF presented itself as an NGO at the Fourth World Conference on Women. It is a 'governmental NGO' with Chinese characteristics and a top-down structure that helps to introduce topics on women issues to the agenda of governmental entities at all levels by leveraging its power in the government. In contrast to this, the grass-roots women's organizations set up after the conference are seen as promoting bottom-up action plans independent of the government system.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the dominant role played by state feminism became the object of criticism in women's studies in China. The government monopolized the discourse of feminist movements, and although the object of the movements, women lacked initiative and selfhood. To counter Marxist views on women, a new generation of liberal feminists, represented by Li Xiaojiang, tried to reconstruct women's gender identity by deconstructing the image of the iron girls: 'Theoretically, they separated women's liberation from class liberation; academically, they separated women's studies from traditional social science knowledge production; strategically, they separated feminist movements from the model shaped and controlled by the state power'. [35] As women's NGOs mushroomed, and women's studies became a full-fledged discipline, Chinese women adopted a new, voluntary approach to political participation and created a new social space.

Two generations of feminists have emerged during the last three decades in China. The first generation shifted the perspective from its own situation to focus on broader enlightenment and changes, and the second generation has taken action inspired by this relatively new enlightenment. [36] Compared with first generation feminists, the second generation feminists are mostly well-educated single young women. Usually they become feminists not because they have endured discrimination or harm in their lives, but out of personal interest, after happening to learn about feminism.

The first generation paid particular attention to combating sexism through legislation, while the second generation appeals to the public through such activities as street performances. While the latter approach might appear to make a strong social impact on the street, its influence on high-level decision-makers is extremely limited. The second generation feminists are yet to achieve anything remarkable, and they are increasingly marginalized.

Since 2012, the younger generation of feminists has organized different street performances,

including wearing wedding dresses with blood stains, [37] occupying men's rooms, [38] shaving their heads to protest the Ministry of Education, [39] going topless to support legislation against domestic violence, [40] and performing the play *Our Vaginas, Ourselves*. [41] Although these performances involved very few participants, they managed to meld appeals to the public with strong visual effects, making feminism a hot topic on new and social media.

The Media Monitor for Women Network (also known as Gender Watch) is a representative of second generation feminist organizations. [42] An NGO established in 1996, it advocates gender equality and women's right to voice their opinions in mass media and is dedicated to improving female professionals' position in the media sector. It has a website, *Women's Voice*, and an online weekly journal, *Women's Voice E-paper*, and uses *Women's Voice* as its moniker for voicing opinions on all kinds of social media platforms.

The performance art activities organized by the second generation feminists combine unique ways of expression with strong body consciousness. They produce stronger visual impacts and deftly use social media, maximizing expression of their personal views. Ai Xiaoming, a retired professor at Sun Yat-sen University and deputy director of the university's research center for women and gender, described their approach as a 'desperate counterattack against all odds' and a powerful force of criticism. [43] To show her support for young feminists, Ai Xiaoming took a topless photo of herself to protest sexual harassment of students by school heads. Perhaps inevitably, in the eyes of some older generation activists, the new generation performance art goes too far, marginalizing its potential to influence.

Conclusion

A look at feminism in China over the last century reveals that it has been led by male advocates and that it has been closely related to major social movements and prevailing social ideologies. Prior to 1949, women's movements were grounded in reformist theories. Indeed, progress towards gender equality was reflected in women's participation in revolutions and politics, the abolition of the old marriage regime, and the rise of women's education, among other trends. Complete theories on women's rights, however, would appear only later.

In the three decades following the founding the PRC in 1949, Marxist thought on women, first introduced to China in the late 1910s, took hold as the guiding principle for feminism and women's development. Class struggle theories were quoted to address gender inequality. Early proponents believed that women were subject to oppression in class societies and private ownership economic structures, so their abolition could guarantee women's liberation.

The Chinese communists made women's liberation a major part of China's revolution from their early days. They not only included women's movements and work for women as a key task of the party and government by supporting a united front on women and mobilizing women in social endeavors, but cemented women's rights and liberation in law. Such efforts laid sound foundations for the successful implementation of Marxist thought on women, both in human resources and organizationally.

Since the late 1970s, Western feminist ideologies have flooded into China, and with them, Western research methodologies, such as those used in sociology, anthropology, and history. This has led Chinese scholars to make fresh attempts at interpreting women's rights, advocating women's studies, femaleology, and feminist philosophy, discussing women's employment and value of life, and launching women's research organizations and centers.

Beginning in the 1990s, China introduced a systematic theoretical framework for feminism from the

West, and Chinese Marxist scholars adapted Western feminist theories to a certain degree. Gender became a core concept in feminism studies and theories. Feminism scholars in China also translated and published a wealth of works. During this period, Chinese scholars also began to research post-modern feminism. With the beginning of the twenty-first century, scholars of women's studies shifted their focus increasingly to global feminism and perceived Chinese feminism as part of it.

There has not yet, however, been a full-fledged women's rights movement in China. The movements that have emerged have been closely linked to the development of the country, and the definition of gender equality has varied depending on China's stage of development. Women's liberation in China has always gone hand in hand with the nation's well-being. In times of national crisis, such movements were, in keeping with mainstream thought, targeted at supporting the country and its people. Women's movements have also been linked to social revolution and class emancipation, a stark contrast to what transpired in the West. In other words, women's movements in China have been born of social movements, rather than feminist movements. In the West, women's liberation has been independent of broader social movements, and that is why it has been on the fringe of society's focus, rather than the mainstream of national and social development. In China, the story is different. Gender equality has been national policy, and women's liberation, an outcome of social movements, became a major component of national development championed and led by the state.

This flurry of efforts has led to equal rights for both sexes in terms of opportunity, but as the gender equality trend has been led by men and is quickly incorporated into other social movements, the road towards a sound gender culture and full fledged feminism is sometimes treacherous. With the boundary between individuals and the state unclear, feminism still has room for development.

Dr Shen Yifei

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our ESSF newsletter in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)

<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/china/12947.pdf>

Footnotes

[1] Liang Qichao (1873-1929) was a Chinese scholar and philosopher from the late Qing dynasty and early Republic of China. He inspired Chinese scholars with his writings on human rights, and his thoughts on women's rights were equally significant. He explored different aspects of the universality of human rights, such as man's natural rights and freedom and equality and examined possible approaches for empowering and liberating women, such as protecting their health, supporting women's education, and advocating women's rights movements.

[2] Liang Qichao, 'Report of Anti-Footbinding,' *Collected Works of the Ice Drinking Room*, vol. 1. (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1989), 121.

[3] Liang Qichao, 'On Women's Education', 1897, <http://www.123guoxue.com/thread-122477-1-1.html>.

[4] This movement is commonly referred to as the New Cultural Movement of the May Fourth Era. See below, note 12.

[5] Ma Junwu (1881-?) served as the first president of Guangxi National University. He was among the first to advocate women's rights. It was thanks to his translations of Spencer's works on feminism that the term entered the Chinese vocabulary.

Jin Tianhe (1874-1947), a poet and scholar, taught at the Shanghai Girl's Patriotic School and founded the Minghua Girls School, two examples of his efforts to advance girls' education. His *Women's Bell* was the first Chinese writing on women's rights, and he is credited with being China's Rousseau by Chinese women of the time.

[6] Lin Zongsu (1877-1944) was the first Chinese woman to run an organization dedicated to law and political education for women.

[7] Chen Xiefen (1883-1923) was among the first women to run a newspaper, during the late Qing dynasty and early Republican period. After founding the *Women's Newspaper*, she became actively engaged in the promotion of women's rights, liberation, and education.

[8] Qiu Jin (1875-1907) was a revolutionary and writer. Her advocacy for women's rights and education served as a major driver for women's movements in China.

[9] He Zhen (1884-ca. 1920) founded the Women's Rights Recovery Association in Japan in 1907.

[10] The Chinese revolutionary Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925) is referred to as the 'Father of the Nation' in Taiwan and as the 'forerunner of democratic revolution' in the People's Republic of China.

[11] Yuan Shikai (1859-1916) was a renowned politician and military strategist who became the second president of the Republic of China.

[12] The May Fourth Era, with its New Cultural Movement, is commonly regarded as the first wave of feminist agitation in modern China. This anti-imperialist, anti-Confucian, nationalist, and intellectual movement aimed at rejuvenating the nation made women's issues a focus of public and scholarly discourse.

[13] Olympe de Gouges, 'The Declaration of the Rights of Woman (September 1791)', *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*, <https://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/293/>.

[14] From the state's perspective, women's rights should be fostered to strengthen the state and be geared towards the nation's needs.

[15] Li Xiaojiang (1951-) is one of the earliest and most famous researchers of gender studies in China. While a lecturer at Zhengzhou University, she founded the first women's studies group within the Women's Federation of Zhengzhou in 1985. She is currently the honorary curator at the Women Culture Museum at Shaanxi Normal University.

[16] 'Anecdotes of Revolutionary Women', *People's Daily*, March 8, 1975.

[17] All-China Women's Federation, *Chairman Mao on Women* (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1978), 20.

[18] Evelyn F. Keller, *Secret of Life, Secret of Death* (London: Routledge, 1992), 17, quoted in Wu Xiao Ying (2000: 65).

[19] *Women's Voice*, <http://blog.sina.com.cn/womenvoice>.

[20] People's Republic of China, Information Office of the State Council, June 1994, http://news.xinhuanet.com/zhengfu/2002-11/15/content_630927.htm.

[21] People's Republic of China, Information Office of the State Council, 'Outline Program for the Development of Chinese Women, 1995-2000', <http://www.cnki.com.cn/Article/CJFDTotat-KJWC199509100.htm>.

[22] Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, *Selections of K. Marx and F. Engels*, vol. 4 (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1995), 162.

[23] Jin Yihong (1947-) is executive director of the Chinese Women's Research Society, vice chair of the Jiangsu Women's Society, member of the Jiangsu Federation of Trade Unions, and consultant to the Standing Committee of the Eleventh Jiangsu People's Congress on legislation.

[24] Research Institute of the All-China Women's Federation and the State Statistical Bureau, 'Report on the Major Statistics of the Third Survey of Social Status of Chinese Women', *Collection of Women's Studies*, no. 6, 2011, 7.

[25] . Zhao Jin, 'Gender Equality and Mass Media', an interview with fellow researcher Liu Bohong of the Women Research Institute of the All-China Women's Federation, *Young Journalists*, June 2008, 54-57.

[26] Research Institute of the All-China Women's Federation and the State Statistical Bureau, 'Report on the Major Statistics of the Third Survey of Social Status of Chinese Women', 8.

[27] 'Third Survey on the Social Status of Chinese Women', *E-News of the All-China Women's Federation*, October 21, 2011, <http://acwf.people.com.cn/GB/99058/15973949.html>.

[28] 'Women Face Discrimination in Job Promotions amid a Comeback of the Notion That Women Are Born Homemakers', *IFENG.COM*, October 21, 2011, http://news.ifeng.com/gundong/detail_2011_10/21/10046492_0.shtml.

[29] This involves having different amounts of work at different stages in life, such as not working during the first years of motherhood.

[30] Zhao Jin, 'Gender Equality and Mass Media'.

[31] Gender essentialism is in essence biological determinism in regard to gender, that is, believing that the sexes and their characteristics are wholly separate. Whereas women are carnal, irrational, gentle, maternal, dependent, emotional, subjective, and poor at abstract thinking, men are spiritual, rational, brave, aggressive, objective, and good at abstract thinking.

[32] The mission of the ACWF, a mass organization led by the CCP for the liberation of women, is to represent and safeguard women's rights and promote gender equality.

[33] According to an ACWF study, in 2015 the average age of marriage for women was twenty-six. See 'Survey on Happy Marriages and Families in China', *CCTV News*, November 19, 2015, <http://m.news.cntv.cn/2015/11/19/ARTI1447917881598300.shtml>.

[34] Li Sipan, 'Feminism in China: From Enlightenment to Self-awareness', *Women's Voice*, February 11, 2015, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_53ebb0a80102vdex.html.

[35] 'A Short History of China's Feminist Movements: Feminism Should Not Be Restricted to the Urban Middle Classes', *Nanfang Metropolis Daily*, March 31, 2015, <http://nandu.media.baidu.com/article/14825830115005217486>.

[36] Liu Yanxun, 'Feminists, Those "Mad Women," from 1.0 Version to 2.0 Version', *China Development Brief*, August 1, 2013, <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.org.cn/news-7729.html>.

[37] The street performance was meant to draw attention to a famous Chinese case (of Li Yang) of domestic violence and pushes for related legislation. On Valentine's Day 2012, three young volunteers wearing wedding dresses stained with lipstick, their faces 'bleeding', took to the streets of Beijing. They wanted to present a stark visual contrast between the image of brides and wounds to raise awareness of domestic violence.

[38] The event was intended to awaken the public to the long-standing shortage of women's toilets and long queues for the women's loo. It was organized in Zhengzhou, Nanjing, and Xi'an and led to changes in government policymaking. In its draft of Hygiene Standards for Public Restrooms, issued at the end of 2013, the Ministry of Health stated that the proportion of men's toilets to women's should be 1:2.

[39] The event was launched to protest alleged discrimination against girls' access to education through a gender quota system by the Ministry of Education and institutions of higher learning. More than twenty people attended. In response, the ministry ordered a halt to quota setting

[40] The event was organized by Women's Voice to garner support for legislation against domestic violence. One of the participants painted herself red and took a photo of herself half-naked in a red wig. Some ten volunteers followed suit

[41] This is a Chinese adaptation of *The Vagina Monologues*.

[42] Media Monitor for Women Network, <http://www.genderwatch.cn:801>.

[43] Yuan Ling, 'New Generation Feminists: Mermaids with Swords in Their Hands', www.diyitui.com, February 8, 2015, <http://diyitui.com/content-1423347060.29273365.html>.