

The Making of "Woman"

The Evolution of Chinese State Feminism(s) Under Three Chinese Leaders

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Abstract: Every nation harbors a dynamic “feminism” owing to unique cultural traditions, national experiences, and women’s own experience of “gender inequality.” The nuanced “feminisms” make historical contextualization of national feminisms essential to crafting a more culturally-inclusive feminist rhetoric. Chinese feminist rhetoric is one of the most dynamic in the world. In the last century, China experienced two dramatic socio-cultural transformations with consequences reverberating in every aspect of Chinese society, especially gender relations and feminist rhetoric. While numerous scholars analyzed how the fundamentally-different Maoist and Post-Mao Era “state feminisms” transformed gender relations, very few extended their analyses to contemporary Chinese feminism. It is crucial that we analyze the state feminist rhetoric of the current Chinese leader, Xi Jinping to understand the evolution of Xi’s gender rhetoric and its connections to earlier state feminisms. A combined analysis of Maoist, Post-Mao Era, and Xi’s state feminisms will craft a more encompassing picture of the dynamic nature of Chinese feminisms and the fluidity of gender constructions since 1900s China. While Xi’s state rhetoric frames the return to traditional female roles as establishing China’s cultural autonomy and elevating China as a whole, in reality, the emphasis on family and women’s empowerment only serves the state’s interests. Ultimately, Xi draws upon both Mao’s and Deng’s state feminisms to impose his own, arguably more oppressive idea of “gender equality.”

“Feminism is never monolithic or static.”

—*Estelle B. Freedman, History of Feminisms*

Every nation harbors a distinctive and dynamic “feminism” owing to unique cultural traditions and national experiences. Each woman’s experience of “gender inequality” is different depending on their ethnicity, class, and religion (Noh, 2003). These nuanced “feminisms” make historical contextualization of national feminisms essential to crafting a more culturally-inclusive feminist rhetoric—to ultimately empower all women with the self-agency they deserve.

Chinese feminist rhetoric is one of the most dynamic in the world and shaped dramatically by state politics and China’s political leaders. China experienced two dramatic cultural and sociopolitical transformations in the last century, with consequences reverberating in every aspect of Chinese society—especially gender relations and feminist rhetoric. Without analyzing how China’s feminist rhetoric emerged with its sociopolitical context, it becomes virtually impossible to advocate for a culturally-appropriate “gender equality” that empowers, rather than constrains, Chinese women.

For centuries, Chinese gender relations were defined by a Confucian patriarchal system that degraded women into inherited objects passed from father to husband to son, a concept known as the “Three Obediences.” Since then, China’s political leaders have played a critical role in shaping gender roles, due to the tremendous power they wield as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader (Qin, 2019; Rauhala, 2015). When Mao established his Communist regime, the People’s Republic of China, in 1949, he radically overturned Confucianism’s debasing rhetoric of women: desexualizing women and proclaiming gender neutrality (Leung, 2003). However, after Mao’s death in 1976, the new modernist leader Deng Xiaoping implemented economic reform and an open-door policy aimed at reversing Mao’s communist policies and modernizing China (Huang, 2018). Deng’s new government ushered in the Post-Mao Era, precipitating another fundamental transformation in Chinese gender relations and feminism (Leung, 2003; Wu, 2010). Unlike Mao’s asexual gender rhetoric, Deng’s state rhetoric in the Post-Mao Era reflected an essentialist view of gender that reemphasized women’s “femininity” and sexual differences (Limin, 2013; Zheng & Zhang, 2010).

While numerous scholars analyzed how the fundamentally-different Maoist and Post-Mao Era “state feminisms” transformed gender relations, very few extended their analyses to contemporary Chinese feminism. Contemporary Chinese feminism is heavily influenced by Chinese legislation, sociocultural trends, and increasing global interconnectedness. Therefore, it is crucial that we analyze the state feminist rhetoric of the current, paramount Chinese leader, Xi Jinping—arguably as powerful as both Mao and Deng—to understand the evolution of Xi’s gender rhetoric and its connections to earlier state feminisms (Fincher, 2012b; Lewis, 2020a; Qin, 2019; Rauhala, 2015). A combined

analysis of these state feminisms will craft a more encompassing picture of Chinese feminisms' dynamic nature and the fluidity of gender constructions since 1900s China.

To analyze the evolution of what we now understand as “Chinese feminisms,” I begin by examining historians' different interpretations of how Maoist and Post-Mao Era state feminisms impacted gender inequality and women's self-perception. I will extend these analyses to incorporate Xi Jinping's state feminist rhetoric and its response to a vastly-different sociopolitical context. By analyzing Xi's propaganda and media statements, I argue that Xi's government is pursuing an aggressive political campaign reemphasizing traditional Chinese values of family and encouraging nationalism, consequently revitalizing Confucian female roles of motherhood and wifehood. While Xi's state rhetoric frames a return to traditional female roles as establishing China's cultural autonomy and elevating China as a whole, in reality, the emphasis on family only serves the state's interests. By pressuring women to marry and reproduce for national “advancement,” Xi—like Mao and Deng—continues to frame women's rights as subordinate to other state goals and as a means to an end. Ultimately, Xi draws upon both Mao's and Deng's state feminisms to impose his own, arguably more oppressive idea of gender equality. Xi uses state rhetoric to reinforce traditional Confucian values of women's inferiority, effectively oppressing women both legislatively and socio-culturally—all to strengthen the CCP's authoritarian control.

Pre-Mao Era “Womanhood”

Until Mao Zedong took power in 1949 and radically uprooted traditional Chinese values, Confucianism dominated social rhetoric (Liu, 2013). For centuries, deeply-entrenched Confucian values of filial piety and the “Three Obediences” underscored women's inferiority and rendered women powerless both in public and in the home. Its debasing rhetoric cultivated traditions like “foot-binding” to restrict women to the domestic sphere and to undermine women's intellectual capacities (Liu, 2013). Confucianism's patriarchal ideals emphasized how social order depends on the “*Wu Lun*” 五伦 or “five relations”: “ruler-ruled, father-son, elder-younger brother, husband-wife, and male friend-friend” (Leung, 2003, p. 360). The rhetoric of social and familial order made traditional Chinese society patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal (a practice where couples settle in the man's home or community) (Leung, 2003).

In contrast to Western individualism, Confucianism teaches obedience and every individual as morally obligated to society—especially women (Liu, 2013; Wu, 2010). Historians agree that Chinese women were consistently defined in relation to men rather than as individual beings, deprived of self-agency, and characterized as tools for social advancement (Leung, 2003; Liu, 2013). Knowledge of Chinese collectivistic culture allows us to better understand how Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi Jinping framed their feminist rhetoric within the context of societal benefit.

Mao Zedong's State Feminism (1949-1976)

With the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Mao Zedong reversed centuries-old Chinese traditions of women's subordination by radically proclaiming women's social equality and by using social-constructionist language: language emphasizing how "gender" is created by society rather than gender-essentialist language suggesting "gender" is created by innate biological differences (Limin, 2013). To free women from confining Confucian gender ideals, Mao desexualized women through social-constructionist language like "*nüquan*" 女权 (female power) versus gender-essentialist language like "*nüxing*" 女性 (female sexuality) (Angeloff & Lieber, 2012; Liu, 2013). Mao specifically departed from "*funü*" 妇女—a term connoting Confucian values of women as wives and mothers—to liberate women from their subservient, domestic roles and propel them into public labor (Huang, 2018; Bo Wang, 2010). Both Huang (2018) and Wu (2019) explained how Mao's famous proclamation, "women hold up half the sky," elevated an unprecedented number of Chinese women into public life. However, while agreeing that Mao's feminist rhetoric affirmed women's equal capabilities with men, many scholars contend that Mao's state feminism was still rooted in a patriarchal revolutionary system.

Scholars disagree over the extent to which Mao's gender reconstruction undermined or strengthened Chinese patriarchy by transforming women's public and domestic roles. A leading historian in Chinese gender discourse, Zheng (2005) explains how, because women's subordination mainly stemmed from the family hierarchy, Mao's Communist policies dissolving the family unit partially weakened Chinese patriarchy. However, other historians argue that Mao's policies extolled women's public contributions while emphasizing domestic responsibilities as women's primary roles (Angeloff & Lieber, 2012; Huang, 2018). They point to how Mao grandly touted the elimination of gendered division of labor with his tailored female ideal, the "iron woman," who simultaneously embraces economic labor and fulfills family responsibilities. While this ideal positively reshaped women's self-perception, it also imposed compounded public and domestic burdens on Chinese women—known as "double burden"—and only paid "lip service" to domestic equality (Gao, 2017b; Limin, 2013). A professor of Chinese women's labor inequalities at Hong Kong Baptist University, Leung (2003) more harshly condemns Maoist feminism as "officially-sanctioned, subordinative ... gendered division of labor and reproductive activities" (p. 365). According to Wu (2019), Mao's superficial gender reforms did not uproot the patriarchal system. Mao only *suppressed* traditional gender discourse. Evidently, Mao's "gender equality" or "*nannü pingdeng*" 男女平等 rhetoric did not equate to "women's liberation" (Limin, 2013).

Some scholars go even further to suggest that Mao did not simply desexualize but actually "masculinized" women. Mao attempted to "re-mold" women by masculine standards, demanding they wear "shapeless clothes ... behave exactly like men" and show

little affection for their children (Leung, 2003, p. 366). By only superficially changing women without uprooting structural patriarchal values, Mao suppressed women's femininity and stripped them of self-agency (Wu, 2010). Gao (2017a) explicitly condemns party propaganda as rooted in gender prejudices—like the idea of women's weaker constitutions—despite the “iron woman” ideal. This echoes previous scholars' views that state propaganda deformed women's images with patriarchal standards (Limin, 2013). Reading these analyses of Mao's state propaganda and rhetoric in combination, Huang (2018) concludes that Mao desexualized women only for the purpose of state labor and forcibly redefined women's identity through their political, family, worker, and communist roles. Consequently, many authors assert that official state discourse firmly decided women's gender identities. Gender equality remained subordinate to Mao's collective goals (Leung, 2003; Wu, 2010). Such was Mao's “passive liberation” or “pseudo liberation” of women (Limin, 2013, p. 95).

Mao's gender equality policies failed because they denied women self-determination and were a “state-down” approach to gender reform (Huang, 2018; Leung, 2003; Limin, 2013). Mao's demand for complete equality was too radical in a time when Chinese women were struggling to be recognized as human—much less *equal* humans (Liu, 2013). Before Mao rose to power in 1949, traditional Confucian rhetoric debased women as lesser creatures without the privileges of femininity like Western women had. As such, Zheng (2005) points to how Mao introduced ideas of women's “equal rights” when women *themselves* had no idea what “gender equality” entailed. Importantly, Gao (2017) and Limin (2013) depart from focusing on male perspectives to instead analyze women's perspective on Mao's gender reform. Both argue Mao stripped women of their “private language” of femininity derived from personal experiences. Lacking feminist consciousness and autonomous sexuality, women's experiences under Maoist “gender equality” policies were more confining than liberating. Consequently, many Chinese women sought to reclaim their femininity and openly embraced the Post-Maoist Era's re-emphasis of their sexuality (Limin, 2013).

Post-Mao Era State Feminism (1978-1995)

When Deng Xiaoping took power in 1978 following Mao's death, Deng radically reversed Mao's state feminist rhetoric and promoted a gender-essentialist view of women, fostering another fundamental transformation in Chinese gender relations. In contrast to Mao's gender-neutral state rhetoric, Deng's new government believed and used scientific rhetoric to underscore women's biological differences with men (Huang, 2018). State rhetoric proclaimed it was restoring “the right order of the nation” by rebalancing gender differences, harkening to Confucian beliefs of “*yinyang*” 阴阳 harmony between genders (L. Wang, 2013). This led to the renewed use of “*xingbie*” 性别 (“difference between sexes”)

and “*nüxing*” 女性 (“female sex”) to describe women, terms popular before the Mao Era (Angeloff & Lieber, 2012).

Researchers widely agree that Post-Mao Era state feminist rhetoric was rooted in “an implicit gender code” that patronized women and denied them self-determination (Angeloff & Lieber, 2012; Wu, 2010; Zheng & Zhang, 2010). Leung (2003) critiques Deng’s policies as using “presumed sexual differences” to group women with the “elderly and young” (p. 367), therefore suggesting women need special protection because of their biological differences. While these laws may have endowed women with unique protection, their paternalistic natures rendered them restrictive and debasing. It helped craft a “social harmony” based on men’s absolute domination over women (Zheng & Zhang, 2010).

Coupled with China’s expanding market-economy, Deng’s gender-essentialist state rhetoric increasingly commodified female sexuality (Leung, 2003; Wu, 2019; Zheng & Zhang, 2010). Leung (2003) reveals how state advertisements celebrated female attractiveness to “fulfill their sex role”; popular media almost exclusively associated women with fashion and beauty (p. 370). This cultivated women’s internalization of themselves as the “second sex,” as “woman” became synonymous with “femininity.” L. Wang (2013), however, provides a contrasting perspective. Placing Post-Mao state rhetoric in historical context with Mao’s masculinized “iron women,” L. Wang (2013) explores how the new state rhetoric could be seen as positive because it reemphasized women’s femininity, something that Mao had forcibly stripped away from many women. However, in both instances, the state defined “womanhood” and women were given no self-agency.

The Fourth U.N. World Conference of Women (1995) in Beijing was a crucial turning point in helping Chinese women recognize the importance of self-agency and begin challenging state-imposed gender roles. The Conference introduced new ideas of “self,” “gender,” and “women’s empowerment” into Chinese feminist rhetoric. With these new concepts of self-autonomy and women’s equal rights, the state changed its terminology from “gender equality” (“*nannü pingdeng*” 男女平等) to “social equality between men and women” (“*shehui xingbie pingdeng*” 社会性别平等) (Zheng & Zhang, 2010). This change gave Chinese women the conceptual framework to free themselves from Marxist and socialist rhetoric of “gender equality” that subordinated women’s equality to other collective state goals (Huang, 2018; Leung, 2003). “Gender” unlocked new meanings for women’s “equal rights,” and pressured the Chinese government to acknowledge international democratic trends and women’s own perspectives in the new contemporary age.

Theoretically, the Conference and burgeoning transnational feminist dialogue should have transformed China’s feminist movement from a state-sanctioned entity into an independent movement powered by women themselves. However, this is not the reality.

21st-century State Gender Rhetoric

After the 1995 U.N. Women's Conference, the CCP did indeed change its state rhetoric to reflect new ideas of "gender"—but only on the policy level. In the early 2000s, the CPP amended China's constitution to emphasize its "recommitment" to gender equality; state organizations formalized "gender" into state rhetoric (Bin Wang, 2019). After Xi Jinping became the Chinese president in 2013, his speeches particularly underscored his attention to gender inequality, frequently alluding to Mao's proclamation, "women hold up half the sky" (Qin, 2019). Most recently, in his 2020 U.N. Speech to commemorate the 1995 Women's Conference, President Xi declared that "equality between men and women is a basic state policy in China."

In reality, however, gender inequality is *increasing* across Chinese society under Xi, compared to its declining trend under both Mao and Deng (Rauhala, 2015). Just one example is how China had one of the highest percentages of women in the labor force at 75% in 1990, a percentage which has declined to 61% in 2019 (Qin, 2019). Moreover, China's economic transformation has overwhelmingly benefitted men. On the World Economic Forum's global gender gap index, China's ranking declined from 57th out of 139 nations in 2008 to 103rd in 2018 (*The Global Gender Gap*, 2018).

Evidently, despite the CCP's enduring emphasis on gender equality as a founding principle, Xi's government is reversing decades of progress in women's rights. This phenomenon could partly be driven by Xi's revitalization of traditional Confucian values of family that both legislatively and culturally pressures women into conformity with his idea of "gender equality." Characterized by women's domesticity and patriarchal domination, Xi's "gender equality" is more oppressive than either Mao's or Deng's. In the final section, I reveal that Xi's gender reform is aimed at perpetuating the CCP's autocratic power—now that the Party faces potential instability arising from China's sex-ratio imbalance and younger generations' challenging of traditional, patriarchal hierarchies.

Xi's Family-Focused Rhetoric

Since 2013, Xi's state propaganda reemphasizing traditional Confucian values, especially of family, has propelled women's decreasing public involvement and inequalities. One of the most preeminent scholars of Xi's state feminism, Fincher (2014) describes Xi's new political theory for the CPP as "Confucian-style morality," which blends Confucian values with Mao's Marxist ideology. The influence of Xi's political ideology is extensive. Xi became the first Chinese president since Deng to have his political ideology with his name attached immortalized in the Chinese Constitution, evidencing his ascension to be one of China's paramount leaders comparable to Mao and Deng (Buckley, 2018). Xi draws upon both Mao's and Deng's rhetorical strategies to preserve the CCP's supremacy. In contrast to the *indirect* effects of Deng's policies on women and similarly to Mao, Xi *deliberately* reshapes women's gender roles, asserting that China's success depends on such state-imposed social order. However, Xi builds upon the gender-essentialism and sexist

Confucian ideals of Deng's government to craft Xi's new vision for China: one characterized by male-centered, Confucian values of family that effectively fortify state control.

Xi's aggressive family-values campaign is nowhere more evident than in his rhetorical characterization of China as "one family" under an indisputable patriarch: himself. This lays the foundation for the state media to portray Xi as the nation's "Confucian father" (Fincher, 2014). In the 2010s, state media intensified Xi's personality cult by affectionately deeming him "Xi Dada," translating into "Uncle Xi" or "Big Daddy" (Fincher, 2018). Reinforced by popular culture, his state-cultivated persona embodies the perfect husband, father, grandfather, and leader all in one. The propaganda particularly evokes the nation's god-like idolization of Mao to celebrate Xi as the national patriarch (Burckhardt, 2016).

By framing Xi as the national patriarch, state media uses traditional Chinese values of filial piety and obedience to justify the CCP's authoritarian control and gender roles as necessary for "family" and social harmony. China Daily, the state-owned newspaper, praises Xi for stressing the importance of family, explaining how Xi's values for the "little family" embody his hopes for the "big family": the nation (An, 2018). By drawing upon Confucian values of filial piety in the nuclear family, Xi establishes that Chinese citizens or the "children" are culturally, morally, and politically obligated to obey their "patriarch"—and therefore, not question the existing gender roles. This reinforces the legitimacy of Xi's and the CCP's control over China's moral and cultural character, and ultimately, their vision for gender roles.

Women's Compounded Legislative and Cultural Oppression

Due to deeply-rooted Confucian values of the "Three Obediences" and women's subservience, Xi especially pressures women into conforming with the CCP's gender roles. Xi is the first president to explicitly break from Mao's and Deng's state rhetoric rooted in Marxist ideals of women's liberation and declare that women must "shoulder the domestic burden" (Qin, 2019). Although women's domestic responsibilities were implicit under Mao and Deng, both had openly encouraged women into the public sphere. One avenue that both Mao and Deng used to spread messages promoting gender neutrality was through the All-China Women's Federation or ACWF, formed in 1949 and the only state-sponsored women's organization. In stark contrast, today, Vice President Meng Man of the ACWF uses traditional ideas of the gendered division of household labor to justify Xi's emphasis on women's domestic roles in a 2018 statement. She explains how the ACWF is inspired by Xi's belief that women have "*certain abilities* that can help them *naturally* play an important role in health, education and charity undertakings," notably excluding other professional fields (*Newly-Elected*, 2018). Therefore, Xi's government distorts and paradoxically entwines the Communist Party's core philosophy that "women hold up half the sky" with Confucian values of women's family responsibilities. It redefines women's role in "holding

up half the sky” as *limited* to their domestic roles, effectively stripping women of self-determination.

Xi adds moral impetus to his call for traditional gender roles by portraying it as a necessary precondition for China’s cultural autonomy and national elevation, especially in the context of increased globalization. Through the deliberate contrast of his 2013 “Chinese Dream” movement with the “American Dream,” Xi stresses China’s need to revitalize traditional values and distinguish itself from America as a global superpower (Sun, 2019). Ubiquitous “Chinese Dream” propaganda such as that urge citizens to prioritize and work towards China’s “national rejuvenation” and cultural individuality (*Youth Urged*, 2013).

Xi’s message directly targets women. Xi highlights the importance of family values—therefore, women’s domestic roles—to national glory. At the 19th CCP National Congress (2017), Xi pointedly declared that a women’s civic duty is to raise “family virtues and personal integrity.” Xi further linked “good” with “family” in his 2018 address to the ACWF, tying women’s traditional duties with the preservation of “national virtues.” He urged women to “possess the spirit of patriotism...use their own development for the great cause of the reform and development of the motherland” (Xinhua, 2018). In these speeches, Xi explicitly calls on Chinese women to “reform” themselves for China’s advancement, yet rarely mentions men and otherwise states, “Chinese people.”

Even in 2020, Xi continues to characterize women as the “means” and “drivers” of social progress—instead of identifying women’s rights as its own important goal—to impel women to fulfill state gender roles (*Full Text: Xi’s UN Speech*, 2020). In his 2020 U.N. speech, Xi even endeavors to reshape women’s understanding of their own happiness. He asserts that women deserve to “feel satisfied, happy...live life in full.” But what does “live life in full” truly mean? Xi deliberately, ambiguously defines what women’s “full happiness” means to veil his hidden meaning; to him, women’s “full happiness” should derive solely from their familial duties, rather than their self-autonomy. By inseparably linking women’s traditional responsibilities of marriage and motherhood to patriotism, national rejuvenation, and cultural autonomy, Xi reshapes women’s self-perception and doubly oppresses women into conformity. If women do not conform, they now face state-supported, social ostracization as women who “selfishly” prioritize their individual rights and wellbeing.

Xi uses the derogatory “*sheng nü*” or “leftover women” to describe single, independent, and highly-educated women over the age of 27 to shame women who do not conform to their “moral, civic duty” of domesticity. While the term was coined by the ACWF and formalized into state law by the Ministry of Education in 2007, “*sheng nü*” was popularized as official rhetoric under Xi due to his state initiatives encouraging women’s marriage and reproduction (Fincher, 2014). It is important to contextualize how Chinese culture teaches women to prioritize their families over their other interests. Single women interviewed in the SK-II short film, “*Marriage Market Takeover*” (2016), and the *New York*

Times Op-Doc, “Leftover Women” (Shlam & Medalia, 2020), illuminate how traditional Chinese culture perceives unmarried women as “incomplete humans”—an idea that Xi’s emphasis on marriage now reinforces and cultivates. Essentially, Xi exploits these entrenched cultural beliefs to both legislatively and culturally compel women to fulfill these state gender roles for societal advancement. His blurring of government-imposed and cultural morality has strengthened the relationship between state feminist rhetoric and Chinese gender relations more than either Mao and Deng.

The ACWF has been instrumental in disseminating Xi’s gender rhetoric and shaping public perception of family and marriage (Zhou, 2019). ACWF newsletters and propaganda address all aspects of women’s lives, from offering relationship advice to strategically castigating “leftover women.” Some ACWF articles endorse traditional Confucian ideals for women, such as encouraging women to internalize their inferiority and marry quickly. They shame women for being too “picky” regarding marriage, urge women to lower their standards, and even tolerate husbands who disrespect women. The following excerpt was taken from the ACWF’s March 2011 column posted days after International Women’s Day (Fincher, 2012b):

“When holding out for a man, if you say he must be rich and brilliant, romantic and hardworking [...] this is just being willful. Does this kind of perfect man exist? Maybe he does exist, but why on earth would he want to marry you?”

The ACWF goes as far as to condone men’s infidelity and vices, asserting such behaviors are women’s faults. They instruct women to never challenge gender roles but, instead, reform themselves to fulfill these ideals, directly tying to state rhetoric framing national success as solely dependent on women’s “self-improvements.” Rather than acknowledging patriarchy as a foundational problem, the ACWF actively encourages women to help perpetuate patriarchal ideals and gender inequality—all for the so-called “national interest.” An excerpt from the ACWF’s article, “Faced With A Marital Crisis, Women Need to Improve Themselves,” states:

“When you find out that he is having an affair, you may be in a towering rage, but you must know that if you make a fuss, you deny the man “face” [...] No man is capable of spending a lifetime being loyal to an outmoded wife who never changes ... Try changing your hairstyle [...] Women must constantly change for the better.”

ACWF further enforces social conformity by vehemently castigating “leftover women” as disrespecting Chinese culture and inhibiting national development. Yet, they hypocritically label “*leftover women*” when it is actually “*leftover men*” due to China’s surplus of 30 million men (Lewis, 2020a).

“Many highly educated ‘leftover women’ are very progressive in their thinking and enjoy going to nightclubs to search for a one-night stand [...] It is only when they have lost their youth and are kicked out by the man, that they decide to look for a life partner. Therefore, most ‘leftover women’ do not deserve our sympathy.”

The state's dehumanization of single women fosters a self-reinforcing cycle in which women internalize Xi's narrowly-defined "womanhood" and accept their inferiority and subordination. "*Sheng nü*" becomes a form of government "language policing" (Feldshuh, 2018), reinforced by pervasive popular culture stigmatizing and branding "leftover women." Much like women's experiences under Mao and Deng, such social stigma renders women unable to achieve full equality and ultimately serves to perpetuate state control.

The Motives behind Xi's Gender Reform

Xi's ultimate motive for gender reform is using women's subordination to solve China's reproduction problem and perpetuate the state's autocratic control. China's State Council addressed how the "unprecedented population pressures" of sex-ratio imbalance and "low quality of general population" (uneducated rural families) are a "threat to social stability" (Fincher, 2014). Confronted with declining birth rates and an aging population, the Chinese government seeks to increase reproduction. However, they only want *high-quality* reproduction by young, educated, and urban women (Chang, 2020). Consequently, the CCP portrays traditional family values as liberating women and their "natural" duties, when, in reality, it unfairly demands women to sacrifice their wellbeing for state interests.

Xi also emphasizes women's domestic responsibilities to address the CCP's fear of potential instability. Especially as there is an excess of 30 million single men in China due to the Single-Child policy, a feminist revolt against a patriarchal society that could overturn the Party's entire political legitimacy (Lewis, 2020b). The CCP perceives gender equality as a threat to its autocratic power rooted in sexism (Fincher, 2012b; Lewis, 2020a; Qin, 2019). In a *Washington Post* article, Fincher (2018) asserts that, "it is impossible to understand the longevity of China's Communist Party without recognizing the patriarchal underpinnings of its authoritarianism. In short, China's ultimate strongman, Xi, like other autocrats around the world, views patriarchal authoritarianism as critical for the survival of the Communist Party." Thus, by reducing women into "reproductive tools for the state, dutiful wives, mothers, and baby breeders," the CCP can reinforce traditional power imbalances, minimize social disorder, and strengthen its authoritarian power (Fincher, 2012a). Yet, the CCP's increasingly "fragile masculinity" symbolizes its increasingly fragile state control owing to growing international dialogue and citizen consciousness (Fincher, 2018).

Undeniably, Xi's traditional Chinese culture and family initiative predominantly serve his state interests. Like under Mao and Deng, women's rights remain subordinate to broader state goals. All three leaders demand women to sacrifice their rights and wellbeing for "Chinese society," which essentially means the CCP. While women's so-called "liberation" was defined differently under all three regimes, the uniting similarity is their framing of "women's liberation" as a means to an end for national "advancement" and the perpetuation of patriarchal authoritarianism.

Conclusion

All three Chinese leaders—Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi Jinping—deny women self-empowerment under their inherently-oppressive state feminisms. None establish gender equality as its own distinctive goal. None place women at the forefront of their own so-called “liberation.” Even in the context of 21st-century globalization and democratization, Xi expands Mao’s and Deng’s oppressive state feminisms to forge his vision of “gender equality” and “womanhood.” It is one that undoubtedly represses women under law and culture by revitalizing outdated, sexist Confucian values of women’s inferiority to promote CPP agendas, all while hiding under the facade of restoring China’s cultural autonomy and catalyzing national development.

However, culture is continually evolving: Chinese feminisms and definitions of “gender equality” with it. While Xi may frame traditional Chinese gender norms as unchanging, Mao’s and Deng’s regimes evidence the fluidity of gender constructions and dynamism of Chinese culture. Xi’s state feminism exists in a new sociopolitical context characterized by a contemporary understanding of women’s equal human rights and increasing Chinese grassroots-feminist voices. To continue denying women choice, self-autonomy, and fundamental human rights would be incompatible with modern civilization.

The Chinese women’s movement no longer simply advocates for equal rights between men and women. They now demand equal rights for all individuals against an authoritarian state. Xi’s increasing disenfranchisement of women evidences his consolidation of power, paving the path for his expanded authoritarian control over all Chinese citizens and their rights. It is this intimate entwinement of women’s rights and human rights that the international community must recognize and support. We must all be aware that patriarchal ideology is its own form of oppression.

As such, the Chinese government cannot be the only entity deciding women’s rights. Grassroots-feminists and other Chinese women must have an active role in shaping Chinese gender reform and determining their lives. We can all play a role in supporting the Chinese women’s movement: not by imposing our definitions of “gender equality” upon them, but by amplifying *their* voices, spreading *their* message, and giving *them* the platform to speak for themselves.

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