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Augustine Menke

University of Montana, Missoula, [augustine.menke@umontana.edu](mailto:augustine.menke@umontana.edu)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINISM IN CHINA

By

AUGUSTINE MAE MENKE

Undergraduate Thesis  
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Approved by:

Eric Schluessel  
History and Political Science

## **ABSTRACT**

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The Development of Feminism in China

Eric Schluessel

This research draws upon primary resources regarding women and feminism from ancient to pre-twentieth century Chinese thinkers, such as Ban Zhao, He-Yin Zhen, and Ding Ling. Additionally, this research draws upon authors exploring feminist ideas in China in the later twentieth century to the early twenty-first century, such as Wang Zheng and Leta Hong-Fincher. The purpose of this research was to develop a better understanding of how feminism has developed and persisted in China and the reasons it may differ from other nations.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINISM IN CHINA

One day, the Chinese goddess Nu Wa was walking through the boundless fields admiring the towering trees, exquisite flowers, colossal mountain ranges, and never-ending rivers. The world was still new and Nu Wa believed her surroundings were beautiful and peaceful. However, she could not help but feel lonely. She told the trees of her sadness, the flowers of her anxieties, and the mountains of her frustrations. When she spoke to the river, she saw her reflection and realized why she felt so lonely. There was no one like her. Nu Wa then reached into the water, pulled up some clay, and began to mold the figure she saw in her reflection. All of her little clay figures had arms, legs, eyes, and noses just like Nu Wa. When she placed them on the ground, they began to run around and dance happily. They even spoke to each other the same way Nu Wa spoke. She grew excited and continued to mold more figures. After so long, Nu Wa became tired. In order to continue molding more figures, Nu Wa assembled a cane and rope. Upon dipping the rope into the river and splashing it into the air, another figure immediately fell to the ground. Nu Wa referred to her figures as *ren*, or people. Legend has it, the noblemen of the human world were descendents of those molded by Nu Wa and the lower class people were descendants of those created by her rope. In order to keep her people happy, Nu Wa later created the idea of marriage and the ability to reproduce. Nu Wa was then freed of the tiring task of creating humankind.<sup>1</sup>

The legend of Nu Wa tells us that women have had an important role in Chinese society since the beginning of time. However, the lives of Chinese women have significantly changed throughout history as a result of developing feminist expression. Feminism seeks to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal, and social rights of women for the equality of the sexes. This has not been easy in China. By the twentieth century, the status of women had a long and contentious history defined by an inconsistent image of the Chinese government both attempting to be progressive in many respects, whilst simultaneously seeking to repress and control efforts to further gender equality. This has made issues of women's history and feminism in China complex and difficult to grasp. This essay will provide an overview of important points in women's history leading up to the twentieth century, where the feminist movement supposedly began. This is because China's past is critical to understanding the role of women

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<sup>1</sup> Birrell, Anne. *Chinese Mythology: an Introduction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, p. 163-164

today. There are three notable points of this feminist movement spanning three generations of women. This essay will assess how feminism developed and operated prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China, then under the Chinese Communist Party, to now with the emergence of the "leftover women" phenomenon all in hopes of better defining what feminism means for China.

### Women's History Overview

There are three periods of Chinese history that have witnessed a dramatic rise of women's empowerment from the prehistoric era to the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> The first being the matriarchal period, followed by the Tang Dynasty, and finally the period from the late Qing era to the present. While these periods are considered high points in women's history, it is important to address some alternative points. In compiling a history of women in China, this essay will expand on these periods of history, but insert other notable points as well.

In matriarchal China, women suffered very little gender oppression. Women retained their their surnames and even passed them onto their children. Additionally, only women were found buried with stone spindles, knives made from bones, and other tools. Mothers were household heads and left property to daughters only. Marital systems in matriarchal societies were also different.<sup>3</sup> Men of all different ages were married to women of all different ages, until it was later taken into consideration. However, they lived in a society where every woman was either mother, sister, aunt, daughter, etc. This applied to men as well. These communal societies are likely where the goddess Nu Wa's creation story was conceived.<sup>4</sup>

Physical sizes and energy levels eventually gave way to patriarchy. Apart from the Tang Dynasty, almost every Chinese dynasty had serious oppression of women under patriarchy, especially the strong Confucian impacts in the Han (206 BC-220 AD), Song (960-1279 CE), and Ming (1368-1644 CE) Dynasties.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the influence of Confucianism and filial piety had a serious impact on the behavior of women and the roles they were expected to play in ancient China. More importantly, they persisted for many centuries.

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<sup>2</sup>Ya-chen, Chen. *New Modern Chinese Women and Gender Politics: the Centennial of the End of the Qing Dynasty*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014, p. 1

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 3

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 4

Pre-Han philosophers directed little of their writing toward women. However, they were still influenced by the *Book of Songs*, *Book of Changes*, and other Confucian classics. Later in the Han Dynasty, many writings on women were produced.<sup>6</sup> The Han Dynasty story of *The Mother of Mencius* and Ban Zhao's text for women's conduct, *Admonitions for Women*, serve as references to what a woman's virtues and vices under the principles of Confucianism were. These selections show what people admired in women, but not necessarily what women were like. In *The Mother of Mencius*, details of how Mencius' mother raised her son are described. The text says, "When Mencius grew up he studied the arts of propriety, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and mathematics. Later he became a famous Confucian scholar. Superior men commented that Mencius' mother knew the right influences for her son. The *Book of Songs* says, 'That admirable lady, what will she do for them!'"<sup>7</sup>

Due to Mencius' education, upbringing, and success, his mother was recognized as one who understood the ways of motherhood and marriage. She gave advice to Mencius about marriage and the right ways to respect his wife. Moreover, she revealed the ways in which a woman should respect everyone else. She states:

The *Book of Changes* says, 'In her central place, she attends to the preparation of food.' The *Book of Songs* says, 'It will be theirs neither to do wrong nor to do good, / Only about the spirits and the food they have to think.' This means that a woman's duty is not to control or to take charge. Instead she must follow the 'three submissions.' When she is young, she must submit to her parents. After her marriage, she must submit to her husband. When she is widowed, she must submit to her son. These are the rules of propriety.<sup>8</sup>

Mencius' mother is explaining the ways a woman may best serve her parents, husband, and son throughout her life. Much of her duties involve preparing food and consequently other household duties. More importantly, it explains a general duty to submit to these individuals and never acquire control over them. By referencing ancient texts such as, *The Book of Changes* and *The Book Of Songs*, a long-standing tradition behind this role is apparent.

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<sup>6</sup> Ebrey, Patricia Buckley. *Chinese Civilization and Society: A Sourcebook*. New York: Free Press, 1981, p. 72

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 72-73

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 73

Ban Zhao, the first female Chinese historian, reiterates themes from *The Mother of Mencius*, but also expands on these duties. On humility, Ban Zhao asserts three customs, which convey the unchanging path for women and ritual traditions. The three customs are humility, industriousness, and continuing sacrifices associated with serving one's "husband-master."<sup>9</sup> Humility is important for a woman because it means "yielding and acting respectful, putting others first and oneself last, never mentioning one's own good deeds or denying one's own faults, enduring insults and bearing with mistreatment, all with due trepidation." Industriousness is important because it requires "going to bed late, getting up early, never shirking work morning or night, never refusing to take on domestic work, and completing everything that needs to be done neatly and carefully." Continuing sacrifices is important because it ensures one's "husband-master" will stay satisfied. This is done by "serving one's husband-master with appropriate demeanor, keeping oneself clean and pure, never joking or laughing, and preparing pure wine and food to offer the the ancestors."<sup>10</sup> Without these three customs, a woman may ruin her reputation and fall into disgrace. She will lose her name to preserve and will not be able to avoid shame.

These texts from Mencius's mother and Ban Zhao dominated perceptions of what women should be. Confucianism promoted an expectation of women to be subservient to men or other authority figures. Ultimately, these Confucian principles do not provide a mechanism for women to act equal or empowered. Unfortunately, the philosophy of Confucianism and filial piety defined their subservient role in society for many, many centuries to come.

The Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) is regarded as a period of relative freedom and equality for women. One of the main indications of the Tang Dynasty's success with women's empowerment was the low literacy rates amongst women. Education is often regarded as one of the most influential ways to help the more unfortunate members of society leave unhappy lifestyles and improve their quality of life. Women in the Tang Dynasty, on average, had better opportunities to receive a higher education or avoid illiteracy than women of other dynasties. We know this because Song Ruozhao's *Confucian Analects for Women* was widely read and circulated by other women during this dynasty.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 75

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ya-chen, *New Modern Chinese Women*, p. 5

*Analects for Women* served as a tool for women's education during the Tang Dynasty. Just as the Mencius' mother and Ban Zhao sought to better define a woman's role under Confucius, so did Song Ruozhao. In *Analects for Women*, Song Ruozhao advises:

When walking, don't turn your head; when talking, don't open your mouth wide; when sitting, don't move your knees; when standing, don't rustle your skirts; when happy, don't exult with loud laughter; when angry, don't raise your voice. The inner and outer quarters are distinct; the sexes should be segregated. Don't peer over the outer wall or go beyond the outer courtyard. If you have to go outside, cover your face; if you peep outside, conceal yourself as much as possible. Do not be on familiar terms with men outside the family; have nothing to do with women of bad character. Establish your proper self so as to become a true human being.<sup>12</sup>

While Mencius' mother and Ban Zhao addresses the relationship a woman must have with her husband and the duties carried out within the home, Song Ruozhao addresses the nature of how she must behave in public. Not only does this passage reinforce earlier ideas from the Han Dynasty, it also promotes strict regulations on minor daily activities such as walking, talking, and expressing feelings.

Even though the *Analects for Women* continues notions of subservience, it provided an education for women to learn how to read and promote education on women's topics. Other factors, such as foreign cultural influences, interracial marriages, and religious thoughts of Buddhism and Daoism also strengthened women's empowerment and improved social status during the Tang Dynasty. This resulted in less Confucian domination of women and eventually paved the way for China's first female emperor, Wu Zetian. Being a woman and having a political career was actually possible under Wu Zetian's reign. She sought to end various policies which promoted patriarchy, and replaced them with other feminist policies. For instance, she suggested the *Daodejing*, a philosophical text which encourages feminine traits, be added to the required reading for students and that a three-year mourning period should be observed for a mother's death in all cases. She allowed other females to be present at courtly rituals and even

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<sup>12</sup> Theodore, De Bary William. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 827-831

took multiple male bedmates at the expense of male emperors who preferred the joys of polygamy under patriarchal social systems.<sup>13</sup> Although other dynasties had powerful empresses, such as Empress Dowager Cixi of the late Qing era, they never reached the extent of political activism that Wu Zetian had in reforming gender equality. Wu Zetian is an important character in Chinese women's history because she proved that women were capable and intelligent enough to rise to power. It became evident that Confucian principles were not all that a woman necessarily wanted or needed to be.

Following the Tang Dynasty, there is another point in women's history worth recognizing. From roughly the eleventh century to the twentieth century, or the Song Dynasty till the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), women practiced the long-standing tradition of foot binding. Foot binding was a widespread custom of applying painfully tight binding to the feet of young girls to modify the foot into smaller shapes often referred to as a "lotus."

The practice of foot-binding became popular during the Song Dynasty. At first, the practice originated in the dance culture of China's medieval court and spread to gentry families, brothels, maid's quarters, and peasant households. The practice of foot-binding continued well into the late Qing era.<sup>14</sup> Dorothy Ko, author of *Cinderella's Sisters*, explains the history of footbinding and how the practice developed and persisted over the course of many centuries. Instead of denouncing footbinding as many accounts do, Ko sought to understand the powerful forces that made binding feet a practical option for Chinese women. According to Ko, the practice of footbinding, the care of the feet, and the reasons for doing so vary from place to place and era to era. Therefore, the reasons for footbinding are complex and cannot be attributed to just a small number of reasons.

Ko mentions some well-discussed, yet superficial reasons for footbinding. Ultimately, these reasons do not fully comprehend footbinding because they often come from an anti-footbinding perspective, rather than from a historical perspective. These reasons include: the male fetishization of small women's feet, the desire for women to remain delicate and vulnerable, which could be compared to the practice of a constricted waist with corsets in western societies, and the "mystification of female labor." Ko elaborates this mystification of female labor by stating, "the binding of the feet, which made women *appear* wasted, allowed the

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<sup>13</sup> Ya-chen, *New Modern Chinese Women*, p. 7

<sup>14</sup> Ko, Dorothy. *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007, p. 1-6.

patriarchs to mask the value of female labor.”<sup>15</sup> Women with bound feet could work well at home by spinning, weaving, and light garden-tending. Bound feet could ensure this work may always get done as there would be little means of women leaving the home for outside work. However, this is not what Ko sought to explain.

*Cinderella's Sisters* argues that rather than stemming from fetishization of small feet, men's desire for bound feet was connected to larger concerns such as cultural nostalgia, regional rivalries, and claims of male privilege. Ko contends women were not always helpless victims. She describes how affluent women bound their own and their daughters' feet to signal their high status and self-respect. The binding of feet was associated with femininity, which is also associated with domestic work. Properly bound feet and beautifully made shoes both required exquisite skills and technical knowledge passed from generation to generation.<sup>16</sup>

Ko's perspective on footbinding is important for understanding this point in women's history because it provides a well-informed, objective interpretation of the practice. This is a requirement for properly assessing a widely discussed feminist topic. With Ko's interpretation, we can begin to understand how this practice has persisted for centuries. If we continue to denounce it from an anti-footbinding perspective, it may be incredibly difficult to comprehend and would not address a woman's agency in engaging in the practice. Amanda Foreman, a writer for the *Smithsonian Magazine*, explains:

Foot-binding, which started out as a fashionable impulse, became an expression of Han identity after the Mongols invaded China in 1279. The fact that it was only performed by Chinese women turned the practice into a kind of shorthand for ethnic pride. Periodic attempts to ban it, as the Manchus tried in the 17th century, were never about foot-binding itself but what it symbolized. To the Chinese, the practice was daily proof of their cultural superiority to the uncouth barbarians who ruled them. It became, like Confucianism, another point of difference between the Han and the rest of the world.

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<sup>15</sup> Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters*, p. 3

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1-6

Ironically, although Confucian scholars had originally condemned foot-binding as frivolous, a woman's adherence to both became conflated as a single act.<sup>17</sup>

This quote from Foreman accurately expands on Ko's belief that footbinding was connected to the cultural nostalgia, regional rivalries, and claims of male privilege. More importantly, it describes how women embodied the correlation between the philosophy behind footbinding and Confucianism.

The practice of footbinding is completely rejected in China now, with the last factory making lotus shoes closing in 1999. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the complexities of footbinding because, "The truth, no matter how unpalatable, is that foot-binding was experienced, perpetuated and administered by women..It survived for a thousand years in part because of women's emotional investment in the practice," according to Foreman. Yes, the influence of men and Confucianism had an immense role to play in its persistence, but the influence of women onto other women had a role as well.

Footbinding was officially banned at the end of the Qing Dynasty. Following the end of the Qing Dynasty, China began a century that witnessed the most dramatic changes of history in women's rights, feminist activism, and gender ideology. For many, the 20th century is where feminism in China began.

### The Rise of Feminism in the Twentieth Century

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, China experienced military and political crisis from both inside and outside the country. The Opium Wars of 1839-42 and 1856-60 forced China to open up trade to other countries, which brought in foreign ideologies. Consequently, they faced the massive, political and religious Taiping Rebellion of 1850-64. To make matters worse, China suffered a humiliating defeat when the Japanese overcame the Chinese navy in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. These events and the conflicts that followed pushed educated men and women, who were living in exile at the time, to embark on a revolutionary movement,

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<sup>17</sup> Foreman, Amanda. "Why Footbinding Persisted in China for a Millennium." Smithsonian.com. February 01, 2015. Accessed May 03, 2017. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/why-footbinding-persisted-china-millennium-180953971/>.

which overthrew the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and led to the establishment of the Republic of China.<sup>18</sup>

Just prior to this, influential Chinese thinkers, such as Liang Qichao, called for the emancipation of women, better female education, and women's participation in nation-building. In a series of essays, Liang Qichao argues the national weakness of China lies in the lack of women's education.<sup>19</sup> As conflict with women persisted, Chinese feminist He-Yin Zhen responded:

For thousands of years, the world has been dominated by the rule of man. This rule is marked by class distinctions over which men--and men only--exert proprietary rights. To rectify the wrongs, we must first abolish the rule of men and introduce equality among human beings, which means that the world must belong equally to men and to women. The goal of equality cannot be achieved except through women's liberation.<sup>20</sup>

He-Yin Zhen is an important character in the discussion of feminism because she is often viewed as a catalyst for the movement. At a time where the exploitation of women in rural communities to produce household goods was at a height, He-Yin Zhen wrote a series of radical and visionary essays in 1907-1908, and established *Natural Justice*; a feminist journal.<sup>21</sup> In writing the essay "On the Question of Women's Liberation," He-Yin Zhen was more concerned with the relationship among patriarchy, imperialism, capitalism, and gender inequality as global historical problems. Whereas, her contemporaries were more concerned with the fate of China as a nation, such as Liang Qichao. He-Yin Zhen was also not afraid to challenge tradition. In another essay called, "On the Revenge of Women: Instruments of Man's Rule over Women," He-Yin Zhen wrote a critique on Confucianism:

Ancient teaching held that the wife is to the husband as the minister is to his lord, therefore men come first, women last; men are superior and women inferior. One the

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<sup>18</sup> Fincher, Leta Hong. *Leftover Women: the Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*. London: Zed Books, 2016, p. 119

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Liu, Lydia He, Rebecca E. Karl, and Dorothy Ko. *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, p. 53

<sup>21</sup> Fincher, *Leftover Women*, p. 120

basis of ‘men first, women last,’ such other devian teachings as ‘yang initiates, yin harmonizes’ or ‘men act, women follow’ were concocted to restrict women’s freedom. And, from ‘men superior, women inferior’ such deviant teaching as ‘the husband is the heaven of the wife’ also came into being. The husband is this made into heaven and the wife earth; the husband becomes identified with yang and the wife yin. The relationship between men and women thus became one of absolute inequality through cosmic abstraction. I cannot but sigh at this.<sup>22</sup>

This quote not only demonstrates Confucianism’s tendency to treat men and women unequally, but also recognizes areas of Chinese society that must change. Earlier, Liang Qichao claimed the education of women is necessary for women’s liberation, but also for the health of the nation. Whereas, He-Yin Zhen responded by claiming it can only happen once patriarchal norms, influenced by many centuries of Confucian thought, have been abolished.

After the Revolution, the People’s Republic of China outlined the promotion of equality between both men and women as a basic state policy.<sup>23</sup> One woman took the Chinese Communist Party’s advocacy for women’s liberation very seriously. In 1942, Ding Ling took advantage of International Women’s Day to point out the hypocritical attitudes and behavior of male party members and address the particular pressures put on women revolutionaries. In the article she wrote for a party newspaper, she spoke about the ridicule they endured over the production of millet, how much they consumed, and their focus on household duties. Not only that, but they also were targets of gossip if they were single and still working within the party. In her article, she says “People are always interest when women comrades get married, but that is not enough for them. It is virtually impossible for women comrades to get onto friendly terms with a man comrade, and even less likely for them to become friendly with more than one.” The interest in marriage by both parties is reminiscent of past pressures to form a family unit. It appears an expectation and desire to marry was still prevalent, despite Mao Zedong’s concern with bringing equality between men and women.<sup>24</sup> At this point, marriage still promoted a husband’s control over his wife. Therefore, women could explore their individuality and limited

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<sup>22</sup> Liu et al. *The Birth of Chinese Feminism*, p. 105

<sup>23</sup>“Gender Equality and Women's Development in China.” Accessed May 03, 2017. <https://web.archive.org/web/20111229231641/http://www.china-un.ch/eng/bjzl/t210715.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Chan, Wing-tsit, Julia Ching, David Johnson, at el. *Sources of Chinese Tradition: Volume 2: From 1600 Through the Twentieth Century*. Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 437

freedoms as a comrade. However, as the pressures to marry became too difficult to bear, a woman would marry.

Ding Ling took issue with cases of divorce. Divorce rarely benefitted women and the reasons for divorce were often attributed to them, despite their efforts to work within the party and continue household affairs. Ding Ling explains:

When women capable of working sacrifice their careers for the joys of motherhood, people always sing their praises. But after ten years or so, they have no way of escaping the tragedy of “backwardness.” Even from my point of view, as a woman, there is nothing attractive about such “backward” elements. Their skin is beginning to wrinkle, their hair is growing thin, and fatigue is robbing them of their last traces of attractiveness. It should be self-evident that they are in a tragic situation. But whereas in the old society they would probably have been pitied and considered unfortunate, nowadays their tragedy is seen as something self-inflicted, as their just deserts.<sup>25</sup>

This “backwardness” idea comes from a the pressure and desire to marry, have children, and cling to old Confucian ways of treating one’s husband. At this point it is not considered an ideal under Mao Zedong’s efforts to “improve” equality, but nevertheless something deeply rooted within the mentalities of the Chinese people. Women try to reject these desires and pressures, but they ultimately find themselves caught between motherhood and working in the state. When husbands look to divorce and find more youthful brides, this “backwardness” is used as a pretext.

There were women who sought to challenge these customs, especially throughout the inner-working of the Chinese Communist Party. Now advocates of feminism, these women worked to advance gender equality and eradicate sexist norms by maneuvering behind the scenes in the male-dominated Chinese Communist Party.<sup>26</sup>

Many feminists joined the Chinese Communist Party throughout the course of the Chinese Revolution (1921-1949) and held powerful positions in the socialist state after the founding of the People’s Republic of China. This period of time saw revolutionary women and

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<sup>25</sup> Chan at el. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, p. 448

<sup>26</sup> Wang, Zheng. *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1964*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017.

men from diverse backgrounds in a political party formed amidst the cross-currents of feminism, anarchism, socialism, liberalism, nationalism, and Marxism.<sup>27</sup>

Despite Liang Qichao, He-Yin Zhen, and Mao Zedong's stances on the importance of equality, feminists working within their socialist state existed in a contradictory political environment, as Ding Ling pointed out. Ideologically, the Chinese Communist Party's platform has endorsed a feminist pursuit of "equality between men and women" and the Constitution of the People's Republic of China grants feminist expressions and actions to uphold the "equality between men and women."<sup>28</sup> However, the term feminism lost favor when feminists from the Chinese Communist Party came into contact with Western socialists and communists and adopted the view of feminism as "bourgeois," which was not a concept supported by the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>29</sup>

Power dynamics and the demotion of feminism by men could overrule the ideological and legal legitimacy of feminist actions. This was done when a male in a position of authority could easily tell a woman official who proposed action on behalf of women's interests that he also believed in the importance of this issue, but more important and larger issues deserved the government's resources and energy.<sup>30</sup> This justified disabling feminist protest. This habit gave rise to a particular institutional behavior. Many state feminists began to operate in "a politics of concealment" in their endeavors to promote feminist agendas.

Since regularly openly raising a demand on behalf of women would have little chance in receiving the support of male authorities, women officials learned to insert feminist items into the Party's agenda in order to gain legitimacy and resources. This political strategy articulated a strong support of the Party's "central tasks," while also embedding a "hidden script" that intended to advance a woman's interests.<sup>31</sup> To put it simply, disguising a feminist agenda with dominant Party language was a major principle in the politics of concealment. An ironic observation could be made that socialist state feminists were actually employing the very tactic used by male officials to disparage their efforts in order to turn tables and promote their own feminist agenda.

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<sup>27</sup> Wang, *Finding Women*, p. 2

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17

After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the People's Republic of China embarked on a period of reform under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. China's shift to a market economy and opening up to global capitalism presented a change in rural women's lives. In 1983, the Beijing Municipal Women's Federation established China's first company to recruit, train, and place rural domestic workers in urban households.<sup>32</sup> Even though the company reinforced the idea that domestic work was "women's work," it had intentions of promoting the advancement of women's interests.

The philosophy behind the company, called the March 8th Housework Service Company, was that affordable household help would relieve urban working wives and mothers of the dual burden of their reproductive and productive roles, enabling their participation in the labor force, and thus putting them on more equal footing with men. It was then asserted that rural women who worked in these roles could alleviate the burden of living in a rural community with lower status.<sup>33</sup> Essentially, this incentivised migration effort presented rural women with alternative and plentiful possibilities for their futures. They could cultivate talents, acquire better jobs, improve social networks, and attract better marriage prospects to improve their quality of life.

In the short term, this system fulfilled expectations of improving women's quality of life. In the long run, this system did not have desired results. Migrant women were deeply affected by the absorption of urban and global consumer culture. They were anxious about belonging, identity, and social status in this urban environment. One woman who was recruited by the March 8th Housework Service Company, reflected on her experience by confiding:

Since I came out of the village to Beijing, since I've been living here several years, economically I haven't improved much, though I still feel that this has been a good experience. I used to think Beijing offered so many opportunities. I could freely work, that we would all be equal, that my labor would be equal to everyone else's labor. But later I discovered, to the contrary, it wasn't anything like what I imagined...I thought, given that urbanites were superior to me...that their character and their "quality" would

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<sup>32</sup> Gaetano, Arianne M. *Out to Work: Migration, Gender, and the Changing Lives of Rural Women in Contemporary China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015, p. 14

<sup>33</sup> Gaetano, *Out to Work*, p. 14-15

match their educational credentials. But in fact, although their educational levels were high, their character and their ethics are not necessarily superior.<sup>34</sup>

The process of rural women migrating to urban communities was simply not enough to improve their quality of life. Rather, it unearthed an even more complex layer of the issue. It shed light on new inequalities rooted in development policies and institutional practices, such as a household registration system, discriminatory labor markets, and constructions of gender and socio-spatial differences.<sup>35</sup>

### Feminism Today

Following this migration came the phenomenon of “leftover women.” The term “leftover woman” is widely used to describe an urban professional female in her late twenties or older who is still single. Many marry quickly--often within several months of meeting a man--specifically to avoid being designated a “leftover.” The intense pressure to marry comes from parents, relatives, friends, and colleagues.<sup>36</sup> The term “leftover women” seems to be a product of this migration, as it focuses on women who prioritize their work and education.

This pressure to marry is often magnified by the Chinese state media. For example, in March 2011, the All-China Women’s Federation posted this quote on their website just after International Women’s Day:

Pretty girls do not need a lot of education to marry into a rich and powerful family, but girls with an average or ugly appearance will find it difficult. These kinds of girls hope to further their education in order to increase their competitiveness. The tragedy is, they don’t realize that as women age, they are worth less and less, so by the time they get their M.A. or Ph.D. they are already old like yellow pearls.<sup>37</sup>

Notable author Leta Hong Fincher has made the world aware of the harmful “leftover women” phrase, but has also raised awareness to damage done in one key area of Chinese

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 98

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 136

<sup>36</sup> Fincher, *Leftover Women*, p. 2-3

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 3

society: the real estate market. China's real estate market is worth roughly thirty trillion United States dollars, and the largest in the world. Women have continuously taken a backseat in this realm by conforming to submissive cultural stereotypes and often leaving property ownership to the male figures in their lives. This is concerning because women have not shared equality in one of the biggest periods of wealth acquisition in history.<sup>38</sup>

Marriage in China is closely linked with home buying, and because urban homes are so expensive, it is impossible for a young person to buy a home unless her parents help her. Typically, Chinese parents tend to buy homes for sons rather than daughters and most homes are only registered in men's names. This often results in women transferring their life savings to their boyfriend or husband to finance the purchase of a home registered in the man's name alone.<sup>39</sup> Some women blindly accept this, while others believe financial equality is worth walking away and becoming a "leftover woman."

In an interview for the *New York Times*, Fincher is asked about the state's involvement in creating the term, "leftover woman" for its own purposes. How would it work? To which Fincher replied:

China has a major shortage of women, with about 20 million more men under 30 than women under 30, according to official statistics. The "leftover" women media campaign pushes women to lower their standards when choosing a partner, so they will marry some of the tens of millions of surplus men, who are seen as a threat to social stability. I argue that the campaign also serves a population planning program to upgrade "population quality" by pressuring educated, "high quality" women to marry so they can have a "high quality" child for the good of the nation.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, rather than praising these educated and successful women as advantageous to society, China prefers to refer to them as "leftover women" in an attempt to make them feel shame for doing so. It seems they would rather maintain the view that a woman's only purpose

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<sup>38</sup>Tatlow, Didi Kirsten. "Q & A: Leta Hong Fincher on 'Leftover Women'" *The New York Times*. May 14, 2014. Accessed May 03, 2017. [https://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/14/q-a-leta-hong-fincher-on-leftover-women/?\\_r=0](https://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/14/q-a-leta-hong-fincher-on-leftover-women/?_r=0).

<sup>39</sup>Fincher, *Leftover Women*, p. 45

<sup>40</sup>Tatlow, Didi Kirsten. "Q & A: Leta Hong Fincher on 'Leftover Women'" *The New York Times*. May 14, 2014. Accessed May 03, 2017.

should be getting married and having children for the good of the nation, even though they *should* be working and educating themselves.

The term “leftover woman” is still in use today and brings awareness to the lack of advancement with gender equality. Despite the efforts of many generations of women over the past century, China still has improvements to make in achieving basic equality. As these issues persist, new generations of women are taking a stance.

On the eve of International Women’s Day in March of 2015, five young Chinese women were arrested for “disorderly conduct.” They were held in Beijing after protesting against sexual harassment on Chinese trains. Performance art or political theater may be a better term to describe their actions.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, these feminist activists caught global attention for their creative antics and persistence. The actions of the Beijing police in arresting the five women gave concern over their lack of legal standard and violation of normal social ethics. There was also concern with the Beijing police and Chinese government putting forth the energy to arrest women bringing awareness to sexual assault on the train system, rather than acknowledge the bigger issue of sexual assault.<sup>42</sup>

The feminist movement’s message of resistance to the traditional, feminine roles of wife and mother poses a unique threat to the Communist Party’s vision of family at the core of a paternalistic state, as seen with the “leftover women” phenomenon. The celebration of single, sexually non-normative, and often child-free women rejects the notion that the basis of society rests within married heterosexual parents, with the foundation of political stability depending on it. Despite the one-child policy being phased out at this point, it is clear the Chinese Communist Party still views women as reproductive tools. The “leftover women” phenomenon proves this. It pushes values reminiscent of Confucianism because it discourages women to seek out an education, return home, and marry the first non-relative male who speaks to them. Whereas, feminism encourages young, middle-class women to reject patriarchal norms, which conflicts with the Chinese leaders belief that the very survival of the Communist Party depends on the

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<sup>41</sup>"China's Feminist Five Unbowed a Year after Detention, Says Activist in Hong Kong for Forum." South China Morning Post. May 18, 2016. Accessed May 03, 2017. <http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/article/1947133/chinas-feminist-five-unbowed-year-after-detention-says-activist-hong-kong>.

<sup>42</sup>Siling, Luo. "Fighting on Behalf of China’s Women — From the United States." *The New York Times*. February 15, 2017. Accessed May 03, 2017. [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/15/world/asia/china-trump-feminists-march.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/15/world/asia/china-trump-feminists-march.html?_r=0).

subordination of women for social stability and to produce future generations of highly skilled workers.<sup>43</sup>

Following a year after their detention, the women of the Feminist Five have vowed to continue their efforts. Today, they turn to social media to bring awareness and raise funds.<sup>44</sup> The Feminist Five are important because they represent a new era of feminism in China. Over the last century, we saw three separate generations of women attempting to rectify a significant gap of gender inequality in China. First, He-Yin Zhen and Ding Ling brought awareness to issues concerning women's rights through their writing. Then, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, there were feminists within the party who recognized a need for women's equality and furthered them through politics of concealment. The migration of women from rural areas to urban areas searching for work in the 1980's-1990s proved women had a desire to change their situations and improve their quality of life. This ambition gave way to "leftover women," which sparked feminism as it appears today. With social media and hashtags, the Feminist Five and other feminists bring awareness to equality issues by voicing their dissatisfaction with the Chinese government on platforms such as Weibo and WeChat. Of the hundreds of millions of internet users in China, women are encouraged to use social media to call out sexism and pressure the government to retract misogynistic propaganda.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

This essay provided an overview of important points in women's history leading up to the twentieth century, where the feminist movement began. This is because China's past is critical to understanding the role of women today. It recognized three notable points of the feminist movement spanning three generations of women and assessed how feminism developed and operated prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China, then under the Chinese Communist Party, to now with the emergence of the "leftover women" phenomenon all in hopes of better defining what feminism means for China.

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<sup>43</sup> Fincher, Leta Hong . "China's Feminist Five." Dissent Magazine. Accessed May 03, 2017. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/china-feminist-five>.

<sup>44</sup>"China's Feminist Five Unbowed a Year after Detention, Says Activist in Hong Kong for Forum." South China Morning Post. May 18, 2016. Accessed May 03, 2017. <http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/article/1947133/chinas-feminist-five-unbowed-year-after-detention-says-activist-hong-kong>.

<sup>45</sup> Fincher, Leta Hong . "China's Feminist Five." Dissent Magazine. Accessed May 03, 2017. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/china-feminist-five>.

What I found was having an understanding women's history leading up to the 20th century was important because it allowed for a deeper understanding of this issue. It demonstrated how the philosophy of Confucianism and filial piety impacted the relationships women had in ancient China, which not only defined their subservient role in society, but defined mentalities of the Chinese people for many, many centuries. Assessing the development of feminism by focusing on three generations of women in the twentieth century to now told me that feminism was always a work in progress, from He-Yin Zhen and Ding Ling, to feminists in the Chinese Communist Party, and to the surge of today's feminism. Additionally, the migration of rural women to urban areas did create the opportunities they were expecting. However, the migration resulted in other issues for a generation to come, such as the promotion of the "leftover women" term. Issues of ethnicity, economic status, and other factors with furthering equality also came to light following the migration. Finally, since women's history and feminism is often complex and difficult to grasp, the first step in understanding is to recognize that it is unlike other feminist movements familiar to western countries. By better defining what feminism means for China, we begin to understand where the complexities of developing feminism under a type of government that has historically rejected the freedom to express lie. Equality had to be addressed differently in China because their priorities are entirely different than those of countries such as the United States. The mechanism we use to enable feminist expression is also entirely different. Therefore, it appears foreign and difficult to comprehend. For the Chinese government, feminism means instability. For Chinese women, feminism means equality and breaking free from the harsh, oppressive traditions that prevent them from being accepted as anything other than a wife and mother.

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