

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3124>



From the archives

Women in the Chinese Revolution

- Features - Sexual politics -

Publication date: Thursday 19 September 2013

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

This article was published in the theoretical review *Fourth International*, Volume 12 No. 4, July-August 1951, pp.109-113. This version is republished from the Marxist International Archive [Encyclopedia of Trotskyism](#). Transcription & mark-up by Eide O'Callaghan for ETOL.

“The changes in a historical epoch may always be inferred from the comparative freedom of women in one part of it or another, for in an improvement in the relations between women and men, between the weak and the strong, we see most clearly the victory of human nature over the nature of the brute ... The degree of the emancipation of woman is a natural standard of the general emancipation.”

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in *The Holy Family*.

The unfolding social revolution in China has awakened millions of the “lowest of the low,” the Chinese women. Women workers, peasants and students have been awakened to struggle for a new freedom and equality. They are fighting to overcome centuries of brutal oppression and inhuman degradation. In thousands they have joined the struggles of the peasants in “overturning” the landlords.

More thousands have joined the workers' struggles in the cities and girl students have taken their place among the revolutionary youth of China. Sheer numbers alone indicate the tremendous importance of the participation of women in the Chinese revolution.

But an appreciation of her numerical participation alone is not enough to gauge the depth of the social change unfolding there. It is necessary to understand the revolutionary significance of the role of women and the woman question in the entire social structure of the country. These women are only now obtaining rights which were obtained in the West long ago, with the development of capitalism and the political regime of bourgeois democracy. The problems of Chinese women today, and the solution of their problems, are an inseparable part of the struggles of the masses of China as a whole – of the peasant to overcome the remnants of feudalism and of the city proletariat against inhuman conditions of labor.

Semi-Slave Conditions

The semi-slave position of the vast majority of Chinese women is well known and their extreme degradation does not need reiteration here. Suffice it to point to the centuries-old practice of concubinage, the buying and selling of wives and daughters, the existence of thousands of slave girls for use either as cheap labor or in prostitution. Even until the most recent developments and the establishment of the new regime in China, the peasant in many places could turn in his wife or daughter for the unpaid balance of his taxes. In the cities husbands openly offered their wives and daughters to strangers to keep the family from starvation.

Women factory workers were little better off. In Shanghai, where more than half of the cotton industry of south and east China was concentrated, women employees made up over 65% of the working population. In the textile industry there were more than three times as many women employed as men. The vast majority of these industrial workers were supplied through “labor masters” who generally took 40% of the workers' earnings. The master kept his laborers in dormitories, sometimes as many as 30-40 workers in one room. A woman could be beaten for errors in her work. She could be punished for infringements of factory discipline by being locked in cages too small to lie down in. The

vast majority of women workers were between 14-19 years of age. Of 8,946 women employees in the cotton mills in Tsingto, 7,272 were found to be less than 25 years old, and 6,342 less than 20 (in 1942).

In an extensive investigation among female employees in Shanghai (1940), it was revealed that “complaints over inadequate wages are exceedingly rare, but complaints about mental and emotional discomfort, such as might be occasioned by fierce-looking supervisors, are very common.” The explanation is that in spite of the near starvation wages and terrible conditions of employment, they worked to escape “family troubles” – forced marriages, tyrannical mothers-in-law, sale into slavery by starving parents, etc.

Ideological Base

To view the woman question of China solely from the aspects of the misery and degradation of her sex is to underestimate its role in the entire social structure. The position of women in society and the structure and role of the family are mutually dependent and inseparable factors. The philosophy of Confucius and his theory and practice of ancestor worship has formed the ideological base of the family in China up to the most recent period. Confucius regarded the family as the foundation of the political organization of the state, and regarded filial piety as the chief moral virtue of mankind.

He developed the practice of ancestor worship, cultivated by the virtue of filial piety, as a means of securing political tranquillity and submission of the people to the authority of the state. Ancestor worship increases the sense of propriety and righteousness, and thereby creates respect for law and order. Furthermore, it teaches respect for the state authority, for learning respect for one’s elder brothers as preparation for serving all the elders of the country. Throughout the works of Confucius the general idea is expressed that women should be submissive to man. Indeed, some authorities state that Confucius, in all his wise sayings, had not one favorable word to say about women. Women are not permitted to fulfill the duties of ancestor worship. Their role is the production of sons and submission to the male head of the household. The submission of the female to the male and of the son to the father, has its reflection in the submission of the peasant to the gentry, tenant to the landlord and the landlord to the state. Thus the family in China, perhaps more than any elsewhere, has served as an ideological training ground for submission to authority and respect for things as they are, for acceptance of one’s position in society as a matter of “fate.”

Role in Agriculture

In addition to its ideological role, the family, and women in particular, have been used as a direct means of accumulating wealth. The process of accumulation on the land has resulted in the most land and the most women being owned and controlled by the rich peasant and local landlord. The poor peasant seldom had more than one wife, while the local lord had numerous wives, concubines and slave girls from whom he benefited both for his pleasure and through their labor in domestic industry. His consequent many sons served as his local political machine. In his book *China Shakes the World*, Belden cites the example of one landlord who had a family of 68 members and through this family controlled 700 tenant farmers, 30 slave girls, 200 squatters and maintained seven wet-nurses to assist in feeding and raising additional family members. By increasing his family he could further expand his rule and acquire additional wealth.

Thus the woman question and the family has been for centuries both a material and ideological means of power and political control over the peasantry in the village by the local semi-feudal lord and on a national scale has been the ideological foundation and a direct means of reactionary oppression by tyrannical rulers such as Chiang Kai-shek. The problems of the land and of women are inseparable and mutually dependent in the Chinese revolution. This is

why any serious attempt of the women to free themselves from oppression or any serious attempt by the peasant to “overturn” the landlord could not help but result in the upheaval of the entire social pyramid, from the family and its degradation of women, through the village up to national authority and inevitably raise the question of state power.

The Women’s Associations

In the course of the civil war against Chiang Kai-shek and his imperialist supporters which resulted in the establishment of the new regime, Women’s Associations were formed in hundreds of villages throughout the liberated areas of China. The Communist Party and the “cadres” – students and intellectuals of the government of the liberated areas – supported the revolts of the women. They gave leadership to their meetings and assisted them in organizing and extending their struggles. The method of organization of these Women’s Associations, the participation of peasant women in “Speak Bitterness” meetings and the justice dealt out by them to hated and brutal husbands is described in detail by Belden in his above mentioned book.

Most dramatic is the story of Gold Flower, a North China village girl, deprived of her young sweetheart and married to an ugly older man she had never before seen. Her husband and his family abused her mercilessly. “Gold Flower, though only eighteen, was already tired of her existence. She hated society, she hated her husband, she hated life itself, she contemplated suicide again, but was restrained by the thought of the sorrow she would bring her mother. When her mother died, she determined she would kill herself.”

In 1945 a Women’s Association was organized in her village after the 8th Route Army passed through. One of its first acts was to investigate Gold Flower’s treatment by her father-in-law. Sixteen women carrying clubs and ropes took him into custody. Here is Belden’s account of the Speak-Bitterness meeting at which he was tried:

“Gold Flower’s father-in-law was held a prisoner for two days in a room in the building of the Women’s Association. On the third day a general meeting of all the women in the village was called to decide what to do with him. Groups of women were making their way toward the center of the village. Never had they all come out on the streets before, and Gold Flower realized with a start that there were many women in the village whom she scarcely knew, so close had they heretofore kept indoors. Dark Jade and Taowa sought her out at home and led her to the hall of the Women’s Association which had been established in the house of a puppet who had fled away when the Japanese had gone.

“When they arrived, the meeting was in full swing. Forty or fifty women were crowded into the room and on the steps of the courtyard outside. Up front, behind a table, was a smaller group of women, among them a girl whom Gold Flower had never seen before. Dark Jade went up to the front of the room and called for silence.

“‘Sisters,’ she announced, ‘a cadre from the district will now speak. I ask you to keep order.’

“The woman whom Gold Flower did not know stood up. From the very first words of her speech the others all came under the spell of her eloquence. She spoke of the feudalism of China, which was making the women slaves of men, of the common interests of brides and maidens, of the necessity to struggle against in-laws who oppressed daughters-in-law, of the need to fight parents who opposed freedom of marriage, of the aims of the 8th Route Army and the Communist party, which were carrying on a struggle against the old black society for the equality of women.

“‘We stretch out our sisterly hands to the oppressed women, and hope that in our struggle against the dictatorship of Chiang Kai-shek and the landlords we shall find faithful allies among the village women.’ Her voice sounded like a

trumpet to Gold Flower. “At the front the workers and peasants of our democratic army are pouring out their blood against the soldiers of Chiang Kai-shek, armed by the American reactionaries; and in the rear, here in the villages, we must stand together and build a new society. And we shall build it! Hand in hand we shall go into the struggle against those who have enslaved us for two thousand years. And any man, any husband, any father-in-law who opposes us we shall beat to the ground and treat without mercy.”

“That’s right. Ah, that’s right!” Gold Flower said to herself over and over again, as she listened to this woman who seemed to be speaking directly to her heart.

“After the cadre finished speaking, Dark Jade, as chairman of the meeting, stood up. Her talk was burdened with clumsy, involved phrases, for she had never made a speech before. But the women listened to her with a great deal of sympathy as she was from their own village and was one of them. Rarely did someone interrupt, and her words found a vivid response.

“Suddenly she paused, and Gold Flower felt herself grow weak as Dark Jade looked directly at her and spoke in an intimate way.

“Now,” she said, “the time is come to talk of the case of our dearest sister, Gold Flower. Her sufferings are the sufferings of all women. If she is not freed, we cannot be free ourselves ...”

“That’s true,” shouted a voice from the center of the room. “Let us free Gold Flower.”

“We must beat that old man,” shrieked a voice in Gold Flower’s ear. “Beat him. Beat him.”

“The other women began to take up the cry. Dark Jade pounded on the table with her fist, and the roar died away.

“Sisters! We must take our meeting to be a serious business so that it should not be shameful to the people and so that we should get a good result from our actions. As it is we have been treated unjustly enough by men, but we should not fall into the same error. We must have respect for our Women’s Association so that everyone shall respect it. Let us first discuss how we shall treat the old man before we decide on anything.”

“The meeting finally decided to call in the old man.

“Dark Jade threw open the door at Gold Flower’s back and her father-in-law, his arms bound to his sides, was led in, guarded by two women. His face was pale and he glanced around the room uncertainly, blinking his old eyes.

“Old man! Be frank. Tell your bad treatment,” said Dark Jade, and the rest of the women echoed her shouting: “Be frank!”

“I have done nothing.” The father-in-law spoke with deliberate roughness. “If you don’t believe me, you can ask my daughter-in-law.” His eyes looked over the heads of the other women and fell on Gold Flower with a look that expressed his hostility, and seemed to say: “Be careful.”

“Looking at him from afar, Gold Flower felt a shiver of apprehension. She saw all eyes were on her. Pressing her fists against her chest, she ran on her toes to the front of the room. Then feeling it was now or never, she summoned all her determination.

“‘I married into your family – yes!’ she hissed into his face. ‘But there’s been no millet for me to eat. No clothes in the winter. Are these not facts? Do you remember how badly you have treated me in these past five years? Have you forgotten the time my mother was sick and you made me kneel in the courtyard for half a day? In the past I suffered from you. But I shall never suffer again. I must turn over now. I have all my sisters in back of me and I have the 8th Route Army.’

“She shouted these words. His face grew dark and red.

“‘Is it right for you to treat me like this? There is much that I could say. If I should speak, all these women would beat you to death.’

“As she said this, a wave of agitation ran through the meeting and a loud shout arose. ‘Speak!’ Then as the roar of the voices sank, a thin girlish shriek pierced the growing quiet:

“‘Down with those who treat daughters-in-law badly! Long live our Women’s Association!’

“‘You ate wheat flour bread and let me eat husks!’ Gold Flower said, growing excited.

“‘Ai-a-a-ah!’ a shout like a bursting shell rose from the women.

“The crowd groaned. In the heavy swelling voices, the sound of shuffling feet could be heard. Gold Flower felt herself being pushed aside. A fat girl was at her elbow and others were crowding close. ‘Let us spit in his face,’ said the fat girl. She drew back her lips over her gums and spat between the old man’s eyes. Others darted in, spat in his face, and darted away again. The roar of voices grew louder. The old man remained standing with his face red and his beard matted with saliva. His knees were trembling and he looked such a poor object that the women laughed and their grumbling and groaning grew quieter. Then Dark Jade, pushing the others back, cried:

“‘Are you ready to reform yourself?’

“‘I will change.’ The old man’s voice was low and subdued.

“‘Will you torture your daughter any more?’

“‘No.’

“‘All women unite,’ the same girlish voice that had cried from the crowd before shouted out in another slogan’;

“‘Women unite,’ echoed the crowd.

“‘Beat down conservatives,’ cried the voice again.

“‘Down with conservatives,’ echoed the crowd.

“Now that Gold Flower’s father-in-law had confessed his ‘sins,’ the meeting was over.”

“Gold Flower’s husband was likewise punished by the Women’s Committee until he agreed to reform. He was finally forced to flee from the vengeance of the village women for his failure to carry out his promise. The liberated Gold Flower became a revolutionary recruiter for the 8th Route Army.”

Role in Revolution of 1925-27

The more recent developments among the Chinese women stem from their basic experiences in the rise of the revolutionary tide in 1925-27. In the course of this tremendous upsurge of workers and peasants, all that was degenerate and decadent in the old society was shaken asunder and trampled upon. “Bandages were torn from the bound feet of women. Young girls, with bobbed hair and an air of defiant energy, streamed into the countryside to awaken their sex and free it of chains that bore the rust of generations. Confucius, the high priest of privilege and submission, was torn from the shrouds of a vicious and reactionary morality and paraded in effigy through village streets and burned,” H.R. Isaacs reported in his *Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*. Women’s Unions were formed at that time, claiming over 300,000 women in the major cities of China. A generation of “bobbed haired girls” arose. Bobbed hair became a flag for which women died!

Then, in the reaction and slaughter of 1927, over 1,000 leading women workers, students, and even bourgeois women were killed. “It is actually true that if a girl had bobbed hair she was subject to execution as a communist in Hunan and Santon,” according to Wm. Wales’ *Inside Red China*. Such is the explosive character of the woman question! It is through experiences such as these that both revolution and reaction learned well the importance of women in China. To go forward, the revolution had to encompass the fight for women’s freedom and equality, and to suppress the reaction the reaction must subordinate women, by death if necessary!

Led in New Upsurge

Through their own activity and organizations, and in conjunction with the revolt of the peasantry and demonstrations of the students, women and young girls joined the battles and the guerrilla warfare of the recent civil war. Many stories of great heroism have been told by observers of various political opinions. Not only did thousands of peasant women lend their assistance to the military units of the people’s army but many women served as armed guerrilla fighters and as spies behind the lines of the Nationalist army. In the liberated areas peasant women went to work in the fields and demanded that their husbands and sons take up arms against Chiang Kai-shek and American imperialism. In many cases these peasant women had not previously been allowed to appear in public unaccompanied. Now they were working in the fields and were among the most ardent supporters of the Red army. Many landlords’ wives secretly gave information to the revolutionary elements to assist in the great overturning. In the area around Peking it is reported that approximately 50% of the rural women have actively taken part in the land reform. It is as a result of their participation in these struggles that the women of China have gained their newly obtained rights.

New Basis for Genuine Equality

The Basic Program of the Agrarian Law adopted by the new government specified that women are entitled to the same allotment of land as men. The *Shanghai News* reports that in Central and Eastern China 60,000,000 women have acquired land equally with men! The question of land equality is especially significant since the vast majority of Chinese people are peasants. Equality of land means the possibility of vast numbers of women becoming

economically independent of men and thereby giving material reality to their legal equality.

The Common Program, adopted by the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in 1949, proclaimed legal equality of women and men. "The People's Republic of China shall abolish the feudal system which holds women in bondage. Women shall enjoy equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, educational and social life. Freedom of marriage for men and women shall be established." The laws on working conditions adopted the principle of equal pay for equal work and set forth the legal basis for protection of the special interests of women and juvenile workers. The industrial program has opened up opportunities for industrial training and employment of women. Symbolic of this is the fact that International Women's Day, declared a national holiday in 1949, was inaugurated by means of a train operated completely by women from Port Arthur to Darien.

The leading Marxists have long anticipated the colossal role women workers play in the development of the working class movement and especially in the Far Eastern revolutions. This was the theme of Trotsky's speech to the Second World Conference of Communist Women in 1921:

"Generally speaking, in the world labor movement the woman worker stands closest ... to that section of labor which is the most backward, the most oppressed, the lowliest of the lowly. And just because of this, in the years of the colossal world revolution this section of the proletariat can and must become the most active, the most revolutionary and the most initiative section of the working class ... Henceforth woman will be to a far lesser degree than ever in the past a 'sister of mercy,' in the political sense, that is. She will become a far more direct participant on the main revolutionary battlefield."

Trotsky's Prediction Vindicated

Chinese women have vindicated Trotsky's prediction. The advances already made toward the solution of their problems are a direct result of women entering the revolutionary battlefield in their own name and giving their life's blood in the struggle for freedom and equality. The awakening of women and their revolt against centuries of oppression and degradation has unloosed a tremendous revolutionary force in China. This force has been a strong contributing factor in the victories of the civil war, and in the building of the new China it will be a source of power in the coming socialist revolution. An understanding of this revolt, its social content and the depth of its penetration into every aspect of Chinese life is indispensable for a thorough analysis of the significance of the social revolution unfolding in China today.