

The Issue of Gender in “The Yan’an Way”

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Abstract

The “Resolution by the CCP Central Committee Regarding the Current Direction of Woman-Work in the Anti-Japanese Base Areas,” known more simply as the “Resolution of ‘43” (*Si San Jueding* 四三決定),” began its full-scale implementation in 1943. Aimed specifically at the issue of overly radical “feminism” and its influence on the steady development of rural society, it sought after a practical means of circumventing rural conflict by emphasizing women’s participation in [general] production as well as an overall increase in their contribution towards economic production. While this new policy helped to reduce dissonance and strengthen the unity of the people, the broader issue of gender remained concealed under the traditional patriarchal family structure [embedded] in rural society. During the Yan’an period, Ding Ling, the representative “New Woman,” had come under heavy criticism due to her divergence with popular opinion at the time. Her eventual standing in line with “the spirit and principles of the party” would put an end to this matter, and although this admittedly played to the needs of the revolutionary situation, it would force the already semi-discernible issue of gender to become pigeon-holed once more. Attitudes held towards the gender issue in “The Yan’an Way” may be traced back to the early efforts to integrate feminine discourse into left-wing revolutionary discourse during the period following the May Fourth Movement, and are also closely related to Women’s Liberation theory, which had served as part of the basis for international communist movements. A re-examination of

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these [developments] will serve as a useful means of incorporating feminism more proactively into modern China's socialist practice.

Keywords

“Resolution of ‘43’, ‘The Yan’an Way’”, Women’s Liberation, Family Structure, Patriarchy, Marxism, Feminism

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Between the years of 1941 and 1943, the Chinese Communist Party, with its capital then situated in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia border region, implemented a series of new political, economic and cultural policies which would not only later serve as a foundation for the CCP’s seizure of power, but also establish a basic model by which to fashion the new state after. This new system would come to be known as “The Yan’an Way.”¹ Many researchers acknowledge that the CCP’s victory during the Anti-Japanese War, as well as their wresting of political power, were both closely related to [their] policy on women. For example, Jack Belden once wrote: “In the women of China, the Communists possessed, almost ready made, one of the greatest masses of disinherited human beings the world has ever seen. And because they found the key to the heart of these women, they also found one of the keys to victory over Chiang Kai-shek.”² Even so, the problem of gender in scholarly research on “The Yan’an Way” has yet to receive the full attention it merits.³

The history of women’s liberation during the Mao-era, which saw its beginnings in these new Yan’an policies, came to forge several “fixed views” of widespread influence. For example, that the revolutionary government was not

1 Mark Selden, *The Yanan Way in Revolutionary China*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1971.

2 Jack Belden, *China Shakes the World*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1970, pp. 317.

3 *China in Revolution: The Yanan Way Revisited* points out that rural policies “[viewed] problems of the countryside as problems of male villagers,” while the author comments that “*The Yanan Way*, and in my view subsequent base area studies, including my own, have thus far failed effectively to address gender and familiar issues. These issues remain elusive in part because they were rarely systematically treated in party and government documents.” Mark Selden, *China in Revolution: The Yanan Way Revisited*, New York, Routledge, 1995, pp 249. [See Epilogue footnote number 10 --- translator’s note].

actually concerned with women’s issues per se, but rather used them as a tool by which to liberate the heretofore untapped labor force from out of the home. Or, that although revolutionary praxis granted women a much broader space for social activity, it also divested them of their uniqueness in terms of social roles, cultural expression and other factors. These types of “fixed views” are seldom placed in their complex historical contexts for more concrete analysis. Moreover, since the end of the Cultural Revolution, contemporary female culture has, under the basic premise of criticizing Mao-era policy towards women, been specifically concerned with the categories of women’s issues which are independent from those of class, which is to say women’s uniqueness in terms of their physiology, psychology and cultural expression(s). Underlying all of this has existed a more unconscious element, namely that women’s discourse from the 1980’s onward has chiefly focused on and been expressive of problems of the “female intellectual.” From its alliance with the New Enlightenment discourse to its subsequent importation of Western contemporary feminist theory, women’s discourse has, throughout this period, subconsciously established the middle-class female as the foundation for its imagining of the female subject. As the Mao-era image of the female worker-peasant slowly disappeared from China’s cultural stage, it was superseded by a female image laden with middle-class sentiment and appeal. This was, in part, [indicative of] a divergence between feminism (*funü zhuyi* 婦女主義) and leftist discourse, yet was also a gentrification of the imagination of the female subject itself. Thus, the particularities of [Chinese] contemporary female culture are in fact rooted in what would be the complex outcomes of the Communist Party’s history of women’s liberation. By revisiting that which was so critical to the formation of socialist China’s female culture as well as its government policies, namely “The Yan’an Way,” an investigation of both the conflicts between revolutionary praxis and women’s discourse as well as their process of cohesion might be said not only to be one strand of historical research, but also an attempt to provide a kind of theoretical reference for contemporary female discursive practice.

1. The Conflict Between “Feminism” and Policy Towards Rural Women in the “Resolution of ‘43”

An important aspect of the series of new policies implemented by Yen’an in 1943 was their fresh resolution on the issue of gender. What is being referred to is the “Resolution by the CCP Central Committee Regarding the Current Direction of Woman-Work in the Anti-Japanese Base Areas” that was first drawn up by the Central Women’s Committee (*zhongyang funü weiyuanhui* 中央婦女委員會), later revised by Mao Zedong and finally promulgated in February, also more commonly known as the “Resolution of ‘43” (Si San Jueding 四三決定). One of the significant aspects of this policy was the way in which it regarded the organization and inclusion of rural women into production as its “top priority,” as well as single unit of “measure.” When evaluating the significance of such policy, the new resolution stated: “[By] producing and accumulating more, women and their family members [may] lead better lives. Not only does this play a significant role in the economic development of the base area (*genjudi* 根據地), but on the basis of such material conditions, women may also gradually extricate themselves from feudal oppression.” Clearly, this resolution did not deny that the mobilization of women into production was aimed chiefly at solving the issue of “economic development” in the base area, yet it also held that by raising the economic status of women, it could help them “extricate themselves from feudal oppression.” Various literature and introductory material about women’s movements from that period all stress that participation in production campaigns had enabled rural women to raise their standing in the family and that the scope of their social activity had been broadened. Also, because the [Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia] border-region government had adopted special measures to encourage women to participate in production, for example by nominating “labor heroines” and “model workers,” or proportionally selecting women to participate in rural governmental organizations, et cetera, the broader social standing of rural women was further elevated.⁴

4 On March 8th 1943, a “March Eighth Women’s Day” observation meeting was organized in the Shan-Gan-Ning border region where the rural women were “knitting sweaters, sewing shoe soles and stitching socks, celebrating their own holiday in a brand new fashion,” while 7 rural women were also selected as “Labor Heroes of the Shan-Gan-Ning border region.” “[After having been belittled all these years, the idea that a woman could now suddenly become a hero was a change which truly excited the people, causing a sensation throughout the whole border region.” All-China Wom-

However, the new resolution also emphasized that the elevation of rural women’s social status must be based on the premise of guaranteeing “an improvement to their family’s livelihood,” which is to say that the elevation of their social standing must not impact the pre-existing family structures and familial relations. Thus, it was specifically on this point in which the “Resolution of ‘43” and previous policies toward women came into a pronounced degree of conflict.

The unveiling of the “Resolution of ‘43” was, in truth, also a part of the Yan’an Rectification Movement. In the fall of 1941, not long after the Rectification Movement was launched by the upper echelons of the CCP, the Central Women’s Committee underwent restructuring, with Cai Chang (蔡暢) taking over Wang Ming’s (王明) position as Secretary of the Central Women’s Committee. Subsequently, the Central Women’s Committee along with the Central Committee of the [Chinese Communist Party] Northwest Bureau (*zhongyang xibeiju* 中央西北局) united to form the Women’s Livelihood Survey Group (*funü shenghuo diaochatuan* 婦女生活調查團) in September, which investigated into the state of women’s movements in the base area.⁵ Among the opening statements made in this new resolution was its criticism that the work methods used by former women’s organizations “lacked a spirit of seeking truth from facts,” and were devoid of a “robust mass viewpoint” (*qunzhong guandian* 群眾觀點). When citing specific examples, aside from its critique that these organizations did not regard economic work as women’s “most suitable type of labor,” it primarily stressed that they were “out of touch with women’s sentiment, were inconsiderate of their domestic burden, the limitations of their physiology and of their life’s [overall] difficulties, that they hadn’t considered what women were capable of doing in these specific circumstances as well as what they must do, but rather had proposed slogans for women’s movements according to their own subjective notions.” It was also particularly critical of how they would often convene mass meetings to rally women together, finding this method wasteful of both “human and material resources.” On March 8th 1943, Cai Chang published her editorial “Welcoming the New Orientation for Women’s Labor” in the *Liberation Daily*

en’s Federation (*zhonghua quanguo funv lianhehui*): The History of Women’s Movements in China [*Zhongguo Funv Yundong Shi*], Beijing, Spring and Autumn Publishing House, 1989, pp 514

5 Referenced from All-China Women’s Federation (*zhonghua quanguo funv lianhehui*): The History of Women’s Movements in China [*Zhongguo Funv Yundong Shi*], Beijing, Spring and Autumn Publishing House, 1989, pp 508-519.

(*Jiefang Ribao* 解放日報), in which she further articulated what the “erroneous” aspects of previous labor policies were, stating that: “Particularly among the female cadres who come from the intellectual ranks of our leading agencies on women’s labor, there is no shortage of those whom seem only capable of reciting various slogans such as ‘Freedom of marriage,’ ‘Economic independence,’ ‘Oppose the four old oppressions,’ … et cetera, never once contemplating how work [might] actually be carried out in the base area; … when faced with the issue of resolving women’s family disputes, favoritism is displayed towards the wife, whereas the husband is reproached; partiality is shown to the daughter-in-law, whereas the mother-in-law is condemned. The result of this is such that public opinion remains unsympathetic towards women’s work [movements], and the [latter] finds itself isolated.” Her tone then becomes sharper, criticizing that “even when they are idling about, under [their] biased notions of ‘feminism,’ they argue with the Party about forming an independent system of female labor”⁶. The “feminism” which Cai Chang vehemently criticizes here may, with specific regard for the issue of gender, be largely viewed as antithetical to the “Yan’an Way.” Although it is difficult to find historical texts which, in clear terms, directly state how “feminism” defines itself as well as its *modus operandi*, it may still be ascertained that the viewpoint held by these “female cadres from the intellectual class” generally regards the interests of women (particularly young and disadvantaged women) as their principal standard of measure. Hence, when dealing more concretely with rural family conflicts, “favoritism is displayed towards the wife, whereas the husband is reproached; partiality is shown to the daughter-in-law, whereas the mother-in-law is condemned.”

The problem “feminism” created was that its promotion of independence and the individual needs of young rural women inevitably bred contradiction within rural society, coming into sharp conflict with what were deeply-imbedded notions of rural patriarchy, as well as those patriarchal family structures which enabled them. It may be observed from a whole host of sources that the emergence of these Communist Party women’s workers, which existed as a revolutionary force, posed some degree threat to the men of rural society. Just as Cai Chang had mentioned when introducing the experiences of female workers in the model area (*shifan diqu* 示範地區) in her essay, the early [women’s]

6 Cai Chang, *Meet the New Direction of Women’s Liberation Work*, *Jiefang Daily*, Mar. 8th, 1938.

movements which encouraged females to join the textile mills were met with resistance from the males: “[Send her off] to make a little money, just to lose my wife, how could this be acceptable?” In his *China Shakes the World*, Jack Belden recounted the story of Golden Flower (*Jin Hua*), the rural woman who utilized the Communist Party’s Women’s Association to drive her husband and father-in-law into submission.⁷ Golden Flower, under rural traditions and the wishes of her parents, had been forced into marrying an “ugly” man some 10 years older than herself. The maltreatment she received from her husband and her in-laws caused her to lose interest in life and she became venomous and spiteful. After the Communist Party set up a women’s association in her village, Golden Flower sided with the organization to “teach a lesson” to her husband. Their preferred method of instruction was to rally together members of the local women’s committee and give the men a sound beating, compelling them into promising to never again mistreat their wives. In the end, filled with enmity, her husband fled the village: “I believe women must obey the orders of men. But you see, in the 8th Route areas, women have become crazy. They don’t obey men.” Golden Flower would then divorce him and relish the prospect of a new life with great optimism. It was precisely the abovementioned story which led Belden to reach his conclusion, believing that the Communist Party had “found the key to the heart of these women.” Although this story took place after the “Resolution of ‘43” was passed, and in a different locale (Hebei province, rather than the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia border region), one can gather from the details provided in the story that the actions of Golden Flower, as well as of the women’s association in her village, were clearly not the ones being promoted by Yan’an’s new policies. Upon criticizing the errors of previous women’s policy, the examples provided in the “Resolution of ‘43” bore much similarity to Golden Flower’s story: During the process of publicizing gender equality and freedom of marriage, as well as encouraging women to combat feudal forces, relatively radical measures were taken. Examples include parading an abusive mother-in-law around the street in a dunce cap (*dai gaomaozi* 戴高帽子), denouncing and beating the husband at large meetings, rashly settling inter-marital disputes, et cetera].”⁸

7 Jack Belden (305)

8 All-China Women’s Federation (*zhonghua quanguo funv lianhehui*): *The History of Women’s Movements in China* [*Zhongguo Funv Yundong Shi*] (The New Democracy Period), Beijing, Spring and Autumn Publishing House, 1989, pp 510-511.

However, the abovementioned situations clearly ran contrary to the image that the Chinese Communist Party was attempting to shape, namely one of widespread social mobilization and acceptance [of the Party] at the grassroots level (particularly by male peasants, which composed the core of the military). So as to diminish the rural conflict created by women's movements, the "Resolution of '43" was inclined towards seeking out non-confrontational methods, which is to say emphasizing women's participation in production as well as increasing their contributions towards economic production. Indeed, once "economic development" became the "top priority," it was implied that, between women's liberation [movements] and the Communist Party's rural mobilization [efforts], the latter took priority, whereas the former became the erroneous policies of "feminism" which were "overly radical," "subjective," "formalistic" and "lacking in the spirit of the mass viewpoint." In his explanation of the necessity of new women's policy, Mao Zedong clearly stated that [they] needed to win approval from the males of rural society: "Increasing the impact that women have on the economy and production can arouse sympathy from the men, and does not stand in conflict with their interests. By beginning with this, then developing it into political and cultural movements, the men will gradually come around on the matter."⁹ In truth, then, this "retreat" from a [wholesale] women's liberation back to only safeguarding their work and labor rights was a way of tapping into surplus labor while simultaneously maintaining rural stability. Among the various activities listed by the "Resolution of '43" in which women might participate in economic production were included both "the ability to cook and feed pigs," as well as "[the ability to] raise children and protect the inheritors of the revolution." Also included were activities formerly prohibited to women (particularly to young women) such as spinning, tilling, managing home affairs, et cetera.¹⁰ With regards to this, the new resolution, on the one hand, had by no means called into question the traditional division of labor among the sexes in rural areas, but rather viewed domestic labor as naturally belonging to that of the female domain. However, on the other hand, its encouragement of women to participate in social

9 *Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi and Zhu De on Women's Liberation [Mao Zedong Zhou Enlai Liu Shaoqi Zhu De Lun Fvnu Jiefang]*, Beijing, People's Publishing House, 1988, pp. 46.

10 "A Further Call to Women in Liberated Areas to Join the Sanitation for Production Cultural Activity" [*geng jinyibu fadong jiefangqu funv canjia shengchanweisheng wenhuayundong*], *Jiefang Daily*, March 7th, 1943.

work (*shehui gongzuo* 社會工作) stemmed from more practical considerations, namely replenishing parts of the male labor force lost during the war mobilization effort(s). As mentioned by Nym Wales (Helen F. Snow) in her description of women’s condition in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia border region: “When the first Front Red Army first came to the Northwest, they were able to, within a few weeks, get about 20,000 new fighters in this sparsely populated area. Why? Because the women organized to carry on in their place in the rear.”¹¹

While this prioritization of economic production as the “principal task” of rural women’s labor significantly reshaped the gender contradiction and raised the social standing of women, there nevertheless remained certain insoluble problems inherent to this approach, as it was ultimately rooted in the patriarchal family structure traditional to rural areas. In fact, the both the “Resolution of ‘43” and its associated supporting documents very seldom discussed how notions of ethics, ancestry and the structure of familial relations in rural areas had particularly oppressed women, especially women who faced issues concerning their relationship with their mother-in-law as well as their spouse. Contrarily, what was strongly emphasized was domestic harmony, that “[If] the husband and wife are of one mind, the dusty loess shall turn into [hills of] gold.”¹² The protection and strengthening of traditional family structures not only forestalled any rural (male) discontent, but more significantly defined the family as the base unit of production under the Communist Party’s new series of policies. A significant component of the “Great Production Movement” (*da shengchan yundong* 大生產運動) that launched subsequent to the Rectification Movement was the textile industry. The large-scale, big factory mode of production previously implemented had, due to the wartime environment, transportation conditions, state of organized production and other factors, been transformed into a workshop-style system of production that featured the family as its [base] unit. In this mode of production, due to the [need for] collection of raw materials, circulation of goods and other factors, women became directly involved in said social activities. This did not lead to the degradation but rather a fortification of family structures. As Delia Davin has pointed out: “the family was the basic economic unit, [...] this family was not the small (conjugal) family of capitalist society but the ‘big family’ of the vil-

11 Nym Wales, *Inside Red China*, Beijing, Beijing Foreign Languages Press, 2004, pp. 194

12 Cai Chang: “Welcoming the New Orientation for Women’s Labor,” *Jiefang Daily*, March 8th, 1943.

Translator’s note: The original Chinese phrase is as follows, “婆姨汉一条心, 沙土变黄金.”

lage whose intention was the most efficient use of labor power. This big family was the basis of the rural economy which was supporting the resistance war. The basis for action should therefore be the reform and consolidation of this type of family.”¹³ This is to say that it was not just the [extended] family unit, comprising of the wife, the husband and his in-laws, but rather [one’s] lineage, one’s community and other elements which comprised of the rural ethical order, which was preserved and consolidated. Although it was possible, during the wartime period, that due to the absence of men [at home] as a result of the recruitment of male soldiers, domestic oppression of women by men was lessened, the fact still remains that because the family-relations structure as well as rural ethical order were maintained, the patriarchal structure oppressive to women had in fact not been weakened. Moreover, because production had become the single objective, it was often the case that the older women (such as mothers or mothers-in-law), who exercised more control over domestic finances prior to [this period] and were more technically adept, were to a greater extent the beneficiaries of the production movement(s), and as such exerted greater control over young women, rather than less.¹⁴ Thus, if it were to be said that economic production was capable of liberating women from the [confines of] the household, it was unable to alter the newly formed hierarchy of control among rural women, determined by factors such as age, economic standing, technological competence, et cetera, which was brought on by the introduction of capital.

The “Resolution of ‘43” was closely related with the set of new policies [later known as] the “Yan’an Way” in the sense that neither would continue to emphasize “opposition to feudal forces,” but rather placed their focus on “mobilizing” the people and formed a conciliatory relationship with the rural ethical order rooted in patriarchal [values]. If it could be said that, to some extent, “feminism” advocated for the interests of rural women (particularly young women), then the rural mode of organization established through the “Resolution of ’43,” which was born out of consideration for economic and cultural mobilization, would inevitably eliminate any [social] dissonance caused by these interests. A possible result of all this was that, at the end of Belden’s story, perhaps Golden

13 Delia Davin, *Woman-Work: Women and the Party in Revolutionary China*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1979, pp 37.

14 Dagfinn Gatu, *Toward Revolution: War, Social Change and the Chinese Communist Party in North China, 1937-1945*, Stockholm University, Institute of Oriental Studies, 1983.

Flower does not drive off her husband and elatedly plan out her new life. Rather, so as to not exacerbate rural conflict, she swallows her pride and continues to live with her husband and the in-laws that she so detests, granted that under the deterring presence of the Communist Party, they might not be able to abuse her at their free-will, as was the case before.

2. The Conflict Regarding Yan’an’s “New Woman” and the Issue of Divorce

Another significant aspect of the “Resolution of ‘43” was its exaltation of rural women to a central position within women’s labor. In making an appeal, it called upon all “women workers,” “female party members” and “female cadres from intellectual backgrounds working within the government” (together these could be collectively referred to as Yan’an’s “New Women”) to “penetrate into the countryside and organize women’s production.” The circumstances in which the “New Woman” [would find herself] in the “Yan’an Way” were, in some ways, highly similar to that of the expert or the intellectual. After its Rectification Movement, the Yan’an’s cultural workers’ (*wenhuaren* 文化人) position would also be reoriented towards that of the “worker, peasant and soldier.” Criticisms they had previously raised about Yan’an’s political hierarchy, the relationship between politics and art, et cetera, would come to be seen as [having] “liberalist” tendencies and were severely reprimanded. The Wang Shiwei (王實味) incident serves as a good case in point. Simultaneously criticized alongside Wang Shiwei was the author Ding Ling, who on March 9th, 1942 published her piece “Thoughts on March Eighth” in the *Jiefang Daily*. What seemed to be not altogether incidental was that, though Ding Ling was not a “woman worker” per se, the issue she raised [pertained to] the new woman. Moreover, the target of her criticism was twofold: gender perspectives, a topic not publicly discussed by the Yan’an polity, and the “silent oppression” encountered by Yan’an’s new women in the realm of family and marriage.

Ding Lin wrote her “Thoughts on March Eighth” shortly before resigning from her position as editor-in-chief of the *Jiefang Daily* literary supplement.¹⁵ On

15 It is worth mentioning that at this time, Ding Ling had just recently married Chen Ming (February,

one occasion, she wrote about the creative process for that piece, recalling: “On March 7th, Chen Qixia (陳企霞) had a letter delivered to me insisting that I write up a commemoration piece for the ‘March Eighth’ holiday. That very evening I composed the entire essay, drawing upon what was a general feeling of injustice among the female comrades that had been roused up by two divorce incidents at the time, whereupon I fully unleashed it [into writing].”¹⁶ The author was unable to find any specific documentation regarding these “two divorce incidents” raised by Ding Ling, but information provided by Nym Wales might serve as a reference: An old Bolshevik had, “purely on esthetic grounds,” sought divorce with his wife whom had “come with him on the Long March, and had just borne him a bouncing son.” This incident had sparked both debate and struggle in Yan’an.¹⁷ When Wales asked Kang Keqing 康克清 about her thoughts on the matter, the latter expressed support towards the idea that “If the two do not agree politically, then they absolutely must divorce,” while also expressing criticism towards the woman: “Comrade Li’s wife was not a good housewife and she was also backward politically, so I have no sympathy for her... some women have the special characteristic of liking to be dependent on men and have babies, and she was one of this type.”¹⁸ In contrast with Kang Keqing’s disparaging views on women’s personal character, Ding Ling sympathized deeply with nearly all women who were burdened by marriage, childbirth and child-rearing. Sentimentally, she penned that “I myself am a woman, and I therefore understand the failings of women better than others. But I also have a deeper understanding of what they suffer.” In this article she published, the appeal she made which received the bulk of criticism stated that: “I hope that men, especially those in top positions, as well as women themselves, will consider the mistakes women commit in their social context.” When describing the predicament of women in Yan’an, Ding Ling particularly stressed “societal” rather than “individual” factors: She faulted the perspectives on gender implicit in all the gossip and rumors floating around Yan’an,

1942), and that Chen Ming had divorced his wife and left behind his family to marry her. Zhou Liangpei, *Biography of Ding Ling [Ding Ling Zhuan]*, Beijing, Beijing October Arts & Literature Publishing, 1993.

16 Ding Ling, “The Complete Story of the Speech at the Yan’an Literature and Art Forum” [yanan wenyi zuotanhui de qianqian houhou], *Historical Materials of New Literature (Beijing) [xin wenxue shiliao]*, vol 2, 1982.

17 Nym Wales, *Inside Red China*, Beijing, Beijing Foreign Languages Press, 2004, pp. 166-168.

18 Nym Wales, *Inside Red China*, Beijing, Beijing Foreign Languages Press, 2004, pp. 189.

stating that “they are inevitably the subject of conversation, as a fascinating problem, on every conceivable occasion. Moreover, all kinds of women comrades are often the target of deserved criticism.” She criticized the disparity among women married with children more fiercely: “those women who are compelled to bear children will probably be publicly derided as ‘Noras who have returned home.’ Those women comrades in a position to employ governesses can go out once a week to a prim get-together and dance. Behind their backs there will also be the most incredible gossip and whispering campaigns.” More importantly, she pointed out that on the question of divorce, women shouldn’t be reduced to being “backward,” but [reasons] “let us consider to what degree they are backward.” Clearly, then, part of the reason that Ding Ling stresses “societal” factors as responsible for women’s “backwardness” was that the revolutionary party had not provided protective measures in order to help shoulder the “silent oppression” felt by child-bearing and child-rearing women. Another significant reason was the general notion held about women, namely that they “naturally” should conceive, give birth and raise children, as well as take care of the men. The price women would pay for bearing these additional “invisible” burdens was viewed as “reaping what they had sown,” and that it “served them right.” Thus, although there were women willing to forsake their social labor to become a “good wife and loving mother,” their “falling behind” the fate of the revolutionary era would not be something to be pitied either.

The issue raised by Ding Ling with regards to questions of divorce not only touched upon a sensitive topic in Yan’an, namely male/female gender relations, but also paid particular attention to, with regards to domestic labor, the social discrimination and gender oppression experienced by the community of women already married with kids. Compared with rural women, the issue faced by Yan’an’s new women was not whether or not they should “leave domesticity behind” (*zouchu jiating* 走出家庭) but rather after taking up social labor, the physical and psychological pressure felt from both work and home which compelled them to “return to domesticity,” as well as the discrimination they faced afterwards. When Ding Ling chided that Yan’an’s women were forever mired in an endless stream of gossip and rumor, and expressed sympathy towards all women’s “history of blood and tears,” what she was emphasizing was that even though women in Yan’an had ostensibly earned the same right to social labor as the Yan’an men, the patriarchal order and gender perspectives restrictive to wom-

en had yet to be reformed. Perhaps it was the satirical remarks coming from her “male comrades” which particularly provoked Ding Ling, who at the time was situated in the heartland of the revolution. With regards to the domestic burden felt by women who were already married with children, she went even further by touching upon the mode of gender relations within the family structure. The issues raised here by Ding Ling were in fact blind spots in Marxism’s solution for women’s liberation, which was to achieve women’s liberation by granting them the right to work and to participate in social affairs. In some ways, the questions she raised were the same as those [later] raised by radical feminists during the 1960’s feminist movements in the West, when the women fighting alongside with men at the front lines of these democratic movements realized that they must additionally face oppression from the patriarchy. This was also the concrete form of what [was meant by] socialist feminists in the 1970’s when they said that Marxism and feminism were an “unhappy marriage.”

Gender perspectives had never been considered an issue to be independently discussed in Yan’an, yet by [digging through] related historical materials one can still glean several clues. Frequently mentioned are the 30 female senior leaders of the Front Red Army (*hong yifangmian jun* 紅一方面軍).¹⁹ Nym Wales wrote that these women occupied important positions because they “have won their legitimate place under the Red Star by long, hard struggle.” She also mentioned an interesting phenomenon: “These Communist women, more-over, multiplied their power by working not individually but collectively, thereby presenting a solid phalanx on every issue, small or great. It was a brave Red warrior indeed who dared oppose the phalanx on any major or minor question. They held a front within a front.” The solidarity exhibited by this group of women demonstrates, somewhat significantly, the awareness of the gender issue on the part of the female revolutionary. However, their power in Yan’an can clearly be attributed to their “being intimate partners and comrade of senior leaders” and these husbands “controlling the power behind the throne, or rather behind the curtains” .Red Army soldiers would refer to these wives as persons with “direct access” (*tongtian renwu* 通天人物), inadvertently betraying the special status conferred upon them

19 Referenced Guo Chen: *Women’s Collected Biographies --- The Life and Times of the First Red Army’s Female Soldiers on the Long March [Jinguo Liezhuan --- hong yifangmian jun sanshi wei changzheng nvhongjun shengping shiji]*, Beijing, Rural Readings Press, 1986.

through these types of marital connections.²⁰ With regard to the question of conception, the majority of these 30 women had chosen not to give birth. Some [had done so] perhaps so as to spare themselves trouble, such as Kang Keqing, others, although having given birth, were hardly able to look after their children, such as Liu Qunxian (劉群先), while some, due to childbirth and their poor health, had returned to the home [environment], such as He Zizhen (賀子珍). In light of these historical facts, the issues raised by Ding Ling in her “Thoughts on March Eighth” essay were not purely matters of form. Although the solutions she put forth were simply her “musings” on tempering one’s moral character, if it is the case that women truly do possess such an independent and “rational” character, then it would not only be women’s [role] in the revolutionary order, but rather its principal components which would need to undergo change. At the same time, because she was aware of the gender hierarchy inherent to revolutionary discourse, Ding Ling’s intent was rather keen, refusing to “brag” about “the need to acquire political power first” and distract from the existence of these problems.

Although Ding Ling’s stance might not be considered “feminist,” she expressed a particular sympathy towards women, and [combined with] her sensitivity towards gender perspectives, as well as her emphasis on “societal” elements leading to the weak position occupied by women, all of these [factors] inevitably led her to speak for women, and [thus] come into conflict with the way Yan’an mainstream society had, intentionally or not, come to frame the gender issue as an “invisible” one. Because of this, Ding Ling and her “Thoughts on March Eighth” article would be among some of the first targets to come under fire during the Rectification Movement, and it was only under the protection of Mao Zedong that she was spared the same fate as Wang Shiwei.²¹ In her self-inspection report, Ding Ling still refused to deny the facticity of the issue(s) she raised: “In that essay, I gave voice to my many years of suffering as well as my most ardent wishes.”²² However, she admitted that “I was only speaking on behalf of a group

20 Guo Chen: *Women’s Collected Biographies --- The Life and Times of the First Red Army’s Female Soldiers on the Long March [Jinguo Liezhuan --- hong yifangmian jun sanshi wei changzheng nvhongjun shengping shiji]*, Beijing, Rural Readings Press, 1986, pp 128.

21 Ding Ling, “The Complete Story of the Speech at the Yan’an Literature and Art Forum” [yanan wenyi zuotanhui de qianqian houhou], *Historical Materials of New Literature (Beijing) [xin wenxue shiliao]*, vol 2, 1982.

22 Ding Ling, “The Attitudes and Reflections that Literary and Art Circles Should Be Having on Wang Shiwei [wenyijie dui wang shiwei yingyoude taidu ji fanxing], *Jiefang Daily*, June 16th, 1942.

of people, and not from the standpoint of the party,” and went on to re-arrange the positions the “party” and “women” had occupied by admitting that the former was more important than the latter. Similar to the settlement of the conflict between “feminism” and the “Resolution of ’ 43,” specifically with regard to the issue of rural women’s policy, the conflict between Ding Ling and the Yan’an government was eventually resolved by shelving the gender issue and [settling for] the “mandate and position of the party” (*dangxing yu dang de lichang* 黨性與黨的立場). It was precisely this method of “settling matters by leaving them unsettled” that forced the already semi-discernable issue of gender to become repressed. The aftereffects of said conflict would later come to form a problem in China’s revolutionary practice, and today affords us a limited space by which we may revisit and re-clarify this period of history, so as to raise new questions and engage in theoretical discussion.

3. The Integration of Marxism and Feminism

It was not just Yan’an’s new policies, but rather China’s entire revolutionary practice during the 20th century, which tended to frame the liberation of women as an integral and inseparable component of the entire national liberation [movement], as well as the modernization agenda of class-based movements. Beginning from when Xiang Jingyu (向警予) and other leftist leaders were integrating women’s movements into labor movements during the 1920’s, a kind of latent conflict has always existed within 20th century women’s movements in China. In 1951, while reassessing the relationship between the Communist Party and feminist movements, Cai Chang made mention of the erroneous tendencies [pursued by] both the “left” and the “right,” through which one can generally gather the heart of the matter. The tendencies of the “right” were its “supersession of the female proletarian viewpoint by that of the female bourgeois,” its “exclusive solidarity with only upper-class women,” its “compliance with the bourgeoisie” as well as its “estrangement from the broad masses of female workers and peasants.” The tendency of the so-called “left” was that it “over-emphasized women’s movements and isolated them from the whole revolutionary struggle by discussing women’s liberation separately from what were the core political

tasks at the time.”²³ On one side was class distinction among women, on the other side was the relationship between women’s movements and “the Party’s chief political tasks.” Cai Chang’s leaning was clear, emphasizing that while “proletarian women’s movements” were more important than “bourgeoisie women’s movements,” women’s movements must conform to the Party’s central task(s). Implied within this [view] was an integration of the gender/class issue, as well as the question of how to integrate.

If it could be said that the lean towards classism within the gender issue in the “Resolution of ‘43” was not an isolated event (the “Resolution of ‘43” merely made the trend more conspicuous and institutionalized), but rather had deeper roots in history, then one might further trace it back to the ways in which leftist revolutionary discourse had initially integrated women’s discourse – particularly the ways in which modern urban women’s radical culture was integrated – during the post-May Fourth period. Here, Ding Ling is once again a suitable case worthy of analysis. As a post-May Fourth-era female urban intellectual, Ding Ling very clearly exhibited her awareness of the “sexualization” of women in the modern urban capitalistic system in her early works. Her debut novel, *Meng Ke* (1927), opens with the scene of a female model being sexually harassed and ends with Meng Ke waking up and being forced to act the role of the female star – a social construct [formed by] men and their hankering gaze – exposing the reader to the condition of women and institutionalized gender oppression. Luo Gang rather interestingly uses the concept of “technologized visibility” to point out that “Ding Ling was not discussing ‘what happens after Nala leaves’ on a rational level, but rather, under the backdrop of commercial culture, the logic of the ‘gaze’ of the city, the social stratification of females and other historical factors, she was ‘contextualizing’ the abstract slogan ‘liberation’.”²⁴ In her later works such as *Miss Sophia’s Diary* (1928) and *Amao Guniang [A Girl Named A-Mao]* (1928), Ding Ling continued to explore the issue of gender first raised in *Meng Ke* while deepening her questions. In the early 1930’s, Ding Ling, with her radical views on women, turned towards “revolution.” With regards to the mean-

23 Cai Chang: “The Chinese Communist Party and Chinese Women,” *People’s Daily*, June 27th, 1951.

24 Luo Gang, “‘Visual Intertextuality’ and Imaginations of the Body --- Ding Ling’s *Meng Ke* and Urban Landscape in the Post-May Fourth Period [“shijue huwen” yu shenti xiangxiang --- ding ling de <Meng Ke> yu houwusi de dushi tujing], paper submitted at the “Textual Analysis and Social Criticism” academic conference (Hai Kou), December 27-28th, 2003.

ing of “revolution,” if what Ding Ling was exposing in her early novels was the alliance of the capitalist and patriarchal system, then women’s liberation must be thought of in the sense of overturning this system of dual-oppression (i.e., gender and class). However, when prominent left-wing theorist Feng Xuefeng (馮雪峰) later assessed the value of the criticisms on gender made by Ding Ling in her early works, he believed that they merely belonged to the “most base and most backward bourgeoisie ‘culture of romance’ sown into the colonial and semi-colonial regions.”²⁵ By framing it as “bourgeois” and “colonial,” women’s radical culture was essentially delegitimized. In terms of its broader historical meaning, Feng Xuefeng’s verdict was not simply a rash and crude one, but rather was linked together with the obscure themes of modernity found in Feminist theory throughout the Third World and late-modernizing countries. This is to say that this type of radical theory emanating from the West, which imagines the middle-class female as its subject, required a more complex process of transformation before it could earn recognition from China’s “semi-colonial” class liberation theory. Moreover, this type of “transformation,” regardless of whether it be under left-wing theorist Feng Xuefeng, or under radical female author Ding Ling, was unable to develop into a stark and self-evident problem. On a personal level, this not only led to the disappearance of both the female perspective and the topic of gender in Ding Ling’s revolutionary novels written after her “turn to the left,” but on a historical level, could also have been said to help bring about a complete dismissal of radical women’s culture within China’s revolutionary movements.

The gender issue inherent to the “Yan’an Way” is, in fact, closely related with International Communism and its theory of women’s liberation. In her descriptions on the views of women held by Marx, Engels, Bebel and Lenin, Juliet Mitchell [effectively] pointed out that Marxist theory has all along emphasized that “socialism *is* women’s liberation.”²⁶ Socialist feminists would later refer to this tenet as being “gender-blind.” Marxist theory tends to view work-related women’s issues from an economic perspective and frames the capitalist system as the source of all women’s oppression. Therefore, its practical method of liberating women is to encourage them to enter into the realm of public labor (*gongong laodong* 公共勞動). Similar concepts of women’s liberation were

25 Feng Xuefeng: “From *Meng Ke* to *Ye*” [cong <meng ke> dao <ye>], *Chinese Writer [Zhongguo Zuoji]*, Vol. 1 No. 2, 1948.

26 Juliet Mitchell, “Women: The Longest Revolution,” *New Left Review*, no. 40, December 1966.

also implemented in Chinese revolutionary movements. During the war, as well as after the founding of the country, the revolution led by the Communist Party in China had turned its efforts towards the construction and establishment of an independent nation-state, while mobilizing “half of the female compatriots to take an active part.” This mobilization effort, however, had been put forth under the notion that “all men and women are equal” (an uncritical notion of male subjectivity) and thus concealed the problems and gender requirements unique to females. In terms of both the social mobilization movements and economic development projects carried out by the Party in rural regions, a significant degree of importance was attached to the traditional family structure, while the gender model based on patriarchy and marital power still remained. Women’s entrance into the public sphere, as well as improvement to their standing, were all carried out under the basic precondition that the domestic gender order was not to be changed. This kind of concession to the patriarchy therein gave women a double-burden, namely their responsibility for both domestic labor as well as social labor. If Marxism has always taken women’s liberation and class liberation to be inseparable issues, the way it treats the patriarchy betrays a more conflictory image with regard to women’s liberation and class/national liberation. The inherent problems are, firstly, after the establishment of a socialist government, is women’s liberation viewed as a “natural” matter of course? Secondly, are women’s liberation movements less important than national liberation and class liberation? It was specifically on these two questions in which Feminist theorists and Marxist theorists began to diverge in thought. Heidi Hartman once used a very vivid metaphor to elucidate the relationship between the two: “The ‘marriage’ of Marxism and feminism has been like the marriage of husband and wife depicted in English common law: Marxism and feminism are one, and that one is Marxism.”²⁷ It was this kind of “unhappy marriage” which led socialist countries to exist as patriarchal societies in form, the key reason being that “Marxist categories, like capital itself, are sex-blind,” and that “many Marxists typically argue that feminism is at best less important than class conflict and at worst divisive of the working class.” Thus, Feminists should not only raise criticism on the capitalist system, but should also challenge the patriarchy. Women’s liberation should be fought on

27 Heidi Hartmann: “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union,” *Capital and Class*, Volume 3 Issue 2, 1979, pp 1.

“two battlefields” – anti-capitalism and anti-patriarchy.²⁸ [If] done this way, feminism shall be able to be more radically as well as more actively integrated in the socialist practice. Similar discussions held on Western Feminist theory during the 1960’s and 1970’s could perhaps serve as reference for contemplating the history of women’s liberation in China, too.

Class distinction among females, as well as the issue of relative importance among women’s movements and Party objectives inherent to the “Yan’an Way,” are in fact the universal problems encountered by feminism when faced with conflict [between itself and] traditional Marxism. The objective of actively trying to bring to light the [history of] China’s 20th century socialist practice and giving a voice to repressed women’s movements is not simply to repeat them once more (as was the case with the women’s culture movements that took place in the 1980’s), but rather to provide new insights on these complex trends within their specific historical context and clues to new ways of thinking. This [excavation] of the history of gender and class discourse is, at some level, a historical reassessment, but could also be seen as theory-building. That being said, both a lengthier period of exploration and more arduous practice will be necessary for a richer and more imaginative exposition.

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28 Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, New York, Routledge, 2017.