

# The Great Leap Backward: A Feminist Analysis of Chinese Famine Politics from 1958-1961

Elaine Cheng<sup>1</sup> and Elizabeth Schmidt<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Flintridge Preparatory School, Flintridge, California, USA

<sup>2</sup>University of California Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, California, USA

## ABSTRACT

This paper revisits the causes and impacts of the deadliest famine in human history—the Great Chinese Famine—through a feminist lens. Mao Zedong and a male-dominated Communist Party-led China into famine after its failed Great Leap Forward industrialization campaign in 1956. During the famine, Chairman Mao’s feminist slogans and state programs to promote gender equality were ineffective at best, and counterproductive at worst. We built the foundation of our analysis on primary sources, including oral histories from a broad demographic of civilians and cadres living throughout mainland China. We also incorporated archival research of reports, speeches, and writings of Communist leaders. To bolster our understanding of gendered experiences during the Great Famine, we interviewed both surviving civilians and Communist party members. During the famine, we found that women bore new double burdens, had their political interests marginalized, and witnessed their labor systematically devalued. In retrospect, China’s patriarchal government, built off Chairman Mao’s cult of personality, gained unchecked power over women during the famine and abused it.

## Introduction

When Dr. Ding Lishui recalls her memories of the Great Chinese Famine as a member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), she is conflicted. “I saw women walking down the streets of Qingdao in their prettiest dresses with their skin clinging onto their bones. They spent their days trying to find their family’s next meal in a tree, filling their baskets with Huai tree flowers and bark to grind up to make bread.”<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ding continued, “Mao Zedong promised us two things in the Great Leap Forward: plentiful grain and gender equality. What we got were women desperate to feed themselves with *Guanyin* clay and inedible flowers—unable to have children because they stopped menstruating out of malnutrition. When Chairman Mao said that women held up half the sky, he did not tell us that the sky would also be collapsing on us.”<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Ding is my grandmother. She is a devoted cadre and served in the People’s Liberation Army in her youth. However, when she spoke of the tragedy of the Great Leap Forward (大跃进) and the ensuing Great Chinese Famine (三年大饥荒), I could always tell that the government propaganda did not blind her entirely to the man-made origins of the tragedy. For the last half-century, the Great Famine has been a topic of great shame in China. Since the end of the famine in 1961, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) used propaganda to perpetuate a revisionist account of the famine. Today, the event that caused the deaths of 45 million Chinese people is euphemized as the “Three Years of

<sup>1</sup> Ding Lishui, in a telephone interview with the author, July 2020; all interviewees’ names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Natural Disasters” (三年自然灾害). The famine’s new name freed the CCP and Chairman Mao of responsibility by masking its political causes.<sup>3</sup>

By viewing famine politics through a feminist lens, this study explains China’s oxymoronic blend of progressivism and conservatism when it came to gender equality. On the surface, the Communist propaganda slogan of “women hold up half the sky” (妇女能顶半边天) coined by Mao Zedong in the earliest days of the revolution has permeated Chinese society and has transcended national borders. In a fundraising speech in July of 2020, American Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden reportedly quoted the slogan as an “old Chinese proverb,” mistakenly ignoring its Communist origin.<sup>4</sup> Supported by a vocal commitment to gender equality, the initial Chinese Communist system held much promise. Historian Kimberley Ens Manning documented Communist China’s strides towards greater gender equality by establishing Women’s Federations (妇联) nationwide to address domestic violence complaints while simultaneously relieving women of their domestic household burdens by forming government dining halls, daycares, and senior centers— supposedly leaving women free to work alongside men in the fields and the factories.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, this feminist dream collapsed during the Great Famine.

The word “feminism” is highly charged politically and has taken a myriad of diverse definitions throughout history.<sup>6</sup> The word is no less controversial now than it was in the 1960s. Merriam-Webster named “feminism” as its Word of the Year in 2017, defined today in conventional and legal dictionaries as “the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes” or the act of “organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests.”<sup>7</sup> This study adopts these two broad, contemporary definitions of feminism.

China was no stranger to feminism during the Great Famine. Early Chinese feminism, before it was adopted by the Communists, was notably different from its Western counterparts. For example, historian Pauline C. Lee compares and contrasts sixteenth-century Ming Dynasty Neo-Confucian philosopher Li Zhi (李贽) and nineteenth-century feminist utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill.<sup>8</sup> Lee studies the seemingly paradoxical ideology of Confucian feminism. The term itself is often seen as oxymoronic because Confucianism is known for its patriarchal theory of filial piety (孝) in which wives and daughters are to submit to their husbands and fathers to “respect” them (孝顺) and maintain societal harmony. Li Zhi pioneered criticism of the Confucian insistence on the division of labor along gender lines into inner/outer (内/外) categories. This idea may sound familiar to Western ears, as it is similar to how liberal feminists criticized the existence of private and public spheres designating women as homemakers and men as breadwinners. In Western canonical philosophy, men often dismissed women’s abilities to reason at all. On the other hand, Confucians believed that women and men could reason in the same capacity, but women choose to apply their reason to “shortsighted” (短见) issues pertaining to the household and domestic life, while men are more “farsighted,” or “有远见.”<sup>9</sup> Li Zhi took a Confucian approach to gender equality, advocating feminism through self-cultivation to surpass social, political, and economic barriers imposed by society. Li Zhi and Mill’s feminist theories now engage in a

<sup>3</sup> James Kai-sing Kung and Justin Yifu Lin, “The Causes of China’s Great Leap Famine, 1959–1961,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 52, no. 1 (2003): 67.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph A. Wulfsohn, “Biden Uses Quote Notably Uttered by Mao Zedong during Big-Money Fundraiser: Reports,” *Fox News*, July 14, 2020, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/biden-reportedly-uses-quote-notably-uttered-by-mao-zedong-during-fundraiser>.

<sup>5</sup> Kimberley Ens Manning, “The Gendered Politics of Woman-Work: Rethinking Radicalism in the Great Leap Forward,” *Modern China* 32, no. 3 (July 2006), 354.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Leffingwell, “Toward a Feminist Definition of Feminism: A Historical Exploration of the Word, ‘Feminism,’” *Public Seminar*, January 16, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> “Merriam-Webster’s 2017 Words of the Year,” in *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-of-the-year-2017-feminism>.

<sup>8</sup> Pauline C. Lee, “Li Zhi and John Stuart Mill: A Confucian Feminist Critique of Liberal Feminism,” in *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender*, ed. Chenyang Li (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 113-132.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

“chicken and egg” debate regarding which comes first in feminism: the equalization of opportunity (as advocated by Mill) to allow women to succeed, or the success of women themselves (termed self-cultivation by Li Zhi) to create an equal playing field through their own merits.<sup>10</sup>

In short, Chinese feminism existed centuries before the Communists. However, most feminists were silenced (the Ming Dynasty government executed Li Zhi in 1602 for being a Confucian dissident) until the Communists gave them a political platform. Modern feminism in China may also seem to be self-contradictory to Western liberal feminists. For example, the Chinese stance on the widespread availability and de-stigmatization of abortion is seen by liberal feminists as quite progressive. However, upon closer examination, Chinese abortions perpetuate an antiquated sexist tradition of preferring male infants over female infants; many of these abortion procedures were used to abort female fetuses because Chinese families preferred male heirs. This practice continues a deep-rooted Chinese tradition of “重男轻女,” bluntly translated as “men are weighed heavier than women,” to favor males even before birth. In this study, we will be looking at feminism holistically to bridge the east-west gap of feminist philosophy.

The Marxist-feminist critique of capitalism dominates the current body of academic scholarship on the interactions between Communism and feminism. In the twentieth-century writings of Friedrich Engels, Marxists believed that unpaid domestic work and reproductive labor persisting in capitalist societies oppressed women.<sup>11</sup> Just as Engels believed that gender equality depended on Communism, Bolshevik feminist Alexandra Kollontai believed that the success of a revolution was predicated on the female proletariat's rise to demand sexual and economic equality.<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, in the modern day, historian Jeffrey C. Goldfarb takes a more cynical approach. He argues that although Communist governments use the idea of equality to oppress their citizens, at least men and women are oppressed equally.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Judith Stacey opens her recent article on the Chinese Family Revolution with the phrase, “women's oppression starts at home.”<sup>14</sup> Socialists have claimed that the patriarchal structure of the nuclear family and the disparity between private property ownership by men and women in capitalist societies can be remedied by a socialist revolution freeing women of domestic duties and seizing all private property.<sup>15</sup> Overall, many scholars throughout the history of socialism and Communism believe that there would be no true liberation of women without socialism, and vice versa.

However, although there is an evident relationship between Communism and feminism, the nuances of how the two ideologies interact in Chinese society reveal how Chinese Communists often marginalized and misapplied feminism. This paper offers an alternate approach to identify the successes and failures of the Chinese application of the pair of complementary ideologies through a post-mortem of one of the greatest human tragedies the world has ever faced. In just three years, 5% of the Chinese population perished, and death rates doubled from 12% to 25%.<sup>16</sup> The famine caused 2.5x as many deaths as World War I, 45x as many deaths as the Irish Potato Famine, and 300x as many deaths as the nuclear bomb dropped in Hiroshima during WWII. First, we study the extent to which one man—Chairman Mao—created a famine. Second, we investigate the gendered impacts of the famine on women, including its effect on fertility, female infants, gynecological diseases, and marriage. Then, we examine the impacts of the failed Great Leap campaign against the institution of a “family” as a way for the state to economically exploit women, and the creation of a new double burden. Furthermore, we reveal the lack of female representation in politics, and how the

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2010), 199.

<sup>12</sup> Alexandra M. Kollontai, “International Socialist Conferences of Women Workers,” in *Alexandra Kollontai: Selected Articles and Speeches* (New York: Internat. Publ., 1984).

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, “Why Is There No Feminism after Communism?,” *Social Research* 64, no. 2 (1997): 236.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Stacey, “When Patriarchy Kowtows: The Significance of the Chinese Family Revolution for Feminist Theory,” *Feminist Studies* 2, no. 2/3 (1975): 64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177771>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 51.

CCP's power structure allows leaders and cadres to sexually abuse and humiliate women. Through these points, our research reveals how China's pursuit of radical equality led to tragedy and the persistence of patriarchy.

## Oral History Methodology

I began this project by speaking to my grandmother about her famine experiences. From her memories, I found a point of tension between her insistence that men and women were absolutely equal in the Communist society, and the realities of gender discrimination that she faced throughout her life.<sup>17</sup> We believed in the power of bringing the voices of the past to inform and empower our present study, leading us to employ oral history interviews as a way to incorporate new primary sources into our research.

We conducted telephone interviews with survivors in mainland China while referencing Mika Thornburg's *Oral History Guide* to develop our interviewing, questioning, and documentation methods.<sup>18</sup> A sample outline of our interview questions can be found in Appendix 1. In total, we conducted six interviews. These interviewees lived throughout mainland China, held occupations ranging from civilian to cadre, and experienced both urban and rural aspects of the famine.

We intended all interview questions to be apolitical and open-ended. Neutral questions prevented hostility when discussing the sensitive subject matter, and avoided influencing the interviewees' answers in favor of or against feminism and the Chinese government. Although our questions were benign, they were fashioned to elicit answers from interviewees that may reveal their innate biases or allow them to rethink their views on the famine. Such reflections did occur, and some interviewees sounded confused and conflicted as their interviews progressed. Since the famine occurred around sixty years ago, we did not expect the interviewees to have complete factually accurate recollections. Nonetheless, valuable information could be drawn by understanding which striking aspects of the famine stayed in their memories, and the effectiveness of post hoc propaganda in altering the "facts."

However, there were obstacles to procuring interviews. The subject's political tenderness made five potential interviewees cite discomfort with the subject matter as reasons to turn down interviews. To supplement our interviews, we incorporated other published oral histories collected by previous historians into our study.<sup>19</sup>

## Mao Zedong and the Great Leap Forward

Regarding the causes of the famine itself, Mao's pride and ambition led him to push China to industrialize at a break-neck speed, vowing to overtake Britain and the United States in just 15 years. In just two years, 99% of the Chinese peasant population had joined a commune, which was an integral part of Mao's collectivization plan.<sup>20</sup> In his mind, collectivization of the rural peasant population was integral to achieving industrialization; the Communists tasked some communes with farming, and other communes were organized to supply steel factories with laborers. Meanwhile, the central government relied on the cadre system, where party members were dispersed throughout urban and rural communities, oversee the communes. Many government leaders tried to warn Chairman Mao of the Great Leap's impending failure due to economic infeasibility, including the Premier of the PRC, Zhou Enlai (周恩来). Instead of

<sup>17</sup> Ding Lishui, in a telephone interview with the author, July 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Mika Thornburg, "Oral History Guide" (unpublished manuscript, Department of History, University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, n.d.).

<sup>19</sup> Yang et al., *Tombstone: The Great*; Zhou, *Forgotten Voices*; Ens Manning and Wemheuer, *Eating Bitterness*; Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962* (New York: Walker et, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Xun Zhou, *Forgotten Voices of Mao's Great Famine, 1958-1962: An Oral History* (London, UK: Yale University Press, 2013), 16.

listening, Mao Zedong ordered Zhou Enlai to publicly self-chastise for raising concerns about the Great Leap and apologize for being seduced by “right deviationist conservative thinking.”<sup>21</sup>

After Mao ordered the humiliation of the second most powerful man in China for concerns regarding the Great Leap, others feared voicing opposition. These fears were affirmed repeatedly. When the decorated revolutionary hero and CCP leader Peng Dehuai (彭德怀) wrote a private letter to Mao Zedong about how the Great Leap may be causing a famine, Mao destroyed Peng’s political career and purged his supporters from the party.<sup>22</sup> Out of a similar fear and desire to please their superiors, local cadres falsified reports for grain harvests during the Great Leap to fill Mao’s impossible quotas, claiming grain surpluses two or three times actual harvest volumes.<sup>23</sup> In this soil, the seeds of famine were sown. Mao celebrated these “huge surpluses” by ordering more grain procurement from rural peasants to the cities and significantly decreasing the next year’s sown average by nearly 10%.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the male-dominated party, led by Mao, crippled by the smothering of dissent and the oppression of female citizens, leaped into famine.

Mao created a cult of personality around himself, and his private beliefs became the basis of a nation’s beliefs. In an exposé published by Mao’s private doctor, Dr. Li Zhisui described Mao as misogynistic as a Chinese emperor in his decadent private life where “women were served to order like food.”<sup>25</sup> Mao had weekly ballroom dancing parties (despite it being prohibited after the Revolution as bourgeois), where ranking party and military leaders invited women “of sterling proletariat background and excellent physical appearance” to entertain Mao in his opulent private bedroom.<sup>26</sup> At the time, Mao was still married to Jiang Qing. His actions of “gathering young women around him like the most denigrate of the ancient emperors” disgusted his doctor, compelling Dr. Li to write a book on Mao’s private life. Considering the monumental impact Mao’s personal beliefs had on the nation, it is difficult to dismiss Mao’s private life and its effect on his governments’ attitude about women.

Ironically, while Mao was infamous for leading a witch-hunt against possible conservative right-sympathetic cadres, he ignored conservatism when it was aimed at women.<sup>27</sup> In addition to his personal misogynistic beliefs, the CCP may have also marginalized gender equality as a political goal because of pressure from conservative peasants who valued the traditional family hierarchy. Kimberley Ens Manning documents instances of CCP leadership reversing and downplaying gender equality discussions due to fervent opposition from rural peasants.<sup>28</sup> Since the People’s Republic of China was born out of a peasant revolution, feminism was often sacrificed to appease the party’s socially conservative base. In the 1950s, the CCP was especially willing to compromise because peasant labor was crucial to accomplishing the Great Leap forward.

## Physical Toll of Famine on Women

Due to the aforementioned political errors, the famine brought forth widespread gynecological diseases and infertility among China’s female peasant population. These reproductive disorders impacted rural women more severely than urban women, illustrating part of the famine’s physical impact. Demographically, according to analyses of China’s meticulous 1982 and 1988 fertility surveys, Chinese women in 1957 had an average of 6.4 children. The average fell

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>23</sup> Kung and Lin, “The Causes,” 54.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Zhisui Li, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao: The Memoirs of Mao’s Personal Physician*, ed. Anne F. Thurston (New York: Random House, 1996), ix.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>27</sup> Kimberley Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer, eds., *Eating Bitterness* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 15.

<sup>28</sup> Ens Manning, “The Gendered,” 355.

to 3.3 children per woman in 1961.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the famine led to a shortfall of 15 to 30 million births in three years.<sup>30</sup> However, not all infants suffered equally. Studies on infant mortality showed that female toddlers had consistently higher likelihood mortality rates than male toddlers during the famine years, suggesting the preferential treatment of sons during times of scarcity.<sup>31</sup> Data analysis indicates that women with surviving sons had a high fertility reduction during the famine. In contrast, women with surviving daughters had a markedly lower fertility reduction. ; despite harsh circumstances, women who had not yet produced a male heir continued trying to produce one.<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, many women stopped menstruating due to malnutrition, leading to infertility. Zhang Shengzhi recalls, “as the chair of the Women’s Federation [in Gushi County], I knew very well what women were suffering. At that time, 60% of the women stopped menstruating, and some 20% to 30% suffered uterine prolapse. There were no more births until 1961.”<sup>33</sup> Uterine prolapse is an excruciating type of gynecological disease. Due to malnutrition weakening the muscles around a woman’s uterus, a woman’s womb would slip into her vagina and protrude out of her body, causing infertility and pain.<sup>34</sup> A Henan zealous Maoist admitted that cadres treated women and men like “beasts of burden... Girls and women pull plows and harrows, with their wombs hanging out.”<sup>35</sup> Surveys from the Jinma, Yongxing, and Yongquan communes found 50%, 60%, and 70% of the communes’ women stopped menstruating, respectively.<sup>36</sup> A case study of the Dashi production brigade witnessed 90% of its female members stop menstruating. The only two children born in that year of famine were to cadre families.<sup>37</sup> These statistics are all from rural areas, where labor was more physically intensive, and food shortages were more severe. Living in the city became a clear reproductive and socio-economic advantage.

One of the defining aspects of patriarchy is when women depend on marriage to ensure wealth, well-being, and reproductive success. During famine years, some married young rural women left their families in the villages, pretended that they were unmarried, and engaged in bigamy with urban men to survive.<sup>38</sup> Archives from Nanjing recorded children abandoned in city streets when rural women “remarried” men in the city and pretended that they did not have any previous children.<sup>39</sup> Weddings increased sharply in some rural villages at the famine’s height in 1960, not because of a surge of romanticism, but because marriage became a pretense for women selling their bodies for food and clothing.<sup>40</sup> Many of those “marriages” ended in a matter of days.

## Elimination of the “Family”

As survival became uncertain, the structure of the Chinese family started to crumble. Despite heavy stigmatization, divorce rates increased markedly during the famine.<sup>41</sup> Archives recorded desperate husbands selling their wives and

<sup>29</sup> Zhao and Reimondos, "The Demography," 282-83.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>33</sup> Interview of Zhang Shengzhi, in *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962*, edited by Yang Jisheng, Edward Friedman, Jian Guo, and Stacy Mosher, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Mayo Clinic Staff, "Uterine Prolapse," *Mayo Clinic*, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/uterine-prolapse/symptoms-causes/syc-20353458>.

<sup>35</sup> Dikötter, *Mao's Great*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> Yang et al., *Tombstone: The Great*, 283.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>38</sup> Dikötter, *Mao's Great*, 256.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Zhongwei Zhao and Anna Reimondos, "The Demography of China's 1958-61 Famine: A Closer Examination," *Population* (English Edition, 2002-) 67, no. 2 (2012): 283.

children into slavery to save other family members. Even when women joined the labor force, men still treated them as property.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, families were torn apart by “revolutionary zeal.” Pan Zhenghui, a countryside woman, decided to leave her infant to die when she was recruited as a “Great Leap Forward Worker” at a distant steel factory. She justified her actions by saying, “in those days, young people like me cared neither for elders or our children. We did everything we were told to do. We were full of revolutionary zeal. That’s how it was.”<sup>43</sup>

In June of 1958, Liu Shaoqi, the Vice Chairman of the PRC, spoke to Chinese Women’s Federation leaders to explain why Chairman Mao made “no family” a Great Leap goal.<sup>44</sup> He unveiled a plan to eliminate the family as a social construct in sixty years. Scheduled to start in 1958, Liu Shaoqi planned to shorten marriages to only last one year.<sup>45</sup> The sole purpose of marriage would be for procreation, and state daycares would raise the offspring. Coupled with the party’s stance on female chastity, those one-year marriages would effectively constrain female sexuality within marriage. In his speech, Liu Shaoqi proclaimed that “by eliminating families it would be possible to eliminate private property...if a wife and children were considered to be one’s personal property.”<sup>46</sup> To Liu Shaoqi and other ranking members of the party, women were just another piece of private property to be collectivized.

According to the party, the family would be replaced by state daycares, canteens, and senior nursing homes. In reality, these state centers only created new double burdens for women and entrenched gender stereotypes that women were responsible for domestic labor. Zhao Liwen told us in an interview that “in my family, my mother bought food, my grandmother cooked it... and a group of women usually worked at the canteens.”<sup>47</sup> As the party still expected women to staff state domestic centers, women were still responsible for these “domestic tasks,” but just in a way that benefited the state most economically. Liu Shaoqi justified women’s liberation in economic terms because their freedom provided the CCP more laborers. Mentions of female empowerment were limited and secondary to their need for female labor to carry out the Great Leap. Ironically, these same Maoists criticized capitalists for exploiting women in the home when they were doing the same at the state level. Finally, when the Great Leap became a great famine, women were then blamed for not working hard enough at home. Many retrospective accounts of the famine accredited women with leaving 10% of crops to rot in the fields when their husbands and sons were off working in steel factories.<sup>48</sup> Two interviewees agreed with this assessment and told us that the famine happened in part because “all the young, strong men were working in factories, and only women were left for the harvest.”<sup>49</sup> First, by deeming women as less qualified, secondary-laborers not fit to work in steel factories, the party contradicted its promises for gender equality in labor. Next, although many do not fault women for causing the famine, this way of retelling their involvement perpetuates benevolent sexism by absolving them of blame because of their inherent inferiority as laborers.

Overall, the state’s attempt to eliminate the family failed in more ways than one. Public canteens and daycares were poorly run by widows and older women. They were overcrowded and often left children underfed and unbathed. As a result, women voluntarily assumed new double burdens to care for their children at home. Su Wanyi, a rural cadre’s wife in the Sichuan province, recalled her husband chasing after young women in their village who allowed his advances because he had power over who got food. When Su Wanyi stayed home to look after her children, cadres

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Interview of Pan Zhenghui, in *Forgotten Voices of Mao's Great Famine, 1958-1962: An Oral History* conducted by Zhou Xun (London, UK: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> Yang et al., *Tombstone*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>47</sup> Zhao Liwen, in a telephone interview with the author, July 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 277-93.

<sup>49</sup> Zhao Liwen, in a telephone interview with the author, July 2020; Zhang Shiyang, in a telephone interview with the author, July 2020.

deducted her work points and food.<sup>50</sup> Women who tried to stay home at night in Macheng to care for their children were banned from canteens. Daycares only absolved fathers of the responsibility to care for children, as mothers were predominantly the ones who wanted to remedy state childcare inadequacies and suffered the consequences. Women also starved after giving birth. Pan continued her interview about her third pregnancy in 1962, when “I was given forty days of maternity leave with a price to pay. I got no work points for those forty days. With no work points, I had nothing. No food.”<sup>51</sup>

## Women and Famine Politics

In addition, there were few women in political positions and even fewer in high CCP offices. By creating a political glass ceiling, the Chinese Communist Party ensured that women could not hold up their half of the sky. Based on CCP records, only four out of ninety-seven members of the 8th CCP Central Committee (serving from 1956-69) were women.<sup>52</sup> The Central Committee was responsible for electing the Politburo, the PRC’s executive branch that held much of the government’s central decision-making power. Unsurprisingly, none of the twenty-five members of the Politburo were female.<sup>53</sup> However, these statistics must be contextualized. Across both the Pacific Ocean and the ideological spectrum, America had even lower female representation in Congress. At the same point in time, women held only 3% of all U.S. congressional seats and 1% of all Senate seats.<sup>54</sup> Even though women had even less government representation in the United States, the U.S.’s adversarial political system allowed women’s rights political organizations to flourish. In contrast, the CCP was able to puppet Chinese women’s political organizations.

China’s Women’s Federations only held symbolic power. Along with labor unions, youth leagues, and the militia, women’s federations existed to instill the central government’s will onto local civilians. When leaders of Women’s Federations attempted to advocate for women suffering during the famine, they were punished and purged for being “rightists” like other members of the CCP. For example, Li Lei, the Chairwoman of the Gansu Province Women’s Federation, learned of cannibalism and tree bark consumption during the famine. Her self-published memoir documents her fury at the CCP branding her as a right deviationist in 1959 for telling the truth.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, most cadres saw a position at a Women’s Federation as an undesirable dead-end political job. This reputation further weakened the organizations’ abilities to demand action from the central government. As a result, many of these women’s federations resigned themselves to focus on local issues such as domestic abuse and sexual violence. While the CCP’s women’s federations were trying to combat gender violence, multiple reports reveal that cadres and party members themselves were frequent perpetrators of sexual abuse. In retrospect, the CCP’s man-made famine exacerbated the societal issues of gender violence.

Although the actions of the few do not represent the majority, there were many alarming accounts of party cadres raping, assaulting, humiliating, and objectifying women during the famine years. In 1960, two-party secretaries in the Wengcheng commune raped 34 women.<sup>56</sup> In Hebei, three-party secretaries and a deputy county head sexually abused women “routinely.”<sup>57</sup> After investigation, the Guijiaying village party secretary admitted to raping 27 women

<sup>50</sup> Interview of Su Wanyi, in *Forgotten Voices of Mao's Great Famine, 1958-1962: An Oral History* conducted by Zhou Xun (London, UK: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>51</sup> Zhou, *Forgotten Voices*, 232.

<sup>52</sup> News of the Communist Party of China (China). <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/139962/8437279.html>.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Rutgers Eagleton Institute of Politics, "History of Women in the U.S. Congress," *Center for American Women and Politics*, <https://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/history-women-us-congress>.

<sup>55</sup> Li Lei, *Long Years*, self-published, October 1999, 149.

<sup>56</sup> Dikoetter, *Mao's Great*, 253.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*



and making unwanted sexual advances on almost every unmarried woman in the village.<sup>58</sup> On a broader scale, one in eight militia guards running detainment stations recalled raping a woman in custody.<sup>59</sup> These party secretaries were supposedly the most zealous advocates for gender equality—upholding the CCP’s gender equality platform. Admittedly, sexual violence is part of a broader cultural issue that is not unique to the Great Famine, but the circumstances during the famine facilitated the manifestations of misogyny. Between 1958 and 1961, rural China witnessed a combination of two factors that led to a rise in sexual violence by government members. Firstly, a male-dominated cadre system meant to oversee Great Leap Forward agricultural and steel projects gave local Communist officials extensive power over labor and resource allocation. Secondly, a famine-induced scarcity of resources allowed these officials to threaten women by withholding food or use food as a bargaining device to procure sexual favors. On top of the two local factors, the central government’s grain procurement policy, one that confiscated most of the grain produced in rural villages to feed urban residents, caused food scarcity in the first place. When the party gave absolute power to local cadres, they turned a blind eye to cadres lording over peasants by controlling food and work points.

Another example of the abuse of power occurred in a Great Leap steel factory in 1958. Three hundred women were forced to work naked in a factory in the Hunan Province.<sup>60</sup> Women would compete for cash prizes worth a month’s salary to see who was the most eager to strip naked in front of male factory administrators. Hunan was one of the provinces most devastated by the famine, where modern Bayesian analysis finds that governmental errors rather than natural disasters caused 100% of the 380,470 excess deaths during the famine.<sup>61</sup> Even when Beijing launched an inquiry against the factory administrators after women became sick in the winter while working naked, the factory leaders justified their abuse by claiming that they were liberating women from “feudal taboos” by “encouraging” them to take off their clothes.<sup>62</sup>

Even punishments of women entailed sexual abuse. Women accused of stealing food during the famine were paraded naked around the village as punishment in Suichang County. Many committed suicides from shame.<sup>63</sup> These grotesque punishments point to the deep-rooted misogyny of local CCP leaders. They combined feudal views of women as property with revolutionary zeal, wielding the worst of both views to punish women. These practices are not anomalies in mid-twentieth century society. Historians cannot say that all, or even a majority of cadres were abusive. However, a flawed governmental system designed without checks and balances allowed cadres with misogynistic personal beliefs to act with impunity.

While some women committed suicide in an attempt to win back their dignity, other women sold their morality for survival. In cities, desperation-induced prostitution resurfaced during the Great Famine. In Chongqing, the capital of Chengdu, prostitution flourished during the famine despite being nearly eradicated before 1958.<sup>64</sup> A jail in Chengdu kept more than a hundred prostitutes, some of whom worked with male thieves and traveled the country to sell their bodies for food.<sup>65</sup> There were also reports of young rural women traveling to cities and performing sexual favors in public parks for as little as a ration coupon worth ten cents.<sup>66</sup> Patterns of prostitution show that China’s urban-rural divide was more than geographical; rural prostitutes were denounced by urban civilians who used the prostitutes’ desperate actions to reaffirm their superiority over rural citizens. In many ways, the city-dwellers became

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>61</sup> Daniel Houser, Barbara Sands, and Erte Xiao, "Three Parts Natural, Seven Parts Man-made: Bayesian Analysis of China's Great Leap Forward Demographic Disaster," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 69, no. 2 (February 2009), ScienceDirect.

<sup>62</sup> Dikötter, *Mao's Great*, 254.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Zhou, *Forgotten Voices*, 200.

<sup>65</sup> Dikötter, *Mao's Great*, 255.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 233.

the new upper class with food capital and grain tickets. As a whole, Zhang Shiyang and Liu Xinqi both recalled in their interviews that villagers were desperate to go to the cities to secure more food and ration coupons.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, sex traffickers preyed on women—young, married, or widowed—from famine-stricken areas such as Gansu and Shandong, resulting in the sale of forty-five women to six different villages by one trafficker.<sup>68</sup>

Women suffered violence inside the home as well. Frustration and extreme circumstances during the famine escalated incidents of domestic violence. In Nanjing, there were two murders between family members reported every month during the famine. Men committed most of these homicides because they felt that their wives or children were “burdens” to the family.<sup>69</sup> Husbands blamed women for being hungry and not getting enough food at canteens. Chen Gu, a woman who lived in the rural Sichuan Province, recalled that “my father beat my mother up because she did not get her portion of the food.”<sup>70</sup>

In rural areas, female labor was separated from male labor—and systematically devalued. According to historian Frank Dikötter, work-point systems in communes paid women less than men.<sup>71</sup> By giving women fewer work points, the system, by extension, gave women less food. Another example of Communist hypocrisy lies within their treatment of menstruation. Communists criticized China’s old feudal society for its backward menstrual taboos vilifying menstruation—a natural part of female existence. However, cadres radically shifted to the other end of the spectrum, humiliating women asking for sick leave due to severe menstrual pain, claiming that they were ridding women of the feudal menstrual taboos barring women from working during menstruation to help them achieve equality. In the Chengdong People’s Commune, party secretary Xu Yingjie demanded that women who requested sick leave must drop their pants in front of their co-workers to undergo a humiliating “cursory inspection” by male party leaders.<sup>72</sup> Again, Communists applied equality too absolutely when they compelled pregnant women to work in the fields until they miscarried. In an interview, Liu Xinqi shared how local cadres made both men and women work in the fields and did not give additional food or time off work to pregnant or nursing mothers.<sup>73</sup> In one Sichuan district, 24 pregnant women miscarried because of field labor during the late stages of pregnancy.<sup>74</sup> Pregnant women who refused to work in the Hunan commune were made to undress in the middle of the winter and break the ice, the logic being that they would keep working to avoid freezing to death.<sup>75</sup> When the Communist government only gave vague guidelines for treating women and men “equally,” humanity was lost during implementation.

## Conclusion

When it came to gender equality promises, Mao Zedong and the rest of the CCP delivered on feminism only when it was advantageous for the party's other political needs. During the Great Famine, the CCP “liberated” women from homes to work in fields. Their motivations were not to empower women to become societal and cultural equals to men but to take advantage of the female labor force to complete the Great Leap Forward. This perversion of feminism contributing to a political tragedy of such enormous magnitude and complexity warrants much more scholarship than the field currently has. In the future, it would be valuable to conduct an extensive literature review of Chinese peer-reviewed academic scholarship to reveal tensions or biases of both Chinese and Western studies on the famine. We

<sup>67</sup> Zhang Shiyang, in a telephone interview with the author, July 2020; Liu Xinqi, in a telephone interview with the author, July 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Dikötter, *Mao’s Great*, 247.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>70</sup> Zhou, *Forgotten Voices*, 250.

<sup>71</sup> Dikötter, *Mao’s Great*, 251.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>73</sup> Liu Xinqi, in a telephone interview with the author, July 2020.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

also plan to study the evolution of the urban-rural gulf in China, and how geographic and economic disparities correlate with ideological differences concerning gender equality. The Chinese Marxist-feminist experiment proved to be a failure during the Great Famine. However, analysis of its failure allows tomorrow's women to push past today's glass ceilings to finally hold up their half of the sky.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. X, and everyone who helped make the University of x Mentorship Program possible virtually amid the COVID-19 pandemic. I am beyond grateful for their countless inspiring speeches over Zoom, ever-present support, and much-needed encouragement. I want to especially acknowledge my English and History teachers at x School, and my philosophy and political science professors at x for inciting my interest in research and helping me develop the skills to carry out my visions. I am also profoundly grateful to my friends and family for believing in me—even when I did not.

Finally, this research paper is dedicated to my grandmother. She is a strong, independent woman who always inspired me with her stories about serving in the People's Liberation Army as a member of the CCP. She taught me not to demonize Communism without fully understanding it, and to appreciate its optimism while harshly criticizing its failures. Nothing could have been more applicable to this research paper.

Following the spirit of my grandmother's words, I conducted this research as objectively as possible. I gave credit to the Communists for being more progressive than much of the 1960s Western world in terms of their ideas of gender equality. However, I also held them accountable for the tragedy that sprang from the misguided and rudimentary application of their theory into practice. Eventually, I know that my grandparents will understand my harsh words in this research paper against the ideology they dedicated their life to because they have always reminded me to pursue the truth—and judge it for myself.

## References

- Blanchard, Eric M. "Rethinking International Security: Masculinity in World Politics." *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2014): 61-79.
- Dikötter, Frank. *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962*. New York: Walker et, 2011.
- Duran, Mercedes, Miguel Moya, and Jesus L. Megias. "It's His Right, It's Her Duty: Benevolent Sexism and the Justification of Traditional Sexual Roles." *The Journal of Sex Research* 48, no. 5 (2011): 470-78.
- Engels, Friedrich. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. London, UK: Penguin Books, 2010.
- Ens Manning, Kimberley, and Felix Wemheuer, eds. *Eating Bitterness*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014.
- Goldfarb, Jeffrey C. "Why Is There No Feminism after Communism?" *Social Research* 64, no. 2 (1997): 235-57.

- Grada, Cormac O. "Great Leap, Great Famine: A Review Essay." *Population and Development Review* 39, no. 2 (2013): 333-46.
- Houser, Daniel, Barbara Sands, and Erte Xiao. "Three Parts Natural, Seven Parts Man-made: Bayesian Analysis of China's Great Leap Forward Demographic Disaster." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 69, no. 2 (February 2009). ScienceDirect.
- Huang, Zheping. "Charted: China's Great Famine, according to Yang Jisheng, a journalist who lived through it." *Quartz*, March 9, 2016. Accessed July 24, 2020.  
<https://qz.com/633457/charted-chinas-great-famine-according-to-yang-jisheng-a-journalist-who-lived-through-it/>.
- Kissinger, Henry A. "Document 12: Memorandum of Conversation: Beijing, February 17–18, 1973, 11:30 p.m.–1:20 a.m." Abstract. *Foreign Relations of the United States 1969–1976* XIXVIII, China, 1973-1976, nos. Part 1.  
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v18/d12>.
- Kollontai, Alexandra M. "International Socialist Conferences of Women Workers." In *Alexandra Kollontai: Selected Articles and Speeches*. New York: Internat. Publ., 1984.
- Kung, James Kai-sing, and Justin Yifu Lin. "The Causes of China's Great Leap Famine, 1959–1961." *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 52, no. 1 (2003): 51-73.  
<https://doi.org/10.1086/380584>.
- Lee, Pauline C. "Li Zhi and John Stuart Mill: A Confucian Feminist Critique of Liberal Feminism." In *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender*, edited by Chenyang Li, 113-32. Chicago: Open Court, 2000.
- Leffingwell, Hannah. "Toward a Feminist Definition of Feminism: A Historical Exploration of the Word, 'Feminism.'" *Public Seminar*, January 16, 2018. Accessed July 17, 2020.  
<https://publicseminar.org/2018/01/toward-a-feminist-definition-of-feminism/>.
- Li, Zhisui. *The Private Life of Chairman Mao: The Memoirs of Mao's Personal Physician*. Edited by Anne F. Thurston. New York: Random House, 1996.
- Manning, Kimberley Ens. "The Gendered Politics of Woman-Work: Rethinking Radicalism in the Great Leap Forward." *Modern China* 32, no. 3 (July 2006): 349-84.  
doi:10.1177/0097700406288317.
- "Merriam-Webster's 2017 Words of the Year." In *Merriam-Webster*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-of-the-year-2017-feminism>.
- News of the Communist Party of China* (China).  
<http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/139962/8437279.html>.

Rutgers Eagleton Institute of Politics. "History of Women in the U.S. Congress." Center for American Women and Politics. <https://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/history-women-us-congress>.

Stacey, Judith. "When Patriarchy Kowtows: The Significance of the Chinese Family Revolution for Feminist Theory." *Feminist Studies* 2, no. 2/3 (1975): 64-112. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177771>.

Thornburg, Mika. "Oral History Guide." Unpublished manuscript, Department of History, University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, n.d.

Wesoky, Sharon R. "Bringing the *Jia* Back into *Guojia*: Engendering Chinese Intellectual Politics." *Signs* 40, no. 3 (2015): 647-66. <https://doi.org/10.1086/679524>.

World Heritage Encyclopedia. "Feminism in China." *Project Gutenberg Self-Publishing Press*. [http://self.gutenberg.org/articles/Feminism\\_in\\_China](http://self.gutenberg.org/articles/Feminism_in_China).

Wulfsohn, Joseph A. "Biden Uses Quote Notably Uttered by Mao Zedong during Big-Money Fundraiser: Reports." *Fox News*, July 14, 2020. <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/biden-reportedly-uses-quote-notably-uttered-by-mao-zedong-during-fundraiser>.

Yang, Jisheng, Edward Friedman, Jian Guo, and Stacy Mosher. *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.

Zhao, Zhongwei, and Anna Reimondos. "The Demography of China's 1958-61 Famine: A Closer Examination." *Population (English Edition, 2002-)* 67, no. 2 (2012): 281-308.

Zhou, Xun. *Forgotten Voices of Mao's Great Famine, 1958-1962: An Oral History*. London, UK: Yale University Press, 2013.