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Survival and Development of Women in China during the Great Famine: Policies, Social Structures, and Gender Role Reconstruction

Di Hu ^{1,*}

¹ Beacon House, Queens Rd, Bristol BS8 1QU, University of Bristol

* Correspondence: Di Hu, Beacon House, Queens Rd, Bristol BS8 1QU, University of Bristol

Abstract: This study examines the survival and development of women in China during the nationwide crisis between 1959 and 1961, analyzing how prevailing ideological frameworks at the time influenced social and cultural transformations, particularly in the redefinition of gender roles. Against the backdrop of rapid industrialization and agricultural collectivization, women bore dual responsibilities in both production and reproduction, serving as contributors to collective efforts while also experiencing the burdens of systemic upheaval. Although policies officially promoted gender equality, their implementation encountered cultural resistance and structural constraints. This paper further explores the lasting impact of the crisis on women's social status and how it influenced subsequent gender dynamics in Chinese society.

Keywords: Great Chinese Famine; women's liberation; gender roles; social transformation; Marxist-Leninist ideology

1. Introduction

The period of widespread hardship in China between 1959 and 1961 is widely understood to have resulted from a combination of political, social, and environmental factors. Scholars generally agree that the origins of this crisis were primarily influenced by human-made elements, driven by a mix of social, political, and natural challenges. This era was marked by severe social and economic upheaval, leading to significant hardship and famine, with profound effects on society. Rapid industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture were key events during this time, shaped by policies aimed at transforming the agrarian economy into a socialist one. The issue of gender during this period has been extensively studied in historical and political science, making it an important subject of discussion in this context.

This essay will explore the time frame from 1959 to 1961, examining how the prevailing ideological frameworks of the period influenced social and cultural changes, particularly women's roles and opportunities. While the ideological goals were clear and progressive, they often encountered practical challenges and cultural resistance, leading to an incomplete realization of the intended gender equality.

The second part of this essay will argue that, while the ideological goals were not fully realized, the difference between the planned ideologies and the actual outcomes played a significant role in shaping the evolution of gender roles, resulting in a unique and tumultuous process of women's liberation. Part three suggests that the increasing demands of this transitional period eventually required women to take on dual responsibilities of both social production and reproduction. This heavy labor was compounded by the hardships and hunger of the time, making women both contributors and victims of the national struggles.

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Part four will discuss the long-term impact of dynamic gender roles on the perception of gender during the crisis. It will explore how these roles influenced subsequent transformative changes and the impacts on women of the period, as well as how the evolving social structure marginalized them over time. Through this analysis, the essay seeks to demonstrate how, amid the crisis and political turbulence, the liberation of women as a marginalized group was precarious, and gender roles were reshaped and reconstructed in the contradictory socio-cultural environment.

2. Literature Review and Aims

Research on women's experiences during the Great Famine (1959-1961) reflects the complex intersection of political, social, and economic forces in Chinese historical studies. This body of work underscores the importance of a comprehensive understanding of historical events and national policies, which collectively shaped the gender roles of women during the famine and the lasting impact of poverty. Both areas of research emphasize the need for a holistic approach to understanding how historical events and national policies influenced the gender roles of women in the context of famine.

Gender studies, as a field, emerged relatively recently in China. Since the 1980s, Chinese historians have increasingly treated women as independent subjects of study, systematically developing the field known as the history of women. Research on the history of women in China, particularly since the founding of the People's Republic of China, has yielded significant results, with studies on women's roles in the 1950s being particularly abundant. Research on women's gender roles during the Great Leap Forward period has primarily focused on women's participation in collective labor, with a particular emphasis on rural women. Studies of urban women during this period, in contrast, remain limited, with most research concentrated on Shanghai. The conclusions of these studies are often similar, for example, highlighting the poor quality of services provided by socialized institutions, such as canteens and crèches, which were unpopular with women [2].

However, it must be acknowledged that these studies have, to some extent, obscured the unique aspects of urban women's labor and neglected the significance of domestic labor in maintaining the social fabric during this period.

Western countries have long been pioneers in theoretical research on gender studies. However, due to the limitations imposed by the availability of historical materials from China's specific historical context, much of the scholarship has focused on the socio-political and economic dimensions of China's Great Leap Forward and its aftermath, particularly issues such as bureaucracy, leadership failures, and the impact on peasants. Gender issues have largely been treated as a subtopic within the broader analyses conducted by Western scholars. The earliest state-supported research on gender roles in China emerged in 1976 [3]. Phyllis Andors' article, "Politics of Chinese Development: The Case of Women, 1960-1966," published in 1976, compared women's emancipation during the Great Leap Forward with that in the West. Andors argued that, due to the state's coercive agenda, the Great Leap Forward was a period of significant social unrest, during which Chinese women were pushed into social production on a large scale before modern household substitutes became commonplace. Consequently, Chinese women during the Great Famine faced a "double burden" of productive labor in society and reproductive responsibilities at home. This analysis of women's labor during the Great Leap Forward has become foundational for subsequent research on the period [4].

While there is valuable scholarship on the topic, longitudinal studies of women's gender roles during the Great Famine are still lacking. Chinese scholars tend to view Mao's legacy more sympathetically, while foreign scholars, influenced by their political stances and limited understanding of Chinese social culture, often focus on criticism and rebuttal. This divergence has created a narrative that lacks objectivity. Therefore, this paper aims to offer a critical perspective by combining second-hand literature with a balanced analytical approach.

3. Ideology, Policy, and Practice in Widely Poverty

During the Great Leap Forward period, Chinese leadership, adopted Marxism-Leninism as the primary theory guiding social construction. The guiding ideology for women's emancipation was informed by Marxist theories of housework and women's liberation, combined with the experiences of women's emancipation in the USSR. This led to the formulation of a series of gender-equality policies. As a result, women became increasingly involved in social labor. The rigid and conservative gender division of labor was dismantled, and traditional gender cultures and relations began to change in the early stages of socialist construction. However, there remained a gap between the introduction of these policies and their practical implementation. In the collectivist era, society's over-emphasis on the "public nature" of the state and the collective led to the encroachment on, and marginalization of, individual women.

The theory of women's emancipation in post-revolutionary China was grounded in the concept of 'Marxist maternalism,' which posited that women's liberation could be achieved through their engagement in productive labor. This framework intertwined women's equality with motherhood, family harmony, and national construction, with a particular focus on maternal health and integrating these elements into broader nation-building efforts. However, this approach not only tasked women with new responsibilities in public life but also emphasized their continued roles within the family, such as maternal and caregiving duties.

After the completion of the socialist transformation, the Chinese Women's Federation, at the Third National Women's Congress, articulated a policy for women's work as "building the country through thrift and diligence, maintaining the family through thrift and diligence, and striving for the construction of socialism." In practice, however, this policy was often simplified and misinterpreted, primarily focusing on mobilizing women for household chores. For example, the CCP engaged rural women in agricultural and industrial tasks to free up male labor for larger-scale engineering projects. In response to these dynamics, Deng Xiaoping, a prominent Communist Party leader, proposed that the "two diligences" principle should apply equally to men, urging them to be diligent and thrifty in managing their families.

As Manning explains, the socialist women's movement in New China evolved both in theory and practice regarding domestic labor and women's roles in society. The socialist collective economy merged the private and public spheres, challenging the male-centered patriarchal system. Yet, traditional gender divisions of labor and patriarchal norms persisted, particularly within family settings. This focus on recognizing women's domestic work inadvertently reinforced traditional gender roles within domestic labor, embedding these roles more deeply into the cultural fabric.

The authority believed that women's fuller participation in productive labor could be achieved through the establishment of social welfare services, such as communal dining and collective nurseries. These policies were designed to encourage women's participation in the labor market while promoting their economic independence and social emancipation. At the same time, these policies sought to preserve traditional roles as mothers and caregivers.

While these women's emancipation policies significantly increased women's participation in social production, thereby enhancing their self-awareness and self-identity, they also sought to dissolve the spiritual oppression of women by feudal remnants. The state's emphasis on family labor recognition affirmed the political status of workers' families. However, in practice, there was a tendency to demand that housewives "serve their husbands and be traditional wives and mothers." The aim of this strategy was to enable women to participate in productive labor while also participating in societal development, thus enhancing their self-worth and social status.

The practical implementation and outcomes of these theories on women's emancipation in socialist China were complex and contentious. As T. Barlow notes, the Maoist approach merged the state and family, politicizing women within the family context. This strategy, which sought to achieve socialist goals through the politicization of women, deviated from both traditional and Marxist norms, representing a unique reconciliation of these ideologies. However, despite the theoretical emphasis on emancipation and gender equality, the practical application often led to adverse outcomes. Many women suffered from deteriorating health due to overwork and insufficient social support, with malnutrition and overwork during the Great Leap Forward leading to severe health problems such as uterine prolapse. Additionally, the evolving roles of men and women placed significant strain on family structures. Although policies aimed to promote gender equality by advancing women's roles, their implementation sometimes caused tensions and conflicts within families.

In conclusion, the Great Leap Forward, under the influence of Marxist-Leninist ideology, aimed to achieve gender equality, though its practical effects were more complex and contentious. The policies sought to transform women's roles and integrate them into national development. However, the results often fell short of expectations. During this period, China pursued an innovative form of socialist collectivism that blurred the lines between the public and private sectors, merging production and reproduction roles. This approach placed newly liberated women in a contradictory position, where they faced oppression both in productive labor and reproduction. Consequently, amidst the nationwide famine, the gender roles of Chinese women underwent significant and challenging transformations.

4. Famine, Modernization, and the Dynamics of Gender Roles

During the Great Leap Forward, profound changes in social production relations and ownership systems led to significant shifts in the social value system and moral concepts, profoundly affecting gender role dynamics. This period was marked by a stark contrast between the ambitious goals of modernization and the harsh realities of development, along with a resulting famine, illustrating a complex and unique trajectory in the evolution of women's roles.

Friedrich Engels, in exploring the roots of women's oppression, highlighted that with the emergence of the patriarchal family, household care lost its public nature and became a private affair; subsequently, a woman, once married, found herself excluded from social production. This historical backdrop set the stage for the challenges women faced during the Great Leap Forward [5]. Initially, women's involvement in technically advanced sectors was met with social resistance and self-doubt. However, figures like Di Zuo-zhi advocated for technological revolutions as essential for enhancing labor productivity and improving conditions for women, gradually altering perceptions. Local ideological efforts also played a crucial role, encouraging women's active participation in technological advancements, thus challenging prevailing social prejudices and facilitating broader acceptance. By organizing ideological work, the local government helped women to eliminate their sense of inferiority and encouraged them to bravely participate in technological innovations, proving their possibilities and legitimacy as technological subjects with actual achievements, thus changing social prejudices and gaining social acceptance.

One of the main problems hindering women's participation in social production is the excessive intensity of physical labour, which is solved by mechanization. In the 1960 documentary film, 'The 38th Hotel', produced by China's Central News and Record Film Studio, there are automated cooking machines such as automatic ordering systems, dish-washing machines, noodle-making machines, vegetable-cutting machines and so on, and all of them are operated by female cooks and workers. The profound impact of such mechanization: it enabled female workers to shift from domestic spaces to contributing to soci-

ety by alleviating the physical intensity of their work through automation. Thus, the invention and use of automated equipment in the Samba Hotel was actually a prerequisite for the fact that all the jobs in the hotel were performed by women. On a practical level, women workers were the inventors and creators of modern equipment; on a political level, women became the mainstay of the technological revolution, as China Worker said, 'Women no longer think about their personal lives in terms of food, rice, oil, and salt, but about how to innovate technology, improve production, and do a good job in terms of collective living and welfare.

However, mechanisation can liberate labour, but the more commodified the household chores are, the more women are trapped in inherent gender roles. Critics like Winner L argue that technology is inherently political, often entrenching power dynamics between different groups. On the question of specific paths, the concept of 'cultural screening' was proposed to sharply oppose the capitalist approach, marking a clear distinction between the socialist path and the capitalist one. He critiqued the commodification of domesticity within the technopolitics of capitalism, noting that in the Western model, women were largely excluded from social labor until household appliances became widespread. "Emancipating women is not achieved through the production of washing machines," Mao stated in a 1965 conversation with a French presidential envoy, emphasizing his opposition to the capitalist approach of technopolitical strategies during the Cold War. Dallas Walker Smyth suggested that the 20-year U.S. embargo on technological commodities against China might have inadvertently benefited China by shielding it from American ideological influences. Coupled with the Soviet withdrawal of technical assistance, China was compelled to depend on its own technological innovations. Through their active participation in the mass technological innovation movement, women transcended the physical limitations traditionally imposed by the division of labor, becoming equal partners in socialist construction as subjects of technological labor.

Importantly, during the collectivist period, the modernization of household chores under socialist technopolitics assumed socialization as a prerequisite. The development of automated equipment, envisioned as a collective living welfare facility, significantly reduced the burden of women's household chores. This ensured women's full participation in social production, ultimately advocating for a socialist collectivization of household chores where modernization and socialization proceeded concurrently. However, as narratives of technological specialization began to replace broader mass narratives, the political identity of women as pioneers of technological innovation and the socialist ideal of dismantling gendered divisions of labor were simultaneously undermined.

By the 1960s, widespread household appliances had trapped many women in suburban homes, reinforcing the middle-class ideal that domestic labor was not for women. This increased the burden on housewives, as noted by Chinese scholars, who also struggled to balance work with family responsibilities while participating in street cooperatives. This often led to psychological stress and identity conflicts. Furthermore, when participation in urban people's communes became mandatory, it introduced a new form of oppression for some housewives, complicating the supposed emancipation of socialized labour. This proves that when the society is not yet able to provide a more complete system of socialised domestic labour and higher service capacity, mobilising all housewives to participate in social production would lead to the occurrence of family disorder.

After the Great Leap Forward, China entered a period of economic restructuring, and the state began to streamline the number of urban workers, with women workers, who had many children and heavy family burdens, bearing the brunt of the burden, and the focus of authority's work shifted from mobilising women to take part in social production to keeping the family, and reaffirming the value of domestic work in socialist construction. The value of domestic labour in the construction of socialism was reaffirmed. That is to say, although gender role is in dynamic transformation, women have never had the autonomy to choose their roles.

Overall, in the period of disaster, women's gender role showed an overall progressive upward change, but the blow of any uncontrollable disaster to the emancipation of the second gender group was huge, so in the overall rising atmosphere of freedom and equality, gender role showed an unavoidable historical regression.

5. Survival or Revolution Narrative

As noted during the Maoist era, Chinese women were legally recognized as equals and were active in social labor during the famine, whether through choice or compulsion. This period saw a significant shift in gender role dynamics, with women taking on dual roles in social production and reproduction amid societal transformation. The burdens of heavy labor, compounded by the poverty and famine conditions, placed immense physical and mental stress on women. While this era did bring about a form of gender liberation, it also, to some extent, positioned women as victims within the revolutionary struggle and the broader national narrative.

Western scholars such as Manning argue that Women's Liberation in Maoist China did not enable women to gain subjectivity in the emancipation process but rather marked them as victims of the state's economic agenda within the binary narrative of state versus individual. These conclusions arise from the belief that the revolutionary leadership during the Great Leap Forward sacrificed individual agency for the national narrative of revolution and struggle, highlighting the necessity of organizational autonomy to achieve Marxist goals—a task that had to be reiterated frequently [1]. For instance, Becker describes Mao's blueprint as pseudoscience, suggesting that the Maoist approach was more of a belief system [6]. This in part perhaps stems from the resistance of Western political propaganda discourses to the new political system implemented in China [7].

Moreover, natural disasters exacerbated the situation, leaving the affected populations in dire straits. Reports indicated that over half of China's farmland was hit by calamities like typhoons, floods, and droughts, further crippling agricultural output. There were claims from certain Western sources that Chinese leadership might have used the civil war as a means to divert attention from the famine. 'Maybe Peking leaders want to divert the attention of their people from the famine now stalking all China. Chiang's threat to use famine unrest to help an invasion of the mainland support'.

The archival evidence reveals that in response to the famine, the CCP Central Committee adapted its approach rather than rigidly adhering to the initial ideology of the Great Leap Forward. A 1959 policy document from the Zhejiang Archives illustrates this shift:

'As the famine spread, the central government began to realize that the pace of the Great Leap Forward was too fast, prompting it to implement corrective leftist measures to aid the countryside. This included abandoning the slogan 'letting go of the belly to eat in public canteens' in favor of 'rationing according to the person, distributing to the household, voluntary participation, and keeping the balance for oneself.' As a result of these changes, the proportion of households participating in public canteens drastically decreased, from 89.3% in March to 58.4% in September [8].

Moreover, not only did local governments seek adjustments, but the central government also looked for economic support abroad during this crisis. For instance, diplomatic correspondence retained by the British National Archives indicates China's requests for economic assistance from the United Kingdom. At the same time, the government actively incorporated women into the political and social fabric, the number of female workers in the nationally owned units rose from 3,286,000 (13.4 % of the total number) to 10,087,000 (20 % of the total number) during the Great Famine.

In the midst of internal and external problems, engaging in revolutionary narratives, political struggles and fighting famine gradually became the most important task of the Chinese government. Women's liberation was also largely involved in political and ideological struggles, and political organisations such as the Political organizations such as the

Women's Federation, which were supposed to advocate for women's rights, were gradually marginalized or even dissolved in the context of the broader revolutionary struggles and political narratives.

6. Conclusion: Reconstruction and Development

As evidenced during the Famine period, Chinese women navigated a complex and often tortuous dynamic, which significantly influenced the trajectory of women's liberation in China. These experiences left indelible marks on both the national discourse on women's rights and the individual lives of women during that era.

Despite initial efforts toward gender equality, traditional roles and inequalities persisted, burdening women with primary responsibilities for household chores alongside their roles in agriculture or other labor sectors. The hard labor during the collectivization era, compounded by inadequate medical care and rest, resulted in chronic health problems for many women as they aged. Numerous women recounted physical ailments in old age, stemming from overwork during their youth—a lingering legacy of their compromised health.

Moreover, these transformations generated tensions and shifts within family structures, impacting marriages and intergenerational relationships. As economic reforms and market liberalization unfolded in the 1980s and 1990s, women who had once been central to revolutionary efforts found their roles evolving, with some feeling marginalized, reflecting the complex legacies of the revolution. Despite women gaining social recognition through their participation in labor and experiencing a strengthened sense of self, societal expectations continued to emphasize women's role in domestic tasks when required.

In response to these challenges, beginning in 1956, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) intensified efforts to improve maternal and child health and reproductive health in rural areas. By January 1957, in Zhejiang Province alone, the ACWF reported the training of sixty new midwives, with an additional six hundred in training, showcasing a targeted approach to address some of the enduring impacts of the Famine on women's health.

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