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Keywords

China, Politics, Cultural Revolution, Economic Reform, Women, Election

**The Implication of Cultural Revolution and Economic Reform
on Rural Women's Political Participation in Post-Mao China**

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Ouwen Jiang is a student of New York University majoring in Political Science and Social Work. This article discusses the implication of Cultural Revolution and Economic Reform on rural women's political participation in post-Mao China. The paper was inspired by a Political Economy class the author took in junior year.

Abstract: Since the passage of the Organic Law of Village Committees in 1987, direct election of village leaders has been conducted in China, and eventually reached a national scale after ten years' experiment. However, rural women's political participation is discouraged by the social and economic reality in the countryside. Taking a historical retrospect, this research project attempts to analyze the impact of Cultural Revolution and Economic Reform on rural women's voting rates and representation in local governments in post-Mao China. The results show that these two landmark political and social transformation in the 20th century have reinforced traditional gender roles, excluded rural women from power, and posed additional barriers to their political involvement by introducing new problems such as landlessness.

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Introduction

Although widely criticized for its social and political chaos, the Cultural Revolution is believed to have enhanced women's autonomy and socio-economic status through a party-led feminist agenda. Guided by Mao's famous proclamation that "women [can] hold up half the sky" women were massively mobilized into the labor force and politics, with the largest number of women being promoted to cadres status in 1962 and 11% of rural party branches having women as either party or deputy party secretaries in 1975 (Rosen 1995: 334). Yet, after Mao's death and the reformers' rise to power, the average number of women recruited into rural party branches dropped from 13.5% between 1966-1976 to 8.6% in the next five years, and currently, only 1% of all village committee chairs are women despite the gender affirmative action enforced in the local elections (Howell 2006).

Such rapid removal of women from power presents an intriguing question that requires a deeper analysis of history that goes beyond the discourse of cultural norms (e.g. strict gender roles, women's "inferiority" to men and lack of self-confidence) and education levels. My hypothesis is that the state-oriented nature of the Cultural Revolution, which only sees the utilitarian value in women and ignores the deeply-embedded gender problem, has not only determined the failure of securing any gendered breakthrough achieved for this period but also created huge barriers to women's future political involvement. The economic reform with its market and money-driven ideology further weakens rural women's incentive

to engage in politics, and the subsequent introduction of household responsibility system and rural land policies, combined with other social factors (e.g media emphasis on a return to “femininity” and recruitment of inexperienced women into local political bureaus), all served to restrict women’s political participation and reinforce gender stereotype of only men being capable of doing politics.

Literature Review

Most papers examining rural women’s low political participation in China analyzed the problem through the lens of cultural norms and institutional inequality. The patriarchal system (Altindal 2009), low incomes and education level (Zhang, Wang, and Liu 2009), Confucian values (Zhou and Gong 2014), as well as the lack of systemic support (Li 2015) are all factors that confine women’s role in politics and their level of involvement. For example, Pang (2014) concludes community norms, level of poverty and the perceived low quality of women in terms of education levels and ability as main reasons for the low voting rates of village women in Ningxia Autonomous Region. Similarly, Sargeson and Jacka (2017) demonstrate that low democratic quality combined with weak financial resources and institutions impede women’s substantive representation in village elections. Insightful as they are, few of those articles have considered this issue from a historical perspective, or linked the ideological and structural barriers to the effect of Cultural Revolution and Economic Reform. What’s missing in their analysis is a more nuanced view on the hidden danger built into the system

during this period that has become more transparent and detrimental as time proceeds.

Among the articles that did provide a historical context, the emphasis is on the effect of Cultural Revolution and Economic Reform on gender inequality that significantly limited rural women's earning ability and educational opportunities. Only a few of them establish a direct relationship between these two historical incidents and women's political participation, with Zhou's (1993) research on the conditions regarding women cadres in Xiantao Municipality in Hubei Province most relevant to this research. In her survey, Zhou provides detailed year-by-year data on the promotion of women cadres from 1949-1985 and separates her analysis into three parts, covering the period before, during, and after the Cultural Revolution. The implementation of household responsibility system, the weakening of mass organizations, and the party's reduced incentive to recruit women are shown as reasons for the decline of women's party membership. In this paper, a similar time framework will be adopted. With a close examination of these two historical incidents and their impact on rural women's lives, a more comprehensive understanding of the social and political reality faced by those women can be obtained, as well as their ability and willingness to engage in politics.

Cultural Revolution

1) State Feminism

Since its inception, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has at least outwardly championed a feminist agenda, propagating slogans

that advance women's liberation and gender equality. However, the party's strategy to mobilize women into heavy industry was a clear response to the radical policy of rapid industrialization that required massive labor force. Women, who were in Mao's vision a wasted reservoir of labor, were indoctrinated to "hold up half the sky" and work side by side with their male counterpart in nation-building. As Deng Yingchao, Vice President of the All-China Women's Federation during the 1950s and 1960s, emphasized in 1953, "women increasingly participated in heavy industry as a result of answering the state's call" (Jin, Manning, and Chu 2006: 614). The transformation of gender division and women's increasing visibility in politics were the consequence of such mobilization, rather than the aim.

Ironically, women's participation in labor did not translate into adequate protection of their rights, or the eradication of Confucian-patriarchal ideology. The slogan that "men and women are the same, and women comrades can achieve whatever men comrades can achieve" simply dismissed the cultural and political obstacles that were unique to Chinese women. The so-called "gender equality" was achieved through the muscularization of women, who were encouraged to take men as the norm and suppress their feminine characters to make themselves more competitive.

2) Iron Girl Movement

Perhaps no example can demonstrate the previous point better than the Iron Girl Movement during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Rural women, in particular, were recruited into single-sex

brigades to work in oil fields and transportation. Although they received widespread party recognition, the assigned work exceeded most women's physical capacity, and resulted in serious illness that eventually led to the disband of many specialized teams (Jin, Manning, and Chu 2006). Even the party-led All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) expressed its criticism in a report, where the movement was said to "harm the protection of women and their labor enthusiasm for long periods" (Jin, Manning, and Chu 2006: 622).

Even when performing as well as if not better than men, women received less work points for the same hours, and women faced with the double burden of work and family responsibility. Married women in the countryside were excluded from brigades because they were denigrated as backward and non-revolutionary for doing housework and providing childcare. Many sent-down youth were shocked by rural women's subordination and the persistence of gender inequality in the village (Entwisle and Henderson 2000). Since entrenched patriarchal ideas and customs were so entrenched, rural women's political participation faced stronger male resistance as they refused to recruit and train women in the party due to the alleged lack of political consciousness and experience (Keshena 2012). Many women cadres that were promoted to higher level party position were sent-down youth instead of local women because of the former group's higher education level and degree of freedom.

3) All-China Women's Federation (ACWF)

As the first nationwide women's organization, ACWF was established in 1949 to promote women's social and economic status

in China under the party's supervision. In the early years of formation, the ACWF remained relatively independent and was able to challenge the party's narrative, although not without limit. For example, when CCP leaders asserted that women's continued role in doing domestic work contradicted the Marxist–Leninist ideology, ACWF contested that under the current economic condition, not all women could be offered a job, and by carrying out family responsibility, they nevertheless contributed to the development of socialism (Tsui 1998). The Five Good Family Campaign was subsequently introduced in 1956 to acknowledge women's effort in taking care of families and the importance of their work to the state.

With the creation of ACWF, women cadres were recruited into the organization at all levels, and responsible for “women's work” such as family planning and education. In fact, the position held by women cadres in the countryside before 1966 was mostly in this area, and promotion to the rank of commissioner or director in the local Women's Federation seems to be the only possibility for female party members, which created a huge limitation to rural women's political participation that still exists today (Zhou 1993). During the Cultural Revolution, ACWF was shut down and completely absorbed into the party framework. Women's problems were no longer recognized as separate issues, but a part of the class struggle that would be simultaneously resolved with the success of the revolution.

4) Implication For Rural Women's Political Participation

Women's participation in labor force and politics before and during the Cultural Revolution demonstrates the process through

which the party successfully overrides traditional patriarchal authority with its own authority. For rural women, the socialist revolution had left the patriarchal system intact and condoned such exploitation of labor within the family. Those women remained heavily dependent on their husbands and burdened by the traditional gender roles. After Mao's death, the "iron girl" was ridiculed in popular literature for being repulsively muscularized and anti-human nature. Retrieving one's own femininity became a progressive attitude, and gender differentiation was actually favored by women in clothing, occupation and social roles. Although many of them joined the party, their political power was restrained in the Women's Federation, and thus unable to reach other male-dominated fields such as economic planning.

The transformation of ACWF into a party organ that is completely under the state's control also hinders rural women's involvement in politics as sometimes the project conceived by the federation focuses more on maintaining social stability and promoting local economic growth, rather than encouraging women's education and enhancing their political awareness (Zhou 1993). Rural women are shown to have distant relationships with the local Women's Federation because of "its weak political functions and their emotional detachment from it" (Huang 2018: 259). Acting as the state's agent, the Women's Federation's role in promoting rural women's political participation proved to be very limited (Huang 2018).

The Economic Reform

1) Overview

The Economic Reform, introduced since 1978, has brought new prosperity to China. Divided into two stages, the reform decollectivized agriculture and opened up the country to foreign investment in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and privatized the state-owned industry in the next decade. The era is characterized by rapid change in socioeconomic and political structure, rural migration to major cities, and a slight shift in the collectivistic ideology. For rural women, the reform is a double-edged sword as they enjoyed more freedom in production, but were further bound by their family responsibility and the entire household.

2) Household Responsibility System

Launched in the 1980s, the Household Responsibility System contracted land owned by the People's Communes to private hands, and peasants were able to exercise control over their own land under certain requirements. After the improved productivity generated by the system created labor surplus in agriculture, many women voluntarily engaged in sideline work at home, activities that were banned by the government before the reform. They raised pigs, grow vegetables, and gather chicken eggs, and doing whatever work they deemed as manageable. According to research conducted in Daqiuizhuang, a rural village that is approximately 50 kilometers from the city of Tianjin, 95% of the local women participated in the collective agriculture labor force prior to 1980. But by 1988, 84% of married women left the workforce to become housewives (Zhang and

Ma 1988). The physical hardship rural women endured during the years in heavy industry also hastened such retreat and reinforced the notion that women are naturally unsuitable for certain jobs, an ideological barrier that still discourages rural women's political participation today. Compared to the pre-reform period, rural women enjoyed more freedom as they no longer faced the double burden of commune work and housework. Sideline production proved to be extremely profitable in the early reform years, and more and more women chose to stay at home instead of attending school, which resulted in a decline in overall school attendance rates and a corresponding increase in the inequality between male and female education level in the countryside (Luo 1997).

The party propaganda also changed its narrative from encouraging rural women to participate in the labor force to emphasizing a honorable return to the family, and the success of women who engaged in sideline works. For example, an article titled "Mrs. Xie Fu and her long haired rabbits" was published by the Women's Federation in 1979, in which Mrs. Xie's story of raising rabbits and selling their furs for 530 yuan, a huge amount of money based on the standard of that time, was praised as a model for emulation (Watson 1992). However, the diversification of income-generating activities have deprived those women of their time to engage in public affairs. It becomes more difficult for the ACWF and other party organizations to recruit women who are bound entirely within their household (Luo 1997). Interest in politics and voting

declines as women become more concerned with making money to improve the welfare of their own families in a new economic order.

In general, the decollectivization of agriculture directly led to the resurfacing of strict gender roles and an old patriarchal belief of “*nanzhuwai, nuzhunei*” (man managing the affairs outside home and woman inside) in the village. Rural women were ascribed with the new role of being virtuous housewives that result in lower educational level and decreased interest in public affairs. The shrinking value of crops and livestock in later years when the agriculture market becomes more mature and competitive makes those women even more dependent on their employed husbands. All-China Women’s Federation and the National Bureau of Statistics have shown that the average gender income gap in rural areas increased to more than 40% between 1990 and 2000, partly because women had become the main labor force in agriculture, the least profitable sector of the economy (Sargeson 2006). A vicious cycle is thus created, with limited initiatives from local Women’s Federation to mobilize any change.

3) *Free Labor Market*

The creation of a free labor market has two major implications on rural women’s political participation. First, women faced severe discrimination in employment as managers acted with their own discretion and favored men in the selection process, who were considered as more stable, reliable and hard-working. When labor surplus became a huge concern in the early 1980s, some sociologists and economists openly proposed that “the high rate of

women's employment was 'unsuitable' for the Chinese economy at that stage and suggested that women should return home to make room for men" (Zheng 1997: 130). The communist party, following the same logic, reduced the number of women cadres recruited from the countryside. The new era, it is said, demanded "warlike" and "entrepreneurial" spirits, qualities that rural women lacked, and the majority of women cadres were thus swept away in the countryside (Rosen 1995). In a study of Xiantao Municipality (formerly Mianyang county) in Hubei Province, the exclusion of women from local party branch is cited as one major reason for the decline in the number of female brigade head from ninety-three in the late 1979 to only twelve in 1990 (Rosen 1995).

In addition, with the rapid economic development in urban areas, men and unmarried young women in the countryside migrated to the cities in search of better job opportunities. The intensification of women's work due to male migrant labor further reduced their incentives to participate in politics, and develop their career in this field. Most sent-down youth had also left the village to pursue a more promising future, and the reservoir of young, educated women in the rural areas had disappeared completely since the early years of the reform (Rosen 1995). One unintended consequence of such depletion of human resources is that when the party policy once again favored the promotion of women cadres, it's hard to find anyone eligible within the local party branches. As a result, "some teachers were turned overnight into county or bureau heads," but many of them were simply unprepared for the new responsibility (Zhou 1993: 60). It was

exactly at this time that the criticism of the poor quality of women cadres began to appear.

4) *The Land Management Law of 1998*

Introduced in 1998 in response to farmers' reluctance to invest in land over which they didn't have secure control, the Land Management Law established a thirty-year land use right for all farmers, and strongly discouraged land readjustment. Although the law successfully increased agriculture production, it caused many rural women to be landless when they get married as there would be no increase in the family's total land allocation with the arrival of a daughter-in-law (Song and Dong 2010). Divorced and widowed women had even more limited access to farmland because of their separation from husbands, and exclusion from the natal families by local tradition. It is concluded by many studies on rural women's land ownership that those who lack a claim to land are more dependent on their partners and at significantly higher risk of domestic violence (Song and Dong 2010). Such reliance only serves to reinforce the patriarchal structure already entrenched in the village, and rural women are reported to lose autonomy in village election when they are forced to vote for the predominantly male candidates favored by their husbands and father-in-law (Pang, Zeng, and Rozelles 2013). As a result, there has been no incentive for those women to cast a ballot, and no opportunity for women cadres to rise to any leadership position in the village.

Conclusion

The low political participation of rural women presents a huge challenge to gender equality and women's welfare in the countryside. The historical roots of the ideological and socioeconomic barriers to a higher level of involvement are explored in this paper as being the Cultural Revolution and the Economic Reform that did not aim for women's emancipation or increase their say in domestic politics. Rural women were further trapped in their household, and unable to express their opinions through voting. More specific policies should be enacted to protect women's safety in family and their access to political power.

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