

TRANSFORMATION OR TRADITION – DID MAO CHANGE WOMEN'S LIVES?

In traditional Chinese society, which was guided by Confucian thought, women were considered inferior to men. However, even as a very young man, Mao rebelled against this idea and preached the equality of the sexes. Later, when he came to power, the first major piece of legislation he passed was the 1950 Marriage Law (see page 31). But in the long term, did Mao's Communist rule really transform the lives of women and children, or were the old traditions too strong to overcome? Read both sides of the argument and the sources, then judge for yourself.

TRANSFORMATION?

SOURCE 1

Gentlemen, we are women!... We are also human beings... [yet] we are not even allowed to go outside the front gate. The shameless men, the villainous men, make us into their playthings... But so-called 'chastity' is confined to us women! The 'temples to virtuous women' are scattered all over the place, but where are the 'pagodas to chaste men'?

(EXTRACT FROM 'THE GREAT UNION OF THE POPULAR MASSES' ARTICLES IN THE XIANG RIVER REVIEW, JULY/AUGUST 1919)

SOURCE 2

Yesterday's incident was important. It happened because of the shameful system of arranged marriages, because of the darkness of the social system, the negation of the individual will, and the absence of the freedom to choose one's own mate. (EXTRACT FROM 'MISS ZHAO'S SUICIDE', A NOVEMBER 1919 ARTICLE BY MAO ZEDONG)

EARLY IDEAS

Mao was a student of Confucius. However, he rejected the Confucian idea of the 'three bonds' between ruler and subject, father and son, and husband and wife. He thought people should choose their relationships, not be tied to others against their will. In the summer of 1919, he used one of the 'Great Union of the Popular Masses' articles (see page 15) to act as a spokesperson for unhappily married women (Source 1).

MISS ZHAO

In another article that appeared in November 1919, Mao examined the case of Miss Zhao, a young woman who had killed herself rather than make a forced marriage to an older man she did not love. Again, Mao spoke up for the woman and against the traditional family system that had placed her in what he saw as an intolerable position (Source 2).

PRINCIPLE INTO PRACTICE

While the CCP was seeking power, its Women's Association organized campaigns against wife-beating and foot-binding – the ancient, and already illegal, practice of wrapping strips of cloth around young girls' feet to keep them small. But it was



Foot-binding produced painful deformities.

not until the People's Republic was founded that Mao could tackle the underlying problem of women's oppression. He did so in the Marriage Law of 1 May 1950 (Source 3).



A traditional wedding in 19th-century China.

THE MARRIAGE LAW

The Marriage Law contained measures for the protection of women and children. Marriage was to become a new kind of relationship freely entered into by women as well as men. Children were to be properly cared for. Infanticide was explicitly banned. This was an important provision, because in a society that considered them of little worth, baby girls were often killed. After the Marriage Law, many women who had been forced to wed divorced their husbands.

WOMEN AND WORK

As the Great Leap Forward was about to begin, Mao promoted the interests of women in another way. Now he pointed out that they should form a major part of the labour force that was setting out to strengthen China's agriculture and industry (Source 4). Soon many millions of women began to operate backyard furnaces, as well as cook in the communal canteens that fed other workers. They were free to do so because communes had nurseries where they could leave their children.

BIRTH CONTROL

Mao's Communist Party also helped women by providing birth control. The scheme was introduced in 1956, then briefly abandoned during the Great Leap Forward, as the aim then was to increase China's population. It began again in 1960 and has since given women much greater control over their lives. Improved health care has also reduced infant mortality.

BETTER LIVES

During his time in power, Mao transformed women's lives. In particular, he freed them from forced marriages and unwanted pregnancies. He also gave them important new opportunities to work and to earn equal pay for their labours.

SOURCE 3

Article 1: *The arbitrary and compulsory feudal marriage system, which is based on the superiority of man over woman and which ignores the children's interests, shall be abolished.*

The New Democratic marriage system, which is based on free choice of partners, on monogamy, on equal rights for both sexes, and on protection of the lawful interests of women and children, shall be put into effect.

Article 2: *Bigamy, concubinage, child betrothal, interference with the remarriage of widows and the exaction of money or gifts in connection with marriage shall be prohibited.*

Article 13: *Parents have the duty to rear and to educate their children; the children have the duty to support and to assist their parents. Neither the parents nor the children shall maltreat or desert one another...*

Infanticide by drowning and similar criminal acts is strictly prohibited.

(EXTRACTS FROM THE MARRIAGE LAW OF 1 MAY 1950)

SOURCE 4

China's women are a vast reserve of labour power. This reserve should be tapped and used in the struggle to build a mighty socialist country. To encourage women to join in productive labour, we must put into effect the principle of equal pay for equal work, men and women alike...

(EXTRACT FROM SOCIALIST UPSURGE IN CHINA'S COUNTRYSIDE, 1956)

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TRADITION?

SOURCE 5

% OF FULL MEMBERS OF
THE CCP CENTRAL
COMMITTEE WHO WERE
WOMEN

1945	2
1956	4
1969	8
1973	10
1977	7

SOURCE 6

In the old society...the Confucian morality of the 'three obediences and the four virtues' and the 'three submissions and five rules'...ruined the lives of countless unfortunate victims. This happened to my first cousin...Her father had arranged a marriage for her, but as soon as the marriage was set, the husband died! But still she had to go through the ceremony of 'crossing the threshold' because from now on 'as long as you live you are a member of your in-laws' family, and when you are dead you will be a spirit of that family...'

(EXTRACT FROM A DOCUMENT IN WHICH THE WOMEN OF SHAOXING DISTRICT CRITICIZE CONFUCIUS, 1974)



Women building roads alongside men in Hubei.

FIGHTING PREJUDICE

Mao Zedong definitely set out to free women from the bonds of prejudice and tradition that had always blighted their lives. However, it proved impossible to turn his grand visions into reality. In his own personal life, Mao often failed to show women care and respect.

PARTY WOMEN

In the early years of the CCP, Mao and his male colleagues did not treat women as equals. Even in the mountain base areas, most female party members spent their time carrying out traditional women's tasks such as cooking and sewing. This may have been their choice, but a greater role in the revolutionary conflict was not in any case on offer. Later, few women were members of the CCP Central Committee (Source 5).

THE MARRIAGE LAW

The 1950 Marriage Law was a ground-breaking piece of legislation. However, it was disregarded by many men, who still treated women exactly as before. Other outlawed practices also continued.

They included the payment of bride prices and the killing of girl children. The Communists could have mounted a campaign to make people keep the law, but failed to do so. This was probably because they did not want to upset the peasant masses on whom they depended for support.

MARRIAGE MISTREATMENT

The Marriage Law failed even to address one major problem. When Chinese peasant women marry, they have to leave their home village and go to their husband's village. There they are always regarded as strangers and often mistreated by their parents-in-law. Under Mao, the CCP did little to support women who campaigned against this form of abuse.

WOMEN AND WORK

Despite Mao's efforts, women had problems at work, too. The village men who ran the collectives set up by the first Five-Year Plan rarely let them rise to a position of power. In the Great Leap Forward communes, some women became team leaders (brigades were divided into teams). But even by the 1970s they never made up more than 21 per cent of the total.

CRITICIZING CONFUCIUS

The fact that women were still oppressed in the 1970s is proved by their participation in the movement to criticize Confucius. This was part of the Cultural Revolution and involved speaking out against the traditional ways of life that the wise man praised. Women used it to protest against the custom of moving village on marriage (Source 6).

MAO'S WOMEN

Mao did not treat his first three wives well (Source 7). He also fell out with his fourth, Jiang Qing. Although they never divorced, in his final years Mao had a succession of young female companions. Jiang eventually killed herself in jail.

TRADITIONAL TIES

Mao attempted to improve the lives of China's women, especially by introducing the Marriage Law. But many Chinese clung to tradition and were slow to adopt the new ideals he promoted. Often, he was not faithful to them himself.

SOURCE 7

The women who shared Mao's life all had their part of misfortune. Miss Luo, the peasant girl his parents chose, suffered the disgrace of rejection and died an early death. Yang Kaihui went to the execution ground proclaiming her loyalty to him, but spiritually crushed by the knowledge that he was living with He Zizhen. She, in her turn, endured extraordinary hardship... sharing Mao's lot in the darkest periods of his political career only to find that, when finally they were able to live normally again, they had grown apart.
(EXTRACT FROM MAO: A LIFE BY PHILIP SHORT)



Jiang Qing under arrest in 1981.