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Women’s status before the revolution

* Chinese women, not unlike women in most cultures, have historically suffered as a result of their comparatively low status.
* The Confucian philosophy (551-479 B.C.E) of “filial piety” produced a deep-rooted and systematic gender inequality for women in China. The three elements of “filial piety” specified that “women must obey men, citizens obey their ruler, and the young must obey the elderly.”
* The Confucian patriarchal structure reinforced abusive practices and traditions such as the sale and purchase of women, female infanticide, and wife beating.
* Additionally, the foot binding of young women was one of China’s most pervasive and long-lasting traditions. At the age of five or six, young girls would have their feet bound with tight cloth, forcing their toes to bend under their feet, causing lifelong deformity. The deformity of their feet had a cascading social and economic effect, causing women to be confined to home and ultimately dependent upon men for their survival. Foot binding was outlawed by the Qing Dynasty in 1902; however, the cultural practice prevailed for several decades before it was discontinued.

Legislative Changes

* Mao sought to enforce communist dogma and rid the nation of the so-called “Four Olds”: old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas. Women were actively absorbed into the public labour force and initiated into the highly politicised nature of life. Mao had always been critical of the subservient role played by women in society and politics, arguing that ‘*Women hold up half the sky’*.
* Communist theory posited that women’s oppression was the direct result of the patriarchal family structure, which was part and parcel of a structured class society. Ultimately, women’s liberation and familial change depended principally on the socialisation of labour relations, including women’s participation in waged labour. A woman would not realise her productive potential unless she was freed from domestic bondage. Marxist solutions to domestic drudgery and capitalist exploitation were a socialised economy that would unshackle women by transferring childcare and housework out of the home and into the public sector.
* In 1949, Mao replaced the word nuren in official documents with funu. Both mean women, but the second conveys the relationship between a father and daughter rather than husband and wife.
* International Women's Day was celebrated in December 1949.
* Prostitution was abolished almost immediately. The crackdown was violently opposed by some of the women, who objected to being detained in reeducation camps or preferred their life in the cities to being returned to their home villages.
* The Marriage Law of 1950 was the most important legislation for Chinese women. Arranged marriage, prostitution, sale of women, child betrothal, matchmakers, polygamy and concubinage were outlawed according to the Marriage Law. Marriage was to be based on love and mutual consent. Free divorce, free marriage, economic independence, and other concepts foreign to most of the population became the advocated codes. There were constant and intensive campaigns by the government to educate the population about the Marriage Law. The Marriage Law was not instituted around women’s egalitarian rights or gender equality but was meant to mobilise women to be equal participants in socialist struggles in building the Chinese nation.
* At first, many women benefited from Mao’s land reforms. During the land redistribution campaigns of the 1950s, women were granted land in their name. These changes were a significant break from tradition in which only men controlled property. However, the gains were short-lived because of the collectivisation of agriculture, which took away the rights of both men and women to own land.
* The CCP focussed on eradicating adult illiteracy, the majority of whom were women. Education and literacy, albeit structured around communist ideology and Maoist thought, provided a new space for women in the social public sphere.
* The number of girls attending schools improved dramatically; after 1959, 100% of girls attended primary school (as opposed to only 38% between 1929 and 1949). By 1978, 45% of primary school children were girls.
* There were also more employment opportunities for women. Military service in the PLA was now an option where they had opportunities for technical education, travel, leadership

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Political Changes

* The magazine *Women of New China* aimed to “help its readers correctly and comprehensively understand the way to achieve women’s liberation in new China,” it had monthly sales of over a million copies before paper rationing in 1963 and its eventual disbandment during the Cultural Revolution.
* Strict cloistering ended, and women were encouraged to participate in politics, although this often meant no more than the passive attendance of village meetings.
* Mass organisations such as the All-China Women’s Federation were created to encourage political activism in women; the organisation set up ploughing lessons for women organised classes to improve literacy and study political ideas. Women were encouraged to make greater efforts for the Communist cause. With an official membership of 76 million, there is no doubt that women provided women with avenues for social and political progression.
* In the Cultural Revolution women also played the same political role as men as members of the Red Guards.
* Nevertheless, men retained the majority of roles at the top of the Party. Most women at the national government level largely owed their influence to their husbands. During Mao’s dictatorship, women made up only 13 per cent of the membership of the CCP. The percentage of women deputies in the National People’s Congress rose from 14 to 23 percent, but there is little to suggest that the CCP was making the required efforts to make politics a realm women were encouraged to enter.

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Patterns of work

* Before 1949, women in almost every rural household wove textiles. The work was often lonely and physically deforming but also gave rise to all-female forms of sociability and networks of technical exchange.
* After 1949, allrural people, men and women, were mobilised to work in agriculture—and increasingly onlyin agriculture, as local handicrafts and sidelines were phased out. For centuries, textile production, as integral and necessary a part of rural life as grain cultivation, was removed from the countryside and redefined as part of urban industry. In the Communist Party’s view, hand spinning and hand weaving were wasteful of raw materials and labour; their very existence in the twentieth century was proof of the distortions that semi-feudalism and semi-colonialism had imposed on China.
* Traditionally, rural women laboured a third to half of the year to clothe their families. They were employed in agriculture, but the Chinese textile industry could not outfit the population. So now women were forced into dual roles of working in agriculture and weaving for the family using cloth acquired on the black market or the meagre government allocations.
* So determined was the Communist Party to undermine the family that in the communes, men and women were made to live in separate quarters and allowed to see each other only for conjugal visits. While this might be considered liberating in some respects since women were freed from the family ties that had restricted them, the enforced social change happened all too suddenly. The Chinese, a profoundly conservative people, became disorientated; women found themselves detached from their traditional moorings. Many felt unhappy that their role as mothers and raisers of families was now to be wholly devalued.
* As women were drafted into the workforce, childcare became the state's responsibility. Conditions in state-managed kindergartens were horrific, with untrained staff and ramshackle facilities. Abuse, neglect, and accidents were rife. During busy times mothers may not have seen their children for weeks. The stress over the well-being of their children added to the misery of the women as they performed backbreaking physical labour.
* In busy periods, women slept only three to four hours every night. For some, the only rest they had for many years was when they fell sick, but even then, they went back to work before full recovery. Pregnant women often worked into the last few weeks of pregnancy and returned to the fields a few weeks after giving birth, not even sitting out the traditional month of postpartum confinement. In one district in Sichuan alone, twenty-four women miscarried after being compelled to work in the fields in 1959. In Hunan, pregnant women who did not appear for work were punished by having to break ice naked. Strict menstrual taboos of popular religion disappeared overnight. Women who sought rest due to menstruation could be subject to an inspection. Few were willing to undergo such humiliation, and so were forced to work through severe gynaecological pain.
* The Great Leap Forward, with its large infrastructural campaigns, further intensified labour demands. Women, like men, were mobilised to build roads, irrigation canals, and reservoirs, and the sexes competed against each other in teams. Up to 1/5 of women suffered from a prolapsed uterus caused by overwork and a lack of nourishment.
* During this collectivisation period, work points were used to reimburse the collective workers for their labour. “The work-point system devised by the communes systematically devalued their contribution since only strong men could reach the top of the scale.
* Unsafe working conditions in the cities impacted women particularly harshly, with half of those working in chemical and electrical industries suffering from gynaecological problems.

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Personal Impacts

* It was difficult to challenge ingrained ideas about women and their roles. The historical practice of female infanticide continued because most Chinese couples believed that boys brought honour and economic benefits and that girls were a drain on resources. The notion of female equality was not well received in Xinjiang province, where Muslim culture dictated that women must be obedient to male family members and restricted to the domestic sphere.
* The exodus of males to the cities greatly burdened the women left behind to maintain the household. They also became subject to the enormous power of local cadres. One party secretary in the village of Wenzhong raped 34 women during the Great Leap Forward, and another in Guijiang raped 27. In Leiyang, Hunan, girls as young as eleven or twelve were sexually abused. In Xiangtan, a cadre set up a ‘special team’ of ten girls whom he sexually abused at whim. During the famine, many women were forced to exchange food for sex with local officials.
* Even if women were not raped, they were subjected to sex-specific humiliations as collectivisation swept aside the customary moral values of sexual restraint and bodily propriety. China was undergoing a revolution, turning upside-down moral codes of behaviour passed down from generation to generation, which led to perversions that would have been unthinkable before 1949. In a factory in Wugang county, Hunan, local bosses forced women to work naked. On a single day in November 1958, more than 300 went about their jobs in the nude. Those who refused were tied up. When questioned by officials in Beijing, the factory bosses said they had encouraged ‘the women to take off their clothes in a ‘spirit of emulation’ which aimed to ‘break feudal taboos’. Those found guilty of crimes were subject to public sexual humiliation, which led to high rates of suicide amongst those punished.
* Women suffered most during the famine years as they scrambled to provide for their children. Many had to decide which child would have to starve so that the rest could survive. It was often better for a woman to divorce her husband and look for a husband elsewhere to increase the odds of survival. For this reason, the divorce rate soared in the famine-struck provinces of China. Many children were left motherless and ended up abandoned. These children were vulnerable to exploitation by CCP officials. Prostitution thrived as women offered themselves in return for food, and, in some parts of China, officials set up brothels for special use by Party members.
* The traditional **nuclear family** fell into one of the categories of the Four Olds that the young were sent to destroy. Mothers were urged to teach their children that Mao Zedong and the Communist Party were their true parents, deserving their first loyalty. Normal family affection was replaced by love for Mao. The young were asked to inform on those among their relatives who betrayed any sign of clinging to the decadent values of the past, even in the slightest manner. In such an atmosphere, it was hard for mothers to continue their traditional role as homemakers.

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