

1. The Maoist Era (1949 – 1976): State-Led Liberation Revisited in Depth

Core Framework: “Top-Down Equality as Revolutionary Strategy”

Unlike Western feminism, which emerged from **civil society struggles**, Maoist China institutionalized gender equality as a **state project embedded within socialist transformation**.

This means:

- Women’s emancipation was **not autonomous**
- It was **instrumental** to:
 - nation-building
 - socialist production
 - class struggle

Feminism here was not a “movement,” but a **policy of the revolutionary state**

1.1 The Marxist Logic: Liberation through Production

At the theoretical level, Maoist feminism was rooted in **classical Marxist doctrine**:

- Women’s oppression = product of:
 - private property
 - patriarchal family structures
 - capitalist exploitation

Thus:

“As long as women are confined to unpaid domestic labor, equality is impossible.”

So the solution was clear:

- integrate women into **social production (labour force)**
- dissolve the economic basis of patriarchy

This produced a radical shift:

- Women moved from:
 - “family-dependent beings” → “social producers”

But here lies the subtle theoretical issue:

- Liberation was defined **economically**, not culturally or psychologically

1.2 Law as a Tool of Social Engineering

The Maoist state used **law not merely as protection, but as transformation.**

1950 Marriage Law - A Social Revolution

This was one of the most radical reforms in modern Chinese history.

It dismantled:

- arranged marriages
- child marriages
- concubinage

It introduced:

- **free choice in marriage**
- **right to divorce**
- **legal equality within family**

Interpretation:

This was not just a legal reform—it was an **attack on Confucian patriarchy**, where family hierarchy had historically subordinated women.

1953 Election Law - Political Inclusion

- Universal suffrage extended to women
- **90% participation rate** in early elections
- Women entered formal politics (though limited representation)

But analytically:

- Participation ≠ power
- Representation remained **symbolic rather than transformative**

1.3 Labour Mobilization: The “Iron Girl” Phenomenon

The Maoist state actively reshaped gender roles through **propaganda + labour policy**.

The “Iron Girls” (铁姑娘)

Women were encouraged to:

- operate tractors
- work in heavy industry
- join construction and public safety roles

This created a **new socialist gender identity**:

The ideal woman = physically strong, productive,
politically committed

Critical Insight

This was not just empowerment—it was also **state mobilization under labour scarcity**:

- China faced labour shortages
- Women became a **reserve labour force**

So:

“Liberation” was partly ideological, partly economic
necessity

1.4 The “Unisex Equality” Model

One important critique

What Maoist equality actually meant:

- Equality = **women become like men**
- Male role = **normative standard**

This led to:

- suppression of femininity
- identical dress, behavior, roles
- elimination of visible gender differences

Scholars describe this as:

- “**asexuality**” or
- “**gender erasure**”

Why this is theoretically problematic

Because:

- It ignores **biological and social differences**
- It assumes equality through **sameness**, not justice

So instead of:

- transforming gender relations

It resulted in:

- **assimilation into male-defined structures**

1.5 The Hidden Contradiction: The Double Burden

This is the **core analytical tension of Maoist feminism**.

Even as women entered the workforce:

- domestic labour remained **unchanged**
- men did **not share household responsibilities**

So women performed:

Sphere	Responsibility
Public	factory, farm, state work
Private	cooking, childcare, caregiving

Key Insight

The Maoist model transformed **public roles**, but left **private patriarchy intact**

This produced:

- physical exhaustion
- time poverty
- structural inequality masked as equality

1.6 The Danwei System: Collective as “Surrogate Family”

Another sophisticated dimension often missed.

The Maoist system reorganized society through **work units (danwei)**:

- provided:
 - housing
 - healthcare
 - childcare
 - employment

This reduced women's dependence on:

- husbands
- traditional family

But:

- dependence shifted to **state/collective**

Andrew Walder calls this:

“organizational dependence”

1.7 Peak Achievement vs Structural Limits

Achievements:

- Massive female labour participation
- legal equality institutionalized
- improved economic independence

Structural limits:

- no transformation of domestic gender roles
- equality defined in male terms
- absence of feminist consciousness
- reliance on state rather than agency

“Maoist China made women workers—but not necessarily free individuals. Equality was engineered from above, but everyday gender relations remained deeply unequal.”

2. The Reform Era & Transition (1978 - 1995)

As China moved toward a market economy, the state's "cradle-to-grave" support (the *danwei* system) began to disappear, creating new vulnerabilities.

The Employment Gap: With privatization, 70% of laid-off workers in urban areas were women.

The Return of Tradition: A "to be a woman" movement emerged as a reaction against the "unisexual" Maoist era, but it often resulted in the re-objectification of women and the return of "good wife, loving mother" tropes.

3. 1995 to Present: The Globalized Gender Discourse

The **Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995)** was the turning point that introduced "Gender" as an analytical tool, moving beyond just "Biological Sex."

The "Leftover Women" (Sheng Nu) Phenomenon

A major point for class discussion is the "Spouse-Selection Gradient Theory."

Concept: As women become more educated and high-earning, they find fewer "superior" men to marry (since tradition dictates the husband must be "higher" than the wife).

Societal Stigma: The term "leftover" is a male-centric label that punishes women for the autonomy they gained through economic independence.

Source Citation

Shen Yifei, *Feminism in China: An Analysis of Advocates, Debates, and Strategies*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.