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Female Empowerment during the Cultural Revolution

Throughout China's history, just as in every society, the vision that society gives women of what femininity should be changes. As we move through the history of China, we see a vision of women as the peacekeepers and those that are to hold together the ever-important family. We see a vision of the stereotypical eastern beauty, the quiet, docile inside individual that strives for unity of the family. Although the specifics of this vision over time have changed, and the goals given to young women by society are distinctly different, the new visions are in actuality a redefinition of the old beliefs. However, there was a hiccup in this vision of what society would like women to be. This hiccup occurred during the Cultural Revolution in China. A chaotic time that China is busy attempting to erase. I would argue, that instead that one of the unique properties of the cultural revolution was that it offered women for the first time a vision of femininity that empowered them in a fashion that will be difficult if not impossible to ever regain. In addition, the current cultural trends seem to be trying to push away from the vision of the empowered woman, instead thrusting upon them a vision of the 1950's American style domesticity.

The force that stabilizes social relationships is not emotion, but understanding (Fei, page 88).

The vision of personal relationships between men and women as being one of understanding, stability and calm seems to be one that flows (with the exception of our hiccup) throughout Chinese history. I would go as far to say that the role of women within Chinese society has been and has become the entire notion of stability. If you examine the life of Chung Chang's mother in Wild Swans, we see the life of a wife that grew up in a society where women were responsible

for offering stability to the family, and she offers this to her family as well. She strives to maintain the unity of the core family unit. Interestingly enough, Chang's own life, and her ability to attack the foundations of the Chinese society finds its home in the hiccup of the Cultural Revolution. I suspect if were not for the structure of society during her teen years, her ability to question the system would not be what it is. She may owe some of her ability to question society to Mao himself.

...Sexual difference in the social division of labor—that men plow and women weave—carried significance of dominance and subordination. It suggested the dominant position men occupied in social production and the dependent or supplementary role of women (Rofel, page 53).

This subordinate view of women was very prevalent prior to the Cultural Revolution. The men they were married to controlled women's lives, and even though this view seemed to ease up, the women in society were still expected to maintain the harmony of the household. Women were expected to still perform as women. The differences between inside and outside were still ever present. Women that went outside these social boundaries were subject to de-feminization. These women were often referred to as used shoes, women not worthy of a second glance.

Transgressing the historically variable border of inside/outside, then, meant the loss of full female personhood within one's kinship world, which is to say within one's social world (Rofel, page 65).

This feminine "border" has become intricately tied to the modernization of China. As time goes on, the view of inside and outside has changed, and with it the view of femininity. Not surprisingly, jobs that are less respected and the skills associated with that job become less respected, that type of work becomes engendered in a feminine way. Women's work. The border never goes away, it only shifts. However, during the Cultural Revolution, this border

seemed to shimmer as if it were going to disappear, but was then refined and solidified by the work of the Chinese society in modern years.

This border has re-appeared in a very Western fashion. Women are looked at in an American 1950's-esque style, presenting women with yet again another conflicting view of what it is to be female. Women are now being offered a view of femininity that includes domesticity and motherhood as its core. However, at the same time, there is a fear by the state of the overpopulation that would be associated with this new female definition.

To the contrary, in crafting marriage, motherhood, and sexuality into concerns of utmost importance for women, official commentary created a new area that demanded constant state attention (Rofel, page 242).

This new state attention is in the form of the birth offices, and their interest in the female reproductive system. However, we have a new female definition being offered to the women of China, and yet again when one falls outside of these societal norms, you are not always pressured by the government, as many Westerners would like to believe. Instead the needed push often comes in the more insidious form, the pressure from peers.

Xiao Ma, in contrast, urged me to marry because, she implied, it was pleasurable in and of itself, a fulfillment of my female identity rather than an obligation (Rofel, page 233).

Through all this time we have the definition of the feminine self in China as something domestic, something docile, something to be inside. Even the definition of women as mothers and wives lends itself to an "inside" life. However, it has not always been this way in China. During the Cultural Revolution, through all of the chaos, you have a redefinition of women in a manner that

constructs them as an intricate part of society. Women were offered a view of themselves as that had never before been offered to Chinese women.

Female workers stripped of gender definitions, smile as they work in this fantasy world where production is stripped of pain (Dutton, page 282-283).

During the Cultural Revolution, women were released from the bonds placed on them by the patriarchy, the bonds of what it meant to be feminine. All work was worthy of every comrade, and all comrades should work. This removed the gendered nature from many jobs, and elevated women to new levels. Women were for the first time allowed to be truly “natural.” Women were allowed to be parallel aspect of society instead of a sub aspect as it had been.

The very prevalence of female political leaders and political activism among women is evidence enough to see that something very different was going on. Women and men were working together for common goals, their gender out of the proverbial equation. Women and men slept together in communal housing, a society was being built where lying down in a building full of men was comfortable to women, instead of fearing violation as in our own society.

The view of women and femininity was so altered during these years, that the women that grew up during this time showed the marks the rest of their lives. Women had grown up in a world where their gender didn't affect their worth. However, when these women were then thrust into the post Mao (Cultural Revolution) era, they found a system quickly descending upon them telling them that their views were not in line with the society around them.

They aggravated authority. They brought trouble, because they appeared not to care about getting into trouble. Their actions

might thus reflect a willed intentionality and self-originating determination to confront the oppression that arises from unequal relations of production (Rofel, page 174).

These women had been truly liberated and were now straining under the pressure of the world around them to fit in with the new definition of femininity. These women had been allowed “outside” into the “male” world. They had been encouraged to be political, to be rebels, and to act typically “male.” They had been empowered by the world around them. The only thing worse than being denied a known freedom, is to allow it and then disallow it. These women had experienced just that.

They express anxiety about the ease with which women, through uncontrolled desire, can disturb the sanctity of national borders (Rofel, page 240).

This quote is more specifically aimed at the partnering of women with “outsiders,” but I believe that it has greater implications, in our society as well as in China’s. Perhaps, women when allowed to fully flourish, as they did during the Cultural Revolution, were causing too much underlying social upheaval, too many changes to the sexual identity rules of society?

There are so many differences between the women that grew up during the Cultural Revolution, and the women who came of age after this era, those main differences really coming down to strength, politics and duty. The younger generations seemed to hold more western ideas of what it means to be feminine. Perhaps this label of “modernity” is synonymous with the restriction of women? I think that it might be worthwhile to examine the Cultural Revolution not as an unfortunate aspect of Chinese history, but instead an example of the harmony that can be fostered by a society where gender doesn’t make the rules as it does so often.