

History 299 - Research Project Proposal

The proposed project will cover the experience of women across China during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. From 1966 to Mao Zedong's death in 1976, The People's Republic of China experienced substantial socio-political upheaval and turmoil, largely in the form of inter-factional conflict among party members, workers, and radicalized student groups. The primary goal of the Cultural Revolution was to rid the newly formed Communist China of any lingering trace of the old imperial system. This saw several facets of life come under heavy scrutiny by zealous students and radical contingents of the Communist Party, including traditional gender roles and the conception of gender itself. The proposed project will examine the lives and experiences of Chinese women during this period to see how conceptions of gender—particularly femininity—were challenged by the Cultural Revolution, and whether these challenges resulted in any meaningful change or progress toward gender equality in Communist China.

The Cultural Revolution's advocacy of State Feminism is a thoroughly discussed topic, though the angles through which it is examined are often limited to two very particular government programs: the Eight Model Operas and the Iron Girls. Writings on the Model Operas and other forms of state propaganda typically emphasize the party's efforts to depict women more broadly as equal participants in the ongoing proletarian revolution, and, by extension, the role female figures such as Jiang Qing played in both the Cultural Revolution and broader Chinese Communist movement. Works concerned with the Iron Girls are similarly propaganda-centric, though often incorporate a top-down view of women's mobilization during the period. The proposed project seeks to fill in the gaps by comparing and contrasting the experiences of various women to elucidate the realities of womanhood and femininity at the time.

The most detailed firsthand accounts the proposed project will analyze come from three memoirs: *Snow Falling in Spring* by Li Moying, *Spider Eaters* by Rae Yang, and *When Huai Flowers Bloom* by Lu Shujiang. Additionally, the project will utilize specific, shorter narratives from two collections: *The Red Mirror* by Wen Chihua (ed. Bruce Jones) and *Wild Swans* by Zhang Rong. Lastly, the project will make use of retrospective essays written by several Chinese women scholars and translated by Hui Wu found in *Once Iron Girls*, as well as interviews found in Carma Hinton's documentary *Morning Sun*. Analysis will compare the experiences detailed therein to one another, highlighting how and the extent to which state-sanctioned gender rhetoric effected these women in their day-to-day.

Scholarly works the proposed project will consult fall into two categories: histories of gender in China, and histories of the Cultural Revolution itself. The former cover the ways in which gender was conceived in China in the late imperial period, brief Republican period, and ensuing Communist period. The latter largely detail the events of the Cultural Revolution and give context as to both how and why they occurred, as well as their effects and lasting legacies.

Bibliography

Brownell, Susan, ed. *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*. University of California Press, 2002.

Hershatter, Gail. *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*. Asia Pacific Modern 8. University of California Press, 2011.

Gail Hershatter, a distinguished scholar of Chinese and women's history, details the ways in which women influenced a variety of movements in China (including the Cultural Revolution) and how those events influenced them in turn. The book provides an intimate yet analytical window into the views of women of the time.

Hershatter, Gail. *Women and China's Revolutions*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

Gail Hershatter collects and analyzes the implications of the life stories of several rural Chinese women in the Shaanxi region in an effort to deepen historians' understanding of the impacts of a variety of state campaigns on rural areas. The book offers interpretations of the effects of China's many revolutions on women that otherwise may be overlooked.

Hinton, Carma, Geremie Barme, and John Crowley, dirs. *Morning Sun*. Documentary. 2003. 117 Minutes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3AiR-b7Ivo>.

Honig, Emily. "Maoist Mappings of Gender: Reassessing the Red Guards." In *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*. University of California Press, 2002.

China historian and University of California professor Emily Honig complicates gender ideology promoted by the Communist state during the Cultural Revolution, examining the ways in which female participation in the Red Guard movement revealed underlying debates and battles regarding gender. The chapter gives greater historical context to the existence of women Red Guards, something seen throughout the primary sources utilized in the project.

Jin, Yihong. “Rethinking the ‘Iron Girls’: Gender and Labour during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.” Translated by Kimberley Ens Manning and Lianyun Chu. *Gender & History* 18, no. 3 (2006): 613–34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2006.00458.x>.

This essay by women’s historian and long-time Nanjing Normal University professor Jin Yihong investigates the state’s economic and political motivations for the mass-mobilization of female industrial workers during the Cultural Revolution by analyzing a host of periodicals from the time and consulting information gleaned from interviews Jin herself conducted. The essay provides greater detail to the design and function of state propaganda and the national impact of the Iron Girls campaign.

Li, Moying. *Snow Falling in Spring: Coming of Age in China During the Cultural Revolution*. Square Fish, 2008.

Lu, Shu Jiang. *When Huai Flowers Bloom: Stories of the Cultural Revolution*. State University of New York Press, 2007.

Tilton, Jessica Huset. *Women in Chinese Buddhism: Rights, Spirituality and the Path to Freedom*. 1st ed. Routledge, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003635338>.

“The Cultural Revolution: Losing Religion, Losing Gender.” In *Women in Chinese Buddhism: Rights, Spirituality and the Path to Freedom*, 1st ed., by Jessica Huset Tilton. Routledge, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003635338>.

Jessica Huset Tilton, a professor at the University of Tasmania, argues in this piece that the Cultural Revolution served as the most major setback for women in China’s modern history, working with firsthand accounts and historical data to do so. The chapter provides insights into how the Cultural Revolution affected specific groups of women.

Walder, Andrew G. *Agents of Disorder: Inside China’s Cultural Revolution*. Harvard University Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674243637>.

In this seminal work, historical sociologist and China scholar Andrew Walder presents a view of the Cultural Revolution from a national perspective. In doing so, he addresses significant gaps in the subject’s literature and provides a more cohesive historical

narrative, utilizing thousands of county-, city-, and prefecture-level annals to follow the ebb and flow of social upheaval. The book serves as an intricate jumping off point, providing detailed background information on the swell of social change brought about by the Cultural Revolution.

Wang, Zheng. *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1964*. University of California Press, 2017.

Internationally recognized women's history and gender studies scholar Wang Zheng examines the efforts of the CCP to establish a Socialist state and cultural structure from a gendered perspective, analyzing personal writings, interviews, and women's magazines from the period to determine the place and role of women in the Communist state structure. The book provides key context to Chinese women's movements during the Maoist era as well as background on gendered politics under the CCP.

Wen, Chihua. *The Red Mirror: Children of China's Cultural Revolution*. Translated by Bruce Jones. Westview Press, 1995.

Wu, Hui, ed. *Once Iron Girls: Essays on Gender by Post-Mao Chinese Literary Women*. Translated by Hui Wu. Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.

Yang, Rae. *Spider Eaters: A Memoir*. University of California Press, 2013.

Zhang, Rong. *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*. Flamingo, 1993.

I, as a member of the University of Mary Washington community, pledge not to lie, cheat, or steal and to actively contribute to a community of trust.

Signature: Ben Lashley 2/13/2026

