

“The Times Have Changed; Men and Women are the Same”
Sex and Gender in the Chinese Cultural Revolution

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History 299

April 23, 2026

I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.

Ben Lashley 4/23/2026

Abstract

Maoist state officials often touted that the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was a time of unprecedented gender equality. Though the period brought about new economic and political opportunities for women, it also saw a denouncement of femininity. The Cultural Revolution achieved greater equality between the sexes by deconstructing feminine gender categorization and regrouping female-sexed bodies into a broader masculine social class. This paper traces the multifaceted approach the state took to gender deconstruction and the ways in which it promoted equality of the sexes in place of true gender equality.

Introduction

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was a period of immense social, political, and economic turmoil in the People's Republic of China. Initiated at the behest of and shaped by the prerogatives of Chairman Mao Zedong, the Cultural Revolution sought to purge "revisionist" elements from the party structure and "feudal" beliefs and practices from broader society. The period was envisioned by those in the Maoist camp as the latest, most abstract stage in the process of Socialist construction; by ridding China of its traditional, allegedly anti-revolutionary traits, the road toward the Communist future would at last be open. As such, the myriad political campaigns launched over the course of the decade targeted every aspect of Chinese life, especially gender.

The debate over whether the Cultural Revolution was an era of increased gender equality or a period of societal masculinization is continuous, with both sides presenting reasonable and convincing arguments for their view. However, few scholars have considered the complex and somewhat ambiguous dichotomy between sex and gender. This paper seeks to bridge the gap between the two sides of the gender equality debate by applying the sex-gender dichotomy to the memoirs of three women who came of age during the Cultural Revolution: Li Moying (author of *Snow Falling in Spring*), Rae Yang (author of *Spider Eaters*), and Chang Jung (author of *Wild Swans*). Through this lens, the Cultural Revolution was a time of greater sexual equality (that is, equality of the sexed body), but a time of state-sponsored gender inequality and even demonization.

A Note on Sex and Gender

Colloquially, sex and gender are often used interchangeably, but there is a difference. For the purposes of this paper, sex refers to the biological category (male or female) an individual

falls into based on their role in the reproductive process (i.e., what genitalia they were born with). Gender, on the other hand, refers to the social category an individual is assigned to, typically at birth, and is then socialized within the characteristics of said category. Gender is a fluid categorization that is possible to change, as evidenced by the existence of the various gender queer communities across the world. The complexities of queer gender identities, however, go beyond the scope of this paper, which will only be considering the broad experiences of the feminine gender (women) as a whole.

***Nüquan*: The Women's Movement Before 1966**

Women's rights and gender equality first entered the conscience of Chinese intellectuals in the late years of the Qing Dynasty as part of the decaying empire's efforts to modernize and, it hoped, retake some the sovereignty it had lost to the Western imperial powers and Japan. It would not be until the early Republican era, however, that women's rights (*nüquan*) would take center stage, becoming one of the defining issues of the May Fourth and New Culture Movements. The late 1910s and early 1920s saw thousands of political and philosophical texts from the West and other parts of the world translated and distributed throughout China. The importation of Western feminism and political theory convinced many intellectuals that gender equality was a significant step in the development of China into a modern state.¹ This led to the fledgling Guomindang (GMD) under Sun Yat-sen and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Chen Duxiu to adopt gender equality as part of their platforms.

¹ The history of women's rights in China is long, complex, and extremely interesting, and I wish I had more space to touch on it here. For further reading on the topic, I highly recommend Wang Zheng's book *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment* for the history of and perspectives on the May Fourth and New Culture Movements, and Gail Hershatter's *The Gender of Memory* for glimpses into the lives of May Fourth "New Women" post-1949.

As time went on, however, many in the Marxist camp began to view feminism negatively, and argued that women's liberation and gender equality could only come through class struggle. This became the official party stance following the end of the Civil War in 1949, when the CCP took power and founded the People's Republic of China. By the 1960s, the party line on *nüquan* became even more extreme. Those loyal to Mao in the CCP considered Western liberal feminism—which served as the foundation of May Fourth feminism—bourgeois; as such, any discussion of *nüquan* or even femininity became associated with rightist elements of Chinese society.²

Gendered Violence: Red Guards

The Cultural Revolution was a time of mass social and political upheaval driven in large part by hordes of radical student-led Red Guard groups seeking to carry out Mao's campaign against revisionists and the Four Olds—old ideas, old customs, old culture, and old habits. What began (or, at least, was framed) as a new step in Socialist construction quickly erupted into an anarchic reign of terror that consumed the entire nation. As part of this campaign to stamp out old culture, the role of women came under special scrutiny. The gender discourse familiar to many women of the time was suddenly upended, giving birth to a period in which, as Women's and Chinese history scholar Emily Honig asserts, “gender identity and gender relationships were being continually contested and reformulated.”

The Red Guard movement, with its People's Liberation Army (PLA)-style uniforms, militancy, and political nature, was steeped in the characteristics of Chinese masculinity. Though

² Emily Honig, “Maoist Mappings of Gender: Reassessing the Red Guards,” In *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, ed. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (University of California Press, 2002), 255.

membership was open to any youth regardless of sex (so long as they came from a revolutionary family), young women were required to conform to masculine characteristics, in line with Mao's line on Western bourgeois feminism. This meant that female Red Guards had to dress in the same PLA uniforms as male Red Guards, cut their hair short to appear less feminine, and participate in political activism and violence.³ Post-Mao critics and gender essentialists often seize on the political violence perpetrated by women Red Guards in particular, characterizing their actions as a sharp and disturbing divergence from the reservation and warmth traditionally ascribed to women. Women Red Guards' inclusion in the martial domain, accompanied by their short hair and androgynous military dress, represented the death knell of Chinese femininity to many in China. To the women themselves, however, Red Guard violence provided an opportunity to disassociate themselves from traditional, conservative notions of femininity by engaging with typically masculine elements of society. For young women, especially those in more rural areas, becoming a Red Guard offered them a path to gender liberation and newfound equality with their male counterparts, despite a difference in sex.⁴

Gender liberation was not emancipation from oppressive constraints placed on women, but rather a liberation from femininity itself. While in middle school, Li Moying describes seeing her friend Lan as a Red Guard for the first time, her long hair "chopped into two short ponytails" and her "sisterly warmth" replaced with righteous rage.⁵ In her memoir, Rae Yang reminisces about wearing "army caps, the peaks pulled down low by girls in the style of the boys."⁶ Yang

³ Honig, "Maoist Mappings of Gender," 256-57.

⁴ Honig, "Maoist Mappings of Gender," 258.

⁵ Li Moying, *Snow Falling in Spring: Coming of Age in China During the Cultural Revolution* (Square Fish, 2008), 55.

⁶ Rae Yang, *Spider Eaters: A Memoir* (University of California Press, 2013), 112.

later notes her pride in appearing more muscular, worn, and dirty than the boys in her group, recalling fondly an instance of two children and their mother mistaking her for an ““Uncle Red Guard”” (*hong weibing shu*).⁷

Liberation from the characteristics of femininity was often not voluntary. Once female Red Guards had abandoned their feminine traits, many took it upon themselves to liberate their fellow women forcefully. Li Moying recalls cutting her hair short to “follow the latest fashions,” and soon after did the same for her Aunt Song; otherwise, a group of “Red Guards ... with rusty scissors” would have done it themselves.⁸ Rae Yang, a Red Guard herself, was stopped in the streets by other Red Guards. They declared her long hair to be “bourgeois,” and anyone like her “would be stopped by them, their hair cut off on the spot.”⁹ Chang Jung, also a Red Guard, found herself distressed by similar acts of defeminization that she experienced:

I found myself trying very hard to avoid militant acts such as stopping passers by and cutting their long hair, or narrow trouser legs, or skirts, or breaking their semi high-heeled shoes My own hair came to the critical attention of my schoolmates. I had it cut to the level of my earlobes.¹⁰

Further on, Chang sums up the attitude of the era succinctly:

Femininity was condemned in the years when my generation was growing up. Many girls tried to talk, walk, and act like aggressive, crude men, and ridiculed those who did not. There was not much possibility of expressing femininity anyway. To start with, we were not allowed to wear anything but the shapeless blue, grey, or green trousers and jackets.¹¹

⁷ Yang, *Spider Eaters*, 121.

⁸ Li, *Snow Falling in Spring*, 68-69.

⁹ Yang, *Spider Eaters*, 116.

¹⁰ Chang Jung, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (Flamingo, 1991), 351.

¹¹ Chang, *Wild Swans*, 380.

Yang offers a similarly matter of fact, though less harrowing, account, detailing her and other Red Guards' outlook on attire:

Sweat ran down our foreheads and soaked our clothes. But we would not wear skirts, blouses, and sandals. Anything that would make girls look like girls was bourgeois. We covered up our bodies so completely that I almost forgot I was a girl. I was a Red Guard. Others were Red Guards too. And that was it.¹²

The Red Guard assault on femininity reveals a vision of gender liberation, and, thereby, equality of the sexes, inextricably tied to notions of masculinity. Overt, physical elements associated with the feminine gender (e.g., styles of hair and dress) were demonized and *de facto* outlawed, while behaviors and attributes tied to masculinity (e.g., physicality, aggression, violence) were encouraged and portrayed as points of pride and virtue. While the Red Guards paid no mind to biological sex, they effectively imposed a single gender identity onto both males and females.

“Women Hold Up Half the Sky:” Iron Girls

While Red Guards brought Maoist gender rhetoric to the masses, the Iron Girls brought it to the labor force. In the late 1960s, party leadership began a campaign of agricultural infrastructure construction across the nation, creating the need for an even larger reserve pool of heavy industrial labor. Once again the state called upon women to mobilize in the name of national strengthening. To achieve their mobilization goals, the party needed effective labor models to draw women away from the domestic and agricultural realms and into the industrial. They found this model in the Dazhai Iron Girls Brigade, an entirely female labor brigade from Dazhai. *The People's Daily (renmin ribao)* published numerous articles detailing the hard work, success, and proletarian spirit of the Iron Girls, inspiring women across China to organize and

¹² Yang, *Spider Eaters*, 125.

form state-sponsored women's work brigades in numerous industries. Wang Zheng, in her book *Finding Women in the State*, emphasizes that Guo Fenglian, the leader of the Dazhai Iron Girls, rapidly "became a symbol of rural women's ... liberation from gender."¹³

The mobilization efforts were a resounding success. Across China, women were organized into labor brigades and set to work—often in roles typically performed by men. Some toiled in the oil fields; others transported fuel and materials to and from factories.¹⁴ In the northern and western reaches of the nation, many women were sent to the fields, now in tightly organized labor groups. One such woman was Rae Yang, who left Beijing as part of the Sent-Down Youth program and found herself tending a soybean field in the Great Northern Wilderness. Yang asserts that the women workers "did not feel inferior to the men in any way at all" and that no matter the task at hand, the women "always did it better." She goes on to underscore this by proudly emphasizing that, at the end of each workday, "those who carried off the palm [i.e., did the best] were always some 'iron girls.'"¹⁵ Chang Jung, too, joined an industrial labor force, recalling that "factories began to recruit new workers They readily agreed to take me on." Soon after, she would leave the factory and take up a position as an electrician.¹⁶

¹³ 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), 225-26.

¹⁴ Jin, "Rethinking the Iron Girls," 618-21.

¹⁵ Yang, *Spider Eaters*, 166-67.

¹⁶ Chang, *Wild Swans*, 546-48.

As women were pushed to take on typically masculine labor—and, therefore, assume the accompanying masculine traits—little consideration was given to women committed to feminine roles. In illustrating the contributions of women across China’s many revolutions, China historian Gail Hershatte emphasizes that “the socialist discourse on labor had little to say about domestic labor.”¹⁷ This lack of discursive representation, as Jin Yihong notes, created an environment in which female laborers had to perfectly manage the balance of their domestic and labor responsibilities or risk being ridiculed for being backward or bourgeois.¹⁸ Rae Yang, while in the Great Northern Wilderness, witnessed such belittlement. Most workers referred to the older women in her village, more accustomed to domestic roles, as “stinking old dependents,” who were the target of much resentment and disdain.¹⁹

The Iron Girls embodied the new world of economic opportunities for women during the Cultural Revolution but were also perhaps the state’s most flagrant attempt to de-feminize female workers. Continual encouragement of women entering masculine labor spheres, coupled with official party organs (such as *People’s Daily*) extolling the virtues of hard-working labor models like Guo Fengliang, further cemented the privileged position of socialist masculinity. In becoming an Iron Girl, women’s bodies gained equal status with those of men—but only when the construction of femininity surrounding it was subdued or shed altogether.

Sex and Sexuality

¹⁷ Gail Hershatte, *Women in China’s Revolutions* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 221.

¹⁸ Jin, “Rethinking the Iron Girls,” 629.

¹⁹ Yang, *Spider Eaters*, 166.

The state's attacks on sexuality during the Cultural Revolution were broad and draconian. Emily Honig, in an essay on socialist sexuality, contends that the rhetoric surrounding sexuality mirrored that of gender.²⁰ Pre-socialist conceptions of gendered sexuality placed men in the role of the austere spectator; women were exclusively cast as the object of desire, and, therefore, inherently sexual beings. As women reduced or abandoned their femininity, they too assumed the austerity of masculine sexuality. Thus, sexual desire, or any overt expression of sexuality whatsoever, was cast into the purview of the bourgeois. Rae Yang, recounting her days as a Red Guard, humorously touches on the view of sexuality: "Sex was bourgeois. No doubt about it!"²¹

The Red Guards played a significant role in the dissemination of new party rhetoric on bourgeois sexuality. Women found having casual sex were subjected to beatings and public humiliation. Those who spoke ill of or outright refused to conform to Red Guard masculinization found themselves accused of sexual promiscuity, marking them as bourgeois reactionaries in the eyes of the state.²² While carrying out Red Guard duties in Guangzhou, locals accused Rae Yang and her fellow Red Guards of wanton sexual promiscuity. Yang resentfully recalls the accusations being "especially vicious" and goes on to assert such charges would "ruin a person's reputation, making him or her, especially her, as odious as dog shit."²³ The demonization of sexuality became so extreme, in fact, that the slightest suggestion of anything of a sexual nature occurring at all was enough to classify someone as a bourgeois reactionary. Chang Jung melancholically relates the tale of her philosophy teacher, targeted by Red Guards because of the

²⁰ Emily Honig, "Socialist Sex: The Cultural Revolution Revisited," *Modern China* 29, no. 2 (2003): 146.

²¹ Yang, *Spider Eaters*, 125.

²² Honig, "Socialist Sex," 149.

²³ Yang, *Spider Eaters*, 132.

way she met her husband. As Chang states, “Love arising out of a chance meeting was regarded as a sign of immorality,” bluntly depicting the absurd breadth Red Guard policing of sexuality.²⁴

Following the dissolution of the Red Guards in the late 1960s and the subsequent initiation of the Sent-Down Youth program—in which thousands of urban youths were sent to the countryside to receive re-education from peasants—sexual policing took on new forms. With no Red Guards to terrorize the masses and the youth sent away from home, young people—women especially—began to explore the sexual aspect of their being. Naturally, the state was not pleased; after all, the youth they had sent to the countryside specifically to act as another reserve labor force would not be very useful if they were too busy having sex with one another. With no Red Guards to utilize, party officials took up the mantle of arbiters of sexual morality. Cadres across the countryside began cracking down on sexual relationships among the youth, relying on the same rhetoric utilized by the Red Guards.²⁵

No matter the circumstances, however, hormonal teenagers will inevitably discover and experiment with sex and sexuality. The harsh criticisms and attempted crackdowns of the rural cadres could never make up for the sheer lack of supervision for these sent-down youth. Peasants native to the villages were too busy with work to pay much mind to the activities of the sent-down youth, and so it became regularly common for the teenagers to date, live together, have sexual relationships, and occasionally even have children. A cottage industry of hand-copied erotic novels even sprung up in a few villages.²⁶ Rae Yang fondly recalls the awakening of her

²⁴ Chang, *Wild Swans*, 348.

²⁵ Emily Honig and Zhao Xiaojian, *Across the Great Divide: The Sent Down Youth Movement in Mao's China, 1968-1980* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 90-91.

²⁶ Honig, “Socialist Sex,” 157-60.

sexual being while raising pigs in the Great Northern Wilderness. Suddenly, she realized, “in spite of my pride,” she desperately desired “to mate ... right there and then, shamelessly, with whatever man.”²⁷

Alongside newfound sexual freedom, women had to contend with the threat of sexual violence. Lack of extensive supervision allowed for more sexual freedom, to be sure, but also created an environment in which party cadres could use their privileged position to sexually exploit young women.²⁸ Rae Yang insinuates that many young women in her village would “dedicate [their] body” to cadres for favors.²⁹ Peasant men, too, engaged in this sort of behavior, though lack of economic resources and political connections (*guanxi*) typically led to outright sexual violence. Rae Yang, upon her return from a home visit, coldly recalls, “The first news that welcomed me back was of rape.”³⁰ Making matters more disturbing, the victim was Yang’s friend Laomizi, and the perpetrator was none other than Chen—the man who trained Yang to raise pigs (and had been part of her sexual awakening). Yang chillingly remarks that “[Chen] might have tried to rape me instead of Laomizi.”³¹ The threat of violence for these women was, tragically, ever-present. Chang Jung notes much the same, as there were “a few reports of rape” from hitchhiking girls in rural Sichuan.³² It became such a pronounced issue, in fact, that the state undertook a mass prosecution campaign against assaulters—a campaign that, unfortunately,

²⁷Yang, *Spider Eaters*, 184.

²⁸ Honig and Zhao, *Across the Great Divide*, 88.

²⁹ Yang, *Spider Eaters*, 209.

³⁰ Yang, *Spider Eaters*, 202.

³¹ Yang, *Spider Eaters*, 182

³² Chang, *Wild Swans*, 483.

swept up just about any young man found to have a sexual relationship with a sent-down youth, regardless of if the relations had been consensual or not.³³

Sexuality was the most difficult area of gender identity for the state to regulate but still bore ideological fruit. Women who conformed to a masculinized vision of sexuality lost much of their sexual freedom, but were largely spared the worst in terms of unwanted sexual advances, objectification and assault. To display any femininity loosened the constraints placed on sexuality, but also overtly signaled a difference in sex that many men sought to take advantage of and abuse.

Conclusion

Maoist rhetoric during the Cultural Revolution claimed it was a time in which gender equality flourished when it simply equated the two sexes. This was accomplished through the deconstruction of feminine gender characteristics and reframing said characteristics as bourgeois and counter-revolutionary. State-sponsored attacks on femininity in the political and social realms by Red Guards and radical officials stripped away the social categorization of Chinese women; mobilizing females en masse to assume conventionally masculine roles in the industrial sector and policing their sexual behavior effectively sorted them into a new social category. In essence, the gender rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution sought to obliterate the old masculine-feminine social binary and reclassify the female sexed body under the broader umbrella of the conventionally masculine proletariat, creating a social system based on class identity that pays no heed to differentiation between the sexes. The rapid backlash to such rhetoric in the wake of the

³³ Honig and Zhao, *Across the Great Divide*, 95.

Cultural Revolution illustrates that gender categories cannot be abolished so easily; furthermore, it challenges whether such gender abolition can occur at all.³⁴

³⁴ The rapid changes that occurred in gender discourse following the end of the Cultural Revolution are fascinating. For firsthand accounts of women's life post-Mao, I would suggest watching Carma Hinton's documentary *A Small Happiness*, which follows the lives of several men and women in a rural village.

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