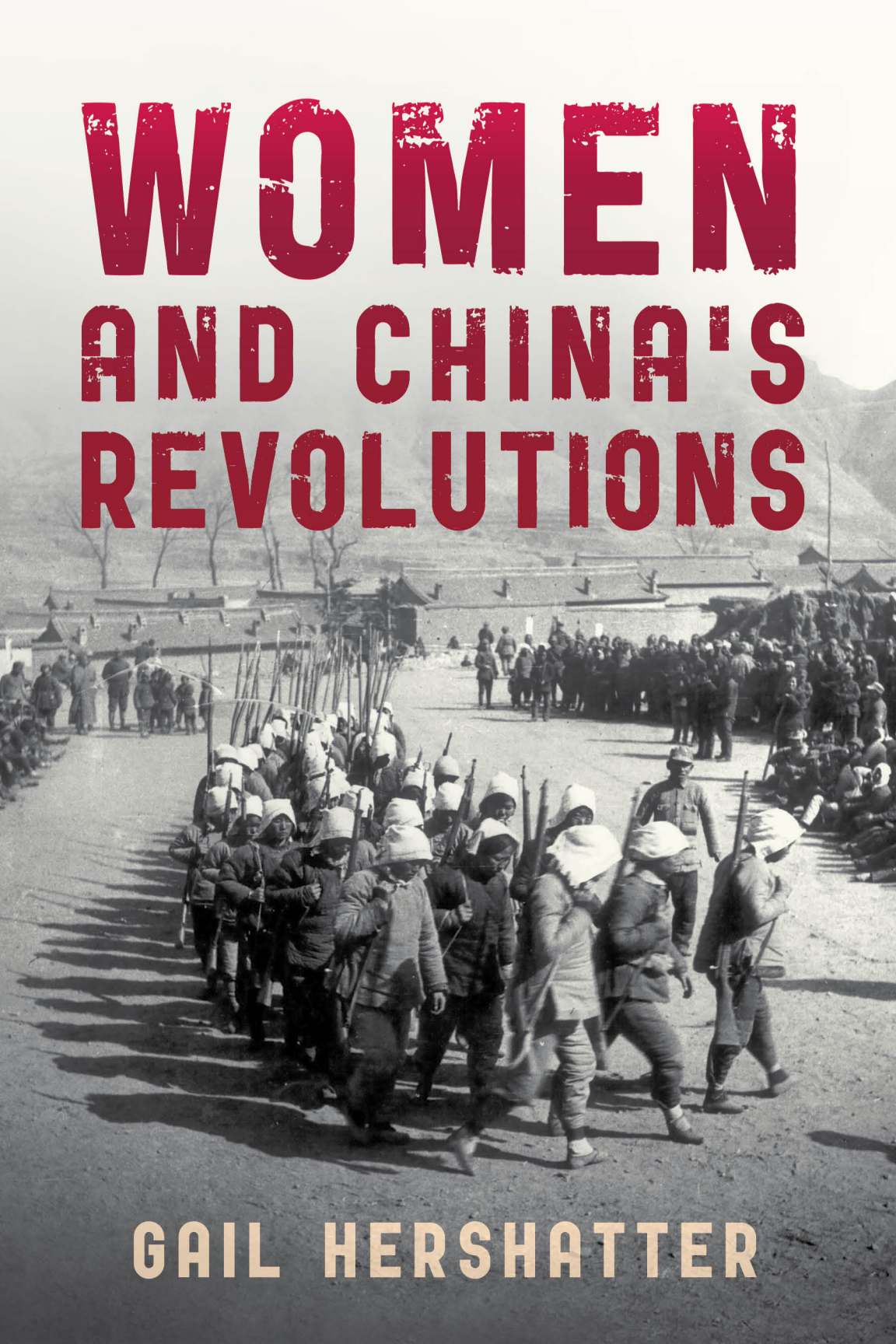
WOMEN AND CHINA'S REVOLUTIONS



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8

The Socialist Construction of Women, 1949–78

When the Chinese Communist Party established the People's Republic of China in 1949, its members brought with them almost three decades of experience in mobilizing women, mainly under circumstances of political suppression and war. After 1949, women's labor and Woman as symbol were central to the Party-state vision of socialist modernization. The period of socialist development ran from the establishment of the PRC in 1949 through Mao's death in 1976 and the beginning of economic reforms in 1978. Many accounts of this period have focused on internecine Party struggles, the sidelining and persecution of intellectuals, the lifelong stigmatizing of adults whose class backgrounds were suspect, the terrible human cost of misguided state economic initiatives, and the upheaval entailed in major political campaigns.[1] Without minimizing the importance of those aspects of Chinese socialism, this chapter explores a different set of questions: Did women have a socialist revolution? If so, which women, and when? How did the revolutionary process shape women's daily lives, and how did women's labor shape the revolutionary process?

Although the Chinese Communist Party guided national policy and the state apparatus throughout this period, it had no unified theory of socialism on which to draw, much less one already tailored to the particular circumstances of China. Socialism was improvised, in part based on the experience of the Soviet Union, but always with attention to local circumstances. The Party itself was riven by frequent arguments about what socialism should look like and how it should be constructed. Most of these arguments were not directly about women's labor—everyone agreed it was necessary. Nor were they about Woman as symbol—everyone agreed,

prematurely, that the basic conditions for women's liberation had been established successfully by the official recognition that women had equal political rights with men.

The All-China Women's Federation was established as a national mass organization led by the Party. Building on organizational forms developed in the base areas, it had branches attached to every level of government. It was meant to ensure that women's interests were represented and that women were informed about their part in national reconstruction. A state-published magazine devoted to women, *Women of China* (Zhongguo funü), kept women's contributions and issues visible to a national audience.[2] But schisms within the Party about how to develop the economy, and debates after the Sino-Soviet split of 1960 about the role China should take in opening a new road to socialism, affected the lives of women even when gender equality was not explicitly on the agenda.

This chapter begins with three campaigns intended to stabilize families: the Marriage Law campaign, which was conducted in the context of land reform; the campaign to introduce scientific midwifery in rural areas; and the urban campaign against prostitution. The chapter then turns to the mobilization of women and the changing gendered division of labor during urban and rural drives for economic development. It concludes with two iconic campaigns of the Mao years, neither explicitly about gender, which had profound effects on different groups of women. The Great Leap Forward and its ensuing famine reshaped the lives of rural women, and the Cultural Revolution and its movement to send urban youth to the countryside changed the lives of a generation of urban women.

Two major themes underlie this chapter. The first is that "women" in the period of socialist construction, as in all previous periods, were not a homogeneous group. Generation, region, ethnicity, and level of education all helped determine which events of Big History most touched women's lives. But perhaps the most profound divide during the socialist period was that between city and countryside, a gap exacerbated by state socialist policies. In the process of socialist construction, resources flowed out of the countryside to fund the cities—but people moved much less, as an increasingly restrictive household registration (*hukou*) system kept farmers closely bound to their communities. Farmers worked in collectives, where income fluctuated with the harvest but generally remained low, and their only access to food was in their home communities. Social services, including education and access to health care, improved somewhat in rural areas but remained limited. So did access to manufactured goods such as cloth. Most urban dwellers were paid salaries, had easier access to schools and hospitals, and enjoyed a relatively stable supply of food, cloth, and other daily goods. The urban-rural divide meant that the daily activities and sense of possibilities were different for farming women and city women. This chapter pays attention to those differences.

The second theme is that women's labor undergirded socialist construction in ways that were not completely recognized. The socialist discourse on labor had little to say about domestic labor, which women and their families saw as women's responsibility. Even as women took on new tasks outside the home, the constant demands of household tasks structured their days before, during, and after their labor for urban work units or the rural collective. The tasks required of rural women were different and more demanding than those urban women had to perform. But for both, the incessant requirement that they maintain their households was not regarded as an urgent problem to be solved in the socialist present. It was deferred to the communist future, when material abundance and socialized housework would lighten women's burden. In the meantime, domestic labor performed thriftily and with diligence was visible in public discourse as a sign of women's accomplishment, but not as an essential—and unremunerated—contribution to the building of socialism. The Party-state's symbol of Woman—emancipated, with full political rights, striding forward into the socialist future—had only a distant, if inspiring, relationship to the daily lives and labor of women.

MARRIAGE REFORM AND LAND REFORM

The Marriage Law of 1950 was written with input from women in the Party leadership.[3] The law was not substantially different from earlier versions enacted in the Communist base areas and had elements in common with the Nationalist Civil Code of 1930 as well. It announced the end of the "feudal marriage system" and of the "supremacy of man over woman."[4] It outlawed bigamy, concubinage, child betrothal, interference in widow remarriage, the exaction of money or gifts in conjunction with a marriage agreement, and compelling someone to marry against their will. It established a minimum marriage age of twenty for men and eighteen for women and required registration of marriages with the local government. It permitted divorce when both parties desired it, required mediation and a court decision in contested divorces, forbade a husband to divorce his wife during or immediately after pregnancy, and stipulated that a soldier's spouse could not obtain a divorce without the soldier's consent.

By issuing this law, the new national leadership signaled its desire to end marriage practices that had been criticized at least since the May Fourth Movement, as well as its intention to insert the state into marriage, formerly the domain of the family, by issuing marriage certificates. Together with the campaign to redistribute land to poor households, the Marriage Law expressed the Party-state's determination to end a situation in which richer families monopolized land, wives, and concubines,

while poor women were trafficked and poor men hired themselves out as landless laborers who could not afford to marry.

The Marriage Law, national in scope, encountered particular difficulties in the complex rural situation of the early 1950s. Inexperienced local village leaders, assisted by Party work teams sent from outside, were preoccupied with the land reform campaign. This involved determining the landholdings and class status of every household in every village and redistributing land and property from landlords and rich peasants to poor peasants.[5] The land reform process already involved considerable social conflict and violence, and there is little evidence that local leaders had the capacity or the desire to mount an aggressive campaign to implement the Marriage Law. Existing cases of concubinage, for instance, were left in place unless one of the parties asked for a divorce, although new ones were regarded as bigamy, and prohibited.[6]

Photo 8.1. Women at Ten Mile Inn village political meeting, late 1940s
Source: Photograph by David Crook, courtesy of Isabel Crook.

However, in some ways the new political environment introduced by the land reform was conducive to marriage reform as well. Young women from the cities attached to land reform work teams spent a great deal of time visiting the women of each household, mobilizing them to attend political meetings and explaining current government policies to them. Under the Agrarian Law, women received an allotment of land just like men, even though in practice all family land was held in common and its use was controlled by the household head.[7] Older women were encouraged to "speak bitterness" at meetings accusing the landlords and rich peasants of exploitation.[8] Younger women learned to speak and sing in public in support of government policies. These activities enlarged their sense of community and social possibility, and many young women found themselves unwilling to go through with betrothals arranged by their families. Some persuaded their families to break off these engagements (see box 8.1). Girls who had been sold to families as foster daughters-in-law, to be raised by their future in-laws and then married to one of the sons, now often returned to their natal families. In short, the new Marriage Law and the new political environment did prevent some "feudal" marriages from taking place.

BOX 8.1.
Feng Gaixia Breaks Off Her Engagement

Feng Gaixia, who grew up in southern Shaanxi province, was betrothed by her parents in 1949 at the age of fourteen.

> My mother cut out a paper pattern for a pair of red cloth shoes for me to wear when I got on the wedding sedan chair. She left it there for me for several days, but I wouldn't make the shoes. I felt, I hadn't even seen him and I didn't know what he was like. Once I said to my mother, I'd rather die than accept him. If you marry me off when I am so young, I am not going to leave even if I have to die. So I threw it back at her and didn't make the shoes. The old lady matchmaker came to us and I would curse her and tell her to get out.

After Liberation, Gaixia became a land reform activist, and by the time she was eighteen she was the head of the township Women's Association. What she heard about the Party-state's marriage policy from the land reform team emboldened her to break off her own engagement.

> In the past, there was nothing to give you backbone, right? After listening to the work team, you came to understand these things. These ideas were like a mirror held up to you, and you looked and compared.
>
> The thinking of the parents was that the daughter is already a member of someone else's family. If you call off the engagement, they are going to lose face. They were doing things for the benefit of their children. They would say that that family is rich and has a better situation.

Fortunately for Gaixia, her grandfather sided with her and helped to bring her father around.

So my mother was the only one left. There was nothing she could do now.

Gaixia decided to confront her intended husband directly.

One day, that matchmaker, that blind old lady, called me to their house. At that time, people liked to write down the eight characters of the year in which you were born. There is a coin and you have a red string tied to it. And then you tell the fortuneteller your age, your birth date and the year you were born and also the [animal zodiac] sign that you have. All these are tied up to that coin and that is the ceremony for the engagement. I wanted her to take that coin back for me. I went to her house and she also called the man over.

Aiya, it really felt extremely awkward. The man was asking, why do you want to call off the marriage? I said, because it is arranged. I've never seen you before today. This is just like "buying a cat in the bag." We are strangers to each other, right? We do not communicate with each other.

In the end, he even threatened me. But I was not afraid because I was already the director of the Women's Association. So I educated him. I told him that now I understand the Marriage Law. Now women are free, and I myself am going to choose the one I love, someone that I can communicate with, share my life with, have a common language with. And in the end, I was successful. We returned all the things that he had given me: a long piece of red cloth, two pairs of socks, a big bottle of facial cream, one bar of soap. Anyway, we were kids. I didn't care much about this. But he kept the eight characters of my birth for more than a year.

Sometimes, when I had meetings in Zhoujiaping, I bumped into him. He was always there as if deliberately, wanting to make things difficult for me. He was really narrow-minded. Well, if you don't like it, you don't like it. You can't force me. I had already made up my mind. That kind of person, how could I marry him? We had already called off the marriage. So what are you doing here? Acting like a hoodlum? I didn't want to speak to him. I just glared at him and then I left. And I didn't tell my mother. Otherwise she would say, look what shame you have brought us.

Source: Interview with Feng Gaixia (pseudonym), conducted by Gao Xiaoxian and Gail Hershatter, 1997, excerpted in Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory*: *Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 96–98.

But the stakes were much higher in families that already had paid a bride price and acquired a daughter-in-law to contribute her labor and help carry on the family line. Many young women were not happy in such marriages, and undoubtedly some of them hoped that they could escape conditions of poverty and make a better match. Here was a contradiction: a law intended to stabilize families by improving the chances that poor rural men could make a match was now destabilizing communities by threatening to disrupt such marriages. In rural communities,

the Marriage Law was popularly known as the divorce law. In-laws and husbands were arrayed against it, directing violent coercion at women who attempted to exercise their new legal rights.[9] In each year from 1950 to 1953, the Ministry of Justice said, seventy to eighty thousand people, most of them women, killed themselves or were killed by family members because of family conflicts.[10]

The Party-state criticized violence against wives who wanted to divorce. But the top leadership had differences of opinion about how forcefully to push marriage reform, and the Law was not publicized consistently on a national level until a one-month campaign in 1953.[11] After an initial period in which divorces were granted if the marriages had been made under one of the categories now forbidden by law, authorities concentrated on mediating, with the aim of maintaining household stability and community harmony. They often talked to village leaders, family members, and neighbors as well as to the unhappy couple, trying to solve marital problems while insisting that couples stay together.[12] These attempts sometimes bordered on the absurd. One provincial cadre reported in 1953 that a township head had encouraged a quarrelling couple to improve their relationship by engaging in sexual intercourse. The local official insisted that the woman throw her trousers out the window while he stood outside, but his attempt to foster marital harmony failed. The couple continued quarrelling loudly, and the township head ultimately had to throw the trousers back through the window. In cases like this, the provincial cadre argued, the couple should be permitted to divorce.[13] Rural and suburban women who were determined to divorce proved adept at finding sympathetic local officials or judges, sometimes traveling in groups to a location far from their own villages to seek redress. In 1953 alone, more than 1.17 million divorces reached the courts.[14]

Over the course of the Mao years, marriage practices changed, but on a much slower time line than that demanded by the brief and intense temporality of a state campaign. The establishment of rural schools and the collectivization of agriculture provided spaces in which youths could get to know and develop an interest in one another. It remained customary for matchmakers to have a role in formalizing a match, and for parents to have a decisive say, but it grew less common for women to be married off without their consent. By the 1970s, it was becoming common for newly married couples to separate their households from those of their parents. Companionate marriage gradually became a hope and expectation that many rural young people shared.[15]

One important feature of rural marriage was not addressed by the Marriage Law: patrilocality, in which daughters moved out of their natal homes at marriage and into the homes of their husbands, usually in a different village. This change at marriage continued to mark the lives

of women, who left communities where they were known and socially embedded and entered ones where they were strangers and had to establish themselves.[16] The change was not as drastic as suggested by the marriage ritual described in chapter 1, in which water was spilled when a bride departed to indicate that she could never return. In practice, young married women often married close by and returned often to their natal families, maintaining close emotional ties, and in some areas they continued to reside more than half of the time with their parents until they became pregnant.[17] It is difficult to imagine how the new PRC state, beleaguered as it was, could possibly have challenged patrilocality as a feature of "feudal" marriage, so embedded was it in rural life. But the failure to take it up had consequences: the persistence of patrilocal marriage has continued to limit women's access to political power and has generated widespread preference for sons well into the contemporary era, as chapter 9 will explore.

MIDWIFERY

Even as the new state was moving to redistribute land and reconfigure marriage, it began to address a pervasive public health problem: the high number of women and infants who died in childbirth.[18] Not since the efforts of the Nanjing Decade had the national government been in a position to address this problem. The campaign to do so, unlike those for land reform and marriage reform, was designed to minimize conflict. In most rural areas, as chapter 5 described, babies were delivered by rural midwives who had no formal training. Some midwives had years of experience and considerable expertise in dealing with breech and other difficult births. But their general use of unsterilized implements to cut the umbilical cord led to high rates of puerperal fever in mothers and tetanus neonatorum in infants. In 1952, the Ministry of Health estimated the infant death rate nationally at 20 percent.[19]

As early as 1950, the newly constituted Women's Federation, along with the Ministry of Public Health and the very small number of trained new-style midwives, conducted surveys of childbirth practices in the countryside. This was followed by short-course retraining for older midwives and the recruitment of younger women from the villages to train as new-style midwives. Both were trained in sterile technique. The mortality rate declined considerably because of these measures. Older midwives were not vilified as a remnant of the "old society"—they were valued for the rudimentary health-care delivery network they made possible. Across the years of collectivization, except for some short-lived experiments with birth centers, it remained common for rural women to give birth at home.

Midwives, usually local farmers who had received training and were paid by the collectives, attended home births.

The midwifery campaign can be seen as part of a larger state project to introduce the latest in scientific knowledge at the grassroots level and to strengthen families by improving women's and children's health. The science behind sterile technique became broadly accepted, although rural women were skeptical about the belief current in the 1950s that it was more scientific for women to give birth lying down rather than squatting. Other scientific knowledge about women and reproduction that circulated in 1950s urban China also looks somewhat dated more than half a century later. State-published books and articles promoted the belief that sexual activity was healthy and normal mainly in the context of marriage and reproduction, and that men's sexual desire was invariably stronger than women's, which was seen as mainly responsive in nature.[20]

PROSTITUTION

When Communist forces moved into Shanghai and other big cities in 1949, they had little experience as urban administrators. The challenges facing them included rampant inflation, refugees and beggars living and dying on the streets, unemployment, and opium trafficking.[21] For newly minted CCP urban cadres, the cities' large number of madams and prostitutes was a sign of this disorder, indicative both of corrupt urban morals and the exploitation of poor women. Eliminating prostitution, like ending opium addiction, was for them intrinsic to establishing a strong modern nation, free of the taint of imperialism and the name that had often been applied to China: "sick man of East Asia." They announced their intention to eliminate prostitution at the earliest possible opportunity, but in Shanghai and other cities they first had to establish basic political control and urban services. By the time the municipal administration moved to round up madams and prostitutes in late 1951, many women had left the trade to find other urban employment or return to their home villages, which were no longer caught up in civil war.

Still, it was a matter of considerable symbolic import for the new government to round up 501 prostitutes and 324 brothel owners. The owners were sent to prison or labor reform, but the prostitutes were remanded to a Women's Labor Training Institute where they were confined for medical care, job training, and ideological remolding. Like many other urban dwellers who suddenly found themselves under Communist administration, the women were not convinced that the new authorities were there to liberate them. They feared being deprived of their source of livelihood and uprooted from their social networks. Many had close ties to their

madams, whom they addressed as "mother." Some had heard rumors that they would be distributed to Communist troops, used as minesweepers in the anticipated military campaign to take Taiwan, or drained of blood to supply wounded soldiers. The arrival of health-care workers to draw their blood and test them for syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections did nothing to allay their fears. When the head of the Shanghai civil administration showed up at the Institute to give them a welcoming speech and proclaim their liberation, they greeted him with a chorus of wails and overturned their food trays onto the floor.

Ultimately, however, most of the women resigned themselves to the new order, and some eventually welcomed it. The staff of the Institute spared no effort in treating their sexually transmitted infections with scarce penicillin. They talked to the women about how they had been oppressed and why they should embrace new lives as productive citizens, taught them how to weave towels and produce socks, and attempted to reestablish links with their families in Shanghai or the surrounding countryside. Within several years, all of the incarcerated Shanghai prostitutes were released to families and jobs. Those who were not already married were provided with matchmaking services that paired them with poor urban men seeking wives, or sent them off to state farms in the far northwest to marry current or former army men working there.[22] Those who returned to Shanghai neighborhoods were under the supervision of newly established Residents' Committees, staffed by neighborhood women alert to any sign of recidivism.

Wherever women were sent, the intention was to reinsert them into a functioning household, part of a larger effort to stabilize society after many decades of war. Of course, this process was not as easy as the upbeat stories published in the state-controlled press suggested. When the Shanghai city government reviewed the membership of its Residents' Committees in 1954–55, for instance, it discovered at least one committee in which women's mobilization work was being staffed by a madam and a prostitute who was supposedly undergoing reform through labor.[23] In Beijing and other cities as well as Shanghai, authorities alternated between treating former prostitutes as victims in need of rescue from the exploitation of the "old society" (the umbrella term for the era before 1949) and suspecting them as disruptive elements who might return to their old ways or otherwise derail the project of revolutionary transformation.[24] Nevertheless, in a relatively short time the sex trade, an important economic sector in pre-revolutionary Shanghai and a prominent feature of urban social life in many other cities as well, had become invisible. Here was a clear demonstration that commercial sexual services, and the trafficking, gang ties, courtesan celebrities, and aggressive streetwalkers

associated with them, were all signs of exploitation to be discarded with the rest of the semicolonial past.

The attempts to reform marriage, the midwifery campaign, and the campaign to end prostitution all aimed to stabilize family formation and reproduction. The goal was a new society in which men would be able to afford to marry, and husbands and wives would have a say in choosing their partners in order to enhance the potential of a happy, long-lasting marriage. Mothers would be able to give birth to healthy children who survived and enhanced the prosperity of the family and the collective. Women would not be sold by their families and would not sell sex in order to survive. Although acceptance of these measures, particularly the Marriage Law, was far from uniform, the idea of stability was deeply appealing to broad segments of the populace after years of war, banditry, and displacement. A woman's place in the early years of socialism was in the family—from which she could be called forth and mobilized for socialist production.

MOBILIZING URBAN WOMEN

Party-state authorities devoted much attention in the first few years of the PRC to establishing an effective presence in workplaces and neighborhoods, and women were crucial participants in both projects.

Party committees were installed in every municipal organization and workplace to guide urban administration and economic production, acting as a sort of shadow government. By 1953, the central government had launched its First Five-Year Plan, a blueprint for economic growth modeled on the Soviet example. Old factories were expanded, and new ones were established.

Most state investment went to heavy industry, a sector that historically had employed few women, and the entry of women into traditionally male jobs—drivers, miners, technicians, engineers—was celebrated in the press.[25] Industries where women had predominated before 1949, such as cotton spinning and weaving, expanded as well. Many women were drawn into manufacturing, teaching, cultural production, health care, and urban administration. The national campaign to build a modern socialist economy, and the rising numbers of women in the paid labor force, dovetailed with the theory derived from Friedrich Engels that had become dominant in the Party during the wartime years: participation in paid labor was essential to women's emancipation.

Until 1958, when it became more difficult to obtain an urban household registration, many men who had worked in cities before 1949 brought

their wives from the countryside to join them. The birth rate and the number of surviving children both increased, swelling the urban population. Urban social life was increasingly organized around the *danwei*, or work unit. Large work units provided housing in apartment blocks, sometimes with communally shared cooking space, and the children of workers often went to schools affiliated with the danwei. Some danwei had canteens, clinics, and child-care facilities. Many goods and services were distributed through the danwei: health care, ration tickets for the purchase of staple goods and bicycles, and tickets for films or other entertainment. Weekly political study sessions also took place in the work unit, and political campaigns were publicized there.[26]

Not all women lived where they worked, because it was common for housing to be distributed through the husband's work unit. Many women did piece work or handicraft production in small collective workshops, which paid less than the larger state-owned enterprises and did not supply the full range of welfare benefits.[27] Even in state-owned enterprises, although men and women were paid equally when they did the same work, women tended to be tracked into lower-paying job assignments and industries.[28] And not all women worked—many middle-aged women, or those with many children at home, did not seek regular paid employment. Some took intermittent odd jobs or were mobilized periodically in hygiene campaigns to pick up trash, dredge canals, and kill insects and vermin.[29] The Women's Federation and its local branches were responsible for mobilizing unemployed women, making them aware of national priorities and incorporating them into state-building projects.

Photo 8.2. Spinning thread, Hangzhou silk mill, 1978
Source: Inge Morath and Arthur Miller, *Chinese Encounters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), 214.

In older neighborhoods outside the larger danwei, the Federation and local governments recruited unemployed or retired women to run the Residents' Committees, which had their own offices and were responsible for transmitting policy, mediating local disputes, staffing a neighborhood watch, and in general being the eyes and ears of the state. Some officials felt that women who had not circulated much outside the home before 1949 would have fewer problematic social connections and would be politically less complicated to manage than other urban dwellers.[30]

Government publicity often featured urban women in socially productive roles in industry, science, engineering, administration, and the arts.[31] But these were not the only images of women that circulated widely. Women wearing brightly colored dresses, or examining some of the consumer goods newly available to urban working people, also adorned the covers of the Women's Federation magazine *Women of China* and other urban publications. Whenever industrial growth slowed, as it did in the mid-1950s, state publications emphasized that the domestic role of women, and their personal attractiveness, were crucial to the health of socialist society.[32] Ideal wives were portrayed as interested in political affairs and equal to their husbands, but also willing to sacrifice for them if the men were out contributing to the construction of socialism. No comparable literature was directed at husbands. Marital harmony, when it appeared at all in the press, was primarily a woman's duty to nurture and maintain.[33]

Many women enthusiastically embraced what they saw as a new society, free of daily threats to life and safety, in which they were recognized and valued for their work. For one woman, who had been a childhood refugee from the 1942 Henan famine, running a day-care center in the west China city of Xi'an meant providing the next generation of children with the stability she had not experienced as a child. She was willing to work around the clock on that project, even if it meant that several of her own children had to be sent to live for several years with their grandmother because she could not care for them.[34] Urban women born in the 1950s recall mothers who put in long hours at their publishing houses or theater companies or factories, sometimes returning home only once or twice a week. When women were sent out to other danwei or to the countryside on the work teams that intermittently were dispatched to do political work throughout the Mao years, they saw their families even less. They spent little time with their children, who were cared for by grandparents or sent to boarding schools at a young age.[35]

As communities were reconfigured around a common workplace or newly reorganized neighborhood, social life opened well beyond the family, creating new connections as well as irritations. Campaigns to increase production were accompanied by fines for infractions and mistakes in

the work. In political meetings, numerous campaigns targeted those who came from suspect class backgrounds or who expressed criticism of the Party leadership. Some women who had been trailblazing lawyers, teachers, and journalists in the 1930s and 1940s, but who were not Communists, found themselves sidelined, their talents unwanted and their motivations put under scrutiny.[36] Other women, including the prominent Communist writer Ding Ling, found themselves the casualties of intra-Party struggles and were labeled Rightists in a 1957 campaign and removed from political life except as targets of criticism.[37] Many sources of social tension simmered, some of which would manifest themselves during the Cultural Revolution.

Juggling the demands of work, political study, and growing families was a standard feature of urban women's life in the 1950s and early 1960s, but the double (or triple) day for women was not generally conceptualized as a problem. Even as women's obligations to engage in socialist construction outside the home were radically reconfigured, government publications continued to promote the importance of a well-run household. The assumption that home was primarily a woman's responsibility was generally unquestioned.[38] A fully committed shift at the workplace followed by a second unremunerated shift at home was a standard feature of urban life for women.[39] Domestic tasks—cooking, shopping, cleaning, child rearing—remained time-consuming and expanded with the growing numbers of children. Housing stock did not keep up with the growth in population, and by the 1960s, families were crammed into small living spaces. No longer the underpinning of a dynastic empire or the proving ground of a New Life, the home was now conceptualized as an ancillary enterprise supporting socialist construction—but not appropriate as a woman's exclusive focus, because such an attitude could be construed as narrow, selfish, and bourgeois.

In spite of these material constraints and the lack of recognition of their unrelenting domestic work, for many urban women the years of early socialism remained a time of expanded horizons and optimism. Those who were workers enjoyed new social recognition as members of the leading class of socialist transformation. And for all urban dwellers, the rising standard of living and improved access to education and health care offered the prospect of an enticing future.

MOBILIZING RURAL WOMEN

In the countryside, women's labor was at the heart of the Party's drive to raise agricultural production. In the early years of the PRC, much of the rural population still had difficulty getting through the growing season

with enough to eat. In some areas, the Party-state encouraged and funded projects such as women's spinning and weaving co-ops. Women pooled their labor, produced cotton yarn and cloth, and sold it on the market to help their families make ends meet. But this support did not last long. Party leaders envisioned socialism as a rapid move in the direction of collective and then state ownership and control of production and marketing. As the state increased control of the purchase and sale of all kinds of goods in 1954, local rural markets shrank, and households lost the ability to generate income by selling the products of women's labor.[40]

Soon after the land reform campaign concluded in the early 1950s, Party-state leaders began to promote mutual aid teams in which neighbors shared labor and farming equipment, particularly during the busy seasons.[41] Mutual aid was not a significant departure from customary practice before 1949. Many villages comprised networks of male kin and their married-in wives, and it was common for relatives to pool labor in times of need. But this change was not enough to spur a dramatic increase in farm production. The national strategy for industrialization relied on cheap and plentiful farm products to feed the cities, generate some foreign exchange, and provide the factories with raw material. The mutual-aid teams were soon supplanted by new ways of organizing labor that began to change women's daily lives.

First, beginning in 1953, village neighborhoods were organized into lower producers' cooperatives, where several dozen village households pooled their labor and equipment on a regular basis. The state tightened its control over the purchase of farm products, buying from farmers at relatively low prices so that, in effect, the countryside was subsidizing the food supply and production campaigns of the cities. At the end of the year, after the harvest was sold, rural households were compensated. Most of the proceeds were distributed according to the land, equipment, and livestock they had provided. About 20 percent was distributed according to their labor.

Beginning in late 1955, this arrangement was replaced by advanced producers' cooperatives. These were bigger groups, sometimes the size of an entire village, divided into work teams. Private ownership of land, so recently distributed to households, was abolished. Each farmer earned a certain number of work points per day for labor. Proceeds were distributed, as before, after the harvest was sold. The collective guaranteed that each household would receive enough grain to support its members, but if the household's members did not earn enough work points to cover even this basic subsistence, they could borrow from the collective and clear the debt later.[42]

Mobilizing women was an important piece of this state initiative. Women had long been active in the fields during the sowing and harvest

seasons, with regional variations. Now they were encouraged to participate year-round in collective agriculture, where their labor could help to raise productivity in the fields and free up the labor of some male farmers to work in other collective enterprises such as machine repair, flour milling, and irrigation works.

Some women already were skilled farmers, usually because the men in their families had died or worked elsewhere before 1949. For these women, laboring in the fields was not new, but its meaning changed: now they were valued for their knowledge, rather than being shamed for their poverty and their public visibility. Some became women's team leaders, and the most skilled among them were selected as labor models.

Women labor models attended regional and even national meetings, where they were introduced to the nation's top leaders. At home, they

Photo 8.3. Labor model Cao Zhuxiang growing cotton, 1950s
Source: Photo courtesy of Cao Zhuxiang.

acted as a live embodiment of agricultural extension techniques, modeling for other women how to grow cotton, ward off insect pests, fertilize the fields, and participate in political campaigns. Often the women themselves were minimally literate and unaccustomed to public speaking, but teams sent by the Women's Federation helped to identify them, taught them how to sum up what they knew, answered their correspondence, and wrote accounts of their daily activity to publicize beyond their immediate community. Women labor models provided a direct link between policies generated by a faraway state and ordinary village woman.

Women labor models were meant to model mobilization, not women's emancipation. Nevertheless, being a woman labor model was a gendered experience. Both men and women labor models were expected to work hard and create new production techniques, but only women labor models were routinely praised for doing a good job of raising their children, treating the collective's livestock with maternal concern, and maintaining domestic peace and harmony with their husbands and in-laws. Women labor models had to be above reproach and controversy in their personal lives, not subjects of community gossip. They had to complete domestic tasks and manage the family's emotional life in a way that enhanced rather than interfered with collective production.[43]

For all women who came out to work in the fields, mobilization created a profound change in their social lives. Already, the land reform and marriage reform campaigns, as well as winter schools aimed at teaching villagers basic literacy, had drawn women out of their homes to meetings and classes. Initially, the senior members of a household often opposed the efforts to involve younger women because they feared that their daughters might be sexually compromised or their daughters-in-law might be tempted to seek a divorce. In the early 1950s, stories abounded of angry parents and in-laws who had locked up their young women, or barred the door and refused to feed them on their return, or abused them verbally and physically.

Patient persuasion by the work teams overcame some of this resistance. Now, with collectivization, it became absolutely necessary for every able-bodied member of a household to labor in the collective fields and earn work points.[44] Under these circumstances, the residual reluctance to let young women out unsupervised quickly evaporated. Unmarried adolescent daughters and young married women spent much of their days working and socializing in the company of their peers—and within range of groups of young men. Across the collective period, village mores about social mixing changed, and the social worlds of village women broadened.

Life in the collectives was far from idyllic for women, however. For one thing, women routinely were paid less than men for their labor, even

Photo 8.4. Two women farmers, Sichuan, 1957

Source: Marc Riboud, *The Three Banners of China* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 25.

when they outperformed men at tasks such as topping cotton plants or picking tea. Men generally earned ten work points a day, whereas women earned seven or eight. Each person's daily working allocation was decided by his or her production team, and the decisions reflected shared assumptions that a woman's labor was worth less than that of a man, although some reports surfaced about local arguments around this issue. Even as the gendered division of labor changed rapidly, and women took on new tasks, the notion persisted that whatever women did was worth less than what men did.[45]

In addition, women routinely worked shorter hours than men in the collective fields, but they put in longer days. They came late to the fields after caring for children and preparing the morning meal, and left early to cook at noontime and before dinner. Often they labored in the fields with small children on their backs. This was the rural version of the double day, and because the only labor that was publicly visible and remunerated was labor for work points, women's earnings were lower than men's—although still absolutely essential for the welfare of families in rural collectives.

Perhaps the most taxing feature of married women farmers' lives was the hidden night shift of labor they performed.[46] After dinnertime or when evening production planning meetings concluded, women settled down at home to spin thread, weave cloth, and sew clothing and shoes for their ever-increasing numbers of children. Many villages were not electrified until the early 1970s, so this work was conducted well into the night under the light of oil lamps.[47]

Several factors converged to increase women's workload in the collective era. First, many of their daytime hours were now spent in the fields, rather than tending directly to household labor. Second, partly because of the end to war and the improvement of midwifery, along with other public-health initiatives, more children now survived infancy. Birth control was not easily accessible or accepted in rural areas, although women sometimes resorted to herbal concoctions and violent physical activities to prevent or end pregnancies.[48] These methods of family planning were not reliable, and increasing numbers of children had to be clothed and shod.

Third, machine-made cloth, clothing, and shoes were not widely available in rural areas, and they were expensive enough that even farmers who were issued ration tickets preferred to sell them on the black market and make their clothes at home. At times when state demand for cotton was high and most of the crop was requisitioned for purchase, some of the raw cotton that women used to clothe their families had to be gleaned from second pickings through the cotton bolls.[49] Their labor time, too, was scavenged from sleeping hours and from the demands of the workday, as

Photo 8.5. Woman takes child to the fields, 1960s
Source: Marc Riboud, *The Three Banners of China* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 60.

women brought their needlework to nighttime political meetings and to the fields to take up during breaks.

Older women, already past their childbearing years, also faced new labor demands during the collective era. Those whose physical strength no longer allowed them to earn substantial work points in the field took over child-care tasks from daughters-in-law who went out each day to farm. This household division of labor made it possible for the daughters-in-law to earn work points, but the child care performed by the older women was not remunerated if it was performed within the household. And older women felt the economic burden of grandchildren in another way as well: a multigenerational household with many children who were too young to earn work points had to stretch its resources to avoid borrowing from the collective. Strained by the demands of these growing families, some grandparents formally separated out their households as accounting units from those of their married sons, even if they continued to live in the same dwelling, so that the younger couple was primarily responsible for providing food for their own children. This gradual weakening of intergenerational co-residence eventually helped to change the nature of rural marriage and perhaps weakened the sense of obligation that grown children felt to their aging parents.

Essential as they were, the clothing women produced and the double day they worked in the collective era did not count as labor. It was neither

remunerated nor publicly recognized because it appeared to take place in a separate domain from that of the collective. Focused on the need to mobilize women's agricultural labor, and supported by the Engelsian belief that in doing so they were contributing to women's emancipation, Party-state authorities never fully confronted the degree to which women's invisible labor was underwriting the entire enterprise of rural socialist construction.

CAMPAIGN TIME AND DOMESTIC TIME: THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD AND THE FAMINE

"Woman-work"—mobilizing women for fieldwork and other collective tasks—was a routine duty carried out at the village level by a local woman who was often the only woman in village leadership, intermittently aided by work teams sent by the Women's Federation.[50] But woman-work burst out of its usual routines with the heightened demand for rural labor during the Great Leap Forward from 1958 to 1960, a time of disruption, experimentation, and ultimately national disaster that left tens of millions dead and the economy badly damaged. The short and frantic period of the Great Leap was also the beginning—and the end—of the Party-state's only serious attempt to socialize some aspects of women's household labor in the countryside. With the collapse of the Leap and the devastating famine from 1959 to 1961, that project was abandoned, and domestic labor was returned to the household and social invisibility. Women's invisible labor, however, was crucial to household survival in the famine years.

Mao launched the Great Leap Forward in 1958, frustrated with China's pace of development and convinced that social reorganization would unleash the energy of farmers and power an economic breakthrough. Although many in the Party had grave reservations about his strategy, farmers initially were enthusiastic about its promise of multistory houses, electrification, and abundant food. They accepted the vision Mao articulated that several years of unstinting effort would be followed by "a thousand years of Communist happiness."[51]

In both city and countryside, production units were amalgamated into large communes that were supposed to provide economies of scale, combining the functions of both production and government. The pace of work in urban factories increased, but the reorganization did not alter most aspects of urban life. The change in the countryside, however, was fundamental. The newly created rural communes could cover an area as big as a county and incorporate as many as several hundred thousand people. Communes were subdivided into production brigades with five thousand or more households, and production teams that might encompass an entire natural village.[52]

Photo 8.6. Woman worker in Yumen oil fields, 1958

Source: Henri Cartier-Bresson, in Cornell Capa, ed., *Behind the Great Wall of China: Photographs from 1870 to the Present* (Greenwich, CT: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972).

Suddenly, under the administration of the commune, rural people were required to coordinate their daily labor with people dozens of miles away. Many men, and some women, left their home villages for weeks on end to work on ambitious infrastructure projects in irrigation and road building.[53] As the men moved out to do this work and took on the project of smelting steel in backyard furnaces—part of the Great Leap effort to expand and decentralize industrial production—villages began to suffer an acute labor shortage. The 1958 harvest season arrived, bringing a bumper crop, but in many areas the possibility that grain would rot in the fields was very real.

In response, women farmers were mobilized to go to the fields in unprecedented numbers, working long days and nights to complete the harvest.[54] Beginning in early 1957, the national Women's Federation had promoted the "three transfers" policy, in which menstruating, pregnant, or lactating women were supposed to be assigned light tasks in nearby locations working in dry fields.[55] During the Great Leap, however, the need for women's labor overrode such precautions. Often women suffered from exhaustion and health problems, including miscarriages and many cases of uterine prolapse from returning to work too quickly after childbirth.[56] These were not always taken seriously by local leaders, including many women in charge of woman-work who felt it was important to put production first.[57]

Photo 8.7. Farmers working in the fields at night, Xinyang, Henan, 1959
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Xinyang_working_at_night.jpg

With women's labor so badly needed in the fields, Party-state authorities paid an unusual amount of attention to lightening women's domestic burden. The "Five Changes" policy aimed to collectivize meal preparation, clothing production, midwife services, child care, and flour milling. Some of these initiatives, had they been implemented consistently or lasted longer, might have altered rural women's lives profoundly. For instance, production brigades and teams were encouraged to organize older women to provide child care for women working in the fields and to pay the child minders in work points. But women had to go to the fields regardless of whether child care was available, and tales from this period abound of children who were left tethered to the bed, wandered off and drowned, or were bitten by animals while their mothers worked.

The most ambitious of the Five Changes was the establishment of rural collective dining halls in many production teams, beginning in the hectic summer of 1958. Farmers turned over their food supplies to the production brigade, smashed their kitchen stoves, and handed in their woks and other metal goods to be smelted down for steel. A day's work was supposed to guarantee all men and women laborers a day's food in the dining halls, with special provisions for the elderly and children. One of the Great Leap's most popular pieces of fiction, "Li Shuangshuang," which was made into a film and rendered as a comic book, centered on the efforts of a voluble and quick-tempered woman to upgrade the food in a dining hall in her village.[58]

For several months, farmers ate their fill, many for the first time in their lives. Glowing output reports coming in from around the country reassured everyone that the hoped-for Communist prosperity was imminent. But the dining halls soon foundered on the larger problems engendered by the Leap: widespread false reporting of massively inflated productivity by local leaders afraid of being characterized as laggards; excessive

government requisitions of grain, in part based on these false reports and in part the result of callous decisions at the top; administrative chaos in huge new structures run by inexperienced cadres; the state decision to repay all debts to the Soviet Union, which in 1960 broke off fraternal relations with China partly over the unorthodox strategy of the Great Leap; and bad weather.

As the food supply in dining halls dwindled, daily meals began to feature thin gruel made of carrot tops, tree leaves, and other marginal sources of nutrition. Women quarreled with the cooks about fair distribution or whether portions could be taken home for sick family members. Villagers hoarded and stole food, fought with one another, and in some areas ate the raw crops directly from the fields before the state could claim them.[59] As malnutrition spread and starvation gripped parts of China, the dining halls were disbanded. The project of socializing domestic work receded into the indefinite Communist future. Even if the Party-state had remained committed to the Five Changes and had been able to fund necessary investments in rural areas, so deep was their association with discord and hunger that it is doubtful households ever again would relinquish control over the family food supply.

The famine years from 1959 to 1961 remain one of the most terrible legacies of the attempt to build rural socialism, as well as one of the most catastrophic famines worldwide, still politically controversial more than half a century later.[60] The national state, reluctant to admit the scope of the disaster and unable to mount a massive aid effort, left each province to devise its own solutions. In the most severely affected provinces, some farmers—mainly young men—took to the road, looking for itinerant work elsewhere. Older people, married women, and children were less free to move, and control of migration through the household registration system kept most people in place. (The household registration system, along with state controls on the press, meant that many farmers were unaware of the scale of the disaster outside their own locality, and many urban people remained ignorant of the suffering in the countryside.) Human trafficking, particularly a trade in brides from the most severely affected places, was not unknown. But markets for sex workers, concubines, and foster daughters-in-law no longer existed, so one potential option for saving the lives of young women and children, traumatic as it had been in earlier periods, was no longer available.[61] Malnourished women suffered high rates of amenorrhea and uterine prolapse in famine-afflicted areas across China. Births plummeted.[62] Estimates of the number of deaths across China during this period in excess of what might normally have been expected range from an official estimate of fifteen million to a high of forty-five million.[63]

Amid this chaos and devastation, women took what measures they could to keep their members alive. They scavenged for food. Those skilled at weaving cloth, embroidering pillows, or making shoes sent their men to carry these products to trade for grain in more remote mountain areas. Mountain villages were poorer than settlements in the plains, but mountainous land had been less intensively collectivized and sometimes still had stores of food. The effective unit of production in many villages shrank to the household, an unauthorized decollectivization that persisted in some areas for several years after the famine abated. The state once again permitted households to cultivate private plots and raise pigs and chickens for their own use, all tasks in which women took the lead.

As harvests began to return to normal levels and cultivation was recollectivized in the early 1960s, the expanded role of women in daily fieldwork was further consolidated. Many men moved to supervisory and technical functions in agriculture, worked in small-scale industries to support agriculture, or became contract factory laborers in towns and cities.[64] The labor force in basic-level agriculture was increasingly feminized, while women's second shift remained untouched.

THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND THE SENT-DOWN YOUTH CAMPAIGN

In 1966 Mao Zedong, who had been in partial political eclipse since the failure of the Great Leap, staged a political comeback. He sidestepped the Party-state apparatus and called upon the nation's youth to "bombard the headquarters" and help him combat revisionism, which he characterized as the Party's turn away from class struggle and the original goals of a Marxist-Leninist revolution. He warned that the Party was now led by "people in authority who were taking the capitalist road" and called for criticism of both the Party leadership and possibly counterrevolutionary attitudes on the part of intellectuals and former elites. His exhortations fell on receptive ears: student activists committed to Maoist ideals, moved by Mao's call for youth to take the lead in effecting cultural transformation, and also worried about their own future prospects; factory workers dissatisfied with autocratic management backed up by Party authorities; farmers still enraged at how local leadership had permitted their communities to suffer hunger during the Great Leap; and a host of others.

Like the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution had little directly to say about women's status. Most of the period's polemics and theorizing had to do with class, centering on questions such as these: could counterrevolutionary class attitudes be passed down from adults

to children born after the revolution? Was an old bourgeoisie secretly wielding power in China, or was a new bourgeoisie emerging? The Three Great Differences that Mao said he wanted to narrow were those between mental and manual labor, workers and farmers, and city and countryside. No fourth great difference between men and women existed. Problems of gender inequity were widely regarded as minor, residual, and destined to disappear with time and further economic development.

Gender was downplayed in Party-state directives of the period as well. The Women's Federation, like many other organizations, was dissolved in 1966, on the grounds that it was permeated with bourgeois ideas and that women's interests were not distinct from those of men of the same class.[65] It was not reconstituted until 1972, and even thereafter it was regarded by many urban women as having nothing to do with them because of its close association with housewives, not working women.[66] But like the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution did affect the lives of men and women in gender-differentiated ways, particularly those who were adolescents and young adults at the time. This was the case even when young men and women were involved in similar activities and nothing about gender was explicitly articulated.

The activist phase of the Cultural Revolution ran from 1966 to 1969. During this period, urban middle-school girls and university students joined their male classmates in forming groups of Red Guards. They wrote big-character posters criticizing the leadership of the nation and their own schools. In one notorious and controversial case in the summer of 1966, at a time when the top Party leadership was encouraging teenaged activists to create "great chaos" and local leadership had completely collapsed, Beijing middle-school girls beat the woman vice principal of their school and forced her and other school leaders to carry heavy loads of dirt until she collapsed and died.[67] Red Guards, including girls and young women, ransacked the homes of suspected "bad elements," a group that included intellectuals and former capitalists as well as the Party revisionists who were supposed to be under criticism.[68] Students traveled to Beijing, some from great distances, to attend one of the massive rallies in Tian'anmen Square where Chairman Mao appeared to encourage as many as a million students at a time.

Students increasingly became embroiled in the conflicts over which Red Guard faction was more accurately reflecting the intentions of Chairman Mao. By 1967, these disputes had spread to the factories and been fueled by workplace grievances there, resulting in armed conflict and many deaths among the militants, including young women.[69] By 1968, the People's Liberation Army had been sent in to restore order, and the central government inaugurated a vast campaign to "send down" urban youth to the countryside "to learn from the poor and lower-middle peas-

Photo 8.8. Red Guards, 1966
Source: Jean Vincent/AFP/Getty, published in the *Guardian*, August 25, 1966, reprinted August 25, 2016.

ants." Shipping young people out of the city also served to quell urban violence and solve a problem of unemployment among urban youths. In 1969, the Party declared that the Cultural Revolution was over, but many of its associated policies, including the sent-down youth program, continued until Mao's death in 1976 and even beyond. The official Party-state periodization of history now dates the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, characterizing it as "ten years of chaos."

In Cultural Revolution factional warfare, particularly in the schools, young people formed alliances based mainly on their families' class labels. The sons and daughters of high cadres stuck together, both before and after their parents came under attack. So did the sons and daughters of intellectuals and bad-class elements, who were not permitted to be Red Guards, and the working-class sons and daughters who had found themselves disadvantaged with respect to the other two groups, in spite of their proletarian background.

Gender was a far less visible organizing axis. Still, it was not absent. Women's mode of dress signified their class allegiance. Red Guard girl students dressed like male soldiers, with cropped hair, armbands, and wide belts.[70] There was a missionizing zeal in their adoption of this military aesthetic: groups of Red Guards seized women pedestrians on city streets in the fall of 1966, cutting their braids, slicing up skirts and form-fitting pants, and warning violators of this new dress code not to mimic the fashion habits of the bourgeoisie. When Wang Guangmei, the wife of China's president, was hauled before a huge political rally to be criticized

for her revisionist politics, Red Guards humiliated her by dressing her in a satirically exaggerated version of bourgeois women's attire: a form-fitting dress and a necklace of ping-pong balls.[71]

The model for political behavior in the early Cultural Revolution was an imagined version of the working-class male. Some young women Red Guards expressed their political enthusiasm by engaging in behavior that was more commonly associated with young men: hectoring, swearing at, and physically abusing suspected class enemies. In later years, when former Red Guards tried to make sense of the atmosphere of those years, one of the main questions they puzzled over was why girls, in particular, had behaved in that way. This puzzlement suggests that in their own assessment, girls and young women had departed more thoroughly from gendered norms of behavior than their male classmates—even though, in fact, beating teachers and abusing neighbors was a departure for young men, too.

Looking back on those years from the vantage point of the post-Mao period, women also recall their sense of adventure, excitement, and sometimes trepidation as they took to the rails and the roads to see Chairman Mao or emulated the CCP's Long March in treks across China. These travels gave both young men and young women a sense of China's vastness and provided a degree of autonomy from adult supervision that they would not have encountered in a more normal time. For young women in particular, this period of political activism and travel meant freedom from family and school constraints that young women of previous generations seldom had experienced.

The sense of being unmoored from previous expectations also characterizes women's memories of being sent down to the countryside. Assigned to state farms or rural production teams, urban young men and women learned new skills, many of them physically taxing. They experienced firsthand the enormous gap in education and living standards between the city and the countryside. Because even the middle-school students among them were better educated than most rural people, many "educated youth," as they were officially known, were quickly transferred out of fieldwork to accounting and teaching jobs. In young women's stories, several themes recur: the drudgery of rural life, their exhilaration at learning to ride horses or master agricultural tasks, their sense that rural women of their age operated under much stronger "feudal" constraints than they did, their periodic campaigns against the gendered division of labor and work-point discrepancies, their discovery that farmers often were not at all motivated by revolutionary ideals or class loyalty, their attempts to combat boredom by circulating hoarded copies of novels and language textbooks, and their growing sense of capability and self-reliance. Some also mention the difficulties of navigating adolescence, sexual attraction,

sex, and unwanted pregnancy with little guidance from adults or peers, and some talk about instances of sexual assault.[72]

As young women of urban origin sought to establish themselves in these unfamiliar rural environments, they could draw upon a few propaganda slogans that were addressed to women in particular. One was an enthusiastic endorsement that had first appeared in the *People's Daily* in 1956, to the effect that "women can hold up half the sky."[73] (It is usually translated into English as "women hold up half the sky," making it an accomplished fact rather than a statement of potential. It also has been pointed out by many observers in China and beyond that Chinese women who work a double day may have been holding up more than half of the sky.) Another was an offhand statement Mao apparently made while swimming past a group of young women swimmers in 1964: "The times have changed; men and women are the same. Whatever men comrades can do, women comrades can do too." His casual observation was reproduced nationally, becoming a standard pronouncement on the state of women's emancipation: mission accomplished. Here the standard of achievement was male—no one was suggesting that men comrades take equal responsibility for housework or children—but this statement did circulate widely in the Chinese press as an encouragement that women could, and should, contribute to the revolution equally with men.[74]

A third way in which the state recognized the potential of women was in the approving coverage given to the Iron Girls[75] (see box 8.2). They were a group of young rural women in the Dazhai production brigade in north China's Shanxi Province who worked tirelessly alongside men to rescue the crops from a 1963 flood. Dazhai later became a national model for agriculture, and across the country Iron Girl Brigades were formed. They performed heroic tasks—including repair of high-voltage wires—that women had not attempted previously. Iron Girl Brigades were comprised largely of unmarried women, thus sidestepping the problem of the multiplying demands on women's time after marriage. In the late 1970s, as China entered the post-Mao reform era, the Iron Girls would become a target for satire and proof that in expecting women to perform the same work as men, the Mao era had violated a "natural" gendered division of labor (see chapter 9).

Finally, women of the Cultural Revolution era could see heroic behavior modeled for them in the eight model operas (and several ballets) created under the sponsorship of Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, whose political power reached a zenith during the Cultural Revolution.[76] These productions were almost invariably set in the pre-1949 era, and in most of them one or more of the main characters were women. The plots usually centered on struggle against cartoonishly cruel Japanese invaders or Chinese class enemies. The heroine of *The White-Haired Girl*, for instance, got her

BOX 8.2.
A Sent-Down Youth in the Great Northern Wilderness: Two Vignettes

Most of us did not feel inferior to men in any way at all. Whatever job they could do, we could do too. In fact, we always did it better.

Cutting soybean was probably the most physically demanding work on the farm. We did it only when the fields were drenched with rain and the machines had to stay out. Trudging through mud up to a foot deep, small sickles in our hands, we cut soybeans on ridges that were over a mile long. . . . By the day's end, those who carried off the palm were always some "iron girls."

At first, the men tried to compete with us. After a while they gave up the attempt and pretended that they did not care. Nobody could beat Old Feng, a student from Shanghai. The men nicknamed her "rubber back," because she never stopped to stretch her back no matter how long the ridge was. Her willpower was incredible! After her, there were Huar [a local young woman] and several other formidable "iron girls." Who ever heard of "iron boys" in those years anywhere? In China only "iron girls" created miracles and were admired by all.

A "gigantic counterrevolutionary incident" broke out in Hulin county. Overnight, almost every house in the region was searched and who knows how many poor peasants were implicated. In our village, some fifteen were arrested. My friend Huar and her mother, Ji Daniang, were among them. Their crime was sticking needles into Chairman Mao's face and body. In fact, they did this unintentionally, for in those days Chairman Mao's pictures were all over the newspaper the villagers had always used for wallpaper. So after the women sewed, if they stuck the needles in the wall at the wrong place, poor peasants became active counterrevolutionaries and were shut up in the cow shed for months.

After Huar's arrest, occasionally I saw her from a distance. Neither of us dared to speak to the other. . . . Her face, hands, and clothes were extremely dirty and her hair was a big pancake, filled with lice. As a punishment, the "criminals" were not allowed to wash themselves or comb their hair when they were detained.

Source: Rae Yang, *Spider Eaters: A Memoir* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 178, 242–43.

white hair when she retreated to a cave after she was seized from her family and sexually assaulted by a landlord, emerging later under the protection of the Eighth Route Army to denounce her tormentor. *Red Detachment of Women* was based on the experiences of a unit of women soldiers organized by the Red Army in the early 1930s.

In many of these productions, the awakening political consciousness of the women was guided by male Party secretaries. They modeled correct behavior and offered gentle but stern guidance on what the revolution required, discouraging the women from sudden outbursts and quests for personal vengeance.[77] The message was that women, too, could be revolutionaries—if they could control their emotions and properly channel their energies under the guidance of a politically experienced man. No cultural productions during the Cultural Revolution were set in the present or addressed inequalities that persisted under socialism. The main message they imparted to women was not a new one: class divisions are fundamental, the roots of women's oppression are found in class oppression, the road to emancipation is to work alongside men to make revolution and build socialism.

Even in a situation where the state paid little attention to analyzing or ameliorating gender inequality, however, the lives of rural women improved during the 1970s. Cultural Revolution initiatives to improve education in the countryside, and to deploy minimally trained "barefoot doctors" to broaden the scope of health-care delivery, benefited women. So did the slow spread of rural electrification and the absence of further catastrophic experiments such as the Great Leap Forward. Collective agriculture and small-scale industry managed to keep pace with population growth during this period, a significant achievement. Women earned incomes in the fields and small rural factories. Courtship practices continued to evolve in directions that gave young women more say in picking a mate. It continued to become more common for young couples to establish their own households at marriage, with young married women less constrained by their husbands' parents. The most profound improvements in rural women's lives were not produced by the utopianism of the Great Leap vision or the heightened politicization of the Cultural Revolution, but rather by the incremental improvement in productivity and stability at the grassroots level in rural communities.

In 1974, as Mao Zedong's health deteriorated and factions in the top Party leadership jockeyed for control, Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, sponsored a campaign to "criticize Lin Biao and Confucius."[78] Lin Biao was a former close comrade of Mao's, once designated as his successor, who had died in a mysterious plane crash in 1971. Confucius, the sage of antiquity who had already come under serious criticism in the May Fourth Movement of 1919, was widely seen as a proxy figure for Premier Zhou Enlai, who was regarded by Jiang Qing as an enemy and an impediment to her ambition for more political power.

This campaign rooted in intra-Party struggle did more to highlight persistent gender inequality than any other political initiative of the "ten years of chaos." In the course of criticizing Confucius, Party

commentators devoted substantial time to the age and gender hierarchies that were embedded in classical Chinese political thought and that persisted in much daily social practice. The campaign raised issues about equal work points, bride prices, the need for collectivized child care and sewing groups, the duty of men to participate in domestic work, and even the possibility of matrilocal marriage.

But this campaign, so closely associated with Jiang Qing, soon foundered. In 1976, Jiang was arrested after Mao's death and put on trial for, among other things, promoting the Cultural Revolution and seizing the opportunity to take revenge on old colleagues in the film industry and the Party whom she felt had opposed her in the past. She was eventually tried, convicted, and held in confinement until her death by suicide in 1991.

The criticisms leveled at Jiang Qing in popular commentary were profoundly gendered, often invoking a saying from imperial times that when a woman seized political power, chaos would result. She was sometimes depicted wearing an imperial crown, or else as a woman's body divided down the middle—one side portrayed in revolutionary army uniform, a style she helped make popular, and the other side garbed in frilly dresses and high heels. The division was meant to signify hypocrisy, discrediting both halves—the woman who tried to seize power like a military man, and the woman who secretly fancied the life of the bourgeoisie while carrying on a violent campaign against people she castigated as bourgeois. Her political concerns were denounced as purely personal, and her assertion at trial that she had acted as "Chairman Mao's dog. I bit whomever he asked me to bite" was widely derided.

The downfall of Jiang Qing was accompanied by a popular rejection of Cultural Revolution models for womanly behavior—militant, active, striving to be as good as a man in a man's domain. An ensemble of mobilizations, slogans, and cultural expressions had been directed at women during the Mao years, encouraging them to be active outside the domestic realm and to understand themselves as equal to men. This discourse was state-initiated, instrumental in its approach to women, and insufficient in its recognition of women's labor and of newly generated inequalities. It was, however, a powerful formulation that shaped the self-perceptions and sense of possibility of many women who were born and came of age in the Mao years. As girls and young women, they did not see gender as an axis of fundamental inequality, difference, or social concern.[79]

The repudiation of the Maoist approach to social transformation intensified during the late 1970s. As the economic reforms began to take shape, the heroic women figures that graced Cultural Revolution posters were replaced by a more complicated, multi-vocal, and contradictory approach to gender.

9

Capitalized Women, 1978–

In the more than four decades since Mao Zedong's death in 1976, China has become a world power and economic powerhouse. The economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping improved material life for virtually all Chinese, even as old forms of inequality deepened and new ones emerged. The reforms set in motion massive changes for women, including but not limited to family size and family relations, work opportunities and workplace discrimination, marriage law and property rights, social expectations and sense of self, and feminism.[1] These changes were shaped by generation, class, and location as well as gender.

Reforms began in the late 1970s in the countryside, as the Party-state disbanded collective agriculture and contracted out land to households. Farmers were still officially designated as rural people on their household registration forms (*hukou*), but with the expansion of markets they could now buy grain anywhere and therefore could seek work outside their rural communities. With state encouragement, millions left the countryside in what eventually became "the largest internal migration in human history."[2] Left behind in many villages were middle-aged women and the elderly, who performed farm labor while caring for grandchildren whose parents had migrated out. The press eventually began to refer to rural dwellers as the "386199 work team," referring to the dates for International Women's Day (March 8), Children's Day (June 1), and Seniors' Day (September 9).[3] Some migrants found factory work in newly opened Special Economic Zones that the government set up to attract manufacturing investment in south China. Others filled service and construction

jobs in the cities.[4] Women's paid labor was essential to powering the new globally competitive economy emerging along the coast.

Initially, the urban economy changed more slowly, as attempts to reform state-owned industry and enlarge the role of the market were slow to take hold. Literary work and film production flourished, as did discussion of social problems, personal life, and gender roles in a newly expanded press. Inflation and corruption helped spur widespread urban protests in the late 1980s, culminating in violent government suppression of demonstrators in Beijing and other cities on June 4, 1989.

A period of economic stasis followed, but when the reforms resumed with Deng Xiaoping's blessing in 1992, the urban pace of change accelerated. The state retained control over key industries, but thousands of state-owned enterprises were dismantled and reorganized, and large numbers of workers were laid off. Many urban women, still in early middle age, were ejected from the shrinking state sector and found work in small commercial ventures.

Throughout the reform period, the Communist Party has retained control of political life, even as its goals and governing ethos diverged radically from those of the Mao years. The differentiated effects of rapid economic development and state-sponsored capitalist globalization were not evenly distributed. State officials made fortunes participating in new enterprises funded by both domestic and foreign capital. New class groupings proliferated, even as the language of class deployed by the Party-state during the Mao years fell into disuse. By 2010 China's index of income inequality was among the highest in the world,[5] with real estate, investment income, and other forms of new wealth widening the gaps between rich and poor, urban and rural, and men and women.

Beginning in the late 1970s, gender differences that had been minimized or ignored under Mao were named by state authorities and the press as "natural." During the Mao years women had been exhorted to contribute to socialist construction and told, as discussed in the previous chapter, that they could "do everything that men comrades can do." Now they were urged to make themselves attractive, support their men and children at work and school, and help ensure stability in an era of dizzying social change. The gendered effects of the economic reforms were topics of public concern. So was sexuality, within and beyond marriage. And as in every previous era, the proper role of women and the symbolic use of Woman—now as instantiations of China's globalized modernity—engendered comment and contention.

Women's experiences across this period are far too complex for one brief chapter to cover, and so this chapter is limited to exploring four important changes.[6] It begins with the rise and fall of the single-child policy, a state family planning initiative from 1979 to 2015 that had un-

anticipated and often deleterious consequences for women and children. Over the course of more than three decades, the policy altered China's demographic structure, contributed to major changes in gendered child rearing and notions of the ideal family, and left China with a looming labor, marriage, and elder-care crisis. The chapter then describes the working lives of migrant women who became factory workers, salesclerks, sex workers, and domestic servants. Migration and employment away from home have profoundly affected women's sense of self, desires, and experiences of family life. The chapter turns next to changes in marriage and divorce, particularly in urban areas, exploring changing expectations about women's sexual attractiveness and men's sexual prerogatives. As divorce rates rise, women's relatively weak social claim to joint property has opened a new gendered wealth gap even as urban wealth has grown. The chapter concludes by introducing feminist voices from several generations of women who have identified domains of gender inequality during the reform era.

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF CHILD REARING

In the early 1970s, before the reform era began, the state introduced a family planning policy known as "later, longer, fewer." Couples were encouraged to start having children later in life, wait longer between births, and reduce the total number of children. In 1979, the state replaced this approach with the much more stringent single-child family policy.[7] In part, the single-child policy reflected the belated recognition that the Chinese population had grown substantially in the Mao years, from almost 542 million in 1949 to more than 975 million by the late 1970s. Officials feared that continued population growth would doom efforts to develop the national economy and raise the standard of living. The policy took total population size as its only relevant datum and was rushed into place without much consideration of overall population structure, acceptability to the public, women's reproductive health, or gender.[8]

Urban people generally accepted the policy and signed single-child pledges. In cities, work units could offer preferred access to housing and day care to compliant families, while docking the salaries and slowing the careers of parents who exceeded the limit. The fact that urban housing stock had not increased appreciably during the Mao years and that urban families with many children were living in extremely crowded conditions reinforced acceptance of the policy.

Over the course of more than three decades after 1979, urban families grew accustomed to the single-child policy, and new child-rearing practices emerged. Families who did well in the reform economy lavished

resources on their single children, from piano and martial arts lessons to special tutors. In families where the only child was a girl, parents invested more heavily in her education than they might have if brothers also had had a claim on limited resources. Social commentators worried that with two parents and four grandparents doting on a single child, China was producing a generation of spoiled "little emperors." But single children were also the "only hope" for a family's future financial security and upward mobility. The pressures on such urban children were intense, leading to a reported spike in psychological disorders and rebellious behavior.[9]

In the countryside, in contrast, the new birth-planning policy was resented and sometimes strenuously resisted. Intended to complement the economic reforms, the policy worked at cross-purposes with them instead. As agriculture was decollectivized and households began to contract out land to farm, children took on new economic value. The disintegration of rural collective welfare, minimal as it had been, left aging parents more dependent than ever on their children—and particularly on their sons. Marriage remained patrilocal and exogamous: daughters left home at marriage and contributed their labor to their husbands' families. The economic reforms thus created incentives to strengthen the family as a unit of production by adding sons.

The single-child policy was enforced unevenly in the rural areas, and almost always it was interpreted to allow for a second child if the first one was a girl. In many areas, farmers had a second child even if the first was a son.[10] Nevertheless, local cadres were given birth-planning quotas that they had to meet, just as they had been called upon to meet crop production quotas during the Mao years. The result was social conflict and tragedy.

Birth-planning cadres hectored and coerced women into terminating over-quota pregnancies, often quite late in the process.[11] Conflicts over abortion and sterilization proliferated, and enraged families and communities insulted and sometimes physically attacked birth-planning cadres. The cadres responsible for enforcing birth-planning targets in rural areas often were middle-aged rural women. They had suffered from repeated childbearing and the economic burden of child rearing during the collective era. Many were enthusiastic proponents of the single-child policy. Now they were confronting younger women of childbearing age and their families, who were facing new pressures to strengthen their families as units of agricultural production. Campaigns to implant intrauterine devices in rural women with children resulted in equally determined efforts by women to remove them, at some risk to women's health.[12] Desperate to produce the sons they felt they needed, some families abused women who gave birth to daughters, engaged in female infanticide, or abandoned or gave away their infant girls.[13]

These were unintended consequences of a state campaign to limit births. Planners had not paused to consider how a putatively gender-neutral policy limiting children could result in gender discrimination when it collided with rural economic pressures. Shocked by rural responses, the Women's Federation launched a campaign to protect the legal rights of women and children, and to educate the general public on the fact that the sex of a baby at birth was in fact determined by whether the father's sperm bore an X or a Y chromosome.[14] In 2003, a "Care for Girls" campaign attempted to raise the status of rural girls, sometimes by characterizing them as more gentle and loving than sons. But government propaganda did not address the connection between patrilocal marriage, economic reforms, and son preference.[15]

As medical care grew increasingly sophisticated, instances of infanticide and abandonment gradually decreased. They were replaced by ultrasound screening for the sex of the fetus, which was illegal but widely practiced, and sex-selective abortion. Gender ratios became increasingly lopsided. Normally at about 105 males to 100 females at birth, in China the national ratio of male to female children under fifteen was 108.5:100 in 1990, 113.6:100 in 2000, and 118:100 in 2010.[16]

The widely shared agreement that a son was necessary in rural households, multiplied over millions of individual and family decisions taken against a background of state pressure, resulted in two linked phenomena: "missing girls" and "bare sticks." The "missing girls" were the estimated total shortfall of the female births that could have been expected,

Photo 9.1. Slogan forbidding sex-selection ultrasounds, 2012
Source: Photo by Gail Hershatter.

numbering about forty million in the mid-1990s and forecasted to rise rapidly.[17] The "bare sticks," an echo of the hardships of late imperial and Republican times, were the estimated twenty-four million surplus men who would never be able to marry, given their relative poverty and the shortage of women.[18] But wives remained essential to rural families not only for childbearing, but also for the labor power they provided in agriculture, small family enterprises, and elder care. In the 1980s and 1990s, the press reported on women who were kidnapped and trafficked to other regions of China to be sold as cut-rate brides to men who could otherwise not afford to marry.[19]

The increasing mobility and prosperity of rural people made it more difficult for the state to enforce birth-planning quotas. Many women were away from home working in cities, often for years on end, marrying people from other provinces and evading the inquiries of family planning cadres, in spite of attempts to track them down in the cities. Rural people who stayed at home and made enough money simply paid the fines for having over-quota children.

State writings sometimes referred to the desire for sons as a feudal remnant that somehow had endured in the more "backward" segments of the population. This formulation ignored the ways that household farming and the disintegration of the collective social safety net, both new in the reform era, reinforced the need for sons. Even under these circumstances, rural desires for children did not appear to be unlimited. Rural women spoke of wanting two children: a son to support them in their old age and a daughter for emotional and some financial support. In their view, a daughter would remain attached to her mother even after marrying out, whereas a son would inevitably divide his loyalties and his resources between his mother and his wife.[20]

Their fears were not unfounded. By the 2000s, reports proliferated of rural elder neglect and elder abuse. Even families with many sons often disagreed about how much each person should contribute to the care of aged parents. The Chinese Constitution continued to require that grown children support their parents. But the new economic pressures of the reform era, as well as the trend for couples to form new households rather than co-residing with the husband's parents, meant that this requirement often was ignored or only partially fulfilled, particularly among poorer families. Elderly women and men both needed elder care, but the problem was most acute in the case of poor rural women, who tended to outlive their husbands and had no access to the pensions available to some urban residents.[21]

By the turn of the century, the birth-planning policy was questioned and then vociferously debated in state policy circles as well as in the wider society. Most of the criticisms did not center on the gender discrimination

that the policy had provoked. Rather, the prevailing worry was that as the birth rate fell, a decreasing number of people of working age would have to support an increasing number of aged citizens. In the aggregate, an inverted demographic pyramid did not bode well for economic development. In 2013, the government decreed that if one spouse was an only child, a couple should be permitted to have two children. In fall 2015, the policy was modified further, to allow every family to have two children.[22]

It is telling that the immediate urban response to the end of the single-child policy ranged from indifference to dismay. Upwardly mobile couples commented that it was not easy or inexpensive to raise children, and that one child might be all they could afford to provide with child care, safe food (often imported and expensive), extracurricular lessons, and tutoring.[23] Women in particular feared that their in-laws would pressure them to have a second child, adding years to their double-day burden, or else postponing their return to paid employment and consigning them to an existence shaped by domestic demands.[24] A questionnaire about women's fertility desires circulated in 2017 outlined the calculations clearly. Among the reasons men and women respondents could choose for wanting a second child were

> [I] like children, want a boy/girl, spouse's request, relieve the pressure of eldercare on one's children, possess the economic conditions to support a second child, [a sibling] will benefit the children's physical and mental health and development, and benefit for the household's stability.

The reasons arrayed against having a second child included

> [I] don't like too many children, birthing a child is painful and don't want to suffer again, fear I will be partial [to one child over another] and that will not be beneficial to the child's health and development, raising children is too much trouble and I don't have time, economic conditions don't permit it and the burden is too heavy, will influence the woman's work and professional development, colleagues and friends all don't want a second child.[25]

The questions, like much of the press coverage about the policy, suggest that within a generation, the single-child policy, combined with other changes in Chinese society, had altered desires about family size in economically advantaged households.

Whether because of rural outmigration, or because desires in the countryside were changing as well, rural families also were not rushing to take on the economic burden of additional children. By early 2018, billboards urged rural families to have second children, and instructed local officials to encourage them to do so. One declared, "Letting everyone in the village have a second child is the unshirkable duty of the village Party branch secretary" (see photo 9.2).

Photo 9.2. Everyone must have two children, 2018
Source: Photo courtesy of Rebecca Karl and Qian Zhu.

OUT OF THE VILLAGE: FACTORY WORKERS, SALESCLERKS, SEX WORKERS, AND DOMESTIC SERVANTS

In April 2017, a forty-four-year-old woman became an overnight literary celebrity for her autobiographical web essay "I am Fan Yusu."[26] The youngest of five children in a poor rural Hubei family, Fan Yusu grew up reading novels. She longed to "walk barefoot to the end of the world."

Her indomitable mother, for four decades the local village women's chair, struggled to secure her children's health and future with little success. Fan's two sisters had serious physical disabilities. One brother became a bitter failed writer, the other a small-time official and gambling addict. Fan's essay describes her decision to leave the village to seek work in Beijing, her life there as a waitress and domestic worker, her brief marriage to another migrant, her struggles as a single mother of two, and the many forms of injustice she observed in her travels.

Fan Yusu left the countryside twice, and each time she was reminded that girls had less status in her home village than boys. The first time, at age twelve, she ran away to explore Hainan Island for three months. On her return she discovered that the villagers regarded her absence as scandalous; she learned that she had "hurt my virtue and shamed my family." To stop the gossip, her family hastily bundled her off to a teaching job in another village. A few years later, Fan left rural Hubei again, this time for Beijing, where she found work, married, and had two daughters. But when she subsequently left her violent alcoholic husband and went back to her village with her children in tow, she found that if a girl was not free to wander, a married woman was not free to return. Her oldest brother regarded her as a potential threat to his claim on the family's land and resources. Her mother's political convictions and years of experience as a women's chair were of no help in the face of local assumptions about patrilocality and property. Fan Yusu realized that she was now "merely a passer-by in the village where I was raised." She took her two children back to Beijing, rented them a room where she could visit them periodically, and found work as a live-in nanny.

Fan Yusu was part of the great migration of rural people to China's cities that began in the early 1980s and intensified in the 1990s. By the turn of the millennium, one hundred million people were working as migrants away from their places of origin. By 2015, the number had grown to an estimated 282 million, comprising more than one-third of China's workforce.[27] Migrants became the backbone of manufacturing in both foreign- and Chinese-controlled enterprises, as well as the construction workers, vendors, street sweepers, and domestic servants who made the urban economy run.[28] About 40 percent of rural migrants were women, often referred to as *dagongmei*, or "working younger sisters."[29]

Rural migrant workers generally found low-skilled jobs that paid little, required long hours, offered no job security, and lacked adequate safety conditions. Without urban household registration, they remained second-class citizens in the cities, with limited access to housing, health care, and schools. Municipal governments could, and did, expel them periodically. Nevertheless, new migrant neighborhoods grew in many Chinese cities.

Photo 9.3. Migrant women at Shanghai railroad station, ca. 2017
Source: Reuters/Aly Song

Women migrants regarded the village life they had left as narrow and constraining. As Fan Yusu put it, "I couldn't bear to stay in the countryside and view the sky from the bottom of a well."[30] Some chafed at the marriage plans their parents had for them; many dreamed of becoming entrepreneurs or white-collar workers and leaving rural life behind permanently.[31] In the Special Economic Zones, women mainly found employment in apparel, electronics, and toy manufacture, industries where they were more than 70 percent of the workforce.[32] They also predominated in retail and hotel work, sex work, and domestic service. Women migrants earned only 72 percent of what men migrants did, and all migrants were paid less than full-time urban employees, but women nonetheless continued to migrate.[33]

The manufacturing zones such as those in the Pearl River Delta cities of Shenzhen and Dongguan resembled many other areas of the world where capital sought low-cost labor. "Factory girls" worked long hours at repetitive tasks. Manufacturing work could be dangerous. Workers who produced electronic good or batteries were exposed to toxic chemicals. Companies fiercely resisted workers' demands that they be compensated for damage to their health.[34] Women often were required to work compulsory—and illegal—overtime, fined for infractions of dress codes and behavior rules, sexually harassed, and restricted in how often they could go to the toilet.[35] Women workers at Foxconn, a major producer of Apple electronics and China's largest industrial employer with about one million workers, reported frequent rituals of humiliation:

> A girl is forced to stand at attention to read aloud a statement of self-criticism. She must be loud enough to be heard. Our line leader would ask if the worker at the far end of the workshop could hear clearly the mistake she has made. Oftentimes girls feel they are losing face. It's very embarrassing. Her tears drop. Her voice becomes very small.[36]

The only housing option for women in the larger factories was to live six or twelve people to a room in dormitories that kept women workers under employer control even after their shifts ended. The factory dormitories also fostered information networks about alternative job opportunities and occasionally became sites of labor protest.[37]

If they left their jobs without permission, workers forfeited a substantial deposit required by the factory. Nevertheless, young women changed jobs and cell phone numbers frequently, seeking new skills, upward mobility, and the chance to shed their rural appearance and remake themselves as respected urban dwellers.[38] Larger factories generally hired women in their late teens and early twenties, with the expectation that they would leave the factory workforce by their late twenties. Many, however, did not return to the villages but took jobs in smaller-scale enterprises that

Photo 9.4. Women factory workers, 2005

Source: © Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Metivier Gallery, Toronto/Weinstein Gallery, Minneapolis

subcontracted work from larger factories or directly from marketers. Migrants often married other migrants, sometimes from faraway provinces. Gradually, these new families became urbanized, although they were not eligible for many urban benefits and suffered intermittent abuse from the authorities. Sometimes their children were sent home to be raised by grandparents, and sometimes they grew up in the cities, with no farming skills and no experience of village life. When these second-generation migrants came of working age and entered factories in the late 1990s and 2000s, they objected to their continued exclusion from full urban residence and the consequent sense of being neither farmer nor worker.[39]

Factory work was not the only employment niche in the urban labor market. Women service workers in retail establishments, hotels, and restaurants were often referred to as "eating from the rice bowl of youth" or "eating spring rice"—that is, trading on their youthful attractiveness. At work they were taught how to look like city girls, eagerly adopting an aesthetic that concealed their rural origins.[40] Women service workers conveyed class distinctions through their mode of dress. In one study of Harbin, the middle-aged saleswomen in a state-owned department store that catered to working-class customers were not required to be attractive or attentive. The small-scale clothing vendors in a bargain basement wore layers of makeup and a come-hither look, drawing caustic comments about their supposed lack of virtue. The shop attendants in an upscale cashmere sweater boutique were invariably young and attractive. Fellow workers instructed them on how to select the correct bra, tone their buttock muscles, express deference, and appear stylish but not excessively seductive, the better to attract upscale customers.[41]

High-end hotels enforced similar protocols. In daily employee gatherings, managers exhorted women hotel workers to present themselves as paragons of feminine attentiveness, utterly attuned to the habits and needs of each guest.[42] For these women, careful cultivation of youthful beauty and appropriate comportment became a job requirement, a form of labor discipline, an entry point to urban modernity, and a means of self-expression.[43]

Another way to eat from the rice bowl of youth was to work as a bar girl, escort, masseuse, or streetwalker.[44] Each of these jobs involved some combination of companionship and services (massage, drinks, dancing) and often entailed the exchange of sex for money, although remuneration and working conditions varied widely. It appears that rural migrant women predominated in the sexual service sector, many finding it preferable to the exhausting, tedious, and potentially dangerous demands of factory labor.[45] Some women were trafficked from villages into prostitution with the promise of waitressing or other jobs, whereas others chose to sell sexual services; some worked as independent agents and others were

Photo 9.5. Bar hostesses at a nightclub in Jishou, Hunan, 2005
Source: Photograph by Rian Dundon. Used by permission of photographer.

controlled and coerced by madams and pimps who took a substantial cut of their earnings. All were vulnerable to violent treatment by customers and police, and to sexually transmitted diseases.[46]

National law decreed that prostitutes could be fined or detained for up to fifteen days, sentenced to reform through education for six months to two years, and in cases of recidivism sent for labor reeducation for up to three years.[47] And yet, in spite of periodic arrests of prostitutes and their customers in the course of campaigns to "strike hard" at crime, the 1990s and 2000s saw a steady persistence of sex work. One estimate, almost certainly a serious undercount, placed the number of sex workers nationwide at six million in 2000.[48] Women solicited long-distance haulers at truck stops, systematically phoned hotel rooms each night propositioning guests, worked at hair salons and massage parlors where no haircuts or massages were offered, accompanied foreign and Chinese businessmen to sing at karaoke bars and dance at nightclubs, and staffed elite escort services.[49] In Sipsongpanna, a minority ethnic area in the southwest where domestic tourism was developing, migrant Han women dressed in local minority costumes to give male Han customers an authentic-looking exotic experience.[50] High-end sexual service providers, some with college degrees and the means to pay for cosmetic surgery, sought extended intimate relationships with elite men and expats working in industrial investment zones. Some developed online subscription services so that

customers could converse with them or view strip shows on WeChat, Skype, and other apps.[51]

Police had considerable leeway in enforcing antiprostitution laws, a situation that easily could lead to extortion.[52] An extensive national crackdown in 2010 drove sexual service providers to stay out of sight, letting only known customers into the karaoke halls or hair salons where they operated, switching venues and working hours frequently. This made it more difficult for HIV/STI prevention workers to contact them. Many women avoided using condoms during police campaigns, fearful that possession could be used as evidence against them. This also increased their health risks.[53]

Adopting terminology from a global debate, some scholars proposed that those who sold sexual services should be regarded as sex workers (*xing gongzuozhe*). But this term did not seem quite right to the women that sociologist Ding Yu interviewed in the Pearl River Delta in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The term "sex workers," they said, failed to convey that what they were providing was a complicated mix of sex, companionship, and emotional support. And if what they did was "work," they demanded to know, why was it not legal, with guaranteed hours and wages and benefits?

The women told Ding Yu that they preferred to be called *xiaojie*, a term sometimes translated as "Miss." Before 1949, xiaojie had been used as a polite form of address for unmarried women from well-off families, but it was regarded as bourgeois in the Mao years and then was revivified in the reform era as a derogatory term for prostitutes. To these women, however, xiaojie was a term of respect. They saw themselves as engaged in the pursuit of a modern identity that could bring autonomy, personal transformation, and in some cases erotic and emotional fulfillment.[54]

Nonetheless, women who provided commercialized sexual services also expressed some ambivalence about their situation. They observed that they had no other good choices for supporting themselves and avoided telling their families what they did.[55] They felt that they should be entitled to legal protection. Some asserted that they were contributing to the stability of their clients' marriages by fulfilling sexual needs that were not being met at home.[56] Sexologist and social theorist Li Yinhe echoed their arguments that consensual adult prostitution should be decriminalized, adding that prostitution would only decrease when women had access to adequate job training and social services.[57]

Another employment option, available to middle-aged as well as younger women, was domestic work in a private household.[58] In 2015 domestic workers comprised 11 percent of the migrant workforce. Women predominated in this sector, working for upper- and middle-class families as nannies, cleaners, cooks, elder-care providers, and all-round assistants.

Frequently they lived in the homes of their employers. In return for free housing, they were required to be on call virtually all of the time.

For some, the attraction of living in close proximity to urban families was that they could observe and adopt urban life practices. Domestic workers moved as quickly as they could to buy fashionable clothes and lighten their skin by shielding it from the sun. They avoided speaking their local dialects in public, so as not to betray their rural origins. In training classes for domestic workers, and through direct instruction from their employers, maids learned to dress neatly but not too provocatively.[59]

The desire of rural migrants to look, act, and become urban was reinforced by a government-initiated effort in the 1990s and 2000s to raise the "quality" (*suzhi*) of the Chinese population. Suzhi encompassed everything from educational level and economic self-reliance to personal bodily comportment. Urban Chinese were generally thought to have higher suzhi than rural people.[60] Raising one's suzhi was a personal responsibility as well as a shared social goal, and those who failed to attend to the process of self-improvement were commonly decried as a drag on national progress.

But work as a nanny or maid also enabled rural women to take an intimate look at urban families, giving rise to critical commentary. Was it really necessary, one maid wondered, for her employer to search her luggage as she left for another job, implying that she must be a thief?[61] And was it really desirable, Fan Yusu asked, to become the mistress of a wealthy man, like the beautiful young woman whose child Fan cared for? Fan watched her employer sitting on the sofa late at night, fully made up "like an imperial concubine from a Palace drama," waiting for her patron to come home. Was this, she wondered, a stable situation?[62] In such shrewd observations, domestic workers provided trenchant, if indirect, commentary on the suzhi question.[63]

By the mid-2010s, not all women migrants were eating from the rice bowl of youth. The number of migrant workers over forty years of age rose steadily.[64] Some migrant women sought to remain in cities indefinitely, opening small businesses of their own.[65] Other women encountered conflict with their husbands or in-laws when they did return to their home villages.[66]

In any case, those villages were beginning to disappear. As cities and county towns expanded into the surrounding countryside and expropriated village land, the remaining rural residents typically were relocated into high-rise apartments in return for a one-time cash payment. Often the terms were not satisfactory, and farmers who still lived on the land resisted. Fan Yusu's octogenarian mother suffered a dislocated shoulder when security guards handled her roughly at a protest about the expropriation of village land.

Increasingly rural migrants had no home to return to, and the limited safety net provided by their small rural plots no longer sustained them when urban employers defaulted on their wages or laid them off. But their rural household registration, and the pervasive discourse that categorized rural people as inferior in suzhi, continued to render them contingent and vulnerable dwellers in the cities.

Migrant women with children faced difficult choices. Many migrants took their children back to their home villages to be raised by grandparents, returning to see them once or twice a year. In 2013, a national Women's Federation survey based on the 2010 census estimated that sixty-one million children had been left behind in the countryside—more than 20 percent of China's children and 38 percent of all village children.[67] The long-term separation of migrant parents and left-behind children has engendered literature and films about parental heartache and problems with left-behind children ranging from alienation to cognitive delays.[68]

Migrant children who stayed with their parents in the cities, however, were subject to the vagaries of local policies that determined what services they were permitted to access. Their number in 2010 was estimated at 35.8 million.[69] In some places they could attend local schools only if there was space and their parents paid steep tuition. In other places they had the option of attending makeshift private schools of widely varying quality that were organized specifically for migrant children by migrant communities or social welfare agencies.[70] When Fan Yusu began work as a live-in nanny, she rented a room for her two daughters in Beijing, even though her work only permitted her to visit them once a week. Her older daughter apparently did not attend school at all but taught herself to read by looking at the subtitles on television shows. Fan Yusu then provided her with a steady supply of novels picked up at flea markets and paper-recycling stations. The daughter went to work at fourteen, and by twenty she had secured a white-collar position. Fan's younger daughter did manage to attend school episodically. In Beijing, neither child was able to live consistently with Fan.

COURTSHIP, MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, AND REAL ESTATE

Public discussion in the early reform years turned energetically to personal life. Portrayals of feminine adornment and sexually enticing images filled the pages of popular magazines and dominated the re-emergent sector of advertising.[71] Personal life and individual desires—particularly with respect to dating, marriage, and aspirational patterns of consumption—engendered enthusiastic discussion in the press and on television.[72] Parental control of marriage choice was no longer a tar-

get of criticism: if not completely a thing of the past, it had been weakened considerably during the Mao years. In both city and countryside, younger women—as daughters and daughters-in-law—gradually had gained more leverage over matters that used to be left to the older generation, including mate choice. New imperatives entered into the public discussion of marriage, including sex appeal, mutual compatibility, emotional support, material aspirations, and property ownership.[73] As the reforms began to commodify social life, public discussion shifted to the question of what sort of spouse was desirable and how a woman should choose—and keep—a man.

The beauty industry grew exponentially to become the fifth largest consumer goods sector by the early 2000s. It was aimed at young unmarried women who competed in beauty pageants and modeling contests, as well as married women who became eager consumers of cosmetics, beauty salon services, and cosmetic surgery, sometimes with the explicitly stated aim of retaining the loyalty of their husbands. The Miss Plastic Surgery Pageant of 2004 named finalists aged seventeen to sixty-two, promoting the message that it was natural to pursue beauty, here understood as freedom from wrinkles and body fat, regardless of one's age.[74]

Not all of the public discussion of sexuality was about maintaining attractiveness to potential or current husbands. Some discussions began to focus on women's active desires and sexual pleasure, departing from the Mao-era characterization of women as primarily passive and responsive to men's sexual initiatives.[75] Same-sex desire was acknowledged in sexological discourse, and communities of lesbians became visible (though somewhat less visible than gay men) on internet sites, in activist groups, and in bars and other social venues. Lively discussions circulated about whether global categories of gay identity were appropriate to the local situation, and how they might be reconfigured or discarded.[76]

But in a society where premarital and nonmarital sex were becoming increasingly common, state authorities in the reform era opted to promote heterosexual marriage and household formation energetically.[77] Government officials were apparently concerned that the quality (suzhi) of the population would decline if educated and affluent women decided to postpone or opt out of childbearing, and that social stability depended in part on men being able to afford to marry. Marriage and childbearing were portrayed as essential components of the "harmonious society" that state authorities began to promote in 2004.[78]

One result was a state campaign beginning in 2007 directed at "left-over women"—a disdainful term that was particularly odd in light of the numerical predominance of men in the aftermath of the birth-planning policy.[79] China's rate of marriage for women was about 98 percent, high by world standards.[80] But women were warned—on the Women's Federation

website as well as in popular media—that if they postponed marriage past the age of twenty-seven, they would become like "yellowed pearls."[81] News coverage stigmatized single women for their unmarried status, emphasizing conflicts with their families as well as their failure to fulfill societal and state expectations.[82] Professional matchmaking agencies, many of which operated online dating sites, ceaselessly promoted the idea that marriage was a required feature of adulthood and a particularly urgent matter for women in their late twenties.[83] The 2015 TV New Year's Gala, perhaps the most-watched show in China, featured a skit in which a "goddess" (pretty woman) was contrasted with a "manly lady" who was having trouble attracting suitors.[84] And the message apparently found a receptive audience among many women: a national survey in 2010 found almost half of women respondents agreed that "a good marriage is better than a career," up ten percentage points from ten years earlier.[85]

Anxious middle-class parents in Shanghai frequented a weekend matchmaking corner in People's Park, advertising the virtues of their grown children, most of whom were educated women.[86] Advice columnists on the online messaging service Weibo and the social media platform WeChat addressed themselves to large followings of unmarried women looking for the right man.[87] Women were chided in the press for being so demanding and materialistic that they failed to recognize men with excellent character, high ideals, and the capacity for hard work. Often criticized was the line delivered by a woman on the televised dating show *If You Are the One* that she would "rather cry in the back of a BMW than smile on the back of a bicycle."[88]

On the show, women were required to answer certain questions about their romantic history, family background, housework abilities, and ideal marital relationship. Male contestants were invited to describe the sort of woman they wanted, producing monologues such as this one from June 2013:

> My favorite woman resembles a Z4 model, having the best functions with the most reasonable price. Like the surface of my car, my woman is fashionable yet without being overbearing. . . . That means it is of great importance that she does housework well . . . Dating a girlfriend feels like driving a car. . . . I expect that in our future life, the woman will make decisions over trivial matters while I control the steering wheel and decide which main direction to go.

In the end, *If You Are the One* did not emphasize a woman's ability to choose her likely suitor. A male contestant who garnered a certain level of approval from the show's panel of women won an international trip and could choose which of the women he wanted to date.[89]

Even as the popular press criticized women's purported greed, it also promoted the expectation that a "real man" should be wealthier, more

educated, and more accomplished than his spouse—leading to many jokes about the unmarriageability of precisely the educated women that state authorities were most eager to see marry. One persistent joke named three genders: men, women, and women with a graduate degree. Only the first two were conventionally regarded as marriageable.[90]

As criteria for marriage choice shifted in the reform era, so did the practices surrounding divorce. In 1980, a new Marriage Law was issued for the first time since 1950. It reiterated most of the principles of the earlier law and raised the minimum marriage age to twenty-two for men and twenty for women, in line with the campaign to limit births. But perhaps the most noteworthy change in the law was a new criterion for divorce: alienation of affection. During the Mao years, petitions for divorce frequently had resulted in years of mediation and even official pressure to remain married. The new law stated that if mediation failed, the courts should grant a divorce.[91]

Whether the law changed social practice or merely reflected it, the incidence of divorce began to rise. Beginning in 2003, couples no longer needed permission of their employers or village leadership to divorce, and the majority of divorces were registered with the local Civil Affairs Bureau rather than going through the courts.[92] The number of divorces nationally soared to 4.8 million in 2016, a tenfold increase over the 1980 total. In the 2010s, in large cities, the ratio of divorces to new marriages was more than one to three.[93]

Behind these statistics were a host of social changes that tended to disadvantage women. From the late 1970s official sources, the popular press, and even comedy routines opined that gender differences were rooted in biology and that assigning gender-inappropriate work to women would be injurious to their health.[94] At several points during the 1980s, economists and sociologists recommended that women should exit the paid labor force and return home, freeing up jobs for men and providing much-needed (but unremunerated) domestic support.[95] During the reform era, many jobs specified that only men need apply; gender discrimination in hiring, promotion, and layoffs was not regarded as a problem.[96] Commenting on the small proportion of women on corporate boards and in senior executive positions at both private and state-owned companies, one Chinese feminist commented, "There is a glass ceiling here too, but most women never even get off the sticky floor."[97]

The situation was similar in Party leadership positions. More than a quarter of the almost ninety million CCP members nationwide were women in 2017, and women were almost a quarter of the representatives to the National People's Congress, not all of whom were in the Party.[98] But women's representation was scarcer at top Party levels. No woman has ever sat on the seven-person Politburo Standing Committee; the

twenty-five-person Politburo in 2017 included two women before the nineteenth Party Congress, reduced to one woman after the Congress; 4.9 percent of the Party's Central Committee members in 2017 were women (a total of ten), down from 6.4 percent five years earlier. Women were only two of sixty-two top provincial leaders (party secretaries and governors), the ranks from which most top central officials were drawn.[99]

Across the reform era, women's labor force participation fell, propelled by layoffs in state enterprises, the falling prestige of state enterprise factory jobs, the rise of the urban rich, and changing portrayals of women's role. In 1990 more than three-quarters of women were employed; by 2010, the rate had fallen to just above 60 percent.[100] In urban families, it became more common for women to stay home after they married, or to change jobs based on whether their labor was needed at home rather than to advance their careers, as men did.[101] Raising children and managing the household—including, in many families, supervising household servants—remained chiefly a woman's responsibility.[102]

In an uncanny echo of Ding Ling's 1942 essay "Thoughts on March 8," advice literature in women's magazines, as well as radio shows, call-in hotlines, and the 2004 hit television show *Chinese-Style Divorce*, all cautioned wives that they needed to work on remaining interesting and attractive to their husbands. The middle-aged woman protagonist of *Chinese-Style Divorce*, a woman who resigns from her job in order to care full-time for her son, is portrayed as an unattractive, hectoring spouse. She attempts to rely on public shaming rather than self-development in order to prevent her husband from divorcing her.[103]

Much discussion in advice columns and television shows centered on perilous situations in which wives might lose the interest of their husbands. Entertainment venues expanded in the reform era, and it became common for men in the course of after-work socializing to consort with karaoke girls and sexual service workers. As married men earned more money, wives were warned, they might attract the attention of younger women and become vulnerable to their wiles.[104] Debates about divorce often focused on the question of infidelity, reportedly a factor in about one-third of cases. Younger women were excoriated as the "third parties" or "Little Third" who broke up otherwise stable marriages.[105]

By the 2010s a new profession had emerged: the "mistress dispeller," a private investigator hired by wives whose husbands were having affairs. The dispeller's assignment was to persuade, threaten, or discredit the mistress in a way that would leave the marriage intact. Mistress-dispeller companies also offered counseling services to economically well-off wives, advising them on how to modify their behavior so that they would remain attractive to their husbands, or at least retain their loyalty.[106]

The Republican Civil Code of 1930 and the Marriage Law of 1950 had been controversial in part because they made it easier for women to divorce. But by the early twenty-first century, wives were well aware that they would suffer disproportionately if their marriages broke up. The gender wage gap continued to grow with privatization, with the ratio of women's to men's wages dropping from 84 percent to 74 percent between 1995 and 2007, and to 67.3 percent in 2010.[107] Women were more likely to be laid off first as unprofitable state enterprises shed employees and privatized. Many women then entered the informal labor market and worked part-time.[108] Even women who retained their state jobs were expected to retire at fifty, while men worked until sixty, and so women's savings and pension payments tended to be lower than those of men.[109] Women's prospects of remarriage, at any age, were more unlikely. As one mistress dispeller put it, "In today's world, a secondhand woman is like a secondhand car. Once it's been driven, it's not worth a fraction of its original selling price." A divorced man on the marriage market, in contrast, was like a choice piece of real estate: "The value only appreciates."[110]

Divorcing women were economically vulnerable in new ways because of the changing importance of real estate.[111] During the Mao years, most urban housing had been a welfare benefit provided through the work unit in exchange for a nominal rent. Even then, divorce had created housing problems: because housing usually was assigned through the husband's work unit, a divorced wife often found herself without a place to live, or staying with her former spouse in a tiny living space divided by a makeshift partition. The problem sharpened considerably with reform-era changes in the urban real estate market. Beginning in the late 1990s, work unit housing was sold off to its residents at relatively low prices. By 2005 China had become the world's largest society of homeowners.[112] Then the value of urban real estate rose sharply in the mid-2000s, as urban development projects razed old housing and replaced it with new high-rises of expensive apartments.[113]

In a booming economy with very few lucrative outlets for investment, buying a home became one of the major ways that a family could increase its assets, and many did so repeatedly, trading up to ever grander homes. An estimated 60–85 percent of urban residents owned their own homes, and by 2013 the aggregate value of residential real estate was estimated at more than $30 trillion. Real estate became the main form of personal wealth. With soaring prices, an urban home could cost fifteen to twenty-two times a buyer's annual income.[114] Because few young people could afford to buy homes, parents made substantial contributions to their children's purchases of real estate.[115]

But here women were at a disadvantage. In buying a home for a new couple it was customary, following long-standing marriage practices, for a man's family to finance part or all of the purchase of the structure, whereas a woman and her family took responsibility for internal walls, fixtures, paint, and appliances.[116] In popular understanding, the man was buying the house, even when the internal construction was extremely expensive. In most cases only the man's name appeared on the deed. This was true even when the wife and her parents contributed to the down payment—which could happen if they had more available capital. It remained the case even if the woman contributed to the mortgage and residential upkeep after marriage.[117]

The assumption that housing was a man's responsibility—and his possession—was widely shared. In some instances, urban parents of a daughter preferred to contribute their resources to the purchase of a house by a male cousin or other more distant relative, even when the daughter was their only child.[118] Few young women insisted that their name be on the property deed, particularly if their own parents did not support the idea. Further, because joint bank accounts were not common in China, a woman's contributions to ongoing housing expenses, if they were funneled first into her husband's account, were not likely to be well documented.

Why did urban women, many highly educated and lucratively employed, find it acceptable that their husbands should appear as the sole owner on property deeds? Many believed that marriage required a house—and that women should decline to marry a man who could not provide one. People who got married without acquiring a house were referred to as entering a "naked marriage." Real estate developers and brokers supported the idea that homeownership was necessary to family formation.[119]

A woman's lack of formal claim to the main form of household wealth soon became a problem. In 2001, amendments to the 1980 Marriage Law clarified which sorts of property should be regarded as jointly owned and which individually owned.[120] In 2003, the Supreme People's Court interpreted the law to mean that gifts made to a child before a marriage—for instance, funds for a house—were the property of that child alone, rather than becoming joint marital property.[121] In 2011, the court issued a further interpretation of the law, holding that property purchased by parents for a child even after marriage and registered in that child's name would be considered as that child's separate property.[122]

As with the family planning policy, a law that on its face was gender neutral had profoundly gendered effects. The interpretation contained a number of ameliorating phrases, but its net effect was to buttress the man's claim to real estate and put the burden of proving joint contributions—

often not well documented within households—on the woman.[123] In a contested divorce, a wife could find herself without access to the marital household's main share of wealth. This produced a growing gender gap in wealth accumulation, even among the most privileged women residents.[124]

In rural areas, a separate property crisis for women was unfolding.[125] At the beginning of the reform period, land-use rights were redistributed from the collective to households, who contracted to farm the land for a given number of years. In an effort to induce farmers to make long-term investments in cultivation, over time the state lengthened the duration of the contracts, from three to thirty and then fifty years, and limited the number of adjustments that could be made in ownership when a household added or lost members.

In theory, rural women had land rights, but in practice the head of the household, usually the father, controlled those rights. When a daughter married and moved to her husband's village, her land share remained with her natal family. Selling her individual share at marriage in order to buy land elsewhere would have meant shrinking her natal family's landholdings. For a newly married woman, acquiring a land share in her marital village was a long and uncertain process, because it meant further dividing the shares of that village. This problem became most acute for women who divorced and were then left without land in either village. Land rights did not reflect the fact that women continued to perform a substantial proportion of agricultural labor.[126]

The problem of rural women's property claims persisted even as the property itself began to disappear. During the reform era, cities and county towns expropriated property in surrounding villages in order to expand and develop. Payments for such property generally went to heads of household, who were overwhelmingly male. The assumption that men had primary claims on family assets left unmarried daughters and divorced women at a disadvantage but was not generally disputed in rural communities. Even as these communities became urbanized, gendered disparities in property ownership persisted and even widened.[127]

It was common in state publications to criticize gender discrimination as a "feudal remnant"—a vestige of older thinking and practices held by rural people who stubbornly refused to modernize. But in the case of rural access to land and payouts for land, this was not entirely accurate. Women were not always regarded as citizens of a particular village at least in part because the state itself had never challenged the practice of patrilocality, either during the marriage reforms of the Mao years or in the reform period.[128] Most rural communities still were organized around

networks of male kin, with men as permanent community members and women marrying in and out. This made it likely that control of rural assets would remain in male hands and that new forms of gender inequality would appear, even as the property regime underwent major changes and the villagers themselves were relocated to apartment blocks.

FEMINIST VOICES

As we have seen, previously unaddressed forms of gender inequality persisted during the reform era and new ones emerged. Nevertheless, gender became a prominent feature of a number of social controversies and critiques, even while class as an analytical category was downplayed or repudiated.[129] In the process, the Women's Federation became less of a transmission belt for government policy than it had been in the Mao years, and periodically assumed a somewhat more activist role as an advocate for women's interests. At the same time, new feminist voices began to emerge outside the Party-state apparatus.

Women who were critical of the changes in women's situation under the reforms usually did not call themselves feminists, for at least three reasons. First, "feminism" had long been modified by the adjective "bourgeois," a legacy of CCP theorizing during the Republican era. Party organizers held that to focus on gender equality was to neglect the more fundamental class inequality that structured society, and this approach shaped the policies of the Mao years as well. In the early years of the post-Mao reforms, the term "feminism" retained a suspect quality, tainted by the implication of bad class politics and subservience to cultural imperialism. Second, the standard statements about women during the Mao years asserted that men and women already had achieved equality as political subjects and laborers, implying that no further agitation was required and rendering some forms of gender inequity invisible. And third, by the early years of the reform era, the Women's Federation was widely regarded as a bureaucratic, unresponsive, and generally ineffectual organization.[130] Nevertheless, beginning in the 1980s and accelerating during the 1990s, Federation officials, women intellectuals, legal scholars, and activists began to use the terms "women's studies," "research on women," and "feminism," rendered in several different ways.

During the reform years, the Women's Federation attempted to address emergent problems concerning the status of women. Federation writers developed a concept they called the "Marxist theory of women." Its content was not at all fixed, but it allowed them to remind the Party of its historical commitment to women's liberation.[131] Federation officials agreed that women's work assignments should be adjusted to conform to their

physiological needs, but also vigorously opposed proposals that women leave the workforce. They continued to support free-choice marriage but opposed easing controls on divorce for fear that this would reward men who had affairs and would economically disadvantage their discarded wives.[132] They sought to limit government sponsorship of beauty contests but also promoted beauty salons as sites of re-employment for women who were laid off from state-owned enterprises.[133]

Federation voices, long the only authorized source of pronouncements about women, soon were joined by voices outside the Party-state. In 1985, literary scholar Li Xiaojiang formed the Association for Women's Studies in Henan, which was followed by the creation of similar groups at many universities and the opening of a women's hotline.[134] Li argued that in the Mao years the standard of achievement had remained male, and that the form women's liberation had taken—mobilization for paid productive labor—had left women with a double burden. Woman, she argued, had to be treated as a gendered subject, different in nature from man. Women's problems could not be described completely by referring to class categories. In Li's view, because women's liberation had been formulated and bestowed by the Party-state, and implemented by the Women's Federation, women never had considered what their own interests might be or how best to achieve them. The urgent task facing women, she said, was to develop their own consciousness.[135] Li and other scholars—as well as many researchers working within the Women's Federation—went on to develop the nascent field of women's studies in China in the 1980s, addressing history, literature, and the emergence of new forms of gender inequality under the reforms.[136]

In summer 1995, China hosted the UN Fourth World Conference on Women and its associated forum for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The suppression of the 1989 Tian'anmen demonstrations had drawn condemnation worldwide, and hosting the Women's Conference was an important move back onto the transnational stage. More than forty thousand feminist activists arrived in China. Although state authorities moved the nongovernmental forum to a distant suburb of Beijing amid rumors that lesbians were planning a naked parade through the city center, they also actively promoted the participation of Chinese women from the Women's Federation and new nongovernmental organizations in the meetings. They also encouraged the development of research on women within the Federation, universities, and nongovernmental organizations.[137]

For Chinese women activists, preparing for the forum created a political space in which to develop national networks, introduce new topics such as domestic violence, participate in meetings abroad, and engage in exchanges with feminists outside of China.[138] This process was legitimized

under the slogan *jiegui*—to connect the tracks, joining China to the rest of the world, in this case explicitly along feminist lines.[139]

Soon after the forum's conclusion, the Chinese government announced a comprehensive program aimed at improving women's political participation, economic conditions, educational opportunities, and general welfare. Subsequent action programs also pledged to incorporate consideration of gender into the state policy-making process.[140] Feminism, detached from the negative connotations of "bourgeois feminism," became a recognized national discourse with substantial global connections. The term "gender," translated as *shehui xingbie* or "social sex difference," called attention to the social production of "natural" difference and inequality.[141]

By the 2000s, Chinese feminists were exploring how they might participate in a transnational feminist network without ceding all powers of definition to Western theories. They discussed how feminism could be "indigenized," or made most responsive to local circumstances, taking account of the ongoing involvement of the Women's Federation and the Party-state, while also maintaining a critical edge about the causes of gender inequality.[142] Such debates took place mainly in academic settings. A recurrent subject of discussion was how to address the problems faced by women workers, former workers, farmers, prostitutes, and others whose lives had been deeply shaped by globalizing processes and Chinese state policies during the reform era.[143]

One important effect of the 1995 conference and the discussions that followed was the slow codification of domestic violence as a social and legal category. The 1992 Law on Protection of Women's Rights and Interests had criticized ill treatment of women, but without providing legal penalties, and was regarded as irrelevant by many women activists.[144] Domestic violence was shrugged off as "smacking the wife around" (*da laopo*) throughout the Mao years and into the reform period.[145] In 2007, the Women's Federation estimated that it affected one-third of families.[146] But domestic violence increasingly was named as an unacceptable practice and a violation of the rights of women. In the 2001 amendment to the Marriage Law, family violence was cited as a legitimate ground for divorce (along with bigamy, abandonment, gambling, and drug addiction). Local government organs were instructed to mediate, the Public Security Bureau was told to stop the violence, and victims were empowered to lodge a criminal complaint, although the parameters of such violence were not outlined.[147] Years of Women's Federation advocacy, police training sessions, and public service announcements followed, some of them guided by nongovernmental organizations devoted to women's issues.[148]

In March 2016, a new Domestic Violence Law took effect in China. Among its provisions were that police should issue written warnings to wife abusers and that courts should provide protective orders to victims,

with police and local government following up to make sure that the violence ceased. Nevertheless, the law treated domestic violence as a civil offense rather than a crime, unless the harm inflicted was grave enough to invoke other articles of Chinese penal law. Courts were empowered mainly to enforce fines and minor administrative penalties, and the police largely were limited to an administrative and mediating role. Absent a strong criminal provision, the law provided only a limited challenge to older ideas that family affairs should be resolved in-house. Reflecting state fears of any social unrest engendered by the rapid and destabilizing changes of the reform era, the law also supported the state idea that family harmony—understood as stability—was an absolute social good, more important than the well-being of those who suffered domestic abuse.[149]

This pervasive state fear of any potential threat to social stability carried over into controls on public demonstrations, even when they were not directed at the state. In March 2015, police detained five young feminist activists in their twenties and early thirties as they were planning a demonstration for the eve of International Women's Day in which they would hand out stickers on public transportation, denouncing sexual harassment.[150] Beginning in 2012, these young women and others already had staged several highly visible actions denouncing domestic violence, including one on Valentine's Day that year in which three of them marched along a public street in bloodstained wedding gowns. They also had agitated for an end to gender discrimination in hiring as well as for more public toilets for women, initiating an "Occupy the Men's Toilets" movement in several cities. The latter initiative eventually garnered a favorable response from national government officials.[151]

Authorities detained the "Feminist Five" for thirty-seven days, interrogating them repeatedly about who was funding their activities. Several worked for a feminist nongovernmental organization. In the years after the 1995 UN conference on women, the Party-state had encouraged nongovernmental organizations—including ones concerned with women's welfare—to take on social welfare projects previously dominated (or neglected) by state authorities.[152] But by the mid-2010s, the state suppression reflected a growing concern that such organizations, funded in part by foreign foundations, might engage in activities beyond the state agenda and outside direct state control.[153]

After considerable international attention, the Feminist Five were released on bail. But the charge against them—gathering a crowd to disturb public order—was not dismissed, leaving them in a legal limbo where they could easily be detained again if they continued to engage in public protest. State measures suggest suspicion about the women's commitment to theatrical direct action, their sophisticated deployment of social media, and their lack of connection to the Women's Federation. It

is possible as well that state authorities were concerned by the activists' expressed lack of interest in taking up the gendered roles of heterosexual marriage and childbearing.[154] For the first time in more than a century, Chinese feminism was added to the list of government-proscribed activities.[155] Nonetheless, periodic feminist agitation has continued to surface. In late 2017 and early 2018, petitions and online accounts appeared by women protesting pervasive sexual harassment and assault in universities, state agencies, private companies, and public spaces.[156]

The past few decades of capitalist globalization in China, in combination with the continued control of the Party-state, have left no sector of society untouched. New ideas, practices, and goods circulate across Chinese territory, producing differentiated effects, many of them profoundly gendered.[157] For women—a heterogeneous group fractured along lines of class, region, ethnicity, and generation that nonetheless face some common challenges—the reform era has meant new forms of labor and commodification, new inequalities and social struggles, and a new prominence of gender and sexuality as categories of analysis. It also has stimulated new critical discussions about how women, and Woman, should feature in the latest iteration of Chinese modernity.[158] Much discussion of women's role has emphasized the individual subject and her "quality" (suzhi), rather than the collective subject of women as laborers. At the same time new forms of interaction, often enabled by online connections, have begun to generate new collectivities and modes of feminist action.

It would be a mistake to regard the emphasis on social stability as exclusively a state concern pertaining to demonstrations and other overt political activity. Many sectors of society have been unnerved by the rapid social changes of the reform period and by the new vulnerabilities brought by China's engagement in a global economy, increasingly visible as rates of high growth are now slowing. The idea that stability is crucial garners wide support, and one often-cited locus of stability is the home, a domain that remains primarily a woman's responsibility to manage. One can see this emphasis on the larger significance of family in the statements by mistress dispellers that their work entailed protecting the home and thus protecting the country.[159] This belief is not so far from the late imperial statecraft dictum that "well-run families were the foundation of a flourishing state" (see chapter 1). In the new and unsettling circumstances of increasing wealth, rising inequality, and an uncertain future, yearning for stability is widely expressed in popular discourse as well. The social glue here is to be provided by women, who are expected—and often expect themselves—to

sacrifice their own desires and aspirations for the greater familial and social good. And the labor women are called upon to perform—not only new forms of paid work and domestic tasks, but now also the emotional work of maintaining marriages—can be understood as the reconfiguration of a gendered division of labor under new and challenging circumstances.

This book began with a series of questions, including how our understanding of China's modern history might change if women were at the center of our analysis, and whether women had a Chinese revolution or revolutions. The answers are not simple. Women's labor within and beyond domestic space enabled the survival of households in the difficult circumstances and upheaval of the late Qing empire. It underwrote revolutionary organizing and socialist construction, and it has powered important sectors of China's recent economic rise. Yet that labor has remained inadequately compensated and often unseen. Meanwhile, the powerful symbolic language of gender has been deployed across the more than two centuries examined here to create a figure of Woman with constantly changing and contradictory characteristics: guardian of chastity, paragon of industriousness, footbound impediment to China's progress, good wife and wise mother, citizen and mother of citizens, abject victim and courageous challenger of Confucian family values, virtuous New Woman, salacious Modern Girl, wartime target and resistance fighter, patriotic Nationalist, patriotic Communist, labor model, socialist constructor, hardworking migrant, enthusiastic consumer, feminist critic. In short, Woman is a figure critical to tracking the full complexity of China's recent past.

The question of whether women had a revolution is similarly tangled. The signal moments we call revolutions—1911, 1949, as well as the recent era of capitalist globalization—have not produced the same effects for all women in China, but each has produced effects that are differentiated by gender. Put more simply, women had revolutions—they were not outside of history as we conventionally organize it—but they did not have exactly the same revolutions as men. Complete exploration of what a revolution meant—where it succeeded, where it missed the mark, where it was less important than other modalities of historical change—has to look at those gendered differences. It also must look at how women worked with the circumstances in which they found themselves: sometimes as rebels or revolutionaries, but often as participants in less dramatic temporalities of change. Through their daily activities, women enlarged their own spaces of possibility during and between the events of Big History.