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Do Not Cry for Me, Confucius: The Reconstruction of Chinese Female Identity During the Cultural Revolution

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**Author**

Huang, Hui

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Hui Huang comes to the U.S. from China two years ago. She is a doctoral student in Cultural Studies of Education program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

**Do Not Cry for Me, Confucius**

**-----The Reconstruction of Chinese Female Identity**

**During the Cultural Revolution**

Traditional Chinese women were portrayed as delicate and submissive. The most famous proverbs prevailed in imperial China were “A woman without knowledge is a woman of virtue” and “It is the law of nature that woman should be held under the dominance of man.” Indeed, the rule of surviving in a society for any ancient Chinese women was “three obedience and four virtues”: a woman had to be obedient to her father before marriage, to her husband after marriage and to her son after her husband's death. She had to be moral, have proper speech, a modest manner and do diligent work.” A woman was doomed to subjugate to man from the moment she was born. This situation didn't change until Sun Yat-Sen overthrew the feudalism institution in 1911. However, there was any feminist movement afterwards. Not until year 1966, in order to consolidate his control over Chinese ideology and eradicate anticommunist influences, Chairman Mao launched an unprecedented revolution in China: Proletarian Cultural Great Revolution. Although Cultural Revolution is still a taboo in Chinese society, it is a common sense among Chinese intellectuals that it was a disaster on Chinese ancient culture and civilization. In this paper, I attempt to demonstrate the radical feminist liberation movement appeared in this revolution, to investigate how this revolution” aimed at a complete cultural transformation of China, including on the issue

of gender” (Hong, 2002).

Targeted at Confucianism, the Cultural Revolution attacked the Four Olds-- old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits left from imperial China. Therefore, women, used to be the subordinates in the society in the imperial state, were expect to claim their equal position as men in “new China”. However, it was not the purpose that Communist regime tried to establish the equity between men and women. The leader Chairman Mao Zedong only wanted to manipulate all possible forces in society which include women to realize his control. Researcher found out that Chairman Mao himself wrote poem to agitate women get involved in Cultural Revolution.

“A poem written by Mao glorifying women in military uniform was set to music and became one of the popular songs in the 1960s and 1970s. It went roughly as: Spirited and attractive, with a five feet rifle/arriving at the training ground with the first rays of morning sunshine/how magnificently ambitious Chinese women are/they prefer military uniforms to feminine clothes” (Ling, 1990).

As the indispensable part of Cultural Revolution, the arts served as powerful propaganda tools. Posters are the main propaganda tools in Cultural Revolution. They are vivid descriptions of the female identity in that era. Here are four famous posters from that era. 1: An advertisement for the opera, "The Red Women's Army," a story about women from south China being organized to fight for a new and equal China. Poster 2: One of Mao's famous quotes was "Women hold up half the sky." Poster 3: Let New Socialist Art Spread China Poster 4: “Stay up late”



The first picture depicted a woman in the “The Red Women's Army” wearing male army uniform, dancing with the swords. She holds the sword expresses her determination to fight with the “anti-communist”. The costumes as well as the open-armed gesture differed from the old fashioned impression of women, which rejected the explicit feminine features. The gathering of Women’s Army was the breakthrough in Chinese history since women had been excluded from the realm of war. During the Cultural Revolution, women were delighted about this progress, since they were so eager to break the shackle of hegemony which gave them insignificant roles in this world. As Hong pointed out,

During the Cultural Revolution, violence also became women's identity,

especially because they wanted to escape from a conventional perception of them as passive and gentle, which were all labeled as "bourgeois" by Mao during the Cultural Revolution. Women invariably dressed as men or as male army combatants because it was "considered very glorious." And often, the belt on their uniform became their instrument to beat up their suspects. Rejecting a bourgeois lifestyle and engaging in aggressive, violent attacks both mandated that girls dress like boys, cut their hair like boys, and borrow their fathers (not their mothers') leather belts. (Hong, 2002)

The second picture depicted a Woman Red Guard raised her arm with the Red Book, leading a group of Red Guard to support Chairman Mao's disciplines. Her pose as a mighty woman would consider as rude and impolite in the ancient China. The clothes she dressed and the hat she wore were all made her look like a man. Her female features were disguised in this picture. If we cover her face, we may consider her as a man. The eradication of female sexual features in this photo expresses a sense of the equal identity between women and men. The name of the post "Women hold up half the sky" came from the revolution discipline for working class women to get involved in the revolution and assume a leading role.

The third picture is the image of Jiangqing, Mao's wife, leading all women from various areas in China to participate in this movement. She also dressed like Chairman Mao, from the coat to the hat, even her gesture was similar. The female identity in this photo reflected independence, competency, and bravery. She was holding the Chairman's Red Book, the guideline in Cultural

Revolution. The words underline the picture meant let the new arts took over all stages. Political purpose directed Chinese women rather the will from women themselves. As Liu points out:

“During the Cultural Revolution, political correctness consisted largely in women wearing the same dark colors as men, keeping their hair short, and using no make-up. On the other hand, men did not have to dress up like women. Therefore, it was women’s symbolic difference from men, reflected in their appearances (clothes, hair style, etc.), that was repressed by the state. Compared with Western feminists who try to deal with gender based on the differences between men and women, in China, gender differences were minimized. In the West, women can protest against their marginalized status. In China, women find their political identity completely determined by how the state defines it and how this definition is implemented by the All –China Women's Federation”(Liu,2002).

The fourth picture depicted a woman studying during the mid-night. The clock points to 11:25p.m. She stayed up late on her readings and notes. The photo behind her depicted her as the competent worker. She could read and writes which were impossible traditional women at that time. But in Cultural Revolution, women were encouraged to read and write, although the reading only limited to Mao's books. The instruments beside the bed also revealed her to be an industrious worker. It was not certain whether she was a widow. But if she was, she was obviously a qualified mother. The boy sleeps well on the bed, with a toy plane by his side. This photo actually tried to establish the model female identity which combined the traditional virtues and Cultural Revolution female requirements. Namely, she could not only take care of the family and work outside, but also read

and write.

According to these pictures, women's value was recognized in that era. Although this women liberation was propelled by the political power, it was the first time that the government and public acknowledged women as a crucial part of society. It was the first step to reconstruct the female identity, not only in appearance, but also the inner spirit. The absent and silent of female in the society and politics had changed since 1966. In most Cultural Revolution movies and documentaries, women assumed the essential roles.

The reconstruction of female identity emerged from Cultural Revolution. Chinese women established endeavored to be independent, intellectual and brave. The peculiarity of this movement as the female liberation lies in its political initiation, which distinct from others western feminist movement. Chinese women changed thoroughly from the old lifestyles, their social activities, and their spiritual life. Women converted into aggressive and tough figures that fought with the patriarchy. They assumed the equal responsibility to build a new communist world. However, questions still exist like what made this tendency of toward egalitarian between male and female disappear in the following years. sBut what needs to be emphasized in this paper is that the subordinate and inferior role of Chinese women had been changed since that revolution.

(I cut the references in order to follow the 6-page format.)