
3a. Gender Assimilation as a Mode of Incorporation for Chinese Women in the Mao Era

(Julia Chi ZHANG)

Background

The People's Republic of China has gone through profound social and economic transformations since the socialist revolution in 1949. The Chinese Communist Party (the "CCP", or the "Party") successfully mobilized both urban and rural Chinese women to participate in the socialist revolution to fight against imperialism, feudalism, and family lineage patriarchy. For the first time in history, women in China were given legally equal status to that of men in domestic and broader social realms. A majority of Chinese women were able to enter the public sphere, receive education or professional training, and above all, work outside their household and participate in public economic production under communist slogans such as "Women can do all that men can do" and "Women hold up half the sky." Women's right to marry or divorce at will became protected by law. Many women became leaders of their work units, and a fair number of them even entered the highest circle of communist political power by becoming representatives of the People's Congress. "At the early 1970s, it seemed to many that China had realized the feminist dream." (Davis-Friedmann 1985)

The drastic transformation of a woman's role and status in the public and domestic spheres attracted the attention of many western Sinologists and feminist scholars from various disciplines within the social sciences such as sociology and anthropology. Many came to China to examine the modern communist-feminist utopia. Some praised the CCP's Marxist approach to handling the "women's question" in China and claimed that "the Chinese experience clearly shows that a commitment to female equality cannot simply be the outcome of economic development but that it can and must shape the patterns and processes of development itself." (Andors 1983: 171) Others, on the other hand, were rather disappointed by what they had witnessed of the movement in China. They concluded that the women's emancipation movement in China was a fraud as well as a failure, that women were utilized by the Party to participate in its political and economic revolution, and that women's interests were almost always compromised by holistic political struggles. Not only was the "Equal pay for equal work" slogan never achieved once it was put into practice, the "half sky" held up by women actually also implied a responsibility to domestic chores in addition to work outside home. (Croll 1978, Stacey 1983, Wolf 1985) Although much has been written about the question "to what extent did socialism in the Mao era liberate women in China," it remains unanswered.

This paper intends to examine the un/success of women's movement in the Mao era through the lens of contemporary sociological/cultural theories of multiculturalism and civil society. I will start by delineating the theoretical drawbacks of the 1970s-generation western socialist feminists in understanding the Chinese women's movement, i.e., their narrow focus on material production and labor participation of women as well as their failure to take into account the cultural exclusion of women. I will then introduce Jeffrey Alexander's theory of civil incorporation which I believe provides an illuminating theoretical possibility in re-examining the women's question in China. Next I will briefly explain how women's liberation in the Mao era was carried out empirically in a form of gender assimilation and therefore did not qualify as a legitimate and wholesome civil participation. I will then try to resolve the question of how and why Alexander's theory that was initially used to account for western democratic societies could feasibly be invoked to explain the Chinese reality by arguing that there was a preliminary civil sphere in Mao's China. I also have to emphasize that this paper is not merely a discussion of women's movement in China but a serious attempt at searching for a civil society in contemporary China that does not only exorcise the draconian power of the state but also provide possibilities of justice, civility, respect and

solidarity.

Previous Research on the Chinese Women's Movement and Their Theoretical Limitations

To a large extent, the methodological as well as theoretical weaknesses embedded in the approaches of the “70s western feminists” contributed to the current confusion and puzzlement over the “women’s question” in China, thus leaving room for further examination and debate. The first problem with previous research was that most of that generation of western feminist scholars who studied the Chinese women’s movement started their arguments from a Marxist, deterministic/materialistic perspective. It is not surprising to know that Phyllis Andors, Judith Stacey, and Kay Johnson all shared similar socialist backgrounds. Stacey claimed in her book *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* that her analysis would be a “feminist historical materialistic” one. (Stacey 1983:12) Andors tried to examine the Mao era women’s movement from a “developmental” point of view, which is evidently economy/production oriented.

Coming from such intellectual and political backgrounds, this group of feminist scholars produced a body of research on the Mao era Chinese women’s movement which was greatly insightful and yet at the same time clearly lacked a cultural dimension. Their studies primarily based the evaluation of Chinese women’s status on economic variables, such as participation in public labor, distribution of family chores (i.e., unpaid labor), legal regulation of maternal leave, women’s wages compared to men’s, one-child policy, and day-care centers in urban areas. This left untouched many important social/cultural phenomena that carried crucial symbolic meanings within the public discourse on gender. As a cultural phenomenon, “gender assimilation” of the Chinese women in the Mao era was put on the back burner by the previous leftist feminist scholars. The androgynous, militant, proletarian women presented in the political propaganda, the “profane” image of the vain and immoral bourgeois women, the strictly ascetic sexual norms and dress codes, the pervasive asceticism and the state-sanctioned romantic relations represented in the popular culture, the absence of and contempt for the daily use of cosmetics, and the large fraction of the female population given masculine names such as “*jun*” (army) and “*qiang*” (strong)—were virtually unexamined in the 70s group’s works. Even though Elisabeth Croll (1978, 1983) touched upon a few of these themes in her work, the breadth and depth of her observations and analysis was far from adequate, and need to be further developed and theorized.

Secondly, previous research done by the 70s feminists put such great emphasis on women’s status and women’s liberation for its own sake, that it lacked a critique of the wider social context of this movement. The rest of the society’s responses to this women’s movement and the interaction of different social spheres caused by it were also generally absent in this literature. The 70s feminists also did not provide a perspective on the integration of women into other institutions (apart from the economy) in the society. Women were seen as isolated, passive social actors that did not enjoy much agency, not active interlocutors of their own interests.

It seems that Jeffrey Alexander’s theory of the inherent binary codes of the discourse of civil society, and his theory of the three modes of civil incorporation provide an essential alternative insight which could be used to tackle the Chinese Women’s Movement in the Mao era. Accordingly, I intend to use this theory to answer some of the most profound questions that concern Chinese feminists today: What were the major problems of Chinese feminism in the communist revolutionary era? Why didn’t mass participation of women in public production help Chinese women achieve equal status with men in the society? What can today’s advocates for a Chinese civil sphere learn from the history of the radical political incorporation of women into the public sphere in the Mao era through gender assimilation?

Alexander's Theory of Civil Society and the Three Modes of Civil Incorporation

Alexander defines civil society as a sphere or subsystem of a society that is analytically and, to various degrees, empirically separated from the sphere of political, economic, and religious life. Civil society is a sphere of solidarity in which individual rights and collective obligations are closely intertwined. It is both a normative (i.e., what things ought to be versus what things are) and an empirical concept. It allows the philosophical relationship between universalism and particularism to be studied empirically, as a condition that determines the status of civil society itself. (Alexander 2001a: 42)

Based on this idealtypical conception of civil society, Alexander lays out the fundamental formulation of the binary codes of the discourse of civil society. He argues that the basic elements of “the language that forms the cultural core of civil society can be isolated as a general structure and studied as a relatively autonomous symbolic form,” that they can be understood “semiotically,” and that the discourse of the modern democratic society follows the sacred/profane and masculine/feminine symbolic codes which occur on three levels: motives, relations, and institutions. (Alexander 2001a: 46) Based on this theoretical framework of the civil society, Alexander argues that it is through the creative and continuous negotiation with the binary codes that discourses legitimatizing democratic dialogues of solidarity, recognition and integration will emerge.

Alexander further lays out the three modes of civil incorporation in the article “‘Theorizing the ‘Modes of Incorporation’: Assimilation, Hyphenation, and Multiculturalism as Varieties of Civil Participation.’” (Alexander 2001b). He stated that modern democratic societies are composed of powerful noncivil spheres such as family, religious groups, scientific associations, economic institutions, and geographically bound communities, and that these noncivil spheres will invade and destruct the civil spheres; as a result, only people who manifest certain primordial characteristics, qualities of race, languages, religions, gender, sexuality, and national origins can be “trusted to exhibit the sacred qualities of civil participation.” (Alexander 2001b: 240-241) Thus, the problem of incorporating members of peripheral groups occurs. “Civil incorporation” denotes precisely “closing the gap between stigmatized categories of persons whose particular identities have been relegated to the invisibility of the private life and the utopian promises that in principle regulate civil life, principles that imply equality, solidarity and respect among members of the society.” (Alexander 2001b: 242)

Responding to this, Alexander points out the three modes of civil incorporation that have been formulated and institutionalized in American society: 1) Assimilation: separating persons from qualities; 2) Hyphenation: neutralizing negative qualities by symbolic association with the core; 3) Multiculturalism: purifying subaltern qualities and pluralizing the civil sphere. Alexander also points out that in empirical reality, the three highly idealtypical modes always blend into each other, and historical communities participate into all three of these processes at the same time. However, Alexander considers multiculturalism to be the only normative and empirically legitimate way to carry out civil incorporation in a diversified, multicultural society:

In assimilation and hyphenation, the particular is universalized. In multiculturalism, the universal is particularized. In assimilation and hyphenation, the ambition of outgroups is to replace ascriptive identification with status based on achievement. (Alexander 2001b: 246)

I have briefly explained Alexander's theory of the three modes of civil incorporation. I will subsequently apply this theoretical framework to the history of the women's movement in Mao era China. I will first explain in the following section how Alexander's theory fits into the Chinese case by clarifying why it is legitimate to identify a civil sphere in Mao's China.

Alexander vis-à-vis Calhoun: The Legitimacy of Identifying a Chinese Civil Sphere

At first glance, applying a highly idealtypical conception of civil society derived from western liberal-political philosophic tradition to Chinese reality seems problematic. China under the communist regime has been considered by most western scholars to be a totalitarian state that does not really allow much flexibility for “rational critical communication,” (Habermas 1989) nor does it “symbolically” present its members “as independent and self-motivating persons. (Alexander 2001b: 239) Sinologist Ian Buruma believes that any liberal democratic tradition is completely absent in China. After Buruma’s one-year interview with Chinese political dissidents in both post-Mao mainland and overseas, he concluded, not without disappointment, that, “[m]oral reformists, Confucianists, Chinese Communists, and religious zealots seem to share the assumption that good government depends more on human virtue than on democratic institutions.” (Buruma 2001:335) Although having never visited China, Max Weber reached the same conclusion in his book *Religions of China* (1951). First, Weber realized that “[t]here’s no self-conscious bourgeois stratum which could not be politically ignored by the government.” (Weber 1951: 137) Then, Weber claimed that the concepts of individuality and liberty were virtually absent in Chinese cultural systems: “No sphere of personal liberty was sanctioned. The very word ‘liberty’ was foreign to the language.” (Weber 1951: 147). He also points out that there is no legal rational authority in the Chinese legal institutions, “The Chinese judge, a typical patrimonial judge, discharged business in thoroughly patriarchal fashion, ..., he precisely did not adjudicate according to formal rules and ‘without regard to persons.’”(Weber 1951: 149)

Arguably, the most recent influential voice on the issue of Chinese civil society is Craig Calhoun. In his book on the 1989 students’ movement, Calhoun (1997) wrote substantially about the idiosyncratic type of political communication in Chinese society and the prospect of building a civil society and public sphere in contemporary China. He convincingly stated that “Mao’s speeches to the people were monological, not part of a polyphonic discourse; they were top-down communications... He addressed ‘the masses’ in Tiananmen Square, he spoke for the general will in Rousseau’s sense, not for the will of any individual or even of all.” (Calhoun 1997: 189) Calhoun was also right in stating that in socialist China, “the people” were constructed to be a homogenous categorical identity, which was given the ultimate resource for authority. But because “the people” is a highly abstract conception that is only valid as a collective identity, power was seized by the state which claimed to represent “the people,” while in western societies the idea of “the people” is highly differentiated, and people’s diverse range of interests are recognized by a government which takes their representations in the government seriously. According to Calhoun, the tendency of the Chinese totalitarian state to blur and neglect the actual categorization and stratification of people along gender and class lines had caused severe social consequences. (Calhoun 1997: 189) The public sphere that is closely controlled by the state follows a primarily “male-intellectual” discourse, which excludes women and the working class (especially ill-educated peasants) in general.

Calhoun also gave his critique from the perspective of civil society. First, he defines civil society as “the realm of organized activity outside the immediate control of the state but not entirely contained within the private sphere of the family.” (Calhoun 1997: 190) He considers the location of civil society to be between the state and the individuals, primarily composed of non-state social organizations that can carry out critical rational political debates, and is directly restricted by state control. Calhoun empirically examined the Chinese in citing that the state enjoyed an enormous power and continuously invaded into other social spheres (the one-child policy was a perfect example of state intruding and regulating the private sphere), thus “undermining the very distinction between public and private.” (Calhoun 1997: 194) Based on this, Calhoun concludes that civil society is “absent” in China, and that to build a civil society in China is the crucial task for Chinese democrats and modernizers. (Calhoun 1997: 194) The task, in Calhoun’s opinion, will fall largely on the shoulders of

newly emerged entrepreneurs, intellectuals-students, and independent media owners. This vision, although bold and romantic/heroic, is empirically wrong and theoretically naïve.

If we take an Alexanderian perspective, Calhoun's definition of and claim about the Chinese civil sphere are problematic in that Calhoun conflates the definitions of the civil society with that of the public sphere. Calhoun believes that civil society is "almost all but the state". He does not separate the private/intimate sphere from the civil sphere, and is completely non-skeptical towards the pervasive noncivil ideologies embedded in the economic and religious spheres. Alexander, on the other hand, considers it necessary to separate the civil sphere from the public sphere, because the fact that a public sphere that carries communicative functions exists does not necessarily imply that a civil and democratic society is in place. In other words, equating the sum of social activism, grass roots movements, and non-governmental organizations with the civil sphere is wrong. A civil sphere, according to Alexander, is "empirically separated from the sphere of political, economic, and religious life." (Alexander 2001a) He keeps a highly skeptical view towards the other public spheres because they invariably carry a potential for distributing pollutive symbolic messages that can work to exclude the members of disadvantaged groups.

Also, the theme of civil solidarity is lost in Calhoun's theorization. Calhoun advocates a democratic sphere, as in the case of China, one that can accommodate different sources of dissenting voices. Calhoun acknowledged and criticized the double-sided nature of Chinese intellectuals. He argues that Chinese intellectuals can be surprisingly narrow-minded and hyper-nationalistic on the one hand, and positivist and enlightenment-oriented on the other, the later inclination mostly demonstrated through an eager embrace for democracy and rationalism. (Calhoun 1997: 192) Calhoun was right in stating that the latter tendency is more crucial for building a pluralistic Chinese public sphere. However, the general Chinese public is likely not able to be easily persuaded by the enlightenment ideals disseminated and championed by the intellectuals. Disappointing enough, Calhoun's analysis does not grant a space for social solidarity. Unlike Alexander, Calhoun's model does not adequately address another important aspect of civic values: civil solidarity in addition to the rights to protest and freedom of speech.

Calhoun rightly observed that certain subaltern groups such as women and peasants were not entrusted by the intellectuals to be granted participation in the process of democratization, (Calhoun 1997: 191) but he did not suggest any applicable alternatives to incorporate these underrepresented groups into the public sphere. (Calhoun 1997: 212) Calhoun ruled out the possibility of a semiotic approach to amend the fragmented, symbolic representation of Chinese civil sphere, while Alexander believes that civil integration and the formation of a critically communicative civil sphere depends on a profound understanding of the binary codes of civility, and a conviction to purify the polluted negative symbols attached to the "civilly incompetent" (Alexander 2001b: 246) subaltern groups.

Calhoun's recognition of China's idiosyncratic and overruling state power delineates a *sui generis* condition for the possibilities of constructing a Chinese civil society. However, contrary to his claim that there has never been a civil society in socialist China, I would argue that there has always been a "preliminary civil public sphere" in China. My reasoning is as follows.

It is true that socialist China does not have a civil society in either a strict Alexandrian or Calhounian sense, but the rational, communicative debates which have an ongoing and fluid regulative force, on both empirical and normative dimensions were never withdrawn from the public sphere of the society. From Alexander's perspective, state cannot entirely act on its own. Propaganda is powerful but not omnipotent, and there are always spaces left for people to communicate and reflect, and through this reflexive median, the people can always, to a certain extent decide what part of the propaganda they are willing to accept and what part not

to. That is why there have always been dissidents or skeptical voices co-existing with the mainstream propaganda in Chinese society. It is latent at one time and salient at another. It sometimes takes the form of intellectual debates, and other times prevalent social discontent. Brainwash through political propaganda has never been fully achieved in China because the intrusion of the political sphere was constantly filtrated by rational critical forces within the public sphere.

I call this uncompleted, embryonic form of a civil society in socialist China a “preliminary civil public sphere.” This conception can help explain China’s nation-wide ideological disillusion after the trauma of a cultural revolution, as well as today’s pervasive distrust toward communist rhetoric despite the omnipresent propaganda. This conception is further illustrated by Calhoun’s examples of the official newspaper’s (the *China Daily*) spontaneous efforts to subvert its role as the state propaganda machine. (Calhoun 1997: 207) It can also help us understand the persistent voices of remembrance in opposition to the CCP’s attempts of erasing collective memory of the 1989 Tiananmen movement. The idea of a “preliminary civil public sphere” in socialist China also provides a license to apply Alexander’s theory of the three modes of civil incorporation in my following analysis of the gender assimilation used in the Chinese women’s movement in Mao era China.

Gender Assimilation as a Political Strategy to Incorporate Woman into the Public Sphere

Both Marx and Engels considered female oppression to be a part of the larger and more general problem of exploitation and inequality in human history, which will eventually disappear in a classless society. Engels said in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* that “[i]t will be plain that the *first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry...*” (Engels 1942:66) The CCP’s women’s liberation policy followed this mentality. The CCP mobilized women to participate in mass production as well as its political struggles since the inception of the communist revolution. “Both war and development meant jobs for women.” (Andors 1983:7)

In order to mobilize vast number of women in the nation to participate in the proletariat revolution, Mao coined the motto: “*Women can do whatever men can do.*” Under this slogan, women were expected to work in an “iron maiden” fashion, working and fighting alongside their male comrades against the CCP’s political enemies. Women were promoted by the political discourse to eliminate the previous monopoly men had held in certain occupations, and entered into fields such as heavy industry, manufacturing, and public transportation. Many became train drivers, bus drivers, blacksmiths, petroleum workers and steel workers. (Andors 1997: 85) Women were also awarded by the state with labor model honors at all levels and were encouraged to view their entrance into these previously male-dominated occupations with pride.

In the Mao Era, women’s participation in public labor had the implications of being anti-capitalist. Such endeavors were especially important because they symbolized personal advancement in the political process. I was informed by a 52-year old woman during a fieldwork interview¹:

The education I had since I was a child taught me that we could do whatever the boys

¹ The interview segments in this article are quoted from my archive of interview records with 30 Chinese men and women from different age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. The interviews were done during the spring and summer of 2000 for my research project on “Cross-Generational Women’s Gender Role in Urban China.” The early interviews were conducted with students and teachers at Nanjing University. The other interviewees were found through snowball sampling and random interviewing on the streets in Nanjing, Jiangsu province. Among the interviewees were university teachers, high school students, high school teachers, students, peddlers, company clerks, government staff, workers and in-town-peasants. Women comprised 60% of the sample. Individual interviews usually lasted from 30 to 60 minutes.

could do, even the manual work. We had no idea of deliberately demonstrating that we were women. When we were working in the countryside, I carried the same amount of corn each load as the men did, and my heart was filled with pride. (Zhang 2001)

In rural areas and in military services, organizations called the “Iron Women labor group” and the “Women’s Artillery Battalion” emerged in large numbers. During the three nation-wide famines of the 60s, many women worked day and night with men in the fields, striving for food production.

The image of women presented in mass media were not only androgynous but also militant and proletarian. Movies and posters from the 50s and 60s were filled with images portraying women operating huge machineries or holding guns, symbolic of women’s participation in modern heavy industries as well as in the military. The physical features of popular women in political media were strong, androgynous, and their facial expressions were always firm and resolute. Heroines in mainstream movies were mostly guerilla leaders, competent soldiers, or at least exemplary workers who feared no obstacles and were willing to die for the common good. These over-politicized and desexualized women in political propaganda acted and spoke like men did; most of them shared the same posture with the male protagonist, resting one hand on their hip while waving the other to a crowd.

Most noticeably, Chinese women’s clothing and hairstyles in the period conformed to the most modest, plain, and desexualized styles. When it comes to clothing, women wore the *Zhongshan Suit* (a desexualized, blue, four-pocket working suit which covered all under-neck parts) and the same military uniforms as men. *“Military uniforms were even more popular because they indicated that the person was ideologically close to the Party,”* one of my respondents remarked. (Zhang 2001) Make-up was neither permitted nor accepted at the time, and many Chinese women growing up in the Mao era had a strongly negative opinion about it. Some of them still find it unacceptable today and refuse to put on make-up even for formal occasions. A 50-year-old female professor from one of the Humanities departments at Nanjing University told me the following:

Our generation doesn’t have the habit of using cosmetics. Sometimes when I headed for an international academic convention, some foreign colleagues suggest that I put on some light make-up. But I find it extremely uncomfortable, even bizarre. All women my age (Mao’s time) consider make-up to be an actress’ thing. If you walked on the streets of China in the 60s and 70s with a painted face, people would definitely think you were morally degenerate or mentally delirious. (Zhang 2001)

Dressing-up, wearing make-up or any other means of showing gender difference were considered embarrassing. Even natural secondary sex characteristics (like the maturing of breasts) were viewed by many young women as shameful. There was a type of underwear—*Shuxiong* (Chinese for “chest-bind”), popular among women of Mao’s time, which could make a woman’s bosom look as flat as a man’s, especially in conjunction with a *Zhongshan Suit*:

We didn’t have things like bras at that time, so we spontaneously invented a tight underwear made of thick linen. When putting it on, we asserted all efforts to make it as tight as could be, the harder (for the others to detect our chest), the better. (Zhang 2001)

Many teenage girls did not want others to see that they already had matured breasts, and therefore they deliberately walked with a bent-over back, like that of an elderly woman. The perming of hair and the use of objects with lively colors or laces were viewed as vain, bawdy, boastful, unabashed, in a word, “bourgeois.” Some people with naturally curly hair had to straighten it so that they would not be labeled “capitalist roaders.” Men and women in blue formed an ever-flowing ocean of *Zhongshan Suits* and military uniforms on the streets of Beijing.

The most explicit description of the ideal woman's image that was expected by the Party was what Mao described in his poem "On the Picture of a Woman Peasant Soldier":

*She looks so handsome and beautiful with the rifle in her hand,
In the morning sunlight is shining right on the military training field,
How I admire the courage and ambition of the new generation Chinese women,
They prefer the military uniforms to those silly red dresses.* (Mao 1960)

Real Life Female Gender Role and Gender Inequality in Mao Era

The salient contradiction between the strong, independent, androgynous, and highly politicized female image in the mainstream party propaganda and the women's daily disadvantaged, gender-based reality is compelling to every researcher who studies the Chinese women's liberation in the Mao era. Despite the strong and independent female image promoted by political propaganda, previous research on Mao era Chinese women carried out by Delia Davin, Phillis Andors, Judith Stacey, Margery Wolf, William Parish, and Elisabeth Croll all showed disappointing records of real life women's participation in both public and domestic spheres. (Andors 1983, Croll 1978, Davin 1976, Parish 1978, Stacey 1983, Wolf 1985) It seems that gender assimilation and women's mass participation into public production did not profoundly change the patriarchal conception of women's role in the society.

Although the Chinese Women's Federation (the "Federation") was founded in order to reinforce women's rights and provide women with a voice in political life, the Federation was institutionally considered part of a larger social movement under the supervision of the Party and did not enjoy the political autonomy that it needed to address women's particular interests. (Andors 1983:30) On a larger scale, the women's movement was always directed towards serving a grand revolutionary goal rather than becoming a negotiating agent for women's interests vis-à-vis that of men. (Croll 1978: 306) At the height of the Cultural Revolution, the activities of the Federation were almost paralyzed.

Although common urban and rural women were given opportunities to take part in the local Party's branch meetings to discuss important issues in their daily lives, many of them were not willing to show up because they were afraid that their participation in public activities would be considered morally "loose." (Croll 1983) Women's entrance into the public sphere was still stigmatized by discourses other than the communist orthodox.

Segregation in the labor market was still very common. Women mostly took occupations in light industry, textile manufacturing, service and kindergartens. (Croll 1990, Divine 1997) Chinese law holds that women should be paid the same as men for the same labor, but because there were more women than men in the low-paying occupations, women as a whole still earned less. Thus, in many instances even if a man and a woman were actually doing comparable work, the payment was still unequal. For example, in the agricultural commune system women were always designated to perform the lower-paying jobs like embroidering. Because women were considered to enjoy the advantage of an "inborn dexterity" with embroidery and needle works, they were paid less per product than their male colleagues. (Croll 1978) The policy towards women's participation in the public production was also unstable. It is obvious that the state sacrificed women's work opportunities in a time of employment decline. In the late 1970s, when the country was undergoing a severe economic slump, women were the first to be laid off and to be advised of "returning home" to support their husbands' work.

However, in the cities, there were calls for men to "help out" with housework and take care of children, but the task continued to fall more on women's shoulders because the domestic sphere was still considered a feminine arena. Usually, the urban women had to come home to

cook and take care of their children after work. This double burden limited their time off and their chances of obtaining the training necessary for promotion. (Andors 1983, Wolf 1984) In rural areas, there were fewer baby-sitting community services than in the cities. Mothers often had to leave the labor group for childcare, and worked only when there was a desperate need.

After the promulgation of the One Child Policy, birth control and family planning were most often directed towards women. (Andors 1983) The Marriage Law did not change the situation that married women had to live with their husbands' families. The direct consequence was that parents figured that their elderly care would be only in the hands of their sons and daughter-in-laws. Consequently, they were unwilling to invest in their daughters' education and future development. Thus, there was little protection for women's property and inheritance rights. Divorced women and widows were usually left with nothing, despite their previous contribution to the family. (Parish & Whyte 1978)

The pressure on women at work was enormous, and the disregard for their special needs had severe consequences on their health. The party propaganda that "women can do whatever work men can do" caused many women physical dysfunction because they were supposed to be able to do men's work at all times, regardless of their physical strength compared to men and physiological conditions such as menstruation. (Andors 1983:55)

Although women were allowed to share leadership positions with men, they were more likely to receive harsh responses and negative comments from both their male and female colleagues and their underlings. According to Margery Wolf's interview, women leaders in the factories were often criticized as being "nit-picking," "selfish," "calculating," and not "generous," "over ambitious" or "not tolerate enough." (Wolf 1985)

Chinese Feminism Through Multicultural Incorporation: An Alexandrian Critique on Gender Assimilation in Mao China

I have identified the "preliminary civil society" in the Mao-era Chinese society. This Chinese pre-civil public sphere has certain unique features that are worth our attention. First, the pre-civil sphere was severely invaded and attacked by the nondemocratic institutions in the political sphere. The state power controlled all forms of the mass media. The initiation, commissioning, production, and dissemination of the mainstream discursive products were the acknowledged political responsibility of the government, expressed in the collective action of "the people." Second, the intimate/family sphere that was organized in a highly patriarchal order, which had no civil respect nor critical rationality, intruded into the pre-civil public and brought a pollutive representation of women's differences into the public sphere. Third, however, the State's drastic mobilization of women entering the economic sphere, and the stronger, more competent and respectable new female images that emerged in national propaganda acted as a counter force in the public sphere against the patriarchal discourse of the female that was deeply embedded in the intimate domestic sphere. Both of these two forces were strong, but the political sphere that controlled the propaganda machine successfully purged the salient patriarchal messages out of the political discourse on a national scale. Therefore, because the pre-civil public sphere had neither the power nor the theoretical underpinning to generate an awareness to incorporate women as equal members, the intrusion of the political sphere into the public sphere was not an entirely destructive thing, at least in terms of elevating women's status.

Because the political sphere's intrusion into the intimate/family sphere carried anti-patriarchal themes, salient politically incorrect messages such as "women are incompetent and subordinate members" or "women do not deserve equal pay or equal education" were prevented from entering the public discourse because it was against the Party's rhetoric. However, the patriarchal discourse was still pervasive and the party itself was a "male" one,

as Calhoun observed. The patriarchal family crumbled, but the patriarchal institution remained. The CCP assumed for itself a father figure to the nation's women whose role was transformed from "the one in the family" to "the one in the state." The power of the political sphere now extended into every aspect of personal life, depriving all people of the freedom to think for themselves. Gender assimilation and the disregard and denunciation of femininity were only a small aspect of the overflowing condemnation of particularism and individualism in Mao's time.

When we apply Alexander's theory of civil incorporation to the case of China, we find that although the preliminary Chinese civil sphere had a consensus that women's public participation was good and necessary, women's labor was considered "a facilitating input" (Alexander 2001c) into the pre-civil public sphere. This explains the changing of the political rhetoric to promote images of the housewives "returning home" in times of economic crisis and the construction of wartime Motherhood during the Korean War with the United States. The stigmatized meanings attached to women's existence in the public sphere and the failure of their civil incorporation was a direct consequence of both the intrusion of the domestic sphere into the civil sphere and the gender assimilation as a form of a radical political sphere invading the civil sphere.

Alexander defines assimilation to be an incorporative process that "takes place when out-group members are allowed to enter fully into civil life on the condition that they shed their polluted primordial identities." (Alexander 2001b: 243) "Assimilation is possible to the degree that socialization channels exist that can provide 'civilizing' or 'purifying' processes... that allows persons to be separated from their primordial qualities." (Alexander 2001b: 243) The CCP did provide women with the socialization channel to shed their civilly incompetent and "polluted" female identities which were being labeled as "backward," "self-oriented," "lacking class-concerns," "ill-educated," "physically weak," "satisfied with petty family happiness," "calculating," and asked them to adopt those civil qualities which were considered sacred and competent. Because the pre-civil public sphere shares the male civil code with both the political sphere and the family sphere, women who had been mobilized to join the public sphere were now made to conform to the male civil code in order to secure their membership in the public sphere. But this assimilating process has a limitation in both "an empirical and moral sense," because "it is not the qualities themselves that are purified or accepted but the persons who formerly, and often still privately bear them." (Alexander 2001b: 441) Thus, we can identify the primary drawback of gender assimilation under the disguise of women's liberation: it failed to challenge the negative meanings attached to the difference of women from men. Instead, gender assimilation merely "reproduced demeaning stereotypes in its own way, confirming the substantive restrictions and debilitating contradictions of the promise of civil society." (Alexander 2001b: 441)

To purify the negative meanings attached to women as a group, there needs to be an awareness of the noncivil ideologies and institutions in the political and intimate spheres. Alexander considers multiculturalism to be the best approach to purify subaltern qualities and pluralize the civil sphere. Women in Mao's era were incorporated into a public sphere that was not civil, the discourse of the public sphere only granted women membership as long as they behaved like men, just another way to deny women equal membership and recognition in the public sphere. The gender assimilation *per se*, constituted the most uncivil oppression on women. On the other hand, multiculturalism works not "to purify the characters of denigrated persons," but to "purify the primordial qualities themselves." (Alexander 2001b: 246) The qualities of being women will not be seen as subject to stigma but rather as variations on civil and utopian themes, and will be valued in themselves. (Alexander 2001b: 246) Alexander argues that multiculturalism is not only a moral preference but also very much an empirical process. In the Chinese case, multiculturalism can help by incorporating the underrepresented groups such as women, peasants and ethnic minorities into the public sphere without assimilating them or forcing them to disclaim their primordial qualities. Only

incorporation based on multiculturalism will lead to establishing a communicative and regulative civil sphere that is both rational and critical. It will provide needed space for lively discussions and fierce debates to channel and negotiate the particularistic voices and interests of different groups while maintaining a civil solidarity based on democratic beliefs and recognition of individual particularity.

Civil incorporation is the precondition for the construction of a Chinese civil society, and not the other way around. Neither a civil incorporation based on assimilation as practiced by the CCP in the Mao era, nor a “civil society-based democracy” constructed and dominated by elite intellectual groups who ignore civil incorporation and civil solidarity (Calhoun and various contemporary Chinese dissidents or intellectuals support this model) is the right route toward the modernization and democratization of the contemporary Chinese society. This study informs us that the long postponed feminist dream in China can only be achieved through the full incorporation of women into the public sphere under the condition that their differences as women are fully recognized, purified and respected, and when the pluralistic civil sphere is strong enough to invade the noncivil political and intimate spheres to impeach the uncivil voices and forces emerging from them.

Conclusion

In this paper, I used Jeffrey Alexander’s theory of modes of civil incorporation to examine the Chinese Women’s Movement in the Mao Era (1950-1976). I began by providing general background information of the women’s movement in the Mao era, and then addressing the theoretical deficiency of the previous generation of feminist scholars who had studied the same movement in that they lacked a cultural, civil society oriented perspective in their research.

Before entering the analytical discussion on empirical facts, I talked about the possible theoretical limitations of applying Alexander’s theory to this particular empirical case. In this case, the biggest question would be “Does socialist China have a civil society?” I compared Craig Calhoun’s theoretical claims on building a “dissident” Chinese civil society with Jeffrey Alexander’s theory on civil incorporation and civil solidarity. I recognized Calhoun’s strength in acknowledging the enormous state power in China; however, I found that Alexander’s theory provides a better understanding on civil incorporation and solidarity based on rational communicative debates within the civil society. Alexander enjoys a theoretical advantage in addressing the boundary between the civil and noncivil spheres; unlike Calhoun who embraces the new entrepreneurs as an important component in civil society construction, Alexander keeps a skeptical outlook towards undemocratic institutions within the economic sphere. Alexander’s awareness of the pervasive binary code of good and evil within the civil society, and his notion of symbolic purification seems to provide a new direction for Chinese feminism, as well as the construction of a new Chinese civil sphere as a whole. Calhoun’s advocacy for social movement, non-governmental organizations, and independent press all provide good and immediate strategies, but they lack a profound understanding of the boundaries between the civil/noncivil spheres and civil solidarity. Finally, I argued that socialist China does have “a preliminary civil society” and a “pre-civil public sphere” which gives me legitimacy to apply Alexander’s theory to the Chinese case.

Then I analyzed the assimilative strategy used in the Mao era women’s movement and applied Alexander’s theoretical framework. I explained why and how Chinese women’s economic independence and their massive participation in public labor did not succeed in granting them a real life equal membership in the public sphere. I concluded that Chinese women in Mao’s era were incorporated into a public sphere that was not civil. In Alexander’s terms, women’s public labor and their subordination were used as a means of “facilitating input” to the communist civil ideal. Gender assimilation promoted by the CCP did not work to purify the negative qualities attached to women, instead, it separated individual women from its polluted

symbolic meanings, thus confirming the demeaning stereotypes of women in the Chinese society. Women cannot be accepted as equal citizens of the public sphere as long as the subaltern meanings attached to their categorical differences are not purified, and the pluralistic values of a multicultural society have not come into being. I argued that the realization of the Chinese feminist dream depends on a “civil repair” (Alexander 2001c: 501) and the construction of a strong, plural, communicative Chinese civil sphere which enjoys multicultural values. The Chinese civil sphere should be capable of invading the noncivil spheres and act as a normative, regulative force towards them. I also raised the point that civil incorporation is the precondition for the construction of the Chinese civil society, and not the other way around. Neither civil incorporation based on assimilation practiced by the CCP, nor a “civil society”/democracy constructed and dominated by elite intellectual groups that ignores civil incorporation and civil solidarity (Calhoun and various contemporary Chinese dissidents or intellectuals support this model) is the right route towards modernization and democratization of the contemporary Chinese society.

(The author is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at Yale University.)

Bibliography

- Alexander, Jeffrey. 2001a. “Possibilities of Justice: The Civil Sphere and Its Contradictions.” Unpublished manuscript. Department of Sociology, Yale University, New Haven, CT.
- Alexander, Jeffrey. 2001b. “Theorizing the Modes of Incorporation: Assimilation, Hyphenation, and Multiculturalism as Varieties of Civil Participation.” *Sociological Theory* 19(3) 2001: 237-249.
- Alexander, Jeffrey. 2001c. “The Long and Winding Road: Civil Repair of Intimate Sphere.” *Sociological Theory* 19:371-400.
- Andors, Phyllis. 1983. *The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women, 1949 - 1980*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Buruma, Ian. 2001. *Bad Elements: Chinese Rebels From Los Angeles to Beijing*. New York, NY. Random House.
- Calhoun, Craig. 1997. *Neither Gods Nor Emperors: Students and the Struggle For Democracy in China*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.
- Croll, Elisabeth. 1978. *Feminism and Socialism in China*. London, Henley and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Croll, Elisabeth. 1983. *Chinese Women Since Mao*. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Davis-Friedmann, Deborah. 1985. “Book Review”. *American Journal of Sociology*. May, pp.1392.
- Davin, Delia. 1976. *Women-Work*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Engels, Frederick. 1942. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. New York: International Publishers.
- Habermas, Jurgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Johnson, Kay. 1983. *Women, the Family and Peasant Revolution in China*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Mao, Zedong. 1961. “On the Picture of a Woman Peasant Soldier.” *An Anthology of Mao's Poems*. Trans. Chi Zhang. Beijing: People's Literature Press.
- Narayan, Uma. 1989. “The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspective from a Nonwestern Feminist.” *Gender/Body/ Knowledge: Feminist reconstructions of Being and knowing*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Sando.
- Parish William L., Whyte, Martin K. 1978. *Village and Family in Contemporary China*. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press.
- Rabinovitch, Eyal. 2001. “Gender and the Public Sphere: Alternative Forms of Integration in Nineteenth-Century America.” *Sociological Theory* 19:344-370.

- Stacey, Judith. 1983. *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press. 1965. The Free Press.
- Weber, Max. 1951. "The Religion of China". Trans. Hans H. Gerth. New York, NY.
- Wolf, Margery. 1985. *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Zhang, Chi. 2001. *Project on Cross-Generational Women's Gender Role in Urban China*. (Field interview transcripts, in Chinese.) Nanjing University, China.