Effects of the Chinese Feminist Movement and the Struggle for Gender Equality

In this research essay, we will discuss the events and circumstances of Qing China that led to the Chinese feminist movement in the mid 20th century and into the present day. I will draw from a plethora of sources, each of which provide an analysis of the lives and sociological contexts of oppressed women in both past and contemporary China. We will explore the origins and causes for the social norms that normalized oppression of women's rights and freedoms. Then, we will discuss the transitional period between the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the subsequent rise of the feminist movement in the later part of the century. To conclude, I will look into the lives of Chinese women in contemporary China.

Firstly, the following quote by Charlotte Furth will put the issues at hand into perspective:

“Ideas about gender organize the social relations between men and women. They gain their power because they seem to be the products of a natural order of things, deeper that any social conventions. Reproductive processes, like eating and drinking, sickness and death, appear as part of the biological substratum of human experience, operating according to universal laws that apply to all human beings and to other living creatures as well” (Furth 7).

I chose to insert this quote because it very clearly describes the significance of gender relations and why social conceptions of gender matter. Individuals of a society are often blinded by seemingly natural aspects of gender relations, and tend to miss some powerful and unnoticeable effects of gender discrimination.

Let us begin our investigation of Chinese feminism with Confucianism, which is one of China's
oldest and most fundamental schools of thought. Dating back to centuries before the common era, Confucianism has had a conflictual relationship with the relatively new concept of feminism. Luciana Valutanu, in her critical essay on the relationship between Confucianism and feminism in China, reveals an often overlooked fact about Confucianism and how its misinterpretations have led to promote the oppression of women. The ancient Chinese social system was male-dominated and patrilinear, and commonly known to have been divided by social spheres, where men played a social role of responsibility outside the household, while women were predestined to be stay-at-home mothers and had no legal rights or social life beyond the interior of the home. This was, in fact, justified by the early yin-yang principles, which supported the oppression of women as the inferior gender by emphasizing the fundamental differences between males and females, and then establishing this discrimination as a societal norm. The yin-yang principles were attributed to Confucianism, which led to a recognizable influence of Confucian thought against women's higher status in society (Valutanu 132).

Despite the misconception that Confucianism is inherently sexist, it is widely accepted that Confucius and his followers did not advocate the inferiority of women in society. This is because “The Analects” have been thoroughly studied, and from many analyses it has been noted that the word “woman” only appears twice in the entire text with no discussion regarding the status of women in society. Therefore, “The Analects” are not immediately responsible for their misinterpretation as a sexist text. The reason for the widespread association of Confucianism and the oppression of women is due to the later developments, up to and including neo-Confucianism, that further suppressed the rights and freedoms of Chinese women (Valutanu 132). Thus it is not reasonable to assume that Confucianism is entirely responsible for the discrimination of women, because premodern Chinese society depended on this form of oppression to maintain its established hierarchical structure. From this, it is evident that Chinese society was not as patriarchal as it became after the integration of the yin-yang principles and
In addition to her aforementioned quote on the invisibility of gender relations, Furth mentions that feminists have noted that the ways in which culture and society define medicine directly affect gender relations and ideologies (Furth 7). State-operated medicine was considered to be legitimate and truthful, which gave medical researchers the opportunity to abuse this power to legitimize women's oppression. The first half of the Qing dynasty was economically and educationally prosperous, which led to increased rates of literacy. The population grew exponentially and the public consumption of state-published books also increased. Of these books, there were many medical texts, that borrowed much from the previous Ming and Sung dynasties. It is arguable whether these texts presented genuine innovation or were simply borrowing from previous texts and also incorporating medicinal folklore into legitimated texts (Furth 7).

From the 17th century to 19th century Neo-Confucianism in Qing China was abundant and integrated into society as an ideological framework. Medical texts from the Qing dynasty reveal that they were written in a way that deliberately supported and reinforced the subordination of women, because of Confucian traditions and moral code (Furth 7). These texts were, therefore, were censored and altered from their objective, scientific bases. To reiterate, literacy rates increased steadily throughout the Qing dynasty, which allowed for more of the mainstream public to be able to study medical texts. However, the previously embedded discourse of gender-based discrimination permeated these readers, since critical thinking and close reading was difficult to achieve after socialization. Also, the popularity of these texts was due to the appeal they had for readers of all classes, since, as members of one society, these readers shared a common-sense understanding (or misconception) of their contemporary medicine (Furth 7).

The oppression of women in Qing medical texts was done by scrutinizing female fertility and biological reproduction. Folklore was transformed into acclaimed medical fact in order to continue the
censorship and manipulation of medical knowledge. Specifically, menstrual blood and blood of childbirth was claimed to be polluted and infectious. The loss of blood by women when delivering children or menstruating was associated with the frail nature of women, since blood was understood to be a symbol of bodily vitality, the loss of which implied the former (Furth 7). Another discriminatory belief about female reproduction was that mothers were understood to be physically connected to their children for months after birth, due to the transmission of bodily fluids through lactation. This further promoted the inferiority of women “as the 'sickly sex’” (Furth 7), because the sickness of children was believed to be caused by diseases transmitted from the mother.

The reproductive functions of Qing women were not only discriminatory on the basis of biology, but also had diverse effects on their social status and disadvantage. Due to the patrilineal structure of society, women who became wives were removed from their parents' home and accepted as outsiders, like guests, into the families of their husbands. This led to prejudice against these wives, rendering them into immediate scapegoats for familial problems and conflicts. Confucian morals were largely the cause for this form of discrimination, which consequently subdued wives under the social authority of husbands. Other cultural practices such as foot-binding and entrapment of women in the household are characteristic of Confucian oppression of women (Furth 7).

In late Qing China, there was a multitude of the well-known legal reforms of moral teachings and legal principles. Prior to these reforms, laws in China were considered to be additional regulators of society to abide by moral beliefs, which resulted in criminal punishment when individuals undermined such morality. As one would suspect, moral misconduct was usually attributed to that of women. For example, during the Tang dynasty, wilful pre-marital and extramarital sex by a woman was considered to be criminal. The reforms of late Qing were a step in the right direction, considering the fact that the new laws did not victimize unmarried and widowed women as criminals for engaging in intercourse. The legal reform of laws surrounding moral misconduct of women is closely related to the
effects that Western laws brought upon China later on (Yeung 307).

Late Qing legal reforms were pivotal for China's government, as they imported elements of Western political and legal models and integrated them into China's new reformed government. Western technology was also inherited into the Chinese military to prepare for plans of “extraterritorial control” (Yeung 298). The main inheritance of Western models of governance was constitutional monarchy, which eradicated the long-standing imperial rule. Confucian teachings, however, could not have been entirely replaced by Western knowledge, since a majority of the Chinese population still believed in neo-Confucianism. As such, the new criminal code was integrated with Confucian morals and societal ideals. Older members of families, having been viewed as experienced vessels of Confucianism, were granted moral authority over their families. With the integration of Western laws, the new Chinese law was a rework of the old legal model. It was previously simplistic, in that its laws were charted into a single, indivisible set of laws. The new model, however, separated its new laws by separate sets of codes, such as 'Criminal, civil, military, and commercial codes” (Yeung 298). This meant that the previous laws that manipulated the behaviour of women were still largely in effect. However, the previously mentioned decriminalization of extramarital sex for women presented a radical change in laws that regulated women's rights.

The new criminal code of China helped to facilitate China's transition to modernity by rendering corporal punishment illegal, as well as slightly loosening the legal control over women's sexual behaviour. The Statue on Sexual Violations, for example, which had a previous total of 12 'commandments' over sexual violations, now was reduced to have only 8. Adultery remained illegal as it was in the Old Qing Code (Yeung 300). Even though the new laws made it legal for unmarried women and widows to have voluntary sex, it made punishment for adultery more severe. Traditionally, bamboo beatings were the main form of punishment, with the number of blows varying with the severity of crimes. One very significantly sexist law, included even in the new legal code, was that only
the husband had the right to accuse his wife of adultery. This leads to the conclusion that women were powerless when it came to their husbands' cheating, meaning that the new legal code was still far from being perfectly equal for both genders.

The end of the Qing empire was a revolutionary time for feminism in China; specifically, between the late imperial reforms of 1898 until the spark of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. A study of Chinese women's journalism by Yuxin Ma describes the growing influence of female Chinese journalists of the time. From 1898, the year of formation of Republican China which succeeded the Qing dynasty, discourse between Chinese women and nationality became the main focus of feminism (Yuxin 759). This was a significant turning point in Chinese feminism because Western ideals and feminist thought were gaining influence and becoming integrated into Chinese feminist discourse. These imported ideas were highly liberal and coincided with the male-dominated promotion of a new nationalist identity, which promoted individualism of women in the press and in journalism. This development also challenged the concept of “good wives and wise mothers” that was socially constructed by male discourse. Yuxin also outlines the efforts of May Fourth women from 1915 to 1923 who were revolutionary feminists. They raised awareness about and emphasized the continued oppression of women's rights and freedoms throughout China's history and sought to stimulate the beginning of new terms, such as human rights and the “new woman” to make it socially acceptable for women to have a presence in the public sphere, much like in the then contemporary West. In fact, journalism was considered a special medium for information distribution, which was believed to be entirely free of male dominance where women finally achieved the ability to have an unbiased, objective and collective voice. This meant that for the first time in Chinese history, women finally found the opportunity to express their collective discontent in their lives under the patriarchal, patrilineal hierarchy of Chinese society (Yuxin 760).

Following the emergence of objective journalism, Yuxin describes the years between 1924 and
1937 as a time period in which many, varying feminist voices gained influence in the press. Aside from activism for women's rights, there feminists also contributed to the government at large, particularly against totalitarianism of the state. It is important to note, however, that these feminist activists did not have entirely identical political goals. It was not until the National Revolution of 1924 to 1927 when these different voices of change came together under a shared ambition to practice feminism, but now without their previous ideological differences. It was considered that this grand collective of feminists became a new gendered public sphere, separate from the exclusively male public sphere that existed for centuries beforehand (Yuxin 761).

Maxine Molyneux's review of four books on Chinese women in the 20th century is useful for our investigation of Chinese feminism. She points out that post-revolutionary China has proven to be inadequate in addressing the power imbalance between Chinese men and women, and that women have much fewer opportunities to assume positions of power. After the establishment of Chinese communism, there were a few positive effects of the new government. In 1950, the Chinese Communist Party instituted a law that banned feudal family trends. In turn, marriage by choice became legal, which allowed women to be far more selective of their husbands. Also, the new marriage law made political positions more accessible for women. These changes made the feudal structure of families an outdated model, placing the “new democratic family” (Molyneux 723) as the new norm for Chinese families. The “new democratic family” served a number of functions previously unseen in Chinese society, such as the reduction of privileges for elderly men, and improved social status for young women and men. The control of the state over family structure since 1950 became more prominent, as seen in the late 1970s with the introduction of population control. Overall, the longstanding traditional pattern of Chinese families became largely extinct by the 1980s (Molyneux 724).

Despite the positive changes in Chinese society and family trends throughout the 20th century, Molyneux finds that all the authors of her reviewed books agree that sexual equality between men and
women had not yet been achieved. In fact, some cases of old family structures and marital traditions were still seen, along with one author claiming that the Communist Party did not exactly attempt to abolish the older family structure, and that the position of women in society has barely improved. It turns out that the Party's claim to promote equality between the sexes and to radicalize family structure was never a priority, and instead invest far more resources into the military. The attempt to radicalize families and place the ban on feudal families was done as a requirement for land reform, so that rural families were forced to go along with the economic interests of the state. Thus, the status of women and their liberation was not the main objective of the Party. Later, during the Great Leap Forward, the Party made it seem like they were ready to free women from familial control, however this was done not for the sole purpose of salvation, but again for the interests of the well-being of the state. Patriarchal rule over the family remained despite the economic changes brought by the Communist Party, but this is to be expected of a country in which 80% of its people were peasants. Inheritance of that very same 1950s law of free-marriage was difficult in rural areas of China, as traditional customs for marriage continued (Molyneux 726). It is interesting to note that the changes to families that the Communist Party has imposed on the Chinese population occurred over a span of only a few decades, meanwhile, in the West, “family liberalization” took centuries (Molyneux 727).

Another author, Feng Xu, from the University of Victoria, briefly relates the history of the Chinese feminist movement and its encounter with foreign feminisms. We have discussed previously that the influence of the West, with its ideologies and radically different legal and moral systems, was substantial and contributed much to the feminist movement in China. It is now time to discuss the significant events that took place in the late 20th century and up to the present day.

A recent UN Conference on Women took place in Beijing in 1995. The Chinese population has been accustomed to, and very familiar, with the concept of biological sex and the basic differences between men and women. This conference, less than 20 years ago, introduced a new term of 'gender' to
the Chinese consciousness. The difference between gender and biological sex is a revolutionary one, that renders the distinctions between men and women a lot less clear-cut and definitive. The connections made at the conference, and subsequent annual conferences, between Chinese feminists and western feminists have resulted in a number of effects on Chinese feminism. Western feminists are making efforts to make feminism more widespread and influential for China. However, Chinese feminists are not yet entirely harmonious in their interests, and have been becoming increasingly opposed since the early 1990s (Xu 197). Chinese feminists are split into two groups, one that associates with Chinese feminism, “nüxing zhuyi”, or Western feminism, “nüquan zhuyi”. When re-translated into English, the term feminism becomes “womanism”, which is a favoured term by Chinese feminists. This is because “womanism” replaces the western concept of feminism by implying a less hostile relationship between Chinese women and men (Xu 203).

Let us now turn to discuss the experiences of Chinese women as agents of change in leadership roles. It is commonly understood that nations, in which women are prevalent in highly authoritative and parliamentary roles, are considered to be well-developed and having gone through a social transformation of gender roles. Even though China has been developing rapidly in the past few decades, Chinese women leaders do not receive the attention they deserve. Angelina Tsang points out that Chinese women who were leaders, either immediately after the establishment of the Communist Party or in the People's Republic of China, have played important roles in social reform which are not clearly recognized (Tsang 314). The PRC made amends to state policies that promoted female leadership in 1988, with a directive called “Suggestions for the Grooming and Selection of Women Officials in the Era of Reform and Liberalization” (Tsang 315). This was essentially a new law that required state organizations throughout the levels of government, above province-level governments, to employ at least one female representative in leadership positions. In addition, another policy in 1995, called “The Programme for the Development of Chinese Women”, which was to last 5 years, increased
the involvement of women in debates on state and social conditions (Tsang 315). Despite the efforts made following the establishment of these policies, the outcomes did not meet expectations, since only 15% of all positions in the Chinese government are occupied by women. To make matters worse, this 15% is employed under male leaders as assistants or subordinates, which further decreases their influence on real decisions (Tsang 315). This data shows the current conditions of Chinese women's struggle for equal representation and power in the government, specifically the fact that it is lacking.

Tsang also describes the disadvantageous hiring procedure of female leaders in politics. Women are often employed into these positions just for the sake of being women, as symbols of righteousness, but are not granted any real decision-making power. Instead, they are shunned by male colleagues as threats to the existing structure of the government. Unfortunately, these women recognize the danger and risks of competing with their male colleagues, and decide to demote themselves, or quit entirely, to avoid these conflicts. To make matters worse, these women receive unsatisfactory family or child care benefits which makes it more difficult for them to succeed in such positions (Tsang 316). The women interviewed by Tsang, who were committed to establishing themselves firmly in their government employment, were not consumed by their career goals. Instead, they valued their family lives greatly, and claimed to be invested in both marriage and motherhood. The greatest challenge that these women shared were actually at home in the form of a conflict, or avoidance there of, to ensure that their careers are balanced with their husband's careers in such a way that their children receive the care and attention they need. Also, they had to stay sensitive to their husband's needs and expectations as well (Tsang 321). From these findings, we can see that the struggle for women to attain political authority is much more difficult than for men. Not only do they have to deal with the discriminatory practices regarding the selection process, but also once they are hired, they have pressure from their male counterparts from all directions. Also, women, by biological needs alone, need special treatment when it comes to maternity leave and childcare benefits, which further complicates their path to success in respected
careers.

On a similar note to the difficulties Chinese women face regarding work and family life, Cheng Jianying describes the double role of contemporary Chinese women, as mothers and working women striving for personal success. Work-family life balance has always been a concern in feminist discourse, especially it was socially accepted in post-revolutionary Chinese society to be out and about in the public sphere, which was previously reserved for men. Jainying makes it clear that it is difficult to determine a perfect equality between the sexes in practice, due to varying beliefs and long-standing notions of what men and women are individually responsible for (Jianying 186). Jianying also urges the need to consider the responsibilities of husbands and wives on a case-by-case basis and their individual circumstances. This is an important concept that needs to be employed by all forms of feminism, since the lives of every couple are unique in terms of their economic, societal and personal circumstances.

More investigations have been conducted about the lives of professional women in contemporary China. Jing Song writes an extensive dissertation on the career and family lives of “professional, white-collar women” to see the effects of rapid globalization and a turbulent society on these women. Feminist research on Chinese women's work experience shows that their participation in the labour force causes frequent conflicts with their personal and family lives. The global labour market is also labelled as an unfair and gendered environment (Song 8). This comes as no surprise, as it is a similar phenomenon as in other countries, even Canada.

Song uses a popular Chinese magazine, Zhiyin, as a source from which to study the roles of women as mothers, wives and caregivers. She notices that these gendered expectations are constructed through both subliminal and explicit messages that signal the norm that women are to marry, be loyal wives, and be comparable to their husbands in terms of educational achievement. The magazine outlines that a happy family is in need of a woman who meets a number of expectations: to have a similar educational level and similar sense of style as their husbands, and to assure that she offers love
and support to her family. One aspect of marriage that is made very clear is that women must not marry out of any other reason than love, as this leads to a very high likelihood of punishment. One article from Zhiyin tells a story of a girl who married a rich businessman, not out of love but, as a way to escape poverty. Her punishment, as the writers of Zhiyin suggest, is the fact that a marriage without love and commitment is not a happy one, regardless of the financial perks (Song 63). This brief article is an example of a social alarm that tries to deter women from marrying out of the temptation to escape poverty, or for any other reason that is not love. I, personally, agree with marriage that is entirely about love, and consider this as a healthy dose of good advice for public consumption.

Another story from Zhiyin also urges women to think critically about marriage, its expectations and what one can falsely learn about what marriage is about. This article describes a woman who has had her marital expectations blown out of proportion by the media (lavish, regular romance and a fun life, etc.) She finally marries and, surely, finds her unrealistic expectations unmet. Then, she falsely learns that the reality of marriage is that her responsibility is to maintain the household while her husband sets minimal amounts of time to spend with her and focuses on work instead (Song 64). In other words, she accepts a rather depressing and boring lifestyle without questioning ways to improve it. Song would agree with my conclusion, as she points out that this woman “has learned to treat her husband as the master of a family. In so doing, this story creates an ideal image of women, so as to educate women on how to experience the transition from girl to wife, and how to develop good understanding of supporting her husband” (Song 53). From these magazine articles and studies on women's double roles as caregivers and workers, we learn that the life of a woman in contemporary China is not ideal. Every woman is faced with some degree of scrutiny from society, coworkers and family members, and in combination with gender segregation, brutally work against the efforts of Chinese women to attain self-actualization and self-sufficiency.

The lives of urban and rural Chinese women, from the late Qing dynasty to the present day
People's Republic of China, have been challenged by a superfluity of conflicting interests on the part of the structure of society, namely patriarchy and partilineality, and sexual discrimination. Furth presented the origins of this discrimination and the basis for the rural family structure from Confucian teachings. From Furth we also learn that Confucianism was not inherently sexist, but was nevertheless indifferent to women and their hardship, as was shown by the fact that it largely omitted even mentioning the word woman in “The Analects”. Yeung related the end of the Qing Dynasty and the legal reform it attempted to enact upon the vastly rural population, despite the efforts of which has largely failed to actualize its goals for a new family structure and promoted status of women in society. Following the establishment of Communist China, Molyneux has shown that the Communist Party made attempts to further change the structure of families into the “new democratic family” structure, and also promised to promote the status and freedoms of women from oppressive families. However, we find that the Party was absorbed by self-interest of improving the economy and strengthening the military, and leaving out genuine concerns for the lives of Chinese women. Finally, we learn a bit about the present circumstances of Chinese women, and the challenge of work-family balance that is not unique to China. Overall, it is evident that the achievement of gender equality between the sexes is a highly controversial and difficult feat, for which much effort was sacrificed to improve conditions for women at home and in the workforce. In the present day, the lives of Chinese women have improved greatly with enhanced personal freedoms and more opportunities for self-sufficiency and education, yet Chinese society is still far from achieving absolute equality.


