MAO A FEMINIST?

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What is it that makes someone a feminist? Is it ones actions or ones intent that grants them the label of a progressive minded reformer? That is the question I pose to people whom dissect the life of Mao Zedong. Mao did remarkable things for women in the 20th century but is heavily scrutinized because his motives were in question. He promoted progressive legislation that enabled women to divorce, work outside the home and have autonomy over her body; however, Mao may not have ever had the political and social rights of women at heart when he made reforms. Mao found that it was politically beneficial to accommodate the needs of female citizens because women made up a massive group of supporters that had previously never been utilized. Appearing to cater to the needs of women allowed Mao to cultivate a cult like following of supporters to promote his own agendas. Along with men, these women were later used in movements like the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. Mao may have granted women the right to work, but they were usually given jobs doing hard labor in factories or on farms. Some people argue that the work promoted equality because the work enabled women to be self sufficient while others denounced the practice claiming that it destroyed femininity. Some critics claim that a true feminist has to have the betterment of women at the forefront of their ideals while others just want a small step toward progress regardless of one’s motives. Maoist ideology supported feminism in China which helped women make strides towards overthrowing patriarchy; however Mao’s motives were bolstered by his own self interests. With all of the information taken into consideration, can one consider Mao a feminist?

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Mao Zedong is one of the most controversial figures in history. He has been labeled a Leninist, Marxist, and communist, but rarely a feminist. Feminist is a title that few people grant Mao, however, he did more for women in China than any other figure in the 21st century. His intentions were not always right, and his heart was not always pure, but he helped women in China make strides to help them overcome over 2,000 years of patriarchy. Chinese society controlled women

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with a number of different methods ranging from mental control with Confucianism or physical control with foot-binding. Foot-binding was inadvertently supported and justified by Confucian doctrines to keep women in servitude. It was not until Mao Zedong and the communist army won the civil war in China that foot-binding was outlawed and women gradually received more rights in society. Mao’s socialist ideology prospered in China which contributed to building up women’s status in society and enhanced their social power. Maoist ideology supported feminism in China which helped women make strides towards equality and overturn parts of the patriarchal structure that previously existed.

Before Mao came to power in 1949, China was an extremely patriarchal country where women had very few rights. Foot-binding was a practice that kept women in subservient roles for much of Chinese history and was a popular practice until 1949. It was so popular, that around forty to fifty percent of the Chinese female population had their feet bound and almost one-hundred percent of nobility. Sex guides were even published that showed over fifty positions that used the feet for male pleasure. It was harsh enough that women were subjected to the brutal agony of the practice, but they had to use their bodies as sexual instruments to please their male partners. Further, women were confined to the house where they cooked cleaned and served as a house keeper for their husbands. Women were unable to change their circumstances because they did not have the right to separate of divorce from their husbands. Those things changed when Mao Zedong came to power. When Mao took over in 1949, he preached equality of all men and women which led to more choices and rights for women.

Mao’s ideological basis came from Marxism and a soviet style communism. Mao transformed the Soviet ideas to meet the needs of China and form his own ideology called Maoism. Maoism called for universal suffrage of men and women along with equality of all basic human rights. During the 1920’s in China, this was a radical idea because the bulk of the male population did not even have basic rights. Mao knew if he wanted to achieve power successfully in China, he needed the support of the men and women. To get women on his side Mao made massive reforms to get women freedom from their oppression.

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3 [NPR 2007].
Mao’s feminist ideology called for massive reforms for women that changed Chinese society. In the 1930’s, he and the other communist officials put out an agenda that gave women the right to divorce their husbands. When couples divorced, women were also entitled to land, money and assets. That enabled women to leave unhappy marriages. Mao called marriage under feudal domination, “A barbaric and inhumane practice”\(^6\). Mao recognized that marriage is far more oppressive for women than men and that is why he wanted every marriage to be based on free choice\(^7\). Further, women who were pregnant were given maternity leave with pay\(^8\). The most surprising of the changes was Mao supported female participation in local government which was a very progressive idea. According to Maoist thought, women were equal to men in all aspects of life and it was Mao who said, “Women hold up the other half of heaven”\(^9\).

Mao advocated women getting involved in women’s organizations and associations for a support network to combat the social injustices. Many women joined small groups in rural areas to talk about their ideas and concerns\(^10\). These groups enabled women to fight the injustices as a group instead of relying on themselves. Mao helped women get organized, but he also solidified his power base among peasant women.

Mao thought that people in China were dominated by the authority of the previous feudal government. He stated that men suffered from domination from political authority, family authority and religious authority\(^11\). Further, he believed that women were victim to the same types of authority, with the addition of the domination from husbands\(^12\). He blamed all of these of the feudal patriarchy system that he claimed existed in China. He thought that with the abolishment of the family structure, the other types of domination would fall with them\(^13\). Mao felt that men’s power was already weakened from the economic struggles China had endured which led to women playing a bigger role in the work environment. Unfortunately for women in China, men were not happy to see their patriarchal power diminish.

\(^{6}\) (Mao 1931)  
\(^{7}\) (Mao 1931)  
\(^{8}\) (Lieberthal 1991), 146.  
\(^{10}\) (Mao 1927), 45.  
\(^{11}\) (Mao 1927) 46.  
\(^{12}\) (Mao 1927) 46.  
\(^{13}\) (Mao 1927) 46.
Abolishing of the old feudal power structure was harder than Mao had anticipated. Husbands, fathers and sons did not support Mao and his changes. Husbands protested divorce because many of them had paid large sums of money on their wives\textsuperscript{14}. They thought it was unjust that their “commodity” could leave them and take a piece of their land with them. Fathers were upset in the same regard. Many of them had spent fifteen years feeding, grooming and housing a daughter that they planned to sell\textsuperscript{15}. Surely daughters would not fetch as good of a price if she could divorce the husband at any moment. Men preached that the changes challenged their values and way of life. The patriarchal way of life was legitimized by the Confucian code of conduct. Mao had to abolish the 2,000 year old Confucian doctrine that had been followed by most of Chinese to succeed in the transformation.

Mao abolished Confucianism because it was used to justify patriarchy in China. Confucian ideals stressed Xiao (filiality) above anything else. Xiao is honoring the family above all other parts of society in life and in death\textsuperscript{16}. Chinese people believed that if one could not achieve harmony in their home relationships, they would be unable to achieve harmony in relationships later in life\textsuperscript{17}. Parents were to be respected and their word was supposed to be followed above anything else. Initially, that seems like a good quality, but when parents oppressed their daughters into body mutilation like foot-binding so they could sell her at a higher cost, there were problems. In the same regard if women wanted to get jobs outside the home, they were viewed as disruptive to the harmony of the family. The daughters never challenged the idea because the Confucian doctrine said, “The only grief one should bring upon a parent is illness.” Since illness cannot be controlled, it is the only thing that one should bother their parents with. Any issues that can be controlled should be followed with the utmost respect for parents.

The Confucian virtue Yi (righteousness) was another key for families to exploit women. The virtue of Yi stated that one must do what is morally right in society. A morally right person would not go against the greater good of society. According to Confucius, a morally right person would rather give up their life than go against what is right\textsuperscript{18}. Doing what is right can be perceived many different ways. Since Xiao taught to never go against the wishes of one’s parents, children must do

\textsuperscript{14} (Lieberthal 1991), 148.
\textsuperscript{15} (NPR 2007)
\textsuperscript{17} (Confucius 1989), 92.
\textsuperscript{18} (Confucius 1989), 97.
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what their parents consider to be right. Young women had to groom their bodies towards a life of male pleasure and servitude. Mothers also had to obey the man of the house because he was considered the ruler of his family. This practice grossly objectified women, but Mao also saw it as a threat to his own power. He saw Confucianism as a threat to his own power because he did not want people revering their parents and what they considered to be right over his own rules of law.

Li (propriety) was the last of the key Confucian virtues that hindered women’s progress. Confucius believed that life was to be lived like a ceremony, with each piece moving in a ritualistic way. Anything that stepped outside of the social role was a disruption to the ritual. People were trained under Li to stay in their role in society and not cause discontent. When an individual stepped outside of their social role and breaks social norms, society becomes unharmonious. It was ideas like Li that confounded women to stay in their role. Chinese women had a role of complete servitude. They prepared meals, cared for children, trained daughters and cared for their husbands. Confucianism had confounded them to their social role because it was inserted into the patriarchal society. Mao did not want women confounded to these social roles. He wanted women in the fields and factories working and producing goods.

Confucianism by itself is harmless and probably a good set of principles to live one’s life by, but when it was inserted into a patriarchal society like the one in China, it became very dangerous. Problems emerged when women were told if they stepped outside of their gender role they were causing disharmony in society. Women were forced to stay in the household and care for the family. When women were married they were literally viewed as a slave to the in-laws. The new family often dumped laundry, cooking, and cleaning on the new bride. She had no choice but to comply because it was her role. Things got even worse for the female bride if she could not produce a male heir. Families needed a son because they were responsible to take care of the parents when they became elderly. If a wife was unable or refused to fulfill all of her obligations, she was outcaste from society. Before Mao came to power, women had no choice but to live in their oppressive family structures.

Mao wanted to abolish the family structure because it was the key to oppression in Chinese society. Mao believed that if China could abolish the family

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19 (NPR 2007)
20 (Confucius 1989) 131.
21 (Confucius 1989) 131.
authority, all the other constraints on women would destabilize. The family structure was viewed as the keystone for oppression because it was the foundation for all other types of oppression. He was never fully able to get rid of the family institution, but he did restructure the family to get rid of many of the oppressive tasks. Communal kitchens were established to cook for the villages. Women were no longer given the task of preparing meals for the family; instead they were cooked in a communal kitchen. Nurseries were set up for women so they were not confounded to the home for child care. Women were given jobs which gave them some economic independence from the men. Farms were also collectivized which took power away from the men to delegate jobs. Delegating tasks was given to an administrator which alleviated men from dominating the work space.

Mao made work an achievable goal for women. In the mid 1950’s, seventy percent of women that were of age to work had some type of employment. Women were put to work doing the same tasks as men. Women farmed, dug ditches and melted iron for steel production. This alleviated some of the patriarchy of the marriage because women had jobs to provide their own income. Mao said that women deserved equal pay for equal work. Equality in the workplace was a basic ideal that drastically improved women’s standing in society. Life in China was still hard, even with all of the improvements.

Unfortunately for many women in China, working the fields was even harder because of their bound feet. Foot-binding was made illegal by Mao when he came to power in 1949, but the remnants still remained. Aforementioned, almost all noble women had bound feet. When the communists took over, the aristocratic families were stripped of possessions and put to work in the fields. They were ordered to do the same tasks as workers with normal feet. One would think that the hard labor would have put an end to foot-binding in China. Foot-binding still continued in the rural areas, even when women were forced into hard labor.

The most significant part of foot-binding was the control it gave the men over their wives. Women with bound feet could not be promiscuous because they

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22 (Mao 1931).
23 (Lieberthal 1991), 147.
24 (Lieberthal 1991), 147.
26 (Lieberthal 1991), 151.
28 (NPR 2007).
could not travel long distances alone. The inability to travel prevented a wife from cheating on her husband while he was away at work. Bound feet could also be used to threaten wives that misbehaved. Wives that misbehaved would get their feet stomped on while others would be pushed to the ground. The women were truly at the mercy of their husbands in these relationships. Most of all, bound feet were a sign of social prestige. A woman with bound feet was wealthy enough not to work. Her husband liked it because it showed he was wealthy enough to provide for his wife and he was her only source of income. That seeded the roots of patriarchy even further.

Mao tried to end foot-binding a number of different ways, but it was so ingrained into society that it was very difficult. Chinese society viewed the “lily foot” as the epitome of beauty and therefore, every man wanted a partner with bound feet. If women went against their parents’ wishes and followed the law and thereby chose not to bind their feet, they ran the risk of never getting married. That only made them bigger targets in society for chastising. People made jokes about women with unbound feet. The most common joke was that women with unbound feet arrive at her destination ten minutes after their toes. Eventually the practice of foot-binding died out and women got over the social stigma of big feet being unattractive.

Even with Mao’s radical and pragmatic agenda for feminism, he still came under scrutiny from feminists. His critics argued that he willingly lightened his powerful agenda when the male peasant farmers became outraged over social changes. Mao’s agenda challenged the patriarchal structure that had been in place, but he had to water down some of the proposals to pacify the men which were needed for the civil war with Chiang Kai-Shek. The male peasants were the bulk of his recruits and he needed them to win the war for China. If Mao would have lost the war, women would have continued to live in the same oppressive social roles they were in before the war. Women may not have made all the gains that feminists would have liked under Mao, but the outcome was much more favorable than if Chiang Kai-Shek would have won the war.

Mao took constant scrutiny from liberal feminists because he put the party agenda before feminism. Liberal feminists like Cheries Kramarae claimed that Mao’s agendas and programs for women’s rights, correlated closely with things he tried to get accomplished in the party. Liberal feminists say that women gave

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29 (NPR 2007).
31 (Kramarae 2000), 738.
up the patriarch of men, but fell into the patriarchy of the state. They also claim that Maoism stripped women of their female qualities and masculinized them. Further claims are made that the restructuring of the family by using communal eateries and nurseries was an excuse to utilize more workers for state and did not have women’s interests at the top of his agenda.

Mao is also criticized for not enforcing many of his laws with the tenacity that feminists would have liked. For example, Mao made foot-binding illegal, but it still continued for many years after 1949. Aforementioned, society would not let go of the custom. Mao argued that foot-binding led to women’s economic dependence on men, but his ideas often went unheard. Feminists argued that he should have had harder repercussions for violators of the anti-foot-binding laws. However, it would be unjust to judge him for society’s inability to let go of a custom. Others say that the only reason he wanted to get rid of Confucianism was because it challenged his authority. Confucianism challenged the authority of leaders because it said that a person should honor their parents even above the government.

My rebuttal to liberal feminists would be that the outcome was still positive for women even though the intentions were not at the forefront. Would it have been better if freeing women from gender roles was his first priority but he failed and women still had bound feet and were jobless? In this case I think the outcome for the greater good of women was more favorable than the intentions of one man. With that said, I do not expect feminists to rally behind a figure that did not truly have their interests at heart. All I would ask is that they be more empathetic when judging the actions of a leader especially one in a fragile position such as Mao’s.

When Mao claimed leadership in China, he had many concerns about keeping leadership of China, and that caused him to loosen some of his policies towards getting women all the rights he had hoped for. Mao hoped to get all the women in China the rights they hoped for through the general revolution. When the general revolution failed to give women the rights that many of them were hoping for, Mao then had to issue new bills and programs to get them the rights that they hoped for. That was extremely difficult during that time because of turmoil that was still in the country. Mao was busy trying to expel the rest of Chiang Kai-Shek’s troops along with getting a firm political hold on the country.

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32 (Kramarae 2000), 739.
33 (Kramarae 2000), 742.
The last thing he wanted to do was give up what him and the other communist party members worked so hard to achieve.

Maoist ideology supported feminism in China and helped women make strides towards equality and helped overturn parts of the patriarchal structure that existed. Mao may not have always had women’s rights at the forefront of his goals, but they still progressed. Chinese society became a fairer place for women while Mao was in power. His ideas were sometimes watered down when they were put into practice, but progress was still made. Progress came in the form of equal pay laws, divorce rights, freedom of choice in marriage and an overall feeling that women were equal to men. Mao abolished a system that validated the body mutilation such as foot-binding which contributed to the greater good of society. In conclusion, if one were to ask me if Mao was a feminist, I would just point to the evidence of what he has done for women in China, and challenge them to find another figure with equal credentials.

Bibliography
Mao Zedong (December 26, 1893 – September 9, 1976), also known as Mao Tse-tung, was the leader of the Chinese Communists and a ruthless atheist dictator after he came to power in 1949. While not the founder, he was an early member of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. In 1935, Mao was elected to the Executive Committee of the Comintern in Moscow and remained on this committee until it was publicly disbanded in 1943. Mao is regarded as perhaps the most prolific mass murderer in human history, not