

How far did life  
improve for women  
landlords  
businessmen and  
peasants between  
194....



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Over China's long history, through countless dynasties, the Chinese have endured immense hardship. Even by the twentieth century there was widespread suffering, and after many years of conflict culminating in a bitter power struggle and Civil War, the Communist Red Army finally emerged as victor and on the 1st October 1949, Mao Zedong announced the creation of the People's Republic of China. But this revolution was far more than a new flag and leader - Mao had massive ambitions for his new country.

Before the revolution, the long-suffering people of China's 10 million square kilometres had undergone a hard life. The vast majority of people were barely managing to survive and women were abused, children starving and peasants had no land of their own. An "eleven year old" girl was put "in chains. .

.. She had been tortured and her face was swollen" 1 by the Japanese.

Meanwhile, a few despotic landlords and businessmen abused their power and exploited the hard-working peasants whilst steadily increasing their wealth.

However, Mao had a difficult task to achieve in order to improve China and recover years lost warring. The very nature of its vastness provides a communication problem in itself, and daily life and opinion varied greatly from province to province. A faltering economy, a quarter of the world's population to feed and disrupted infrastructure were all major obstacles but the Communists succeeded in introducing considerable changes over the years. Women arguably benefited most from Mao's new China. For years they had suffered at the hands of men and had been treated as possessions.

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There was an old proverb saying, " A good woman should follow her husband, no matter what his lot in life.

Even if he is a chicken or a dog." 2 Prostitution was rife, and men had multiple wives while arranged marriages were common. There was competition between concubines, and a woman's quality of life mainly depended on the social status of her husband. Female babies were often killed as male children were considered more valuable, and archaic and atrocious practices such painful foot binding was ingrained and deemed normal for all girls. Mao implied his desire to abolish these antiquated principles in the Common Programme stating that, " women should enjoy equal rights with men.

.." 3 justifying this with " women hold up half the sky" 4. Then came the Marriage Law passed in April 1950.

This brought about many changes welcomed by women, ending years of prejudice and made the sale of females illegal. Other traditions such as childhood marriages were outlawed and women were liberated from years of degradation. Mothers were granted maternity benefit and moreover, infanticide and foot binding were banned. Women no longer suffered violence at the hand of aggressive fathers, working women got non-discriminatory pay, property was jointly owned between husband and wife, divorce by mutual consent was introduced and women's workloads were reduced by Mao's nurseries. All these measures gave women greater freedom, control and independence. However, it was one thing announcing changes in the law and quite another implementing and enforcing them.  
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Traditional, firmly-established rituals meant some women still suffered especially in remote mountain villages where these barbaric customs had been carried out for years. Even now, Mao's ruling hasn't come completely into effect in some remote areas. Deep-rooted opinions persisted and women were still considered lesser (in private at least) by men. Chauvinism was unavoidable and, in her autobiographic book *To The Edge Of The Sky*, Anhua Gao relates how her first husband beat her “.

.. unmercifully for up to half an hour at a time...” Also, many ill-treated wives didn't gain much from the new divorce laws - to ask for a separation meant to lose face, hard-earned respect and possibly your children.

Overall though, there's no doubting Mao's new rulings were much welcomed by women (and men) all across China. Finally an end to the mistreatment they'd tolerated for centuries was near. Landlords and businessmen may well have been wary when they discovered the Communists had ousted Chiang Kaishek and his corrupt government from mainland China. Socialism threatened their way of life and they would have been suspicious that their control would be seized.

Previously, their standard of life would've depended on whether they lived under the control of the KMT or in Communist “ liberation” areas. Average landlords and businessmen would have been content with life in Kuomintang-controlled areas and would have many amenities at their disposal as well as a powerful and privileged standing. Conversely, those living in liberation areas would have already started to feel the impression of

Communist rule as they were perhaps persecuted or sometimes denied civil  
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liberties and landlords would have land confiscated. In Mao's Common Programme of 1949, he explained the need for land redistribution and decreed that "feudal landlords [and] capitalists.

.. shall be deprived of their political rights" 5. This singling out understandably disturbed many of the higher classes, and those who had supported the Kuomintang government fled with Chiang Kaishek to Taiwan. However, the Communists were keen not to lose all skilled and experienced non-working-class people by alienating them or driving them out, and Mao wanted to use their talents and expertise. 'Small' capitalists were allowed five percent interest on investments until the mid-'60s and minor businesses were allowed to continue under private ownership until 1956.

Mao even said, "...there should be no encroachment upon industrial and commercial enterprises..

.."

7 in a speech in 1948. Many larger businessmen merged with state-owned enterprises and many came under the control of the state. Also, taxes were steadily increased on businesses to pressurise owners into joining with the government. The Communists took over major banks and railways as well as heavy industry.

In fact, by 1953, eighty six percent of commerce was under government control<sup>8</sup>. Under the Agrarian Reform Law, landlords were put on trial for being tyrannical and cruelly enforcing high rents or mistreating tenants. Though some landlords were let off, many were imprisoned or killed. Then,

land was redistributed to reflect the number of people better - before land reallocation, just 2.

6% of the people (the landlords) owned almost 30% of China's land. After land-seizure, this figure was reduced to a far fairer fraction; landlords then possessed 2.1% of crop area<sup>9</sup>. Although 'rightists' or 'capitalist roaders' like businessmen and landlords generally lost out under Communist rule, they were usually allowed to live on as lower members of society after confessions. The "speak bitterness" meetings (in which peasants accused oppressive landlords and often forced confessions out of them) humiliated and degraded landlords already bewildered by the new régime. Disgraced former-land owners became lower than peasants performing low-pay, menial tasks and having few rights.

Undoubtedly, those previously better off in society ended up far worse after the Communist takeover, especially those who abused their position of high social status and power. The most important group of people in Mao Zedong's revolution was undoubtedly the peasants - the all-conquering proletariat. The ever-faithful masses had been instrumental throughout the revolution providing shelter and intelligence to the Red Army. Mao recognised their importance and in turn, the refreshing air of the honest Communists meant that over 100 million Chinese were loyal to them before revolution in 1945.

As the peasant population was so vital for Mao's vision of China, it's important to see how he changed their lives and how they benefited from a

Communist revolution. Before the revolution, taxes were high and food  
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sparse - though, the lucky peasants living in liberation areas benefited from tools, land, food money, freedom and interest-free loans from the Communists. Firstly, peasants (especially those classified as 'poor') obviously benefited from the land redistribution plan detailed above. Also, the aforementioned "speak bitterness" meetings gave the people a feeling of revenge and freed them from the all-powerful rule of landlords.

However, despite receiving about 47 million hectares of land, a fundamental lack of tools and equipment meant many peasants couldn't cultivate their new land. This set-back spawned the idea of mutual aid teams - roughly ten families pooling their labour and equipment for a common aim. About forty percent of peasants had joined in schemes like this by 1952 and it spurred the greatest food production increase of the decade<sup>10</sup>. Peasants had to sell a small share of their harvest to the government at a fixed price but by late 1952, the scale of operations was stepped up.

Lower-stage co-operatives started forming, involving thirty to fifty families (about one village). Peasants joined together and shared but although each peasant still legally owned his land, a low rent had to be paid to the co-operative as a whole. Continuing to follow Stalin's lead, collectivisation continued when the sheer number of co-operatives got too great and efficiency was increased further with the predictable higher-stage co-operatives or collectives. These comprised 200-300 households but most of the land had to be given to a managing committee - peasants were only allowed a small private plot. While the new collectives still boosted production, increased effectiveness and management during Mao's Five-Year

plan, merely five years after they'd received land, the majority of Chinese peasants found they were near landless again<sup>11</sup>.

Although the rate of change was slowing after the frenzy of activity following 1949, Mao still had time to implement another significant change to people's lives in 1958. After the remarkable success of the Five-Year Plan, Mao decided to embark on a more ambitious project - his Great Leap Forward. At the core of this project was the organisation of China, splitting the rural areas into self-sufficient 'communes'. These units comprised about 25,000 peasants each and ran every aspect of life from schools and nurseries to hospitals and even its own armed forces. Communes were unpopular amongst some people as private plots were banned in a few communes and they were forced to eat in communal kitchens. People living in communes were paid according to the work points earned but they had to contribute a certain amount to various commune funds.

Despite some negativity, by the end of 1958, 90% of people had been placed in one of 26,578 People's Communes<sup>12</sup>. A key aspect of the Great Leap Forward was a new industrial slant - workers were encouraged to exercise "walking on two legs"<sup>13</sup> - communes worked hard to try and vastly increase production. Still high on the Five-Year Plan figures, peasants all over China set about Mao's new projects with ardent zeal. Hundreds of schemes were undertaken by the armies of 'Blue Ant' workers who, together, achieved impressive engineering feats with little or no equipment - just focussed manpower. Commodities such as steel (purified in hundreds of thousands of small 'back-yard' furnaces across the country), cement and fertilisers were



produced by hard-working peasants and, organised Beijingers built a 209-foot high dam in six months using just their bare hands.

With such a gargantuan workforce, Mao proclaimed to the proles it was “possible to accomplish anything” as “people are more important than weapons” 14. However, despite the high ambitions for The Great Leap Forward, overall it has to be remembered as a failure. The emphasis was on quantity over quality and the vast majority of ‘backyard steel’ produced was too impure for industrial use even though steel production had increased almost ten times in the seven years from 1952. The strains imposed by the intensive labour combined with other factors brought about three years of famine from 1959. On the whole, it has to be said that a Communist revolution benefited peasants. They are the foundation of Communist beliefs and despite disappointment and tragedy, it has to be said the average peasant was far better off under Mao’s rule.

Before, the future had been very uncertain but it looked like lower classes would forever have to carry out the landlords’ every whim – oppressed with no chance to make opportunities for themselves or their children. The least the Communists gave them was equality, respect, semi-freedom and private plots of land. In addition to the influences outlined above, there are many changes implemented in China since 1949 that have had a great effect on the lives of millions of Chinese. Mao stepped up basic education a lot during the first years of Communist rule, and from a country where the bulk of people were illiterate, by the mid-1960s over ninety percent of the population had an understanding of reading and writing<sup>15</sup>. However, Mao

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resented higher education and also all schools were closed for two years affecting a whole generation's education.

Working conditions were also improved which made life better for every working man and women as well as the increased awareness of personal hygiene and medicine which reduced disease in China. Mao was idolised by millions of Chinese and to object or even question him meant certain punishment due to seemingly omnipresent informers. In fact, much of the people's obedience was due to pure fear. One advantage Mao had was the high-morale, enthusiasm and trust of the working people.

He had absolute control, and, after expressing a dislike for "destructive" sparrows in the '50s, everyone rallied together effectively causing the sparrow's extinction in China and disastrously resulting in massive crop destruction by now-unchecked pests. The inescapable propaganda machine raised the hopes of every patriotic Chinese and a collection of Mao's thoughts was distributed to nearly everyone in China in the form of a 'Little Red Book'. Everywhere you went, 'big character' posters would scream political messages at you as well as theatre mirroring Mao's sentiments. Still, the people were encouraged with messages like "the east wind is prevailing over the west" 16 and "Work for China", promises that "One day of socialism can equal twenty years of capitalism" 17 and constant stories about the increasing failures of America and Britain.

Peasants were often reminded of the appalling conditions before their liberation with foul tasting 'bitterness meals'. After all, Lenin said "to forget the past means betrayal" 18. Children were indoctrinated into accepted

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beliefs singing “ Socialism is good” and similar slogans every day in school<sup>19</sup>, and betrayal was common with children informing on their parents. Many people were persecuted after Mao’s “ 100 Flowers” campaign especially intellectuals and those treated badly during the Communist takeover after expressing too critical views for Mao’s liking. Earlier on, the Three Antis (and later Five Antis) campaign caused the killing of hundreds of thousands of people accused of corruption, waste and bureaucracy.

Looking back, it’s easy to point out the many mistakes made, but there’s no denying some feats achieved by the Communists were remarkable. A revolution is “ an instance of great change in affairs” <sup>20</sup> and Mao certainly brought about a “ great change”. However, the question is, how did these changes affect people’s lives? The peasants were influenced a lot by Mao’s brand of Communism. Weighing up the ups and downs since 1949 I’d say life improved for the vast majority of peasants and guessing upon the outcome of Chiang Kaishek’s continued leadership, they would be much better off in Communist China. Personally, I’d say that women benefited as a general group the most. The Marriage Law and similar rulings significantly changes their lives for the better and there was little brought about by the Communists that made life any worse for them.

It was definitely an improvement on living under the Kuomintang and peasant women would gain doubly. The obvious losers in this revolution were the landlords and businessmen. However, for many classified under this category, if you followed the wishes of Mao, it was relatively easy to escape any major punishment. You’d still be reduced to the class of a peasant, and

the businesses that were allowed to continue trading never made as much profit for their owners.

Although many landlords and businessmen and landlords lost out and were even killed, if you played your cards right, things wouldn't turn out too bad. Obviously though, you'd never again see the rose-tinted days of KMT rule...