Introduction

Women’s issues were a part of the Communist Party’s concerns from its early days. In his “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan,” Mao Zedong said that men in China were subject to three systems of domination: the state system, the clan system, and the supernatural system. Women, he said, were subject to all three of these systems of domination, and also dominated by men. Women’s rights were thus acknowledged as a part of what the Communist Party was struggling for from the beginning. In practice, however, women’s issues were routinely relegated to the back burner in a Communist Party dominated by men and focused on war with the Guomindang and the Japanese, and, after 1949, on economic development and factional struggle. Nonetheless, women’s status did change significantly during the first thirty years of the People’s Republic.

In the 1980s a new emphasis on market-driven economic growth and the growth of consumerism in China’s cities brought new developments for women in the family, the workplace, politics, and society in general. In the document below, Li Xiaojiang, professor of Chinese at Zhengzhou University and chair of the Women’s Studies Research Center, analyzes the situation in 1988.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)


Awakening of Women’s Consciousness (1988)
By Li Xiaojiang

The [Thirteenth Party] congress initiated improvements in economic efficiency in order to realize more quickly the transformation of our country from impoverishment, to relative comfort, to prosperity. It also attacked the bureaucracy of the political world, the dogmatism of the theoretical world, the egalitarianism of the economy, and the apathy of the individual. It proposed a realistic approach to reform and true economic competition. These goals, sought after but unrealized for many years, are well and good -- but they threaten women. In the spirit of realism, we are impelled to face squarely the issue of biology and childbirth for women in social production. In actual economic competition, the facts that the quality of women as workers is inclined to be low and that they have a dual role evidently make women and the enterprises that employ them less competitive.

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Second quarter [of 1988]. With the simultaneous implementation of enterprise self-management and discretionary hiring and contract systems, women’s social benefits, salary, employment, and promotions were all threatened, rendering women workers’ problems more acute.

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Fourth quarter [of 1988]. With the deepening of economic reform and widespread pursuit in industry of peak work capacity, the increased vigor of enterprises and the increasingly tense double burden for women came into direct conflict. The call for “equal work -- equal pay” causes women to face even more severe challenges in light of the actual work assignments and the disadvantaged position women encounter returning to work after childbirth. Under the circumstances, some women will inevitably decide to return home. But people will interpret this not as the will of society but as the conscious choice of women.

Questions:

1. How does Li Xiaojiang represent the relation between women’s rights and reform?
2. Are the problems that Li points to unique to China?
3. Are there ways in which the growth of markets and the commodity economy advance women’s rights?

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The “Report on Work” of the Thirteenth Party Congress clearly lays out the theory of the first stages of socialism: so-called reform, including reform of political structures, is intended first and foremost to advance the development of society’s productive forces. The congress initiated improvements in economic efficiency in order to realize more quickly the transformation of our country from impoverishment, to relative comfort, to prosperity. It also attacked the bureaucracy of the political world, the dogmatism of the theoretical world, the egalitarianism of the economy, and the apathy of the individual. It proposed a realistic approach to reform and true economic competition. These goals, sought after but unrealized for many years, are well and good -- but they threaten women. In the spirit of realism, we are impelled to face squarely the issue of biology and childbirth for women in social production. In actual economic
competition, the facts that the quality of women as workers is inclined to be low and that they have a dual role evidently make women and the enterprises that employ them less competitive.

Reform has also eliminated life tenure for cadres and the “iron rice bowl” of industry. At precisely the same time that the limited tenure policy and the contract system were being implemented, much of the protection and many of the benefits for women in industry began to disappear one by one. As a result, the problems of “same work -- different pay” and unequal promotion for men and women have arisen.

In 1988 a series of women’s issues became even more pronounced. Not only women, but the many men whose interests are intertwined with women’s and who are with women from morning to night, were affected, as well as all the families concerned about a daughter or a wife. Let us take a glimpse at the issues in the natural course of that one year.

First quarter. In the process of democratic elections for people’s congresses at every level and for the Seventh National People’s Congress, few female cadres were elected, highlighting the problem of women’s participation in government.

Second quarter. With the simultaneous implementation of enterprise self-management and discretionary hiring and contract systems, women’s social benefits, salary, employment, and promotions were all threatened, rendering women workers’ problems more acute.

Third quarter. In job assignments for college graduates and those who failed to pass the college entrance examinations, employment problems for women surfaced anew. This directly endangered young women intellectuals’ future prospects and development.

Fourth quarter. With the deepening of economic reform and the widespread pursuit in industry of peak work capacity, the increased vigor of enterprises and the increasingly tense double burden for women came into direct conflict. The call for “equal work -- equal pay” causes women to face even more severe challenges in light of the actual work assignments and the disadvantaged position women encounter returning to work after childbirth. Under the circumstances, some women will inevitably decide to return to the home. But people will interpret this not as the will of society but as the conscious choice of women.

The travesty is that these pressures women endured then and continue to endure are never seen as social problems; they are construed as merely individual problems. Criticizing society as unfair is to no avail. The balance of justice has never been the moving force in the progress of history. If one is only willing to face reality, then one must see that the emergence of women’s problems is actually a means for society to resolve many other social problems that emerged with reform (such as excess labor, labor productivity, and so on). Women have thus been the cornerstone in the development of society’s productive capacity. Historically it has been so; in reality it is so. No wonder authoritative sociological publications are unwilling to print much on women’s
issues, for to speak excessively of women’s liberation at this point would be to say that women’s problems are obstructing society’s reform and economic development. This means that Chinese women, who have worked hard all along to recognize their unity with society, cannot but acknowledge that women’s issues in the midst of economic reform have been abandoned by society. There are truly women’s problems, in that they have become sociologically insignificant.

What Exactly Are the Issues?
Discussions of women’s issues in the past were always about women enduring oppression, discrimination, and enslavement; these were the pernicious vestiges of feudalism and the product of capitalist exploitation. To put it bluntly, these were mostly the problems of working women and could be categorized as problems of class.

Today, however, just as issues of class in China and the world have receded, women’s issues have gradually become more pronounced. They are reflected not only in the problems of women workers and of all women at work but also in the lives of women of every class and in every facet of women’s lives. Especially in contemporary China, women’s problems come from every direction, creating among those who concern themselves with women’s issues a sense of crisis.

It is hard to deny, even for Chinese women accustomed to the catch phrase “Socialism liberates women,” that the crisis objectively exists. If we use the obvious “equality of men and women” standard to measure women’s actual plight, then Chinese women’s liberation seems to be taking the road of regression. In the face of this “reverse tide,” the long-parroted, never tested, never deeply researched theory of women’s liberation appears exhausted. It is this weakness of conventional theory that compels us to face the reality of Chinese society and the reality of Chinese women, to investigate conscientiously all these earth-shattering women’s issues.