

“WHAT WOMEN SHOULD KNOW ABOUT COMMUNISM”
By He Zhen

Introduction

The intellectual life of early twentieth century China was a rich mixture of Confucian scholarship (clearly a fading tradition), along with a variety of western ideas — social Darwinism, feminism, anarchism, anti-Manchu revolutionary thought and so on.

He Zhen was the wife of the anti-Manchu anarchist leader Liu Shipei (1884-1917). The essay below appeared in the journal *Natural Justice*, which He Zhen and Liu Shipei published while in exile in Japan.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Complete document follows this section)

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“What Women Should Know About Communism”
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... those of us who are women suffer untold bitterness and untold wrongs in order to get hold of this rice bowl. My fellow women: do not hate men! Hate that you do not have food to eat. Why don't you have any food? It is because you don't have any money to buy food. Why don't you have any money? It is because the rich have stolen our property. ...

There is now a kind of person who says that if women only had a profession, they would not fear starvation. Middle-class families, for example, are sending their daughters to school... Then if they get married they can become teachers. They won't need to rely on men in order to survive. Likewise, families that are very poor are sending their daughters and daughters-in-law to work in factories. ... However, as I see it, schools too are owned and operated by certain people, and if you teach in a school, then you are depending on those people in order to eat. Factories too are built by investors, and if you work in a factory, you are depending on its owners in order to eat.

...

I have a good idea that will exempt you from relying on others while still finding food naturally. How? By practicing communism. Think of all the things in the world. They were either produced by nature or by individual labor. Why can rich people buy them but poor people cannot? It is because the world trades with money. ... If every single woman

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understands that nothing is more evil than money, and they all unite together to cooperate with men to utterly overthrow the rich and powerful and then abolish money, then absolutely nothing will be allowed for individuals to own privately.

Questions:

1. He Zhen argues that women suffer bitterness because they are forced to rely on men for their livelihood (symbolized by the rice-bowl). What solution to women's problems does she suggest, and why?
2. He Zhen does not talk about men's social status in these excerpts. If she were to talk about men and their status in society, what points might she make?
3. He Zhen rejects the idea that women can solve their problem by entering the workforce on their own. Why? What arguments might you make against her?

Complete Document

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What is the most important thing in the world? Eating is the most important. You who are women: what is it that makes one suffer mistreatment? It is relying on others in order to eat. Let us look at the most pitiable of women. There are three sorts. There are those who end up as servants. If their master wants to hit them, he hits them. If he wants to curse them, he curses them. They do not dare to offer the slightest resistance, but slave for him from morning to night. They get up at four o'clock and do not go to bed until midnight. What is the reason for this? It is simply that the master has money and you depend on him in order to eat.

There are also women workers. Everywhere in Shanghai there are silk factories, cotton mills, weaving factories, and laundries. I don't know how many women have been hired by these places. They too work all day into the evening, and they too lack even a moment for themselves. They work blindly, unable to stand straight. What is the reason for this? It is simply that the factory owner has money and you depend on him in order to eat.

There are also prostitutes. Every day they are beaten by their pimps. Whatever the customer is like, they must service him if he wants to be serviced, or they must gamble with him if he wants to gamble. People despise them. The “wild chickens” of Shanghai have to stand in the streets waiting for customers at midnight in the wind and snow. What is the reason for this? It is simply that since your family is poor you must sell yourself in this way in order to eat.

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Aside from these three kinds of people, there are also concubines. They must swallow their resentment no matter how the first wife mistreats them. This too is because they depend on men in order to eat. As for widows, a very few who are from rich families will die to protect their virtue. Very many who are from poor families will die because they have no children [to support them] and cannot remarry. This too is because they have nothing to eat. But even if they survive, their lives are still bitter and so they actively seek to die. As for women who farm the fields or raise silkworms, their lives are also very bitter. The things they have to do are just enough to let them scrape by. Moreover, women who marry are beaten and cursed by their husbands or else ignored, and they dare not make trouble. [This is] not because they want to gaze upon their husband’s face but because they want to gaze upon a bowl of rice.

Thus those of us who are women suffer untold bitterness and untold wrongs in order to get hold of this rice bowl. My fellow women: do not hate men! Hate that you do not have food to eat. Why don’t you have any food? It is because you don’t have any money to buy food. Why don’t you have any money? It is because the rich have stolen our property. They have forced the majority of people into poverty and starvation. Look at the wives and daughters in the government offices and mansions. They live extravagantly with no worries about having enough to eat. Why are you worried every day about starving to death? The poor are people just as the rich are. Think about it for yourselves; this ought to produce some disquieting feelings.

There is now a kind of person who says that if women only had a profession, they would not fear starvation. Middle-class families, for example, are sending their daughters to school, either to study a general course or to learn a little of handicrafts. Then if they get married they can become teachers. They won’t need to rely on men in order to survive. Likewise, families that are very poor are sending their daughters and daughters-in-law to work in factories. As long as they stay there day after day, they will have a way of making a living. They won’t have to become maids or prostitutes. This point of view has some truth in it. However, as I see it, schools too are owned and operated by certain people, and if you teach in a school, then you are depending on those people in order to eat. Factories too are built by investors, and if you work in a factory, you are depending on its owners in order to eat.

As long as you depend on others, you cannot be free. This is not much different from those who depended on others in previous ages and thus were subject to oppression. How could they be called independent? Moreover, when you depend on a school or a factory for your living, won’t you end up jobless if they close down or if your boss decides he has too many workers or if no one wants your skills? Therefore, in the final analysis depending on others is dangerous and not at all a good idea. ...

I have a good idea that will exempt you from relying on others while still finding food naturally. How? By practicing communism. Think of all the things in the world. They were either produced by nature or by individual labor. Why can rich people buy them but poor people cannot? It is because the world trades with money. It is because people seize the things they have bought with money for their exclusive use. If every single woman understands that nothing is more evil than money, and they all unite together to cooperate with men to utterly

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overthrow the rich and powerful and then abolish money, then absolutely nothing will be allowed for individuals to own privately. Everything from food to clothes and tools will be put in a place where people — men and women alike, as long as they perform a little labor — can take however much of whatever they want just like taking water from the ocean. This is called communism. At this time, not only will we be free of depending on others for food to eat, but also the food will all be good to eat. It will be possible to have good things to wear, good things to use, and good things to play with. Think about it: will this be a better future or not? I am not lying to you. If we only unite together, with this method [communism] we can naturally have a good future. There is no doubt about it. As we say colloquially, “the good times are coming.” This is what I have to say today.