

‘How Can Socialism Ensure the Full Liberation of Women?’

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I’m really excited to be able to attend this meeting, and especially to be able to come to the top of the world, Nepal, to discuss problems facing women all over the world.

First a little about myself. I’m an American citizen. I’m 75 years old. I spent the first 27 years of my life in the U.S. where, as a young nuclear physicist, I did my part in the creation of the atom bomb. I spent the next 48 years working in agriculture as a participant in the Chinese revolution.

My topic here is “How can socialism ensure the full liberation of women?” I feel so strongly about the positive experience of socialism as practiced over 30 years in China, that I’m particularly happy to have this opportunity to speak. Today with the collapse of the whole socialist camp, which comprised 1/3 of all humankind, there is a great disillusionment with socialism. People everywhere are confused. They are looking for another way out.

Was it the economic system of socialism that failed? I say no. Definitely not. Socialism — the elimination of labor as a commodity, that is the elimination of buying and selling labor power for the purpose of profit, combined with a planned economy — is the only way out. There is no other way that can solve the problems of the people of the world including the problems faced by women everywhere.

What benefits did 30 years of socialism under Mao bring to the people, specially the women of China? By 1980 this vast country, formerly known as “sick man of Asia” had no internal debt, no external debt. It had 30 years of stable prices and had built up an all-encompassing system of social benefits for those employed in the state sector — which meant virtually the whole urban population of some 200 million people. These benefits included not only employment, but housing, education, medical care, maternity care, pensions, etc. In an “enveloping community setting, there was essentially no unemployment, begging or homelessness, virtually no crime, no shanty town slums, no prostitution, and even among the very poor, no underclass of social outcasts in desperate degrading poverty.” Thus

employment in a Chinese work unit under Mao “allowed even at a very low level of the Chinese economy, conditions of society completely unfamiliar in the vastly more wealthy United States!”

(Quotes from Robert Weil’s excellent article: MR ’94 Dec. p.27)

Of course, there were still some married women who were themselves not part of a work unit. But more and more women were drawn into the work units as the need of socialist construction expanded. By 1980, those urban women still not in work units as such, all organized themselves into street committees running the affairs of their local communities. They also formed an incredible number of production cooperatives recycling factory waste products, sewing, running canteens, etc. So that in fact, “with the children all in school, everyone — men, women and children — belonged to one type of unit or another.

For the rural population, before the “reforms” began, security was provided by the village collectives, the building blocks of the people’s communes. After deducting costs of production, as well as funds planned for expanded production and welfare, the yearly village income was divided out to each individual member according to work points earned.

Land reform had been the first great leap forward for rural woman in China. Under the article 6 of the 1947 Land Reform Law “...all land of landlords and all public land ... and all other village land, in accordance with the total population of the village, irrespective of male or female, young or old, shall be unifiedly and equally distributed; ... and it shall be the individual property of each person.” Under this law, women for the first time owned their own land. After the new marriage law of 1949, which introduced freedom of choice in marriage and divorce, the work point system introduced with the formation of agricultural collectives, was the next tremendous leap forward in the process of woman’s emancipation. Since by the new commune rules income from work points must be paid to the individual who earned them and not to the “head of the family”, women suddenly stood equal with men as earners of family income rather than non-paid virtual household slaves.

With income counted in work points, women for the first time pressed to join work in the fields. Was this an asset or a liability? Many men were worried. If women joined work in the fields and got work points too, wouldn’t that just decrease the value of work point? Peasant leader Chen Yon Kuei, in the far off, barren mountain village of Dazhai, Shaanxi Province, saw things differently. With so much to be done, how could there be too much labor power? Mobilizing the strength of the collective — old and young, men and women — he led the whole village into battle. During the slack farm season, gullies became fields, little fields became bigger fields, and terracing brought crops to steep mountain slopes. Year after year income of the coop steadily increased. We once made a simple calculation. If all

of China's peasants had followed Dazhai's example in transforming their crop land, China would not only have enough grain for her own needs but would have enough excess grain to feed 500 million people, more than the whole of Africa at that time. Clearly the world food problem is not due to over population but to capitalism's waste of human resources. Do we need family planning? Yes, I think we do, but not to solve the problem of food. We need family planning to liberate women, to give better care to children and to conserve the environment. A planned economy naturally includes some planning of population growth.

Talking about women in the collectives, I'd like to tell a story here from our own experience. In the middle 70's, my husband Sid (Erwin) Engst and I worked in the Red Star commune, south of Beijing. The commune was having difficulty carrying out their quota for family planning. In those days, each couple was urged to have not more than two children. But peasant families wanted boys, not girls. Without making girls as welcome as boys, there was no way out of the dilemma. What was wrong with a girl child? By custom, she must leave her parent's family and become a member of her husband's family upon marriage. Usually, that meant leaving the village and becoming a member of another cooperative, a different economic unit. As to the parents, she had no obligation to care for them when they got old. As to the village, people thought what good would it be to train girls in any technical skills if they would soon be leaving? We hardly have enough resources to train people for our own village," said the village leaders, "let alone train them for other villages!" Just at that time, a woman in one village rose up to challenge the leadership which had changed her daily work points from 10 to 8 points just because she had gotten married. Under these pressures, the question of women's equality was put to the whole commune for discussion.

Women asked, "when we do the same work as men, why do we get less work points?" The men replied, "because you are weak and we are strong!" The women retorted, "OK, for everyday in the year that our work depends on strength, we'll agree to getting less, but for the other days we must get the same! Let's see who plants rice the fastest!" So they organized a rice planting competition. The women outstripped the men by far. The men conceded. From then on, women got 10 points the same as men. The women said, "we work all day just like the men, why, when we get home, should we have to do the cooking while the men sit in the kang smoking their pipes waiting to eat?" Party secretaries from the whole commune were called on to discuss this issue. In those days, highlights of these discussions came to every village through the commune loudspeaker network. One evening we heard criticisms of party secretary Wong from such and such a village. In the discussions he had agreed that since women also worked in the fields, men should help with the housework. He announced proudly, "I'll do anything needed at home. Except for emptying the pot and changing the baby's diapers, I'll do anything." "What's wrong with, men emptying the pot?" came a sharp woman's voice over the

loudspeaker. Men everywhere started. Emptying the pot! One day there was suddenly a great commotion beating of drums and clashing of cymbals. What's going on? A group of young couples were getting married. The bridegrooms had all volunteered to become members of their wives' families instead of the wives becoming the members of the bridegrooms' families. Within a few months, with all these changes going on, villages started training young women as electricians, carpenters, tractor drivers and even mule drivers! "Women hold up half the sky!" What excitement! Having a girl child might be almost as good as having a boy!

A short 5 years later, the "reformers" came to power in China. Capitalism's insatiable demand for commodity labor broke the communes. Under direct pressure from the top, agricultural collectives were replaced by the so called "family contract system." The "excess" labor power used by the peasants to steadily transform their crop land, now flocked to the cities serving the needs of imperialism's new invasion. The coastal cities burst with new skyscrapers. Luxury hotels, foreign banks and superhighways rose like mushrooms after a spring rain. Coca-Cola, Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonald's, the whole works flocked in. As to agriculture, who cared? Old people, women and children were left to tend the fragmented fields. What did this mean to the millions of Chinese peasant women? It meant abolition of the work point system and the return of the patriarchal family. Since by custom heads of families can only be men — father, husband or son — some 400 million peasant women lost their economic independence and, with it, lost the hard-won gains they had made towards political equality with men.

Up until 1980 (i.e., before the communes were broken up) socialism had already brought personal security to over 800 million peasant men and women, in their case not from the state as such, but from their collectives. In those days, "excess" rural labor turned to basic construction of the land. With expanding irrigation networks, drainage systems and the development of local agricultural related industries, agricultural production steadily increased. From 1949 to 1984 the annual increase in grain production outstripped the increase in population.

Increased collective income also meant more money could be set aside for the village welfare fund. Even in the poorest villages, the village welfare fund guaranteed each member a subsistence grain allowance. The grain distributed according to work points was added to this. By 1980, aside from basic food, the welfare funds provided essentially universal primary school education, minimal care for the old and, most striking of all, a nationally integrated health care system starting with "barefoot" doctors at the village level.

Weil's article quoted earlier gives a well documented description of the "reformer's" 15-year dismantling of this unprecedented system of social benefits built up under Mao in China — a system

which had encompassed more than a fifth of all humankind, half of whom are women. Being at the bottom of the ladder of oppression, women had gained the most from socialism. And therefore, had the most, to lose.

Why this ferocious attack not only by the Chinese “reformers” but by the media of the whole western world against this system which had brought so much to the Chinese people, and to the Chinese women in particular? What crime had the system committed?

Clearly there is but one answer. The crucial crime of this system was its fundamental legal code abolishing labor as a commodity. My brother William Hinton on page 664 of the newly published book *Ninth Heaven to Ninth Hell* ponders this question:

“What is the source of this hatred? It stems I think, from the same source as the gut hatred most Chinese landlords harbored for the Chinese Communist Party. If the Party won a victory it would mean land reform, the end to land rent and the end of landlords, not as individuals, but as an exploiting class. For it was clear to all, including the landlords, that land rent and the landlords who collect them. By the same token, at the end of the twentieth century, in spite of the collapse of the first socialist experiments worldwide, the bourgeoisie and would-be bourgeoisie are now faced with a similar reality. Capitalists cannot get along without wage workers, but working people, including working peasants, can get along very well without capitalists.”

To Those who would live off the profit of other people’s labor, what could terrify them more than this? For some 30 years, not only did the Chinese workers get along just fine without capitalists to “give them jobs” the Chinese peasantry got along, just fine without landlords or rich peasants to employ them. What’s more, in spite of US blockade, the Chinese economy developed extremely fast without “help” from the World Bank nor the IMF, and without foreign investment. And most disturbing of all for the bourgeoisie, this remarkable speed of economic development was done by reliance on the creativity and enthusiasm of the Chinese people themselves. What has happened once can always happen again. Mao died, capitalism has been restored, polarization has set in with a few becoming extremely rich. But no matter how much the present leaders in China try to bury these 30 years, the “terrible” ghost of Mao’s achievement will never cease to haunt them.

These achievements did not come easy. The new society was not a utopia. It was a real society born in fierce struggle. What was the main obstacle? Was it the US economic blockade? No. Was it the split with the USSR? No. The main obstacle to the development of socialism in China was internal, not external. Over 30 years, by far the most complicated, the hardest to understand, and the most difficult to handle was the omnipresent fierce internal party struggle. Talking about these fundamental questions

am I leaving the topic of women? No. Certainly not. In all types of social oppression, women are always at the bottom of the ladder. I feel very strongly that if we do not dig down to the bottom to unearth the the complicated relation of women's own special oppression with that of all oppression, we can never get anywhere. We cannot just look at the phenomena, we must try hard to understand the essence.

After years of study, investigation and analysis, not only of China, but all the socialist countries at that time, Mao finally formulated what we consider to be his greatest contribution to Marxism. That is that under socialist economic conditions, the main class struggle in society between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie changes its form, appearing not as a struggle between economic classes which no longer exist as such, but as a line struggle in the top echelons of the party. This dialectical, metamorphosis, where inner party struggle becomes the predominant form of class struggle in society, occurs after the communist party in power has essentially completed the socialist transformation of the economic base, i.e. after the transformation of private ownership of the means of production into public or collective ownership. At this point the old bourgeoisie has lost its teeth. w=Without connections within the party in power it has no chance of a comeback. Though the bourgeoisie has disappeared, as Hinton mentions above, the "would-be" bourgeoisie is still very plentiful both inside and outside the party.

The necessity of making class analysis without classes is something completely new in human history. It is something none of us has ever experienced before. From this point of view, Mao's method of education people was very interesting. For over 18 years my husband and I worked in state farms in Shaanxi province. Every morning before going to work we had an hour of political study. In the early sixties, after the so-called "failure of the great leap forward" and before the open split with the USSR, two questions for discussion came down through the party to our study. The first question was, "Are there classes in socialist society?" The second was, "Is there class struggle in socialist society?" No answer was given. We discussed this a long time. We tried to figure out whether there was exploitation or not. I can't remember exactly, what our conclusion was, but as I recall, we all agreed the "relations of production" depended a lot on the management. Of course, at that time we never dreamed this could become an antagonistic contradiction. If this question came to our study, it came to every corner of China.

Just think, way back then, Mao mobilized hundreds of millions of people to discuss this question!

In socialist society, without a bourgeoisie, what criteria could be used to discover this "would-be" bourgeoisie? This question became more and more acute until it finally burst in the Cultural Revolution. At this point Mao pointed out, the only way to distinguish them is by this line they carry out.

During those years some leading cadres only appeared to believe in socialism. They did not correct their mistakes, or only made a show of correcting them, and clandestinely obstructed in one way or another all advances along the socialist road. Mao called these cadres, “those in authority in the party taking the capitalist road” or simply “capitalist roaders.” Personally, I found that an extremely sensitive test of line was and is the attitude toward women. In China “capitalist roaders” were invariably male chauvinists. To them women’s place was in the home. Women were naturally weaker than men so women should naturally have lower wages. Women can’t be trained for technical jobs because they take too much time for getting married and having children, etc.

Of course, not all male chauvinists were “capitalist roaders.” The real “capitalist roaders” could gradually be detected by the consistency of their line. They invariably pushed a policy which would have changed the economic system itself to legalize both the transposition of public assets into private capital and the accumulation of private capital through exploitation. Their attitude towards women was just one facet of this overall strategy.

It was the struggle against activities of this kind which appeared as a two-line struggle. The taller the tree, the bigger the shadow. Struggle originating at the bottom could only have a local effect. The higher the cadre, the greater the effect, until struggle at the top of the party affected every aspect of society as a whole.

Once we capture the analysis of the two-line struggle — the struggle between the “bourgeois reactionary line and the proletarian revolutionary line” as Mao called it, is precisely a class analysis of socialist society — then we realize the tremendous work Mao has done in formulating this analysis. It is a creative development of Marxism.

During the Cultural Revolution, Mao tried in every way he could to teach the Chinese people how to detect “capitalist roaders” in the leadership of the party by analyzing the line they pushed. The three main criteria were “who do they believe in, who do they rely on, and who do they mobilize?” Clearly, relegating women to the kitchen is leaving out half of humankind! The “reformer’s” call for a few people to get rich first is an excellent example of “believing in the few, relying on the few, and mobilizing the few.” As soon as the “reformers” came to power in China, they cut the right to strike from the constitution, forbid people to hang big character posters, and cut out all mass movements. The June 4th 1989 “Beijing massacre” unmasked, once and for all, the true meaning of their line.

The opposite is what Mao called “the proletarian revolutionary line” — “believe in the masses, rely on the masses, mobilize the masses.”

Do decisions being made by the leaders take into consideration the interests of all the people or just those of a few? Of long term or just immediate interests? Do the policies pushed by the leaders help unite all the people in building a new society or do they cause splitting between different ethnic, regional, gender or any other groups? Do leaders discuss things with those they lead or do they do things secretly behind closed doors? Do they involve people in decision making or do they just hand out orders? Do they welcome criticism from below or do they fear it? If so, why? With nothing to hide, why should they fear criticism? Are women encouraged to do their part in building the new society? It was these kinds of questions that Mao mobilized the Chinese people in their millions to ask during the Cultural Revolution.

Using these criteria, people all over China soon began unearthing “capitalist roaders.” The “capitalist roaders” immediately counter-attacked with the deadly weapon of factionalism. The situation became extremely complicated. As the proletarian leadership called on all the people to unite against a “small handful” the “capitalist roaders” incited factionalism — both in relentless personal power struggles against each other and as shields to protect themselves from detection by the people.

Since the main ideology in society was petty-bourgeois, the majority of the people were left helpless, unable to extract themselves and the leaders they chose from the entanglement of factionalism. In my opinion, this was the main objective cause of the failure of the Cultural Revolution. It is also the main objective cause preventing the working people of the world — men and women, black, white, yellow, and brown — from uniting to defeat their common oppressors. The oppressors have always instigated and thrived on our fighting among ourselves.

With the collapse of the socialist camp, the world bourgeoisie has triumphantly taken over. The ball is now in their court. But they are helpless. Capitalism’s insatiable greed for maximum profit leaves it with no solution. Corruption, crime, drugs, environmental destruction, ethnic wars, unemployment, destitution in the midst of abundance are all it can offer. With billions upon billions of dollars going into armaments, it has no money for education, health, social welfare, or common sense.

But I’m an indomitable optimist. Since capitalism can’t possibly solve the problems of the people, the people will certainly throw it out! For 30 years in China I lived the future. I know it’s beautiful and know it works. Eventually socialism will certainly sweep capitalism off this earth and with it the oppression of all people including women.

Thank you.