

What was the position of women in Mao's China?

The CCP had always advocated female equality, with Mao famously proclaiming that 'Women hold up half the sky'. Traditionally, women had been expected to stay at home and to obey their menfolk while the practices of concubinage, foot binding and arranged marriages had given women a second-class status.



A young woman operating a precision machine at a factory in Beijing, October 1955

From 1950, the traditional practice of killing unwanted baby girls was officially abolished (although not always enforced), foot binding was outlawed and girls were expected to go to school and women to work. The 1950 Marriage Law forbade arranged marriages and child betrothals, the payment of dowries and concubinage. Official registration of marriage was introduced and new laws made divorce permissible by mutual consent or on the complaint of either husband or wife. Those who had been subject to an arranged marriage were allowed to petition for divorce.

The 1953 Election Law gave women the right to vote and some joined the government and PLA. Women were actively encouraged to train for jobs formerly held only by men. There was a drive to curb prostitution. In the 1950s, laws gave women the same property rights as men. Some were even granted land in their own name in the redistributions that followed the campaign against landlords (see page 146). In the communes, communal eating and shared cleaning released women from traditional household chores and here, and in the larger factories in the towns, communal nurseries and kindergartens allowed them to escape child minding and return to work.

Fact

Modern feminist writers such as Xiufen Lu, in *Chinese Women and Feminist Theory* (2005), have suggested that the communists overplayed the picture of former feminine subordination in order to glorify their own achievements.

Fact

Although a well-off man would only have one 'official' wife, concubines or 'other women' were recognised and sometimes seen as the way to produce a male heir. The practice of foot binding, to preserve dainty female feet (regarded as sexually attractive), had spread from elite women to families of lesser means from the later 19th century.



Theory of knowledge

A historian's standpoint

Should governments intervene to outlaw practices such as foot binding? If we applaud Mao's attempts to 'liberate' women, do we do so through Western eyes?

However, communist policy towards women did not always bring positive results.

- There was a huge increase in the numbers of divorces – 1.3 million divorce petitions were filed in 1953, many from ill-treated wives, and a drive against hasty action had to be launched.
- Although the number of women in work increased from 8% to 32%, jobs could be physically demanding and many women had to act as both workers and mothers.
- In rural and Muslim areas, government interference was resented and arranged marriages continued.
- Women provided only 13% of the party membership and 14–23% of the deputies in the National People's Congress between 1954 and 1975.
- Communes and schools, where children were taught that love for Mao was more important than love for their family, undermined the family unit. Young people were encouraged to speak against their parents in the 'four olds' campaign (see page 138) and many youngsters were sent far from home to experience rural work. The outlawing of ancestor worship also hit at the family unit.

Initially, the communists favoured the large families that swelled the population in the early 1950s. However, with the coming of the famine, women were told that two children was the ideal. Late marriage – at 25–27 years for men and 23 years for women – was encouraged and couples who had large families, or did not allow sufficient time between pregnancies, were criticised in their group meetings. Partly because of this campaign, the Chinese population grew more slowly than had been expected, although between 1953 and 1964 it increased 112 million, as death rates fell and birth rates remained high.

Marriage reform

One of Mao's first policies, in keeping with the promises made during the civil war, was the Marriage Reform Law of 1950. Socially, this had a very great effect on the people of China, in particular the women. For the first time, both genders were equal in a union, and both had to agree to be married. The elimination of arranged marriages had two benefits. First, Mao gained the support of many women, a group his opposition had entirely ignored during the civil war. Second, life was improved for large numbers of people within China. Younger people afraid of arranged marriages and those unhappy in their current marriage were able to choose their own spouse, or even file for divorce. In addition, other basic human rights were established: women could not be sold into prostitution, and unwanted female babies could not simply be disposed of. The government abolished practices such as foot binding. Later laws passed at the same time allowed women to own property and land, although this was a short-lived gain, as it would soon be replaced by the collectivization policies of the First Five Year Plan in 1953.



Although the marriage policies seemed to be a major step forward in terms of social engineering and did rid China of many inequities of the old system, they were not without opposition. China was a patriarchal society and the traditional roles of women were entrenched in the minds of many people. Some areas of China, particularly in the west, were Muslim, and the freedom gained by women under the Marriage Reform Law went against the doctrinal policies of the Koran.