

## RADICAL CRITIQUES OF TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

The radical critique of traditional culture led directly to the spawning of new political movements, often inspired by trends in the West and Japan, to remedy what were seen as social injustices and oppressive institutions in China. These were essentially intellectual movements, without popular support, but they had a profound influence on members of the educated elite who became leaders of revolutionary parties. Among these, anarchist, egalitarian, and feminist movements in the early decades of the twentieth century contributed to the ferment and discontent that stirred the founders of the Chinese Communist Party. In the essays that follow, the close association of feminism and liberationist ideals with anarchism and communism is evident.

### HE ZHEN: "WHAT WOMEN SHOULD KNOW ABOUT COMMUNISM"

The early anarchist movement in China produced a rigorous critique of the family system and the place of women in traditional society. Chinese feminism had been a

distinct current since at least the 1880s, when Kang Youwei had organized a society against foot binding, and again in the 1890s, when Liang Qichao argued that women should become productive members of society and that as the first educators of China's children, they needed to become educated themselves. The woman revolutionary Qiu Jin also eloquently spoke of the plight of women.

The essay below is by He Zhen, of whom little is known beyond the fact that she was the wife of Liu Shiwei (1884–1917), a leader of the anarchist movement. The essay, probably originally a speech or lecture, was published in the journal *Natural Justice* (*Tianyi bao*), founded by He and Liu after they fled to Tokyo in 1907. Circulated for the most part on a monthly basis among the growing exile and student community in Tokyo, copies of the journal were also smuggled back to the mainland. Along with *New Century* (*Xin shiji*), published by Chinese exiles in Paris, it propagated anarcho-communism while advocating revolutionary action; it may be said to represent the most radical wing of the growing revolutionary movement. In this essay, He Zhen refused to justify feminism on grounds of its subserving the nationalist movement, instead demanding “women’s liberation” as an absolute right. Further, she argued that the state and society oppressed both men and women and that both would continue to be oppressed as long as capitalism survived. Revolutionary change was thus needed to create a new society on truly egalitarian principles; for a few women to join ruling-class men at the top of society would still leave the majority of women mired in misery at the very bottom.

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.

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 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.

[He, “Lun nüzi dangzhi gongchan zhuyi,” pp. 229–232 — PZ]

#### WOMEN’S REVENGE

The learning of Confucianism has tended to be oppressive and to promote male selfishness. Therefore, Confucianism marks the beginning of justifications for polygamy and chastity. People of the Han dynasty studied Confucianism and felt free to twist the meaning of the ancient writings as they pertained to women in order to extend their own views. The *Discourses in the White Tiger Hall* is a good example of this. The people who proposed these doctrines were simply pursuing their selfish interests. For example, from Wang Mang, who dressed up the *Rites of Zhou* to have more imperial concubines, ordinary wives, and empresses, down to the likes of Zhang You and Ma Rong, everyone increased the number of their wives and concubines.

Song dynasty Confucians continued [these doctrines]. They further supported this system of oppression and denigrated women, placing them outside of the “human way.” Ever since, every single man of learning has praised the theories of the Han and the Song as priceless beyond jade and gold. These attitudes have reinforced each other, and the faults of the theory have never been understood. Cunning people have dressed up these theories to their own advantage. Stupid people believe in these theories with a superstitious force impregnable to skepticism. I don’t know how many of us women have died as a result. Therefore, the entire learning of Confucianism is a murderous learning. . . .

The ancients said that the relationship between the wife and her husband