

Women in China, Katie Curtin, Pathfinder Press, New York and Toronto, First Edition, 1975 (pp. 95, no price given)

Katie Curtin, a Canadian railroad worker and socialist, sets out to answer the question "To what degree have Chinese women been freed from their traditional inferior status?" As she traces the progress of women's emancipation in China in a historical perspective, several themes emerge. These include the centrality of the family institution in Chinese society, the strong link between women's emancipation and the prevailing political ideology at a given point in the history of China, the gains (and losses) made in the long and tortuous history of women's emancipation in China.

Using data from secondary sources written by both Chinese and Western authors and records of western visitors to the People's Republic of China, Curtin gives some of the indicators of women's inferior status in traditional society, such as the image of women in Chinese cosmology and society; their minority status; female infanticide; restriction of women's movement as symbolised by the binding of women's feet, especially in the upperclass; arranged marriages and polygamy; and lack of property rights among other indicators. The indicators of women's status were most prominent in the patriarchal family based feudal stage of Chinese society. The family is singled out throughout Curtin's book as the framework and vehicle for women's oppression and conversely becomes the main target of attack in the history of the women's movement in China.

Curtin traces the history of women's emancipation from the early 1800s through the Chiang Kai Shek era up to the Maoist period. In the 1800 period male liberal reformers such as Liang Chi-achap and Kan Yu-wein were championing the idea of women's equality. Early women activists such as Chiu Chin who established the first feminist press in 1907 and was later executed for attempting to assassinate a provincial governor were influenced by the liberal reformers. One of the milestones of this period according to Curtin was the powerful ideological attack on the family structure in the Chinese Renaissance established in 1916. The Women's Association of Hunan formed in 1921 was popularly known as the five proposals movement because they were calling for the right to self-determination in marriage, the right to vote, the right to be elected to office, the right to work and to right to education. By December 1921, women in the Hunan Province had won women's suffrage and personal freedom, women were elected to the provincial legislature. On the employment front Curtin shows, for the same period, women being militantly active in the trade union movement. In 1923, for example, 20 000 women workers struck for a 10 hour working day and wage increases of five cents per day.

During the early Chiang Kai-Shek era the Kuomintang (Chiang Kai-Shek's party) adopted a civil code which endorsed most of the early women's movements demands. However, the civil code largely remained on paper with limited application in rural areas. Curtin only illustrates that the women's movement was inextricably linked with that of the overall political situation in the country. Thus during the period of 1927, Chiang Kai-Shek became very vindictive against women activists. Women's Associations were destroyed and 300 women killed for being caught with short haircuts, a symbol of emancipation.

Curtin's treatment of women under Mao starts with the observation that there were only 50 women in the Long March by the Chinese Red Army, where their roles were restricted to public health and supply corps. According to Curtin's assessment Mao's radical position on the family and divorce were aimed at countering Chiang Kai-Shek's repressive measures. Thus the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) women's 'speak bitterness' sessions were gatherings designed to recount and denounce the humiliations, beatings and rapes of the old system.

The new Democratic China under Mao saw the establishment of the China Democratic Women's Federation whose objectives were to implement the government policy on women and:

act as a watchdog for lack of implementation or violation of the policy. The policy towards women under Mao was to consolidate women's gains from the revolution. The gains included the right to vote, women's rights to property, free choice of marriage, divorce, custody of children, forbidding of concubinage. Apparently according to the author the CCP had its limits in drives against traditional family structures, and did not promote women's emancipation in as far reaching a way as the Bolshevik revolution did. However, Curtin does not offer an explanation or give reasons for this observation. What is apparent, however, from the information given is that women took advantage of their new gains, especially the divorce laws. In 1950, for example, in Shanghai, 91 per cent of divorce cases were initiated by women. We are not told, however, what the actual number of cases were.

The reader can only infer from the description of male resistance to the implementation of the policy towards women that the CCP had no choice but not to press too far. Male resistance is portrayed in detailed descriptions of incidents such as the murdering of women activists on party missions to implement the policy. The extent of resistance was such that even party cadres "whom the party had never trained in the Marxist concept of the liberation of women were anxious to maintain their male position of superiority in family and social matters and therefore resisted the application of the new law" (p 37).

Curtin argues that it was necessary for the CCP to sustain the significant inroads made by women under the programme of the new democracy. However, once the CCP had consolidated its power, broken the hold of precapitalist village structures, the CCP sought stability. Militant women's movements were seen as being disruptive. A new line of retrenchment was adopted in 1953 which down played the political role of women, emphasised "dedication to family unity, discipline and loyalty", making divorce extremely difficult and emphasising women's economic production role. Thus the role of the family in political stability and economic production became the area of emphasis.

As far as women and the workforce were concerned, Curtin argues that real gains were made but these were uneven. There was no steady increase of women in employment, because the numbers varied with the rate of economic growth, the priorities of various sectors, and shifting economic policies at any given time. Thus when the CCP sought to increase economic production, the liberating effects of being a working woman were emphasised while the home was glorified when women could not be absorbed in the workforce. To enable women to play their economic role social services were provided. The author gives detailed accounts of the type and numbers of childcare facilities in the urban and rural areas.

Curtin argues that Chinese women's involvement in politics is limited to lower levels and gives figures relating to the composition of the party's decision making bodies to prove her point. The Central Committee elected at the 8th Congress in 1956 had 70 males and 4 females, in 1969 it had 134 males and 11 females and in 1973 there were no women in the politburo. Those who rise do so through their husbands, not independently, witness Yen Chun and Chion Ching, proving Chin's point that "equality of sex does not really extend to matters of central importance". Other topics addressed by the author include women and education, abortion, birth control and sexuality.

The author concludes by recognising accomplishments, but strongly asserts that deep rooted inequalities exist between the sexes. She sees the end of women's repression through the independent mobilisation of the Chinese masses to "sweep away and destroy the ruling bureaucracy". As far as Curtin is concerned, "Mao had no intention of leading a struggle for socialist democracy" he just wanted to use the masses "to destroy the political dominance of a rival sector of the bureaucratic caste led by Lim Shao Chin faction in the CCP". One cannot help but conclude that Curtin is decidedly anti Mao.

The main strength of Curtin's book is in demonstrating the link between women's

emancipation and the wider political context, and how Chinese women's demands were often subordinated to considerations of party interest.

Several times in the book the author seems to get carried away by concentrating on the background political context, to a point of de Quincy type digression, an illustration of this is her lengthy comparison of the Societ CP and CCP. Secondly, given the size of China geographically and in population terms, there is not enough indication of disparities between regions, rural-urban and even strata within the society. Thirdly, it is difficult at times to disentangle the very strongly expressed opinions of the author and the real situation. For example, with regard to abortion and sexuality, Curtin says "of utmost importance to the Chinese women is the question of distribution and knowledge of birth control". Whose sentiment is being expressed here, Curtin's western feminist sentiment or that of Chinese women?

Notwithstanding these weaknesses, the book provides factual information about women in China from a historical perspective. The reader needs to always keep in mind the date of publication, and the reliance on secondary data. Curtin's book also provides a stimulus for comparing women in China and women in the aspiring socialist state of Zimbabwe.

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Food, Poverty and Consumption Patterns in Kenya, Joel Greer and Erik Thorbecke, International Labour Office, World Employment Programme Geneva, (1986 pp 170, 20 Swiss Francs).

North-Western European Democracy as a positive academic social movement is presently entering very deep and unsafe waters over the whole issue of describing and measuring African poverty and suffering. At least that is the impression that can be gleaned from the latest culturally plurastic offering from the International Labour Organisation's World Employment Programme. Joel Greer and Erik Thorbecke are informing us in this monograph that it is possible to measure food poverty. It is indeed a great puzzle why they think that this should indeed be translated into the fancy equations that constitute their statistical *smorgasbord*, if, to begin with, they themselves are not quite sure what this *food poverty* means in terms of its basic causative factors. Greer and Thorbecke are just a drop in the ocean of European social scientists who have fished in the *terra incognita* that constitutes the African continent. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that in the year that Band-Aid hit celluloid screens, and many band-aid solutions were thought up in Washington DC, that the clearest definition of *food poverty* the reader can glean from this beautifully packaged book is:

"Food poverty is a normative, arbitrary and inexact concept. It is an attempt to measure whether individuals consume enough food or have the means to consume enough food to enjoy a minimum desirable level of physical health. The casual links from food consumption and mental well being are only imperfectly understood by nutritionists and the medical profession and, in any case, are subject to inter-personal variability - even within a relatively homogenous population. Further compounding the problem is the difficulty of measuring actual food consumption". (p 1-2).

Despite the humble confession of ignorance, the conclusion in this very elegant statistical *smorgasbord* is:

"Maize is grown more efficiently by small farmers than large farmers, and if the government does not actively promote land reform, it should recognise and facilitate the effective parcelisation of large farms which occurred. Increasing the price of maize combined with appropriate complementary measures could be an important first step in revitalising Kenya's agricultural sector". (p 139-140).