“What Do Women Live For?”: Women of China and the All-China Women’s Federation

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Introduction

In response to a 1964 editorial entitled “What should be the criteria in selecting a husband?” the magazine Women of China (Zhongguo Funü) received a large number of letters from female readers relaying personal experiences, beliefs, and preferences. One woman, named Ai Zhuan, was worried about the low salary of a suitor, and wrote to the journal, “I always felt that happiness consisted of a good economic condition.” Another reader, Huang Xiaozhong, did not find having a low-ranking husband to be all that problematic and “pointed to the differences in salary and position between herself and her husband, she was a doctor and he a low level government worker but this gap had not affected their feelings for one another.” A response by reader Kong Guihua, talked about her dissatisfaction with her boyfriend who was not exciting enough. She wrote “When I asked him to take me out and have some fun, he would tell me what he read from the book. I soon realized that he was like a ‘bookworm.’ His life was too dull…for me.” In response to opinions like Kong’s, reader Hai Zhao wrote of her husband, “I have never held that his studying and loving his work and studies means that he does not know how to live…I feel that work and study themselves are a kind of pleasure.”

These letters, which were presented in a widely circulated women’s magazine, all publicly document a wide range of female opinions and voices each engaged with one another in a larger discussion of women’s everyday experiences in a new and different society. Letters like these show that a public discourse did exist surrounding the problems of women in the early years of the People’s Republic of China, even when the Chinese Communist Party repeatedly stressed that women’s issues should not be separated from the task of socialist construction, the

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process of building a socialist society and economy. As the official publication of the national organization for women, the All-China Women’s Federation, *Women of China*, and its earlier incarnation *Women of New China (Xin Zhongguo Funü)* was a forum for shared discussion between Chinese women and the ACWF. The magazine’s focus on woman-only issues like women’s health and the double burden of work and family stands in direct contradiction to the Chinese Communist Party’s policy of subordinating women’s issues to class issues. Amid the clashes and maneuvering between the ACWF and the CCP, another voice emerges through the magazine’s publishing of letters and personal narratives: the voices of Chinese women. In 1963, these voices were clearly presented in the magazine’s nine month discussion on the question “What do women live for.”

“What do women live for” showed that Chinese women in the early People’s Republic of China did not fit into CCP orthodoxy or even the guidelines of the ACWF. Chinese women, as expressed through their letters to the magazine, both appropriated and genuinely believed in CCP and ACWF theories on women. Letter-writers described the joys of work and their hopes for the future. At the same time, their letters also expressed dissatisfaction with the burdens and prejudices still facing women in the supposedly equal socialist society they lived in. Most accounts of the 1950s and 1960s in China have focused too much on the political and ignore that women were still living lives with complex relationships to the party/state, the ACWF, and each other. In “What do women live for” the voices of female factory workers, housewives, local ACWF cadres, female labor team members, and others were published. Voices like Deng Yulan, who wrote to the magazine about the burdens and pressures of work and family. She wrote, “I naturally felt that my leaders and comrades do not understand my actual situation, that they are

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2 Founded in 1949 as *Women of New China*, the name was changed in 1957 to *Women of China*. For cohesion and convenience, the magazine will be referred to as *Women of China* throughout this thesis.
inconsiderate of my actual problems, and furthermore, that they should not make demands on me the same as a man.”

Women like Deng Yulan and the others who wrote to Women of China in 1963 were often separate from the political machinations of the state and were simply trying to balance their desires and duties amidst the backdrop of broad social changes.

Looking at “What do women live for” is a way to see the early People’s Republic of China as more than just politics. Earlier histories have focused too heavily on the policies, mechanisms, and, ultimately, the oppression of the Party. The history of women in the early PRC is neither one of complete oppression nor total liberation. It is, instead, a multifaceted series of narratives in which women pursued personal goals, worked with and around the Party, and strove to figure out exactly what it meant to be a woman in the PRC. Within Women of China, Chinese women expressed their everyday problems, obstacles, and victories, mostly without reference to the political situation of the nation. The letters published during the “What do women live for” discussion reveal a more personal look at the experiences and relationships of women during the early People’s Republic. These letters expressed resistance to the party, society, and, occasionally, to the very idea of being labeled a woman. On the other hand, letter-writers also expressed the annoyances and successes of everyday life, as well as the fulfillment they found in socialist life. While the CCP and the ACWF represented women as a unified mass with a single set of interests based on gender, as can be clearly seen in the title of the magazine and the terms used by the CCP and the ACWF to describe women, the content of the magazine actually exposes a fractured female populace. Individual women saw themselves both as a part of women as a whole but also as individuals with separate needs and desires from the collective.

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3 Deng Yulan, “Shi Shiji Wenti, Haishi Sixiang Wenti” [“It is a Realistic Problem, but it is also an Ideology Problem”], Zhongguo Funü, no. 194 (June 1963): 12-13.
**Historiography**

*Women of China* has never been the starting point for a historical investigation in its own right. Scholars have used the journal to supplement and emphasize other arguments but the magazine in its entirety has never been examined. However, the reader letters in the magazine, the multiple voices presented, and how the letters use Chinese women’s own voices to express the everyday problems of women are important because they take historians closer to the reality of women’s lives in the early People’s Republic of China. These letters present a vision of the early PRC that has yet to be explored. In this history, the voice of the party/state does not speak for women; they use their own voices to speak for themselves. Chinese women were not a unified group subsumed by the state and defined only politics. The voices in “What do women live for” stand at a complex intersection of everyday problems, feminism, and politics. Often within a single letter, an individual woman expressed pride and hope along with dissatisfaction and resistance.

Harriet Evans in *Women and Sexuality in China: Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949* admits that publications like *Women of China* expanded the definition of official discourse in the 1950s and 1960s but does not delve into any of the implications or details of these publications. Evans writes at length about the ways in which she feels the CCP manipulated discourses about gender and sexual morality as a form of social control but never explores the possibility of any action or distinct voice on the part of the ACWF or Chinese women. Previous scholars like Phyllis Andors and Judith Stacey, while groundbreaking in their focus on gender and Chinese history, have emphasized the victimization of Chinese women at the hands of the Chinese state and its puppet the ACWF. The titles of these works like *The Unfinished Liberation*

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of Chinese Women, 1949-1980 and Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China either denote a certain sense of indignation and disappointment or rely on outdated terminology. These scholars have argued that anything group or publication associated with the CCP must then fall in line with all dictates and negative aspects of the CCP and its ideology.

These earlier scholars have distinguished between the Maoist period (1949-1978) and the Reform Era (1978-present) as the two main periods of history in the People’s Republic of China. This simple chronology neglects distinct and important changes in state policy within each of these periods. In the 1950s and early 1960s especially, alliances, ideologies, and power shifted. To ignore these changes is to ignore important policies and campaigns that changed not only the position and abilities of the ACWF but also the day to day experiences and expectations of Chinese women. The early 1960s is a moment that is ignored by these simple chronologies. The year Women of China published the “What did women live for” discussion, 1963, was a unique time when, due to a shift in political power, the ACWF felt that it could once again agitate for women’s issues. For a period of time, the door was open for a frank discussion of the meaning of a woman’s life.

Initial writings on the ACWF were particularly critical of the organization’s relationship to the Chinese Communist Party. Scholars such as Andors, Stacey, and Kay Ann Johnson present the ACWF as merely a lackey of the CCP. These scholars portray the CCP as oppressive, patriarchal, and deceptive in the ways it used Chinese women in its pursuit of enforcing its ideology. Lisa Rofel provides a succinct characterization of this work when she writes that these works characterize women as “objects of a communist state that had used women’s liberation

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rhetoric to further its own ends. In this version, Chinese women were still victims…they were not liberated by ‘work’ but were instead now doubly burdened by a socialist state’s demands.”

These assertions are correct; the CCP, for the most part, ignored women’s issues, attempted to co-opt women’s liberation for power, and often persecuted the ACWF. The great emphasis on the oppression of the state and the “unfinished liberation” of women, in the words of Phyllis Andors, by these scholars relies on a dualistic notion of women’s history in which women are either oppressed or resistant to the state. It has obscured the lived experiences of Chinese women and the work that the women’s movement in China did accomplish.

It has only been in the last decade that historians such as Wang Zheng have complicated the history of the women in the PRC China by focusing on early grassroots movements within the ACWF and on the disagreements between the ACWF and the CCP. Using ACWF archives, Wang Zheng has shown how the ACWF and its subordinate groups expressed “their own gendered visions of a socialist state” in the face of gender-neutral socialist ideology. In doing so, she reveals an overlooked history of women’s agitation from within the Chinese Communist Party. Other scholars, such as Tina Mai Chen and Gao Xiaoxian, have also looked beyond the earlier focus on the oppression of the CCP to discuss and explore women’s lived experiences during the period. As Gao in particular has pointed out, women’s own feelings and experiences were embedded in a web of contradictions. She writes, “Rural women were empowered to

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8 Wang Zheng, “‘State Feminism’? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China,” 538.

challenge gender and class hierarchies while they simultaneously remained constrained by existing gender norms and practices of gender inequality.\textsuperscript{10} In Gao’s investigation of female labor models from the late 1950s, she found that many of the women involved in agricultural labor were proud of their work, even when it involved physical and emotional strain, and they connected their work with personal achievement, not socialist construction.\textsuperscript{11} Gao’s method of examining how women could advance their self image and pride while being simultaneously constricted and co-opted by the CCP is important for this thesis. In order to more fully understand the period, it is necessary to move beyond earlier dualistic conceptions of the CCP and the early PRC.

\textsuperscript{10} Gao, “‘The Silver Flower Contest’,” 594.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 606.
The Origins of the All-China Women’s Federation and Women of China

Intrinsic to CCP theory on women is the long history of women’s involvement in the Party. These women, who later became ACWF leaders, used their history of involvement with the party and their connections to male elites to further the ACWF. The influence of the May Fourth period’s criticism of family and the cultural oppression of women was also present in CCP ideology. Not only did the May Fourth period’s cultural criticism influence the CCP, but many of the leaders of the ACWF had a history of activism for women’s issues that began in the May Fourth period. Although these women were involved in the CCP, they were initially and primarily interested in women’s issues. The ACWF, the national organization for women, was officially tasked with inciting women for socialist construction. While the CCP saw the organization as a means of involving women in productive labor for the state, ACWF leaders saw it as an organization for women and their interests. Beneath all of this is a fundamental change in the terms of women. When these terms changed from relational names situated in the family, women became a political mass, united together and requiring representation. Without this linguistic change, prominently reflected in the title of Women of China, the ACWF could not exist.

The Chinese Communist Party and Women’s Liberation

Women, as a group and as individual activists, were an instrumental part of the Chinese Communist Party from its beginning in the 1920s. In reform movements within China prior to the founding of the CCP, the status of women was believed to be a benchmark of Chinese modernity and progress. Reform-minded nationalists from the turn of the century like Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei compared women’s status in Chinese culture to China’s status in the
world – women were backward and so was China. These writers felt that China could not become a world power until women became productive, laboring members of society. The connection between the emancipation of women and China’s progress was carried through to the May Fourth period and into the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party. In the mid-1910s the May Fourth Movement began which criticized “traditional” Chinese culture and the cultural oppression of women. May Fourth intellectuals criticized the so-called oppressive structure of the Chinese family and advocated for cultural change, beginning with marriages based on love.

As Christina Gilmartin has pointed out in her book Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical Women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s, May Fourth feminism was a direct influence on CCP policies concerning women. In addition to incorporating May Fourth beliefs on marriage and women’s rights, Chinese Communist theory on women was also heavily based on the work of Friedrich Engels. To Engels, women’s oppression stemmed from women’s exclusion from “productive” labor, meaning labor outside the home. In Chinese Communist Party ideology, women would be liberated only when they left home and participated in production. In doing so, they would no longer need to rely on husbands and male family members for survival and their economic independence would improve their social position. The ACWF echoed this belief in the power of work in achieving women’s liberation. Women of China editor Dong Bian wrote in 1958, nine years after the founding the People’s Republic of China, that when Communist society was finally achieved there would be

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14 Croll, Feminism and Socialism, 239.
widespread mechanized production and women would be able to participate in any and all forms of labor. When this happened, women would be liberated.\textsuperscript{15}

Chinese Communist beliefs on women were always portrayed by Party leaders as the antithesis of “feudal” Chinese culture, as represented by footbinding, arranged marriages, and women’s cloistering within the home. A CCP statement from 1922 declared that “repressive” actions of Chinese culture, like footbinding and discrimination against women, should be abolished. In 1923, the CCP’s Third National Congress officially proclaimed that the CCP must maintain legal equality for women.\textsuperscript{16} According to the CCP, in the past women were cloistered and disabled by footbinding, but under a Communist society they would leave their homes, engage in productive labor, and finally realize liberation. Upon the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, women’s liberation was once again emphasized. Article 6 of the Common Program, the constitution of the PRC until 1954, declared that the PRC “shall abolish the feudal system which holds women in bondage” and guarantee equal rights for women in all aspects of life.\textsuperscript{17} Like reform intellectuals before them, the CCP saw women’s progress as an essential part of China’s progress.

Women represented an unused labor force to the Chinese Communist Party. Mao Zedong once said that women “form[ed] a vast reserve of labor power which should be tapped in the struggle to build a great socialist country.”\textsuperscript{18} During periods of intense economic expansion, like the Great Leap Forward, women were called on to work in agriculture and other fields that had been vacated by men in favor of industrial production. While the CCP valued work outside the


\textsuperscript{17} Quoted in Croll, \textit{Feminism and Socialism}, 223.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{The Upsurge of Socialism in the Countryside} (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1960): 286, quoted in Croll, \textit{Feminism and Socialism}, 238.
home, domestic labor became devalued and there were no work points awarded to housewives or women’s work in the home. The history of women’s labor for the family tracing back to the Song Dynasty was erased, which only further emphasized the backward nature of the past.  

Equal marriages, based on love instead of parental mandate or economic considerations, offered another important path to equality in CCP ideology. During the May Fourth period, the term for family, once the organizing principle of Chinese life, changed to the “little” family (xiaojiating 小家庭). The “little” family was centered on a free-choice marriage between a man and a woman and the children produced from it. Throughout Communist ideology and policy, the “little” family was meant to be a shift from the large families of traditional China, personified by arranged marriages and concubinage. These large families had actually largely disappeared by the early twentieth century and had always been the exclusive domain of wealthy families anyway. In early twentieth century China, most households consisted of parents, their sons, and daughters-in-law but the CCP continued to exaggerate the newness of the “little” family by contrasting it with the myth of large, traditional Chinese families. Despite Communist moves against tradition, the family was still the center of Communist life and in the 1953 All-China Women’s Federation Congress, Zhang Yun argued that the family was the microcosm of society. Thrifty household management, often advocated by both the CCP and the ACWF, was believed to have a direct influence on the health of the nation.

19 Technology and Gender, Francesca Bray’s study of women’s labor within the home, explores the centuries of textile work Chinese women did within the home. This labor was necessary for the material livelihood of the family home and was performed by all women, regardless of class. Francesca Bray, Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).


21 “Build up the country economically, manage the household thriftily, struggle for socialist construction,” Congress documents 3, p. 26, quoted in Davin, Woman-Work, 66.
Communist emphasis on the “little” family is perhaps best exemplified by the Marriage Law of 1950. The Marriage Law officially abolished the “feudal marriage system,” as represented by arranged marriages, child betrothal, dowries, and concubinage, and replaced it with a marriage system based on “the free choice of partners, on monogamy, on equal rights for both sexes, and on the protection of the lawful interests of women and children.”

Marriage was now based on a willing partnership between two equals. Women could only marry after the age of 18 and men could marry after the age of 20, which already represents an inequality in the law. When a couple did marry, they were “bound to love, respect, assist, and look after each other...to engage in productive work, to care for their children and to strive jointly for the welfare of the family and for the building up of the new society.”

Marriage was no longer a private transaction between families but a publicly registered union with expectations for both partners. Divorce was mediated by the government and allowed if both parties desired it. All references to family and home in the “What do women live for” discussion are to the “little” family and marriages based on the Marriage Law of 1950.

The All-China Women’s Federation

The All-China Women’s Federation was founded in April 1949, preceding the founding of the People’s Republic of China by six months. It was founded as an organization dedicated to work related to women or “women work” and its main task was to galvanize women and inspire them for involvement in socialist construction. The CCP intended the ACWF to be a

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23 Ibid., 107-8.
24 From 1949-1957, the All-China Women’s Federation was known as the All-China Democratic Women’s Federation. The organization’s name was changed in 1957 to reflect the Party’s belief that socialism had been established after the First Five Year Plan. For the sake of cohesion, I have chosen to refer to the organization at any time as the All-China Women’s Federation. Davin, Woman-Work, 65.
bridge between women as a united mass and the state/party. ACWF leaders, on the other hand, viewed it as an organization to advance women’s interests. In 1956, Deng Yingchao, then Vice-Chairman of the ACWF, described the organization’s role as to “give expression to their [women’s] aspirations, protect their rights and interests as well as those of their children, and supervise the implementation of the policy and decrees regarding the equality of men and women.”

Through the ACWF, the assorted women’s groups and organizations that existed during the Jiangxi Soviet and Yan’an periods were forged together into a national women’s organization. These earlier organizations were either local in nature or larger, like the Peasant and Women’s Association, the Directive Commission of Women, and the Chinese Women Thrift Association. The exception was the YWCA (Young Women’s Christian Association) which remained separate from the ACWF.

The ACWF divided itself into village, district, county, and provincial levels, with each level represented by delegate congresses elected by the level below them. The national ACWF was divided into three large governing bodies: the National Women’s Congress, the Executive Committee, and the Standing Committee. Below these were a series of departments: Organization, Propaganda and Education, Productive Undertakings, Welfare for Women and Children, International Work, and Secretariat. Women of China initially fell under the Department of Propaganda and Education but was later separated into its own department in the national ACWF.

26 Quoted in Croll, Feminism and Socialism in China, 258.
27 Tsui, “Chinese Women: Active Revolutionaries or Passive Followers?,” 29.
28 Davin, Woman-Work, 56.
29 Zhang, “The All-China Women’s Federation,” 145.
Between 1949 and 1966, a group of women with longstanding ties to the Communist Party and May Fourth feminism were central figures in the ACWF. These were not Communists who happened to be women but female activists who had a long history of agitating for women’s issues and feminism before and after joining the Party. Their words were published in the magazine and their actions and negotiations within the CCP kept the ACWF afloat until 1966. These women included Deng Yingchao, the vice-chairman of the ACWF from 1949 to 1967. Deng was married to Zhou Enlai, the Premier of People’s Republic of China. She was active in the women’s rights movement long before she joined the Chinese Communist Party in the mid-1920s. In 1922, she was a leader in the Zhili Women’s Right League group in Tianjin and a year later, Deng became active in women’s publications, eventually becoming the editor of Women’s
Daily, the only women’s newspaper in China at the time. Deng’s initial activism was centered on women’s issues, not Communist revolution. It was not until Deng was convinced that the Communists were dedicated to women’s issues that she was persuaded to join the CCP. When she finally joined the Party in the early 1920s, she was part of a contingent of younger women in the Party who “wanted to politicize gender issues and tried to involve women in the National Revolution on this basis.” Deng wanted women to push for revolution as a means of pushing for women’s rights. Deng may have been a devoted Communist later in life but her political consciousness developed with May Fourth feminism and through her time as a leader in the ACWF, her dedication to women’s issues remained.

Other women involved in the ACWF and Women of China also shared a history of activism for women, as well as longstanding ties to the CCP. Cai Chang, chairman of the ACWF from 1949 to 1967, joined the party in the early 1920s and acted as the head of a propaganda team for one of the armies during the Northern Expedition. She participated in both the Jiangxi Soviet and the Long March, two critical events in CCP lore, which gave her prestige and credibility within the Party. Luo Qiong was one of the most prominent ACWF theorists, the Deputy Director of the ACWF’s Propaganda and Education section, and the head of the Secretariat Bureau of the ACWF after 1957. Luo was also active in the early party, producing

30 Gilmartin, Engendering the Chinese Revolution, 84, 95, 129.
31 Croll, Feminism and Socialism, 124-5.
32 In 1926, the Chinese Communist Party and the Guomindang (Nationalist) Party joined forces to unite China under one government. They moved north through the country to defeat warlords who controlled wide amounts of land in China. Tong Zhang, “Power, Women and Revolution – The Role of the All-China Women’s Federation in China’s Revolution” (Ph.D. diss., Binghamton University, State University of New York, 2003): 82.
33 Between 1931 and 1934, the CCP established a government in Jiangxi province called the Jiangxi Soviet. When the Guomindang attacked the Jiangxi Soviet in 1934, the Party and its armies began the Long March to evade the Guomindang. Gilmartin, Engendering the Chinese Revolution, 178, 219.
texts on women’s labor in the liberated areas throughout the 1940s.\textsuperscript{35} From 1949 to 1957, Shen Zijiu was the editor of \textit{Women of China} and the director of the ACWF’s Propaganda and Education section. Shen was active in women’s publications and she founded the feminist publication \textit{Women’s Life} in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{36} Kang Keqing, known as “The Girl Commander,” was a leader in the Red Army throughout the 1930s and 1940s.\textsuperscript{37} Married to Zhu De, who was Commander of the People’s Liberation Army and Vice-Chairman of the CCP and the PRC, Kang was head of the ACWF’s Child Welfare Department.\textsuperscript{38} The histories of these women and their longstanding engagement with feminism pushed them to continue supporting women’s issues in the early 1960s even after the CCP declared women liberated.

After Shen Zijiu, Dong Bian was the editor of \textit{Women of China}. Prior to assuming editorship of the magazine, she worked as a vice-editor under Shen Zijiu. After becoming editor of \textit{Women of China}, Dong was also named Secretary of the Secretariat Bureau in 1957.\textsuperscript{39} It was Dong Bian, the wife of Mao’s personal secretary, who initiated “What do women live for” and took the brunt of the criticisms from radicals after the discussion was published.\textsuperscript{40} The influence of Dong Bian as an editor in the shift back towards a woman-focused viewpoint in the magazine is undeniable. Dong openly proclaimed that she was proud that \textit{Women of China} had become a women’s magazine.\textsuperscript{41} In a 1966 \textit{Women of China} staff memo, Dong was quoted as saying that articles about political study “had nothing to do with women.”\textsuperscript{42} She also claimed that continuous

\textsuperscript{35} Two examples of Luo’s texts in the 1940s are \textit{Production by village women in the past year} and \textit{The cottage textile industry in the Shaan-Gan-Ning border region}. Davin, \textit{Woman-Work}, 40-42.

\textsuperscript{36} Dooling, \textit{Women’s Literary Feminism}, 174.

\textsuperscript{37} Croll, \textit{Feminism and Socialism}, 189, 193.

\textsuperscript{38} Stacey, \textit{Patriarchy and Socialism}, 152-3.

\textsuperscript{39} Dooling, \textit{Women’s Literary Feminism}, 176.

\textsuperscript{40} Tong, “Power, Women and Revolution,” 95.

\textsuperscript{41} Zhang, “The All-China Women’s Federation,” 350.

\textsuperscript{42} Report of staff of \textit{Zhongguo Funü} (10 July 1966), quoted and translated in Croll, \textit{Feminism and Socialism in China}, 308.
revolution was like “frying rice that had gotten cold.”  

Although these declarations are from the time when Dong was being criticized and pushed out of the magazine for her role in “What do women live for,” it is clear that Dong saw *Women of China* as a women’s magazine instead of merely a socialist magazine for women.

The problems of gender inequality within the Chinese Communist Party began early. While many early Chinese Communist Party members, including women, lived lives and espoused beliefs that radically differed from “traditional” Chinese culture, they also maintained many essentialist and hierarchal views of gender and women’s position. For example, in 1942 Zhou Enlai, a crucial CCP leader and the Premier of China from 1949 to 1976, argued that women had a natural predisposition to childcare and the home. It was very rare for even the highest ranking ACWF leaders to criticize the link between women and the home. So entwined were women and the family that in addition to protecting the interests of women, the ACWF was charged with the protection of children’s welfare. Furthermore, All-China Women’s Federation leaders like Deng Yingchao and Kang Keqing were married to elite men in the CCP. These relationships provided access to the upper echelons of power that Women’s Federation leaders may not have had otherwise. Through these relationships and their own histories within the Party, Women’s Federation leaders could better understand the “masculinist sentiment” amongst the male elite in the Party and thus better navigate Party policy for the benefit of the Women’s

**References**

43 Ibid., 308.
It is also clear that in the structure of the CCP, marriage to high ranking members was often the only road to advancement.\\(^{48}\)

*Image of Deng Yingchao from Women of China, June 1963*

**Women of China**

ACWF was responsible for filtering CCP policies and thought to women. The primary avenue for this was *Women of China* and the magazine became a venue for Communist campaigns like Land Reform and the Korean War, while also presenting articles about women’s issues. For the CCP and the ACWF, writing and publishing were methods of raising

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consciousness. The press was an incredibly important and useful means of reaching the public and had been used at great length by the CCP such since the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Unlike many earlier publications for women, \textit{Women of China} was a magazine for women that was written by women. The magazine’s use of female stories meant that it often stood apart from Party ideology, while also effectively providing that same ideology to its female readers.

There were an estimated fourteen other magazines and twenty-two newspapers directed at women throughout the 1950s and early 1960s but \textit{Women of China} was unique in that it targeted the female public of the \textit{entire} nation. Published monthly, the magazine not only welcomed questions and essays from readers but was also used as a teaching material in female literacy classes run by local Women’s Federations, indicating an influence and pervasiveness that no other women’s publication had. ACWF leaders were responsible for forwarding information about the women’s movement to larger national publications like \textit{People’s Daily}, the national newspaper of China, which often reprinted articles from the magazine. The ACWF, in turn, filtered articles relevant to women from those same national publications and published them in the magazine. The magazine was filled with reports on the fieldwork done by local branches of the ACWF and female work units. In the early 1950s the magazine had a specific section for these reports entitled “Communication” and it featured articles like “Young Manufacturing Renovators” from the Shenyang city Women’s Federation, which introduced commendable young female workers, and reports on the “Tianjin 6\textsuperscript{th} Spinning Factory’s Work”

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50 Gilmartin writes, “Most of the feminist press of the May Fourth era, in fact, was dominated by men,” in Gilmartin, \textit{Engendering the Chinese Revolution}, 41.
51 Zhang, “The All-China Women’s Federation,” 169.
52 Ibid., 172.
from the Tianjin City Trade Union Female Work Department.\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Women of China} was more influential and widespread than any other publication for women and it is the magazine’s national and public character that makes it so fascinating. It was the textual embodiment of the Chinese women’s movement in the early People’s Republic of China.

Literacy rates during \textit{Women of China}’s first run were problematic for its success. At the founding of the People’s Republic, it was difficult for the CCP and ACWF to find female cadres who were literate.\textsuperscript{54} Women, especially rural women, were largely illiterate and the ACWF launched numerous programs to increase literacy. A solid indication of increasing rates of literacy is the increasing circulation of the magazine from 1949 to 1963. In 1949, circulation was 10,000 per issue and by 1955 it had increased to 300,000.\textsuperscript{55} Into the late 1950s and early 1960s, circulation numbers stayed between 258,000 (April 1962) and 377,800 (December 1959.) Circulation numbers hide the number of women who read the magazine in local reading rooms and libraries or who borrowed the magazine from friends and families, thus the number of readers could have been significantly higher. In 1963, unlike previous years, the circulation numbers for the magazine were not published in each issue. While it is impossible to know how many women read the magazine during 1963, the attention “What do women live for” garnered is a sign that the magazine at least reached a sizable portion of the literate female population.

The increased participation in “What do women live for,” along with the higher circulation numbers for the magazine, are both signs of higher rates of literacy amongst women. If “What do women live for” was published in the early 1950s, the response would not have been

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\textsuperscript{54} Davin, \textit{Woman-Work}, 58.
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as strong and varied as it was in the early 1960s. However, calls for reader participation and narratives in the magazine did exist fairly early on in its run. The early magazine was, in the words of scholar Naihua Zhang, like a “two-way communication channel” between the All-China Women’s Federation and female readers.\(^\text{56}\) Throughout the 1950s, sections like “Everyone Discusses,” which reappeared as “Everyone Talks” in later years, and “Criticisms and Recommendations” appeared in the magazine. The existence of reprisals for reader letters by authorities is unknown, thus it is impossible to fully comprehend how honest readers could be without fearing for personal safety but at least some degree of freedom was used in writing to the magazine. Readers attached their names, locations, and occasionally their photographs with their letters. In “What do women live for,” every letter is identified with a name and a location.

**Terminology**

During the May Fourth period new terms for women emerged that radically altered how women were publicly perceived and represented. These linguistic changes are present in *Women of China* and the magazine’s Chinese title, *Zhongguo Funü* invoked these new terms. The ACWF and *Women of China* made a claim to represent the mass of women, not a heterogeneous group consisting of relational subjects. While claiming to represent women as a mass, the magazine showed in the early 1960s that women were actually a fractured group that represented itself as women but did not share the same interests, lives, or needs.

The term for feminism, *nüquan zhuyi* (女权主义,) is never mentioned within the publication; feminism was bourgeois but the sentiments of May Fourth feminism are evident in the evolution of the ACWF and *Women of China*. Beginning in the May Fourth period, when the

\(^{56}\) Zhang, “The All-China Women’s Federation,” 196.
gendered pronoun *ta* (她) was created to refer to women, women transitioned from being referred to by a multiplicity of relational terms to becoming a political mass that needed to be provoked for political action and represented by the CCP.  

A woman was previously referred to based on her position within the female kinship structure; *funü* (妇女,) the term later used in *Women of China*'s title, referred explicitly to female kin or wife (*fu* 妇) and daughter (*nü* 女) to be exact. As such, in its old usage *funü* was a relational category that by its very definition situated women within the family. Instead of two distinct sexes, man and woman, Chinese language created “a profusion of relational, bound, unequal dynads, each signifying difference and position difference and analogically.” Over the course of a woman’s life, she would be referred to by a variety of terms which designated her position within the family such as wife (*fu*), mother (*mu* 母), or daughter (*nü*). Men were also referred to based on their position in the family.

The May Fourth period brought a group of new terms for women, like *nüxing* (女性,) and the Communist reappropriation of *funü*. With these terms, woman/female became an all-encompassing definition that included all women regardless of their position in the family structure. Initially *nüren* (女人,) female person, emerged as a category for all women. During the “What do women live for” debate, *nüren* is frequently used by letter-writers to describe

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57 *Ta* as a pronoun can refer to either man or woman in spoken modern Chinese but in the written form, it is gendered. Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution*, 22.  
59 Ibid., 259.  
60 Ibid., 259.
themselves and women as a group. Then nüxing, female sex, came into use in the 1920s. Instead of a relational position within the larger family structure, nüxing represented a biological other to the male norm, nanxing (男性). Nüxing is not used at all in the “What do women live for” discussion. In response to nüxing, the CCP appropriated funü as its term for women and imbued the term with added Marxist conceptions of production and the state. Funü no longer referred to a woman within her family but to a political subject who, according to the CCP, “opposed feudalism, imperialism, individualism, and bureaucratism.” Funü meant not only biological women but political women with interests that needed to be represented by the Party.

May Fourth ideas on family, marriage, and feminism, along with the profusion of new terms for women that emerged in the same period deeply influenced CCP thinking on women and the development of the ACWF. Without May Fourth feminism and the redefinition of woman, the ACWF could not have existed. Furthermore, numerous ACWF leaders, such as Deng Yingchao, first became active in politics during the May Fourth period. May Fourth feminism helped develop the beliefs of these female activists and inspired their continued dedication to women’s issues.

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61 Ibid., 267.
62 Ibid., 254.
What Do Women Live For?

In April 1963, Dong Bian, the editor of Women of China, posed a series of “constant” questions in the “Problem Discussion” section of the magazine, crucial among them “What does a woman live for? How should a female cadre deal with revolutionary work, family, children…how should she put these two things in their right place?....How can one resolve when family and work conflict? What should a revolutionary woman pursue?” The “Problem Discussion” section was not a new feature in the magazine and “What do women live for,” the discussion that emerged from Dong’s constant questions, was an expansion of earlier instances of reader participation in the magazine. “What do women live for” was unique from what came before it in light of the failures of the Great Leap Forward and the wide extent of reader participation in the discussion. Between April 1963, when Dong Bian opened the conversation, and the end of the discussion in December 1963, the magazine received over two thousand letters about the question. Although only thirty-nine were published initially, the magazine eventually published a separate compendium of all of the letters.

The very fact that fourteen years after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the official organ of the All-China Women’s Federation felt that it could ask these questions is telling enough. It was in the context of a more open economy and society that the All-China Women’s Federation was once again able push for social, political, and cultural change on behalf of women. In 1956, Mao said that women were liberated but within “What do women live for,” Women of China showed that women still faced challenges their male comrades did not. Under CCP ideology, a woman’s life should be defined by socialism but the “What do women live for”

64 The translations of reader letters and editor notes in this chapter were all done by me, with the exception of a small selection of translations found in Elisabeth Croll’s The Women’s Movement in China: A Selection of Readings, 1949-1973. Those translations from Croll’s work are credited as such. “Bianzhe an” [Editor’s Note]. Zhongguo Funü, no. 193 (April 1963): 12.
65 Zhang, “The All-China Women’s Federation,” 349.
discussion revealed that the meaning of a woman’s life in the PRC was not yet fixed. Women had overwhelmingly participated in productive labor and yet – they still faced a society that burdened them with household labor, double standards, and inequality. The emotions and experiences expressed through the published reader letters give us a clearer vision of the thoughts and experiences of Chinese women and a further glimpse into the complex web of interaction between individual women, society, and larger political institutions. These voices neither fully subscribe to nor oppose CCP ideology but instead reflect a variety of influences and experiences that were able to be expressed through the magazine. A large number of women express pride and a sense of self-worth in their letters even within a society that historians have categorized as oppressive. The complexity of voices in the discussion revealed that women were not the unified mass the CCP thought they should be.

Dong Bian opened the discussion by asking readers and Women’s Federation cadres from across the country to write in with their knowledge and experiences with the questions she posed and to pose further questions. Within the magazine itself, “What do women live for” became a monthly feature and over the course of the discussion readers and cadres wrote in to the magazine to respond to previously published letters. This back and forth within the magazine created a nationwide debate and a forum for airing grievances with work, one’s surroundings, and the larger position of women in society. Throughout it all, Women of China, and thus the ACWF, presented itself as a moderator for these discussions and, eventually, as the organization that would help to resolve these issues. Every issue, editor Dong Bian would introduce that month’s letters, detailing what she and the staff of Women of China saw as the most interesting and thought-provoking opinions and questions raised, like a point raised by a male comrade who
thought women should take care of the family and men should focus on work. Dong would ask readers what they thought of these statements and would further encourage readers to write in with their opinions and experiences. Alongside each issue’s section on “What do women live for,” the magazine continued to publish other articles, many of which related to the issues presented in “What do women live for.” Articles like “Male comrades involved in family affairs are hen-pecked,” from July 1963, and “I am a person who struggles in any way to marry the partner of my choice,” from October 1963, kept the themes and personal nature of “What do women live for” alive outside of the pages devoted to the conversation.

In “What do women live for” a third voice, one that is neither the official voice of CCP nor the ACWF, presents itself. A few central themes emerge in the discussion. The first is the conflict between family and work. Multiple women, ranging from former model workers to ACWF cadres, complained about the impossibility of male standards for women when women were still saddled with raising children and doing house chores. Despite these complaints, very few women argued for a change in domestic roles or for other paths for women outside of family life. Discrepancies in material status were also discussed at length in “What do women life for.” Numerous women complained of the differences in their lives and the lives of CCP and ACWF cadres. Throughout the whole discussion a diversity of voices were published that present a fragmented female populace. Individual women frequently referred to themselves as belong to the mass of women and used the pronoun “we” in their writing while also expressing discontent and a lack of sympathy for other women.

Background

The Great Leap Forward and its failures provided the context for “What do women live for.” Beginning in 1958 and ending in 1960, the Great Leap Forward was a means of speeding up China’s economic development and making China an industrial nation. Men were pushed into irrigation, mining, and other industrial projects while women were required to fill the positions in agriculture left open by men. To allow for women’s increased participation in labor, widespread rural collectivization occurred. Collective dining halls and childcare centers were

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established to relieve women of their domestic burdens. Due to this, millions of women entered productive labor. Cai Chang, the chairman of the ACWF, argued that the Great Leap Forward would not only allow women to contribute to the nation but it would also help women achieve liberation and economic independence. The results of the Great Leap Forward were disastrous. A series of droughts and floods resulted in large famines and many of the women who were involved in large-scale labor efforts pushed themselves so hard that they brought severe injuries upon themselves. Scholars estimate that between 15 and 30 million people died as a consequence of the Great Leap Forward.

After the Great Leap Forward, Mao Zedong remained the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party but his political power was dramatically weakened. Liu Shaoqi, Chairman of the People’s Republic of China, and Deng Xiaoping, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, took over political power. Zhou Enlai remained Premier of the People’s Republic of China. Beginning in 1961, a series of economic reforms began, notably the “san zi yi bao” policy which advocated free markets, private plots, and some private ownership. This shift in power and the return to private ownership were essential to the renewed emphasis within Women of China and the work of the ACWF on women’s issues as distinct from class issues and socialist construction. The increased power of Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and Zhou Enlai, two of whom were married to women activists Wang Guangmei and Deng Yingzhao and who had all supported the ACWF in its earlier clashes with the CCP was important for the “What do women live for” discussion. Equally important was the influence of a more open economy and society.

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68 Ibid., 565.
69 Ibid., 568.
70 Ibid., 570-1.
72 Andors, The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women, 94-95.
The unprecedented participation of women in productive labor brought about by the Great Leap Forward did not result in the liberation of women. Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party had argued since before 1949 that it would only be through participation in labor that women would finally achieve equality but the experience of the Great Leap Forward and the additional burdens it brought on working women caused many within the ACWF and beyond to question this thinking. In response, the All-China Women’s Federation began to focus once again on women’s issues as separate from class issues. In 1962, the ACWF published a training manual for women cadres in *Women of China* that echoed this new focus on the specific problems of women: “Now that the broad masses of women have taken part in productive labor, can one say that there is no more work to be carried out among women? No….though the broad masses of women have taken part in production, they still have many special problems in production, living, and thought.”

Despite women’s productive labor, they still faced the burdens of household work and lower wages. After conducting a survey, the ACWF promoted the idea that the continued presence of traditional feudal ideology was preventing women’s ascendance. Even in the “new” society, the ACWF found that women were faced with many of the same obstacles and prejudices associated with the old, “feudal” society.

Prior to the Great Leap Forward, United States estimates on Chinese employment show that 60-75% of women participated in agricultural work but that daycare facilities for working mothers could only care for 5% of children. This changed during the height of the Great Leap Forward, the years 1958 and 1959, when it is estimated that at least 50% and as much as 70% of

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73 Beijingshi Fulian Xuanchuan bu [Beijing Women’s Federation Dissemination Department], “Nongcun funü gongzuoyewu xiaoacai” [Reference materials for training basic-level women cadres], Zhongguo Funü no. 178 (Feb 1962): 14-20, quoted and translated in Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China*, 290.

74 Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China*, 290.

the children of working mothers were in communal childcare services.\textsuperscript{76} The failure of the Great Leap, the economic downturn, and the increased privatization of the Chinese economy in the early 1960s led to the closure of many of the communal childcare and dining hall services that had allowed women to leave home to work.\textsuperscript{77}

As the letters sent in to \textit{Women of China} during the “What do women live for” debate show, most women were once again responsible for household work and caring for their children. At the same time, women were expected to maintain their roles as productive workers. This meant that mothers, mothers-in-law, older women in the neighborhood, and nannies were often asked to watch over children as their mothers left home to work. As Kay Ann Johnson points out, this shift in childcare duties to older women affected the position of older women within the family and the community. She argues that this generational shift “represents a gain in the status and independence of daughters-in-law vis-à-vis mothers-in-law in recognition of the value of the family of younger women’s remunerated labor outside the home.”\textsuperscript{78} When the Communists first came to power in the 1940s some mothers-in-law, left at home to cook, clean, and care for children in their old age, were said to have complained that “Everything is upside down since the Communist Party came. Mothers-in-law have become daughters-in-law.”\textsuperscript{79} Tellingly, “What do women live for” did not feature narratives from older women or hired domestic help. These women were old enough that they were married with children long before the founding of the People’s Republic. Some of them were women whose consciousness did not develop with the aid of the Chinese Communist Party.

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\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 172.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 169.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 174.
\textsuperscript{79} Davin, \textit{Woman-Work}, 42.
\end{flushright}
The hiring of domestic servants and nannies by cadres was officially sanctioned; the cadre stipend for personal expenses included funds to hire domestic help so they could leave the house and work.\textsuperscript{80} An earlier article in \textit{Women of China}, entitled “Concerning the Work and Wages of Maids,” advised women with domestic servants on how to treat their workers, yet another sign that at least some women depended on servants. Nannies and maids earned a third to half of what a working woman made and thus, only the upper echelon of Chinese society could afford to hire one. This meant that poorer women were left to take care of their children on their own.\textsuperscript{81} The discrepancy in class and status between female cadres and their domestic servants was never presented as problematic in the magazine.

Many women in their letters regarding “What do women live for” mentioned asking older women in their families or nannies to assist them in housework and childcare. Occasionally women even left their families and children altogether to focus on work. Zhu Xifan, in her July 1963 letter, described how she moved out of her family’s home to live closer to her workplace. She wrote, “I return home on vacations, family matters and the children are looked after by the nanny and my husband. There are people who say my conditions are good, that’s right, good conditions are created by oneself.”\textsuperscript{82} Zhu’s good conditions, which resulted in her receiving the March 8 Red Banner Award for her productive labor, could only be created by leaving her children to the care of others while she left home to work.

In addition to decreased childcare and canteen services for women workers, the wages and work points earned by women still lagged behind those of men doing the same work. The


\textsuperscript{81} “Guanyu baomu de gongzi, gongzuo” [Concerning the work and wages of maids], \textit{Zhongguo Funü}, no. 17 (Sept. 1956), quoted in Davin, \textit{Woman-Work}, 184-185.

\textsuperscript{82} Zhu Xifan “Haizi jiawu meiyou yingxiang wo jinbu” [Children and family matters do not influence my progress], \textit{Zhongguo Funü}, no. 195 (July 1963): 12.
problem of unequal pay was predominantly mentioned through editor’s notes and it was not frequently brought up by the individual women who wrote to the magazine. In the July 1963 issue of Women of China Peng Cejiu, an ACWF cadre, wrote, “We’re oppressed in work points—men each day record 10 points, 12 points; the most women get are 5 or 6. Thus, we aren’t willing to come out to work.”83 The valuation of male labor over female labor represented another failure of Party policy towards women.

83 Peng Cejiu, Zhongguo Funü (July 1963), quoted and translated in Andors 93.
What Do Women Live For: Work vs. Family

The double burden of work and family was a constant theme throughout the discussion. A frequent narrative was that of the revolutionary woman who was a great worker before having children. Slogans like “Whatever men can accomplish, women can do too” established male achievements as the standard for women. Men, their abilities, and their accomplishments were the examples for women and female model workers were all too often praised in light of how they compared to their male counterparts. Women engaged in the “What do women live for” discussion revealed the fundamentally different conditions, burdens, and obstacles facing working women in China. Work outside the home and household affairs were often portrayed as in conflict with one another and many women complained of not having enough energy to complete both. Letters like that of former model worker Deng Yulan argued for the impossibility of male standards for women. In her letter to Women of China, she writes of her situation, “Once I thought of all these difficulties [children, house work, labor outside of the home] then I naturally felt that my leaders and comrades do not understand my actual situation, that they are inconsiderate of my actual problems, and furthermore, they should not make demands on me the same as a man.”

Culture demanded that women shoulder most of the household burdens but, Deng argued, her leaders did not recognize this when they evaluated her work.

As depicted in Agricultural Production Heroines of the North-East, published in 1950, Deng Yulan was a model worker and heroine. According to the text, Deng was a poor rural woman who was a skilled and enthusiastic agricultural worker and Women’s Federation member. In her June 1963 letter to Women of China, Deng’s name is not placed next to her location, indicating recognition of her name and achievements. Her biography in Agricultural Heroines

84 Deng Yulan, “Shi shiji wenti, hai shi sixiang wenti” [It is a practical problem or a thought problem], Zhongguo Funü, no. 194 (June 1963): 13.
described Deng as a model worker who inspired women around her, including her own parents, and who convinced others of the importance of work for young women. She convinced the mothers of female daughters in her community to allow their daughters to work as well. Deng’s biography and her heroic achievements were based on her own disadvantages due to class and gender; Deng was forced to learn to be such a great worker because her family was poor and had no sons. These reports also mentioned how Deng helped women tied to their homes due to young children become involved in home-based tasks like animal rearing.85

Deng Yulan, in her letter to *Women of China*, described her praiseworthy work before the birth of her child: she was passionate, energetic, and enthusiastic, and both her comrades and leaders praised her. After the birth of her first child, Deng had fewer chances to leave the house to work and she began to feel out of touch with reality, feelings which were only amplified after she had more children. Even with the help of her mother at home, everyday Deng had to breastfeed, make clothes for her children, and tend to their illnesses. Eventually Deng did go back to work but while at work, she could not get her mind off of her children and her leaders criticized her for not working as hard as she did before. She proclaimed, “I feel that the female cadres with family and children can not be compared with the male comrades, female cadres who are not married can be compared to men, but once married with children, then the situation is different.”86 Although Deng did not go so far as to renounce the connection between women and the home or to declare that men should equally share the burdens of housework and children, her comments revealed her frustration at the double burden faced by working women. If a model

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worker like Deng Yulan felt that she must speak out about the unequal conditions for women, what did other women think?

The next month, He Ying from Harbin’s letter was published. While He’s letter also ended with her eventual redemption through productive labor, she presented her story of dealing with family and work in such a way that the narrative arc is less important in light of her statements criticizing the situation around her. Like Deng Yulan, He Ying saw her own situation change from ideal worker to overburdened and unsure mother. He Ying was a theater performer whose feelings changed immediately after giving birth to three children. She felt disheartened and she lost faith in her ability to continue to pursue her dream of being a theater performer. She wrote to the magazine, “My mood was very bad, plus for three to four years I didn’t practice so my skills became rusty, at that point I thought of my old dream, which was to become an outstanding people’s dance performer, the distance between this and my reality was very far.”

Soon, her leaders pushed her to receive new training and engage in physical labor and when she did, He Ying realized her errors. She felt that she owed the country something because it was the country and Party that cultivated her. He’s praises for her leaders and the redemptive power of work did not come without her own commentary about inequality. She added:

I have come to deeply understand that a female comrade who wants to make achievements in work, even when she continues doing the work she enjoys, she will have to work harder than men, there will always be a lot of difficulties and hardships but as long as she has a strong will and her thinking is upright, it is still possible to overcome hardship and difficulty.

He Ying argued that yes, women could overcome the difficulties surrounding them and participate in work, but it would require more work than it did for a man.

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87 He Ying “Yao juexin cong xiao tiandi li chongchu lai” [One must be determined to sally forth from one’s own little world], Zhongguo Funü, no. 195 (July 1963): 10.
88 Ibid., 10.
The letters about women’s labor did not entirely center on the obstacles facing working women. Some letter-writers like Fu Sui, who refused to give up her own professional dreams after being left to raise a child on her own, reaffirmed the value of female labor. In her July 1963 letter to the magazine, Fu described how she was left in Beijing without her husband or mother due to her job at a university. She began her letter, “Our female comrades are definitely unlike male comrades, apart from having to do the same kind of work as men, we still have to shoulder the duty of raising children.”\(^89\)

When she had a child, Fu’s work became harder to accomplish. She wrote, “But now, every day I spend a lot of time with my child, so when it comes to studying, working, and improving myself, they are all the more exhausting for me than they are for other people and I don’t perform as well.”\(^90\)

Despite these obstacles, Fu refused to push aside her own work to support her husband and child. She proclaimed, “A person like me, who has received a high level of education and cultivation from the Party, how can I confine myself in the family and ignore my responsibility to the people?”\(^91\)

She realized that her work and her value could not be replaced by her husband and son. Fu argued that her work was important and should be valued as such.

One letter from a male writer embodied the continued presence of “traditional” and “feudal” ideas within Chinese society concerning women and the home. Male writers were published in the discussion although their letters were sparse. This man, Chen Ji, wrote to the magazine in detail about the division of labor within his own home. He wrote, “When we had our first child, we both had a clear division of labor: I would focus my energy on doing

\(^89\) Fu Sui “Guanjian zaiyu ruhe duidai” [The crucial thing depends on how one treats it], *Zhongguo Funü*, no. 194 (July 1963): 11.
\(^90\) Ibid., 11.
\(^91\) Ibid., 11.
revolutionary work well, and she would manage family affairs well.”\footnote{Chen Ji, “Nüren yingdang duo gao jiawu” [Women should be engaged in family matters], Zhongguo Funü, no. 195 (July 1963): 13.} Both Chen and his wife worked at the local middle school, he as the head of the educational administration and she as a librarian. Chen’s prejudiced description of his wife’s dedication to caring for the home is clear. He wrote “As for her housework…the more she does, the more methodical she is.”\footnote{Ibid., 13.} In his letter, Chen seemed amazed at his wife’s shocking improvement in her work at home. His feelings on his wife were premised on his belief that his wife’s educational level and work abilities were lower than his own and thus, “her contribution to society is also smaller than mine.”\footnote{Ibid., 13.} Chen argued that his wife should stay home and do what she does best: care for the family and home.

However, Chen complained that his wife was not so placating after all. After giving birth to a few more children, her workload at home grew exponentially and, as Chen put it, “She started to raise objections and demands that she and I equally bear the burden of family matters. After I get off work, I would help her cook food and keep the children in good humor; I would change dirty clothes and also clean them myself. I did these things and I really loathed it.”\footnote{Ibid., 13.} He added indignantly, “I feel that home is no longer like home! What’s especially annoying is, in this conversation, her loving care for me has disappeared.”\footnote{Ibid., 13.} If both partners spend time on the family, Chen claimed, it would influence both of their work. In fact, working in the family had already influenced his own work and he certainly was not happy about it. He argued that if his wife continued to take care of the family, it would “create better work conditions for me.”\footnote{Ibid., 13.} What’s more, he continued, “Given that she already has all these kids and house chores, what
can she really achieve?" Chen’s wife’s chance to participate in labor outside the home had come and gone now that she had a few children. Chen’s inclusion in the conversation might be token; he might just be there as a representation of the feudal thinking that the ACWF was rallying against but it is also safe to assume that thinking like his was not entirely uncommon.

Men were not the only ones who saw women as naturally bound to the home and children. Women often addressed women’s natural roles as mothers in their letters. Unlike Chen’s letter, which argued that his wife was meant for the home because she was less skilled, Xiu Feng, a woman, argued that even when women are engaged in work, they will always be burdened with housework and childcare because of their gender. In her letter published September 1963, Xiu wrote, “Women’s peculiar physiological structure determines their role of taking up the natural and sacred duty towards society, that is, bringing up the next generation. No matter in what work women are engaged, they are all charged with this inescapable obligation.” Xiu’s statement was less of an argument for essential gender difference than it was a statement of societal standards for women, right or wrong.

Only a handful of letters questioned the association between women and the household. These letters fall into two categories, the first being those of women like the aforementioned Zhu Xifan and Hui Guizhi who left their children to the care of others while they pursued work. Even with voices like Zhu and Hui, the family remained the center of social life in Chinese Communist society. Hui Guizhi is one of the few divorced women published in the magazine during the “What do women live for” debate. The dearth of narratives from divorced women shows that despite the CCP’s divorce laws, the practice was still frowned upon in the early 1960s.

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98 Ibid., 13.
When Hui and her husband divorced in 1957, she was left with caring for their child. The burden was heavy but Hui proclaimed that with the help of the Party’s organizations and comrades, she “gradually became strong.” Eventually, Hui realized that she needed to focus on work. She wrote, “So, from the standpoint of individual happiness, I arranged to put the child in an old mother’s house, and asked her to raise it for me.” It was to pursue her own happiness that Hui left her child in the care of another and the rest of Hui’s letter did not mention her child, her ex-husband, or her relationship with either party. Instead Hui focused her narrative on her life and work amongst the masses. Hui left to teach the masses about the party’s policies and it became her source of happiness, partly because she saw the material results of her work in their lives. She wrote, “Every time I personally help the masses solve a particular problem, I feel so happy!” She listed her experience in the field, including her work with a mother named Chen Fuzhen. Chen was loaded down with a full house and children and she was not able to leave her home to work. Hui worked with the local Women’s Federation leader to help Chen acquire a pig for her home and this greatly improved the economic life of the family and it allowed them to live more productive and comfortable lives. Chen and Hui developed a friendship and still wrote to one another at the time of Hui’s letter to the magazine. In describing her work in helping an individual woman improve her life, Hui’s letter gives a glimpse of the kind of work that ACWF cadres did on the ground, one-on-one with women. Through interactions and work like this, Hui described how she had achieved the greatest happiness. She wrote, “I believe, for a female cadre who wants to achieve the greatest happiness, the most fundamental thing is that you make yourself wholeheartedly absorbed in work serving the people...[and] continually seek the

101 Ibid., 16.
102 Ibid., 16.
greatest joy and happiness in work.” Hui was one of the few women whose letter
predominantly ignored women’s place within the home.

The move toward different lifestyles for women was partly due to the increased
acceptance and availability of birth control. Birth control had been advocated by the magazine
since its inception but Chinese Communist Party propaganda had overwhelmingly focused on
pro-natalist policies and other policies that emphasized sex as meant for procreation alone. Although birth control was frequently featured in Women of China throughout the 1950s, it was

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103 Ibid., 16.
104 Dooling, Women’s Literary Feminism, 176.
not until the early 1960s that knowledge of birth control came to the villages.\textsuperscript{105} Due to limited medical services, the use of birth control was still somewhat limited but some of the letters showed an increasing acceptance and use of modern birth control. Zhu Xifan described birth control as the “positive” way.\textsuperscript{106} Zhu claimed that she adopted birth control “in order to reduce the trifles of family matters.”\textsuperscript{107} With birth control, she could plan births and now both she and her husband had more time for relaxation and happiness. The women who wrote to the magazine advocating birth control did so in the context of monogamous marriages. Throughout the discussion, there was no mention of unmarried women using birth control but the portrayal of birth control within the magazine was a nod towards a sexuality that was not entirely dominated by reproduction.

Women like Zhu Xifan and Hui Guizhi were the exception, not the rule, and the vast majority of women still had to juggle the responsibilities of both household work and work outside the home. Some letters, like those of Wang Cheng and Guo Yuxiang, another man who wrote to the magazine, argued that domestic work should be evenly divided between husband and wife and that women should be allowed to reorient their focus away from the home. Wang Cheng wrote:

\begin{quote}
Although husband and children are a part of life, they are not the main purpose for which we live….Whether in the years of struggle in the past, or at the present stage of peaceful reconstruction many women comrades have left their husbands and children for the purpose of serving the needs of the revolutionary undertaking. They have cherished far-reaching ideals and have done so correctly – in line with the spirit of serving the needs of the revolution.\textsuperscript{108}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{105} Davin, \textit{Woman-Work}, 135.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{106} Zhu Xifan, “Haizi jiawu meiyou yingxiang wo jinbu,” 12.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 12.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{108} Wang Cheng, “Buneng ba geming gongzuo he zhangfu haizi pinglie,”[One can’t place revolutionary work and husband and children on par with each other]. \textit{Zhongguo Funü}, no. 197 (Sept. 1963): 19, quoted and translated in Elisabeth Croll, \textit{The Women’s Movement in China}, 18.}
\end{footnotes}
Wang accepted that all women would have to marry and have children but these things, though a part of life, could not make women forget their real roles and their need to work.

Guo Yuxiang, a male cadre who asked to offer his opinion on the matter, reiterated the ideal of the Marriage Law of 1950 when he argued that husband and wife should be equal partners. He argued that “Family form[ed] due to husband and wife, family labor is also the responsibility and duty of both partners…If the male partner benefits from others’ efforts…this is…feudal thinking on the authority of the husband making trouble.” He added, “As a revolutionary husband and wife, at the same time as comrades, in the family you also should mutually help one another…this can also improve both husband and wife. If family matters are all placed on women, that is not the attitude of a revolutionary cadre towards his wife.”

Guo’s emphasis on the need for husband and wife to work together in and outside the home is a representation of the ideals of Chinese Communist Party policy and law.

Lifestyle, Materialism, and Social Status

Throughout the debate another theme appears: the difference in lifestyle and status between high ranking cadres and average women. After all of the Party’s talk of class struggle, creating an egalitarian society, and experiments like the Great Leap Forward, class difference remained in the People’s Republic of China. Ai Juan’s August 1963 letter presented these class differences most clearly. Her letter revealed that there was a sizable gap between the material riches of high ranking cadres’ lives and her own. Ai saw the lives of Women’s Federation leaders as supremely blessed while she, on the other hand, was not so blessed. She wrote, “I am

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110 Ibid., 19.
very unlucky because my husband is a little [low-ranking] cadre. Although he is very good to me and shows consideration for me in all respects… but, I am still not satisfied, the reason being that his position is low, his pay is little, the life he lives is not prosperous.” 111 After she had a child, the difference in her life and the lives of the higher ranking cadres became even clearer. She wished, “If he was a leader cadre, then I could be like our department leader’s wives, spacious living, wearing woolen clothing, eating fragrant and tasty food, and I could employ a nanny to sew and wash… living a cozy, happy life.” 112 Seeing these differences in status and material wealth made her want to divorce her husband but she had no reason, so she just treated him coldly.

After reading some of the essays featured in “What do women live for,” Ai began to question her thinking. Ai was not the only woman who referenced the influence of other articles on her thinking. Fellow letter-writer Zhang Wenjun wondered, after reading three of the articles surrounding “What do women live for,” whether or not her focusing of her energies at home was wrong. 113 Women, like the aforementioned Hui Guizhi and Wang Mingxia from Beijing, were often inspired to write to the magazine because they were so incensed by other letters published in the magazine. 114 In both of these cases it was a Liu Guilian’s letter about a local Women’s Federation leader who focused more on family than work that drove them to write to the magazine. This letter will be further discussed below but for now it is important to note the back and forth between women in the magazine.

112 Ibid., 17.
113 Zhang Wenjun, “Wo de xiangfa you cuo ma” [Does my opinion have faults], Zhongguo Funü, no. 194 (June 1963): 13.
Even after reading other essays in the magazine, Ai Juan still felt her views on this issue were not that wrong. She argued, “I also think this is a normal human feeling, since in today’s society, there are low and high positions, salaries are large and small, life is good and bad, so ‘Man struggles upward, water flows downward,’ [idiom that means ‘one should never give up one’s efforts to improve oneself morally and financially’] is a very natural thing. Besides, our revolutionary goal is to make people’s lives even better.”

Through pointing out the differences between the lives of higher ranking cadres and average cadres and, inevitably, party elites and the average Chinese citizen, Ai not so subtly revealed another deficiency of Chinese Communist Party ideology.

Just as Ai was inspired to write in to the magazine by other essays, many women did not agree with Ai’s sentiments and directly responded to her. One of these women was Wang Shiyi, who argued that a husband’s position is not important. What is important is the relationship between husband and wife. She wrote, “I strongly disagree with Comrade Ai Juan’s view that if a woman can find a husband in a comparatively high position…that is happiness. I think real happiness can only be attained if the husband and wife care and help one another in their married life.” Other women chimed in to support Ai’s vision of happiness, like Cai Yin. Cai wrote, “I think a woman will find her life the happiest, the most joyous and the most amusing if she can find a husband who works in the city, if she lives in a modern, industrial city, does a little light social work, and leads a rich diversified urban life with her husband.” The persistence of these visions of material wealth as happiness reveals a society that continued to be divided by class and status.

If anything, the “What do women live for” discussion shows that there was no single female experience. The ACWF and Chinese women were not monolithic. Despite the magazine’s title, which presents women as a cohesive whole, the picture that emerges from the letters is one of a fractured female populace consisting of individual women who, while appreciative and accepting of their own relationships with the women around them, did not necessarily see itself as a cohesive whole with the same desires and needs. The letters published during the “What do women live for” discussion also revealed how crucial the relationships between women were. These relationships not only inspired what individual women saw as correct behavior but they
were also influential in how individual women identified and viewed themselves. Furthermore, many of the letters explore the work women did among themselves and the relationships forged between ACWF cadres and the women who worked beneath them.

Liu Guilan’s letter, “Is the warmth of the family a female cadre’s greatest happiness” was frequently discussed from its initial publication in June 1963 until the end of “What do women live for” in December 1963. Liu’s letter shows how Women’s Federation leaders and cadres were subject to more intense criticisms and pressures than other women in their communities and were held up as examples of both what and what not to do. Zhao’s lifestyle choices became the subject of intense debate within the magazine, drawing criticisms from women who only knew her name through reading about her in the magazine. At the center of Liu’s letter was the story of the assistant leader of Liu’s local Women’s Federation, surname Zhao, who was viewed as both supremely happy and as a bad example of revolutionary work by those around her. Zhao had a pleasant family life with a well-placed husband and children that she managed with the help of a nanny. Liu remarked, “These two people’s burdens are not heavy, of course their lives are relatively happy.”

Zhao herself and some of those around her saw Zhao’s life as a happy one. She still worked but her family was what made her truly happy. Liu described Zhao: “On holidays she very enthusiastically wants to cook for her husband, although she is busy most days, she still has a smile on her face.”

Comrade Zhao seemingly had it all and a great attitude to boot, but there were women in the community who argued that Zhao was negligent in her work and that she had forgotten her true purpose in life. Liu described the thoughts of Zhao’s critics and wrote, “A person who lacks broad ideals in thought, who is negligent at work, who doesn’t

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118 Liu Guilan, “Xiao jiating de wennao shi bu shi nü ganbu de zui da xingfu” [Is the warmth of the family a female cadre’s greatest happiness], Zhongguo Funü no. 194 (June 1963): 14.
119 Ibid., 14.
strive to make progress, who doesn’t make achievements, this is regarded as happiness?"  

Zhao’s critics also argued that, “These last few years, an opposition has developed between Vice-Director Zhao’s life and work, her life demands have become higher and higher, and her enthusiasm for work has become lesser and lesser.” Due to her decreased enthusiasm for work, Zhao has started to delegate her tasks to others and her critics charged that she did not understand the situation around her.

Liu did not pass judgment on Zhao’s situation and stated in her letter that she believed that both arguments had reason. As a Women’s Federation leader, Zhao was supposed to be an example to Liu and others but Liu was confused if Zhao’s actions were correct or not. Liu asked the editor, “Comrade Editor, what is true happiness? In our time, what kind of happiness should a revolutionary woman pursue? Do you regard being fulfilled with the warmth of the family a problem? Please tell me.” Liu’s letter points out the ways in which women related to one another and Women’s Federation leaders.

Some women very clearly expressed their lack of sympathy for women who could not adequately manage family and work or who placed family above everything else. In the process of comparing their experiences to Zhao and women like her, Zhu Xifan and Zhong Guanhua, another letter-writer, presented themselves as more enlightened and liberated than the others. Other women were a benchmark to judge one’s own actions and mindset. Comparing one’s own achievements in work to those of women like Zhao was a way for these women to take pride in their own accomplishments and to evaluate their own achievements.

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120 Ibid., 14.
121 Ibid., 14.
122 Ibid., 14.
Zhong Guanhua’s letter, “Seek happiness in revolutionary work,” was a direct response to Liu’s narrative about Vice-Director Zhao. Zhong identified herself as someone who knew Zhao personally and she argued that those who believed Zhao is happy were wrong. She wrote, “I believe if a revolutionary female cadre thinks that she is doing good work, putting revolution and collective benefit in the primary position...[and] making a contribution towards the people, even if what one eats and wears are both lacking, I believe this is incomparable happiness.”\textsuperscript{123} Zhong contrasted her depiction of Zhao’s life by describing her own life. Zhong herself personally chose to live apart from her husband to pursue work. Through explaining her own choices, Zhong declared that housework and labor were not as difficult to manage as Zhao and those around her made it seem. Zhu Xifan also showed her unsympathetic feelings for women who could not manage revolutionary work and duties at home. She ended her letter to the magazine with the following, “I don’t agree with female cadres who have problems dealing with work, children, and family problems, emphasizing practical troubles, when actually the problem lies in their thought.”\textsuperscript{124} Zhu and Zhong personally sacrificed to find happiness in work and in their letters they both demand that those who can not do so should not be pitied.

Not every relationship between women was based on self-evaluation and criticism. Many of the women mentioned the female cadres and leaders who helped them overcome their problems. For all of the later criticism about how these letters ignore the importance of the CCP and the collective, an overwhelming number of letters point not only to the importance of relying on Party workers, but also point to the importance of working with others to solve problems. Fu Sui mentioned that her female leaders and comrades “discovered my situation and helped my

\textsuperscript{123} Zhong Guanhua “Zai geming gongzuo zhong xiuqiu xingfu” [Seek happiness in revolutionary work], \textit{Zhongguo Funü}, no. 195 (July 1963): 13.
\textsuperscript{124} Zhu Xifan “Haizi jiawu meiyou yingxiang wo jinbu,” 12.
advancement. They made me realize that my thinking was wrong,” when she was falling behind in her work after giving birth. She pointed to the examples of the other women around her as influences on her desire to change her ways. She wrote, “In comparison to the numerous outstanding women of New China, I truly feel ashamed.” Fu envisioned herself in relation to the work of the other women of New China and she compared her mindset, achievements, and consciousness to their own. She hoped that she would be able to live up to their example. Her proud image of the laboring women of the new society she lived in reveals both an admiration for their work and a hope for her own future. So many other women had overcome difficulties and hardships and it was their example that Fu wanted to live up to.

_Liberation and Pride_

The issue of whether or not Chinese women were liberated and happy is not easily resolved since it is far from being as black and white as liberation versus oppression. Many of the women who wrote to *Women of China* saw themselves as liberated working women. They genuinely believed that the society they lived in, the opportunities available to them, and their situations in general were greatly improved from those of women who lived before the founding of the People’s Republic. Wang Liangzhen ebulliently described the opportunities available for women in her letter and wrote, “Today, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and Mao, women are in government, they have economically liberated themselves, we have achieved the right to participate in every kind of work. Now that we have rights, we should give

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125 Fu Sui “Guanjian zaiyu ruhe duidai,” 11.
126 Ibid., 11.
priority to our responsibility: our responsibility for revolution and construction.”Regardless of the double burdens, sacrifices, and the larger party politics, many women genuinely felt they were moving in the right direction. While it is very easy to see the mechanisms and culture of the time as repressive, there were aspects of women’s lives that were objectively better. What they saw around them made them believe that women now had better lives than they ever had before. The pride in Wang’s assertion that “Us women are one half of the nationwide population, we are a strength that can’t be ignored,” is palpable. Wang’s statement expressed her belief that for the first time women were a powerful force that was capable of anything now that women had been given opportunities. Although feelings these were encased within a larger political system that co-opted women’s labor and promoted false egalitarianism for political gain, they were still there. Based on the narratives presented in the discussion around “What do women live for,” it is clear that in the early 1960s feelings of empowerment existed next to women’s complaints about their lives and the prejudices they faced.

Zhong Guanhua wrote to Women of China emphasizing her ability to determine her own life. Married in 1956, Zhong and her husband had great feelings for one another but their occupations meant they were separated by a vast distance and could only meet once a year. Her friends and family, including her husband, told her to give up her job, live with her husband, and enjoy the benefits of his cushy military position. But, Zhong asked, “I feel: a revolutionary female cadre and a member of the Chinese Communist Party, how can she only consider personal happiness and not consider the demands of work? If every person only cared for themselves, only cared for being content with reuniting husband and wife and family life, who

128 Ibid., 13.
would build socialism? So, I resolutely refuse their advice.”\textsuperscript{129} She affirmed that she was very happy because she had the responsibility of being a team leader in her office. Her work group had become so accomplished that she was given a trip to Beidaihe, the summer resort of CCP elites, to relax. Her letter was a statement of her own pride in her achievements.

Even stay at home mothers, women who would not be considered all that “liberated” by the Chinese Communist Party, felt pride in their work at home and expressed it through their writings to \textit{Women of China}. Zhang Wenjun, a woman who was more dedicated to her work in the home, wondered if she was doing the right thing by focusing on her family. Even with her

doubts, Zhang clearly felt that her labor within the home had merit for the nation as a whole and should be recognized as such. She wrote, “I nurtured five children…if I foster them well, that is a much greater contribution to the nation than myself, even if I sacrifice myself a little, it is worth it.” She felt pride for her work within the home and declared that if she did not do the work at home, her home would be a mess. Her husband obviously did not offer a helping hand to his wife, so Zhang took it upon herself to do it. She wrote, “But, I am the mother of five children, if I didn’t choose to carry this heavy burden at home, wouldn’t the children’s studying be affected?” She still worked, but when she was at work she often thought of her family and her co-workers were unsatisfied with this. Building a strong family of well-raised children was Zhang’s purpose in life and despite the calls for women to place work over family, she had found pride in her work at home.

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130 Zhang Wenjun, “Wo de xiangfa you cuo ma” [Does my opinion have faults], Zhongguo Funü, no. 194 (June 1963): 13.
131 Ibid., 13.
Conclusion

In December 1963, Women of China editor Dong Bian closed the conversation surrounding “What do women live for” with one last editor’s note. She noted that although space was limited and the magazine was only able to publish a selection of the letters it received, all of the letters sent in by readers were helpful. She wrote that the letters raised “the problems of working women dealing with children and family.” Furthermore, she argued that women “apart from personally wanting a positive method to solve these problems, they still demand departments, enterprise leaders, and society to assist them as well as the concern and help of family and workers.” Dong felt that the women of China not only wanted help in individually resolving these issues but that they also still wanted and needed the assistance of the ACWF in furthering their interests and changing society. In the closest thing to an answer to the question “What do women live for,” Dong argued that the ACWF must be involved in lessening the burdens of family and children for working women. The ACWF must help women focus their energy on work and production. She ended her note with, “We believe, with the help of every aspect of society and the cooperation of family members, we only need to clearly put revolutionary work in the first position in working women’s thinking, and then they can definitely arrange children and family appropriately, and do good revolutionary work.” What women live for is work and this should be given priority in the minds of working women, not home life. In her final note, Dong did explicitly demand a complete reconfiguration of household duties but her belief that women must work implicitly argued that something must change in society, whether it be a change in culture or a change in CCP policies.

133 Ibid., 11.
134 Ibid., 11.
Although most of the letters that questioned party policy and ideology ended with comments on the redemptive power of work and an overwhelming majority of letters still used socialist rhetoric and imagery, the discussion around “What do women live for” was attacked by Maoist elements within the Chinese Communist Party. A 1964 article in *Red Flag*, a radical Maoist publication, entitled “How the problem of women should be viewed” argued, “‘What do women live for?’ is the same as to admit that women can have a special conception of life and conception of the world of their own not because of class but because of their sex. Such a raising of the question is improper and not in accordance with the Marxist-Leninist class viewpoint.”

Wan Muchun, the author of the *Red Flag* article, argued that the perceived double burden of working women was a myth and that it was actually a matter of whether or not the woman had revolutionary consciousness. He added, “So the question here is primarily a question of whether or not the woman comrade has the firm will and determination to dedicate herself to the revolutionary cause of the proletariat.” *Women of China* was furthering bourgeois thought because the magazine and its editors were promoting the idea that women had their own distinctly female views and experiences. Furthermore, it was impossible, according to Wan, that a woman in Communist China could even wonder what she lived for. He proclaimed, “How can it be imagined that a revolutionary woman cadre does not even know what she lives for, and is puzzled all day long as to whether she should put her husband, her children, and her family in the first place or her revolutionary work in the first place?” Simply in asking the question, *Women of China* had aligned itself against the Chinese Communist Party. The emphasis on individual experience and women’s issues in “What do women live for” brought backlash against the

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136 Ibid., 22.

137 Ibid., 22.
magazine in the face of rising Maoism in the years before the Cultural Revolution. Wan’s argument that women should “raise their consciousness and determination in taking part in revolutionary struggles, [and] not draw their attention to so-called ‘domestic bliss’” could fall in line with the sentiments Dong Bian expressed in her closing editor’s note to “What do women live for.” However, Wan ignored the cultural and societal standards that remained in Chinese society.

Further criticisms launched at Women of China argued that the discussions in the magazine turned women’s attention “away from political and revolutionary issues and encouraged them to personalize and individualize their problems.” In the eyes of many, the magazine’s problem was that it separated the personal from the collective. A letter to Women of China from the Women’s Federation of Meng County in Shaanxi province critiqued the magazine. The letter described the magazine as “displaying the signboard of solving so-called personal problems of women, [in doing so] the magazine publicized revisionism and tried to make the women’s class viewpoints blurred and lead women to show no concern over major state affairs, but merely to show concern over the life of their individual families and go after so-called happiness of husbands and children.” The argument was that Dong Bian and Women of China were trying to make women “return once more to the kitchen.” In light of the actual content of the reader letters and discussion, these criticisms appear unfair, since at least more than half of the letters described the joys of work. The angry reactions of female readers, like Zhang Yubing and Chan Koubao who wrote to the magazine in 1966, reveal that the varied

138 Ibid., 23.
139 Croll, Feminism and Socialism in China, 307.
140 “Letter from Women’s Federation Meng xian, Shaanxi,” Zhongguo Funü, (July 1966), quoted and translated in Croll, Feminism and Socialism in China, 308.
opinions sent in by readers to *Women of China* during the 1963 discussions did not express the views of every woman. Chan, for example, described “What do women live for” as a “vain attempt to make our revolutionary women cadres and masses of the revolutionary women indifferent to major affairs of the country and of the world and make them…fall into the quagmire of bourgeois love for good food, good wine and good times.”

In 1966, Mao Zedong was asked to write a new title page for the magazine and *Women of China* thus aligned itself with the Maoist faction. Dong Bian was removed from her position as editor in 1966 amid widespread criticism and a new staff was chosen. The new magazine staff immediately declared that the magazine would now focus on the needs of ordinary women, meaning peasants and workers. The staff wrote that they were “pursuing proletarian politics and helping revolutionize the ideology of women workers and commune members, People’s Liberation Army women, revolutionary girl students, revolutionary women cadres, and revolutionary women intellectuals.” The Cultural Revolution’s emphasis on class struggle and the Maoist belief that class was the primary way to analyze the oppression of women meant that, as Johnson succinctly puts it, “women had no special interests, only common class interests with men. Therefore women did not need a separate organization.”

The discussion of gender and sexuality issues that the ACWF and its primary organ had kept alive since 1949 was no longer necessary and in 1967, both the All-China Women’s Federation and *Women of China* were closed.

The letters from women across China received and published by *Women of China* throughout the “What do women live for” discussion in 1963 described the everyday struggles

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144 Johnson, *Women, the Family and Peasant Revolution*, 181.
and annoyances of women. For the women who wrote to Women of China, describing their everyday problems was not necessarily a political move. Most of the letters did not end with a resolution to the question “What do women live for” and none of them ended with a call for new policies. The women who wrote to the magazine were not writing to insist on an overhaul of CCP policy, but rather to express what they saw around them. Their voices expose a culture and society where women still faced obstacles to equality, whether it be a lack of understanding of women’s problems or a lingering cultural link between women and the home. Their voices also show individual women who felt that things were better than they were before and who took pride in their progress and work. As Gail Hershatter points out in the introduction to her book, Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth Century Shanghai, official history often removes any traces of women’s history that do not “clearly fall into the categories of suffering and resistance.” The discussion around “What do women live for” offers a history that does not neatly fit into one of suffering, cooption, or resistance. The discussion and the issues of work, family, material status, and culture that it brought up reminds us that not all histories can be easily described by politics and the state.

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