

1928

By the early 1920s, China had more than 200,000 women workers, mostly concentrated in the textile mills and tobacco factories in the Yangzi River Delta. Far from being passive, these women workers repeatedly staged strikes and protests to demand higher wages, shorter working hours and better labour conditions. This posed a conundrum for the newly established Chinese Communist Party (CCP): were female workers supposed to have their own dedicated organisations? Or were they to be subsumed in class-based trade unions that paid no attention to gender distinctions? After initial hesitations, in 1923, the Party passed a motion that made it explicit that women workers' movements should not be separated from the labour movement at large. To build their base, prominent female Party members such as Xiang Jingyu and Yang Zhihua went to work on the shop floor, building workers' schools and leading strikes themselves. Despite the tragic interruption of their work in the wake of the breakdown of the First United Front between Communists and Nationalists in 1927, these early efforts laid the foundation for women-work in factories when the CCP returned to the cities after taking power in the 1940s. Starting from Xiang Jingyu's tragic execution on 1 May 1928, this essay looks back at the CCP's engagements with women workers in those momentous years.

Feminist Agitation inside Chinese Factories

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At dawn on 1 May 1928, thirty-three-year-old Xiang Jingyu was publicly executed by the police of the Nationalist Government in Hankou. According to witnesses' recollections, on her way to the execution ground, Xiang shouted revolutionary slogans at the huge crowd that had gathered. As one of the earliest members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the inaugural head of the Party's Women's Department, Xiang's martyrdom marked the end of the earliest feminist initiatives within the CCP.

In recent assessments of the CCP's gender politics during revolutionary times, the consensus is that, in general, the Chinese Communists subsumed gender issues under the imperative of a masculine class politics.¹ Evidence of this includes the CCP's overall hostility towards 'bourgeois feminism' and autonomous women's organisations, as well as the marginalisation of women leaders within the Party. Despite the persistent struggles and calculated manoeuvres of Communist feminists, the Party to this day has remained male-centred and has displayed, overall, a strong masculinist, misogynist culture. However, by revisiting the literature on the earliest interaction between labour activism and the CCP's 'women-work' (妇女工作), this essay brings to light a more ambiguous and contested relationship between gender and class politics during the communist revolution. Following Delia Davin, I use 'women-work' instead of 'women's work' in translating 妇女工作, which covers all sorts of activities the CCP sponsored to empower women, including revolutionary struggle, production, legal reform, literacy and hygiene campaigns, and so on.² This essay seeks to elucidate how political processes, especially those involving women revolutionaries, were deeply intertwined with individual agency and contingency—hardly fitting into teleological narratives featured either in the Party's official accounts or in some recent popular discussions.

An Inclusive Feminist Agenda within the Party

On its establishment in 1919—mainly thanks to German Marxist feminist Clara Zetkin's efforts—the Communist International (Comintern) requested its branches in each country set up a women's bureau and recruit proletarian women to join the Communist-led unions. While the first congress of the CCP in 1921, an all-male event, could only briefly comment on the general principles of women-work, at this incipient stage, the Party maintained a much more inclusive attitude towards independent feminist movements than it would in later periods.³ In Beijing, Miao Boying had been active in Marxist study groups since 1919 and became the first woman to join the Party, in July 1921. Later, in 1922, Miao and her colleagues formed the Women's Rights League (女权运动同盟会), an organisation that sought to compete with the liberal-leaning Women's Suffrage Association (女子参政协进会) to broaden the latter's suffragist agenda by transforming gender relations in all sectors such as legal equality in marriage, equal pay, paid maternity leave and women's access to all educational institutions.⁴

In Shanghai, although she was not counted as a formal member in the first Party congress, Wang Huiwu, the wife of founding Party member Li Da, took care of the logistics of the meeting and was entrusted with developing the CCP's women's program together with Gao Junman, the wife of Chen Duxiu, the General Secretary of the CCP from 1921 to 1927. At the same time, in the autumn of 1922, along with a fellow feminist named Wang Yizhi, Wang Huiwu also worked on cultivating informal ties with prominent women activists outside the Party, including women in the Nationalist Party (Guomindang, or GMD) and Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) activists who specialised in labour conditions and taught at the CCP-sponsored Shanghai Pingmin Girls' School.

It is worth noting that this strategy of reaching out to women's rights groups with different political backgrounds was far from a universally endorsed strategy within the Party in this period. While these women's vocal claims and Wang Huiwu's anarchist tendencies encountered strong resistance and attacks from male feminist Party members such as Mao Dun and Chen Wangdao, others were more supportive. Chief among them was Li Dazhao, then head of the CCP's Beijing branch, who maintained that 'as long as China is under warlord control, all civil rights groups of

this type essentially promote the interests of the public and should be supported'.⁵ He advocated for women's rights organisations, whether under the rubric of the Women's Rights League or the Women's Suffrage Association, to be established in every province in China.

Non-Communist Mobilisations of Women inside Factories

The early 1920s also saw the culmination of the first wave of industrial labour activism in Chinese history, in which women workers played a crucial role. As the CCP had just been established in Shanghai, local Communists considered linking up with women workers to be a great opportunity to build up their base and strengthen their forces.

To be sure, women workers had protested and joined strikes as industrialisation began in China in the late nineteenth century. Concentrated in the silk, cotton and tobacco industries, women became the bulk of the labour force and frequently participated in episodes of labour unrest. For example, in Shanghai, the first recorded women's strike took place in 1894 as textile workers in Yangshupu District protested against a pay cut—a mobilisation that ended with eight of them being arrested.⁶ In August 1911, 2,000 women from four silk filatures went on strike, asking for a raise—and were successful. In May 1912, the Shanghai Women Silk Workers' Association (上海缫丝女工同仁会), the first proto-union for Shanghai filature workers, was founded, with a strong focus on upgrading women workers' low skills as a means to protect their jobs. In the summer of 1917, more than 1,000 women workers in the British American Tobacco Company (BAT) went on a strike that lasted several weeks to push back against pay cuts, which was followed by another, three-day strike by 1,000 women workers in the Japanese-owned Nikka Spinning Company. Both strikes ended with the factory owners partially compromising.⁷ Overall, from 1895 to 4 May 1919, it was estimated that there were no fewer than fifty-seven strikes in which women were the main participants.⁸

Workers' activism in this period was mostly defensive rather than an offensive strategy born of class consciousness. In most cases, their mobilisations were facilitated by native-place associations and gangs, and their demands revolved around higher wages, shorter hours, better working conditions and more employment opportunities. This is why, when both the Nationalists and the Communists tried to mobilise them to unionise—which inevitably disrupted production, not necessarily resulting in gains

and oftentimes causing a backlash—many women workers initially saw ‘unionisation’ as the cause of rather than the solution to their problems.⁹

Women workers’ struggle peaked in 1922. According to available data, that year more than 30,000 women workers went on strike eighteen times in about sixty factories in Shanghai, Hubei and Guangdong.¹⁰ The most notable strike was in August, when more than 10,000 women workers from the Shanghai Zhabei Silk Factory went on strike for ten days, demanding higher wages, shorter hours and the right to establish an independent, women-only union, the so-called Shanghai Women’s Industrial Progress Union (SWIPU, 上海女子工业进德会).¹¹ However, this union was not a spontaneous creation of the silk workers but was organised by Mu Zhiying, a female gangster from the Subei region who had the support of a gang and was backed by assemblymen who were also from Subei and were filature owners themselves.

Having just passed the ‘Resolution on the Women’s Movement’ (关于妇女运动的决议) at the Second Congress of the CCP a month earlier, Communist leaders regarded the strike in August 1922 as a milestone in Shanghai’s labour history, and male feminists such as Shao Lizi started to write extensively about the event.¹² However, interestingly, no-one within the CCP at the time of the strike was able to make real connections with the women workers on the ground. This was mainly because at the time, the CCP’s women’s program was undergoing a major leadership transition, from Wang Huiwu to Xiang Jingyu, and they did not have spare capacity to build ties inside the factories.

Xiang Jingyu’s United-Front Approach

A member of the New Citizen’s Study Society (新民学会) that was co-founded by Mao Zedong in Hunan Province in 1918, Xiang had sailed to France in December 1919 with her fellow Hunanese Cai Hesen, Cai Chang and their mother, Ge Jianhao. In France, Xiang and Cai Hesen formed the ‘Xiang–Cai Alliance’ (向蔡同盟), a new form of marriage based on revolutionary romance. The couple and their fellow students—including Li Lisan, who in the following years would become one of the most prominent Chinese labour leaders (see Perry’s essay in the present volume)—studied French and Marxist theories while actively taking part in the struggle for the rights of Chinese student-workers being waged at that time. Their political activism so upset French authorities that it

led to their deportation in September 1921. On returning to China in December that year, the couple settled in Shanghai, joining the CCP's burgeoning Shanghai branch.

At that time, Wang Huiwu had just started publishing the Marxist feminist journal *Women's Voices* (妇女声). Originally, Xiang did not show interest in dedicating herself to the Party's women-work and in fact kept her distance from Wang's projects. Xiang's writing during this period was mainly focused on China's national liberation. However, at the Second Party Congress in 1922, Wang's husband, Li Da, failed to be reelected and his position was taken over by Cai Hesen. It was believed that Xiang's appointment as the inaugural head of the Women's Department was partly due to the fact that she was Cai Hesen's spouse. However, even after taking over the leadership of the Women's Department, Xiang remained ambivalent about involving herself in women-work.¹³

Having assumed this leadership role quite abruptly and facing a host of preexisting organisations that were already organising women in the factories, including native-place associations, gangs and the YMCA, Xiang found it difficult to penetrate the shop floor. The most noticeable connection between Xiang and female labour activism at this stage was a few articles Xiang wrote in the autumn of 1923, praising the Zhabei strike of the previous year, supporting a detained silk worker in the SWIPU and calling for feminist associations in Shanghai to support women workers.

The turning point in her engagement with women-work came at the Third Party congress in the summer of 1923. The bloody 7 February Incident earlier that year had dampened prospects for the Communists' ambition to launch a workers' revolution (see Luo's essay in the present volume). In despair, the CCP accepted the Comintern's proposal to form an alliance with the GMD, which came to be known as the first GMD-CCP Cooperation (国共合作) or the First United Front (统一战线). It was in this context that Xiang Jingyu shifted her attitude about taking charge of the Women's Department. Maintaining strong nationalist sentiments that she had acquired while growing up in Hunan and then studying in France, Xiang was pleased to see that the Party had finally committed itself to promoting a national revolution. Now, she could begin women-work in earnest, focusing especially on strengthening ties with independent feminist groups.¹⁴

It was through the United Front that Xiang showed her political vision and talent in advancing women's rights. From the Third Congress of the CCP until mid-1925, utilising the resources of the GMD to consolidate

her own program, she channelled an extraordinary amount of energy into establishing the foundation for a broad-based women's movement. Although Xiang had a record of criticising women's suffrage movements, she still acknowledged the importance and legitimacy of these struggles. To her, the only way to develop a mass movement truly for women was to integrate the struggles of feminist groups with those of workers.

Communists Making Inroads Among Women Workers

During this period of cooperation between the CCP and the GMD (1924–27), Communist organisers were able to make significant inroads among women workers and cultivate a number of Communist women labour leaders. Much of the credit goes to Yang Zhihua, then a sociology student enrolled at the CCP-sponsored Shanghai University, who, after 1949, would become the architect of women-work within the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU, 中华全国总工会).¹⁵ Since being recruited by Xiang in 1924, Yang had put great effort into establishing links with the women workers at the BAT factories by fully immersing herself in the workers' daily lives, taking time to befriend them and 'even adopting their style of dress'.¹⁶ Yang and her colleagues also taught literacy classes in working-class neighbourhoods during this period.

Having gained the trust and respect of these female tobacco workers, Yang mobilised a large number of them to join the general strike in the wake of the May Thirtieth Incident of 1925 (see Leong's essay in the present volume) and serve as propagandists for the cause. By September 1925, the number of women recruits into the Party had risen sharply to about 1,000—ten times the number before the May Thirtieth Incident. The following year, this organising effort eventually facilitated the demise of the power base of gangster Mu Zhiying among women silk workers, signalling that the CCP was finally making inroads into social space previously dominated by gang societies.¹⁷

Xiang's Final Years and Legacy

In October 1925, three years after the first leadership transition, the CCP's Women's Department was shaken up again, as Xiang Jingyu and Cai Hesun were sent to Moscow for a study trip and Yang Zhihua became deputy head. Xiang's abrupt departure was due to personal reasons that were inevitably entangled with political power plays. In late 1925, she

started a relationship with Peng Shuzhi, then an important theorist in the Party and later an exile and leader of the Fourth International. The Party stepped in to save the endangered relationship by sending Xiang and Cai away from Shanghai. Despite the Party's efforts, they divorced in Moscow in 1926.

When Xiang returned from Moscow in early 1927, Yang Zhihua had already become the *de facto* head of the Women's Department, and Xiang was instead assigned to work in the Party committee in Hubei Province, based in Wuhan. In Shanghai, Yang continued mobilising women workers until the 12 April Incident, when the GMD started to brutally purge Communists nationwide (see S.A. Smith's essay in the present volume).¹⁸ In July the same year, when attacks on the Communists reached their peak in Wuhan and the local Party branch was forced to relocate, Xiang insisted on staying. Xiang and another Communist, Xia Minghan, were arrested by the police in March 1928, and her public execution on 1 May served as a final testimony that the heyday of mass women's movements in Chinese urban areas had ended.

It was not until the late 1940s that the Communist Party returned to the cities and resumed its women-work by establishing the All-China Democratic Women's Federation (ACDWF, 中华全国民主妇联), in 1949. This new mass organisation was originally designed as a united-front organisation, serving to liaise between women across all social sectors—an approach that resembled Xiang Jingyu's vision of woman-work. Also in 1949, after two decades of tumultuous trajectories in her personal and political life, Yang Zhihua became the inaugural head of the Women's Department of the ACFTU. Thanks to her earlier experience in the Shanghai factories, Yang maintained a close relationship with workers on the ground and designed policies that were based on firsthand observations and were highly beneficial to the workers, such as the 'Regulations on Protections for Women Workers' (女工保护条例) of 1953, which included fifty-six days of paid maternity leave, employer-sponsored childcare services and other benefits.

Some Lessons

By restoring agency to these feminist members in the CCP and revealing both the structural limitations to and the historical contingency conditioning their fates, this essay makes two interventions in our current discussion about gender and labour politics in this period. First, I suggest

that the CCP in its earliest days took the issue of women workers seriously not only because it was ingrained in Marxist dogma, but also because women made up a substantial portion of the industrial working class and, therefore, were crucial to the CCP's base-building efforts. Despite the disappointing and tragic results, these earlier mobilisations and the organisational infrastructure that was built for this purpose shaped the nature of the CCP's later women-work. It was only after 1957 that the feminist mass-line umbrella organisation of the ACDWF was completely subjugated to the Party's absolute authority.¹⁹

Second, while it has been well recognised that the CCP subsumed gender issues under the imperative of a masculine class politics, I highlight that, in its incipient stage of development, feminist causes did not always toe the class line. Women-work led by Xiang and her colleagues in fact recognised the importance of building a coalition with women in all social sectors and dedicated much effort to networking with them—a strategy that was largely made possible by the cooperation between the CCP and the GMD but unfortunately ended with the collapse of that fragile alliance.