

1961

Launched in 1958 as a counterpart to rural collectivisation during the Great Leap Forward, the Urban Commune Movement mobilised city residents—mostly women—for production in small workshops and factories. The domestic work left behind by the newly employed ‘housewives’ was then socialised through the development of canteens, kindergartens, and service centres. While collectivisation in the countryside was slowed because of the great famine, urban communes were revamped in 1960–61 and, although social welfare services deteriorated, many of the factories survived through the decade. This essay takes us to one of these small female-staffed workshops in Beijing.

Anatomy of a Woman Worker: Collectivisation and Labour during the Great Leap Forward

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In March 1961, there were 184 women working in a powder metallurgy factory at Beijing's Tianqiao Urban Commune. Established in 1958 as a neighbourhood enterprise, this factory in Xuanwu District employed almost exclusively women, all of whom were 'unskilled' labourers, supervised by thirty-one male managers and technicians. This was not unusual for urban commune factories, where a stated objective was to harness the 'reserve army' of labour—which referred mainly to women without paid employment, who were usually called 'housewives' (家庭妇女). Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policymakers claimed that this deployment of female labour would allow for a massive expansion in production while furthering the goal to 'complete women's liberation' (妇女彻底的解放).¹ Commune leaders thus aimed to transform 'housewives' into 'workers' (工人) and to free them from burdensome but 'non-productive' domestic chores.

But on 15 March 1961, when the Neighbourhood Office of the Beijing Party Committee reported on the situation at Tianqiao, they made no mention of women's liberation or industrial productivity and wrote instead about the workers' bodies. The committee claimed that fifty-eight of the 113 women surveyed were suffering from gynaecological problems. Twenty-four had vulvitis, vaginal infections, or chronic pelvic infections; nineteen had irregular periods (two among those had amenorrhea); six suffered from a prolapsed uterus; and nine suffered from cervical erosion (子宫颈糜烂).²

Unfortunately, we found only one other short and uninformative document about this particular factory, though there are a few sources on the Tianqiao Commune more generally.³ Despite having little information about the site or the survey, this single report still offers significant insights into how CCP observers envisioned and constructed productive and non-productive female bodies during the Great Leap Forward (1958–62)—a time when an unprecedented number of women joined the industrial workforce as part of a radical effort to change social and

gender relationships.⁴ What the surveyors saw in these women workers and how they interpreted material and bodily phenomena hint at the gendered assumptions that framed the CCP's understanding and utilisation of labour, and shaped the nature of women's experiences and their potential liberation during the Great Leap and beyond.

The Factory and the Report

It is difficult to ascertain the specific industrial processes that occurred in the Tianqiao factory. The term 'powder metallurgy' (粉末冶金) is vague and covers a wide range of techniques, from the relatively crude to the highly sophisticated. The document offers almost no information about the factory's products, other than references to workshops for 'iron oxide' (氧化铁) and 'bearings' (轴承). Earlier sources on the Tianqiao Commune note ferric oxide as one of the unit's major products, together with electric switches, mica condensers, and tungsten wire recycled from discarded light bulbs.⁵ The details in the report suggest this enterprise was like most commune factories, which were generally low-tech, sometimes makeshift, and reliant on residents' activism and initiative. It was often the workers themselves who provided the initial capital by toiling without pay for a few months. Larger state-owned factories might offer tools, equipment, and basic technical instruction, but mechanisation was minimal at best, and communes gathered their production materials from industrial scraps. These enterprises also employed mostly women labourers, who performed lower-skilled and repetitive tasks to produce everyday goods (clothing, shoes, etc.) or semi-finished objects for larger state-owned (and more heavily male-staffed) factories.⁶ The report's comments about workplace safety suggest that, like many such operations, the Tianqiao site lacked both the capacity and, to a certain extent, the will to properly care for its workers.

When the writers of the report described the women at the Tianqiao factory, they spoke of weak bodies, assailed by illness, at levels they found alarming. In their effort to ascertain the causes of what they saw as a health crisis, the surveyors pointed to three factors: poor hygiene; labour that 'was not suitable for women to perform'; and particular negative effects that cold and damp environments had on female bodies. The first problem apparently developed because the factory had only one small shower room with four showerheads. Women had to wait in long lines at the end of the working day and, as a result, 'many of the manufacturing personnel

went long periods without bathing; some had even gone several months since their last shower.' Dirt mixed with metal powder from the factory thus 'soaked into their skin and penetrated into their bodies, giving rise to vulvitis and in some cases further developing into vaginitis and pelvic infection.'⁷

The surveyors also thought the women were working too hard, even by Great Leap standards. The report argued that women ought not engage in tasks that required heavy lifting, but apparently 'the heavy labour was all done by women' at Tianqiao. 'Their labour enthusiasm runs very high,' it continued, 'especially among many of the activists, who want to set a good example by performing hard labour.' Unfortunately, such strenuous activities were thought to 'lead to irregular periods or a prolapsed uterus.'⁸ The head of the iron dioxide workshop—a twenty-four-year-old 'city-wide 8 March Red Banner pace-setter and district-wide model worker'—reportedly twisted her back while loading a truck. In the three months since the accident, she had not had a menstrual period, had developed 'weak legs,' and periodically 'spit up blood.'⁹ Finally, the committee noted that cold, damp conditions were notoriously bad for menstruating women. Part of the manufacturing process apparently required personnel to stand for long stretches in frigid rooms wearing high rubber boots and immersing their hands in cold water. Probably drawing on Chinese medical knowledge, which posits that such conditions allow poisonous *qi* (气) to enter the body, the committee explained that women who worked with cold water while menstruating could 'quite easily' develop gynaecological problems.¹⁰

The report concluded by suggesting these problems stemmed in part from the fact that 'the leadership in this factory did not take work safety issues as seriously as they should,' but also from the inexperience of leaders and cadres who might not know, 'for example, that women are not suited to perform hard labour.'¹¹ The committee then made some basic recommendations: install extra showers, establish a women's committee, ensure that workers avoid cold water while menstruating, and stop heavy lifting altogether. 'All hard labour that is unsuitable for women should be performed by male workers,' the writers insisted, adding that men could be brought in from elsewhere if needed.¹²

Gendered Silences

Given the nature of the worksite and the historical context, it is surprising that the Tianqiao report made no mention of, or did not fully discuss, other aetiologies for gynaecological problems that ought to have occurred to the surveyors: diet, sex, and metal poisoning. The first two possibilities do not appear at all in the brief; metal poisoning does, but without reference to other, non-gynaecological symptoms, even as the committee describes metal powders that settled all over the women's skin, not solely on their genitals.¹³ As all of these factors entered into other health-related discussions in the People's Republic, their omission here prompts several questions.

As the Tianqiao survey notes, the kinds of metal powders in use at the factory were very volatile substances, easily absorbed through the skin. Cadmium and other elements used in metallurgy are highly toxic and can cause gynaecological problems, but exposure can also have non-gynaecological effects. The committee makes no mention of coughs from inhaled powder or skin rashes where powder had lingered. Even if the report meant to address gynaecology alone, why would other symptoms caused by the same elements not be relevant? Was the CCP so focused on gendered illness that it glossed over visible—but not female-exclusive—issues?

Like so many sources from the Urban Commune Movement, this report is also silent about the potential effects of malnutrition. In 1961, Beijing was still feeling the devastation of the Great Leap famine. Capital-city residents enjoyed much better provisions than their rural compatriots, but one still wonders how much and what kinds of food were available to poor women workers in an urban commune factory that was reported to be in disrepair and possessing very few resources. Both Nicholas Lardy and Kenneth Walker have pointed to stagnation in overall average food consumption (and caloric intake) from the late 1950s into the 1960s.¹⁴ This was connected, in urban areas, to rigid implementation of rationing by 1957 and to the collapse of agricultural output in the wake of the Great Leap. Grain procurement—to feed the cities and for export—had increased during the famine years, which made the food shortages even more disastrous in rural areas. But after procurement policy was relaxed in 1961, feeding the cities became a challenge, especially as urban populations had increased by 30 percent during the Great Leap.¹⁵

There is also anecdotal evidence of a decline in the quality of the food provided in cities, with coarse grains and potatoes making up for shortages of more nutritious foods. Food served in Beijing's communal canteens was reported to be of even lower quality than what other city residents ate—no meat and very little oil—as famine shortages were compounded by the need to keep commune expenses to a minimum. A 1961 report on citywide commune services admitted that cereal provisions were too low, canteen food was of poor quality, and most residents preferred home-cooked meals.¹⁶ Thus, it seems likely that the Tianqiao workers had experienced a rapid decline in the quality of their diet. Missed periods and amenorrhoea were common symptoms of malnutrition during the Great Leap (and otherwise). Moreover, risk of illness (including metal toxicity) also increased dramatically during the famine, as underfed or poorly fed bodies were less able to protect themselves against disease. The silence surrounding the famine might have led the writers of the report to hide diet as an important cause of the health problems at Tianqiao. Or gynaecological ailments may have served as code words—bodily conditions that were politically 'speakable', but that could still signal to others in the know the presence of the hunger that was not to be mentioned.¹⁷

Finally, there was another silence: sex. Although the CCP achieved remarkable success in its efforts to eradicate sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexual activity often caused non-STI-related vaginitis, vulvitis, and pelvic infection.¹⁸ It is difficult to know anything about these women's sex lives, but many of them were likely married and/or sexually active, as suggested by their status as housewives and the fact that commune enterprises were overwhelmingly staffed by young but adult women. The report admitted that the male supervisors in the factory had very little knowledge about women and their bodies. It may be that male observers saw a number of gynaecological problems that would have been common among sexually active women (compounded by the inaccessibility of hygienic facilities), and thus misinterpreted both their cause and their significance, which potentially deprived the women of needed care. In any case, the many silences in this report are most revealing not of issues related to women's health, but of specific male and Party-centred anxieties about women in general and the female labouring body in particular.

The Gender of Labouring Bodies

Political taboos would have made hunger off-limits in the Tianqiao discussion. But the silences around sex and metal poisoning seem more closely connected to the very notion of these women as a 'reserve' of otherwise unproductive housewives. To the state, these were women, not workers (not even women workers). They were 'potential' labourers, but until they laboured under the gaze of the Party, outside the home, they were cast as 'idle and unused' (闲散), and as-yet unproductive or 'not engaged in production' (不参加生产). CCP discussions of this 'reserve army' (后备军) further suggested that these women could be mobilised to enter factories and produce but they would never quite reach the productivity levels, or the political status, of other workers, whom CCP rhetoric tended to gender masculine. The Tianqiao report was rhetorically consistent with that vision. Surveyors focused on industrial aetiologies—metal poisoning and overwork—and ignored sex, which could be and was discussed elsewhere in conjunction with gynaecological issues, but which was also a part of the domestic and reproductive realm.¹⁹ The observers also associated metal poisoning with gynaecological illness alone, and thus limited it to an issue for women workers and not a broader failure to care for worker safety in general. In this way, the reproductive associations with womanhood were both confined to the domestic space and deployed to excuse the failure of the state to serve the labouring people, by blaming harm to labourers on the relative inadequacy of female bodies—an inadequacy that was itself directly connected to the presumed fragility of women's reproductive organs.

When the report described 'mindsets' (思想), it further reinforced this vision of the labourers as women whose womanhood hampered their productive capacities—and, by extension, the capacity of the entire factory. While the report made mention of less obviously gendered attitudes, such as lack of concern for workplace safety, it paid more attention to the perceived femininity of the workers: 'Some of the personnel have feudal mindsets. When their period comes, they are too embarrassed to say so and just keep working on cold water tasks as usual.'²⁰ The report added that problems were exacerbated by the fact that the mostly male managers and cadres lacked experience dealing with female bodies.²¹ Even as they worked, sometimes injuring their bodies in the process, the Tianqiao women were defined by their femininity more than their labour. Industrial production was supposed to transform 'unproductive housewives' into

‘workers’, but the Tianqiao report suggests that it could not, at least not in the eyes of the state. From the perspective of the state, these women were, first and foremost, female, reproductive bodies—bodies that were sickened by the demands of production, rendering them again ‘unproductive’ and potentially ‘non-reproductive’ as well.

The socialist category of the ‘worker’ was envisioned, in its archetypal form, as male, and thus women were always, at least implicitly, ‘women workers’. The addition of the modifier put distance between the actors and the act of labour, and between women and the political category of ‘labourers’. This gap provided a way to evade and displace larger questions about how well socioeconomic experiments were furthering the interests of the people. This distance might also be what led the Tianqiao surveyors to focus on the physical and mental manifestations of femininity and gendered relationships, which resulted in descriptions of weak and docile bodies, accustomed to domestic chores and ‘ill-suited’ to hard labour, as well as ‘feudal’ mindsets that hindered the operations of production. Even when summoned by the developmental call of the Great Leap, these housewives were still ‘untrained’ (培养教育不够) and ‘unskilled’ (根本没有技术), and suited, therefore, only to specific forms of work: tedious, repetitive, simple.

This gendered discourse extended well beyond a single factory. Wang Zheng has described the Great Leap Forward as a crucial, if brief, event in the history of Chinese feminism, a parenthetical moment in which the agenda of ‘female liberation’, through the socialisation of housework, temporarily replaced that of the more regressive ‘double diligences’.²² Yet, Wang also shows that, even during the high tide of this experiment, female labour was rarely viewed as equal to male labour. Most sources from the urban collectivisation campaign bear this out, describing labour in commune enterprises as cheap, low-quality, done mainly by women, and thus marked by the perceived weaknesses of female minds and bodies. This discourse had very concrete effects, such as helping to justify lower pay for women. CCP bureaucrats repeatedly stressed the importance of maintaining low-salary systems (低工资制) for ‘reserve-army’ commune workers. Paying these housewives only half of what many male workers would earn for similar tasks was key to the profitability of commune enterprises, a benchmark that was central to the state’s evaluation of those enterprises even during the socialist period.²³ Simultaneously, a never fully severed connection to the realm of social reproduction made most female labour ultimately and easily disposable. In the words of commune

authorities and policymakers with regard to women workers: 'If there is work to do, they can do it; if not, they can always go back [home] to cook and clean.'²⁴

A Failed Liberation?

The sense that an army of housewives could be deployed as needed and move seamlessly between industrial and domestic production (and reproduction) may have partly caused, and certainly reinforced, the decline and eventual collapse of commune social-welfare systems. By 1960, communal services no longer seemed poised to liberate women from unremunerated domestic labour. Canteens and childcare centres were often poorly run, and they were also expensive. It had come to be expected that such services operate without economic support from the state or the commune, leading to rapidly rising fees, declining attendance, and closures.²⁵ While few women were truly relieved of domestic tasks, even in the most successful moments of Great Leap experimentation, the complete dissolution of communal services further increased the double burden of industrial labour and housework for housewives, who were now expected to report for factory duty whenever they were needed. The injustice was not lost on commune leaders, who expressed concerns about women being overworked, but there was little to be done as pressure to produce increased and resources declined. Reports quoted female labourers who mocked a 'liberation' they said consisted of nothing more than adding poorly remunerated, tedious industrial chores to women's already substantial workloads.²⁶ Some women reportedly argued that working in a commune factory and being a housewife were essentially the same, as 'both are a sheer waste of our talents.'²⁷ A subversive slogan alleged that women workers now suffered from the 'three lows' (三低) (that is, low salary, low services, and low rations) and 'two misfortunes' (两倒霉) (that is, not being able to find a partner or raise a family).²⁸

Collectivisation during the Great Leap Forward aimed to generate a series of radical transformations and sometimes effected powerful changes, if only briefly. But the project of women's liberation through mass participation in industrial labour was contravened by a failure to rethink and reconfigure social reproduction. The assumption that housewives were unproductive and thus constituted an untapped reservoir of workers was born of and exacerbated a lack of critical analysis about the nature of socially reproductive labour. The notion that domestic work could

simply be moved to non-domestic sites, without having to be reconstituted in a new form, reflected a lack of attention to how social reproduction would be transformed (and needed to be consciously refashioned) in the socialist transition.

A glimpse inside a small commune factory in the Tianqiao neighbourhood of downtown Beijing highlights the always unresolved tension between women's liberation articulated as participation in (often injurious) labour and the unchanging view of women's bodies as the crucial locus of, and best suited to, social reproduction. Never again did the CCP make such a radical attempt to promote gender equality. By the late 1970s, 90 percent of urban, working-age women were employed outside the home, making up nearly half of the industrial workforce, but that change did not come with improvements in divisions of labour, either at home or in non-domestic workplaces. Women remained largely responsible for housework and were usually assigned jobs that were 'suitable'. Notions of 'suitability' remained somewhat similar to their Great Leap versions, as women continued to be employed in lower-skilled and subordinate positions, and even those opportunities were often reduced if a woman became actively reproductive.²⁹