

Chapter summary

- Traditional attitudes to women in China were highly negative. Women had no voting rights and many were not educated.
- The 1950 Marriage Reform Law gave women the right to divorce and to own property. It banned arranged marriages.
- Mao declared that living in communes would free women from the domestic drudgery of housework and childcare. However, they were forced to undertake harsh physical labour, so the quality of their lives did not improve.
- Traditional attitudes took a long time to change. In isolated rural areas arranged marriages continued.
- Some women were empowered by the reforms introduced by the regime.
- In 1949 access to education in China was very unequal. The regime made education available for children of a lower-class background.
- Education suffered during the Cultural Revolution. The schools were closed and the students were encouraged to abandon their studies and join the Red Guards.
- Mao introduced Pinyin: a simplified written language. This improved communication across the country.
- Healthcare in China in 1949 was very backward; many peasants did not have access to a doctor. Mao introduced the 'Patriotic Health Campaigns' to educate them on how to prevent diseases spreading. Later the 'barefoot doctor' scheme encouraged young students to go to the countryside and provide basic healthcare.
- Mao believed that culture was a tool used by the 'feudal' ruling classes to control the masses. He wanted to rid China of the 'old' culture and replace it with a new communist culture.
- Jiang Qing, Mao's wife, was given the job of ridding China of its old culture and instead creating new art which would glorify the communist revolution.
- For the communists, religion was an outdated idea. Christianity was hated because it had been brought to China from the West. Religious leaders were arrested and churches and temples attacked.

Recommended reading

- A. D. Barnett, *Communist China: The Early Years, 1949–55* (Pall Mall Press, 1964). An account by an American journalist and academic who lived in China and Hong Kong during the early years of the regime.
- J. Chang, *Wild Swans* (HarperCollins, 1991). Best-selling autobiography of three generations of Chinese women. The author grew up during Mao's rule and later became a Red Guard. Includes a chapter on the famine.
- J. Chang and J. Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (Jonathan Cape, 2005). Chapter 50 focuses on the role of Madame Mao in the Cultural Revolution.
- D. Davin, *Women-Work: Women and the Party in Revolutionary China* (Oxford University Press, 1976). A pioneering study of the impact of the communist regime on China's women.
- F. Dikotter, *Mao's Great Famine* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010). Recent scholarly analysis of the Great Famine; includes a chapter on its impact on women.
- F. Dikotter, *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945–57* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013). Evaluates the treatment of religious groups.
- G. Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women in China's Collective Past* (University of California Press, 2011). Based on the recollections of women who lived in Mao's China, very detailed exploration of the impact of Party policies on their lives.
- M. Lynch, *Mao* (Routledge, 2004). Chapter 8 describes Mao's attitude towards the status of women and includes an evaluation of his relationships with Jiang Qing.
- R. Keith Schoppa, *The Columbia Guide to Modern Chinese History* (Columbia University Press, 2000). As well as concise narratives of key events, this guide provides a wide range of socio-economic data.
- D. Twitchett and J.K. Fairbank, *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 14: The People's Republic Part I: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1949–1965* (Cambridge University Press, 1987). Chapter 4 'Education for the new order' and Chapter 9 'New directions in education' are detailed accounts of changes in educational policy.