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## Kang Keqing: From Victor to Victim

Rebecca Pullano

Since the earliest recorded times in Chinese history, women had been considered inferior to men. However, the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty in 1911<sup>1</sup> marked the commencement of the destruction of traditional Chinese culture; this cultural change coincident with the growing seeds of Communism in the country, led to the incorporation of women into society in a seemingly more egalitarian manner. Yet, despite an outward appearance of equality, it is likely that providing women with greater rights was, in fact, a purposeful strategy of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party intended to gain support for Communism. In fact, one could argue that, although women had significantly more freedom after the fall of the Qing Dynasty than they had experienced in traditional China, the nation was still based in patriarchy, men and women were not treated equally. The façade of power that women assumed during the Communist Revolution is essentially a microcosm that reflects the larger picture of Mao Zedong's rule. Mao frequently used false appearances in order to secure his personal power as the head of China, especially throughout the Cultural Revolution. For example, during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which began in the mid-1960s,<sup>2</sup> many Communist Party members who were essentially responsible for helping Mao rise to power were removed from power on unreasonable grounds and shunned by Mao, who "preferred to use the masses more directly"<sup>3</sup> to accomplish his goals because they were more willing to accept his beliefs without questioning him as higher party cadres were more likely to do.<sup>4</sup> One important woman in Chinese history who exemplifies the notion of appearance versus reality under Mao's rule during the Chinese

Communist Movement that began shortly after the fall of the Qing Dynasty in the 1920s,<sup>5</sup> and, later, during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 to 1976,<sup>6</sup> is Kang Keqing, known as the "Girl Commander" in the Red Army.

Traditional China was dominated by Confucian teachings, which stated that "women in the human order should be lowly and inferior like the earth,"<sup>7</sup> but the dawn of modern China brought about reforms that were promising in terms of rights gained by women. After the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, the two factions of the United Front, the Kuomintang Party (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), found themselves engaged in a power struggle for leadership of China. The KMT was "the party of wealthy gentry and landlords, [and it] had no place for peasants of women in either their political or military organisations."<sup>8</sup> The CCP, on the other hand, took advantage of the fact that women had been oppressed for so long. Rather than exclude women from joining the movement, "the CCP slowly rebuilt its popular support during the 1930s under [Mao Zedong's] rule, [and] its focus shifted from urban to rural recruitment, including the women of China's huge peasant class."<sup>9</sup> During the revolutionary struggles, women played a vital role in the Communist cause, as they found themselves involved in production of resources and propaganda campaigns. In addition, according to historian Bernard Cook, "Communist women's groups focused on maintaining morale and enhancing women's status within the family and the Communist movement."<sup>10</sup> Because Mao and the

<sup>1</sup> Maria R. Haberfield and Ibrahim Cerrah, *Comparative Policing: The Struggle for Democratization* (California: Sage Publications, 2008), 16.

<sup>2</sup> William J. Duiker, *Contemporary World History, Fifth Edition* (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010), 269.

<sup>3</sup> R. Keith Schoppa, *Revolution and Its Past: Identities and Change in Modern Chinese History, Third Edition* (New York: Prentice Hall, 2011), 348.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 346- 349.

<sup>5</sup> Marc J. Belcher, *China Against the Tides: Restructuring through Revolution Radicalism, and Reform, Third Edition* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2010), 205.

<sup>6</sup> William J. Duiker, *Contemporary World History, Fifth Edition* (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010), 269.

<sup>7</sup> Arvind Sharma, ed., *Women in World Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 140.

<sup>8</sup> Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles, *Women of the Long March*. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 79.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard A. Cook, *Women and War: a Historical Encyclopedia from Antiquity to the Present, Volume 1*. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 108.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

CCP offered women greater rights, women were naturally drawn to support them, and holding leadership positions in the CCP made women feel as though they played an important role in the cause for which they were fighting. Kang, for example, chose to support the CCP because she was able to get more involved and was offered more personal and professional freedom. It is possible that, because the KMT was more exclusive in its membership, the CCP was able to gain momentum and emerge victorious from the struggle for leadership in China in the 1940s.

Later, after the CCP celebrated success and Mao emerged as China's leader, the women's movement continued as reforms were being made in the country. For example, a 1951 speech made by Teng Ying-chao, Vice-President of the All China Democratic Women's Federation proclaimed that the People's Republic of China (PRC), led by the CCP, made significant reforms that gave women "equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, educational, and social life."<sup>11</sup> However, as evident from the experiences of female Red Army general Kang Keqing, Mao and the Communist party leaders did not intend to equate women's status to that of their male counterparts.

Kang Keqing was born in 1911 to a poor peasant family in Jiangxi Province, where she was adopted into a nearby farmer's family because her biological parents were too poor to raise Kang themselves.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, the family into which Kang Keqing was adopted became financially insecure, so when Communist organizers came to her village in 1926, her adopted family was enticed by the benefits Communism seemed to offer. In fact, her foster father was so enchanted with the ideas of Communism that he became the head of the village's Peasant Union.<sup>13</sup> Kang was also captivated by these ideas and was repulsed by the "rapacious landlords and gentry of the KMT... [whose] soldiers and landlord militiamen committed atrocious acts of intimidation."<sup>14</sup> In

<sup>11</sup> Teng Ying-chao, *The Women's Movement in New China* (All China Democratic Women's Federation, 1952), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Commire and Deborah Klezmer, ed., *Women in World History. A Biographical Encyclopedia. Volume 8: Jab - Kyt* (Waterford, CT: Yorkin Publications, 2000), 440.

<sup>13</sup> Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles, *Women of the Long March*. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 76.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

1926, Kang "joined the Communist Youth and was made captain of the Young Pioneers."<sup>15</sup> In an interview with Helen Foster Snow, Kang referenced a massacre in February 1927 during which the KMT mercilessly murdered a thousand peasants, many of whom were not even Communists, in Kang's district. She said "'The killing of my comrades made me furiously angry and more revolutionary than before.'"<sup>16</sup> Motivated by the Communists' cause, Kang joined the Fourth Front Army in 1928 to avoid an arranged marriage set up by her foster father. While working in Jinggangshan, where the Red Army base was located, Kang Keqing met Zhu De,<sup>17</sup> the "'father' of the Chinese Red Army."<sup>18</sup> Although he was married when they met, his wife at the time, Wu Yulan, was captured and decapitated by Nationalist soldiers in 1929, and a few months later, Zhu and Kang were married. Kang admits that she was not in love with Zhu when she first married him, but she was drawn to his devotion to the Communists' cause and had great respect for him.<sup>19</sup> As will be seen later on, this marriage allowed Kang Keqing significant benefits as a woman. She used her *guanxi*<sup>20</sup> as Zhi De's wife to her advantage, gaining opportunities that she would not normally have had as a woman.<sup>21</sup>

In 1930, the Fourth Front Army, pressured by the Nationalists, evacuated Jinggangshan and reestablished their base in Jiangxi.<sup>22</sup> Kang travelled

<sup>15</sup> Anne Commire and Deborah Klezmer, ed., *Women in World History. A Biographical Encyclopedia. Volume 8: Jab - Kyt* (Waterford, CT: Yorkin Publications, 2000), 440.

<sup>16</sup> Nym Wales, *The Chinese Communists: Sketches and Autobiographies of the Old Guard: Book 1: Red Dust, Book 2: Autobiographical Sketches, Books 1-2*, (Greenwood Pub. Co., 1952), 213.

<sup>17</sup> Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles. *Women of the Long March*. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 80.

<sup>18</sup> Anne Commire and Deborah Klezmer, ed., *Women in World History. A Biographical Encyclopedia. Volume 8: Jab - Kyt* (Waterford, CT: Yorkin Publications, 2000), 440.

<sup>19</sup> Dean King, *Unbound* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010), 37.

<sup>20</sup> Guanxi describes the interplay of a complex network of personal and social relationships. It can be understood in terms of it not being just what you know, but also whom you know" [definition from "Glossary of International Trade Terms," *Credit Today*, <http://www.credittoday.net/public/2001.cfm>].

<sup>21</sup> Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles, *Women of the Long March*. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 84.

<sup>22</sup> Anne Commire and Deborah Klezmer, ed., *Women in*

with her husband and the Red Army and was engaged mainly in propaganda-related work, promoting the CCP and Red Army and recruiting people to join in the efforts.<sup>23</sup> In 1932, Kang and Wu Zhonglian were appointed to command the Women Volunteers of the Red Army where Kang served as regimental commander and Wu as political instructor. Although it seemed a major step to incorporate women into the Red Army in such a manner, it has been argued that it was simply a weak attempt for Zhu De to fulfill the Central Committee's decree to incorporate partisans into the army.<sup>24</sup> Women were not expected to be readily incorporated into combat positions in the Red Army, and it was rare for them to train in the Red Military Academy. For example, Kang was only one of two females to study in the academy; the other girl was expelled. Because of the rarity of women's participation in Red Military Academy, Kang's marriage to such an important official is what actually allowed her such an opportunity.<sup>25</sup> Although Kang did attend the Red Military Academy and had her hopes set on being a soldier, she still was not allowed to fight in battle. In fact, historians have noted that, "one can only surmise that allowing her to enroll in the first place was simple appeasement."<sup>26</sup> Clearly, women were not actually viewed as equal to men within the party, although the CCP claimed they were. Rather, women were given the appearance of power and were selected for specific positions that seemed important in hopes of appeasing them and making them feel as though they played significant roles in the party. These roles, however, were actually prescribed by men, and women did not truly have the freedom to choose *how* they wanted to participate. It appears that, although the CCP wanted to make it look as though they were extending opportunities to women and destroying the patriarchal nature of Chinese society, it was simply a means to an end in order to garnish support; they really had no intention of readily incorporating women into an egalitarian environment. In this case, Kang was exceptional because, since she was Zhu De's wife, she was

given special opportunities such as enrolling in the military academy, but it became apparent that the connections her marriage afforded her could only bring her so far, as she was still restricted from being a combatant and holding the positions that she personally desired.

In 1934, the Red Army ran into some complications. During the Fifth Campaign of the Communists, Chiang Kai-shek organized a blockade of 500,000 troops and an offensive attack of 400,000 troops against the Red Army, which was much smaller in number. Because of these actions, "the Communists decided to give up the Soviet districts and to save the Red Army by breaking the blockade and marching it to the north. This Long March began on October 14, 1934."<sup>27</sup> The mobile army consisted of 86,000 male soldiers and only thirty females, one of whom was Kang Keqing. Among the mere thirty women soldiers who participated in the main Army on the Long March, most were the wives of soldiers and important party leaders, such as Mao Zedong's wife, He Zizhen. The fact that Kang was one of only thirty women on the Long March shows that she and the other women were offered a rare opportunity; not all women were afforded the equality to men supposedly existent in the CCP under Mao. In Kang Keqing's case, it appears that this opportunity was given to her not only because she was married to a powerful man in the Party, but also because she remained childless. Kang viewed having children as detrimental to revolutionary work and blamed women for finding themselves in such a situation.<sup>28</sup> This comment shows that women in the CCP were still somewhat restricted to traditional roles; because Kang viewed having children as detrimental, it seems that once women did have children, they were again confined to tending to their children rather than participating in party work. Kang's lack of offspring allowed her to move further along in her party work because she was not constrained by childcare. Another comment by Kang furthers this notion. In an interview, when asked about "the so-called 'Women's Problem,'" she promptly put a stop to that line of questioning: "I don't care much about the women's problem; I always work with men, not women."<sup>29</sup> By recognizing her uniqueness from other Chinese women, however, Kang

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*World History. A Biographical Encyclopedia. Volume 8: Jab - Kyt* (Waterford, CT: Yorkin Publications, 2000), 440.

<sup>23</sup> Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles. *Women of the Long March*. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 84.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>27</sup> Nym Wales, *Inside Red China* (New York:

Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc, 1939), 57-58.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

acknowledges how she differed from other women and was also admitting that women were not equal to men in China. Rather, her case was an extremely exceptional one, and even she was not considered equal to her male comrades. As the book *Women of the Long March* notes of Kang's position in the party after the Long March, "Few Long March women were so lucky, and, while Kang Keqing spoke of what she had achieved being made possible solely through her personal efforts and the goodness of the party, it is difficult to believe she would have been unaware of the privileges being the wife of Zhu De brought her."<sup>30</sup> Clearly, her status as the wife of such an important man in the Communist Party, coupled with the circumstance that she remained childless throughout her entire life, speaks to the fact that her case was unique and that most common women, who likely had children, were not usually afforded such freedoms.

Although Kang Keqing was given opportunities that most Chinese women were not during her revolutionary work, she was still limited in pursuing her professional interests to the same extent as a male. In fact, even her husband prevented her from fully achieving her goal of becoming a commander in the army. After successfully completing the Long March and settling into Yan'an, Kang "plunged into studies, hoping to become a ranking military officer."<sup>31</sup> In Yan'an, Kang first studied at the party school and later joined the Anti-Japanese Political and Military Academy.<sup>32</sup> She claimed that Zhu De supported her studies and encouraged her desire to become a commander, but evidence seemed to prove otherwise. When asked why there were no women's regiments in the Red Army, Zhu De claimed that the Red Army could not take them in because of disciplinary problems and inadequacies in their physical condition that prevented them from performing at the level most men could.<sup>33</sup> From these statements, it seems evident that Zhu De really had no intention of incorporating women

<sup>30</sup> Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles. *Women of the Long March*. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 152.

<sup>31</sup> Harrison Salisbury. *The Long March: The Untold Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 83.

<sup>32</sup> Anne Commire and Deborah Klezmer, ed., *Women in World History. A Biographical Encyclopedia. Volume 8: Jab - Kyt* (Waterford, CT: Yorkin Publications, 2000), 441.

<sup>33</sup> Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles, *Women of the Long March*. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 155-156.

into the Red Army, despite Kang's belief that he, too, wanted her to participate in the military.

Although Kang wanted to believe that her husband was on her side, in the 1940s, Kang came to the realization that as her husband and the other men of the party did not truly share her perspective. Because the KMT and the CCP joined together in a united front to try to fight off the Japanese, in 1940 Zhu De was sent on a trip to Luoyang, on which Kang accompanied him, to meet with KMT officials to organize their actions.<sup>34</sup> It was on this trip that she first "became aware that what she expected from her life as a Communist, and what the Communists, in the influential form of Zhu De, expected of her might not coincide."<sup>35</sup> During dinner on the evening of her arrival, Kang was startled when she was addressed in a toast as Mrs. Zhu and even more surprised when her husband encouraged her to go along with it because that was the way they did things in the KMT. Later on the trip, she was further offended when Commanding Officer Wei of the KMT offered her a smaller pistol that he thought was better suited for a woman, and rather than defend her, Zhu encouraged Kang to accept his offer. Because she was so uneasy with the way her husband expected her to act, she requested to be excused from events, but was denied by Zhu De, who told her it was her obligation to put the revolutionary work before her personal comforts.<sup>36</sup> This experience of Kang is probably the clearest example of the "appearance versus reality" notion of the CCP's treatment of women. When it was convenient, the CCP was more than willing to liberate women and raise them up, but when this threatened what the CCP wanted to accomplish, women were expected to return to previous roles, inferior to men.

While Kang retained her dreams of becoming a combatant, Kang never saw the day in which this would be the case. After the Japanese surrendered to China in 1945,<sup>37</sup> Kang held various non-military positions in the Communist administration. For example, in 1946, Kang became vice-chair of the

<sup>34</sup> Anne Commire and Deborah Klezmer, ed., *Women in World History. A Biographical Encyclopedia. Volume 8: Jab - Kyt* (Waterford, CT: Yorkin Publications, 2000), 441.

<sup>35</sup> Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles, *Women of the Long March*. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 166.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 167-168.

<sup>37</sup> Marc J. Belcher, *China Against the Tides: Restructuring through Revolution Radicalism, and Reform, Third Edition* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2010), 205.

Committee for the Protection of Children in the Liberated Areas. Two years later, Kang was placed on the Preparatory Committee for the foundation of the Democratic Women's Federation, and in 1949 was placed on the Standing Committee of the Women's Federation when it was officially formed. During her time on this committee, various reforms were passed that gave women more rights such as the Marriage Law of 1950. In 1955, Kang gained the position of secretary of the Democratic Women's Federation, which she held until 1957 when she became a vice-chair of the Federation of Women.<sup>38</sup> Although these were certainly positions of importance, Kang had requested in 1947 at the first meeting of the Central Committee's Women's Council to be released from the Women's Council and placed in a line of work that dealt with the military rather than with women.<sup>39</sup> However, this request was denied by all the delegates of the meeting, including Zhu De, who "publicly disclaimed her in his address... without mentioning names... [and] criticized that attitude of female cadres who were not willing to become involved in women's work."<sup>40</sup> Ironically, where her husband's position had previously allowed her more opportunities, "it is certain that her husband's high profile and the spectre of nepotism worked against her... Negative *guanxi* ensured she would never become a commander in the army."<sup>41</sup> It is quite apparent from this situation that, although women were making grounds in the struggle to change Chinese society, they were still viewed as inferior to men, contrary to the equality that the Communist Party claimed to offer. Evidently, it was only on men's terms that women were granted rights, and it was only when it did not cause men of power to be inconvenienced that they would offer women more rights.

When the People's Republic of China was established, changes in China took place as Mao sought to purge his administration of anyone who went against him. Kang herself participated in the events of the Cultural Revolution to destroy Mao's "enemies," but later fell victim to the revolution. In

<sup>38</sup> Anne Commire and Deborah Klezmer, ed., *Women in World History. A Biographical Encyclopedia. Volume 8: Jab - Kyt* (Waterford, CT: Yorkin Publications, 2000), 441-442.

<sup>39</sup> Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles, *Women of the Long March*. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 219-220.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 221-220.

1957, Kang "unwittingly collaborated in the campaign to destroy Ding Ling, Peng Zigang, Pu Xixiu, and Liu-Wang Liming."<sup>42</sup> However, both Kang Keqing and Zhu De became targets of attacks by the Red Guards in the mid-1960s. Both were attacked through propaganda posters; on his, Zhu was accused of being a "black commander," while Kang was targeted as being a "capitalist roader." Additionally, Kang was subjected to a "struggle session" during which she was attacked by the Red Guards and other Chinese citizens who were called to participate. From this, she came away deeply disturbed and resorted to spending most of her time with Zhu De in their apartment.<sup>43</sup> In 1976, the same year that Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong died, Zhu De passed away. As Deng Xiaoping grew to power in the nation, Kang also began to assume more power, and in 1977, she was elected to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the chair of the Federation of Women. After a long life of political work, in 1986, Kang retired from politics, and on April 22, 1992, she passed away.<sup>44</sup>

Essentially, Kang Keqing's life experiences, although exceptional for a woman, provide evidence that women in post-imperial China were not necessarily given more power for the sake of increasing their personal influence or advancement. The women's movement seemed a ploy by ruling males to delude women into accomplishing the political agendas of the party in power. For example, it seemed as though the most popular position held by women in the CCP was that of a propagandist, which would serve their purpose quite well. Because women of traditional China had been confined to the home, having women out in the open, spreading the message of the Communist Party would certainly help convince people that Mao Zedong and his followers truly sought to change China and would encourage them to join in and support him. Although it is true and should be recognized that women had been given more rights than they had previously experienced, Chinese society under Mao and the CCP remained largely patriarchal and was clearly ruled and dominated by men.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>43</sup> Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles, *Women of the Long March*. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 237.

<sup>44</sup> Anne Commire and Deborah Klezmer, ed., *Women in World History. A Biographical Encyclopedia. Volume 8: Jab - Kyt* (Waterford, CT: Yorkin Publications, 2000), 443.

The sad irony of women's rights in China is that their apparent advancement took place on men's terms and not for the improvement of women's stature or welfare, but rather to accomplish the motives of Mao and the CCP. Ultimately, however, the treatment of women is just one example of how Mao utilized deception in many aspects of his long rule of China. In the mid-1950s, for example, Mao encouraged intellectuals to criticize the government's actions during the Hundred Flowers campaign, but he ultimately ended up viewing the criticism as a threat to his power and launched a campaign to eradicate any perceived opposition.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, in later years during the Cultural Revolution, Mao expelled the very men who helped him gain power because he felt threatened by these party cadres. With the support of the masses, who were blinded by Mao's promises for a better China, he was able to strip these men and women of their authority and leave them politically and socially immobilized.<sup>46</sup> Macrocosmically, it appears as though Mao's attempted advancement of China as a whole was actually intended to accomplish the motives of his personal agenda and solidify his personal power, and women in China at this time were just one group offered a façade of power for the sake of furthering Mao's goals.

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