Introduction

This book began in Beijing in the autumn of 1979 with a set of lengthy discussions with Wang Yizhi, a retired principal of No. 101 Middle School and a veteran woman Communist. It was my good fortune to have been recommended to her by Carma Hinton, one of her former students, and before long I found myself interviewing her about the story of her life. Many times over the next two years I rode my bike up that long dusty road past Zhongguancun and Beida (Beijing University) to Wang Yizhi’s modest home at the edge of a small pond on the rambling campus of No. 101 Middle School and listened to her reminiscing about her experiences of growing up female in China and becoming a revolutionary.

Wang Yizhi ultimately entrusted me with much more than her autobiography; she opened up a whole new chapter in Chinese women’s history. Most intriguing were her reflections on the first phase of the Chinese Communist movement (1920–1927), which took me far from the beaten track of Chinese Communist party history I had traveled in graduate school. I found myself in a maze of uncharted avenues and alleyways peopled with a host of unfamiliar women and lined with a multitude of vital revolutionary organizations for politicizing women, such as the Shanghai Pingmin Girls’ School, the Women’s Rights League, Shanghai University, the Women’s Movement Training Institute, and the women’s class of the Wuhan Central Military and Political Institute.

The world of women Communists seemed intrinsically appealing as a research project, but at first I doubted that sufficient written doc-
umentation existed to warrant such an undertaking. Fortuitously, the dramatic change in research conditions for Westerners in the early 1980s included the opening of Chinese libraries and archives. At the same time, Chinese researchers produced a massive outpouring of scholarly and documentary publications about the Chinese Communist party, including an impressive collection of works on Communist women put out by a special research team of the All-China Women’s Federation. From these materials I was able to draw a road map to the untapped resources scattered through China on women and the Communist party in the 1920s. Convinced that the project was viable, I began full-scale research in the autumn of 1981.\(^1\) Focusing my attention exclusively on women revolutionaries seemed eminently fitting at first. Making women visible and restoring them to history was a major endeavor of women’s studies when I initiated this project. Once I became fully immersed in the relevant periodical and documentary literature, however, the limitations of this approach for this study became evident. In order to comprehend fully women’s roles in the formation of the Chinese Communist party and in the mass mobilization campaigns of the National Revolution, I needed to understand the ways in which the world of Communist women of the 1920s intersected with—and in crucial ways was created by—the world of Communist men. Thus, the use of the word “gender” in the title of this book is not meant as a synonym for “women.” Rather “gender” is invoked as an essential analytical conceptual framework for the exploration of relations between men and women in the Chinese Communist party and in other revolutionary mass mobilization organizations of the 1920s. It is used to map the hierarchy of the newly created Communist polity, the dimensions of power, the boundaries in revolutionary organizations, competing notions of the proper place of women in public and private life, and the multiple meanings associated with masculinity and femininity.\(^2\)

Examining the experiences of women in the early Chinese Communist revolutionary movement through the lens of gender does not merely augment our understanding of party activities, as a study of the peasant mobilization campaigns might do, but rather, it forces a shift in perspective. In this book, in contrast to other studies of the Chinese Communist party, the deliberations, decisions, and directives of the Central Committee\(^3\) and party congresses often appear less significant than the ideological, cultural, and social facets of party life and programs. To the first generation of Communists, changing what they
understood as “traditional” or “feudal” culture and society was inex-
tricably connected with the task of political transformation. Thus,
many Communists of the 1920s were just as concerned with recon-
stituting their social relationships in accordance with egalitarian prin-
ciples as they were with constructing a political organization. Dedi-
cated to the proposition that “modern” marriages had to be based on
love and free choice, they created a party that functioned at once as a
radical subculture for social experimentation and as a revolutionary
political organization.

This new perspective on the early Chinese Communist party and
the cultural preoccupations of its members broadens our understand-
ing of the extent to which cultural contention was at the core of the
revolutionary process in twentieth-century China. It makes visible the
enormous attention devoted to gender issues in the revolutionary dis-
course and practice of the 1920s, issues such as male-female relations,
marrige, women’s political, social, and legal status, the nature of
the family, and women’s roles in the public domain. In so doing, it
shows that these issues often proved much more contentious at a
grassroots level than matters related to political rule and the nature of
the state.

Examining the party-building and revolutionary actions of the
Chinese Communist party in the 1920s through the lens of gender
also suggests new ways to think about important historical events and
their meanings in China during the course of this century. Through
its examination of the Chinese Communist party’s gender relations,
women’s program, and role in the large-scale mobilization of women
in the National Revolution, this book makes visible one aspect of the
dramatic transformation of the political order that occurred in China
during the 1920s. It argues that the 1920s in China was not just “a
decade of challenge,” to borrow the scholar Teng Ssu-yü’s phrase, but
a period of peak influence of feminism on Communist and Nationalist
revolutionaries, and a seminal period in setting critical features of the
relationship of women to the Chinese Communist party.

This study seeks to integrate what have up to now remained more
or less disparate scholarly endeavors—Chinese modern political his-
tory and gender studies. Despite the pioneering work of women
scholars, Western specialists writing on the Chinese Communist rev-
olution (1920–1949) have thus far given little consideration to gender
issues. Many pioneering and innovative works on the Chinese Com-
munist movement published in the last decade have overlooked the
ways in which gender figures into revolutionary discourse and practice. This book does not purport to present a comprehensive history of the Chinese Communist party in the 1920s, but it does at least begin to place the challenge of engendering the Chinese Communist revolution on the scholarly agenda.

When I began my work, the dominant conceptual framework employed by historians for examining women’s roles and the articulation of women’s issues in Communist revolutionary movements was the incompatibility of Marxism and feminism. This theoretical approach exerted a discernible influence on the pioneering scholarly articles and books published in the China field in the 1970s concerning the Communist treatment of gender issues in the 1920s. Given the well-documented Western research on the experiences of women in other Communist parties and Chinese Communist ideological treatments of the “woman question” since 1949, it seemed eminently reasonable to assume that the Chinese case represented yet one more example of proletarian ideology meeting and overcoming bourgeois feminism.

After many months in the libraries of China during the early 1980s sorting through materials that had previously been unavailable to Western scholars, it became clear that we had been looking at the early years of the Chinese Communist party through the prism of late-twentieth-century feminist concerns. We had failed to recognize the vast differences between the party policies on women’s issues in the 1920s and those that came later. Ultimately, the tensions between gender and class in classical Marxist theory proved much less influential on early Communist policies and practices than the feminist ideals that had been nurtured in Chinese political culture since the turn of the century. The founders of the Chinese Communist party were strongly influenced by the blossoming of feminist thought during the May Fourth era (1915–1921) and by the countless instances of female activism that ripped through the political and social fabric of China in the 1920s. Under their auspices women’s emancipatory issues were integrated into the political action program of the new party, and women were given command of this area of work.

The Chinese women Communists of the 1920s were less troubled by Marxist theoretical tensions between gender and class than were either of their closest contemporary counterparts in the socialist world—the “reluctant feminists” of the German Social Democratic party, such as Clara Zetkin, and the “Bolshevik feminists” represented
by Alexandra Kollontai. Moreover, women’s presence in the Chinese Communist party, in contrast to the major European socialist parties in the first decades of the twentieth century, had a distinct impact on setting the party’s revolutionary agenda for women’s issues, particularly after the formation of an alliance between the Communist and Nationalist parties in 1923. In fact, Communist women played a critical role in weaving together thousands of discrete incidents of women’s independent struggles into a massive social mobilization of women. Ultimately, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of women were drawn into political action through their efforts. The tremendous popular response to this campaign attested to the drawing power, especially among younger women, of May Fourth feminist issues and the way in which these issues were fused with socialist ideals to formulate a fundamental assault on certain aspects of the kinship system and gender hierarchy.

Indeed, even Xiang Jingyu, the most prominent Communist woman leader of the era, ultimately decided to embrace the feminist orientation of the Communist women’s program. In contrast to other Western studies, which generally portray Xiang Jingyu as disdainful of feminist issues, this study demonstrates that her main contribution as director of the Chinese Communist Women’s Bureau was the formulation of a strong program for promoting a radical alteration of gender relations in the revolutionary movement as well as for combating gender oppression within the party. Despite occasional twinges of reluctance, she persevered in building a feminist-oriented Communist women’s program. Understanding the feminist leanings of Xiang Jingyu and her fellow male and female associates requires attention to the remarkable power of Chinese nationalism. Indeed, it had become an overarching political imperative in China by the last years of the Qing dynasty and facilitated the grounding of feminism in the first decades of the twentieth century. The influence of this historical connection between nationalism and feminism was far-reaching in Chinese political culture of the 1920s and proved to be a compelling factor in shaping the feminist ideological formulations and program of the Chinese Communist party in its first years of operation.

The connection between gender issues and nationalism in the revolutionary movement of the 1920s was strengthened by the introduction of Lenin’s thesis on the colonial question. As E. J. Hobsbawm has noted, in the post–World War I era, when nationalist movements were proliferating and “the radicalism of the Russian Revolution took
over from that of the French Revolution as the main ideology of global emancipation,” Lenin discovered that the anti-imperialist nationalist struggles of colonial and semicolonial peoples in the third world were a tremendous potential asset to the cause of world revolution because they could seriously weaken Western imperialist power and influence. Communist revolutionaries in many parts of the world embraced nationalist struggles on the grounds that they would ultimately prove beneficial to the industrial proletariat. In China, Lenin’s thesis had a strong impact on the policies of the Communist party, particularly its decision to form an alliance with the Nationalist party in 1923. His thesis also provided further justification for the Communists continuing support for feminist positions and programs, including a wide variety of women’s groups that espoused anti-imperialist views, regardless of the groups’ class composition.

My use of the word “feminism” in this study is not meant to imply that feminism in a Chinese context is synonymous with Western feminism. Disparate historical experiences and profound cultural differences between China and the West have given rise to substantially different variants of feminism. Understanding early-twentieth-century Chinese feminism on its own terms requires a break with a universalist outlook that presumes that only one type of female emancipatory experience, that based on Western criteria, can be deemed truly feminist. Recently, some scholars have raised strong objections to the use of the Western definition of feminism as the sole yardstick to determine whether social-change movements in the third world have a feminist character. In contesting the very meaning of the term “feminism,” these scholars draw attention to the fact that feminist movements in the non-Western world have been compelled by their localities to address the intersection of gender oppression with imperialist, racial, and class oppression. Perhaps the most articulate spokesperson for this approach to third-world feminism has been Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who has noted:

Unlike the history of Western (white, middle-class) feminisms, which has been explored in great detail over the last few decades, histories of third world women’s engagement with feminism are in short supply. . . . Constructing such histories often requires reading against the grain of a number of intersecting progressive discourses (e.g., white feminist, third-world nationalist and socialist). . . . In fact, the challenge of third world feminisms to white, Western feminisms has been precisely this inescapable link between feminist and political liberation movements. In fact, black, white,
and other third world women have very different histories with respect to the particular inheritance of post-fifteenth-century Euro-American hegemony: the inheritance of slavery, enforced migration, plantation, and indentured labor, colonialism, imperial conquest, and genocide.14

In other words, modern feminist movements in the third world have been compelled by the realities of western hegemony to broaden their agendas by connecting their effort to end gender oppression with struggles for national liberation.

From the vantage point of the late twentieth century, it seems curious to use the word “feminism” in conjunction with the Chinese Communist experience. Indeed, Chinese Communists have generally avoided contact with feminist groups and expressed great scorn at being identified in any form or fashion with feminism, which they commonly render into Chinese as nüquan zheyi. However, this strong disdain was not in evidence during the formative phase of the Chinese Communist party, in large part because of the historical development of the term in China and its political connotations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nüquan yundong was a term that was first coined around the turn of the century as a translation for the Western phrase “women’s rights movement.” However, the ideograph quan connoted both “rights” and “power.” This nuance allowed Chinese of later generations to use the term to refer at once to women’s rights and to the feminist movement. Thus, although it is possible for Nancy Cott to talk about the specific historical moment in American history when the term “feminism” entered the political vocabulary as a break with the ideology of the suffrage movement, in China no such clear-cut moment can be identified.15 Instead, the movement for women’s rights, including the right to vote, merged with the feminist movement.

Chinese Communists of the 1920s did not reject the nüquan yundong; in fact, they participated in the establishment of a nationwide organization in 1922 that bore the name Nüquan yundong tongmenghui (variably translated as either the Feminist League or Women’s Rights League). To Communists of that era, one appealing feature of the nüquan yundong groups was that they saw women’s issues from a nationalist perspective. An improvement in women’s conditions was always viewed as an integral component of strengthening the state.16 However, to most cultural revolutionaries of the late 1910s and early 1920s, the nüquan yundong was not as in step with the times as the junzi jiefang yundong (women’s emancipation movement). This women’s
movement was seen as broader than *nüquăn yundong* because it drew adherents from all social classes. Perhaps because this term was preferred by Communists, *funü jiefang yundong* continued in popular usage throughout most of the twentieth century, although its English rendition changed from the “women’s emancipation movement”—a phrase that to our ears sounds somewhat archaic—to “women’s liberation movement.” In order to remain faithful to the historical tenor of the 1920s, however, this study will use the term “women’s emancipation.”

**Format**

This study weaves portraits of early Communist revolutionaries into a chronological treatment of the gendered dimension of the making of a Communist polity, the social mobilization of women in the revolutionary upsurge of the mid-1920s, and the immediate aftermath of this social ferment. Part 1 contains four chapters that focus primarily on gender issues in the making of the Shanghai Communist organization between 1920 and 1925. It deals with the tensions between the feminist aspects of the ideology and program of the party on the one hand and patriarchal attitudes and behaviors on the other hand. The founders of the Chinese Communist party were committed to challenging many aspects of their own culture, including male-female relations, the patriarchal family structure, and the social and legal status of women. At the same time that they formulated a radical program on gender transformation that challenged the dominant culture, however, they reproduced and reinscribed central aspects of the gender system from the larger society within their own party organizations. This contradiction was mirrored in the personal lives of these revolutionaries: they conducted themselves in a radical egalitarian fashion but at the same time replicated certain traditional aspects of gender hierarchy. As a result, a patriarchal gender system that proved to be enduring grew within the body politic of the Chinese Communist party.

Part 2 consists of three chapters that probe the gender dynamics of the revolutionary upsurge of 1925–1927 under the rubric of the First United Front, the term for the alliance between the Nationalist and Communist parties. These chapters demonstrate the decisive im-
pact of politics on the emergence of a massive social mobilization of women for the National Revolution in certain parts of China. Beginning in Shanghai with the May Thirtieth Incident (1925), Part 2 traces the unfolding of mass women's movements in Shanghai, Beijing, and the southern provinces of Guangdong, Jiangxi, Hunan, and Hubei. The mass mobilization of women was pursued through a strikingly innovative use of cultural symbols, propaganda, and organization, tools that were derived from the Soviet revolutionary model. The explicit aim of this intense effort of mass mobilization was to bring women into the political process, usually for the first time, and make them feel like they were an integral part of the making of the new state. We can discern in this process the gendered contours of the state that was created through this revolutionary process and established as the legitimate political authority twenty-some years later.

Part 2 also pinpoints the difficulties encountered by these mass women's movements from within the political parties that spawned them. From the removal of Xiang Jingyu to the problems in funding that He Xiangning faced to the unwillingness of labor and peasant organizers to focus on gender issues, both the Chinese Communist and Nationalist parties exhibited the strength of traditional attitudes and behaviors that pervaded their political organizations. To be sure, the mass women's movement also experienced public opposition to its programs. But the defeat of the women's movement was due less to public opposition or internal weaknesses than to the collapse—in blood—of the first United Front.

The concluding chapter summarizes the main issues presented in this book and then examines the impact of the acrimonious and bloody breakdown of the Nationalist-Communist collaboration on the fate of feminism in Chinese politics. The tragic struggle that ensued between the two parties included a propaganda war over the politicization of gender issues. The Nationalists, discovering that the issue of alleged Communist sexual immorality was an extremely effective weapon, accused the Communists of promoting sexual chaos. One of the many issues under attack was the conduct of women political organizers, who were portrayed as sexually promiscuous and dangerous to the moral order. The identification of morality as an issue of contention had far-reaching consequences for both parties. The Nationalist party embraced traditional values once again, and promoted domesticity, as was most clearly revealed in the New Life Movement of 1934. The Communist party itself became puritanical in the 1930s, modifying or
abandoning much of its original women’s program. Thenceforth, both parties set definite limits on women’s political roles and the use of gender issues in political and social campaigns. Not only were female political identities restricted but patriarchal conceptions of political power became unassailable.

Yet neither party entirely abandoned the cause of women’s emancipation. As the Nationalists became the rulers of the country in 1928, they enacted a civil code that granted women full citizenship rights in the new state, and Chinese women achieved suffrage and extensive legal rights—on paper at least—years before their counterparts in the Catholic countries of Western Europe. Meanwhile, the outlawed Chinese Communist party, in its continued efforts at revolution, kept alive much of the language and rituals of women’s emancipation, a fact that was to have an enduring impact on the political and social order of post-1949 China, as well as on revolutionary movements in other third-world countries.