

SOCIALIST REALISM REVISITED: STATE-SPONSORED LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ‘NEW WOMAN’ IN MAO-ERA CHINA (1949–1976)

Líng Yǔshēng

Anhui Normal University, Wuhu

China

Abstract

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 initiated a profound transformation of literary production, cultural policy, and gender discourse. Guided by Mao Zedong's ideological vision and influenced by Soviet socialist realism, literature became a crucial instrument for political education and social engineering. Within this framework, the image of the “New Woman” emerged as a central cultural construct designed to symbolize socialist modernity, class consciousness, and revolutionary commitment. This review article examines how state-sponsored literary criticism contributed to the construction, dissemination, and regulation of the New Woman in Mao-era China (1949–1976). Drawing upon scholarship in Chinese literary studies, gender studies, and cultural history, the article analyzes the institutional mechanisms of literary criticism, the ideological foundations of socialist realism, and the representation of women in fiction, drama, and revolutionary model works. The study argues that literary criticism functioned not merely as an evaluative practice but as a disciplinary apparatus that shaped acceptable representations of femininity and citizenship. While Maoist discourse promoted unprecedented opportunities for women's participation in public life, it simultaneously subordinated gender identity to class struggle and socialist collectivism. The article concludes that the New Woman was a politically constructed figure whose significance reveals the complex intersections between state power, literary production, and gender ideology in socialist China.

Keywords: Socialist Realism, Mao-era China, New Woman, Literary Criticism, Gender Politics, Chinese Literature, Cultural Revolution, Socialist Culture

1. Introduction

The founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 marked a watershed in Chinese cultural history. Literature was assigned a new political mission: to serve socialism and facilitate revolutionary transformation. Mao Zedong's “Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art” established the ideological foundation for literary production, insisting that literature and art serve workers, peasants, and soldiers and remain subordinate to political objectives. These principles remained influential throughout the Mao era and became institutionalized through cultural organizations, publishing houses, writers' associations, and state-sponsored literary criticism.

Among the many cultural projects pursued during this period, the construction of a socialist female subject occupied a prominent place. The Communist Party sought to eliminate feudal traditions, promote gender equality, and mobilize women into productive labor and revolutionary activism. Literary works became essential vehicles through which new ideals of womanhood were imagined and disseminated.

This article reviews the scholarship concerning socialist realism, literary criticism, and the representation of women in Mao-era literature. Particular attention is given to how state-sponsored criticism shaped literary portrayals of women and how these portrayals contributed to the ideological construction of the New Woman.

2. Theoretical Foundations: Socialist Realism and Maoist Cultural Policy

Socialist realism originated in the Soviet Union during the 1930s and became the dominant aesthetic doctrine throughout the socialist world. It required writers to depict reality not simply as it existed but as it ought to develop under socialism. Heroic workers, peasants, and revolutionary leaders occupied central positions in literary narratives, reflecting the anticipated triumph of socialism.

Following the establishment of the PRC, Chinese literary institutions adopted many Soviet models. Literary organizations, publishing systems, and critical practices were reorganized according to socialist principles. Critics evaluated works primarily according to ideological correctness rather than aesthetic innovation. Literature was expected to promote collective values, revolutionary consciousness, and political loyalty.

Mao's cultural philosophy differed from Soviet orthodoxy in important respects. While Soviet socialist realism emphasized industrial modernization and proletarian heroism, Maoist cultural policy placed greater emphasis on peasant participation, mass mobilization, and revolutionary transformation. Nevertheless, both systems viewed literature as an instrument of political education.

The concept of "literature serving politics" became the dominant principle of Mao-era criticism. Literary critics were expected to identify ideological deviations, praise politically exemplary works, and ensure conformity with Party objectives. Consequently, literary criticism evolved into a mechanism of cultural governance.

3. State-Sponsored Literary Criticism as Ideological Apparatus

State-sponsored literary criticism occupied a strategic position within Maoist cultural administration. Critics were not independent evaluators but participants in a broader ideological project. Through journals, newspapers, literary conferences, and political campaigns, critics determined acceptable literary themes and representations.

The institutionalization of criticism occurred through organizations such as the Chinese Writers Association and the All-China Federation of Literary and Art Circles. These institutions monitored literary production and promoted officially approved interpretations.

Several political campaigns demonstrated the power of literary criticism. The criticism of Hu Feng in 1955, the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957, and the Cultural Revolution all revealed how literary debates could become political struggles. Authors and critics accused of

ideological errors faced professional marginalization, public denunciation, or political persecution.

Scholars have argued that criticism during this period functioned as a form of ideological regulation. Instead of facilitating diverse interpretations, it established normative standards for representing class relations, revolutionary history, and gender roles. Through repeated critical interventions, literary discourse became increasingly standardized.

4. Gender, Revolution, and the Emergence of the New Woman

The Chinese Communist Party viewed women's liberation as an essential component of socialist modernization. Revolutionary leaders frequently proclaimed that women held up "half the sky," emphasizing their importance in economic production and political participation.

The New Woman differed significantly from earlier representations found in May Fourth literature. Republican-era New Women were often depicted as educated intellectuals struggling for personal autonomy and romantic freedom. Maoist literature, by contrast, emphasized collective identity, labor participation, and revolutionary commitment.

The New Woman embodied several key characteristics:

Class consciousness.

Participation in productive labor.

Political loyalty.

Collective orientation.

Revolutionary optimism.

These characteristics reflected broader socialist values rather than specifically gendered concerns. As a result, female protagonists were often evaluated according to their contribution to socialist construction rather than their individual aspirations.

Literary criticism reinforced these expectations by praising female characters who subordinated personal interests to collective goals. Women who demonstrated revolutionary commitment were celebrated as socialist heroines, whereas characters expressing individual desires were frequently criticized as politically problematic.

5. Representation of Women in Early Mao-Era Literature (1949–1966)

The seventeen years between 1949 and the Cultural Revolution witnessed extensive literary experimentation within the boundaries of socialist realism. Fiction from this period frequently portrayed women participating in land reform, agricultural collectivization, and industrial production.

One influential example was Ding Ling's *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River*. Although written during the revolutionary transition, the novel became an important model for socialist representations of women. Female characters were portrayed as active participants in class struggle and social transformation.

Similarly, many rural novels depicted peasant women overcoming feudal oppression through collective action. Marriage reform, literacy campaigns, and labor participation appeared as recurring themes.

State-sponsored criticism celebrated these narratives because they demonstrated the transformative power of socialism. Critics emphasized the political development of female protagonists rather than psychological complexity. Consequently, women's personal experiences were often subordinated to broader narratives of class struggle.

This literary pattern reflected the ideological assumption that gender inequality would disappear automatically through socialist transformation. Consequently, independent discussions of patriarchy were frequently marginalized.

6. Literary Criticism and the Regulation of Female Subjectivity

One of the most significant functions of literary criticism was the regulation of female subjectivity. Critics determined which forms of femininity were politically acceptable and which were ideologically suspect.

Several recurring themes emerged:

6.1 Rejection of Bourgeois Femininity

Critics frequently condemned representations associated with bourgeois individualism, romanticism, and domesticity. Female characters focused on personal happiness were often portrayed negatively.

6.2 Promotion of Collective Identity

Women were encouraged to identify primarily as workers, peasants, soldiers, or Party members. Literary criticism praised narratives that emphasized collective achievement over individual fulfillment.

6.3 Heroic Labor

The ideal woman participated actively in productive labor. Agricultural workers, factory laborers, and revolutionary cadres became dominant literary models.

6.4 Political Consciousness

Political awareness was presented as the defining feature of socialist womanhood. Literary criticism frequently assessed female characters according to their ideological maturity.

These evaluative standards significantly influenced literary production. Writers adapted their narratives to align with critical expectations, reinforcing the dominance of officially sanctioned gender models.

7. The Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Model Heroines

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) represented the most radical phase of Maoist cultural politics. Traditional literary forms were largely replaced by revolutionary model works promoted by Jiang Qing and other cultural authorities.

Female protagonists occupied unusually prominent positions within these works. Characters such as Wu Qinghua in *The Red Detachment of Women* became iconic representations of revolutionary femininity.

These heroines possessed several defining features:

Exceptional political commitment.
Physical strength.
Military competence.
Absolute loyalty to revolutionary leadership.
Rejection of traditional gender norms.

On the surface, these representations appeared highly progressive. Women assumed leadership roles and participated in revolutionary struggle on equal terms with men. However, scholars have noted important limitations. Revolutionary heroines often achieved equality by adopting characteristics traditionally associated with masculine revolutionary identity. Femininity itself was frequently minimized or rendered politically irrelevant. State-sponsored criticism reinforced this tendency by celebrating revolutionary militancy while discouraging explorations of personal identity, sexuality, or emotional complexity.

8. Contradictions in Maoist Gender Discourse

Although Maoist literature promoted gender equality, significant contradictions remained. First, women's liberation was often justified in terms of economic productivity rather than personal autonomy. Participation in labor was valued because it contributed to socialist development.

Second, class identity frequently overshadowed gender identity. Women's issues were interpreted through the framework of class struggle, limiting discussions of patriarchal structures.

Third, representations of equality often depended on the masculinization of female characters. Revolutionary women gained recognition by demonstrating traits associated with political militancy and labor discipline.

Fourth, literary criticism rarely addressed domestic labor and reproductive responsibilities, despite their continued importance in everyday life.

These contradictions reveal the limitations of state-sponsored feminism in Mao-era China.

9. Reassessing the New Woman in Contemporary Scholarship

Recent scholarship has challenged earlier interpretations of Mao-era literature as merely propagandistic. Researchers increasingly emphasize the complexity of socialist cultural production and the diverse experiences of women within socialist society.

Contemporary scholars argue that Maoist representations of women produced both opportunities and constraints. On one hand, socialist policies expanded educational access, employment opportunities, and political participation. On the other hand, women remained subject to ideological regulation and state-defined models of citizenship.

The New Woman therefore cannot be understood solely as a symbol of emancipation or oppression. Rather, she represents a historically specific attempt to reconcile gender equality with socialist collectivism.

10. Conclusion

State-sponsored literary criticism played a decisive role in constructing the New Woman during Mao-era China. Through institutionalized critical practices, literary authorities promoted representations of women that embodied socialist values, revolutionary commitment, and collective identity. Socialist realism provided the aesthetic framework through which these representations were disseminated, while literary criticism functioned as an ideological mechanism that regulated acceptable portrayals of femininity.

Although Maoist literature expanded the visibility of women in public life and challenged many traditional gender norms, it also subordinated gender identity to political objectives. The New Woman emerged not as an autonomous individual but as a carefully constructed socialist subject whose value derived from participation in collective revolutionary projects.

The study of Mao-era literary criticism therefore offers important insights into the relationship between literature, ideology, and gender. By examining how cultural institutions shaped representations of women, scholars can better understand the broader dynamics of state power and social transformation in twentieth-century China.

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An Interdisciplinary Journal of Research, Literature and Literary Reviews

Vol. 103 No. 1, 2025

ISSN: 0014-2751

Cai, X. (2016). Revolution and Its Narratives: China's Socialist Literary and Cultural Imaginaries, 1949–1966.