Marriage in China has undergone a dramatic change from its Confucian past when virtually every woman was married, to the period of “liberation” under Mao Zedong’s rule (1949-1976) which sought to end traditional influences on marriage, and to the Post-Mao period (1976-Present) where the institution of marriage underwent dramatic changes that continue to reverberate today. This essay tracks the status of married women over three different eras: the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), the Maoist period, and Post-Mao period, and examines how women’s official standing in society and lived experiences were or were not congruent with each other. Using a three-way comparison, this paper argues that modern Chinese women are living in the most dynamic and egalitarian phase in modern Chinese history because of their increased access to legal protections and changes in cultural attitudes towards marriage.

**Qing Dynasty 1644-1912**

The first period of analysis is the Qing Dynasty, with a focus on the 19th century until the dynasty’s demise in 1912. Of the three periods of this analysis, there is clear evidence that the Qing Dynasty was the most oppressive towards women, as it was then that women held the most static position within the family. The official laws - both legally and socially - that governed the lives of married Qing women were based largely on Confucian ethics, laden with patriarchal oppression. However, the officially repressed status of women in the Qing Dynasty was largely in line with their lived experience, making this period also the most harmonious between the official status of married Chinese women and their own expectations. The position of married women within this period was governed far more by the culture than the government directly.

To fully understand the position of married women during this time, one must first have a grasp of Confucianism, as it is the primary socially-governing philosophy throughout Chinese history. Even though Confucian teachings date back to around the 6th century BCE, Confucianism continues to influence Chinese society in the 21st century, and it has formed the foundation of a society based on interpersonal relationships. There are five important relationships within Confucianism: ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger sibling, and friend with friend. Most of these relationships are grounded in a rigid understanding of hierarchy, where power and authority between two parties is firmly identified, and wives as considered weaker than

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husbands. The ideal wives in Confucian society are expected to be obedient to their husbands, and their place is exclusively within the confines of the family, while the husband is able to pursue relationships and goals exterior to family.³

In relation to these other important relationships, the bond between husband and wife was not as valued as the much more significant dyad consisting of father and son. In fact, the importance of filial piety between father and son was so critical that a healthy spousal relationship was encouraged as a means to teach a son, not to benefit the husband or wife. As a result, abuse towards the wife was discouraged, but not due to respect or a desire to protect her. Instead, spousal abuse was frowned upon for its possible negative repercussions on the son witnessing this abuse.⁴ This example further exemplifies the perceived role of women as belonging in the home, as their role within Confucian society centres around children and the family. However, this official stance was radically different from the lived experience of women in this period, as told by Qing Dynasty feminist writer Qiu Jin (1875-1907), who states in her work, Jing Wèi Shí [Stones of the Jingwei Bird], that Qing wives frequently suffered “beating and abuse” and that husbands commonly “favoured concubines over the wife.”⁵

In terms of legal power, one of the greatest discrepancies between husband and wife in the Qing Dynasty was access to divorce. The ability to end a marriage was reserved solely for the husband or his patriarchal elders, and the wife and her family were forced to occupy a passive role in the process. Qing divorce was classified into one of three categories: to drive off a wife, to negotiate divorce, and destined divorce. If a wife was driven off, there were seven valid reasons that the patrilineal line could argue, such as a wife’s failure to demonstrate sufficient filial piety to the husband’s parents, a wife’s failure to produce a male child, a wife being considered too sexy, too jealous, suffering from disease, prone to gossip, or stealing.⁶ However, despite the names, both negotiated and destined were still firmly under control of the husband and his family. In the event of a successful divorce, the woman was reduced to a piece of legal property to be removed from the care of the ex-husband’s household by the local government, and then either returned to the male head of her family or remarried.⁷

³ Ibid. 323-325.
⁵ Amy Dooling and Kristina Torgeson, Writing Women in Modern China: An Anthology of Women’s Literature from the Early Twentieth Century (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 64.
⁷ Ibid. 824-825.
Similarly, the instigation of marriage was also out of the control of the prospective wife, as the process was largely dictated by her family and the family of the suitor. This is because marriage in the Qing Dynasty was not an institution based around two autonomous individuals, but more of a union between two families with the husband and wife acting as their representatives. According to both Confucian ethics and state law, marriage was legitimised by the parents on both sides, and it was considered unethical for the children to make any sort of protest. Therefore, in both the process of beginning and ending a marriage, women were forced to occupy a static role in which their husbands and their families had much greater power than they had. This position was upheld by Confucian ethics with a Confucian understanding of family as the governing principle, and the rigid nature of this system served to eliminate agency in the lives of women throughout the Qing Dynasty.

One important aspect of marriage that has undergone a great deal of change over the course of 20th century Chinese history is the division of property between husband and wife. The Qing legal codes surrounding property were written overwhelmingly in favour of husbands, going so far as to legally classify a wife as property. For most of the Qing Dynasty, women were unable to assert ownership over property, although property rights were eventually given to women in the final decade of the Qing Dynasty’s existence. Additionally, in the event of divorce within this era, the wife would have to give up custody of her children in addition to possessions claimed by the husband. Qiu Jin’s writings confirm that this policy was accurate to many women’s experiences during the Qing period, and even though her account comes from 1907, when property laws had been extended to women, she laments that, “[women] have no freedom in domestic affairs, and when it comes to property, it belongs entirely to the husband.” Other important cultural practices also shaped the role of women within marriage, the most important of these being foot binding and concubinage. First, foot binding was intimately connected to marriage in the Qing Dynasty, as participating in the practice was perceived as integral for a Han Chinese woman to get married. Bound feet were thought to be a key distinguishing feature which separated women who would become wives,
and those who were relegated to the less desirable position of concubine. Therefore, women were subjected to foot binding as an important avenue for their social mobility and security within the family, as allegedly the only way for them to easily increase their social status would be to secure a marriage with a high-ranking man.

An important side effect of foot binding was that it more tightly linked women to their marriages, as women who experienced foot binding stated that the practice impeded their ability to perform mobility-dependent tasks. This encouraged women to take part in activities that more often took place within the home, and wives developed a reliance on other members of the household to perform duties which demanded much movement. Therefore, women with bound feet were relegated towards work within the home, such as weaving, and this resulted in the undermining of their ability to act autonomously.

The other important cultural practice unique to Qing marriage is concubinage. This practice was directly connected to the other ways in which married women had their bodies regulated within the Qing Dynasty, through the control of women’s sexuality. By far the most important Confucian tenet of female sexuality is the preservation of chastity above everything else, so concubinage was adapted to fit with the strict rules placed on married women. In the event of sexual assault (e.g. rape or adultery), the virtue of the woman was always called into question, since the ideal female archetype in the Qing Dynasty was chaste and had little contact with any men outside of her family. In fact, the cult of female chastity was so influential that female victims of sexual assault were expected to choose death over disgrace, and were then awarded posthumously with a restoration of their honour. Therefore, it is evident that wives within Qing society were highly controlled, and their sexual life was expected to be totally reserved for their husbands, with devastating consequences if they contravened.

15 Ibid. 1044.
16 Ibid. 1062.
17 Fang, “Construction of Womanhood in Confucian Texts for Girls,” 82.
18 Brownell, Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader, 52.
The highly regulated position of wives within the Qing Dynasty meant that the sexual role within marriage was dramatically hampered, leading husbands to look to concubinage for sexual satisfaction. The relationship between a husband and wife within the Qing period is differentiated from a concubine and husband by an equal responsibility of rituals and obligations, while the commitment between husband and concubine is much weaker. The only situation in which a concubine could achieve an elevated status within the family was if she was the mother of the only male heir/s.²⁰ However, even concubines with increased importance within a family were usually unable to achieve a position equal to the principle wife.²¹ Wives were supposed to act primarily in the role of child production, while concubines assumed a more sexualised and socially fulfilling function.²² However, the interactions between wives and concubines were supposed to resemble a relationship of mentor and student, with the wife acting as a moral exemplar who took responsibility for the actions of her husband’s concubines in the household.²³

In Confucian ideology, the wives in every household took responsibility for all children produced by themselves and concubines, with an emphasis on sons. Such an emphasis illustrates the concubine’s role within the family as a sexual servant, while the wife took on the undisputed role of caring for children.²⁴

However, in practice, the roles of concubine and wife were often blurred, and it was possible for a concubine to usurp power within the household through the production of an heir. In fact, concubines could develop a closer relationship with a husband than he had with his wife.²⁵ Therefore, the theoretical hierarchical structure of the Qing family was prone to disruption by concubines, most famously in the case of Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) who began as a concubine but became the family matriarch and the last ruler of the Qing Dynasty. In fact, it was under her rule at the end of the Qing Dynasty that punishments against sexual crimes were greatly reduced, and women were awarded a higher degree of freedom over their bodies and their sexuality. This occurred in the final decade of the Qing, marking a

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²² Du, “Concubinage and Motherhood in Qing China (1644–1911),” 176.
²³ Li, “Woman Writing about Women: Li Shuyi’s (1817–?) Project on One Hundred Beauties in Chinese History,” 73.
²⁴ Du, “Concubinage and Motherhood in Qing China (1644–1911),” 176.
²⁵ Du, “Concubinage and Motherhood in Qing China (1644–1911),” 176.
radical departure from the governing Confucian morality in Chinese history towards a more equal role for women. 26

To conclude this analysis of married Chinese women in the Qing Dynasty, it is clear that this period, compared to more recent eras in Chinese history, was the most oppressive, characterised by powerful parental and spousal control. Through strict Confucian ethics and societal norms, women’s roles within the family centered around childcare, and their relationship with their husband was relegated below the bond between father and son. Women’s parents and their spouses’ families held far greater legal control over their lives than they did, resulting in women having little input in the inception or ending of a marriage. Additionally, the cultural practice of foot binding further tied women to their families for support through physical means. Furthermore, their sexuality was rigidly controlled, and their bodies were regarded as an apparatus to create heirs. Women’s detachment from their own sexuality meant that well-off men often took concubines, and wives would then have to oversee these women and their progeny. While not all women’s experiences were completely in line with their official status or the ideal Confucian norms of the time, the Qing Confucian culture and legal code worked together to create the incredibly constrictive environment in which women could be treated as objects, making this period the most oppressive of the three eras of modern China.

Maoist Period 1949-1976

The second period of analysis does not directly follow the Qing period, as between the years 1912-1927 China was effectively governed by dozens of conflicting warlords in various regions, each with their own policies of rule. Then from 1927-1949, China went through a series of changes as it was controlled by the Nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the occupying Japanese, meaning that the country was not under the jurisdiction of a single government. A great deal of social development occurred in these years, which improved the status of women and marriage, the most important being the May 4th and New Culture movements following the Treaty of Versailles (1919). The Maoist period from 1949-1976 has been selected for comparison, due to its marking the beginning of another singular government within mainland China.

This era in Chinese women’s history brought with it a great number of grand promises for the improved status of women within society. Mao (1893-1976) was a devoted communist and supporter of socialist-feminism, so much

of his rhetoric about women was in favour of absolute equality between sexes.27 However, after 1920, Mao’s writings were less inclined to focus on women’s role in the family from a feminist lens than a Maoist-Leninist lens, stating that the solution to inequality between sexes was to, “shatter the oppression of imperialism and the feudal forces...”28 This period, however, is when the state became much more influential in the marital life of its citizens, and in many ways replaced more traditional institutions in its domination of people’s domestic lives. Many aspects of marriage became regulated and documented by the state, and this laid the foundation of government involvement, which would later even extend its grip to control birth rates directly in the Post-Mao period.29 However, such radical and pervasive state involvement was not easy to implement, so it took several decades before the Chinese state was truly in control of marriages under Mao.30 In order to understand the official legal position of women and marriage within the newly influential state of the Maoist period, the most important document to examine is the New Marriage Law of 1950.

This law was influential regarding the status of marriage, even into the 21st century, and it was clear that many of its articles directly attacked Confucian practices and dynastic Chinese culture. However, while the law made important progress towards freedom and equality between men and women within marriage, it in no way eliminated all patriarchal systems within Chinese culture.31 In relation to the act of marriage itself, the law explicitly stated that “[t]he marriage system [was] based on the free choice of partners, on monogamy, and equal rights for the sexes...”, and that, “[m]arriage upon any third party, mercenary marriage, and any other acts of interference in the freedom of marriage are prohibited...”, thus undermining both parental influence on marriage, and forms of polygamy including concubinage.32 These articles established, with no room for misinterpretation, that marriage in this era of Chinese history was intended to be under the complete and equal control of the man and woman, with no room for outside interference.

When addressing the institution of marriage, this law continued to promise complete equality between the married couple. It states that the “[h]usband and wife enjoy equal status within the home,”33 and that a husband

27 Stuart Schram and Nancy Hodes, Mao’s Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings (Armonk: East Gate, 2005), 44.
28 Ibid. 132.
30 Ibid. 472-473.
33 Ibid. 370.
and wife should have equal control over their property. Similarly, the regulation around divorce was also made much more equitable than under the Qing Dynasty. Under the CCP leadership, men and women had equal access to divorce. In relation to property, again women were elevated to a legal position equal to men in their ability to take control over their own personal property, greatly enabling them to remain self-sufficient, regardless of marital status.\textsuperscript{34} However, the creation of these laws did not immediately mean they achieved widespread implementation, and women were still often disadvantaged in inheriting property through divorce.\textsuperscript{35}

While many of these advances grew out of changes made during the Nationalist period, including a law outlawing foot binding, improvements to women’s position within society were legitimized for the first time with the 1950 Marriage Law by a government that has continued to rule since its inception.\textsuperscript{36} Therefore, the Maoist period made undeniable strides towards greater rights and protections for women within marriage in official state rhetoric. Even Mao argued in opposition to men who “beat their wives; [and] look down on women”, lumping them together with “foreign imperialism… corrupt officials, local bullies, and bad gentry” as threats to the new Chinese culture.\textsuperscript{37} Through this policy, he helped create a basis of support towards ending spousal abuse and granting women additional freedoms in many aspects of life, both interior and exterior to the family. However, with such radical changes occurring within a single generation, it is understandable that many of these promises and protections were not fully transmitted to the actual experience of women within this period.

The first hurdle that the Marriage Laws encountered was the speed with which they were implemented, and their radical departure from traditional views of marriage, creating a shock-wave amongst those responsible for their enforcement.\textsuperscript{38} This was most violently manifested in the skyrocketing number of murders and suicides of young women who attempted to divorce their husbands in the initial years of the legal reform, proving that more time was required before the new laws would be universally accepted. In fact, the CCP released a statement that the number of women who had been killed or resorted to taking their own lives was placed at 70,000-80,000 between the years 1950 and 1953.\textsuperscript{39} This provides definitive proof that legal change can

\textsuperscript{36} Dorothy Ko, \textit{Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 50.
\textsuperscript{37} Schram, \textit{Mao’s Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings}, 46.
occur at a much more rapid rate than social or cultural change, and that access to new freedoms does not mean that they can be successfully implemented immediately.

Therefore, during the dynastic period of China, the Confucian model of women was fairly representative of how women were treated in everyday life. However, during the Maoist period, there was a notable gap between the equalist rhetoric and legal policies of the Chinese state compared to their lived experiences. This division can be explained with the incredibly rapid changes China experienced in the final decades of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, as the political and legal spheres of China transformed quicker than the deep-rooted Confucian cultural understanding about women and marriage could accept.

Aside from the process of initiating or ending marriage, it is undeniable that women at this time were granted a great deal of new opportunities outside marriage as well. However, women’s liberation in the job market did not alleviate traditional responsibilities placed on them within the family and, as a result, working women could only gain limited access to the formerly exclusive male spheres of the workforce, as men failed to shoulder their share of domestic duties. This meant that while laws were put in place to eliminate women’s dependence on men for economic security, once within the institution of marriage, women were still burdened with the traditional expectations that often shackled them to the household. However, rather than being bound to the house as they had been in previous eras, married women during the Maoist period were expected to value home economics, making their role within the household more of a passion than a duty. Moreover, they were still burdened with the double duty of work within, and outside of, the home.

Despite the secure control that Mao and the CCP managed to gain over all of mainland China after 1949, the problem of antiquated culture continued to impede the Maoist-Leninist ideological take-over of the Chinese population. This was what necessitated the need for the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in the minds of Mao and his supporters, and this period brought even more sweeping changes across Chinese society, including those affecting women.

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41 Ibid. 117.
and marriage. This period marked a departure from economics as Mao’s number one priority within China, and instead elevated culture to the forefront of change.\footnote{Johnson, \textit{Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China}, 178.}

This decade in Chinese history was critical towards Confucianism, and any residual obstacles in the way of equal treatment of men and women were viewed as insufficient material conditions, bourgeoisie mentalities, and lingering “feudalist” practices.\footnote{Ibid. 178.} However, contrary to its stated purpose, the Cultural Revolution in many ways regressed the status of women within marriage and substituted Confucian teachings with state rhetoric to justify the mistreatment of women, in many ways mimicking their degradation in previous eras. One manifestation of this regression did not target women specifically, but this decade resulted in a breakdown of China’s legal system, along with the legal benefits women had managed to achieve within the new regime.\footnote{Rubie Watson and Patricia Ebrey. \textit{Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society} (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 339.}

However, in relation to the sexual liberation of women, evidence suggests that the Cultural Revolution marked a time when sex and marriage became increasingly disconnected, and women were more freely able to explore their sexuality outside of wedlock.\footnote{Hershatter, “State of the Field: Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century,” 1014.} However, despite the increased opportunities for sexual expression, the birth rates within China declined during this period, lowering from 6.375 births per woman in 1966 to 3.472 in 1976 as child production became increasingly unimportant within the lives of women both inside and outside of marriage.\footnote{“Fertility Rate, Total (Births Per Woman),” The World Bank, April 6, 2018, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=CN.} Family planning and birth control, including abortions, were also made part of state doctrine, along with the radical attacks on Confucian culture during this period, so that the approach to marriage and the position of women within Chinese society were poised to make even more dramatic changes by Mao’s death in 1976.\footnote{Hershatter, “State of the Field: Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century,” 1015.}

To conclude this study of Chinese women and marriage, the Maoist period from 1949-1976 introduced a plethora of new legal promises and state commitments to improving the status of women and, in many ways, their lives improved. However, such radical changes took decades to become properly integrated into society, which meant that much of the rhetoric of equality and liberation failed to be fully realised during this period. This resulted in a widened disconnect between official state policy towards marriage and
the lived experiences of women. However, the legal and social movements established under Mao created the environment necessary for Chinese women and their experience of marriage to undergo radical changes which reverberate today.

**Post-Mao Period 1976-Present Day**

After Mao’s death in 1976 and the ascension of Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) to power in 1978, China underwent some of its most dramatic changes in modern history. As the country evolved, so too did its institution of marriage. In this period, the Chinese state became more involved in marriage than it ever had been before with the implementation of the One Child Policy (OCP). Despite this involvement, the position of women within marriage now is better than at any previous point within modern Chinese history.

In terms of official legal policy, the post-Mao leadership first updated the New Marriage Law in 1980, which largely aligned itself to the 1950 Marriage Law, but implemented greater protection for women during divorce. Women gained an advantageous position through amendments including article 27, which states that, “[t]he husband is not allowed to apply for a divorce when his wife is pregnant or within one year after the birth of a child.” Not only does this eliminate the inequality of Qing era divorces, the law favoured women over their husbands due to their more vulnerable role during childbirth.

Several other updates have been made to Chinese marriage laws since then as well, but the most influential policy pertaining to marriage after 1980 is the One Child Policy (OCP). This policy was put in place to deal with the rapidly growing Chinese population, but it was not all encompassing. First, the OCP only applied to Han Chinese, the country’s largest ethnic group which currently makes up 91.6% of the population. Even among the Han, there were exceptions to the rule based on special circumstances, and those who did not follow the policy. Despite this, the OCP served as one of the strictest regulations over women’s bodies in modern Chinese history, and it managed to last until 2016.

However, the most important part of OCP’s legacy on the subject of women’s status within marriage is its cultural impact. Because families were only permitted to have one child, it meant that each child born became treasured by the family - thus precipitating the “little emperor” phenomenon. Essentially, each child born within this era to a family unwilling to risk having another child became the most important member of the household.

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Mothers and fathers were each expected to devote all of their resources towards raising their one child to be able to compete in the newly capitalist Chinese economy, and if that child was a girl, she was given a much better education and higher expectations than any women of previous generations. This has resulted in the most interesting development for women within modern Chinese marriage - the idea of the shèngnǚ or “leftover women”.

Leftover women are highly educated female children born in the 1980s and 1990s, and they are the clearest sign that the traditional Chinese understanding of women and marriage which existed through the Maoist period has begun to break down. These women are defined by their refusal or inability to enter into a marriage before their mid-20s, as they are more focused on their careers and personal lives. However, they are also the embodiment of the change in understanding concerning Chinese marriage in the Post-Mao era. On one hand, leftover women represent the freedom promised to women within the marriage laws created in the 20th century, as they are seizing their agency and asserting the belief that marriage for women is optional and in their control. However, the highly sexist discourse surrounding leftover women shows the reluctance of the Chinese culture to accept women in a position of empowerment within marriage.

Leftover women represent the group standing most in direct opposition to traditional marriage within China, as they approach the institution in new and diverse ways which show the conflict between maintaining independence and pleasing one’s family. As stated by Sandy To, there are several methods used to accomplish this balance of marriage and independence, but many uphold patriarchal standards of Confucian China. These include women marrying men who have much greater economic success than themselves, so they are able to continue their career without the man feeling as if his own accomplishments are threatened. The second strategy is to hide their economic accomplishments from potential partners, so men of similar economic status do not feel intimidated or emasculated by the woman’s achievements. Therefore, some women are attempting to realise the equality promised to them through state legislation, while remaining within the parameters of Chinese culture that placed men as the primary breadwinners within the

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56 Ibid. 12.
family. However, there are also those who are breaking out of the confines of Confucian hierarchy altogether.

Leftover women who shun traditional standards of marriage have adopted other methods to maintain their career paths while still getting married. These strategies include marrying a man of lower economic status than themselves, which is an undesirable choice from the perspective of a woman’s parents, but results in greater financial independence. The next strategy is to marry a man outside of Chinese culture with the expectation that he will be more accepting of female independence, but this also has a possible negative consequence of the parents’ disapproval of their daughter marrying outside the culture. Finally, the smallest category of women are those seeking partnership in untraditional ways, such as co-habitation, or those not interested in marriage at all. These strategies attest to how the state of marriage within China, and women’s place within it, is in a state of flux able to challenge conventional understandings of one of society’s most enduring institutions.

Additionally, the pressure placed by parents on their children to marry means that the decision not to marry remains highly problematic, even within modern Chinese society. In fact, the term *shèngnǚ* is highly pejorative, and unmarried people past their mid-20s are often stigmatized. In response to this increased social pressure, a number of people have begun to enter into “fake marriages” to appease their parents. This is especially true within the gay community, where gay men and lesbian women frequently enter marriages together to gain the acceptance of their parents and wider social approval.

Additionally, divorce has become increasingly common within the Post-Mao era of China, growing from an average of 497 divorces a day in 1980 to 1,795 in 1988. A primary driver behind divorce in modern China is as a result of women’s desire to fulfil their own personal aspirations, meaning women are no longer tied to the family through outdated Confucian principles. Additionally, one noteworthy aspect of modern Chinese divorce is that divorces initiated by women are now significantly higher than those

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58 Ibid. 10-11.
59 Ibid. 13.
63 Ibid. 385.
initiated by men, indicating that the opportunities and protections given to women through modern divorce law are being utilised on a mass scale. 64 Furthermore, women are embracing their own sexuality in the Post-Mao period, both inside and outside marriage. Part of this shift occurred because of the OCP, as families were expected to only have one child, sex was further distanced from producing a male heir within the family after one child had already been born. 65 Other important factors resulting in greater sexual freedom for women include increased geographic mobility, access to contraceptives, and enhanced legal protections for children born outside of marriage. 66 However, because women’s role in marriage is no longer explicitly tied to childbirth, they are more freely able to enter and leave marriages, and as they are no longer dependent on a man, it can be conclusively stated that the modern role of Chinese women in marriage is that of a relatively equal partner in a relationship based on mutual respect.

Given the newly empowered status of women within China, it is clear that their lived experiences are approaching the equality promised to them by the Chinese government. Traditional understandings of marriage within Chinese culture remain to pressure the Post-Mao generations of women into occupying a subordinate position within marriage, but the new opportunities and attitudes awarded to the children of the OCP have made exponential progress towards marital equality. However, there are still a number of hurdles to overcome from lingering cultural attitudes towards marriage, but the Post-Mao period has initiated a moral shift in modern China which is moving in favour of egalitarianism for married women. 67

To conclude, the Post-Mao era has continued the trend of legal liberalisation. It is clear by the wide variety of approaches towards marriage that leftover women represent a new era of dynamism within Chinese marriage. While some women still choose to live within the patriarchal norms of the Confucian past to preserve the approval of their parents and conservative Chinese society, the new generation of highly educated and independent Chinese women are forcing change to occur within Chinese marriage by demanding more autonomy to pursue their own goals, frequently outside the realm of traditional marriage. While parents are nowhere near as influential as they were in the Qing Dynasty on the marital decisions of their children, in some cases they are still able to pressure their daughters to marry and have

65 Deborah Davis, “Privatization of Marriage in Post-Socialist China,” Modern China 40, No. 6 (2014): 554.
66 Ibid. 555, 569.
children. However, parental influence is waning, and it is a combination of female independence supported by the state which has produced the new potent state of Chinese women within marriage.

**Conclusion**

The position that Chinese women have occupied throughout modern Chinese history has experienced radical change from the Qing Dynasty to the Post-Mao period, although the evolution of their official rights and cultural expectations have not always reflected their lived experiences. In the Qing Dynasty, Confucianism was the main code which was used to dictate the position of women within marriage, and it was highly restrictive for a number of reasons. During this period, women were tightly bound to their husband and were unable to live independently, could not own property, and had their bodies strictly controlled. However, the lived experience of Qing women was relatively close to the roles laid out for them by the state and culture at the time, as they were deprived of the power to challenge any of these systems which served to control them.

Women within the Maoist period underwent dramatic change, part of which was accomplished in the tumultuous decades between the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1912 and the end of the Nationalist Government on the mainland in 1949. The communist government declared its intention to achieve absolute equality between men and women within China, and while progress was made, its goals were not fully realised. Women during this period were awarded greater control over marriage and divorce, were made less dependent on men by entering the workforce, and were able to disconnect their sexual needs from the confines of marriage. However, such sweeping changes moved at a faster rate than society could handle, as women were still expected to play traditional roles within marriage, and were also persecuted for legally accessing divorce.

Lastly, the Post-Mao period has become the most dynamic period of modern Chinese history in regard to women’s position within the family. The OCP (One Child Policy) has helped to create new generations of women willing to defy patriarchal understandings of marriage, but it has also made them targets of the cultural conservative backlash. In large numbers, women are more freely accessing their legal rights with regards to marriage, meaning that the gap between the lived experience of women and official state policy is continuing to narrow. Finally, there are those pioneers - men and women - who seek non-traditional marriages, thus placing Chinese culture on a path of even more dramatic change.

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68 Joanna Chiu, “Mandatory Marriage,” 32.
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