

2022

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### Recommended Citation

Ling, Li (2022) "Analysis and Commentary on Mao Zedong's Views on Women's Liberation in His Early Manuscripts," *Contemporary Social Sciences*: No. 2, Article 7.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.19873/j.cnki.2096-0212.2022.02.006>

Available at: <https://css.researchcommons.org/journal/vol2022/iss2/7>

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# *Analysis and Commentary on Mao Zedong's Views on Women's Liberation in His Early Manuscripts*

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**Abstract:** The *Mao Zedong Zao Qi Wen Gao* [Early Manuscripts of Mao Zedong] is a collection of young Mao Zedong's manuscripts from 1912 to 1920 and is a record of his growth during his youth. It is worth mentioning that the views of women's liberation and progress have a place in Mao Zedong's early manuscripts. This study focuses on reviewing and discussing the motivation behind young Mao Zedong's attention to women's liberation and progress issues, his relevant views in these manuscripts, and how these views played a role in his growth into a Marxist. This study aims to explore, from the perspective of women's studies, the thought basis and virtues that led young Mao Zedong to become a Marxist.

**Keywords:** early manuscripts of Mao Zedong, views on women's liberation, commentary

**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.19873/j.cnki.2096-0212.2022.02.006>

The study on young Mao Zedong's views on women's liberation and progress is inspired by Ji Mu Wen [Funeral Oration for My Mother] in *Mao Zedong Zao Qi Wen Gao* [Early Manuscripts of Mao Zedong]. In the oration, he recalled the days of his mother's life, lamented the difficulties she endured, praised her love, her guidance for her children and her friendliness to

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This paper is supported by Chengdu Social Science Project titled "On the Sociological Origins of How Young Mao Zedong Became a Marxist" (No. 2019R19).

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the neighbors with words that are sincere, affectionate, and touching. This is the last letter that a son wrote to his mother. It not only tells the greatness of his mother, but also expresses the son's sympathy for a woman who lived in the "end of the traditional three cardinal guides."<sup>①</sup> Mao Zedong elevated his personal emotions to the awareness of the social injustices faced by women living in the "end of the traditional three cardinal guides," and this is the charm of Ji Mu Wen in the sense of sociological imagination. It is worth mentioning that the *Early Manuscripts of Mao Zedong (The Manuscripts)* is a collection of manuscripts of young Mao Zedong from 1912 to 1920. It includes articles, letters, poems, reading notes, plans, diaries, chronicles, and conversations, which reflect young Mao Zedong's profound understanding of women's issues. However, in the existing literature, the studies on young Mao Zedong's participation in social affairs are more than the studies on his views on women's liberation and progress. Using women's liberation as a medium, this study attempts to examine the social and personal factors of young Mao Zedong in accepting Marxist thought.

### **The Motivation Behind Young Mao Zedong's Attention to Women's Issues**

Women's liberation is an important part of the contemporary ethos. During this period, as an important aspect of social change, the issue of women's liberation has received extensive attention and has made important progress. In the history of China, the national movement of women's liberation started during the May 4th Movement. During the early stage of the New Culture Movement, Chinese socialist pioneers strived to enlighten the public about the new ideas of democracy and science. They put forward general propositions on women's liberation and discussed the great significance of women's liberation to social progress, and as an important aspect of social changes, women's liberation has also made significant progress. Young Mao Zedong's views on women's liberation were gradually formed under such a broad historical background. This study attempts to discover the foundation of Mao Zedong's views on women's liberation from the subtleties of his writings and to enrich the literature that traces the realistic background of how Mao Zedong became a Marxist.

There are three direct sources that record Mao Zedong's concern for women's issues.

The first is his mother's influence on the family. Mao Zedong disclosed the tragic destiny of his mother at the beginning of the Ji Mu Wen. She gave birth to seven children in her lifetime; three grew up while four others, including two girls and two boys, died young. She worked hard on child raising, and suffered from various illnesses. As her son, Mao Zedong said that he was filled with sadness whenever the memories flooded back. However, from the perspective of women's liberation, he then evaluated the whole life of his mother from two perspectives. The first was her virtue. The most admirable character of his mother was her universal love. She reached out to every person

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<sup>①</sup> In traditional Chinese society, one of the basic principles of the Confucianist ethics morals is "the three cardinal guides," which means rulers guiding their subject, fathers guiding sons, and husbands guiding wives. Women were called "the end of the three cardinal guides" for that "husbands guiding wives" is the last of the three cardinal guides.

with love, disregarding the close or distant relationships. She was kind by nature, and the neighbors were always moved by her. She was sincere and had no intention to deceive others. She was clear-headed and organized, and could tell the difference between right and wrong. She liked to keep the environment neat, clean, and spotless. She had a pure heart and treasured friendship. In the son's eyes, the mother had all the five constant virtues (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness) and was a charismatic person, but the role and identity of Mao's mother also gave him dull pain. His perspective was that his mother suffered unfair treatment throughout her life. If her universal love came from the five constant virtues, the unfair treatment came from "living in the end of the three cardinal guides." A wife had to obey her husband, and as a result, she could not fulfil her aspirations and could not get what she desired so she was mentally distressed. To Mao, it was his mother's eternal regret. Mao Zedong was born in an ordinary and typical peasant family in Shaoshan, Hunan province. His father, Mao Yichang, with the courtesy name of Shunsheng, was born on October 15, 1870, and died on January 23, 1920; his mother, Wen Suqin,<sup>①</sup> was born on February 12, 1867, and died on October 5, 1919. Mao Zedong's father, Mao Yichang, was a farmer who was both ordinary and extraordinary. He was also a strong-willed, shrewd, and capable father. Mao Zedong's mother, Wen Suqin, was a great woman, a typically dutiful wife and a loving mother. She was hardworking and frugal, kind-hearted, warm, and generous, and she always helped the other villagers. In a letter to his classmate Zou Yunzhen, Mao Zedong wrote, "There are three kinds of people in the world. One is to harm others to benefit themselves, another is to benefit themselves without harming others, and another is those who can harm themselves to benefit others. My mother was the third kind of person." "My mother was a kind woman who was generous and forgiving, and was willing to help others at any time. She sympathized with the poor, and when they came to beg for rice in famine years, she would not hesitate to hand out rice." Mao Zedong was deeply influenced by his mother and was willing to help others since he was a child. Mao Jusheng, the younger cousin of Mao Shunsheng, came from a poor family. Mao Zedong and his mother sympathized with him and often gave material assistance to this poor relative. Mao Jusheng relied on a paddy field that covered seven *mu* (about 0.466 hectares) to make ends meet. Mao Shunsheng had long been interested in this paddy field and took the opportunity to buy it when Mao Jusheng was having the most difficult time. Mao Zedong and his mother were strongly opposed to what the father had done after they knew it, but Mao Shunsheng denied that he had done anything wrong. Mao Zedong wittily said that there were two "parties" in his home, which were the "ruling party" consisted by his father and the "opposition party" consisted by him, his mother, his younger brother and sometimes the hired workers. However, in the "united front" of the opposition party, the opinions of the members were not always the same. Mao's mother advocated a policy of indirect attack. She opposed any explicit expressions of emotions, and any attempts that openly resisted the "ruling party." She said

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① According to the Resume filled out by Mao Zemin on behalf of Mao Zedong, which is kept in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, her real name is Wen Suqin, instead of the previously known "Wen Qimei," ("文其美" or "文七妹") with two versions in Chinese of the same pronunciation

that this was “against the rules of China.” The taboo of “outside the rules of China” was exactly what Mao Zedong had been trying to break. Through his mother, he saw the suffering of women, the first was childbirth, and the second was having low status. In his adolescence, Mao Zedong lived in Shaoshan and had a rebellious spirit, even under his father’s strict discipline. Some scholars believe that he opposed the patriarchal society represented by his father. In fact, it was the family environment in which he grew up, the morality of his mother, the peremptoriness of his father, and the sense of social responsibility that he learned from his studies that prompted Mao Zedong to shift from a father-son conflict to a social consciousness that opposed authority. Ross Terrill (2019, p. 15) said that this illustrated the rigid and strict hierarchy in the bigger picture of traditional Chinese society.

The second is the circumstances that he faced. According to the *Shao Shan Mao Shi Zu Pu* [Pedigree of the Mao’s Family of Shaoshan], Mao’s wife Luo was born on October 20, 1889, and was four years older than Mao Zedong. Mao Zedong’s father had extremely high expectations of him, as he was the eldest son. That was why his parents arranged Mao Zedong’s marriage and made the 14-year-old Mao Zedong marry Luo. Luo’s grandmother was also a member of the Mao family, and was the cousin of Mao Zedong’s grandfather, Mao Yichen. That is, Luo’s grandmother was Mao Zedong’s great-aunt, while Luo was the niece of Mao Zedong’s father. Mao Shunsheng was so fond of the niece that he asked Luo’s family to marry the daughter into his family. In the old days, the Chinese people considered that marriages between close relatives were worth celebrating. In 1936, Mao Zedong told Edgar Snow: “My parents had married me when I was sixteen to a girl of twenty, but I had never lived with her—and never subsequently did.” Mao Zedong had never considered Luo as his wife and hardly thought of her at the time. Mao Zedong had always been bothered by the feudal thought that marriage should be between families of equal social ranks. He advocated free love and agreed to break the concept of family ranks. His classmate and friend Cai Hesen, and Cai’s wife Xiang Jingyu was a good example. In 1920, Xiang, a Hunan woman who was studying in France, married Cai without a traditional wedding ceremony or legal registration. Rather, they announced they would build a new form of “Xiang-Cai alliance” due to their shared aspiration for revolution. The youths at the time passed on the story with admiration. In the winter of 1920, the marriage of Yang Kaihui and Mao Zedong was a result of free choice and free love of educated youths under the influence of the new thoughts in the May 4th Movement. Yang Kaihui was born in a scholarly family in Changsha and had been a companion of Mao Zedong in his early revolutionary activities. When they were getting married, she refused to sit on a bridal sedan chair, prepare a dowry, or listen to the words of a matchmaker to demonstrate the difference between her marriage and a conventional one. Yang Kaihui was also a dutiful wife and loving mother and played an important role in the early emotional life of Mao Zedong. Mao Zedong’s poem, *Tune: The Beautiful Lady Yu—Written on My Pillow* expressed his nostalgia and longing for his beloved wife. “Like what would sorrow look, piled on my pillows? A sea of surging billows. As night is long and dawn is slow to come from afar, Lonely I rise in

nightgown to count star on star. When morning comes, all thoughts fade from my mind. How can I leave you far behind? A hooklike waning moon floats in the western spheres. At the sight of this, can I refrain from shedding tears” (Mao, 1995, p. 60)? This was the first time Mao Zedong had written a poem for his beloved wife, and it was also his first love poem in the ancient graceful form. His poem was poignantly and beautifully written, while his endless nostalgia and longing for his beloved wife were conveyed between the lines. What is even more legendary is that an unsent letter of Yang Kaihui was made public to the world 80 years later, which would make any reader sad and sigh. The lines in her reply reveal how sincere their love was and how dearly they longed for each other. The romantic life of a revolutionary was the realistic basis for Mao Zedong’s thoughts on women’s liberation.

The third is the influence of the new thoughts he was exposed to in his studies. Mao Zedong was originally a student at The Fourth Normal School of Hunan Province, which was merged into the Hunan Provincial No. 1 Normal School in April 1914 when Mao was still studying there. In the autumn of the same year, Mao joined the 8th class of the bachelor’s course of the Hunan Provincial No. 1 Normal School and graduated in June 1918. In his five years of studying in the normal school, he transformed from a student who pursued knowledge to a politician who followed the revolution. During the rise of the New Culture Movement, women’s issues were recognized as one of the most important social issues. All the people engaged in the New Culture Movement cared about and participated in the discussion of women’s issues. Cai Yuanpei, Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Wu Yu, Hu Shih, Zhou Zuoren, Lu Xun, Zhang Dongsun, Shen Yanbing, and Ye Shengtao had all engaged in the discussions of women’s issues and were all advocates and practitioners of women’s liberation and progress. There was a column focused on women’s issues in *New Youth* magazine. Literature that had far-reaching impacts including *Zhen Cao Lun* [A commentary on Chastity], *Wo Zhi Jie Lie Guan* [My view on defending oneself’s Chastity] and *A Doll’s House* were published in the magazine. *The Journal of the Young China Association* published the “women’s edition” in 1919; The supplements of the *Min Kuo Yir Pao*, including *Consciousness*, *Women’s Review* and *Women’s Weekly*, became the well-known media for the discussion of women’s issues after the May 4th Movement (Yang, 2019). During his studies in the normal school, Mao Zedong strove for knowledge, read extensively, studied numerous Chinese and foreign books, and subscribed to many newspapers. Commenting on the biggest gain from reading, Mao Zedong said, “during this period my political ideas began to take shape. Here also I acquired my first experiences in social action” (Snow, p. 108). His views on women’s issue were a part of his political and social thoughts throughout his youth. The political concepts put forward and supported by Mao Zedong were what supported his belief in social revolution. Social action experience included conducting surveys in the rural villages during summer school trips, running newspapers and magazines, writing reviews, and setting up various research groups and societies. It is without a doubt that Mao Zedong had gained a great deal of experience during his studies. He also knew how to write ancient style poetry. In the *Ji Mu Wen*, Mao Zedong (2020,

pp. 375) dedicated to his mother a pair of couplets and a poem. Poetic and lively, he expressed the deepest love with simple yet vivid words. Mao was a good writer and published many uplifting and inspiring critiques in *New Youth*, *The Shian Kian Weekly Review* and the *Ta Kung Pao* newspaper. His three famous articles, namely *The Research on Sports* (1917, April 1), *The Great Union of the People* (1919, July 21) and *A Criticism on the Suicide of Ms. Zhao* (1919, November 6) were written around the time when his mother passed away. He published nine articles in a row concerning the suicide of Ms. Zhao, to look for the reasons for her suicide and to expound on his views on women's self-reliance, superstitions about marriage, and freedom of marriage. He conducted a deep analysis of the social environment related to this incident and concluded that it was a public event of the human race, which should be concerned about and be studied by all people except those who believed in extreme individualism and celibacy (Mao, 2020, p. 376). It is without a doubt that Mao Zedong's thoughts on women's issues were an essential part of the ideas of women's liberation in the New Culture Movement, in addition to inheriting the enlightened ideas in the New Culture Movement. He also studied and searched for ways to expand women's liberation in specific social systems (Yang, 2019).

### **Young Mao Zedong's Views on Women's Liberation in His Early Manuscripts**

A common theme from *Ji Mu Wen* to *A Criticism on the Suicide of Ms. Zhao* is the constraints on women, who had to obey their husbands at the "end of the three cardinal guides." He advocated to understand this problem from the perspective of the whole society. He pointed out that a person's suicide was determined by the environment. In *A Criticism on the Suicide of Ms. Zhao*, Mao Zedong wrote that the incident revealed the corruption of the marriage system, the dark side of the social system, the impossibility of independent will, and the absence of freedom in love. Ms. Zhao faced a three-sided iron net: the society, her family of origin, and her husband's family. These three nets blocked all her roads so that she was unable to survive and chose to die. The study of Ms. Zhao's suicide was an application of the ideals of Mao Zedong, in which he held that when people discuss various academic theories, they should discuss them in the light of real events. It is also a concentrated reflection of Mao Zedong's thinking on women's issues. This is how Mao Zedong was good at discovering issues in daily life. He analyzed the social ills suffered by all women in the world based on the burden of the social rules and principles that his mother had borne.

First, research is the first step to solving the problems faced by women. He issued seventeen questions for women's issues which was one of the lists of questions proposed in *Wenti Yanjiu Hui Zhangcheng* [The Constitutions of the Problem Research Group] in September 1919. During the May 4th Movement, there was a heated "problems and-isms" debate between Hu Shih and Li Dazhao. The debate between the theorists revolved around the concepts of "problems" and "isms." Among researching the problems, introducing theories, and finding the solutions

to problems, they questioned which was of the priority, that is, whether they should solve the “problems” before promoting the “isms,” or promote the “isms” before solving the “problems.” The “problems and isms” debate was mainly conducted from a theoretical perspective. It did not involve any solution to specific problems but only provided a way of thinking and certain research methods (Yang, 2009). The discussion initiated by Hu Shih had not only encouraged scholarly discussions in academia and the political world but had also drawn the attention of the educated youth to the problems of China at that time and had raised some problems related to the social ills of the times so that they could start to consider possible solutions. In *Wenti Yanjiu Hui Zhangcheng*, Mao Zedong listed 71 problems that had to be studied urgently, but he pointed out that the research of problems must be based on theories. Therefore, before the study of the various problems, it was necessary to study various isms. Mao Zedong systematized the women’s issues through research and raised 17 questions that simultaneously involved different aspects. These aspects included women’s political participation, women’s occupations, women’s education, unbinding feet, freedom of love, and contraception. The core of all problems was why women were bullied by men and had never been able to change their status for thousands of years. He conducted physiological and psychological analysis and concluded that the problem stemmed from the physiology of women, and the only problem was reproduction. According to modern ideas, the core of the relationship between men and women should be love, and it should not be controlled by economic benefit. “Considering physical strength, women can do the same jobs as men. However, they cannot work when they are pregnant or taking care of children. This is the main reason why women are suppressed and cannot change their status” (Mao, 2020). For this reason, he pointed out three ways to make women independent. First, women should never get married before they are physically mature. Second, before the marriage, women should acquire enough knowledge and skills that allow them to support themselves. Third, women need to prepare their own living expenses for their use after childbirth. This is the only way for women to stand on their feet, and he called on both young men and women to work hard.

Second, women commit suicide because of social factors. This understanding of Mao Zedong was profound and was formed from a sociological perspective. Émile Durkheim’s *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* was published in 1897. In his book, Durkheim did not make moral judgments on suicide. Rather, he studied suicide as an ordinary social phenomenon. This kind of thinking was very influential in China in the era of change. The introduction of sociology into China at the beginning of the 20th century was out of the need for social changes in China. The Beijing Shehui Cujin Hui (Beijing Society for Social Improvements) was established in November 1914. The members aimed to unite the scholars of Beijing, engage in social services, and improve traditional customs. In November 1919, the Beijing Society for Social Improvements founded the *New Society* magazine, which was issued once every ten days. The editors included Zheng Zhenduo, Qu Qiubai, and Xu Dishan. The founders hoped to devote the magazine to the cause of social transformations. Focusing on social transformations, it published articles that advocated



social services, discussed social problems, introduced sociological theories, examined education for commoners, recorded social incidents, and criticized social shortcomings. Among the articles that discussed social problems, the majority focused on intellectuals, females, marriage, labor, and suicide. There were also articles that focused on social surveys, social services, social movements, and social transformations. In short, *New Society* advocated social services, exposed the dark side of society under the rule of warlords from a sociological perspective, and advocated social improvements (Yang, 1987, pp. 44–45). With the deepening of the revolution, the New Culture Movement split into factions. Li Dazhao, who advocated a complete revolution, and Hu Shih, who advocated reform, started the debate about whether China needed a fundamental transformation or focused improvements. They had a consensus on women's issues, in which they agreed that women's issues in China were worthy of attention, but they disagreed on the approaches to solving the problems. Li Dazhao explicitly integrated sociology with social revolution and pointed out that once the economic problems were resolved, any political, legal, family system, and women's liberation problems could be resolved (Yang, 1987, p. 49). The women's issue reflected that Mao Zedong was deeply influenced by the trends of thoughts at that time.

He pointed out that Ms. Zhao did not kill herself and it was a non-suicide (Mao, 2020, p. 376). This is Mao's understanding of the difference. At that time, some people praised the suicide, seeing it as a most delightful and gratifying event (Mao, 2020, pp. 392–393). Some people rejected the idea of suicide. Both views were based on the outlook on life. However, Mao Zedong asked, "Why are there suicides in society?" He believed that in terms of social habits, people celebrate births and mourn deaths, while both are based on and imposed by the fundamental "rules of survival" (Mao, 2020, pp. 390–391). The reason why there were suicide cases in society was that society had deprived these persons of hope so they were completely disappointed. Mao pointed out that as they had no respect for the sentiment of suicide, then they should oppose it. He also listed four possible choices for Ms. Zhao, namely, to survive with intact integrity, struggle and be killed, kill herself, and surrender. Therefore, Ms. Zhao's suicide was only of relative value in terms of preserving her integrity. However, he believed that suicide was "non-suicide." Ultimately, this was a problem caused by the deeply entrenched authoritarian society. He raised a profound question to all people. The head of a woman and the head of a man are actually the same; the waist of a woman and the waist of a man are actually the same, why does a woman have to wear a bun that is flashy and can be easily messed up by the wind? Why does she have to wear a long skirt that can be soaked by mud and water tightly around her waist? It turned out that women are sinners, and that the high buns and the skirts are the instruments of torture put on them. The jewellery on their hands is handcuffs and shackles. Ear piercing and foot binding are equal to physical punishments. Schools and families are prisons. They dare not moan when they are in pain and dare not go out when they are confined. We wonder why women are bullied by men, and cannot change their status for thousands of years? This criticism is really sharp and vivid and has drawn more people's attention to the improprieties caused by the inequality between men and women in

our daily lives. One will not be able to write this criticism without thorough understanding and observation of society. It reflected the self-consciousness of young Mao Zedong in his thoughts and actions.

Third, the small union of women can join to form “the great union of the popular masses.” Mao Zedong believed that one of the fundamental methods of social revolution was “the great union of the popular masses.” Regarding Ms. Zhao’s suicide, some people believed that Mao Zedong was not objective as he put all the blame on the environment and they pointed out that Ms. Zhao’s own weakness was the key. Some asked regretfully why she didn’t choose to flee? The social environment had made this impossible. Mao Zedong listed eight social phenomena that were commonly seen, and explained the women’s issue in a way that was down-to-earth and close to the daily life: (a) There were more than 40 hawker stalls that sold foreign goods in Changsha city, while within 30 Chinese miles of Shaoshan Township where he lived, there were seven or eight hawker stalls that sold groceries. Why was that? (b) Why were there only men’s toilets in Changsha city while none were built for women? (c) No women could get into barbershops. Why was that? (d) Why were there no women living alone in the hotels? (e) Why didn’t we see any women having tea in the teahouses? (f) Customers usually visit silk and satin shops like Taihefeng and foreign goods shops like Yutaihua to talk about business. Why were there only male customers but no females? (g) All rickshaw drivers in the city were men and there were no women. Why was that? (h) Why were there no female students in the Nanmen Wai First Normal School? Why were there no male students in the Gudaotian First Normal School (Mao, 2020, p. 387)? The eight questions aimed to reveal that women had no social status or space compared with men, whether in occupations, education or daily life. Society had built a net to completely separate the women and the men, and where could the women escape to? He also cited the case of Ms. Mao, who escaped for freedom of love. Ms. Zhao had been proactive in her actions, but she was also “caught, beaten, and scolded” at the end. Can escaping be considered to be easy? The society was so evil, how could Ms. Zhao escape? Where could she escape? He spoke for women from a female standpoint; the great union of the popular masses must be supported by small unions. Mao Zedong believed that human beings had the genius to become united by nature, and there could be big unions and small unions. Unions of women were an integral part of the big unions. Many small unions had common interests and could be combined to become big unions. By looking into history, Mao Zedong concluded that the deep-rooted deficiencies of lay in the fact that people valued self-interest more than cooperation. “The businessmen have no intention to set up companies; the workmen have no intention to set up a labor party, while the scholars follow the old method and close the door to study by themselves without conducting research together” (Mao, 2020, p. 358). It can be said that Mao Zedong had found a bright future for the great union of the popular masses of the Chinese nation in the prospect of women’s unions.

Fourth, to strengthen women’s education, the funding for men’s and women’s education should first be made equal. Women’s education was a sign of the social progress in the Republic of

China (1912–1949) period, but in reality, how was the women’s education during the period of the Republic of China? Mao Zedong compared the funding for women’s education with that for men’s education. He found that the fixed annual funding was 1.04 million *yuan*,<sup>①</sup> and the temporary funding was more than 1.1 million *yuan*, totaling more than 2.15 million *yuan*. However, the total funding for the two women’s normal schools and a temporary middle school was only 100,000 *yuan*, which accounted for only one twentieth of the total education funding. He sighed for the fact that there was no middle school for girls in Hunan with a population of 15 million and pointed out that it was shameful. In the budget of the tenth year of the Republic of China, funds were allocated for the “temporary middle school” (6,000 *yuan* for fixed funding and 4,000 *yuan* for temporary funding.) and he heard that some legislators wanted to cancel the funding entirely (Mao, 2020, p. 492). In the face of these social realities, he believed that the political world had become too old and corrupt, and there was no hope for a political reform. He believed that the people had to ignore everything and open a new path. Mao Zedong picked up a vital point by analyzing the issue of women’s education from the perspective of education funding. His father’s strict discipline had helped to raise his consciousness. Mao Zedong once told Edgar Snow about how he spent 160 *yuan* when he was a student at the Hunan Provincial No. 1 Normal School. “Of this amount, I must have used a third for newspapers, because regular subscriptions cost me about one *yuan* a month, and I often bought books and journals on the newsstands. My father cursed me for this extravagance” (Snow, 2019). Therefore, Mao Zedong had realized the connection between funding and education since he was a child. Focusing on the details, he advocated that paying lip service was not enough to strengthen women’s education. Rather, equality should be realized by eliminating the difference between the funding for women’s and men’s education. Mao Zedong’s characteristics of thinking meticulously and deeply were unique. This also reflected a life skill that had been given to him by his family, especially his father, which was to focus on fine details. “A difficult part for a person to have achievements is to be meticulous. If one can pay attention to all details, one can start from achieving small things and go on to succeed in important issues, so it will not be difficult for the person to become a sage. If one cannot be careful with details, the person will also fail in important issues” (Mao, 2020, p. 541). He did not confine himself to women’s issues; rather, he thoroughly examined all aspects of the Chinese society and was able to study women’s issues from the perspective of overall connections.

### **Commentary on Young Mao Zedong’s Views on Women’s Liberation**

Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, said that “Without women, there would be no continuity of the human race or human society. The pursuit of gender equality is a great cause” (2015, September 27). Young Mao Zedong was a thinker of

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① *Yuan* is a certain currency during the Republic of China period (1912–1949).

women's liberation, and the ideas in his early manuscripts inherited the new cultural spirit of the May 4th Movement. When we reread young Mao Zedong's views on women's liberation today, we will find their brilliance. Young Mao Zedong's great sense of responsibility and his growth path are reflected in his views on women's liberation. As Xi Jinping emphasized, "The lofty ideals and firm beliefs held by youth are the indestructible driving force of a country and a nation" (Xi, 2021, May 4). It has become a typical model for the growth of youth.

First, young Mao Zedong analyzed women's issues from a framework of history. At the beginning of the 20th century, women's issues had been a global problem. One of the focal points of the debate was to pursue gender equality. During the May 4th Movement, with the re-emergence of the women's liberation movement, a large number of educated women with advanced thinking founded various women's associations to fight for "civil rights" in groups. Mao Zedong was an outstanding representative in the pursuit of equality between men and women. Due to his personal experiences, he sympathized with women and supported women's freedom. In his early manuscripts, the most valuable contribution of Mao Zedong's views on women's liberation were to enrich the discussion of women's issues at all levels. His seventeen questions concerning women's issues were a clear proof of his observations and opinions. He linked women with family, marriage, and social revolution. The issue of women's liberation was a worldwide issue, and a sign of the revolutionary ideology of the May 4th Movement intellectuals. As a modern youth who lived in an era of national transformation, what was profound in Mao Zedong's thought was that he placed the issues of women's liberation into a framework of science and democracy from a social perspective and pointed out that the social factors of women's suicides lie in obsolete thinking. In the article Ying Jiu Chen Duxiu [Rescuing Chen Duxiu], Mao praised Chen as a star in the academic world. He went right to the heart of the matter by pointing out why Chen Duxiu was arrested. He pointed out that China was extremely dangerous in that time, not in the sense of the weakness in the military forces, the insufficient financial resources, or the fragmentations due to civil strife but lay in the extremely empty and corrupt spirit of the population of the country (Mao, 2020 p. 282). This was caused by the underdevelopment of scientific thinking and the lack of democracy. Mao Zedong pointed out that superstitions about marriage could be seen everywhere (Mao, 2020, p. 404). We can see Mao Zedong's extraordinary courage and strategies in his exploration of the solutions to women's issues, as well as his strong sense of social responsibility, which are worth pondering.

Second, the views of women's liberation are the fruits of young Mao Zedong's practice of social surveying. Mao Zedong was an outstanding representative of the Communist Party of China's emphasis on investigation and research. As a young student, he began to conduct investigations and research. During his studies at the Hunan Provincial No. 1 Normal School in 1917 and 1918, Mao Zedong participated in summer "study trips" and visited Changshan, Ningxiang, Anhua, Yiyang, Yuanjiang, Liuyang, and other places in Hunan Province together with his schoolmates. He also worked as a teacher at the night school of a factory. To recruit

more students, he continued to advertise in newspapers and became influential. Young Mao Zedong was directly affected by the theories of Yuelu Academy so that he valued investigation and research. The Academy advocated the spirit of “seek truth from facts,” which originated from the practical-learning culture of Hunan. He opposed “empty thoughts” and advocated speaking based on the realities in life and society as well as studying facts and truth (Mao, 2020, pp. 333–334). The views on women’s liberation of Mao Zedong came from his continuous observations, research and understanding of society. Young Mao Zedong established groups such as the Xinmin Institute, in order to investigate the circumstances of the country, understand and transform the society, and to ultimately put the theories into practice. Young Mao Zedong aimed at transforming China and the world. From his aspiration and his active participation in organizing work-study programs in France and Russia, we can see his extraordinary aspiration and wisdom. During his five years of study at the Hunan Provincial No. 1 Normal School, Mao Zedong believed that the biggest gain was that “my political ideas began to take shape” and “I acquired my first experiences in social action” (Snow, 2019, p. 108). The political concept mentioned by Mao Zedong was the belief in social revolution. Social action experience included conducting surveys in the rural villages during summer school trips, running newspapers and magazines, writing reviews, and setting up various research groups and societies. It can be said that Mao Zedong had gained a lot of experience during his studies. He closely integrated individuals with society and was eager to do something for the revolution in China and the world. He wrote in a letter to a friend that, if they wanted to do something for the world, of course, they could not get away from the territory of China for that it is necessary to conduct on-site investigations and research. His method in his studies was to value investigations and research and to learn from the “wordless book.” This laid a solid foundation for him to later lead the Chinese revolution.

Third, young Mao Zedong’s views on women’s liberation gleam with the revolutionary essence of Marxism. The Communist Party of China continues to pursue women’s liberation and development. The period from the end of 1919 through 1920 was a critical period for Mao Zedong’s ideological change. During this period, Mao Zedong accepted many Marxist theories through various channels. He was also affected by Li Dazhao’s and Chen Duxiu’s research regarding the October Revolution of Russia and Marxism, so his thinking further developed towards Marxism. During his youth, Mao Zedong was inspired by various thoughts and historical figures, and also put a few of his ideas into practice, including anarchism. However, in January 1921, in his speech at the Changsha General Assembly of the Xinmin Institute, he listed five trends of thought that were popular in China at that time for the audience’s reference: the school of social policy, the social democracy of the Second International, the fierce method of communism advocated by Vladimir Lenin, the moderate method of communism advocated by Bertrand Russell, and anarchism. After analyzing the pros and cons of these trends of thought, Mao Zedong believed that the fierce method of communism was “the most appropriate” (Chen, 2009). He explicitly stated that for the issues of China, he didn’t agree to the solutions without

doctrines, in which only the symptoms but not the disease were treated. He held that there should be an “-ism” that we all abided by and doctrines are like flags. Only when a flag is erected can everyone have expectations and know where to run (Mao, 2020, pp. 497–498). The “-ism” was Marxism-Leninism. Affected by the theory of the Proletarian Revolution of Marxism, Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu discussed from a high level and advocated that women’s liberation and social revolution must go hand in hand. Gradually, young Mao Zedong had more consensus with the historical materialism in Marxism advocated by Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu. After his surveys in the rural villages of China, Mao Zedong believed that the complete liberation of Chinese women could only be achieved by proletarian revolution. To achieve women’s liberation, economic independence would be particularly important. Apart from enriching the content of the women’s liberation movement in the May 4th Movement, Mao Zedong’s view on women’s issues had also provided nourishment for the early development of the Communist Party of China’s theories of women’s liberation, demonstrating Mao Zedong’s political potential and quality as a revolutionary.

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(Editor: Xiong Xianwei)