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China's strong Female voices: Case Study of Dai Qing

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Abstract

This paper presents the life and work of Dai Qing, an influential Chinese woman who has made significant contributions to the Chinese state and society. Born during the Republican era, she worked as a party cadre in the PRC. Her efforts in environmental protection, women's welfare, and freedom of speech are noteworthy. She also played a role in China's development during Mao era and worked extensively in villages as a Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution. Her life struggles through various phases, and her work on different issues provides firsthand information on China's development and the condition of Chinese women across different periods. During the Cultural Revolution, she demonstrated her dedication as a cadre without complaint, believing in the communist approach to the nation's development. However, upon realising the shortcomings of the party system, she began voicing her concerns and documenting these issues in her writings. By providing background about Chinese women in different eras within a Confucian-dominated society, this paper explores how Dai Qing forged her path and remained steadfast in her views and opinions. This paper also portrays a new China where women's voices are not marginalised, and their ideas are valued.

Keywords: Dai Qing, Cultural Revolution, Confucianism, Maoism, Women in China, Tiananmen.

Introduction

China was rooted in the Confucian ethos till recently, expecting women to be under their men. Starting from the late Qing dynasty reform movements, women's liberation ideas began surfacing, and slowly, with the establishment of the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China, there were significant changes in the condition of Chinese women.

As the late 20th and early 21st century reform movements paved the way for women's emancipation, Mao's era played a significant role in liberalising and modernising the status of women while normalising their participation in various domains. Today, many strong female voices are expressing their views and making a difference in society. Although their numbers were small, ancient and modern China produced notable female figures who emerged from the seraglio, spoke out, and impacted the Chinese state and society. Among these are Ban Zhao¹, Li Qingzhao, Xue Tao, Wu Zetian, and Empress Cixi⁴ from the Qing Dynasty. While such examples were exceptions in ancient Chinese society, their contributions and those of many others were substantial. However, mentioning all the names is not feasible. These women made history in traditional Chinese society, leaving a lasting legacy for future generations and paving the way for women's emancipation.

To carry forward this study, it is important to understand women's condition in China

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traditionally. Moreover, to study this, it is vital to study Confucius's opinion, as he and his philosophies have profoundly impacted Chinese society. His philosophy dominated China significantly in almost all dynasties and even post-dynastic periods. However, great efforts were made to eliminate this as his teachings and philosophies suggested a hierarchical system where hierarchy in all spheres of life was at its core. Filial piety (respect for the elderly/seniors) was emphasised. Women's role in ancient China stressed their reliance on men in childhood under their father, after marriage under their husband and after the death of their husband under their son. She was never considered to have a superior position and thus always had a lower position in society where she was subjected to obey her superior, and raising her voice was not advisable. Tiny feet (females only) were considered beautiful. Feet were bound tightly. It started with the elite class in the Song Dynasty, but gradually, it spread to all classes by the time of the Qing Dynasty. It added to the hierarchical system, and it can be interpreted that this further restricted the boundaries for Chinese women, limiting their role centred around the domestic sphere as daughters, wives and mothers, with an expectation of limited or no exposure to education, employment and their involvement in socio-political matters.

After the late Qing and Republican eras, which marked the beginning of modernisation and reform, foot binding was advised to be abolished. Late Qing reformers advocated for women's rights. Women were now encouraged to participate in almost all social, political, and educational fields. With this encouragement, they have started playing a crucial role in society. As discussed by Louise Edwards, there were no arguments in modern China after the abduction of the dynastic system about the characteristics of contemporary Chinese women. The external manifestation of modernity-clothing, hairstyle, and shoe styles was dismissed as superficial trappings and women's inner qualities were emphasised and encouraged. She was now expected to play a role in national welfare. Now, they were expected to participate and contribute to power and governance for the betterment of the nation. (Edward, 2000)

However, as they were politically and socially marginalised for a more extended period, many challenges were ahead. It was not easy to unroot this for a society rooted in the tradition of hierarchy under the Confucian idea of 三从四德 (three obedience and four virtues), and it was an accepted norm that women were subordinates. One of the main challenges was that until recently (before the late Qing reforms), women were excluded from education and sociopolitical matters. It was not easy to bring this to practice and have more space (sufficient schools/colleges/employment) for them. It needed some time to get this to normal and normalise society's mindset. Also, one of the main challenges at this stage was to have proper laws that ensure women's rights concerning inheritance, property rights, and family life. After the emancipation of the PRC, laws defending women's rights started evolving slowly. Very soon after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, in the year 1950, marriage law was introduced, which prohibited forced marriage and concubinage. The law was further amended in the later period, subsequently in 1980 and 2021, giving women the right to raise their voices against domestic violence and the right to divorce. It further granted them property rights after divorce. A significant contribution to the emancipation of women was by Chairman Mao Zedong, who introduced the slogan 妇女能顶半边天 (Women hold up half the sky). He believed that women have an equal role in building a socialist China and that realising the dream of China's revolution would not have been possible without liberating Chinese women. During his tenure, the Marriage Law of 1950 and the Land Reform Law were introduced as policies to give women the right to have their say in marriage and access to land in rural areas. Chairman Mao and his government encouraged women to study and choose their employment. Also, he

encouraged women's participation in politics and societal matters. Under his governance, many women soon started participating in social and political activities. It began mainly after the late Qing reform movements and after the May 4th movement, but under Mao, the number grew tremendously, aiming to 100% participation of women. Thus, despite all the social challenges, we see an unprecedented number of women coming ahead, taking part in almost all the social and political activities happening in the Chinese state and even taking leading positions. That was a groundbreaking change and brought lots of positive changes. In 1966, under Chairman Mao, China launched the Cultural Revolution (改革开放), where slogans propagating women's rights were sung. Moreover, it was circulated in all parts of China through the Red Guards that traditional gender roles must be broken and that women in China should be treated equally in all areas. During this 10-year-long movement, women played an active role as Red Guards. However, with its positive impact on Chinese society, CR also brought some adverse effects on society, including humiliation and persecution of many of the educated Chinese women, mainly intellectuals and teachers. Though this happened to all genders who were considered counter-revolutionary, such acts put a question mark on CR's vision. Also, in Mao's era, advocating women's involvement in the proletariat revolution was meant to advance larger national goals rather than achieving genuine liberation. Mao's perspective failed to address the systematic and cultural roots of discrimination that impede the achievement of true gender equality. (Chandran,2010) Nonetheless, Mao Zedong worked hard to bring equality to Chinese society, which paved the path for the true emancipation of Chinese women in later decades. However, despite all his efforts and his support for Chinese women, the traditional Confucian values which advocated for patriarchal norms persisted at large in the society and breaking the taboos was a primary challenge. Nevertheless, with more laws protecting women's rights, things were heading in a better direction.

With more reform policies to normalise women's education, employment and participation in socio-political matters, a non-discrimination law for women was introduced, which prohibited discrimination against them in the domestic and public sphere and at the workplace, where she had legal grounds to raise voices against discrimination in hiring, pay and promotion at workplace. They are now also given maternal rights, and laws on protecting women's rights and interests, introduced in 1992, ensure that employers must respect their need for leave and support during pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare. Such policies have many positive impacts on Chinese society. Even with these laws, there were cases of domestic violence; a domestic Violence law was introduced in 2015, which defined the boundaries of domestic violence, stating women have the right to raise their voices in cases of any violence, be it physical, psychological or sexual abuse. Also, support services, e.g., shelters and legal assistance, were introduced for victims.

However, even after the introduction and implementation of such laws and regulations, like in other societies, gender bias persists in the Chinese state and society. Orthodoxy in mindset is still ruling in people, mainly in rural areas, and cases of workplace discrimination are still high. Though the country has made remarkable progress in this matter, achieving gender equality remains an ongoing challenge, just like in other countries.

With this background, this work introduces Dai Qing, a strong, contemporary Chinese woman known for her voice against a few government policies. A woman who has risen like the phoenix from an eclectic and fiery background- one that would have burned out most spirits. (Topping,1997) Her voice has impacted the Chinese state and society immensely; thus, her

contribution is noteworthy. The paper is based on some interviews, including interviews with some newspaper journalists and interviews I conducted personally on different occasions since I first contacted her in 2013. I have also tried to read books by Dai Qing, which gives us a perspective on understanding the overall background. Before starting the work, I tried to do a background study on women in China, mainly their role and status in the ancient and modern periods. Some of the works which require special mention are *Women and Family in Chinese History* by Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Gender and Chinese History: Transformative Encounters* by Beverly Jo Bossler, and *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture* by Robin Wary. In her book, Patricia writes about women in the Song period and emphasises the divisions in the inner sanctums of the palace in Song China and the role and status of women in these divisions. By these divisions, she meant the wives, concubines, serving women and maids. With this work, she brings up the issue of dowry and foot binding, which was prevalent in Song China, and writes how size and feet define the beauty and work of a woman. Robin Wang writes about how Chinese women in the ancient period who could somehow access education contributed immensely to the field they worked. For example, in Ban Zhao's (see footnote 1) lessons for women and the Tang sisters' *Analects for women*, he analyses that women's writings that have achieved canonical status are relatively rare and thus, wherever given opportunities, these women proved that their work was just as noteworthy as those authored by their male counterparts.

Bossler's account provides a different perspective on how common narratives about Chinese women have primarily depicted them as victims. However, more profound studies on this subject reveal that, in various periods, Chinese women have played active roles across different domains. The essays in this volume offer new directions for approaches in women's studies and analyse how the study of gender has transformed our understanding of Chinese history. His work encourages us to move beyond preconceptions and examine the matter profoundly and thoroughly. A similar perspective can be seen in the edited work *Some Voices: Chinese Women Growing Up in Mao's Era*. This collection presents memoirs by nine Chinese women who grew up during the Mao era. All educated women from urban areas reveal the lives of modern Chinese women, providing a perspective that contrasts with the typical portrayal of them as victims of persecution and repression as they discuss their struggles to obtain an education. Dai Qing's works, including *Series of the Chinese National Women*, *Sexually Open Women*, *China's Lack of Interest Regarding Sex: A Collection of Questions from Mainland Society*, *An Offering to the Heart*, and *Sentimental Writing for Women*, are invaluable for understanding Chinese society, particularly the condition of women and the changing scenario. Her book, *Yangze! Yangtze! Chang Jiang, Chang Jiang: Arguments Regarding the Three Gorges Dam Project* offers insights into the socio-political developments surrounding the dam and the scientific and geographical implications of its impact on the environment and society. Her in-depth research influenced the state council to alter plans for the project, resulting in its suspension for years. In *Tiananmen Follies*, she documents her experiences in prison and reflects on the movement from various angles. Her recent work, *The Most Dammed Country in the World*, addresses environmental concerns related to large dam projects in China. The collection of speeches and essays in this book advocates for a greener world. To better grasp her views, interviews conducted by Wang Zheng (1988) and Geremie Barme (2006), along with my nearly decade-long interaction with Dai Qing, have been instrumental in understanding the subject matter more systematically. I appreciate her consistent cooperation and helpfulness in our communications (via email, WhatsApp, and Skype) despite her esteemed reputation.

As this work is mainly focused on Dai Qing, her works and her interviews take us to her perception of being a woman in China, how she rose to some influential positions, and how she expressed her opinions freely.

She is an investigative journalist and environmental activist. Shei is best known for her voice against a few studies and mismanagement while planning and implementing the Three Gorges Dam project. She wrote about the corruption and various environmental concerns involved in the project. In 1989, she was imprisoned for her writings on the issue. On this, she says, "I am the same person I was 16 years ago, and I still say what I want to say. An American friend remarked that Dai Qing is the only Chinese person he has met who is doing the same things she has always done and saying the same things she has always said. I have indeed made friends with the policeman assigned to watch me – that does not mean I have capitulated, but rather that I'm a person of integrity. I'm also an independent thinker; as an independent observer, I want to speak up about what I see. As [the late Edward] said, intellectuals speak truth to power. The things I said about Three Gorges 16 years ago are things I'm still saying today." (Probe International, 2010)

Dai Qing's case is unique because she experienced nearly all the significant historical and political events and phases of contemporary China, including the Sino-Japanese War, World War II, the Triumph of Communism, the Great Leap Forward, the Hundred Flowers Bloom, the Cultural Revolution, the Three Gorges Project, and the 1989 Tiananmen Incident. As she proudly states, "I belong to both the Republican era and the CCP era in China" (Mishra, 2019). Dai Qing is also a prominent writer who has published more than 25 books and has written for various newspapers and magazines. Her works are in Chinese and have been extensively translated into English.

Dai Qing was born into an elite yet traditional family in 1941 in Chongqing, Sichuan province. She is also believed to be distantly related to the family of the last Emperor, Pu Yi. (Wu Dunn, 1991). Growing up as a Red Princess of China (Allison, 2016), Dai Qing's parents were highly educated. Her mother was the daughter of a prominent scholar from Beijing. She was born in feudal China, where higher education for women was rare, and very few Chinese women could afford it. After completing her basic degrees in China, she went to Japan to pursue higher education and become an oil engineer. Dai Qing's father, Fu Daqing, was educated in Moscow alongside a prominent Chinese political figure, Li Shaoqi, and was a good friend of Chen Duxiu. Fu Daqing is regarded as a Chinese communist propagandist, translator, and organiser who worked for the communist cause. However, Dai Qing believes that, although he was a dedicated communist, he was overlooked by the state, and recognition was never a concern for him. She writes, "He was brilliant but was never appointed to an important position in the CCP because he was uninterested in promoting himself and gaining power, and that is the example I have been following all my life (Dai, 1998)." Dai's parents firmly believed communism was the answer to China's problems. When the Sino-Japanese War broke out, they joined the communist intelligence organisation and were assigned to occupy Beijing. As a devoted communist family, her parents had to sacrifice almost everything during the war. In 1944, her mother was about eight months pregnant with Dai Qing's younger sister when she was caught and tortured by Japanese troops. Fortunately, she survived the ordeal and managed to flee to Chongqing. That same year, Fu Daqing was killed by the Japanese army. It is surprising, however, that such a significant personal loss at the hands of enemy troops has not made her irrationally biased on specific issues, such as anti-Japanese sentiments in China. During an interview, Keiko asked Dai Qing about her opinion on the anti-Japanese protests in China. Mrs. Dai Qing replied, "Anti-

Japanese demonstrations can easily become irrational due to resentment over Japan's history. However, although the Japanese military police killed my father, I have long tried to appreciate how democracy has spread in Japan since the end of World War II. The situation might be different if Chinese education covered such topics.” (Yoshioka, 2012). After her father's death and the end of World War II, Dai Qing and her mother moved to Beijing. One of her father's friends, Marshal Ye Jianying, adopted her in Beijing. Marshal Ye Jianying was a well-known political figure in modern China, serving as the commander-in-chief of the Eight Route Army and later becoming Minister of Defense. As the Marshal's adopted daughter, Dai Qing became part of China's party elite (Barme, 1). 991). She started her education in a British missionary school. When the Great Leap Forward period was introduced, Dai, who was in her teenage years, contributed to the cause by building a small backyard steel furnace in an old church and constructing the Great Hall of the People.

Later, Marshal Ye Jianying, her adoptive father, encouraged her to attend Harbin Military Engineering Institute. She joined the institute and graduated as a missile engineer. 1966, when the Cultural Revolution broke out, Dai Qing worked as an engineer in a laboratory, specialising in intercontinental missile guidance and propulsion systems. Her research involved the high-speed precision engine. After the reform movement started, Dai left her missile job and joined the Red Guards; however, with time, she learned that leaders were giving misleading instructions to the Red Guards. She felt for the movement's motto that aimed to sweep away four olds (old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits). Still, she disagreed with the concept of supremacy at the highest level of government in China, which she felt was very much in practice even under Mao. Gradually, this made her think that working hard as a Red Guard is useless. She also realised that many who worked hard with Mao to enhance the Chinese economy were sidelined.

Once, she found an old photograph in a pile of discarded documents beneath some quilts. It depicted her father-in-law with Mao Zedong. The picture featured a few party members sitting beside the dam, chatting in a relaxed manner about various issues. This photograph was first published by a People's Pictorial photographer in 1953. At the bottom of the page was a calligraphic inscription by Mao Zedong: “Celebrate the Successful Completion of the Guanting Reservoir Project.” Her father-in-law, Wang Sen, had been the project manager for the dam. When she showed the picture to him, he did not respond. Even her husband, who was playing cards with him, remained silent. Her father-in-law glanced at her once before returning to his cards.

Years later, in 1980, De Jia, Qing's husband, told her that his father had once described the inner workings of the project and his concerns about it in detail to his son. He whispered to him, “Build a dam and bleed a river dry. ” As a project manager for the dam and a senior party worker, he had struggled throughout his life for the Party. It was now that he had uttered such things about the Party. The phrase he used summarised it all. It was respect for Chairman Mao and the oath they had taken upon the establishment of Communist China that had stopped him from revealing his dissatisfaction with Party policies on specific issues. Since its inception, widespread corruption has been associated with the project, which was known to the top leaders. Experts have predicted its environmental impact and ecological disasters such as landslides, water pollution, and erosion. However, the state always overlooked such advice from the experts, as a large amount of money and planning was involved, along with the involvement of top-level leaders and businessmen. Corruption at the local level was also a matter of concern for idealistic party workers and intellectuals. In many cases, even the local people did not receive compensation.

When her husband narrated this to her, it was already the late 1980s. By then, she was involved with an environmental group that opposed the whole idea of the Three Gorges Dam. Her environmental group was investigating what had happened to the earlier Three Gorge Dam Project on the Yellow River. As per her writing, she had publicly started speaking to protect China's rivers and water sources. (Dai, 2007)

During the Cultural Revolution, she and her family also suffered. Her mother and stepfather, whom Dai referred to as her 'third father', were arrested, tortured, persecuted, and imprisoned by the Red Guards for their Western ideas. Dai Qing and her husband were sent to the countryside, where they worked on a farm raising pigs and assisting locals in reclaiming land. Dai Qing had recently given birth to a baby girl. The Red Guards took her daughter away and handed her over to a working-class stranger. For almost three and a half years, they could not even see her. Dai had demonstrated her dedication to her work and the nation even before this, just two months after giving birth. She was so determined to return to work that she swam in a cool reservoir to stop her breast milk from flowing. (Griner, 2016)

Before joining the military farm, Dai Qing admits she believed Mao's line, "sweat from work can purify the filth in the soul. " However, after working on the farm, she physically experienced many things, and numerous buried truths surfaced. She learnt many hidden facts about the People's Liberation Army. She realised that the military was merely an armed political group used solely as an extension of political action. Dai Qing had only worked on the farm for about three and a half years when she discovered there was a warrant for her and her husband's arrest due to their involvement in a reactionary organisation. Dai Qing and her husband escaped to Beijing, but the threat of imprisonment persisted. After returning from the countryside, she was not allowed to return to her former position as a missile engineer. Fortunately, leveraging her skills as a missile engineer, she secured a job as a technician in the Ministry of Public Security's Television Surveillance Division. Nevertheless, that position did not last, and soon she was imprisoned.

After the Cultural Revolution ended, taking into consideration her command over English and her reputation as a faithful Party worker, she was employed at the PLA Headquarters of the General Staff. In those days, fluency in English was very rare in China. Thus, the government needed people who knew English (Garschagen, 2009). She was soon transferred to the Civilian Intelligence Department. There, her job was as a spy, which required her to identify foreign enemies. She was required to write reports and memos on the activities of foreigners. The number one foreign enemy on China's list was the Soviet Union. Her first assignment took her to France to spy on writers from Eastern European Communist Countries.

Regarding the assigned task, Dai Qing argues, "I do not think spies are bad people, but I did not like doing that work. The special thing about being a spy is that you have to cheat people into believing you, and this was too much against my nature."(WuDunn, 1991) However, the appointment was for an All-China Writers' Association member. (Dai, 1942)

Dai Qing took good advantage of this opportunity. In spare time, she used to write short stories. It was during this period that she discovered her passion for writing. It was a good start for her writing profession. Soon, she completed many vital works. "No: A Collection of Short Stories", "Spring Story of the Red Rock "and "Spirit "were published. These initial writings gave her recognition all over China.

In 1982, a male colleague conspired against her, leading to Dai's departure from her job. This marked a turning point in her life. She pursued writing as a full-time profession and began her career as an investigative journalist with *Guangdong Daily*, a mouthpiece for the Chinese government. Almost immediately, she became one of the most courageous investigative journalists in the country. Because of her bold writing and critical style, she frequently was in trouble and could not achieve further promotions. However, this did not discourage her. In 1979, during the Sino-Vietnamese War, she was dispatched to Guanxi province to report on the conflict. Rather than act as a puppet journalist, Dai presented the facts straight. In 1987, she highlighted the government's lack of environmental concern in her article, "Red Alert: Report of the Da Xing, An Ling Forest Fires". This report exposed the government's negligence that had resulted in a month-long forest fire in Heilong Jiang. Newspapers refused to publish it due to its critical stance; ultimately, it was included in one of her monographs. During this period, she produced several significant works, including "China: Intellectual Life," "Series of the Chinese National Women", "Readers' Questions and Answers", "Chasing the Devil and God", "Away from Modern Superstitions", and "Sexually Open Women". These works received mixed reactions, with some criticism and some appreciation from readers. "Series of the Chinese National Women" and "Sexually Open Women" were groundbreaking texts that faced government bans. "Sexually Open Women" was banned in July 1989 following the crackdown on protests in Tiananmen Square, with the official stance asserting that unchecked sexual licence will lead to political and social destabilisation. The book primarily presented candid accounts of premarital and extramarital sex, as the authors aimed to normalise Chinese attitudes towards sex.

Though Dai's work related to gender equality and other related issues brought trouble, her most significant work is her work on dam projects in China. She intensely studied the functioning of the dam and compiled the essays and interviews as the *Yangtze! Yangtze!*. She was imprisoned. This book was hailed by the *Far Eastern Economic Review* as a "watershed event in post-1949 Chinese politics, representing the first use of public lobbying by intellectuals and public figures." (ICIJ, 2014) It was a completely isolated world in prison, away from family and friends. The period was distressful for her. Sometimes, she even thought of committing suicide. As described by her, in prison, her companions were centipedes, spiders and snails.

The only visitor allowed to see her was her father-in-law. By that point, he was almost on the verge of death due to lung cancer. Dai cried and said, "Father, when I first met you, it was during the Cultural Revolution, and today you meet me in jail; I do not believe you did anything wrong, nor have I done anything wrong". He didn't say much; he replied, "We can resist". This short, powerful sentence inspired Dai Qing to continue fighting for the cause she believed in. A few months later, she learnt of her father-in-law's death. The words he spoke in prison remained in Dai's heart forever, motivating her to survive and oppose the project. As the book's primary author, she endured 10 months of imprisonment. However, the book successfully fulfilled its purpose, as the State Council decided to postpone building the dam for five years. (Adams and Williams, 1989)

Dai was arrested just after the 1989 protests crackdown, although she never joined the movement. On May 20, 1989, sensing the forthcoming disturbances as the government planned to send troops to counter the revolution, Dai commented, "An irrational government is now confronted by irrational people." (Barne, 1992) Dai even urged the students to end the protest after the April 27 demonstrations. As Germie Barne further illustrates, she feared that party cadres would manipulate the agenda of the 1989 protests and that the revolution and the

government's response would spiral out of control. And it did. The 1989 Tiananmen massacre occurred due to sheer misunderstandings and miscommunications.

For some reason, she was cautious in her approach, though she covered the happenings on the square as the reporter. When the hunger strike decision during the 1989 Tiananmen movement was made, Wang Chaohua had invited Dai Qing to her home. Wang was very distressed thinking about the developments at the Tiananmen Square. She met Dai Qing and discussed things, but all the time, there were tears in her eyes. She had hoped that Dai Qing, with her recognition, could provide guidance to much younger students. However, Dai Qing had her agenda in her mind. This had been a couple of perfect weeks for journalists. With Zhao Zeyang's blessing, the decade-old censorship policy melted away overnight. With much personal nagging, Dai had managed to get Hu Qili's approval for Guangdong Daily to publish a full page of opinions by prominent but controversial intellectuals. This opportunity was unthinkable just weeks earlier. She was busy assembling them for a symposium. Her invitees included many big names, such as Yan Jiaqi and Bao. A month earlier, a similar but unauthorised seminar with many of the same attendees had convened to commemorate Hu Yaobang's death. The proceedings were published in the Shanghai-based Economic Herald and had resulted in its shutdown. Dai Qing had approval from the Politburo Standing Committee members to do the same thing. On the day of the symposium, seeing Wang Chaohua, Dai Qing looked disappointed as she did not want to have her symposium hacked by the student leader of the square.

Before Wang Chaohua could say a word, she announced her conversation with Hu Qili, which appeared as a full page in Guangdong Daily. Her enthusiasm was shared by others. It seemed that everything had been pre-decided regarding 'what to speak'. Finally, Wang Chaohua was asked to speak as well. She choked up, and tears streamed down her cheeks before she could utter a single word. In a rambling, bumbling voice, she expressed to the meeting that the situation at the square was not the glorious and historic event that the intellectuals had been fantasising about. Instead, it had been very troubling. She felt panic, but through her teary eyes, she sensed that many in the room were also crying. (Eddi, 2009) As Dai asserted many times during the 1989 events, she is not an extremist. Dai Qing has her position on whether China needs democracy.

However, Dai was detained in July 1989 on charges that Most of the student leaders, and other movement participants being put in the same jail. From the prison, Dai Qing was heard accusing the leaders of the 1989 uprising of being extremist and simplistic zealots and arguing that overnight revolution would only result in a bloodbath. Unlike other dissident prisoners, Qing writes that she had no problem with the behaviour of the interrogators as they were doing their job. She writes that the jailor and other officials at the jail were not at all harsh on her, as complained by other dissident activists. She praises them and appreciates their professional approach towards the prisoners. She says they never mistreat her and repeatedly praise her guards for their kindness.

In contrast with the account of other fellow dissident prisoners in prison, she writes that the Party's approach to the prisoners was very human. Thus, there was no experience of torture and misbehaviour in jail. (Dai, 2005) Though in the forward of her edited book, *The River Dragon has Come*, Topping reveals, "she later experienced a constant terror like the sword of Damocles hanging over my head. She was forbidden to sing and kept her sanity by reciting poetry to herself. She studied law to get herself released, cried for her husband, and for a time contemplated suicide." (Topping, 1997)

During this period of imprisonment, she also worked on many important literary writings. Many of her significant works, such as “Chang Jiang, Chang Jiang: Arguments Regarding the Three Gorges Dam Project,” “Whether to Continue with the Three Gorges Dam Project: Readers’ Collection of Arguments,” “China’s Lack of Interest Regarding Sex: A Collection of Questions from the Mainland Society,” “An Offering to the Heart: A Chinese Fiction,” “Liang Shuming, Wang Shiwei, Chu Anping- Intellectuals in China,” “Away from Modern Superstitions: Arguments on Rational,” and the most important one, “My Imprisonment,” were published. Regarding her release in May 1990, Dai says it felt like moving from a small jail to a big one; she was almost under surveillance. However, unlike many of her contemporary activists and intellectuals, her travel was not restricted. She joined Harvard University as a Nieman Fellow and later became a research fellow at Columbia University and the Australian National University. After her release, Dai Qing became a steadfast advocate for freedom of speech and a critic of censorship. She has also gained an international reputation as one of China’s most dedicated environmentalists. Her vigorous efforts against China’s enormous Three Gorges Dam have rightfully earned her awards from environmental organisations worldwide. She was awarded the 1992 Golden Pen for Freedom (Prague), the Goldman Environmental Award (San Francisco), and the 1993 Conde Nast Environmental Award for her contributions to literature and activism. After her imprisonment in 1989 for Yangtze Yangtze!, her work was banned in China, but it continued to be published in the international media. With the support of foreign environmental organisations, she also assists other Chinese activists in organising and securing funding.

For her reactionary nature, she has been under house arrest many times. She had been concerned about the state’s ambiguous approach towards the rights of the people. In Frankfurt, she said, “You can read anything you want in China, but most people do not even know of the existence of such books. There is the internet, of course, but that has not made much of a difference. Writers who want to be published in China know what is historically and politically sensitive, so they work around the pitfalls. The publishers are all state companies.” (Garchagen, 2009) Her visit to the Frankfurt Book Fair in September 2009 caused a controversy.

Following the threat from the Chinese government, the organisers withdrew the invitation to Dai Qing. Later, Dai Qing was sponsored by the German Chapter of PEN . A long story in *Der Spiegel* denounced the move as undue pressure from Beijing, while *Deutsche Press Agentur* described the decision as China flexing its muscles. However, Dai attended the event. Chinese delegation to the event, led by former ambassador Mei Zhaorong, criticised the organisers, citing it as a violation of agreements and claiming they did not come here to participate in the event to have a lecture on democracy. The director of the Frankfurt book fair, Jurgen Boos, emphasised the book fair’s commitment to freedom of speech and described the walkout of the return of the Chinese delegation as an indication of democratic discourse in action. However, despite an earlier invitation, Dai was not allowed to speak at the closing ceremony. Peter Ripken, the project manager of the event, reportedly informed Dai that she was not allowed to speak, attributing the decisions of the Foreign Ministry of Germany. This certainly drew criticism and damaged the Frankfurt Book Fair’s reputation (China and The Frankfurt Book Fair, 2009, blog EastSouthWestNorth).

Now, she lives in exile in Thailand, where she says she is happy to be with like-minded people. (Liang, 2024) Before moving to Thailand, she lived on the outskirts of Beijing with her husband and daughter. Her daughter was denied entrance to a graduate programme in history at Beijing University because she was believed to be too supportive of her mother’s views. Her daughter

supports her work, but sometimes she feels insecure about her and requests her not to invite more trouble for her. But Dai Qing thinks that if one chooses to be a writer, one must speak the truth. This is professional ethic; otherwise, as she says, it is better not to get oneself involved in this profession (Yeung, 2011)

Dai's life and work are important in understanding the Chinese state, society, and, most importantly, Chinese women. She has experienced working in the Chinese state and society in different phases and has written extensively on women in China, mainly in the widely known Chinese women's series (1988); her views on the gender issue are special. After seeing the developments on this issue, from emancipation till now, Dai feels that even though the equality between men and women in China has been a big slogan since its emancipation, women born in the upper middle class and educated in metros experience equality to some level with their men counterpart but girls and woman in rural villages and from low-income families, are still deprived of education. Women also face much difficulty in the workplace. They are deprived of land and home ownership. Such equality exists in China on a mass scale. There are many cases of female foeticide. While women have had more opportunities in the last three decades, these have not been holistic.

However, she feels there has been an improvement in women's education. Nevertheless, as she shares her view, although China has outstanding women in all fields today, their proportion is low. (Personal communication, Mishra Swati and Qing Dai, Gmail exchanges, 2019) Talking about the government's goal to narrow down the gap, she says, “男女平等”, 一直是共产党的口号——从 CCP 诞生起, 不仅仅建国后。出生于大都市、受过教育, 特别身处中上层的女性, 在选举 (包括管理层女性比例) 等表面的政治权利方面, 享受到了。但在人口和贫困的压力下, 直到 21 世纪, 女童失学、女婴虐杀、女性就业困难、农村土地配置 (女儿不能在本村获得自留地与宅基地) 等等实质的不平等, 中国广泛而实际存在。缘于政治经济制度造成的贫困, 男人和女人一样, 在中国是不能享受到平等的。而实现男女平等的第一要务, 是解决贫困。所以, 徒呼平等没有用。要从文化、经济、政治改革入手。(Personal communication, Mishra Swati and Qing Dai, Gmail exchanges, 2017)

Coming from an elite family, Dai states that she never felt any discrimination as a woman. She reasserts that this is due to her privileged background. She recalls that during her childhood days, when men and women were not supposed to eat at the same dining table, Dai enjoyed a different upbringing. She reaffirms that wherever she has used the word suppression in her biographies, it is about the suppression of one's opinions and ideas and not the suppression faced as a woman. (Mishra, 2019)

Conclusion

While talking about China and traditional Chinese society, we often perceive Chinese women as submissive, obedient, soft-spoken and a victim of patriarchy. Dai Qing breaks our perception. She is just the opposite. She is independent, extrovert and articulate, far from oppressed and silenced. However, she believes that men and women are biologically and mentally different. She represents a section of modern Chinese women who are bold and outspoken and raise their voices wherever they feel it is required. Though Western writers try to see her as a feminist writer, Dai's approach is not at all towards feminism. She is more of a non-feminist or anti-feminist. (Wu, 2005) In her writings, she has brought many persistent social problems in Chinese society, including practices like bigamy, foot binding, and matchmaking. However, she rejects the idea of feminism, and she believes that feminism is a Western concept and does not

suit Chinese society.

Despite her contribution to women's welfare and women's rights, the study also finds that maybe due to her privileged upbringing, she fails to understand some of the women's problems in Chinese society. Nonetheless, Here, our aim is not to discuss whether Dai is anti-feminist or non-feminist; it is how Dai represents a free and independent Chinese woman who is self-reliant and offers support to her male counterparts and family members. Like the legendary woman mentioned at the beginning of this paper in the ancient and modern periods, she breaks the stereotypical notions of Confucius's ethos regarding women, paving the path of hope to narrow the gender gap in China. As equality and opportunities are more difficult for women from poorer and rural backgrounds, as discussed in this chapter, China is working hard to reduce poverty and modernise its rural areas; we hope it will find a solution to minimise the gap if poverty is a significant factor related to women's emancipation. Finally, this work raises an important question of how and why women must deprioritise themselves of many critical roles and duties to be in work.

Declarations

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Not Applicable

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