

IRSH 67 (2022), pp. 131–154 doi:10.1017/S0020859021000705

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

## Women Labour Models and Socialist Transformation in early 1950s China\*

NICOLA SPAKOWSKI 

*Institut für Sinologie, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg  
Werthmannstraße 12, 79098 Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany*

E-mail: [nicola.spakowski@sinologie.uni-freiburg.de](mailto:nicola.spakowski@sinologie.uni-freiburg.de)

---

**ABSTRACT:** This article investigates Chinese women labour models (or labour heroines) of the early 1950s as actors and symbols of socialist transformation. It centres on the example of Shen Jilan (1929–2020), who was one of the most prominent women labour models of the time. Shen rose to fame through her struggle for equal pay for equal work in her native village, became a delegate to China’s National People’s Congress, and even participated in the Third World Congress of Women in Copenhagen in 1953. The article critically engages with the concept of “state feminism” and proposes a shift in focus from state–society relations to work as a means to understanding the transformation of women’s lives under socialism. Socialist society was a society of producers and work shaped people’s daily lives; it was central to identity formation and constituted the regulating mechanism of social relations. Indeed, women labour models, together with related categories of working women, came to typify the new Chinese woman, who was integral to and symbolic of socialist modernity. They epitomized communist theory about women’s participation in production being the mechanism of their liberation. The article has three main parts, each of which addresses a different level (local, national, international), different constellations of actors and agency, and different aspects of the relationship between working women and socialist transformation. By tracing Shen Jilan’s activities in various contexts, the article reveals the complexity, contradictions, multilayered nature, and also incompleteness of socialist transformation.

---

\* The author would like to thank Tani Barlow and Dong Limin for helpful discussions and comments on an earlier draft. Thanks also to an anonymous reviewer for suggestions and to Joleen Meiners for help with editing the footnotes. Research for this article was supported by the German Science Foundation.

On 22 March 1953, *Shanxi ribao* (Shanxi Daily), the newspaper of China's northern Shanxi province, published a one-page article titled "Zai zuguo gege zhanxian shang de funümen" (The women at the various fronts of the motherland). Fourteen photos featured women in different settings and occupations: the military front of the Korean War; fields and factories (including heavy industry); the construction site of a retaining dam; wasteland surveyed by female personnel; a maternity ward; and a kindergarten. The "theoretical front" was represented by Kang Keqing and Cao Mengjun, two prominent women's leaders, studying Stalin's "Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR" and a document issued by the Nineteenth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Their equivalents at grassroots level appeared in two photos: vice cooperative leader and labour model Shen Jilan instructing her co-villagers on the upcoming autumn harvest; and vice-cooperative leader and labour model Guo Donglian discussing the production plan for 1953 with co-cadres of her cooperative.<sup>1</sup> Similar reportage articles centred entirely on work, making women the "new force in the cause of the construction of the country".<sup>2</sup>

The photo reportage and the details of its composition are of interest for two reasons. First, they indicate the central place New China envisaged for women. Second, they present concrete configurations of women's new role in society, as *working* women, instructed by the theories of communism (emanating from the Soviet Union) and guided by labour models and cadres who provided planning and organizing at village level. Indeed, women labour models, together with related categories of working women,<sup>3</sup> came to typify the new Chinese woman, who was integral to and symbolic of socialist modernity,<sup>4</sup> and who epitomized communist theory about women's participation in production being the mechanism of their liberation.

1. "Zai zuguo gege zhanxian shang de funümen" (The women at the various fronts of the motherland), *Shanxi ribao* (22 March 1953).

2. "Funü shi guojia jianshe shiye zhong de xin shengli jun" (Women are the new force in the cause of the construction of the state), *Xin Zhongguo funü*, 5 (1953), pp. 17–18.

3. These are the so-called firsts among women (*nüjie diyi*) in typical men's jobs and the "iron maidens" (*tie guniang*) of the 1960s. See Tina Mai Chen, "Female Icons, Feminist Iconography? Socialist Rhetoric and Women's Agency in 1950s China", *Gender & History*, 15:2 (2003), pp. 268–295; Yihong Jin, "Rethinking the 'Iron Girls': Gender and Labour during the Chinese Cultural Revolution", *Gender & History*, 18:3 (2006), pp. 613–634; Kimberley Ens Manning, "Embodied Activisms: The Case of the Mu Guiying Brigade", *China Quarterly*, 204 (2010), pp. 850–869.

4. This is also reflected in the front covers of *Xin Zhongguo funü* (Women of New China) and its successor, *Zhongguo funü* (Women of China), the organ of the All-China (Democratic) Women's Federation, in the years 1949 to 1966, forty-eight per cent of which featured working women; see Huang Jigang, "Cong 'xin nüxing' dao 'fengmian nülang'. You nüxing qikan fengmian kan xian-daixing huayu zhi shan bian" (From "new woman" to "cover girl": Front covers of women's magazines as evidence for the evolution of the discourse of modernity), *Xiangtan daxue xuebao*, 37:4 (2013), p. 133. See also Chen, "Female Icons", pp. 268–295; Ma Chunhua, "'Nüren kai

This article presents China's women labour models, or labour heroines,<sup>5</sup> as important actors and symbols in the construction and transformation of China in the early 1950s and work as the perspective that is best suited to understanding these processes. It is true that women's mobilization for work is at the heart of scholarship on Chinese feminism in the socialist period, but scholars are divided over their assessment of this period, both within and outside China.<sup>6</sup> Whereas feminists in the West initially praised Mao Zedong's China for its progressive women's policy ("women hold up half the sky"), negative voices prevailed from the 1980s. Western scholars spoke of "patriarchal socialism", and saw Chinese women as instruments and victims of the socialist state. In their eyes, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was not genuinely interested in the liberation of women but mobilized them for production for purely economic purposes.<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, China's "new women's movement", which began to form in the second half of the 1980s, criticized the Maoist pattern of women's liberation as top-down and over-politicized, forcing women into masculinized gender roles and imposing on them the double burden of productive and reproductive work. Chinese women, these critics claimed, should develop a subjective and collective consciousness and strengthen themselves for the labour market instead of relying on the state.<sup>8</sup> While these

huoche'. 'Shiqi nian' wenyi zhong de funü, jiqi yu xiandaixing" ("Women drive trains": Women, machines and modernity in arts and literature of the "seventeen years"), *Wenyi zhengming*, 6 (2014), pp. 17–23; Song Shaopeng, "Jiazhi, zhidu, shijian. 'Nan nü tong gong tong chou' yu laodong funü zhuti de shengcheng" (Value, institution, event: "Equal pay for equal work between men and women" and the production of a subjectivity for working women), *Funü yanjiu luncong*, 7 (2020), pp. 108–128.

5. The two terms were used interchangeably. *Laodong yingxiong* ("labour hero") was the early expression and an import from the Soviet Union. It was soon joined by the term *laodong mofan* ("labour model"), which I prefer here because it signals what is specific about labour models' function in Chinese society, namely, to demonstrate exemplary rather than exceptional actions and attitudes.

6. See also the critical reviews of existing scholarship by Zhong Xueping, "Women Can Hold Up Half the Sky", in Ban Wang (ed.), *Words and Their Stories: Essays on the Language of the Chinese Revolution* (Leiden [etc.], 2011), pp. 227–247; Wang Lingzhen, "Wang Ping and Women's Cinema in Socialist China: Institutional Practice, Feminist Cultures, and Embedded Authorship", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society*, 40:3 (2015), pp. 589–622.

7. See, for instance, Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley, CA, 1983); Harriet Evans, "The Language of Liberation. Gender and *Jiefang* in early Chinese Communist Party Discourse", *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, 1 (1998). Available at: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue1/harriet.html>; last accessed 23 November 2013.

8. Nicola Spakowski, "Women Studies with Chinese Characteristics? On the Origins, Issues, and Theories of Contemporary Feminist Research in China", *Jindai Zhongguo funüshi yanjiu* (Research on women in modern Chinese history), 2 (1994), pp. 297–322; Nicola Spakowski, "'Gender' Trouble. Feminism in China under the Impact of Western Theory and the Spatialization of Identity", *positions: east asia cultures critique*, 19:1 (2011), pp. 31–54; Tani E. Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham, NC [etc.], 2004), pp. 253–301; Liu Jie, "'Nan nü pingdeng' de yihua yu wudu. Yi jitihua shiqi Taihang shanqu funü canjia

negative voices mirrored a desire for self-determination after years of political campaigning, they also suited the needs of a market economy free of state intervention and cashing in on the consumption of autonomous subjects.<sup>9</sup> No wonder that, since around 2010, a new group of feminists formed that attributed women's discrimination in Reform China to neoliberalist structures and called for intervention at the level of political economy.<sup>10</sup> As for working women under Mao, these new socialist feminists point to the voices of women who have experienced socialism and claim to have profited from socialist gender policies, were proud of their work, and were positively affected by the propaganda of labour heroines and other progressive female role models.<sup>11</sup> These Chinese debates are not unique, but echo the discussions on "state feminism" in the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, state feminism has become a concept in China Studies as well,<sup>13</sup> and scholars outside China Studies use the Chinese state feminists described in Wang Zheng's book *Finding Women in the State* as evidence of women's agency under the constraints of socialist states.<sup>14</sup>

While scholarship under the rubric of "state feminism" is able to defend state intervention on behalf of women as a plausible strategy, and while recent research has highlighted moments of women's agency even in the context of strong socialist states,<sup>15</sup> I do not adopt the term because I find it misleading

shehui shengchan wei li" (Alienation and misunderstanding of "equality between men and women": A case study of women's participation in social production in the mountain areas of Taihang during the period of collectivization), *Dang shi yanjiu yu jiaoxue*, 1 (2014), pp. 17–27.

9. See Barlow, *The Question of Women*, pp. 253–301.

10. Nicola Spakowski, "Socialist Feminism in Post-Socialist China", *positions: asia critique*, 26:4 (2018), pp. 561–592.

11. Zhong, "Women Can Hold Up Half the Sky", pp. 244–245. Not all authors respect subjective voices, though. Huang Xin, "In the Shadow of Suku (Speaking Bitterness): Master Scripts and Women's Life Stories", *Frontiers of History in China*, 9:4 (2014), pp. 584–610, for instance, tries to explain away subjective assessments of interviewees and "re-educate" them to assume a more "feminist" viewpoint.

12. Francisca de Haan (ed.), "Ten Years After. Communism and Feminism Revisited", *Aspasia*, 10 (2016), pp. 102–168.

13. For an early use of the term, see Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, "From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference: State Feminism, Consumer Sexuality, and Women's Public Sphere in China", in Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang (ed.), *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China* (Minneapolis, MN, 1999), pp. 35–67.

14. Wang Zheng, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1964* (Oakland, CA, 2017), Kristen Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War* (Durham, NC, 2018), pp. 51–52.

15. For China, see Wang, *Finding Women in the State*. The difference between my own and Wang Zheng's perspective lies in the role and conceptualization of the state. While Wang rightly corrects "the conventional image of a monolithic party-state" by highlighting the "subversive women" within the state apparatus (pp. 7–8), I suggest abandoning fixation on the state as an isolated entity (and thus also the term "state feminism") in the first place. See also Wang, "Wang Ping and

in two respects. First, the term “state feminism” implies a generic feminism that is non-statist. The qualification of socialist feminism as statist not only entails a hierarchy between the two forms of feminism – feminism as the norm, state feminism as deviation from this norm – but it also excludes the possibility of a continuum between purely liberal and purely statist feminist formations. In addition, the “state” in state feminism explicitly or implicitly tends to follow a conceptualization of state and society as autonomous spheres. The state, in this view, is marked by “coherence, integrity, and autonomy”.<sup>16</sup> Societies, on the other hand, are conceived as self-regulating entities, composed of individuals who are protected by law, have “authentic” selves, make rational choices, are autonomous in their decisions, and act accordingly (“rights, choice, agency”).<sup>17</sup> These concepts have been contested from various angles,<sup>18</sup> but they still leave their traces in literature on women and the state. They force us to make either/or choices in the allocation of actors to one of the two spheres and to produce clear-cut assessments of gains and losses along notions of autonomy or repression.

The second reason for my reservations about state feminism as a focus of investigation is that privileging the state hides aspects that might be equally or even more important for understanding feminism in socialist societies. In my view, work, the very material and social basis of socialist societies, is such an alternative. Socialist society was a society of producers, and “socialist

Women’s Cinema”; Chen, “Female Icons”; Zuo Jiping, “20 shiji 50 niandai de funü jiefang he nannü yiwu pingdeng: zhongguo chengshi fuqi de jingli yu ganshou” (Women’s liberation in the 1950s and equality of duties between men and women: Experiences and feelings of Chinese urban couples), *Shehui*, 1:239 (2005), pp. 182–209. For Central and Eastern Europe, see Shana Penn et al., *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe* (New York, 2009).

16. Joel S. Migdal et al., “Rethinking the State”, in Klaus Schlichte (ed.), *The Dynamics of States: The Formation and Crises of State Domination* (Aldershot, 2005), pp. 1–40.

17. Amy Borovoy et al., “Decentering Agency in Feminist Theory: Recuperating the Family as a Social Project”, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 35:3 (2012), pp. 153–165, 153.

18. In China Studies, Jake Werner, “Global Fordism in 1950s Urban China”, *Frontiers of History in China*, 7:3 (2012), pp. 415–441, 438, speaks of a “social totality” that comprises both state and society. In political science, scholars have proposed to see the state as a process; see Joel S. Migdal et al., “Rethinking the State”, in Schlichte, *The Dynamics of States*, pp. 19–20. Bob Jessop, *State Power: A Strategic-Relational Approach* (Cambridge [etc.], 2008) proposes a “strategic-relational approach” to the state, which he sees as a social relation. Olle J. Fröde, “Dissecting the State: Towards a Relational Conceptualization of States and State Failure”, *Journal of International Development*, 24 (2012), pp. 271–286, 272, speaks of the state as “structures of interaction”. In sociology, scholars have stressed relationality in the formation of subjectivity; see, for instance, Norbert Ricken, “Anerkennung als Adressierung. Über die Bedeutung von Anerkennung für Subjektivationsprozesse”, in Thomas Alkemeyer, Gunilla Budde, and Dagmar Freist (eds), *Selbst-Bildungen. Soziale und kulturelle Praktiken der Subjektivierung* (Bielefeld, 2013), pp. 69–99; Norbert Ricken, “Zur Logik der Subjektivierung. Überlegungen an den Rändern eines Konzepts”, in Andreas Gelhard, Thomas Alkemeyer, and Norbert Ricken (eds), *Techniken der Subjektivierung* (München, 2013), pp. 29–47.

man” was conceived of as a working man or woman. Work shaped people’s daily lives and was central to identity formation. It constituted the regulating mechanism of social relations and, as such, was also the point of departure for the liberation of women.<sup>19</sup> One does not have to be an advocate of the communist theory of women’s liberation through work in order to acknowledge that “the work-originated changes in women’s lives and belief system fundamentally changed women’s social position and traditional views about them”.<sup>20</sup> The concept of work as social basis emanated from state ideology, of course, and the state was a strong actor in the field of work. But women’s lives were shaped by socialism in various ways, not only in terms of the (beneficial or negative) effects of an intervening state.<sup>21</sup>

In this article, I continue earlier research on women and feminism in the process of China’s “socialist transformation”,<sup>22</sup> with transformation defined as the “deliberate and intended attempt of a radical and systemically steered social change”.<sup>23</sup> By using the term “socialist transformation”, I place Chinese feminism in a broad and multidimensional process that affected women in a multitude of ways, not just as subjects and objects of feminism. In addition, socialist transformation included actors at all levels of society. These actors, in most cases, cannot be neatly assigned to either the state or society, or separated into winners and losers of the new conditions, nor can their individual experience be easily divided into gains and losses. Rather, relations between actors and the effects of socialism upon actors should be conceived of as complex and even contradictory. Finally, transformation as an intended process includes the possibility of unintended outcomes or incomplete change. Shen Jilan, the labour model featured in the photo reportage on “Women at the Various Fronts of the Motherland”, is an excellent example of the complexity, contradictions, multilayered nature, and incompleteness of socialist transformation.

19. For a more extensive discussion of the significance of work, see Nicola Spakowski, “Moving Labor Heroes Center Stage: (Labor) Heroism and the Reconfiguration of Social Relations in the Yan’an Period”, *Journal of Chinese History*, 5:1 (2020), pp. 1–24; Nicola Spakowski, “Yan’an’s Labor Heroines and the Birth of the Women of New China”, *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China*, 22:1 (2020), pp. 116–149.

20. Zhong, “Women Can Hold Up Half the Sky”, p. 239.

21. See Dong Limin, “‘Lishihua’ xingbie. ‘Guanlian’ ruhe keneng (“Historicizing” gender: How can a connection become possible), *Wenyi zhengming*, 4 (2012), pp. 31–35, 34, on the many factors and dimensions that shaped the phenomenon of women’s participation in production.

22. Nicola Spakowski, “*Mit Mut an die Front*”. *Die militärische Beteiligung von Frauen in der kommunistischen Revolution Chinas (1925–1949)* (Cologne: 2009); Nicola Spakowski, “Die Frauenpolitik der Kommunistischen Partei Chinas und das Problem der ‘Frauenbefreiung’ (1920er bis 1940er Jahre)”, *Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismusforschung* (Berlin, 2015), pp. 1–16.

23. Raj Kollmorgen, “Gesellschaftstransformation als sozialer Wandlungstyp. Eine komparative Analyse”, Sozialwissenschaftlicher Fachinformationsdienst, *Politische Soziologie*, 1 (2006), pp. 1–30, 19.

This article investigates Chinese women labour models of the early 1950s as actors and symbols of socialist transformation, centring on the example of Shen Jilan (1929–2020). Shen Jilan was one of the most prominent women labour models at the time, rising to fame through her struggle for equal pay for women in Xigou village and even becoming a delegate to the Third World Congress of Women in Copenhagen in 1953. Her case is well documented and allows us to address all levels and contexts where labour models mattered: the local, the national, and the international. My main sources are texts on Shen published in the state media in the early 1950s, such as newspaper reports and interviews.<sup>24</sup> Even though these texts presented an image of women labour models shaped by the preferences of the state, we should not dismiss them as mere propaganda, unrelated to women's experience. Rather, as Tina Mai Chen has pointed out in her work on women in typically male fields of occupation, the representation and experience of these women were inseparable, based on "a tripartite process linking representation of model women in CCP propaganda, language of experience employed by and for these women, and actions undertaken by women in response to such representation"<sup>25</sup>

The article has three main parts, each of which addresses a different level, different constellations of actors and agency, different aspects of the relation between working women and socialist transformation, and particular evidence of the incompleteness of the process. The first part introduces the system of labour models and provides biographical information on Shen Jilan. It focuses on Xigou village and work as Shen Jilan's true spaces of activity and identification, and on her fight for equal pay for equal work, the episode that brought her fame. It reveals the upsetting effect of women's participation in production on the traditional gender order, and shows how the particular ideals and interests of various actors – state, local cadres, village women – converged in the demand for equal pay. The second part moves to the national level and the political order, where male and female labour models were appointed delegates to the National People's Congress (NPC; China's "parliament") and figured in the CCP's efforts to legitimize communist rule. It highlights women's new sense of honour, dignity, and acts of recognition as important aspects of their "liberation" – gains that are easily overlooked in a rights-centred discussion. The third section is dedicated to Shen Jilan's participation in the Third

24. Interviews, oral history, and autobiographical texts are valuable sources for social history. However, in a Chinese context, authors and interviewers be careful not to touch upon issues that are outside the politically acceptable. What constitutes a sensitive issue depends on the subject and varies over time, though. See also my discussion of the use of memoirs for social history in Spakowski, "Mit Mut an die Front", pp. 25–30, and on subjectivity in memoirs in Nicola Spakowski, "Destabilizing the Truths of Revolution: Strategies of Subversion in the Autobiographical Writing of Political Women in China", in Marjorie Dryburgh and Sarah Dauncey (eds), *Writing Lives in China, 1600–2000: Histories of the Elusive Self* (Basingstoke, 2013), pp. 133–158.

25. Chen, "Female Icons", p. 271.



World Congress of Women in Copenhagen in 1953, a stage shaped by Cold War constellations and a discourse of socialism's superiority over capitalism. China posed – and was praised – as a forerunner of women's liberation, with women's right to work and equal pay as ultimate yardsticks of equality. One would have expected a central role for Shen Jilan in this display of socialist progressiveness but this was not the case. It was the educated and experienced heads of the Chinese delegation who represented New China on the congress stage, and they pointed to the young and uneducated Shen Jilan as mere evidence of successful liberation.

### FEMINISM AT THE GRASSROOTS

The system of labour models was established in the communist border regions in 1942 and was extended to the entire country in 1949, when the CCP came to power.<sup>26</sup> Labour models were not important in their individual contribution to economic output, but rather as models for everybody to learn from. They were models of concrete practices of work in the fields and factories, and they exemplified the attitudes and behaviour expected of socialist citizens. As intermediaries between the Party and the people, they functioned as quasi-cadres and were responsible for organizing work. Women labour models, in addition, were examples of women's liberation through production, based on the logic that their contribution to family income earned them the respect of their husbands and mothers-in-law.<sup>27</sup> Many of these women, however, also assumed responsibility for mobilizing their female co-villagers and acquired formal positions in the local organizations of Party and government.<sup>28</sup> And a few

26. For the formation of the system in the 1940s, see Patricia Stranahan, "Labor Heroines of Yan'an", *Modern China*, 9:2 (1983), pp. 228–252; Spakowski, "Moving Labor Heroes Center Stage", and Spakowski, "Yan'an's Labor Heroines". For labour models after the founding of the PRC, see Gao Xiaoxian, "'The Silver Flower Contest': Rural Women in 1950s China and the Gendered Division of Labour", *Gender and History*, 18:3 (2006), pp. 594–612; Gail Hershtatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley, CA, 2011), pp. 210–235; Gail Hershtatter, *Women and China's Revolutions* (Lanham, MD, 2019), pp. 197–199, 234–235; Guang Meihong *et al.*, "1950 nian quango funü laomo xingxiang zai tantao" (A re-exploration of the images of woman labour models in the 1950s), *Shanxi shida xuebao*, 43:5 (2016), pp. 27–31.

27. Spakowski, "Yan'an's Labor Heroines". For the early 1950s, see, for instance, Lan Cun, "Laodong jiu shi jiefang, douzheng cai you diwei". Li Shunda nong lin chu mu shengchan hezuoshe funü zhengqu tong gong tong chou de jingguo" ("Work means liberation, but only through struggle one can gain status": The course of the fight for equal pay for equal work by the women of Li Shunda's production cooperative of farming, forestry, animal husbandry and pastoral economy), *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily), 25 January 1953, hereafter *RMRB*.

28. For female labour models in political functions, see Liu Weifang, "Quanmian jianshe shehuizhuyi shiqi funü canzheng yizheng chutan" (Women's political participation in the period of all-round socialist construction), *Zhonghua nüzi xueyuan xuebao*, 1 (2010), pp. 98–103.



labour models even rose to national fame, owing to the breakthroughs they achieved in their respective field of work. One example from the early 1950s is textile worker Hao Jianxiu, who invented a new method to prevent thread breaking, a serious problem in textile production.<sup>29</sup> In agriculture, Shen Jilan is among the most prominent women labour models, owing to her fight for “equal pay for equal work” (*tong gong tong chou*) in Xigou village.

Shen Jilan was typical in her origins as a poor peasant woman but untypical in her exceptional political career. Born in 1929 into a poor family in Shanxi Province,<sup>30</sup> marriage in 1947 brought her to Xigou, a hotspot for introducing new cooperative forms under the guidance of Li Shunda. Li was the founder and head of the renowned “Production cooperative of farming, forestry, animal husbandry and pastoral economy of Li Shunda” and also among the most prominent male labour models of the time. In 1952, Li appointed Shen Jilan to the post of co-leader of the cooperative, probably for two reasons. First, Shen could work – she had unbound feet that allowed her to move easily, and she was used to working outside the home from the age of fourteen. Second, she was active in the local women’s association, which was headed by Li Shunda’s mother.<sup>31</sup> Besides, appointing women as co-leaders of cooperatives was a policy supported by regional authorities.<sup>32</sup> As co-leader, Shen was responsible for mobilizing Xigou’s women for work in the fields. She succeeded, but it was only the principle of equal pay that convinced the village’s women that work outside the home was worthwhile. Shen Jilan’s unrelenting fight for equal pay for equal work soon gained her national fame.<sup>33</sup> Owing to her role and achievements in Xigou and the publicity she received, she was

29. Thousands of articles featured the “Hao Jianxiu method”. Hao was even mentioned by Zhang Yun in her speech to the Third World Congress of Women; see “Wo daibiaotuan futuanzhang Zhang Yun zai shijie funü dahui yanshuo. Zhongguo funü yonghu heping jiejie guoji wenti” (Speech to the World Congress of Women by Zhang Yun, the vice head of China’s delegation: The women of China support the peaceful solution of international problems), *RMRB*, 12 June 1953.

30. For monographic biographies of Shen Jilan, see Mai Tianhe, *Bense rensheng. Shen Jilan* (A life with a distinctive character: Shen Jilan) (Taiyuan, 2007); Zhong gong Shanxi sheng weiyuan xuan-chuanbu (Propaganda department of the party committee of Shanxi province) (ed.), “Shiji renmin daibiao. Shen Jilan” (The delegate of a century: Shen Jilan) (Beijing, 2014). For interviews with Shen Jilan and oral history protocols, see Ma Shexiang, “Fu jin yi wang 60 nian. Danren li jie quan-guo renda daibiao jingli he ganshou – Shen Jilan fangwenlu” (Reflecting on the past 60 years in the light of the present: The experience and feelings of a NPC delegate of several legislative periods – an interview with Shen Jilan), *Dang de wenxian*, 6 (2009), pp. 106–109; “Duihua Shen Jilan” (A dialogue with Shen Jilan), *Nan feng chuang*, 3 (2006), p. 21; Liu Chan, “Liang hui ‘huohua shi’ Shen Jilan. Wo de jibie shi nongmin” (Shen Jilan, “living fossil” of the two conferences: My rank is that of a peasant), *Funü shenghuo*, 3 (2016), pp. 7–9; Li Zhongyuan, Liu Xiaoli (eds), *Koushu Shen Jilan* (An oral history of Shen Jilan) (Beijing, 2017).

31. Song, “Jiazhi, zhidu, shijian”, pp. 121–122.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

33. For rural women’s mobilization for production and the general notion of “labour is glorious”, see Guang Meihong, “Guannian, jingsai, zhidu. 20 shiji 50 niandai Zhongguo nongcun funü canjia



Figure 1. Exhibit in the Shen Jilan exhibition hall in Xigou, Shanxi Province: “The path of Shen Jilan, delegate to the First to Thirteenth National People’s Congress”. Photograph by the author.

nominated as a labour model and appointed to a number of functions in the Women’s Federation and related bodies and activities at the regional and national level.<sup>34</sup> In 1953, she became a delegate to the Second National Conference of Women in Beijing, and she was even appointed delegate to the first NPC in 1954. She held this position until the end of her life, and is actually the only person in China who was a delegate to the NPC for thirteen successive legislative periods (see Figure 1). After Li Shunda’s death in 1983, Shen became head of Xigou and started to develop new economic opportunities for the village. When I visited Xigou in October 2019, she was still involved in village affairs. She passed away in June 2020 at the age of ninety.

Shen Jilan was a prominent person in public discourse. In the reform period, she became the object of a number of films and plays.<sup>35</sup> Her career was

laodong dongyin zai tantao” (Concepts, competition, system: Re-discussing the motives for rural women to participate in work in the 1950s), *Gu jin nongye*, 3 (2013), pp. 90–96.

34. For the long list of positions and distinctions Shen received, see Chang Yinting, “Gongheguo jianzhengzhe de shengming zuyi. Yi quanguo laomo Shen Jilan wei zhongxin” (The footprints of the life of a witness of the republic: A case study of national labour model Shen Jilan), *Shanxi nongye daxue xuebao*, 10 (2018), pp. 30–37, 31–32.

35. For examples, see Feng Xiang, “Jiang zhengzhi he jiaoxuefei. ‘Shen Jilan’ de ganga” (Talking about politics and paying tuition: The dilemma of [the movie] “Shen Jilan”), *Nanfang zhoumo*, 3 April 2014.



Figure 2. Statue of Shen Jilan in the Labour Hero Park in Changzhi, Shanxi Province. Photograph by the author.

crowned in 2019 with the Medal of the Republic, China's highest order of honour, and the local government of Pingshun County continues to honour her and other labour models of the region with a labour model park in Changzhi (see [Figure 2](#)). A museum in Xigou is exclusively dedicated to Shen Jilan's life. Critics, on the other hand, point to her peasant background and lack of education, which, they claim, made Shen a "living fossil" in the NPC.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, her statement that, as an NPC deputy, she never voted against the Party, made her the object of public debate.<sup>37</sup> Democracy activists call her a "voting machine", and particularly excoriate her for voting

36. Liu, "Liang hui 'huohua shi' Shen Jilan".

37. Xu Zhongqiang, "Shen Jilan gai bu gai dang renda daibiao" (Should Shen Jilan be a delegate to the NPC), *Shidai renwu*, 4 (2013), p. 76.

in favour of the infamous Hong Kong security law on 28 May 2020, her last act of voting.<sup>38</sup>

The battle for equal pay took place in spring 1952 while Li Shunda was away for several months on an inspection tour of the Soviet Union. Only a few women were willing to join agricultural activities because they could not see how they would benefit from work outside the household – which they were expected to do on top of domestic work. Those who participated in work realized that they did not receive the same number of work points as male team members.<sup>39</sup> The battle for equal pay was fought in several rounds. First, Shen Jilan convinced the women of her village that working outside their homes would enhance their status in the family. She then convinced her male co-villagers that women deserved the same number of work points as men, thus giving women an incentive not to return to their homes. The resistance of male villagers was based on the claim that women worked less, performed worse, or took on less-demanding tasks. Step by step, the women of the village proved that they were able to perform as well as male team members in the same physically demanding tasks, and step by step the male villagers had to acknowledge that women could work as hard as them. Some peasants revealed a malicious streak, arbitrarily assigning tasks to women. Eventually, Xigou's women got the same pay, and upon Li Shunda's return, the arrangement was changed so that women received equal pay but were released from those jobs that were physically too demanding. In addition, the village introduced several rules and services to protect and support women. Consequently, relations between men and women improved, and “beautiful and happy families” were the result in Xigou, Shen Jilan's in-laws among them.<sup>40</sup>

This local event became public through a long report in *Renmin Ribao* (*RMRB*; People's Daily), a national paper and the CCP's mouthpiece, on 25 January 1953.<sup>41</sup> This was because Lan Cun, the author of the report, had

38. Shen Hua, “Zhongguo Renda ‘jushou jiqi’ Shen Jilan shen hou de huati (The deceased Shen Jilan, “voting machine” of China's NPC, as a topic of conversation), *Voice of America*, 6 July 2020. Available at: <https://www.voachinese.com/a/shenjilan-npc-reform-07062020/5491539.html>; last accessed 25 September 2020; and “China Detains Activists Over Criticism of the Ruling Communist Party”, *Radio Free Asia*, 3 October 2019. Available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/criticism-10032019140459.html>; last accessed 25 September 2020.

39. The introduction of the work point system was an important element in the collectivization of agriculture. Women benefited from the system because their work became countable and visible and was no longer hidden in the family economy. Countable work raised their status in the family and was the condition for exposing unequal remuneration at village level. See also Spakowski, “Yan'an's Labor Heroines”.

40. Lan, “Laodong jiu shi jiefang”.

41. *Ibid.* It was also published in “Women of New China” (Ma Ming, “Nongye shengchan zhanxian shang de nü mofan Shen Jilan” (Shen Jilan, female model at the front of agricultural production), *Xin Zhongguo funü*, 5 (1953), pp. 17–18.

been present at a local meeting where Shen had related her experience of mobilizing women for work. More importantly, the national government obviously *wanted* these events to become public. Indeed, events in Xigou mirrored a conflict that existed in other pioneer villages, where the work point system had been introduced and women were mobilized for production but earned only half the points of men. At the time when the work point system was to become national policy, the government obviously used events in Xigou to promote gender equality as a core feature of socialist society and as an incentive for women to work outside their homes. It was only in 1978, though, that the principle of equal pay for equal work was introduced into China's constitution.<sup>42</sup>

What was at stake when Shen Jilan demanded equal pay for women? Reports on the events in Xigou, a village famous for its pioneer role in China's transition to socialism,<sup>43</sup> and similar events in other places, demonstrate how grave the problem was and that it was actually work, together with marriage,<sup>44</sup> that decided on privileges and power in the family.<sup>45</sup> To mobilize women for production was a break with tradition, and had been put into effect in communist base areas in 1943.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the 1940s, however, when the family was still the basic unit of production, the cooperatives of the 1950s came with a system of remuneration through work points that made women's work countable. Women's contribution to the family income could no longer be hidden in a family's budget, and each family member's share in the household income affected her or his status within the family. Men's fierce resistance against women's entrance into the workforce and against the principle of equal pay reflects their fear of losing their status as household heads and sole decision-makers in family matters. Even if individual political leaders used women's mobilization for work as a mere tool for purposes other than their liberation, it was a policy that radically affected the traditional gender order. This traditional order was not easily transformed,

42. Song, "Jiazhi, zhidu, shijian"; the author debunks a number of myths related to Shen Jilan and her fight for equal pay, in particular Shen's supposed pioneering role and the claim that equal pay became a constitutional principle in 1954.

43. Chang, "Gongheguo jianzhengzhe de shengming zuyi"; "Xiang Shen Jilan xuexi" (Learning from Shen Jilan), *Shanxi nongmin*, 27 December 1952, and Lan, "Laodong jiu shi jiefang" emphasize this fact as proof of how grave the problem of women's discrimination was.

44. Neil Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949–1968* (Berkeley, CA, 2000).

45. See the report on Wuxiang County in Shanxi Province, where the fight for equal pay was "a process of bitter struggle". Men are reported to have behaved in a particularly obstinate way and women seem to have developed a group consciousness. When the men demanded ever-increasing proof of women's capacities, women asked in return whether men could bear children; see "Nan nü tong gong tong chou fahui le funü qianli" (Men and women's equal pay for equal work brings women's potential into play), *Shanxi ribao*, 16 January 1953.

46. Spakowski, "Yan'an's Labor Heroines". For women and work before that time, see Guang, "Guannian, jingsai, zhidu".

though; indeed, it required “bitter struggle”.<sup>47</sup> Newspaper articles reporting women’s fight for equal pay noted success in some places but failure in others. Women succeeded usually as a consequence of struggles similar to those in Xigou.<sup>48</sup> Besides equal pay, women’s increasing share in production (in Xigou, their work amounted to thirty-five per cent of the total sum of work days),<sup>49</sup> the high percentage of locally appointed women labour models, women’s appointment to the post of co-leader of cooperatives, and more “harmonious” relations between husbands and wives and daughters- and mothers-in-law were presented as indicators of success.<sup>50</sup> In other places, the problem persisted, even though the Party pushed hard for the principle of equal pay.<sup>51</sup>

The basic lesson to be drawn from the story of Xigou’s women was that true realization of women’s rights depended on their own struggle. Indeed, the title of the *RMRB* article “Work Means Liberation, but Only through Struggle Can One Gain Status”, a quote from Shen Jilan repeated in other papers,<sup>52</sup> indicated that the promise of liberation in state ideology was the socialist framework for a feminist struggle for rights. The concrete (and measurable) goal for women was status, but gaining status required them to directly confront their husbands and male co-villagers. The struggle for status, then, was called a matter of “self-liberation”.<sup>53</sup> Women had to free themselves

47. “Xiang Shen Jilan xuexi”; “Nan nü tong gong tong chou”. For a similar struggle for equal pay in the production of cotton, see Gao, “The Silver Flower Contest”, pp. 602–603.

48. He *et al.*, “Tong gong tong chou’ yu funü jiefang. Yi nongye hezuohua shiqi de Heshun xian wei li” (“Equal pay for equal work” and the liberation of women: A case study of Heshun County during the period of organizing agricultural cooperatives), *Shandong nüzi xuexyuan xuebao*, 4:140 (2018), pp. 50–56; Li Jinzheng and Liu Jie, “Laodong, pingdeng, xingbie. Jitihua shiqi Taihang shanqu nan nü ‘tong gong tong chou’” (Work, equality, gender: Men’s and women’s “equal pay for equal work” in the mountain areas of Taihang during the period of collectivization), *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu*, 7 (2012), pp. 53–61.

49. Lan, “Laodong jiu shi jiefang”.

50. *Ibid.*; Peng Fei, “Nongcun funü canjia shengchan de yi mian qi” (A flag in peasant women’s participation in production), *Shanxi ribao*, 26 December 1952. See also He *et al.*, “Tong gong tong chou’ yu funü jiefang” on the positive effect of the policy on women’s access to positions in government and the Party. For the combination of mobilizing women for work and establishing democratic and “harmonious” family structures, see Spakowski, “Yan’an’s Labor Heroines”. The necessary link between both strategies is also emphasized in “Huzhu shengchan zhong nan nü bixue tong gong tong chou” (In production through mutual aid men and women have to receive equal pay for equal work), *Shanxi ribao*, 26 December 1952. See also Shen Jilan, “Gei renmin dang hao daibiao” (Being a good representative of the people), *Shanxi nongmin*, 21 August 1954. She speaks of her “harmonious family” where everything is negotiated between family members and her parents-in-law treat her with an attitude of respect.

51. In Wuxiang County, only a minority of cooperatives gave women equal pay (“Nan nü tong gong tong chou”). According to He *et al.*, “Tong gong tong chou’ yu funü jiefang”, p. 55, the principle was realized only in model cooperatives.

52. Peng, “Nongcun funü canjia shengchan”; “Xiang Shen Jilan xuexi”.

53. See, for instance, Peng, “Nongcun funü canjia shengchan”; “Xiang Shen Jilan xuexi”. “Huzhu shengchan zhong” speaks of women’s “mentality of considering themselves as weak” (*zi ruo sixiang*).



from a traditional understanding of their role and, step by step, prove their abilities vis-à-vis men. The particular sequence of events – with women meeting ever increasing challenges from male peasants – makes the story of Shen Jilan’s fight for equal pay a manual of how to approach gender conflict at the local level.<sup>54</sup> In a nutshell, newspapers made women’s status a matter of performance. The burden of proof lay with the women,<sup>55</sup> and the standard was men’s.<sup>56</sup> This strategy of education fitted the Party’s identification of the causes of the practice of unequal pay, namely the “feudal” mindset still effective in agrarian China.<sup>57</sup> One article classified the conflict as a “struggle within the working population” (“laodong renmin neibu de douzheng”),<sup>58</sup> an equivalent to “side contradictions” in Marxism. Defining the problem as a mere side contradiction and relegating its solution to women’s own struggle certainly left the transformation of the gender order incomplete.

Even though the central state intervened only half-heartedly at the village level, it set up a legal framework that truly enhanced the status of women.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, among the first laws promulgated by the newly founded state were those that were intended to enhance the status of women: the Marriage Law of 1950, which gave women the right to divorce and prohibited marriage practices that violated women’s freedom of marriage, and the Land Reform Law of the same year, which stipulated that each individual, irrespective of gender, was entitled to the same acreage of land. Many additional stipulations and services improved women’s lives, in particular health and education. Finally, state propaganda advocated equality and new roles for women in public life.

For Shen Jilan, the events in Xigou were the starting point for her career in the Women’s Federation, which forced her to leave Xigou. This is also why Shen, an icon of women’s fight for equality, did not really identify with this

54. This is also true for a picture story published in the daily newspaper *Shanxi nongmin* (Peasants of Shanxi) in October 1953: Zhang *et al.*, “Shen Jilan”, *Shanxi nongmin*, 17, 21, and 24 October 1953. The paper obviously wanted to reach illiterates among the population. In “Nü gongchandang yuan Jia Guoyong tongzhi lingdao funü zhengqi tong lao tong chou” (Female Party member Jia Guoyong leads women in their struggle for equal pay for equal work), *Shanxi ribao*, 11 November 1953, a woman is portrayed who took Shen Jilan as a model to fight for equal pay also in her village. This fight very much resembles the one in Xigou.

55. This is particularly evident in the editorial of *Shanxi nongmin*, which calls for learning from Shen Jilan (“Xiang Shen Jilan xuexi”).

56. Some Chinese scholars are particularly critical of women’s adaptation to men’s standards; see, for instance, Liu, “‘Nan nü pingdeng’ de yihua yu wudu”.

57. Ma, “Nongye shengchan zhanxian shang de Shen Jilan”; “Huzhu shengchan zhong”; “Xiang Shen Jilan xuexi” compares this feudal mindset with a “wandering ghost” that lives on in people’s “backward brains”.

58. “Huzhu shengchan zhong”. See also “Xiang Shen Jilan xuexi”, an editorial that speaks of “social reform” (*shehui gaige*).

59. For state policy on women after 1949, see Hershatter, *Women and China’s Revolutions*.



career. From interviews, we know that her genuine space of interaction was Xigou and her primary field of identification was “work” (*laodong*), manifest in her role as a labour model. She respected Li Shunda and “the Party” and appreciated her in-law family as her major network of support.<sup>60</sup> Asked about her appointment to the position of provincial head of the Women’s Federation in 1973, she said:

I didn’t feel I could do that. I have no education; it was the Party which fostered me to be a labour model. Labour model, labour model – only if you take the lead in work you are called labour model. How could I be called labour model if I was sitting in an office and not working?<sup>61</sup>

In another interview, she said: “As a labour model, I do have to work. And as an NPC delegate for Xigou, I cannot leave Xigou.”<sup>62</sup> Shen Jilan’s stance confirms the fact that feminism cannot be easily isolated from socialist transformation.

#### (WOMEN) LABOUR MODELS AND THE PARTY

While Shen Jilan’s fight for equal pay was a village affair that was limited to local Party members, her career as a labour model and representative of women’s issues brought her onto the national stage and into direct contact with the Party leadership. From interviews, we know that assuming roles on the national stage lay beyond the horizon of labour models, and meeting Mao Zedong in person was an absolute highlight in their lives. These events are all the more important because they explain labour models’ loyalty to the Party as well as their symbolic function in the Party’s efforts to legitimize communist rule.

Labour models had good reason to be loyal to the Party. In interviews, Shen Jilan and her labour model sisters express deep gratitude for the tremendous improvement that revolution effected in their individual lives and the Party’s care for their concerns as people with particularly poor origins.<sup>63</sup> At a fundamental level, liberation to them meant being able to earn a living. In addition, it brought release from repressive family structures and humiliating practices in

60. See, for instance, Ma, “Fu jin yi wang 60 nian”; Xia Lina, “Shen Jilan. Renmin daibiao dahui de ‘huohuashi’” (Shen Jilan: The “living fossil” of the National People’s Congress), *Zhongguo Renda*, 25 May 2009, pp. 50–51; Chang, “Gongheguo jianzhengzhe de shengming zuyi”.

61. “Duihua Shen Jilan”.

62. Ma, “Fu jin yi wang 60 nian”, p. 108.

63. See, for instance, the interviews with Shen Jilan in Zhu Xianli *et al.*, “Ganxiang yu yuanwang” (Reflections and aspirations), *Nongye kexue tongxun*, 30 March 1954, pp. 509–511; Tian Liu, “Lai zi renmin, weile renmin” (From the people, for the people), *RMRB*, 18 September 1954; Ma, “Fu jin yi wang 60 nian”, and one with Shanghai textile labour model Yi Shijuan (Xia Lina, “Zhenzang ban ge duo shiji de minzhu jiyi” (Democratic memories that were collected for more than half a century), *Zhongguo Renda*, 16 November 2014, pp. 53–55.

the workplace.<sup>64</sup> Representatives of the state and the Party even instilled them with a sense of self-esteem. Women labour models spoke (and still speak) of the dignity installed in them and the honour they received. Shen Jilan stated: “The Party and Chairman Mao gave us so much attention and care, what reason did we have not to work hard for this heroic country and this mighty Party?”<sup>65</sup> These women’s commitment to their tasks can probably best be explained with a mix of benefits (material, symbolic, legal). The symbolic gains and the “dignity” that women from the lower strata of society felt seem to have played a prominent role in this mix.<sup>66</sup>

Interaction with Mao Zedong was marked by mutual recognition and was reported in newspapers as evidence for the particularly close relationship between Mao and the people. This charismatic bond was a matter of careful orchestration by the Party and practised from the beginning of the labour hero movement in the 1940s. Indeed, labour heroes’ glorification of Mao was an important element in the establishment of a Mao cult.<sup>67</sup> Shen Jilan is a case in point, and her reverence for Mao is most evident in a report where she mentions her direct meeting with Mao in 1953. Mao appeared to her “as if a fresh red flower was blossoming out”.<sup>68</sup> He told her “Work hard!” – words, she said, she would never forget.<sup>69</sup>

Charisma was a pillar of political legitimization that was meant to justify the exceptional status of Mao Zedong. It was closely intertwined with two more pillars of legitimacy, namely ideology – in particular the claim to have “liberated” the Chinese people and to have made the working class the “master” (*zhurenweng*) of the state<sup>70</sup> – and formal representation through the National People’s Congress. For all three pillars, labour models figured as representatives of the working class.

Indeed, the sudden prominence of labour models, who typically originated from exceptionally poor conditions and lacked an education,<sup>71</sup> constituted a radical reversal of traditional social hierarchies. Biographies of labour models such as Shen

64. Women labour models in industry usually mention the humiliation of body searches and the foreman system. In the countryside, women were humiliated by husbands and mothers-in-law (see, for instance, Lan, “Laodong jiu shi jiefang”).

65. Ma, “Fu jin yi wang 60 nian”, p. 108.

66. See also the notion of the “decent society” in Avishai Margalit’s *The Decent Society* (Cambridge, MA, 1996).

67. Spakowski, “Moving Labor Heroes Center Stage”.

68. The red flower is a typical metaphor in the Mao cult. It was also employed in a letter titled “A red flower is blossoming in our heart” (Women xinli kaile yi duo hong hua) sent to Mao Zedong by the women of Li Shunda’s cooperative; see “Women xinli kaile yi duo hong hua” (A red flower is blossoming in our heart), *Xin Zhongguo funü*, 7 (1953), pp. 12–13.

69. Shen, “Gei renmin dang hao daibiao”.

70. Zhu *et al.*, “Ganxiang yu yuanwang”, p. 509. For the discourse of “masters of the country”, see Zhang Jishun, “Creating ‘Masters of the Country’ in Shanghai and Beijing: Discourse and the 1953–54 Local People’s Congress Elections”, *China Quarterly*, 220 (2014), pp. 1071–1091.

71. Guang *et al.*, “1950 nian quango funü”.

Jilan provided examples of *fanshen* (literally, to turn the body), or liberation at an individual level, which testified to the successes of revolution as a collective event led by the Party. These biographies were marked by a strong contrast between people's miserable lives in the old society and their happiness in the new.<sup>72</sup>

Shen Jilan and other labour models also mattered in the process of establishing "representative" political forms. The NPC is China's parliament and nominally the highest organ of state power. True power lies with the Party, of course, which, in the early 1950s, sought to establish an image of the NPC as a true parliament and an image of NPC delegates as true representatives of the people. In the first NPC, which convened from 15 to 28 September 1954 and was of particular importance because it passed the first constitution of the PRC, a considerable number of delegates were labour models, three of them coming from Pingshun County: Xigou's Li Shunda and Shen Jilan and Guo Yu'en from Chuandi.<sup>73</sup> Nominating labour models for the NPC constituted the ultimate act of recognition, considering that they had only recently been relieved from extreme poverty and powerlessness.

Labour models were preferred subjects for interviews and features in news coverage of the first NPC.<sup>74</sup> Articles highlighted the sense of "honour" (*guangrong*) – a key term in these texts – and responsibility these labour models felt.<sup>75</sup> One such text, "Being a Good Representative of the People" (*Gei renmin dang hao daibiao*),<sup>76</sup> appeared under the name of Shen Jilan.<sup>77</sup> Shen reports how she received the news about her appointment and immediately rushed to Taiyuan, the capital of Shanxi, where delegates of the provincial People's Congress wanted to meet her. A long section is dedicated to the departure scene in Xigou, where villagers support her, help her collect her luggage, and accompany her. Shen appears as a person who is part of a community that she can rely on and that also understands the importance of representative politics. She is a deputy who really comes from the people. On her journey, she reflects on the past, listing the steps in her career from

72. Zhu *et al.*, "Ganxiang yu yuanwang"; Tian, "Lai zi renmin, weile renmin"; Shen, "Gei renmin dang hao daibiao".

73. Ma, "Fu jin yi wang 60 nian", p. 107. This shows the exceptional status of Pingshun and Xigou for agricultural policies at the national level. Among the twenty-four delegates to the NPC from Shanxi, eleven seem to have been labour models in 1954 or later.

74. In Tian, "Lai zi renmin, weile renmin", five out of six delegates mentioned by their names were labour models, Li Shunda and Shen Jilan among them. Zhu *et al.*, "Ganxiang yu yuanwang" is a collective interview with four labour models, again including Li Shunda and Shen Jilan.

75. Zhu *et al.*, "Ganxiang yu yuanwang"; Tian, "Lai zi renmin, weile renmin". An *RMRB* article pointed out that the draft of the constitution had been under discussion for three months already and that "(l)abor model delegates from the fields of industry and agriculture discussed it particularly conscientiously" (Tian, "Lai zi renmin, weile renmin").

76. Shen, "Gei renmin dang hao daibiao".

77. Since it was only later in her life that Shen learned to read and write, she must at least have been "helped" with writing the text.

joining the Party to her participation in the Second National Assembly of Women – which was also the occasion when she met Mao Zedong – to her participation in the World Conference of Women in Copenhagen in 1953. Besides the list of remarkable events in her life, she also provides a typical story of *fanshen* and women's liberation.<sup>78</sup> The fight for equal pay is not mentioned in this and other texts featuring her as an NPC deputy.

Texts such as this one try to portray the NPC as a true body of representation and its delegates true representatives of the common people. They also emphasize its revolutionary nature by highlighting the humble origins of its members and in particular their illiteracy (but not their gender).<sup>79</sup> However, readers are left in doubt about whether labour model delegates can really meet the high demands of parliamentary work. This is a sign of the incompleteness of socialist transformation.

In 2006, Shen Jilan gave an interview that focused on her role as NPC delegate, and she admitted her political naivety at the time of the First NPC. Asked how she intended to participate in the deliberation and administration of state affairs, she responded:

I am a village woman. At that time, I couldn't even read and write, I just wanted to see Chairman Mao. When I eventually met with him, I was so excited that I couldn't say a single word. Tears were running from my eyes. Giving my vote to Chairman Mao meant that my mission was accomplished. How could I make any suggestions?<sup>80</sup>

It was her role as NPC delegate that provoked critical questions in Reform China and immediately after her death.<sup>81</sup>

## WORKING WOMEN AND THE SUPERIORITY OF SOCIALISM

The most extraordinary event in Shen Jilan's life was probably her participation in the Third World Congress of Women,<sup>82</sup> organized by the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF),<sup>83</sup> and hosted in Copenhagen

78. For Shen Jilan as an example of women's liberation, see also Zhu *et al.*, "Ganxiang yu yuanwang", and Tian, "Lai zi renmin, weile renmin".

79. See, for instance, Tian, "Lai zi renmin, weile renmin".

80. "Duihua Shen Jilan".

81. See above.

82. For a full account of her trip to Copenhagen, see Mai, *Bense rensheg. Shen Jilan*, pp. 68–74.

83. For the history of the WIDF, see Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)", *Women's History Review*, 19:4 (2010), pp. 547–573; Francisca de Haan, "The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF): History, Main Agenda and Contributions (1945–1991)", *Women and Social Movements International, 1840 to the Present*. Available at: <https://alexanderstreet.com/products/women-and-social-movements-international-1840-present>; last accessed 15 June 2016; and Elisabeth Armstrong, "Before

from 5 to 10 June 1953.<sup>84</sup> The Chinese delegation went to Copenhagen by train, with a stop-over in Moscow, where the group was shown the sights of the achievements of socialism.<sup>85</sup> In the historical context of celebrating the friendship between China and the Soviet Union, propagating the Soviet Union as a model for China and emphasizing the differences between the two camps in the Cold War, Shen Jilan, a simple peasant woman of Xigou village in northern China, became a messenger for socialism and socialist feminism. Reports on the event further demonstrate that work, women's right to work, and the principle of equal pay were the core elements in the strategy of socialist feminism and its competition with the capitalist world.

WIDF was founded in Paris in 1945 as "a progressive, 'left-feminist' international umbrella organization, with an emphasis on peace, women's rights, anti-colonialism and anti-racism" and a "strong association with the communist world".<sup>86</sup> Francisca de Haan identifies it as "the largest and probably most influential international women's organization of the post-1945 era".<sup>87</sup> The All-China Democratic Women's Federation (ACDWF), later renamed the All-China Women's Federation, was among the particularly large member organizations.<sup>88</sup> The meeting in 1953 was the third of its kind and assembled 1,900 women from sixty-seven countries.<sup>89</sup> The Chinese delegation of thirty members was selected by the Second National Conference of Women and led by Cai Chang, Li Dequan, and Zhang Yun, who all held leading positions in both ACDWF and WIDF. In the list of participants published in *RMRB*, Shen Jilan appears as "agricultural labour model, vice-head of Shanxi Province Li Shunda's production cooperative of farming, forestry, animal husbandry and pastoral economy". Her equivalent in industry was Sun Xiaoju, a railway labour model.<sup>90</sup>

Bandung: The Anti-Imperialist Women's Movement in Asia and the Women's International Democratic Federation, *Signs*, 41:2 (2016), pp. 305–331.

84. Basic information on the conference (dates, number of participants) is taken from de Haan, "The Women's International Democratic Federation". Information in Chinese texts slightly deviate. A better understanding of China's role in the WIDF and the Copenhagen conference would have to be based on archive material, which, unfortunately, is not accessible.

85. For the trip to Copenhagen, see Mai, *Bense rensheng. Shen Jilan*, pp. 68–74; Zhong gong, "Shiji renmin daibiao", pp. 31–34.

86. De Haan, "The Women's International Democratic Federation", p. 1.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

88. *Ibid.*

89. *Ibid.*, Table 2.

90. For the list of participants, see "Zhongguo di er ci quanguo funü daibiao dahui xuanchu woguo chuxi shijie funü dahui de daibiaotuan" (China's Second National Congress of Women elects the Chinese delegation to the World Congress of Women), *RMRB*, 27 April 1953. A report on the departure of the delegation from Beijing speaks of twenty-four members and eighteen service staff; see "Chuxi shijie funü dahui Zhongguo funü daibiaotuan qicheng" (Departure of the delegation of Chinese women who participate in the World Congress of Women), *RMRB*, 20 May 1953.

Chinese coverage of the event was extensive and included translated *Pravda* articles and the speeches of delegates from countries other than China. Readers of *RMRB* and *Xin Zhongguo funü* (Women of New China) learned that the assembly was an international and thus diverse and colourful event, but that the world and women's lives therein were divided into two: "one world, two ways of life".<sup>91</sup> In countries of the capitalist world, colonies, or dependent countries, women were in a "miserable situation" (*beican chujing*), whereas in "the Soviet Union, China, and other countries of people's democracy", they were leading a "happy life" (*xingfu shenghuo*).<sup>92</sup> Articles with an international focus gave the "big picture" of this divided world. They focused on work and made women's right to work and the principle of equal pay a yardstick for assessing their situation. This is also true for the final resolution, which put provisions related to work at the top of a long list of rights.<sup>93</sup> The ideal of these and similar texts was a working woman who fully participated in the economic and political life of her country.

A second type were articles on the situation of women in China that substantiated the superiority of socialism with facts. This is the case with speeches by leaders of the Chinese delegation, Li Dequan and Zhang Yun, which, the papers claimed, were enthusiastically received by the audience of the congress.<sup>94</sup> While Li Dequan outlined the situation of women in China, Zhang Yun focused on matters of war and peace, with only brief sections on China's economic recovery after the war and women's contribution to economic progress. But even Zhang mentioned two labour models by name.<sup>95</sup> My emphasis here is on Li Dequan's speech because it is a good example of

91. Shen Zijiu, "Shijie funü dahui buji" (Notes on the World Congress of Women), *Xin Zhongguo funü*, 8 (1953), pp. 18–22, 20.

92. Lu Cui, "Yonghu shijie funü dahui de zhaokai. Zai Zhongguo di er ci quanguo funü daibiao dahui shang de fayan zhaiyao" (Embrace the convocation of the World Congress of Women: Excerpts of the speech at China's Second National Congress of Women), *RMRB*, 26 April 1953; Shen, "Shijie funü dahui buji", "Shijie funü dahui (jieshao)" (The World Congress of Women (introduction)), *Xin Zhongguo funü*, 7 (1953), pp. 6–7; "Ba shijie funü dahui de jingshen daihuiqi" (Bringing back the spirit of the World Congress of Women), *Xin Zhongguo funü*, 8 (1953), pp. 23f. For the quotes, see "Shijie funü dahui (jieshao)", p. 7. For more articles and speeches in *RMRB*, see the issues of 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, and 15 May.

93. "Shijie funü dahui tongguo de xuanyan ji jueyi" (Resolution and decisions adopted by the World Congress of Women), *Xin Zhongguo funü*, 7 (1953), pp. 5–6.

94. For the enthusiasm of the audience, including standing ovations for Li Dequan, see Shen, "Shijie funü dahui buji", p. 21.

95. "Wo daibiaotuan". Zhang Yun gives the example of Hao Jianxiu, the most prominent labour model in the textile industry of the early 1950s, and Gong Zhaozhi, a technical worker in the famous Anyang Steel Company. The latter is introduced as an example of all those women who work in fields conventionally regarded as men's work. For both examples, Zhang highlights the inventiveness of women in production and their important contribution to a rise in quality and quantity in the production of the respective field.

official Chinese rhetoric on women under socialism and because she mentioned Shen Jilan by name.<sup>96</sup>

Li, the first Minister of Health in the PRC and a woman with roots in a pre-1949 social and cultural elite,<sup>97</sup> spoke to the delegates as a representative of “the women of New China”, and the contrast between “new” and “old” constituted the framework of her speech:

As is well known, in semicolonial-semifeudal Old China, women didn’t have any political or economic rights or the right to education; they didn’t even enjoy rudimentary human rights. They had the double status of being oppressed and being enslaved [...] Today, China’s women are the master of New China who enjoy the same rights as men, they are active builders of free and happy New China.<sup>98</sup>

Li’s long report included sections on the equality of women and men as a constitutional right; women in leadership positions at all political levels; women’s right to vote; women’s economic participation and the rights and welfare provisions pertaining to their status in the world of production; education; the marriage law; and, finally, the improved situation of children. Summing up, Li could claim spectacular progress for China’s women: “In only three years our country and the women of our country forged ahead not for a few years or decades, but for an entire era!”<sup>99</sup>

Shen Jilan and her equivalent in industry, Sun Xiaoju, figured as examples of the advancement of women under socialism. In the brief paragraph on women in rural China, Li Dequan mentioned women’s right to land, their equality in agricultural production, equal pay for equal work, and women’s enthusiasm for learning agricultural and administrative skills, resulting in responsible positions and government awards.<sup>100</sup> To Shen Jilan, she devoted only one short sentence: “Shen Jilan, a delegate to this congress, is a woman who in the old society was oppressed and looked down upon, but now she is the vice head of the famous production cooperative of farming, forestry, animal husbandry and pastoral economy of Li Shunda.”<sup>101</sup> Speaking on behalf of Shen Jilan, Li Dequan rendered her a symbol of socialist China’s progressiveness. She mentioned her as co-head of a cooperative named after its male leader, Li Shunda, and omitted her fight for equal pay altogether. Obviously, Shen

96. “Wo guo chuxi shijie funü dahui daibiaotuan tuanzhang Li Dequan zai shijie funü dahui shang de yanshuo” (Speech to the World Congress of Women by Li Dequan, head of the Chinese delegation to the World Congress of Women), *RMRB*, 10 June 1953.

97. Kate Merkel-Hess, “A New Woman and Her Warlord: Li Dequan, Feng Yuxiang, and the Politics of Intimacy in Twentieth-Century China”, *Frontiers of History in China*, 11:3 (2016), pp. 431–457.

98. “Wo guo chuxi”.

99. *Ibid.*

100. For the under-representation of peasant women’s interests in the WIDF and the efforts of Asian women to get them on its agenda, see Armstrong, “Before Bandung”.

101. “Wo guo chuxi”.



Jilan was not allowed a voice on the international stage and certainly did not claim one. In interviews during her later years, she admitted: “Back then, I followed the others, I didn’t dare to speak much.”<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, she described herself as a misfit in the delegation, lacking knowledge of diplomatic decorum, for the first time in her life wearing a *qipao*,<sup>103</sup> not knowing how to paint her face, and not managing to walk in high-heeled shoes.<sup>104</sup> Biographers also highlight the gap between Shen Jilan’s rural origin and the modern urban environment she found herself in,<sup>105</sup> and they mention the gifts Shen bought with the pocket money she received at the stopovers on the trip: in Berlin, a doll that could blink its eyes, and a couple of toy cars and rubber balls in Moscow.<sup>106</sup> Shen Jilan might have symbolized the liberation of women in China, but China’s representation on the international stage was left to an educated and sophisticated elite – yet another element of incomplete socialist transformation.

In the travel report published under her name in the national magazine *Xin Zhongguo funü*,<sup>107</sup> Shen Jilan posed as an advocate of the superiority of socialism, based on her tour through Moscow and the insights she gained at the congress. Among the railway workers she spotted from the window of the train to Moscow, a majority were women. She stated: “Indeed, in the Soviet Union women do the same work as men; their life is very happy.” Moscow educated her on the boons of progress; and the congress provided her with insights into the lives of women outside China, those from the capitalist, colonial, and semi-colonial world, who “are oppressed like we were before liberation”, and those from socialist and “new-democratic” countries, “which are totally different”. The principle of equal pay is also an important yardstick in her report, in which the United States appears as a backward country, with women receiving only sixty to seventy per cent of men’s wages for the same work.<sup>108</sup> This article and others made women’s liberation a matter of social progress, with national models showing others the way towards the future. While the Soviet Union constituted the ultimate model of equality between men and women, China could claim status as a model (*bangyang*) as well.<sup>109</sup> International delegates’ enthusiastic reactions to Li Dequan’s speech, according to one article,

102. Li Zhongyuan, Liu Xiaoli, *Koushu Shen Jilan*, p. 101.

103. A close-fitting dress with high neck and slit skirt. The entire delegation had been equipped with *qipaos*, skirts and high-heeled shoes by the Women’s Federation, see Xia, “Shen Jilan”, p. 51.

104. Xia, “Shen Jilan”, p. 51.

105. Mai, *Bense rensheng. Shen Jilan*, pp. 68–74; Zhong gong, “Shiji renmin daibiao”, pp. 31–34.

106. Mai, *Bense rensheng. Shen Jilan*, pp. 73–74.

107. Shen was practically illiterate and not in a position to write these kinds of texts.

108. Shen Jilan (recorded by Yang Yi), “Cong shijie funü dahui guilai” (Back from the world conference of women), *Xin Zhongguo funü*, 8 (1953), p. 18.

109. Shen, “Shijie funü dahui buji”, p. 21. See also “Shijie funü dahui (jieshao)”, p. 7.

reflected that the situation described by Li “showed them their own future”.<sup>110</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This article has presented women labour model Shen Jilan in the context of China’s socialist transformation. Work was the core field in this process, as the basis of socialist “construction” and the point of departure for creating new social relations. Labour models mattered not so much for their concrete contribution to production but as actors and symbols of change. Women labour models, in particular, represented the new logic of women’s liberation through participation in production. They mobilized women for work and figured as examples of successful liberation. Indeed, work, women’s obligation or right to work, and gender equality in the workplace were core concerns in feminist discussions at the time, both within and outside China, and they still are.

The example of Shen Jilan also helped to illustrate core features of socialist transformation: its multilayered nature, complexities, contradictions, and incompleteness. Shen Jilan assumed different roles at different levels of interaction, from central actor in the transformation of the gender order at the village level, through representative of the working class in China’s new political order, to symbol of the superiority of socialism as a society of gender equality at the international level. To her and to her labour model sisters, women’s rights mattered – but so did recognition, honour, and dignity. Women labour models cannot be attributed to clear-cut spheres of either state or society, nor are they clear-cut cases of either instrumentalization or liberation. Shen Jilan was and remains a controversial figure to this day.

110. Shen, “Shijie funü dahui buji”, p. 21. See also the report on non-Chinese participants who had arrived in China together with the Chinese delegation; a participant from Ecuador is quoted who saw “the Soviet Union and China as examples to learn from” (“Ba shijie funü dahui de jing-shen”, p. 23).