

Women and Buddhism in Communist China

E-Learning Course by Bhikkhu Anālayo on *Asian Buddhist Women*
Numata Center for Buddhist Studies / Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts
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Phases of political development in the PRC



Time	Type of Phase	Significant Events
1949 - 1955	Consolidation of rule	Communist take-over, land reform, „socialist construction“
1956 – 1960	Radical utopian Phase („people’s communes“)	„100 flowers movement“, „Anti-Rightist campaign“, then „Great Leap Forward“; an estimated 35-40 million people killed
1961 - 1965	Cautious reforms	Attempts at economic consolidation
1966 - 1976	Radical phase (violent „class struggle“)	„Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution“ leads to large-scale destruction and civil war - like conditions during 1966-69
1976 - 1978	Succession crisis after Mao’s death	Attempts at Stalinist recentralization of economic production
Since 1978	Reform Era	Deng Xiaoping’s economic reform program leads to growth, while keeping political control fully in place





1949-55: Land reform, „Socialist Construction“



Demütigung von Landbesitzern Anfang der fünfziger Jahre: Prügeln, ertränken, steinigen



土改完成農民生活好



Hinrichtung in China: Feuer für die Revolution

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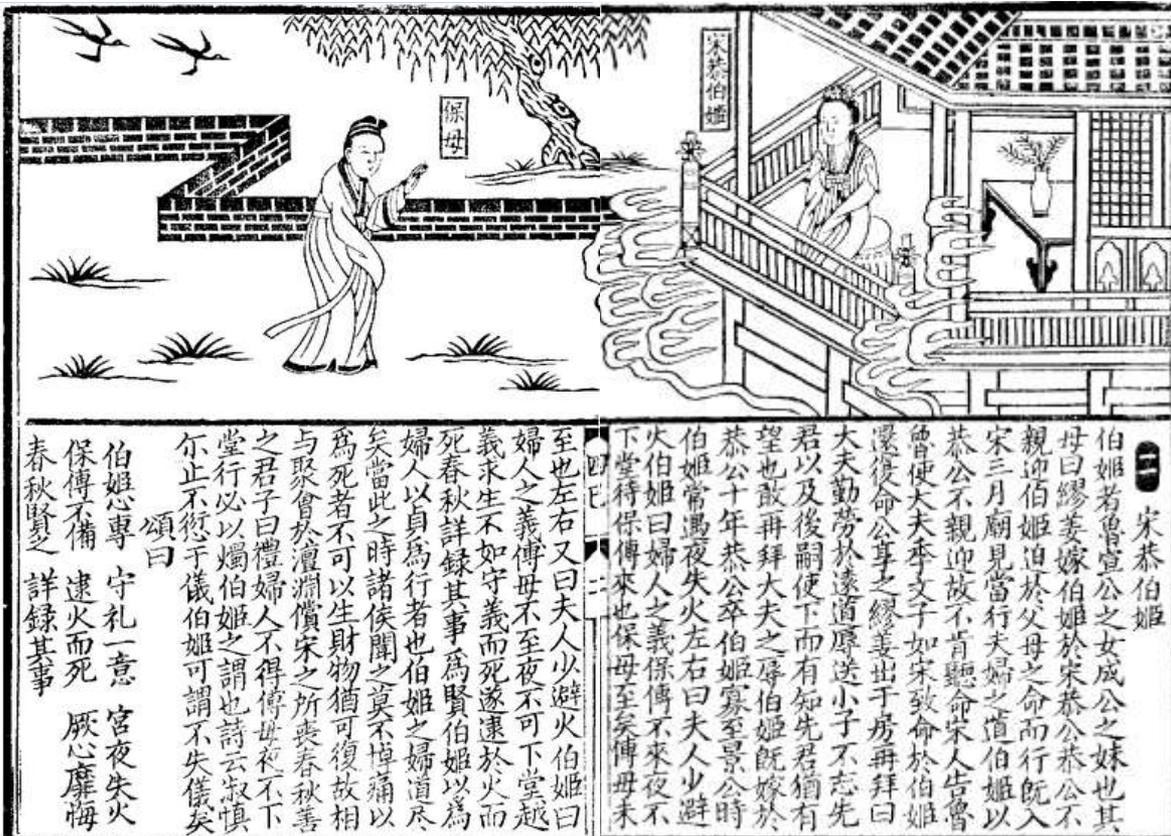
1. Traditional Chinese notions of womanhood and women's changing role in modern China
2. Chinese Buddhism and the communist revolution
3. The fate of Buddhism during the Mao Era
4. Women and Buddhism since the reforms of 1978

From the *Lienüzhuan* 列女傳, (Biographies of exemplary women)

by Liu Xiang, 1st century B.C.

Boji was a widow...Once...she found herself at night in a house that had caught fire. Those nearby cried, "Lady, flee!" Boji said, "The rule for women is that when the matron and governess are not present, they do not leave the house at night. I await the coming of the matron and governess." (The matron arrived, but the governess did not, and so) ... she continued to stay there until the fire reached her and she died ... Thus did Boji fulfill to the utmost the duty of wifehood.

(transl. O'Hara 1945, p. 105, cited after Susan L. Mann 2011, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History* p. 27).



Boji 伯姬 (late 6th century B.C.)

- daughter of Duke Xuan of Lu
- widow of Duke Gong of Song

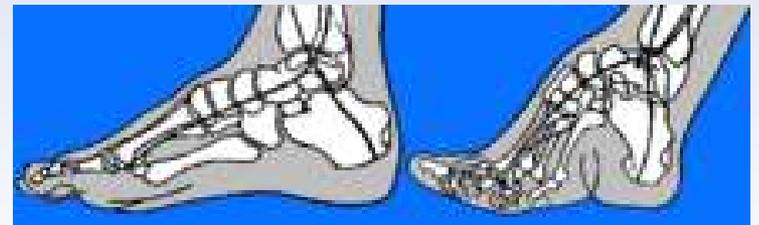
Image: 《文選樓叢書》本《新刊古列女傳》 from Chinese Text Project, <http://ctext.org/lien-v-zhuan/song-gong-bo-ji>

Gender-specific body mutilation restricting women's range of movement: The Custom of Footbinding in Imperial China



A comparison between a woman with normal feet (left) and a woman with bound feet in 1902

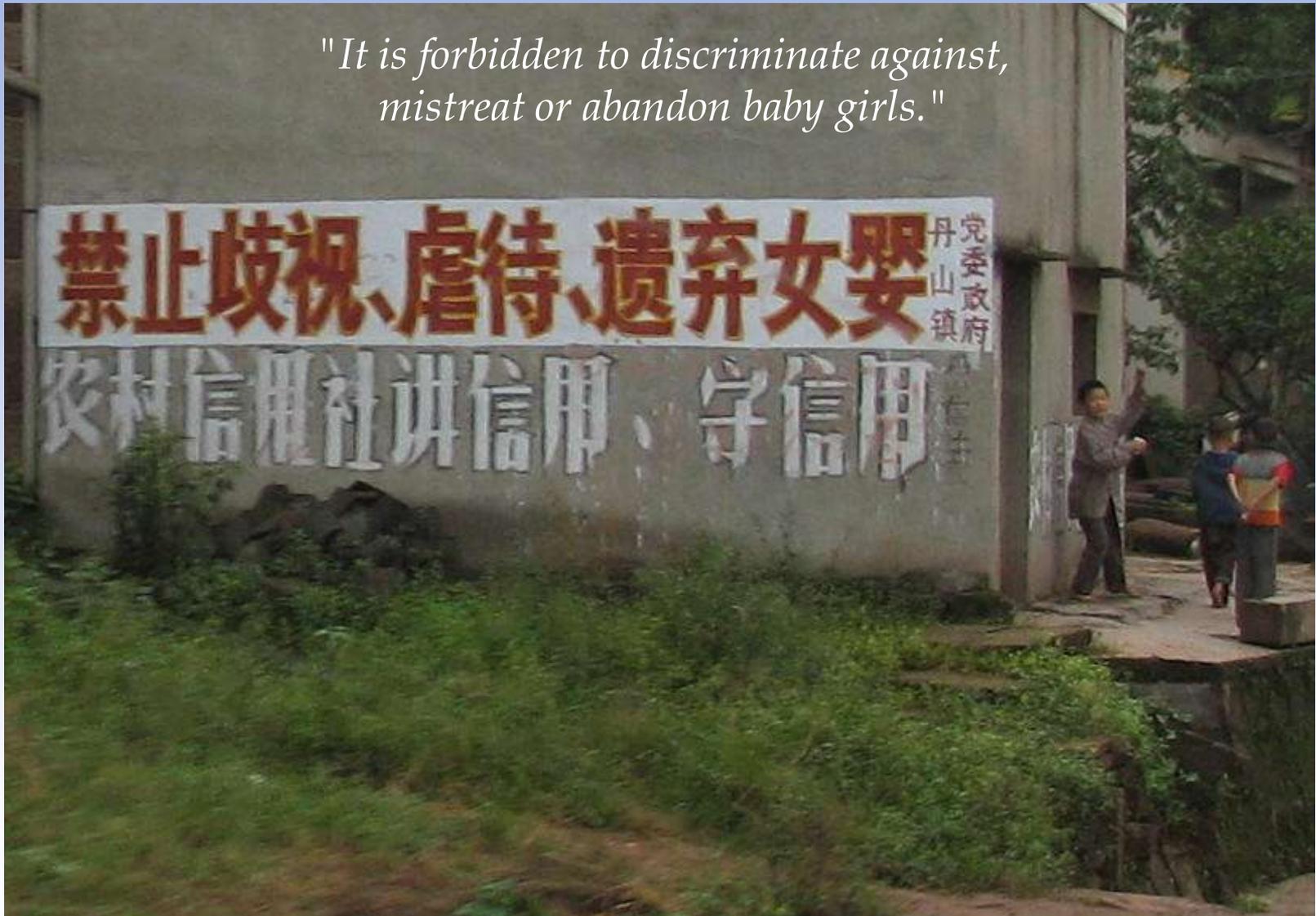
An X-ray of two bound feet



Schema of an x-ray comparison between an unbound and bound foot

Gender Gap: China will lack an estimated 30 million women by 2020

"It is forbidden to discriminate against, mistreat or abandon baby girls."



A Roadside sign in Sichuan province.

An ethnographic study on a lay Buddhist Hakka women's ritual in Southeastern China:

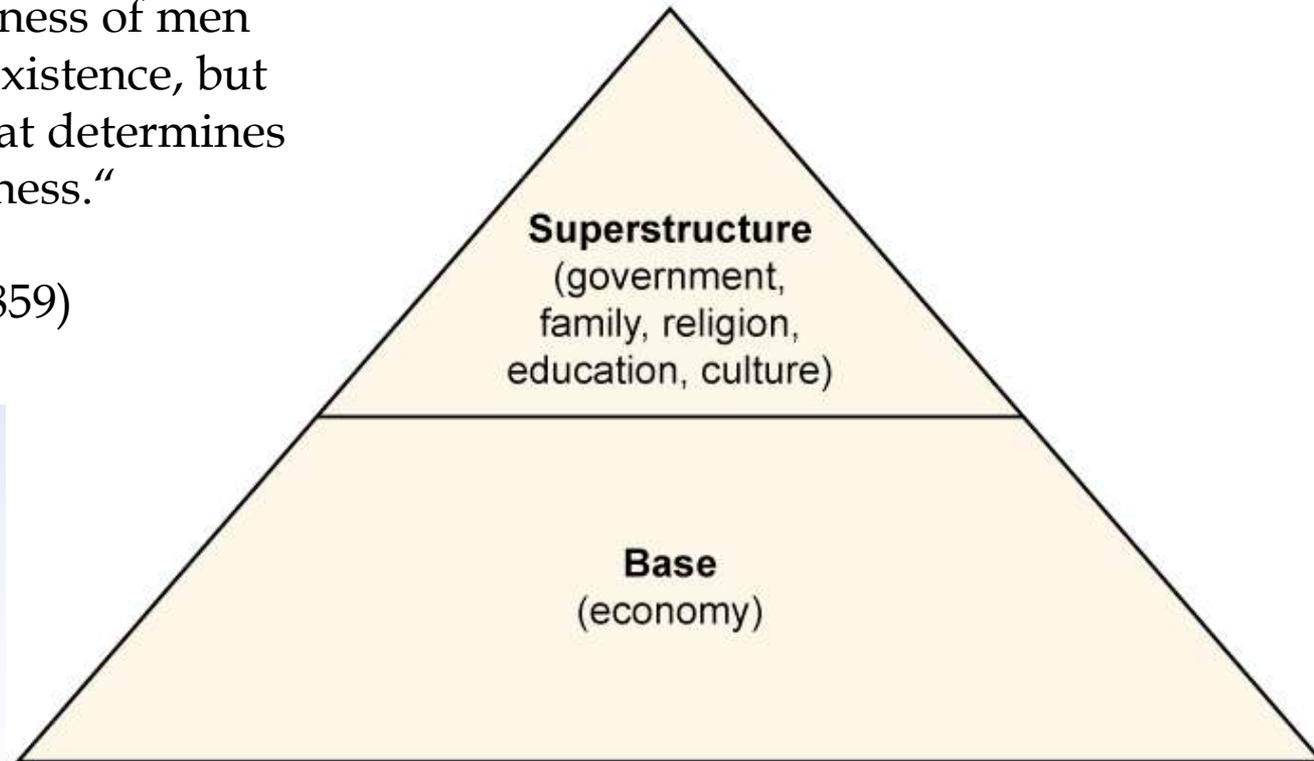
Cheung, N.T.: "Receiving Prayer Beads": A Lay-Buddhist Ritual Performed by Menopausal Women in Ninghua, Western Fujian, in: Kiely, J. and Jessup, J.B. (eds.): *Recovering Buddhism in Modern China*, New York: Columbia UP 2016, pp. 615-704.

The Marxist Model of Society (Base and Superstructure)

„The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life.

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.“

Karl Marx (1859)



Mao Zedong on Buddhism (1938)

„Christianity says that God created the world, **Buddhism and all of China's various fetishist religions** attribute the movement and development of all the myriad phenomena (*Wan Wu*) of the universe to spiritual forces.

All of these doctrines which think about movement apart from matter are **fundamentally incompatible with dialectical materialism...**“



Mao Zedong, DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM (April - June, 1938), in: Mao Tse-Tung, Selected Works, vol. 6, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-6/mswv6_30.htm

Mao Zedong on Religions (1940)

„New-democratic culture is scientific. **Opposed as it is to all feudal and superstitious ideas**, it stands for seeking truth from facts, for objective truth and for the unity of theory and practice.

On this point, the possibility exists of a united front against imperialism, feudalism and superstition between the scientific thought of the Chinese proletariat and those Chinese bourgeois materialists and natural scientists who are progressive, **but in no case is there a possibility of a united front with any reactionary idealism.** In the field of political action Communists may form an anti-imperialist and anti-feudal united front with **some idealists and even religious people, but we can never approve of their idealism or religious doctrines.**“



Mao Zedong on aspects of Buddhism (1958)

„Having cleared away blind faith, we no longer have any spiritual burdens. **Buddhas are made several times life-size in order to frighten people.** (...)

Marxism-Leninism looks at everyone on equal terms, and all people should be treated as equals.“



Mao Zedong on religious freedom (1945)

„All religions are permitted in China's Liberated Areas, in accordance with the principle of freedom of religious belief. **All believers in Protestantism, Catholicism, Islamism, Buddhism and other faiths enjoy the protection of the people's government so long as they are abiding by its laws.** Everyone is free to believe or not to believe; neither compulsion nor discrimination is permitted.“



Mao Zedong, ON COALITION GOVERNMENT (*April 24, 1945*)

[Political report made by Mao Tse-tung to the Seventh National Congress of the Communist Party of China.]

https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_25.htm

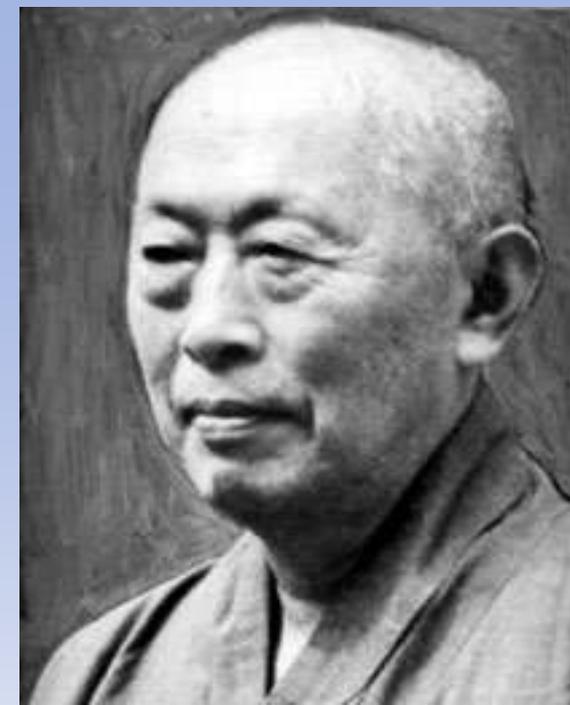
Attempts by „progressive Buddhists“ at reconciling Buddhism and Marxism

...progressive Buddhist thinkers in the early 1950s enthusiastically sought to discover Buddhism in Marxism and to re-create a Buddhism based on Marxism. (...) (However,) only Marxist criticism of religion was allowed, while the Buddhist criticism of Marxism was strictly forbidden.

To a large extent, Buddhists avoided such criticism and ignored the differences (...) and instead devoted their efforts to searching for common ground (...) in their quest to conciliate Buddhist doctrines with Marxist ideology so as to show (...) (that) ,their doctrine was not superstitious, but scientific, not feudal and reactionary, but eminently compatible with Marxism.““

Xue Yu 2016, Buddhist Efforts for the Reconciliation of Buddhism and Marxism in the Early Years of the People's Republic of China, in: Kiely, J. and Jessup, J.B. (eds.): *Recovering Buddhism in Modern China*, New York: Columbia UP 2016, p. 383.

The „progressive Buddhist“ Ven. Juzan 巨贊



Ven. Juzan (1908–1984).

“According to Mahayana doctrine,” observed the leading progressive monk Juzan 巨贊 (1908–1984), “for Buddhists to support Chairman Mao is not just a right but an obligation.” He further noted, “For the welfare of all beings, for the benefit and happiness of the world, for *anuttarā-samyak-sambodhi* [supreme and perfect enlightenment], we, unreservedly and unconditionally (yet not aimlessly or in an unprincipled manner), support Chairman Mao, the savior of the people of all nations and religions.”

Mao Zedong on Buddhism (1952)



„It is necessary to carry out education among the democratic parties and in religious circles so that they will not be taken in by the imperialists and stand on the enemy's side.

Take Buddhism for example. It has not much contact with imperialism and its ties are chiefly with feudalism. As the struggle against feudalism involves the land problem, it affects the monks, and those who come under attack are the abbots and elders of the monasteries. Once this small number is overthrown, ordinary monks (...) will be emancipated.

Though no believer in Buddhism, I am not against forming an association of Buddhists to get them united and enable them to distinguish clearly between the people and the enemy. (...) We should unite with everyone provided he truly makes a clear distinction between the people and the enemy and serves the people.“

LET US UNITE AND CLEARLY DISTINGUISH BETWEEN OURSELVES AND THE ENEMY (*August 4, 1952*)

[Salient points of a speech delivered at the thirty-eighth meeting of the Standing Committee of the First National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.]

https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_22.htm

Ven. Juzan on the non-proletarian class background of Chinese monastics

Having (...) received the kindness of Mao and other Communist leaders, monks and nuns should repay them by willingly undertaking socialist transformation of their feudalist nature. **The first step was to admit that they had in fact lived parasitic lives before,** and to readily repent for it through self-criticism.

When a monk asked whether monastic members should be considered to be proletarians since they had already renounced the world and given up worldly things, **Juzan categorically rejected this idea** and pointed out that monastic members in China (...) had not lived their lives begging for food, nor had they participated in agricultural activities (...). Although ordinary clergy might not be taken for the feudal class, **they definitely could not be considered members of the proletariat because they certainly had benefited from the rent of temple lands without tilling the land.**

Abbots were the representatives of temples, and thus belonged to the landowning class, because anyone who did not perform productive labor was a member of that exploitative class (Xiandai foxue 1950, 1, 1: 29).



Ven. Juzan (1908-1984)



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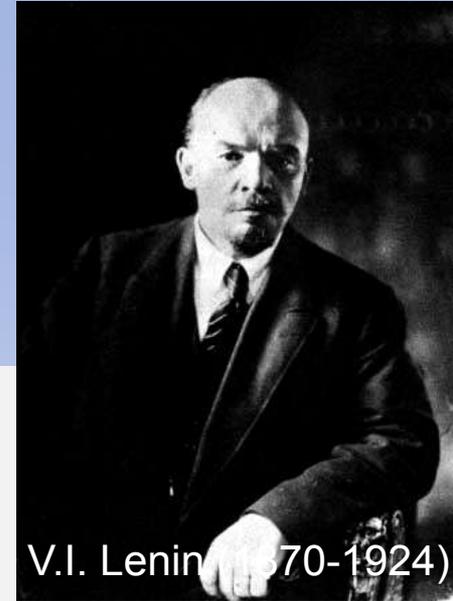
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China's key principle for organizing the state: Lenin's „Democratic Centralism“ (民主集中制)

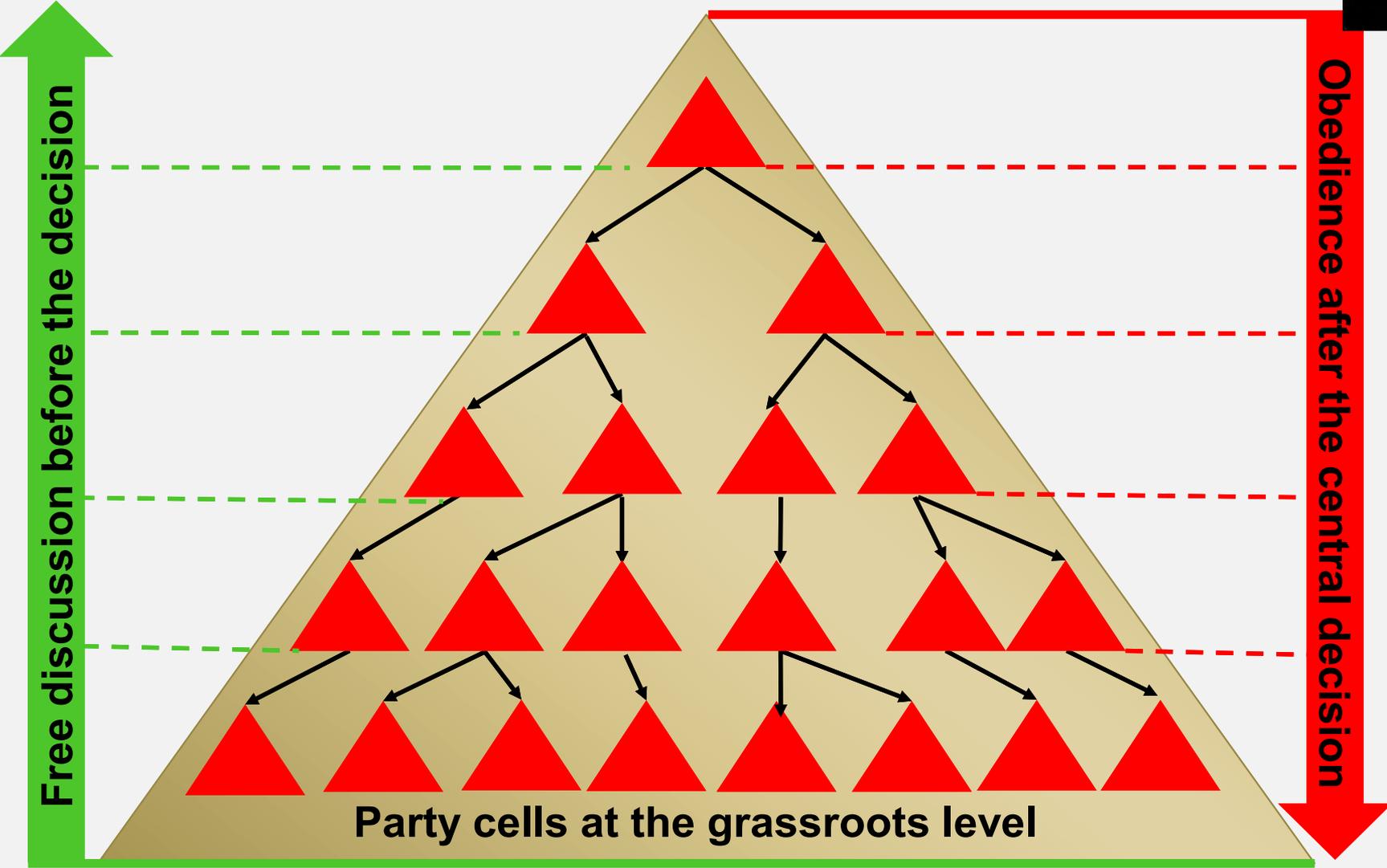
- The party member follows the party
- The minority follows the majority
- The lower levels follows the higher levels
- The entire party follows the Party central



Lenin's model of „Democratic Centralism“



Party Central



Communist Party control over all state organs



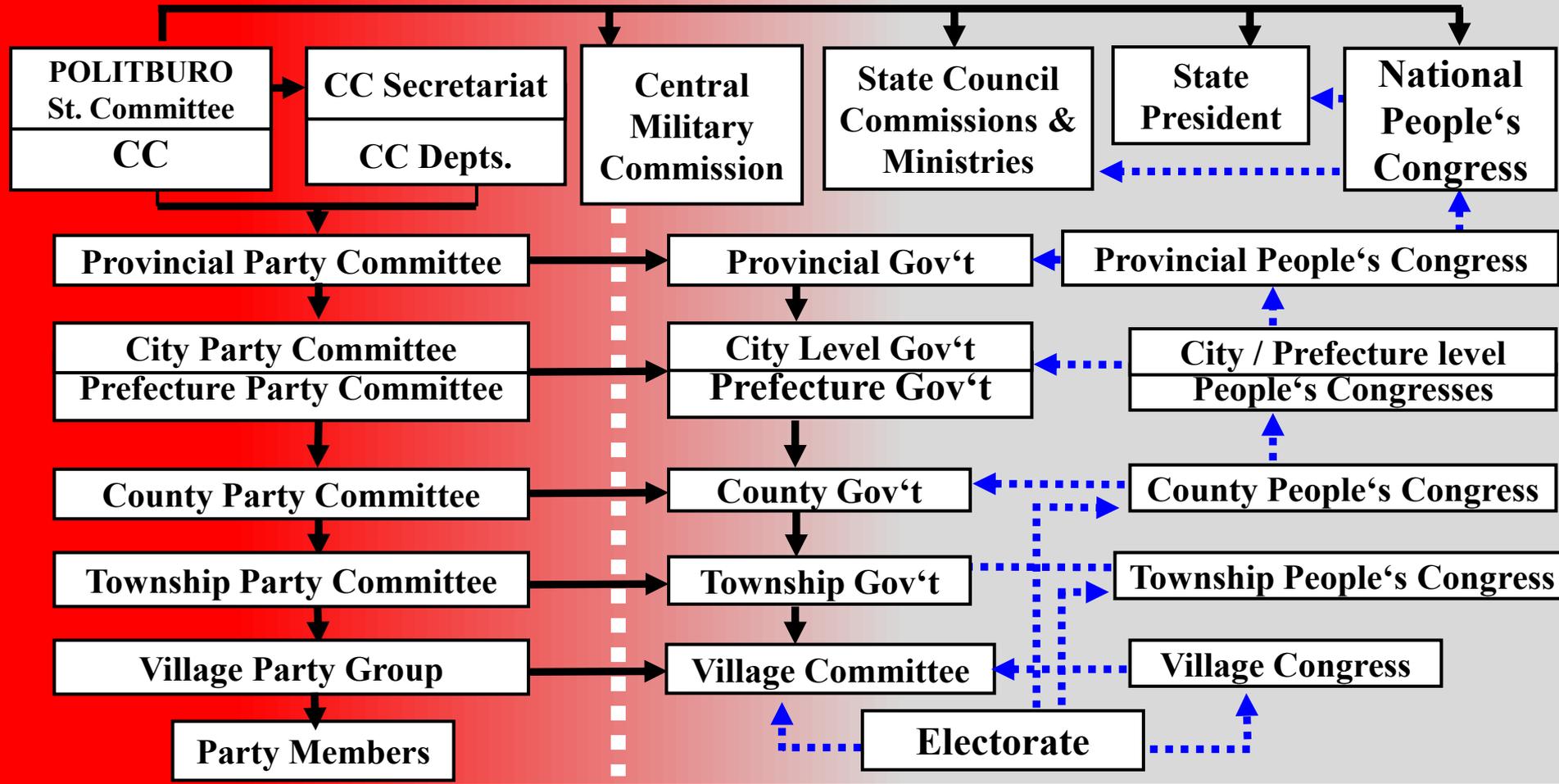
flow of authority →

election ...→



PARTY

STATE



Source: Modified after Heilmann, Das politische System der Volksrepublik China, 2002.

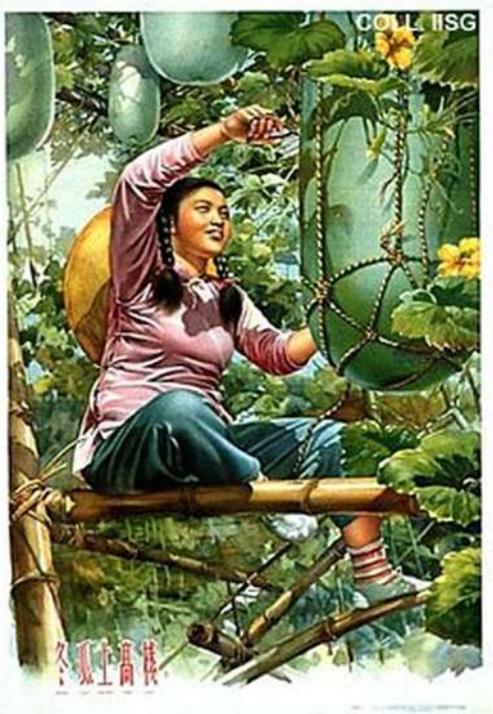
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1958-62: „Great Leap Forward“: Propaganda vs. Reality



„Steel production“ in the countryside

„The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution“ (1966-76)

Public humiliation of „class enemies“



Quasi-religious Mao Cult

*„Sweep Away
All Monsters and Demons“
(Chen Boda)*

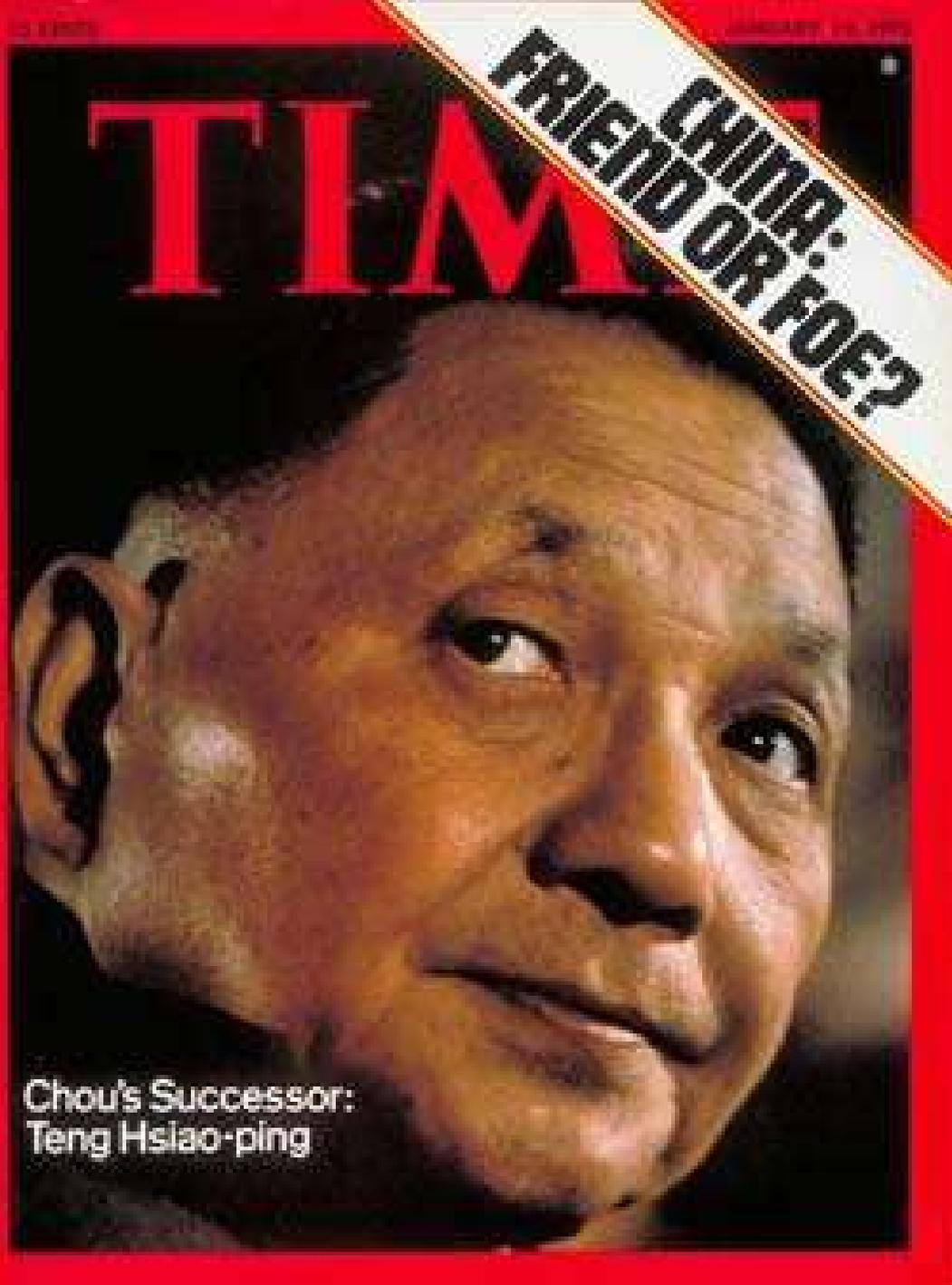


Death of Mao on Sept. 9th, 1976

The Succession Struggle after Mao



Mao's wife Jiang Qing arrested in October 1976, later sentenced to death



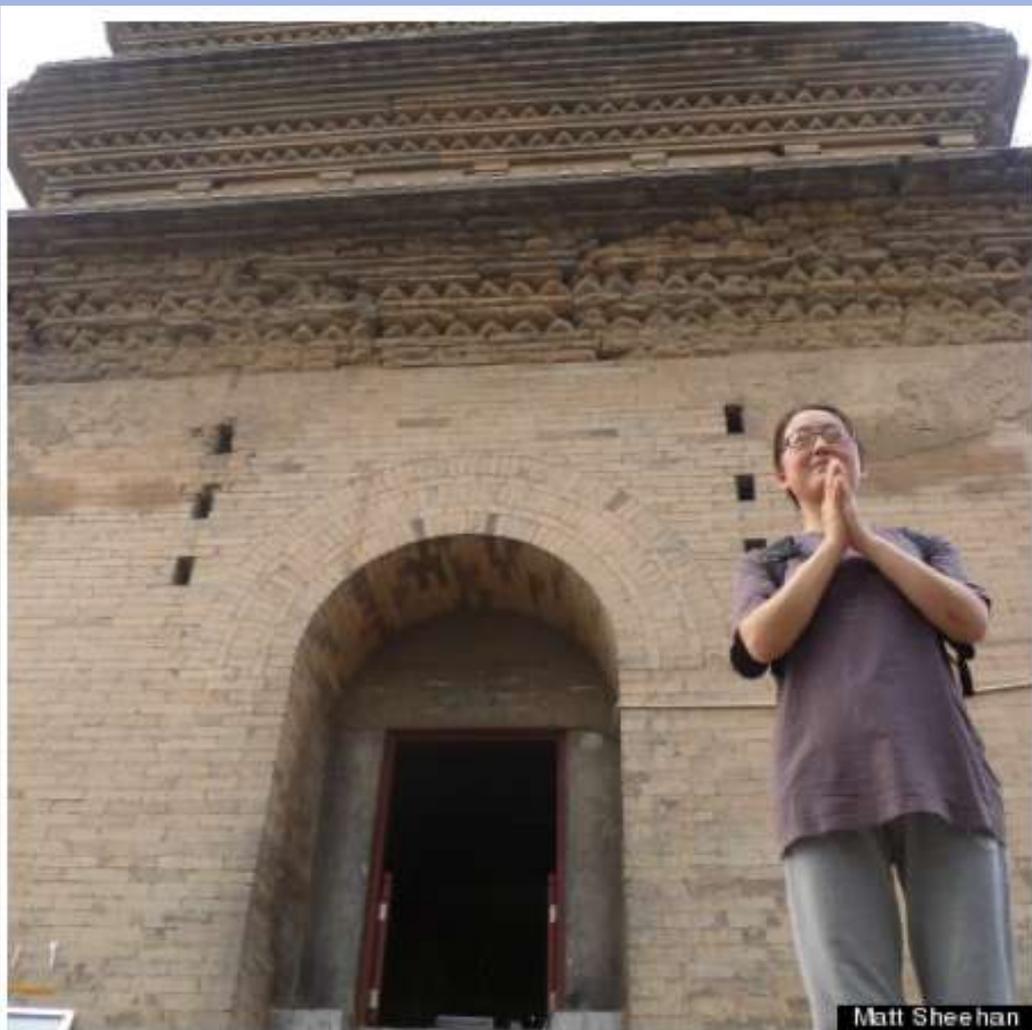
A spiritual vacuum in the reform era?

According to a philosophy professor at a prominent Shanghai university, many of these supposed victories have proven hollow for the Chinese people.

“On the surface we’ve achieved the goals, but no one is happy,” the professor (...) told The WorldPost. “There’s no love, no hope. For more than 100 years we Chinese have been trying to catch up with Western countries. We want science, technology and military power.

But the most important thing is the soul of the culture. The mind is based on the soul, and we’ve lost our souls.”

Why Christ, Mao And The Buddha Are Making A Comeback In China. The Huffington Post, 08/06/2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/06/china-religion_n_4860813.html



A newly converted
Chinese lay
Buddhist (2014)

Samantha Yang takes refuge from her demanding schedule at the Temple of Accumulated Fragrance outside of Xi'an.

From : Matt Sheehan, **Why Christ, Mao And The Buddha Are Making A Comeback In China**
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/06/china-religion_n_4860813.html

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