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The Fourth Mountain the fourth mountain:

Women in China

by LINDA GORDON

women in china

by
linda
gordon

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...of the East Wind...

...from Canton...

...with 65,000 people who collectively own...

...with 165,000 acres of land. The town was a...

...of waterwashed fields with...

...separated by watered ditches...

...the family five years ago. It had...

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...a picture of Mao Tse-tung. He asked me how...

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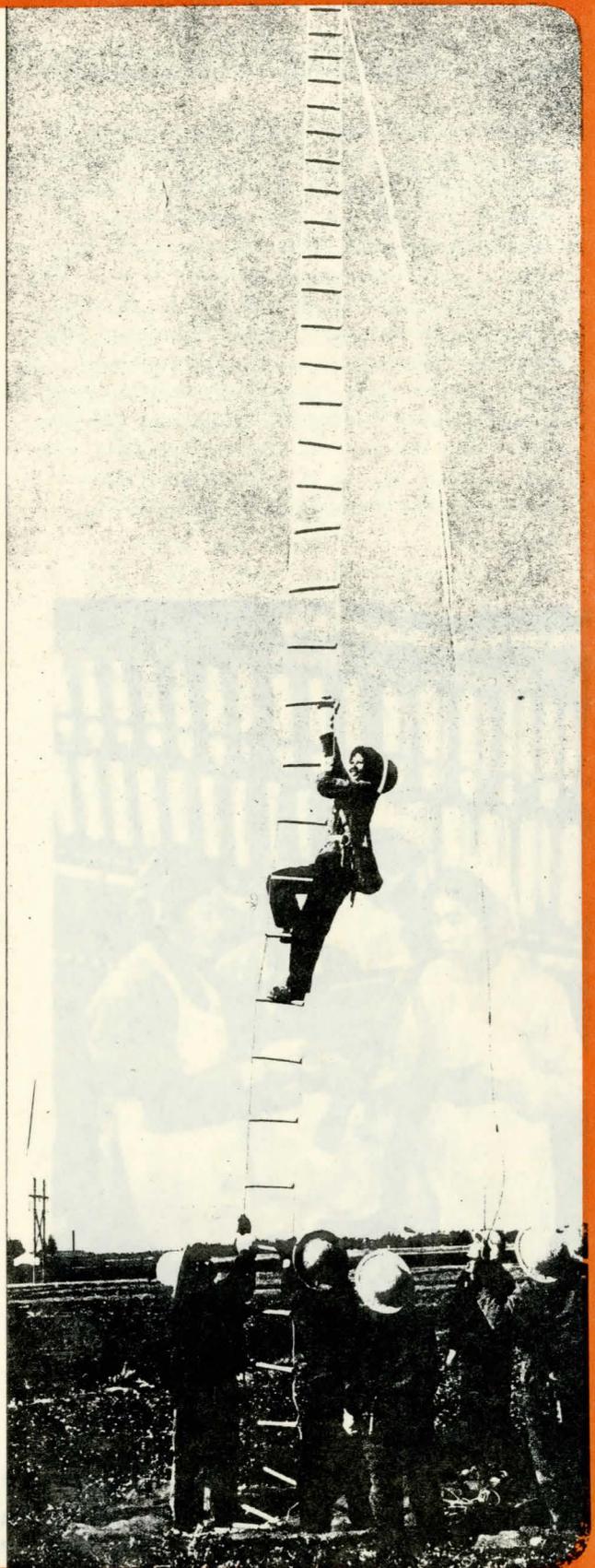
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LINDA GORDON is a writer and editor. She has written for...

...in December 1979, she traveled to...

...with a group of 17 students who...

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The first home I visited in China was that of a peasant family of the East Wind Commune, a two-and-a-half hour drive from Canton. East Wind is an agricultural cooperative with 63,000 people who collectively own and farm 165,500 acres of land. The house was a single-family dwelling of whitewashed adobe with three rooms separated by arched doorways, and was built by the family five years ago. It had electricity (brought in two years ago) but no running water; the family shared a well in the courtyard with a few other families. When we came to the house, four Americans and several interpreters, it was about noon, and the family's ten-year-old son was home from school for lunch. We were received by the man of the family. The son shyly hid behind his father, sat on his lap, and occasionally buried his head in his father's shoulder as we talked.

We asked many questions, and the man told us how proud he was of his commune. A poster of the commune hung on the wall, next to an abacus and under a picture of Mao Tse-tung. His eldest son had been chosen treasurer of the commune, and the middle child, a daughter, was in high school in the commune center. High school is not yet compulsory in most of China, where simply bringing elementary education to over 700 million people has been a staggering achievement. To this man, not educated

LINDA GORDON teaches women's history at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. In December 1972, she traveled for three weeks in China with a group of 17 Americans that included radical political organizers, professionals, and working people from all over the country.

This article owes much to one of my colleagues on the trip, Stella Riley.



himself, it seemed remarkable that his daughter was so privileged.

The woman of the house did not say a word. She served us green tea in bowls, did not look us in the eye, and stood in the background with her head down. We explained, through our translator, that some of us had come to China with a particular desire to learn about Chinese women, and tried to make her feel that it was her duty to speak with us. What was her situation like before the revolution, we asked, and how had it changed since? Finally, she responded.

With her head still down, and speaking ever so softly, she said that in the old regime, when she was in her teens, she had been sold by her father who could no longer support her. That was my introduction to what the Chinese call "the bitter past."

I think there may be nowhere in the world where the past was as bitter for women as in China. It is not hyperbole to say that Chinese women were enslaved. Not only were women, both children and adults, frequently sold, but female infanticide was also accepted in many parts of the country. Teen-aged girls were often married off to baby boys, to serve in the grooms' families as domestic servants until the grooms grew old enough to impregnate them. The quintessential symbol of the oppression of women in the old China was the crushing of their feet by foot-binding. Perhaps it is worth explaining what this meant, since I had not understood it before going to China. The girl child's toes were curled down against the sole of her foot and then bound in that position with one set of rags; the foot was then bound front to back by a second set of cloths. As the child grew, the normal growth of her foot was checked by these cloth bands, which forced her bones to break and to reset in a clenched position. It was excruciatingly painful. I saw many old women who had had their feet bound. Although they now wear larger, padded shoes, they still can hardly walk—they use canes and hobble with tiny, lurching steps. It is revealing to consider how thorough must have been the conditioning of mothers that made them willing to inflict that upon their daughters.

Everywhere we went in China—big cities and communes; among peasant, working-class, and professional women—we asked women about their bitter past. Although their individual stories were different, they had one striking thing in common: their worst memories were not of their specific oppression as women but of the oppression of poverty that they shared with their men. The woman we visited at East

Wind Commune (who grew much less shy as she began talking) told us:

*I had no opportunity to go to school, nothing to eat or to wear. Having failed to pay the rent to my landlord, he took away the only house I had. After my marriage I was still homeless. I had only a shack to live in, and not a single tile above my head. . . . Things have been greatly changed. Now we have money to buy things, enough to eat and to wear. My position has been raised considerably. You are most welcome to visit my family.**

On another visit, in Shanghai, we heard a very different kind of story from a woman textile mill worker:

I have been working in cotton mills for 40 years. My family was poor. I began work when I was nine years old. I suffered very much in those days. I was abused and flogged by bosses and reactionaries. . . . The capitalists disregarded our health. We worked 12 to 16 hours a day, seven night shifts in a row, 6:00 p.m. to 10:00 a.m. for two nights, then 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. the other five nights. We worked like beasts of burden and were treated very badly. Prices rose every day. We had no canteen in the factory; we had to eat cold rice from home. Our human dignity was neglected. We went to the factory through a big gate, but when we left we had to pass through a small gate and be searched, because they feared we might steal something. My eldest son, he would be 32 now, but 20 days after his birth I had to go back to work to avoid being fired. My mother tried to feed him with sugar-water, but he died soon from lack of nutrition.

Later in our discussion, after we asked specific questions about her marriage, she mentioned that her husband used to beat her. But it was not one of the first things on her mind; it was almost as if she didn't blame him.

*I did not have a tape recorder, but copied down these quotes verbatim as well as I could. Everything went through a translator, since none of our group spoke Chinese, and the clumsiness of construction is usually a result of the translator's English. All of this, of course, leaves room for error in my reconstruction of the exact language, but I can vouch for the overall accuracy of the content of these quoted statements.

Two Steps Forward

Certainly my collection of anecdotes from a three-week trip does not constitute a scientific survey. And yet I could not avoid seeing the common thread in these stories, and drawing some conclusions about how Chinese women themselves experience their recent history. Many Americans, particularly feminists like myself, tend to apply categories from their own experience to third world revolutionary countries like China, and are disappointed at the large areas of sexual inequality that remain. For example, a few weeks after returning, I heard a China scholar, Shelagh Leader, argue at a women historians' conference that women's liberation in China had been a failure because certain goals—ending sex roles, breaking down the family, equalizing women's representation in political leadership, etc.—had been subordinated to male-defined values. This analysis of contemporary China is accepted by many American feminists and for that reason seems worth discussing.

There are two things wrong with the analysis. First, the goals that Leader identifies were those of the feminist movement of Kuomintang China (1921-1949), a movement that involved a tiny fraction of Chinese women, all of them urban middle or upper-class intellectuals. The orientation of the movement was to attack the family in order to win opportunity for higher education and admission to the professions for women. It did not touch the experience of the majority of peasant and working-class women in China. The second problem with the analysis is the matter of the values that Leader labels male-defined. Feminist goals, she said, were subordinated to "economic development and political control." Behind that phraseology is the idea that somehow economic development benefits only men. To call water conservation projects, fertilizer factories, electrification—all that is creating such rapid economic development in China—"male defined" is to slip into the most unfeminist notion that women are only a special interest group, not human beings, and do not benefit from the general improvement of the human condition.

What is wrong with this kind of condemnation of China, however, is its criteria, not its facts. It is true that women are far from equal in China. For instance, Chinese women hold a dismally small percentage of leadership positions. This means that all the gains they have made are given from above. Ultimately women can be equal only when they have an equal share of whatever constitutes power in their society. But until they do, one must look at the liberation of

women in any society as a *process* in which the goals are not predefined but are invented through the process.

In China the process of women's liberation cannot be understood separately from the process of the entire revolution. It has been true everywhere, as Sheila Rowbotham shows in her excellent book on women in revolutionary situations (*Women, Resistance and Revolution*), that women gain from a process of general democratization and lose from a rightward turn in politics. In China that is abundantly clear. Women made special progress, and "women's issues" became especially important, during three periods in the history of the People's Republic of China: immediately after the revolution; in the Great Leap Forward at the end of the 1950s; and in the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s. Between each of these explosions of energy, women probably lost some ground, and I think they have lost some ground since the Cultural Revolution. It is the nature of the process that it is never steady. At best, it is two steps forward and one back.

The Chinese have a strikingly keen sense of social process in all its unevenness. They refer, for example, to the Communist seizure of power in 1949 as the Liberation, never the Revolution. In their usage, the revolution is the process that has been going on since 1949. Perhaps Mao Tse-tung's most brilliant insights are in his discussions of the process of social change, its difficulty and painfulness, and the techniques that Communist cadre can use in hastening it: techniques of criticism, of patience, of popular mobilization. Mao Tse-tung's analysis reflects and is infused with Chinese cultural traditions—Buddhist and Confucian attitudes, and the peasant experience—that promote patience and an organic sense of change. Mao has distilled and analyzed the logic of these traditions so that it is transferable to other cultures as well. For example, I learned a new sense of tact while in China. Previously I had thought it a leftover piece of upper-class etiquette, repressive, and encouraging dishonesty. For the Chinese, tact means explaining one's wishes, views, or criticism in the way that will make them most likely to be accepted, a way that will be understood as supportive and constructive by the other person. I learned, too, much about "ultraleftism"—of any nationality. One extraordinary 17-year-old woman, who had seen the older students in her high school go to political extremes during the Cultural Revolution (advocating no teachers, no history or study of any material that predated the socialist revolution; destroy the Buddhist temples, close the libraries), defined it for us: ultraleftism is to

identify ideals but not to offer a plan for how to get from here to there.

Such understandings one can take home from China. One cannot bring back specific strategies for change because China's problems are so different from ours. Similarly, one can apply to China only our most general canons for understanding social change, not the specific values formed in Western society.



The Chinese revolution should be viewed from within China's own social and cultural context. Measuring it against the goals of the American feminist movement, or even the Kuomintang movement, is not useful. Women's liberation in the West cannot provide a strategy for the liberation of peasant housewives who had to carry water three kilometers, from landlord's well to home, several times a day. On the other hand, I do not think that Marxism-Leninism has yet provided that analysis fully either. The traditional socialist contribution on the "woman question" has postulated that the integration of women into industrial labor would break down male supremacy. So far, to the extent that this integration has happened, it has not produced those results. It is clear that if the Chinese continue toward sexual equality, it will be on the basis of a new theory, a socialist and Asian feminism, that transcends both Western feminism and European urban Marxism.

For women, the Liberation meant, most importantly, the abolition of slavery. Chinese women were immediately entitled to personal freedom. They

could no longer be sold, or married without their consent, or beaten, or forced to work without pay. And yet even this victory, clearly the necessary condition for any further advance, is not yet fully established. A Chinese woman Party leader told me that wife-beating is still an occasional problem, and some young factory workers said that pressuring young women into arranged marriages also continued, especially in the countryside. In general, the peasants have clung more tenaciously than workers to traditional, patriarchal social patterns. Then, too, these things vary greatly from one area of China to another because administration is decentralized. As we saw the different situations of women from one place to another, it became clear that in a decentralized country much depends on the quality of the local leadership. In some places there were militant women's committees, aggressively challenging male dominance and supporting women; in other places there were passive or bureaucratic women's committees, or none at all, and correspondingly less progress in raising women's position.

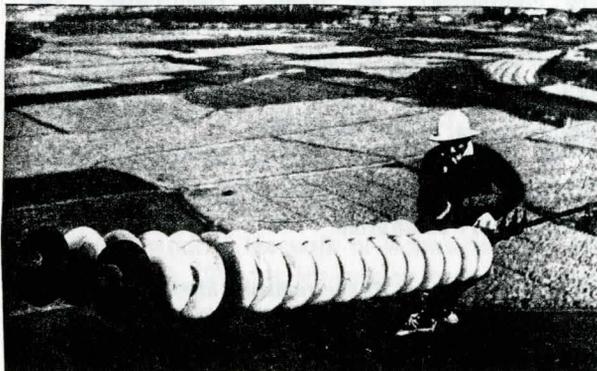
If the emancipation of Chinese women from slavery is not complete, however, it is not for a lack of struggle. Immediately after Liberation, especially in some rural areas, there was open, violent sex war. Husbands and fathers attempted to prevent the independence of their women with physical force. Women formed squads and beat up recalcitrant men. (Some of these stories are told in William Hinton's *Fanshen*.) In these early battles over the marriage laws (which allow divorce and prohibit forced marriage), 100,000 women died from murder or suicide. (These efforts were obviously not like encounter groups or the consciousness-raising sessions of American feminists.) With the cost in human life so high, it is not surprising that the Chinese Communist leadership have urged the mediation of these conflicts wherever possible. Mediation is also a matter of political principle. In Mao Tse-tung's analysis of sexism, such issues are fundamentally contradictions *among* the people, rather than contradictions *between* the people and the ruling class. The Chinese believe that, whenever possible, physical force should be avoided in struggles among the people. The Maoist theory of Cultural Revolution and social transformation is based on the conviction that *everyone* can change, if given space to do so, without having to suffer complete rejection by the community.

Fields and Factories

The attainment of personal freedom for women might be compared in historical terms to the bourgeois revolution against women's feudal lords. The next step—a socialist revolution for women—required bringing women into the productive labor force. Ironically, in China this has had a particularly revolutionary effect among the peasantry, never considered in the original Marxist strategy. In most peasant communes, every individual now receives a wage (usually a share of the profits) for work done. Women always worked, of course. But traditionally the peasant income had been a family income, and in the patriarchal family the man controlled it. Now peasant women are paid, though their incomes are usually less than what men receive. Most communes have a point system to determine wages, and give more points per hour to harder or more skilled labor. Most women still are credited with fewer labor hours for the commune than men because the work of cooking, cleaning, and child care does not earn points. But the traditional proscription on women doing field labor is rapidly breaking down. I saw many fields where women and men worked together. Moreover, I saw several big water conservation projects where women did heavy construction work alongside men and received the highest wages available in the commune for it.

Chinese women frequently emphasized the importance of having their own wages. It was a piece of information they offered immediately in response to a general question, and they frequently added, "Now my husband respects me." At first I thought they were describing the "vibes" of the marriage relationship. I soon learned that it more often meant something very concrete, such as, "My husband does not beat me," or, "My husband lets me go to political study groups." In other words, the women now go out alone at night.

In the cities women are also being "incorporated" into the industrial labor force. It is important to remember that factory labor is enormously prestigious in China. The Chinese are taught to be proud of belonging to the proletariat, the class that holds the future of China in its hands. The high pay, the eight-hour day, and the city life of a factory worker seem to be great privileges to a peasant. Of course, women's equal access to these privileged positions is not yet assured. The last big push toward women's equal rights to jobs was in the Cultural Revolution, culminating around 1970. Before Mao Tse-tung's "mass line" emerged victorious in the Cultural



Revolution, the dominant "revisionist line" had been associated with a debunking of the important contribution women could make in the economy. This cynicism probably continues in many areas of the economy and among many leaders. For example, when we asked why there were no women surgeons in one hospital, the head, a man, told us it was because women did not have enough stamina for long operations under the hot lights. (We had seen young peasant women haul huge boulders all day long.) Nonetheless, the degree of women's participation in the workforce is impressive. In machine-tool factories we saw women integrated into all jobs, including the most skilled. At the docks in Shanghai we saw women stevedores, who did the same work as men.

Few women, however, are elected to the "revolutionary committees" that govern factories and every other institution in China. Indeed, this was characteristic of the elected governing bodies of every place we visited with one exception: local government. Here women dominate. This is because local government, for the most part, represents people who are not employed and hence are not represented elsewhere, and these are mostly women and old people. In general, my impression is that the proportion of women in leadership positions is only slightly better than in the United States.

But again, I found my old standards for judgment no longer useful. I recall a conversation with members of the revolutionary committee of a machine-tool plant in Chengchow. "What about the advances of women here?" we asked. A woman comrade spoke at length, spelling out the maternity leave, child care, and other social services (they seldom mentioned equal pay because they took it for granted), and then another proudly interjected, "And we *even* have two women members on the revolutionary committee now." "And how many are there on the revolution-

ary committee?" we asked. "Twenty-five," she replied, without the slightest sign of discomfiture or regret. Fifty percent or even proportional representation for women is simply not a goal that Chinese women appear to have envisaged.

We asked why there were so few women on the committee and were told by one woman on a factory revolutionary committee:

This is mainly due to the remnant ideology left over by old history. Most women comrades don't have as much leadership experience as some men. Some men comrades do not have a proper attitude toward women; also, some women comrades look down upon themselves. With this mental burden women can't go into different activities as actively as men. But the Party puts great stress on this, and cultivates us in every way. There is still a gap between what the Party asks and what we do so far, but effort will bring more improvement. We can change the fact that we look down on ourselves.

In one factory I visited, a spirited discussion broke out among revolutionary committee members in answer to our questions about the status of women. A woman said that some women still believed they were physically inferior to men, and needed prodding. Then a man began to make a rather pompous little speech, saying that equality was the official policy, when another woman interrupted him, saying that those of a higher "cultural level" ought to help those at a lower level. "And besides," she said, "many women are heavily burdened with household chores." Others continued to add to the discussion for at least a half hour. While the democratic, outspoken style of this discussion (in front of American tourists!) was typical of an informality we grew to expect, it is clear that there is a great deal of concern and ferment over the "woman question."

One of the efforts that will increase the proportion of women in leadership positions is the massive political study program. Every adult is encouraged to enroll in a study group that usually meets at least weekly. Groups are composed of people who work together or live near each other, and include people of all ages and experience. At the most elementary level, the groups read the three most beloved short pieces of Mao: "The Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountains," "Serve the People," and "In Memory of Norman Bethune." They then move on to a series of six Marxist-Leninist classics: the Communist *Manifesto*; Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*; Engels' *Anti-Dühring*; Lenin's *State and Revolution* and

Materialism and Empirio-Criticism; and Stalin on the "national question." These are difficult works, and many of the people in the study groups are barely literate. If necessary, the books are read aloud, slowly, perhaps only a few paragraphs at a meeting. But the material is not learned by rote; instead people discuss what relevance it has for their own work and life. This program of study is important for women. Certainly it increases their self-confidence and ability to express themselves. It is also intended to, and no doubt will, increase the proportion of women in the Communist Party, a chief route to political power in China.

Families and Courtship

In one place we encountered deep defensiveness on the question of women's participation. It was in a village organized as the Thrive Day By Day Brigade of the Red Mountain Commune. We visited the primary school, which is compulsory, and it had 50 percent girl students; the junior middle school, which is not compulsory, had only 20 percent girl students. When we asked why, the chairman of the revolutionary committee of the brigade said there were many more boys than girls born in that region. We questioned him, and he stuck to his story. We asked him again, this time in a large formal discussion with many people from the brigade. When he said the same thing, the chairwoman of our delegation said flatly that we did not believe it. There was a long silence after the translator had communicated that remark. Finally, a woman sitting in the back of the room said that she thought the reason there were so few girls in the junior middle school was that the girls were expected to do the housework.

Problems of this kind, which stem from a traditional view of the proper division of labor in the family, continue particularly in the countryside. There seems to be no simple way to solve the problem either, since the Chinese decided not to continue their earlier policy of weakening the family itself. The family is strong in China now. We saw no evidence of any kind of collective living except among young unmarried people, who often live dormitory style when away from their parents' homes at school or work. Where young people stay in their own cities or villages, they customarily live with their parents until they marry. Boarding schools are extremely rare. Old people live with their children. Many institutions provide special privileges to support the family, such as two weeks of extra vacation plus travel time if one's job requires separation from family.

Chinese views of sexuality and marriage remain equally traditional. Marriage is idealized as a permanent companionship, and young people are urged to postpone marriage until their late twenties. There is also a strong taboo on extramarital sex. Though these goals are not completely realized, most people seem to accept them as desirable norms. Men and women, even married couples, are not demonstrative in public (while it is customary for men with men, and women with women, to be very affectionate physically). Courtship patterns often remain quite formal. Even in a big city factory, we were told, a young man might be reluctant to speak to a woman working near him in the same plant for fear of offending her. He might seek, instead, a formal introduction through a mutual friend. It is not that people are prudish. If we asked questions about birth control or venereal disease, for example, people answered our questions easily and fully. It is another kind of reserve, perhaps a feeling that sexual relationships ought to be private.

It is far too facile, I think, to categorize Chinese society as sexually repressive, to analyze its patterns in the categories of Freud or Reich. Sexual matters should not be wrenched from their historical context any more than political matters. On the one hand, Chinese traditional philosophy and religion do not have the same antisexual depths as Christianity. On the other hand, the urging of sexual postponement is part of a general future orientation and postponement of gratification that seem rational for a developing economy. Also, the particular sexual forms of advanced capitalist societies, such as the sexual objectification of women, the association of sexual excitement with physical beauty, and the general exaggeration and mystification of the power of sexual intercourse altogether, are missing from Chinese society today. Indeed, all the pressures that create sexual *anxiety* seem to be missing. If this is true, and in light of the tremendous amounts of meaningful, needed work to be done, it seems to me worth speculating that the sexual postponement asked by Chinese official morality is not a neurotic pattern at all. More particularly, that rather Puritanical standard may well be good for the cause of women's emancipation. The Chinese sexual morality is enforced much more equally upon men and women than in our society. In the West, sexual "liberation" seems to bear extremely unequally, for the restrictions on women's sexual freedom are everywhere far deeper than those on men's.

The clothing style of Chinese women also helps prevent their sexual objectification. Women and men, girls and boys alike normally wear loose pants and jackets, padded in the winter. There are sex-defined differences—women wear brighter colors and patterns—but they are subtle. One effect of this dress style was quickly apparent to the foreigner: young Chinese women walk differently than women in the West, with larger, more swinging steps. Their jaunty, confident stride is the walk of women who are not self-conscious. This is in striking contrast to the manner of Western women who have learned to walk down streets constantly aware of their bodies being appraised by men.

At first, as I observed the crowds from our bus or car, it seemed to me that everyone looked alike because they dressed alike. When I met people, however, I discovered that the opposite is true; because their clothes are similar, I noticed their faces more. In a society where people can't establish an individual identity by buying personal accoutrements, it is easier to notice the more basic individual identities.

Making Transistors

One major advantage of Chinese women is that the official ideology of their country is committed to sexual equality, and it is official practice to attack many sexist customs specifically. Because of China's drive for economic development and need for labor power, the struggle to revolutionize women's roles followed efforts to bring women into the labor force. But wage labor is different in China than in the Western capitalist economies, because of the socialist organization of China's economy and because of the excitement and intensity of China's struggle to end her ancient poverty. Under these circumstances, a job in itself—industrial, agricultural, or public service—can be an enormously challenging and changing experience for a woman.

I got a clear glimpse of this when our delegation visited a women's cooperative transistor factory in Shanghai. It was a visit full of surprises. The first was when our bus turned off the main street into a narrow, winding, poor residential street, and pulled up in front of a small, white concrete-stucco house, labeled in red Chinese characters, "Fung Hu Box Factory." A large crowd of people from the neighborhood, mostly women and children, crowded around the bus to see the Americans; then five or six of them introduced themselves as the revolutionary committee of the factory. They invited us into a

meeting room in the “Box Factory,” where they served us tea and cigarettes on the inevitable white tablecloth.

Yang Lai-ying, vice-chairwoman of the revolutionary committee, described the factory’s history to us. It was established as a box factory in 1958, during the Great Leap Forward. That was a campaign, initiated by Mao, to kindle a popular movement to launch the Chinese economy onto a higher level through grass-roots production efforts and initiative. It encouraged people to use available resources in new and unfamiliar ways and to develop new processes to make production more efficient. In Yang’s words:

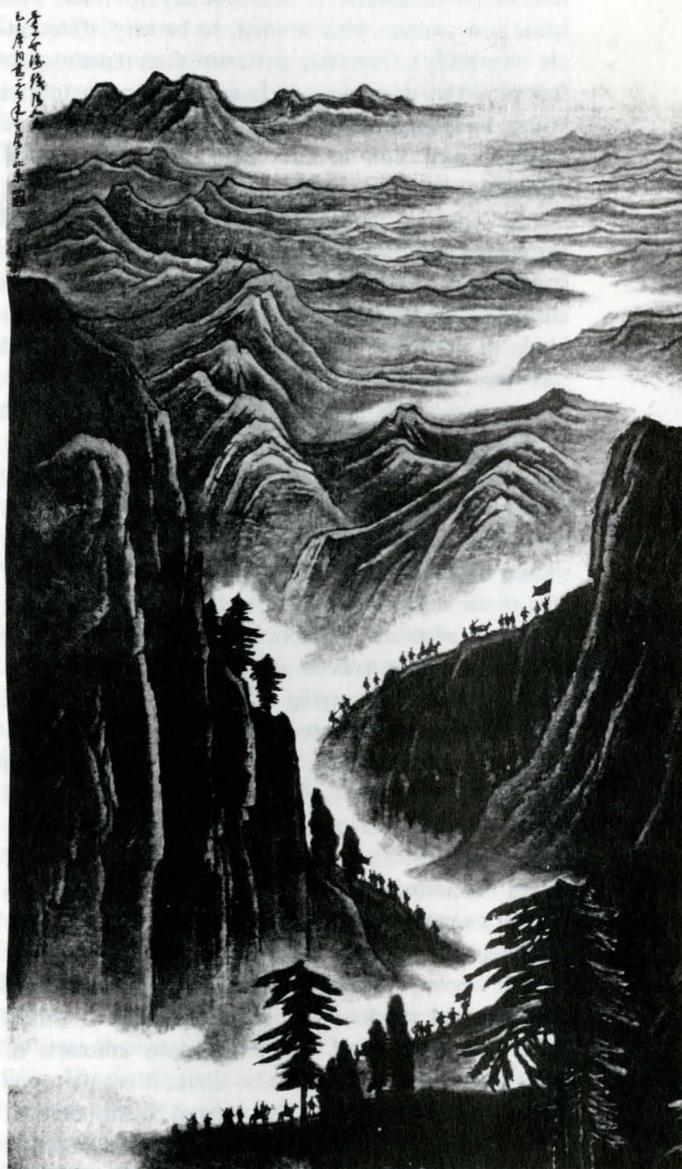
We, the former housewives, responded to the call of Chairman Mao. We would no longer stay idle at home, but contribute to building socialism. We set up a small factory to serve the big factories, and meet the needs of the people. We said, “We also have two hands. Why should we stay idle at home?”

At first we were only 32 women comrades. Our educational level was low, because before Liberation we lived in poverty. We had no opportunity to get an education, so we were illiterate. After Liberation we attended night school, so we had gotten a little education.

When our group was first organized, we had to work out of the bonds of home. We had to wage acute ideological struggles at home, since before Liberation we had been oppressed not only by the three big mountains, but by a fourth—the authority of husbands. We women were even more oppressed than men in the old society.

The “three big mountains” were imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism. This metaphor is widely used by Chinese people when they explain their view of women’s oppression, and clearly reflects their view that the struggle for women’s liberation is not essentially a struggle against men, but against patterns left over from the old society.

I am one of those 32 women in these years of the small factory. I come from a poor peasant family. In the old days, I was a worker in a factory, but I suffered from a skin disease and got fired because of it. After that I was unemployed, and suffered greatly. After Liberation I did some social work in the neighborhood under the leadership of the Communist Party. During the Great Leap Forward, I was enthusiastically trying to organize the fellow women comrades in the neighborhood to set up this production group.



Once the group was established, we had no equipment. We brought simple tools from home, such as hammers. We tried to make small wooden boxes. It was an easy job, which we could do with these simple tools, but the wooden boxes are needed by the people. With the development of production, the work force increased to over 140.

Because of the influence of the revisionist line pushed by Liu Shao-chi, the development of the factory stagnated before the Cultural Revolution. Liu Shao-chi and his followers despised women. They said, "What can you do? Just earn pocket money!" We were indignant. We said, "We, the women, are trying to contribute to building socialism. We are not about just making some money."

Liu Shao-chi, now out of office and under house arrest in Peking, is the figure most associated with the revisionist line defeated in the Cultural Revolution. As I noted above, these revisionist policies were, on the whole, *dominant* in China before the Cultural Revolution. Antifeminism was attributed to the revisionist policies frequently in our visit to China, and was in fact a direct consequence of the revisionists' economic strategy. They were committed to the training of technical experts, which included giving the trainees material privileges and incentives if necessary, to move the economy as efficiently as possible to a higher technological level of production. One well-trained engineer, a Liu Shao-chi follower might argue, is worth more to the economy than all of these housewives.

After the Cultural Revolution, because of the needs of the national economy, the state encouraged us to try to manufacture something more important than boxes, and set us the job of making transistors. At the beginning, our educational level here was low, the average age was 46, and the factory was 90 percent women. We didn't quite understand what transistors were. But we have always firmly adhered to the mass line—we got the people together to discuss how to solve the problem. The workers said that this assignment has shown the confidence that Chairman Mao and the Communist Party have in us, so we should try our best to do it. It is said that this kind of job requires a higher educational level and can only be done by young men workers. But we said, "We also want to make revolution, and we have two hands. Why can't we do it?" We were determined to overcome these difficulties. So we sent ten young women to a big factory to learn the techniques of making transistors. These ten women workers faced a lot of difficulties learning the techniques.

We also lacked the equipment we needed. So in solving this problem, we also adhered to the mass line. The women said we should mobilize the husbands to give us a hand. Some of our husbands were electricians, metal workers, and so forth. So the husbands were organized to use scrap materials to make equipment for us in their spare time. So we have built up this factory from scratch.

The "mass line" refers to Mao's line, the opposite of the revisionist line. The phrase is not, as it sounds to most Westerners, a rhetorical slogan, but describes a particular economic and political policy. It means a radical decentralization both in the formulation of economic priorities and in their accomplishment; a commitment to the policy of seeking economic development through the efforts of large numbers of "unskilled" workers, even though this may mean that each task is *not* accomplished in the most efficient way. Its secondary slogan is "self-reliance"—not waiting for higher-ups to give orders or instruction, or to provide mechanical aids or technological improvements. Mistakes, wastefulness, inefficiency will surely follow; but the *political* goal of popular participation in building the people's *own* economy must always be given priority.

So we started to produce transistors with homemade equipment. Later we got some help from the state. Now about 70 percent of our equipment is made by ourselves, and 30 percent is given us by the state. We make integrated circuits—transistor, condenser and resistor together.

At one point we were stunned to learn that we would need a special camera, a final reduction camera, that would cost 220,000 yuan [about \$110,000], and we would have to have that amount in foreign currency. But after studying exactly what that camera would have to do, we were able to construct one out of a standard Shanghai [a Chinese box camera] at a cost of only 10,000 yuan.

After this introduction we toured the factory, having first taken off our shoes to avoid bringing dust into the filtered air of the workrooms. The air filtration system, like most of the factory equipment, was homemade. The machinery for cutting, grinding, polishing, and measuring parts for the transistors was makeshift and held together by string, rubber bands, and simple functional carpentry. The homemade photographic equipment that Yang had described was a camera sitting on a wooden stool. In place of an expensive device for regulating the distance between

the camera and the object being photographed, they had drilled holes in the floor at precisely measured intervals and simply moved the stool so that its legs fit into the different holes.

A friend of mine on the trip said that something about the building reminded her of the Mystic Housing Project in Somerville, Massachusetts, the white working-class city where I live; and the factory leaders reminded her of some Somerville community activists she knew. It was an extraordinary insight into the significance of the transistor factory—it was just as if a group of Somerville housewives had organized a sophisticated electronics factory themselves.

After the tour we went back to the meeting room, where we met a woman named Whah Ah-fung. She was one of the ten women picked by the group to go to the state factory to learn how to make transistors. This is her story of what the experience was like:

In the old society, women were despised and always neglected. Only after Liberation have we been respected by everybody. I feel proud of the progress of women since Liberation so when I was picked to learn the techniques, I was moved, and determined to learn, in order to build socialism. But when I got to the factory, I was frightened because of all the things I never saw and heard before. I felt this was a difficult thing to do, and a feeling of fear came into my mind.

The leading member of the factory had a talk with me, and he asked my opinion. I said that it was quite difficult for me. I was already 42 and my educational level was low. I said it would be better to send some young worker to learn the techniques, not me. The leading member told me that there were not many young workers in our factory, and asked me if I had the confidence to overcome these difficulties. I said, "Of course." He said, "All right, you can go." So I studied Chairman Mao's three constantly read articles. I said to myself, "I should study these heroic spirits," and my morale was heightened.

After one week of study under the guidance of the veteran workers in the big factory, I learned something about making transistors. But then I was assigned to a quality-control job. This required a knowledge of the foreign alphabet, but I knew nothing of foreign languages, so I was rather upset.

So the first difficulty I faced was learning something about foreign languages. I asked my son to help me. I asked him, "What is this letter? It looks like a chair." My son rubbed his head and did not know what I was talking about. He told me to copy it more carefully, so the next day I did, and brought it

home to him. Then he said, "This is not Chinese! How do you dare to think you can learn foreign letters when you have not mastered Chinese?" I said, "Because of the needs of the state. They sent me to learn techniques for making transistors." He said, "This is too hard for you, an older worker. Why don't they send a younger worker?" I said, "Why do you despise me? We older workers also try to build socialism. Why shouldn't we learn techniques?" So my son helped me and after one month, I learned the English alphabet.

After study in the big factory, we went back and began the trial manufacture of transistors on our own. It was an entirely different thing from doing it in a big factory under the guidance of veteran workers. It took us 76 days to make the first batch of transistors.

We have also met with a lot of other difficulties, but under the leadership of Chairman Mao, we have overcome them. From my own experience I have seen the difference between the old and the new society. In the old days, women were so despised that we would never have even seen such a product, let alone make it ourselves. Now modern products are made by former housewives—this is because the Communist Party and Chairman Mao believe in the potential and wisdom of us women.

For these women, clearly, integration into the labor force has been one of the best things in their lives. I cannot say how typical or exceptional the transistor factory is, but it is certain that the general effort to bring women into the labor force has progressed quite far. Although I have no statistics, I understand that both American and Chinese experts agree that the great majority of Chinese women in large cities work outside their homes. The visible proof of that is in the vast array of supportive services designed to disentangle women from the responsibilities of child care and housework.

Services for Women

One important kind of support comes from the dissemination of birth control propaganda. Birth control is valued in China only secondarily as a form of population control, for the Chinese do not believe they have too many people. It is primarily a way to liberate women from child-care responsibilities that tie them to their houses. "Two children is enough for every family" is the attitude that is urged by birth control counselors. Of course, having more children is not illegal and many Chinese couples—especially



peasants, more conservative on this as on many social issues—continue to have large families. In some localities a conference with a birth control counselor is required before a marriage license is issued. For contraception the Chinese use pills and monthly hormone injections. They encourage sterilizations of either male or female after a couple has had the desired number of children, and abortions are available free.

Another kind of support for women in the workforce is an array of institutions for child care and even housework. Full-time child-care centers, usually located in a parent's place of employment, accept children from the age of eight weeks; women get paid maternity leave until their children reach that age. All the schools have hours as long as the normal working day or longer, so that both parents can easily work full-time. There are "service stations" where sewing, mending, dressmaking, shoe repair, knitting, etc., are done cheaply. There are also many prepared-food shops, whose prices are set so the cost of a meal is as low as cooking at home. And since in Chinese cooking most of the labor is in cutting up the ingredients, there are also shops that sell raw foods prechopped, so a worker can design a dinner menu, buy all the ingredients, and then fry it up in a few minutes!

Equally important, there is a campaign to convince men to share in the housework. (It seems, though, that another common division of labor is that grandmother does the housework, and may even care

for the children if the parents are not enthusiastic about day-care centers, while the parents and the grown children work.) But the struggle over sharing housework is of a different, more socialized nature in China than in this country. Here, arguments over housework remain personal power struggles between two individuals. In China women can say to their husbands, "Chairman Mao says you have to do the housework." Needless to say, that gives a woman more clout than insisting on her own authority alone.

In other words, the Chinese have not just socialized, or collectivized, specific tasks such as child care. They are attempting to collectivize the struggle for women's emancipation itself. This is the area in which they seem closest to the ideals of the American women's liberation movement, for they have *acted* on the principle that all problems between men and women, no matter how personal, are also political.

Hu Yu-chen, a woman member of the revolutionary committee of a large Shanghai textile mill told me a story about her work that shows what this kind of support can mean. One day a woman factory worker came to her to ask for help in getting a divorce. Hu asked why she wanted a divorce. "Because we fight all the time and he even hits me." Hu was surprised and upset because the husband was a veteran cadre. She asked further about the cause of the fights, and it turned out that the key problem was the husband's refusal to do his fair share of the housework. Hu was nervous when she learned this because the husband was an important man, and she had only recently

been elected to the revolutionary committee. But she knew it was her duty to criticize the husband. "So, I went to the Party Committee. They said, 'Just talk to him and persuade him to give up his bad ideas.' So I went to talk to him. I said, 'You are a cadre and she is a worker. How can you have such ideas? . . . You are wrong. Your wife works. You should do housework.' So under my criticism he recognized his mistake." By this time the wife had moved out, and refused to go back: "He always promises to change, but never does." Hu went to the husband and told him to leave work, go home, clean the whole house and cook dinner, and she convinced the wife to go home just for a discussion. At the dinner table, Hu not only insisted that the husband criticize himself formally, but asked his eldest son to give his opinion. He criticized his father openly, a more painful event for a Chinese than for an American father. And the family, according to Hu, lived happily ever after.

There is a strange combination of a most traditional and a quite radical view of marriage here: a commitment to permanence and monogamy but also to the intervention of the "state" or its equivalent in support of social values that include sexual equality. It is important to understand that this intervention from the state follows from policies established by the male-dominated Communist Party (the Central Committee of almost 200 has under 20 women), and not from an independent women's organization or movement. The Chinese Federation of Women, abolished during the Cultural Revolution for being overly bureaucratic, was recently re-established. Simultaneously, several articles appeared in the Chinese press that pointed to areas in which women were still treated disrespectfully and urged renewed struggle against male supremacy. It is possible, of course, that the Federation in its post-Cultural-Revolution form will be more militant and directly responsive to women than it had been before. Still, it seems unlikely that the Chinese would want an organization that was not ultimately responsible to the general policies set by the national leadership. That is, so to speak, the obligation that results from having the Party's authority behind the women's liberation struggle.

The Fourth Mountain

The governing policies are not feminist. I saw no sign of a feminist analysis or strategy operating in China. What I mean by that is an analysis of sex roles, not just sexual inequality, that locates those roles at the

basis of class society and postulates as a goal the abolition of as much of the sexual division of labor as is biologically possible. Where there is agreement on this definition of goals in the United States—and obviously the American women's movement is deeply divided—I think that American feminists have found serious limitations to the ideal as an organizing principle. It has been difficult to interest women in fighting to abolish the sexual division of labor if the work of the men in their lives is not very desirable, and if the political power that their men have is insignificant. This is the case as well in a country like China where most people of both sexes must do hard manual labor all day all year.



It might be helpful at this point to recall the Chinese image of the "fourth mountain" as the description of women's oppression. In this model, not only is sexism not fundamental, it is the opposite. It is a kind of male bad habit laid on top of the real problem. I noticed little if any consciousness of the ways in which sexism oppresses men as well as women, that common refrain of contemporary American feminism.

But feminism has grown out of very different roots from Chinese communist thought. In essence, I think, feminism has been a bourgeois ideology in several ways. For one thing, it has emerged from the particular frustrations of educated women in an advanced capitalist society. They see the men in their lives in powerful and privileged positions, positions denied to women because of their sex and their sexual socialization. (This does not mean that all feminists are bourgeois, nor that working-class women are not oppressed as women. In a society where capitalist forms of organization and ideas dominate, women of different classes share many of the same problems.) Secondly, in terms of its ideas, contemporary feminism has not significantly altered the principles laid out a century and more ago by the first generations of European and American women's rights advocates: from Mary Wollstonecraft through

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, even to Shulamith Firestone. All their theory, for the most part, has been a contribution to and a continuation of the intellectual tradition of classical liberalism. Feminism has been committed to equality of opportunity and legal equality for all in principle. But it has accepted the right of private ownership of substantial amounts of capital to determine the real opportunities available to individuals. And feminist strategy has been defined by its opposition to a particular form of male supremacy—a capitalist form—with particular characteristics: using women as cheap labor to maximize profits; as objects to stimulate consumption; as unpaid houseworkers to groom the labor power of husbands and children. Inevitably, feminism adopted some of the values of the ideology it opposed, most importantly individualism: the ideal of individuals rising according to merit. Today, for example, conservative feminists tend to give highest priority to equal rights, the removal of restrictions that prevent the rise of individual women.

By putting our own feminism in its cultural context we can, I hope, better appraise what a rebellion against male supremacy might look like in China. It would be in opposition to socialist male supremacy in a society that does not intend to produce a capitalist class or to tolerate private profit gained from others. It would come from within a culture that both from tradition and from socialist principle does not encourage individualist values.

If a Chinese feminism emerges, we must assume that it will be very different from ours. It might not even conceive of itself as a "liberation movement" since it might well accept the images of liberation defined by the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist tradition. It might remain simply a civil rights movement, a campaign for equality. It is also possible that there will be no communist Chinese feminism because the "woman question" will be solved through the gradual equalization of power between the sexes. I am rather skeptical about this, however, because it seems to me that in China as everywhere in the world men still reap many concrete benefits from their political and economic supremacy that they will not give up without a fight. China's social policies are raising expectations that will create contradictions if women do not get their fair share of the returns. But the contradictions may indeed remain, as Mao Tse-tung suggests, contradictions among the people. And they may therefore be resolved in the same way that others have been—within the Communist Party, through another Cultural Revolution led this time by women.

Contemplation of that possibility is evidence of the enormous achievement for women of the Chinese revolution. Beginning 24 years ago with women nearly slaves, the male leadership of the Chinese Communist Party has brought them the possibility of education, dignified work, individual wages, control over their own reproductive capacity; and has conducted an impressive amount of antisexist education of men and women. If indeed the contradiction between women and their masters has been reduced to a contradiction among the people, that is powerful evidence for the efficacy of socialism as a way of attacking women's oppression.

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