

# SOME OF US

*Chinese Women Growing  
Up in the Mao Era*

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to know and like him. Guirong and I laughed when recalling the funny incidents of the past, and I shed tears when she told me about a tragic event in her family. That was one of the most cherished nights of my life. I had never felt so close to her and to that piece of land. I knew I would go back again and bring my American-born daughter with me. I wanted her to know the place and the people there, a place that is part of her mother's past and roots.

## NOTES

1. I am indebted to my friends Susan Joel and Paula Palmer for their reading and editing of my drafts, and to Bai Di, Wang Zheng, and Xueping Zhong for their comments.
2. Called the movement of "going up to the mountains and down to the village" (*shang shan xiaxiang*), it was one of the most ambitious and drastic mass movements in the history of the People's Republic of China. It was propagated as a way for the youth to transform the backward rural China and to reform their own petty bourgeois world outlook. Scholars have pointed out that it was a means of reducing the unemployment pressure exacerbated by the disruption of production during the Cultural Revolution.
3. *Jiating chushen* in Chinese, determined by the political and economic status and the occupation of one's parents and grandparents. The Red (good) family class background included "revolutionary cadres," "revolutionary military officers," workers, poor peasants, and lower-middle peasants. The Black (bad) family class background included capitalists, landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, and "rightists." This distinction was used as a way to stratify people and was seen as an indicator of one's political trustworthiness.
4. In Chinese, *wen ti* can mean either "problem" or "matter."
5. An educational practice during the Cultural Revolution when prospective students for colleges and universities were not selected directly from the graduating high school class but from young people who had served as workers, farmers, and soldiers for some time after graduation from high school.

WANG ZHENG

## CALL ME "QINGNIAN" BUT NOT "FUNÜ" *A Maoist Youth in Retrospect*

A few days before Women's Day, March 8, 1978, my five roommates and I were in our college dorm after class.<sup>1</sup> Each of us had just received a movie ticket from the administration. To celebrate Women's Day, our college was showing a movie free to all female faculty, staff, and students.<sup>2</sup> Staring at the ticket in her hand, Qiao, the youngest among us, protested: "Yuck! How come now we are counted as *women* [*funü*]?! It sounds so terrible!" Her strong reaction amused us. But we all agreed that we did not like to be categorized as women. For us, the contemporary Chinese term for women, *funü*, invoked the image of a married woman surrounded with pots and pans, diapers and bottles, sewing and knitting needles, and who hung around the neighborhood gossiping. Her world was filled with such "trivial" things and her mind was necessarily narrow and backward. We were certainly not women. We were *youth* (*qingnian*), or, if you like, female youth, to which we had no objection.

Our discussion of the meaning of the label *woman* did not go much further that day, but it has emerged from my memory again and again during the past decade of my study of feminism. Each time, the scene in my memory has generated different questions for me to ponder. Did we internalize male cultural values to such an extent that we denigrated women the same way men did? What

were the specific meanings of *funü* in the Mao era? Did our rejection of the term suggest any facets other than our internalization of patriarchal values? What shaped my perceptions of the terms *youth* and *women* in my early years? What was implied by the word *youth* to which we tried to cling? Scholars of Communist societies have often emphasized the manipulation of youth by the totalitarian states. But when "youth were identified most fully as agents of change for the whole society," how did this emphasis affect gender production?<sup>23</sup> Since in most societies young women are seldom identified as "agents of change for the whole society," how did Communist female youth fare with the officially sponsored identity of major agents of social change? These and many more questions led me to revisit my life in the Mao era.

Funü, women, who were they? When the word *funü* was used in the Mao era, it was often used in, or associated with, the compound noun *jiating funü*, family women-housewives. The rest of the women were in other categories, with respective proper names, such as female scientists, female workers, female engineers, female teachers, female drivers, female shop assistants, female students, female cadres, and female revolutionaries. Women in these categories with a prefix "nü" (female) enjoyed a much higher social status than housewives. The state mobilization of women's participation in socialist construction was accompanied by popularizing Engels's theory, which held women's participation in social production as the measure of women's liberation. When most urban women were thus "liberated" in the dominant political discourse, *jiating funü*, who had to devote their energy to family responsibilities, were excluded from the glorious rank of socialist constructor. They were seen as relics of the old feudal society. Accordingly, the term *jiating funü* soon acquired such derogatory connotations that one could not utter this word without contempt. My mother was among this marginalized, degraded, and rapidly shrinking social group in the Mao era.

But there were still many *jiating funü*-housewives when I grew up in the 1950s, and they were all mothers or grandmothers. On the first floor of a four-story row house in downtown Shanghai where my family lived, the four families sharing the tiny space were

run by four housewives. My mother was illiterate and had small feet (*xiaojiao*) that used to be bound. Of the four housewives, only one could read, and she had small feet, too, even smaller than my mother's.

Since my mother was home, I did not have the opportunity to go to daycare or kindergarten. I always envied kids who held onto a rope to form a line when walking in the street with their teachers. They sang and laughed and had great fun with their little friends. I just stayed home and watched the four or more housewives in the neighborhood wash, cook, shop, and gossip.

The world of housewives was not without excitement and joy. Indeed, they had to go to their battlefield every morning, the market. Even with all kinds of coupons that rationed food equally for city dwellers, the quality and quantity of everyone's meals were not equal. If a housewife could manage to be first in line in the market, the best cut of pork would be hers. Otherwise, she might have to purchase a piece of lousy meat from pig breast with her half a jin monthly ration. Vegetables and fish were not rationed, but sold on a first-come first-served basis. The markets usually did not open for business until 7:00 A.M., but many housewives began to lining up as early as 4:00 A.M. Each took a little wooden stool and one or two bamboo vegetable baskets. Shoppers had to run between several lines, since each line was for just one item. A stool, a basket, and even a brick could hold one's place in the line. But she had to go to each place constantly, to chat with the women both in front and behind her to secure recognition of her place while she was away and to check if it would soon be her turn.

My mother, with her small feet, ran from line to line every morning. Often, she came back from the market with baskets of meat, fish, and vegetables that were too heavy for her to carry, especially on Sundays. I could always tell without her saying a word whether or not she got good stuff. She had a joyful smile if she got what she needed for her planned menu. And she was elated if that day the market had some rare delicacy and she was the lucky one who got it. Getting enough good food was a major part of her life. She had eight children and a husband (a picky one) to feed. Without guests, lunch was usually three to four courses (my father

and some of my older siblings did not come back for lunch) and dinner was five to six courses. To feed such a big family well in a time of scarcity was a remarkable achievement.

In those years, I never consciously associated my mother with the term *jiating funü*, though I knew she was a housewife. The term *jiating funü* suggested many negative attributes that I did not see in my mother. I placed her in a different category. She was illiterate and could not read the newspapers that gave us new ideas. In fact, she did not even know how to say any of the new expressions, although she showed wonderful verbal memory by telling me many folktales and nursery rhymes. I have searched hard in my memory and can only think of one or two occasions when she said *renmin zhengfu* (people's government) and *Gongchandang* (Communist Party). That is all. Ignorance of the new socialist ideas should have qualified her as a backward woman, but I never judged her that way. Instead, what I saw in her was hard work and self-sacrifice. In my early teens, I once asked her, "Why didn't Mom go out to work when most women did? Mom could be selected as a model worker easily!" She replied, "Well, if I had gone out to work, you all would have had to eat in the canteens. The meals there are poor and more expensive." She paused a little, adding, "No one who went out to work has small feet." I lost words to continue the conversation. I knew her small feet physically tortured her daily, but I had never realized that they were also such a terrible burden on her mind. The oppression of old feudal society is still with Mom, I thought. Mom is a victim of the old society. I am a new person of the Mao Zedong epoch (a set phrase of the time).

My mother's small feet and illiteracy made it easy for me to identify her as the "oppressed." When my father blamed my mother for trivial things like forgetting to sew a button back onto his shirt and upset her, I would protest to my father. "Stop oppressing Mom, Dad! This is the new society. Dad should not oppress Mom any more." (In my family, the central content in children's moral education and the strictest rule held by my father in discipline was never to address seniors by pronouns "you," "they," "she," or "he." To show respect, to know your place, a junior should always address or refer to the older ones by kinship terms. This Confucian

etiquette became my second nature and mixed with my revolutionary speech.) Sometimes I would try to instigate my mother to revolt. "Mom, don't be afraid of Dad. Men and women are all equal. Mom should say this sentence to Dad loudly." But Mother smiled at me with a little embarrassment. "I don't know how to say those words," she said. "I have a clumsy mouth." I could not understand why her mouth was so clever when she told me all those fairy tales, folk songs, and stories from her life. Since new phrases came out of my mouth easily, I decided to be my mother's mouth whenever new words were needed. Sometimes after I defended my mother, she would say, "Fortunately, I have a little daughter to speak for me." Father called me "a little protector of Mom." My fourth sister once told me, "Dad laughs when you criticize Dad. But once when I tried to do the same, Dad got mad at me and scolded me terribly. You are Dad's favorite. You can do whatever you want to." I knew my father pampered me, his youngest child, his little pet. Even my criticism sounded amusing to him. He must have seen humor and irony in his little daughter's mastery of revolutionary language.

Mother was the youngest daughter of a worker's family, and she herself became a worker in a lace factory owned by Germans at eight years old. She worked in the factory until she turned twenty, when she married my father. Father was the youngest son of a comfortable gentry family. Both of them were from Shandong, the native place of Confucius. Their fathers, though of different classes, shared a friendship based on a similar taste for wine and an appreciation of each other's character. Drinking and chatting in a bar one day, they found that one's daughter was two years younger than the other's son, neither engaged. They delightedly decided the marriage of their children right away.

My parents got married in 1930, when my father had already acquired a desire for the new style of women, women with an education and natural feet. My father always openly complained about this arranged marriage, which he had tried to resist. One day he complained to me in my mother's presence, "Look, my greatest misfortune is to have married your mother, who does not know the pleasure of reading. She always interrupts me when I am totally

absorbed in my book." I replied right away, "That is the result of Dad's selfishness. If Dad taught Mom three characters a day since the day Mom married Dad, instead of just asking Mom to wash and cook, Mom could have long been literate. Didn't that Communist in the movie teach his wife to read? So no one is to blame but Dad self." Both my parents laughed. They knew what I referred to and what I meant.

We had all seen "The Revolutionary Family," a very popular film with a cast of first-class actors. The story was about a woman's life from the day she was carried on a wedding sedan chair in the late 1920s. She was illiterate and marrying a man she had never seen before, just like my mother. But her educated husband was a Communist, unlike my educated father, who was a Nationalist. The underground Communist husband taught her to read and write. After he was killed by Nationalists, she carried on his revolutionary task and brought up her three children as revolutionaries. When I saw on the screen that handsome Communist husband holding his young bride's hand, patiently and lovingly teaching her to write with a brush pen, I wished that that were the relationship between my parents. The only difference between my parents and this couple was that my father was a Nationalist. I concluded after viewing the movie that all the consequent huge differences between the two couples hinged on that one crucial difference. I assumed that there would not be such inequality between my parents if my father were a Communist. But if my father were a Communist, I would have been totally confused and would have lost the ability to direct any revolutionary words at him. Since he used to be a Nationalist, all the ideas and concepts that I learned from books and movies could be applied to our family case consistently.

Movies constitute a large part of my childhood memory. There were four movie theaters within a ten-minute walk from my home. The price for a movie was fifteen or twenty cents for adults, eight or twelve cents for children and students. When the whole school booked a movie, the discount price for each student was five cents. The Cathay Theater, one block from my home, had Sunday morning children's specials. Since my early elementary years, I spent many Sunday mornings there. Our school often booked movies

there, too. Watching movies was a part of the teaching curriculum. All of the students lined up and went together to the theater. After each movie, our teacher would lead a class discussion, and then we were required to write an essay about what we had learned from the movie. Heroes and heroines in the pictures were our role models, and revolutionary movies were a guide to a revolutionary life.

My experience in film education had begun even before I started school in 1958. My second sister, Xiujuan, nineteen years older than I, was a factory worker. On her day off, she liked to spend time with me apart from helping my mother with housework. One warm, sunny day, she took me to see *Tens and Thousands of Rivers and Mountains*. This was a hot new movie about the Long March of the Red Army. I must have been four or five years old. It was the first time I had ever seen a war movie. I still remember the scene in which Red Army soldiers tried to cross the suspension bridge over the Dadu River. The bridge was made of cables connecting two cliffs high over the roaring river. The Nationalist army had removed the planks on the iron cables to prevent the Red Army from crossing the bridge. But the Red Army soldiers tried to cross it anyway. One after another, they grabbed onto the thick cables to crawl over the river. Bullets came at them from the fortress on the other side of the bridge. One after another, wounded soldiers who could not hang onto the cables any more fell into the swift current below. Having never seen death before, I was astounded by the violent, agonizing deaths amplified on the huge screen. My heart pounding madly, I struggled desperately with each soldier trying to hang onto the cable. Their ordeal became mine. They died but I remained alive.

On the way home from the theater, Sister Xiujuan took me to a food shop for a snack. She ordered a delicious fruit soup. It was a rare treat for me. I took a sip of the warm, sweet, refreshing soup and said, "The Red Army soldiers never had such delicious soup!" Sister Xiujuan smiled at me and replied, "No, they never had it. They endured all the hardships and sacrificed their lives for the sake of our happiness." It dawned on me that I owed my enjoyment of this bowl of fruit soup to those soldiers who had fallen into the river.

My indebtedness to revolutionary martyrs was reinforced after I began school. Movies, storybooks, and textbooks all described how revolutionaries sacrificed their lives so that we could live happily in the new socialist China. The red scarf that we Communist Young Pioneers wore was "a corner of our red flag that was dyed with the blood of martyrs." Wearing the red scarf over a white shirt, we Young Pioneers loudly sang our theme song, "Communist Successors:" "We are the Communist successors. Inheriting the glorious tradition of our revolutionary predecessors, we love our country and love our people."

I was obsessed with the idea of becoming a revolutionary. There was no other choice, since I definitely did not want to be the enemy of the revolutionaries or the despicable renegade. I wanted to be like the many heroes and heroines in the movies and novels. The most dangerous work in the revolution was underground work. Underground Communists were often arrested and horribly tortured to force them to talk. I fantasized about becoming a Communist underground worker. Taiwan was not yet liberated, and two-thirds of the people in the world were still living in darkness. I thought it very likely that I would be sent to do some underground work when I grew up. But, I wondered, can I endure the torture if I am arrested? I could not give an affirmative answer to my own question. I was afraid of many things besides pain. My mother used to raise chickens in our backyard. Once a rooster suddenly charged at me. I was so frightened that I climbed through a window to escape. In school, when our teacher placed sample trays of frogs and earthworms on our desks for us to observe, I closed my eyes tightly, feeling as if I were in hell. How can I pass the test of torture? This disturbing question generated the biggest anxiety in me until one day I found a solution.

In the third or fourth grade, I read many detective and spy stories. One story from the Soviet Union was about a German spy caught by the Soviet Intelligence. When the Soviets began to interrogate the German spy, he bit on the corner of his collar and died instantly. The Soviets found out that there was a tiny lethal pill sewed into the tip of his collar. I had never read anything like that in stories about Chinese Communist underground activities.

"The foreigners are more advanced," I thought. "I am sure when I grow up, our country will have this technology, too." The new finding relieved me immensely. My innate weakness could not inhibit me from becoming a revolutionary any more!

Why am I recalling these childhood experiences with fondness, the experiences that prove how thoroughly "brainwashed" I was by Communist propaganda, to use American mainstream language? Why are my feelings connected to these memories so different from those I experienced twenty years ago? Twenty years ago, when Chinese intellectuals began to expose and critique the horrible deeds of the Communist Party's dictatorship, I was thinking of those soldiers falling into the river and seeing their tragedy multiplied.<sup>4</sup> The party had betrayed all those martyrs and they had died in vain. I questioned the meaning of their sacrifice. I saw myself among a whole generation of youths who were cheated and used by Mao because he called on us to devote our lives to the revolution while he devoted his to power struggles. The ugliness of the actual process of revolution relentlessly mocked my naïveté in taking the beautiful dream of revolution as reality. I found myself reviewing my childhood dreams and adolescent efforts to be a revolutionary with deep ambivalence.

The overwhelming amount of literature exposing Maoist crimes both enlightened and confused me. The older generations were condemning the Maoist persecution. Many of my generation were repenting their inhumanity when they were Red Guards. Everyone who was talking, including the once victimizing Red Guards, was a victim scarred by the Maoist dictatorship. But I could not think of any example in my life to present myself as a victim or a victimizer. I did not know how to feel about my many happy memories and cherished experiences of a time that most vocal people now called the dark age.

Twenty turbulent years have passed since then. Changes in the world, in China, and in my location have all helped me to walk out of my confusion. There is no need to hide my positive feelings for much of my life in the Mao era. Instead, I have a historian's intense curiosity for understanding the historical and social background that shaped my positive feelings and enabled me to express

my feelings against the dominant voices in the American post-Cold War discourse and Chinese post-Mao discourse. This presentation of my memories is the result of a twenty-year external and internal transformation that cannot be expounded in the limited space here. Perhaps one brief example can illustrate some experiences that assisted my reassessment of the Mao era.

Not long after I arrived in the United States, I met an American woman at a friend's home. She told me with apparent pride that her daughter was a cheerleader. I did not know what kind of leader that was. Hearing her explanation, I could not bring myself to present a compliment, as she obviously expected. I just hoped that my eyes would not betray my disdain as I thought to myself, "I guess this American woman has never dreamed of her daughter being a leader cheered by men." I feel fortunate that I was "brainwashed" to want to be a revolutionary instead of a cheerleader.

In the fourth grade, teacher Jiang asked us to write an essay on the topic of "What I Will Be in the Future." I am sure that all the schoolchildren in China were asked to write more than once on topics such as "My Dream" or "My Wish for a Career." But this was the first time I had written an essay of this kind. I liked the topic because I had much to say. I did not write about my fantasy to be a Communist spy in that essay. I guess by that time I already understood the party's expectations of the younger generation. Battlefields, guerrilla wars, and underground works were the past glories. My generation, born in the new society, definitely missed out on those romantic and adventurous experiences. Now we were expected to devote ourselves to the socialist construction. Chairman Mao said that our country is as poor as a sheet of blank paper, but that will allow us to paint the most beautiful new picture on it. Building a beautiful new China sounded like a pretty exciting project to me.

The essay reflected my mood quite well. I wrote that I wished to be a geological prospector who explores the mysterious primeval forests or uncharted land to find long-buried treasures (natural resources) for our country; or a farmer who makes our homeland a gorgeous tapestry; or a textile worker who weaves the most beautiful fabrics for our people; or a teacher who spreads the seeds of wis-

dom and fosters the growth of a forest of talented students; or an actress whose performance inspires her audience; or a doctor who cures the sick and rescues the dying. I concluded the essay by saying, "Whatever occupation I take, I will be a socialist constructor." I was pleased with my flowery essay because it genuinely expressed what was in my mind. I could not decide which one to settle on, and I wished to have a taste of all those occupations. These occupations (and many others that did not appeal to me, such as that of a scientist) were glamorously propagandized, and the descriptive words I used were widely circulated clichés at the time. We learned to write in the language of official discourse quickly. I believe many little girls and boys of my generation dreamed of being a geological prospector. Facing the Western embargo, China desperately needed to exploit its natural resources. Propaganda for recruiting young people to work in this area was very effective. When my neighbor's daughter was accepted by the geology department of a prestigious university, we all envied her for her future prospects of an adventurous life. The government's directory on the career choices of youth certainly shaped my desires.

But my desires seemed to be too extensive. Teacher Jiang read my essay loudly to the whole class as an example of poor writing, though without mentioning my name. "It is unfocused without a theme," she criticized. "No, I have a theme," I disagreed in my heart. "The obvious theme is that I want to be a socialist constructor!" Of all my essays in the elementary and middle school, I only remember this one because of the humiliation of winning the prize for the worst essay. To me, a historian, this valuable piece of historical evidence in my memory is illuminating. Before I had reached ten years of age, the subject position of a socialist constructor was solidly established. The socialist constructor was no doubt heavily constructed by the dominant political discourse. But to a girl, was this discursive position more oppressive and limiting than that of a homemaker, a position no less powerfully constructed by the dominant discourse in the United States during the same period? Was brainwashing girls to become young vanguards in socialist construction more oppressive and limiting than brainwashing girls to become cheerleaders for football games? No.

The image of a socialist constructor was gender free. Coexisting with traditional gender expectations of labor division, this dominant gender-free discursive position created legitimacy for women to cross gender boundaries and enabled girls' personal development. The theme of my essay was to be a socialist constructor, a category that would allow me to go in any direction. In fact, I seldom thought of myself as a girl, a category that did not mean much to me when the prevailing slogan was to be a "socialist new person." Once I was striding on the wall of our backyard to get a good view of our neighborhood. My mother called, "Get down! How can you little girl climb the wall? What terrible manners!" I looked at her without budging an inch, retorting in my mind, "Mom is just feudal. Why can't a little girl climb the wall?" At school, girls and boys shared in all activities, including sports. I jumped and ran like boys. I got into fights with boys. Nothing in the formal curriculum reminded me of my gender. I was a student and a member of the Young Pioneer League, who was going to be a new youth of the new China.

Despite my sheer unawareness of gender, a gendering process was taking place quietly in the realms beyond the reach of official ideologies. Much that I experienced in the subcultures or outside of the public institutions shaped my subconscious sense of femininity. My strong conviction in the official ideology that "male comrades and female comrades are the same" and my perception of being a nongender youth coexisted with an unconscious conformation to feminine norms and an eagerness to establish my femaleness in a heterosexual world.

When I walked into the hallway of our row house one day, I saw my neighbor Mother Huang tell something to three women on the first floor, one of whom was my mother. Mother Huang spoke in a low, secretive voice with a sneer. The other three women listened with apparent fascination. I passed by indifferently, but when I turned the corner of the hallway, where they could not see me, I stopped and listened. I have excellent hearing. My ears were especially sensitive to whispers and secretive tones, perhaps a result of training by Mother Huang, who was an informed source since her husband was the gatekeeper in our lane. Gossiping about

neighbors' personal troubles and family feuds gave a sense of moral superiority to Mother Huang, who used to be a washerwoman in a brothel and was still washing clothes for some neighbors to subsidize her husband's meager income.

Mother Huang was now gossiping about Peiying! Peiying was a high school girl living with her paternal aunt in the number 7 row house in our lane. I never talked to her, but I liked her a lot. She walked in and out of the lane with a gentle sweet smile. She was always dressed neatly and in good taste. Fair skinned and slender, she was very pretty. What had happened to her?

"Her teacher asked her to coach a naughty boy in her class. The boy, who is one year younger than Peiying, often went to her home to do homework with her help. But who would expect, he made her pregnant! Now she has to marry that little rascal!" Mother Huang's sarcastic and vindictive tone implied, "That serves her right!"

At the time, I was about nine years old and knew that a man could make a woman pregnant, but I did not know how. Of course, this gossip did not help solve the puzzle, a puzzle I had nowhere, or no way, to ask for an answer, a puzzle I had to figure out someday by myself. When I was seventeen, I finally put pieces of the puzzle together and reached a moment of revelation. But many of my friends did not learn the answer until their wedding night, just like my mother. At nine, I was unimaginative. I could not imagine what Peiying did with that boy. But judging by these women's reaction, I could tell right away that her pregnancy was disastrous. Soon, events confirmed my assessment. On Peiying's wedding day she was dressed up like a bride, but unlike other brides, she was sobbing in such deep grief it seemed like she was going to a funeral. I can still see her vividly today, wearing a bright red flowery silk scarf and holding a white handkerchief to wipe away her tears. Peiying sobbed her way out of the lane, under the stares of many women and children. She broke my heart. Such a lovely girl to end up like this!

Worse still, that little rascal soon proved to be an abusive husband. Each time he hit her, she cried back to her auntie's home. Sometimes Peiying would run out of the house screaming and yelling,



with her hair all messed up and her clothes crumpled. I never saw her gentle maiden smiles again. Peiying divorced the man when her son was two or three years old. Hers was the only divorce in our lane of eighty-two households.

Later, whenever I came across the word *zhencao* (chastity), I would think of Peiying. I knew all too well that losing *zhencao* meant a girl's doom. I don't remember if I vowed not to let a man ruin me like Peiying did, but I suspect her experience had something to do with my aloof manner toward boys.

I never saw Peiying's case as feudal oppression, a phrase I effortlessly applied to my mother. Peiying was an educated youth in the new socialist society, an image that had no association with feudal oppression. There was no new language to describe Peiying's trouble. Even if at the time I did come across official material on marriage and love, the common cautionary tales to guard women against the pitfall of losing chastity would not help demystify the taboo, but only reinforce it. There was certainly no such term as *sex-gender system* available to me. Peiying's trouble was described and commented on by housewives in the neighborhood, who were a large part of her trouble. I felt extremely sorry for Peiying for subjecting herself to so many gossips and so much shame. But at no time did I wonder why she had to endure such humiliation for her pregnancy or why she had to marry that rascal. Every adult took it for granted that that is the way of life. A little revolutionary like me could not think otherwise. Although I disliked Mother Huang's and other gossiping housewives' pettiness, their gossip demarcated clear boundaries for me.

Little girls became successors of the old sexual morality as easily as they became successors of revolution. After years of free association with boys in elementary school, we self-imposed gender segregation in the junior high school. We no longer played with boys and seldom talked to them, except for deskmates in absolutely necessary situations. No teacher or parent had a hand in creating this segregation. We adolescent girls initiated it for a simple reason: to avoid gossip.

One girl at a senior level often talked merrily and lengthily with boys. My classmates and I commented on her behavior disapprov-

ingly, "Look at her! She is so flighty." "Look at the way she curls her bang. She tries to be pretty!" Trying to be pretty was a derogatory description of a girl. We often openly expressed our admiration of pretty girls and disdain of those who were not but were trying to be. Trying to be pretty revealed one's intention to draw attention. We were not shy of standing out in our academic performance or extracurricular activities, but we definitely did not want to attract any attention to our appearance. Decent girls were supposed to behave this way. We had established this set of behavioral norms before we learned about political terms like *bourgeois lifestyle* in the Cultural Revolution.

One summer it was getting hot earlier than usual. But because it was not yet the usual time to change into skirts and short sleeves, all seventeen girls in my class kept waiting for someone to be brave enough to change into summer clothes. No one wanted to be the first to change because she would attract unbearable stares. We rolled up our long sleeves and waited. Finally, one girl could not put up with the heat anymore and came up with a smart idea. She talked to each girl in our class and we all agreed delightedly that we would change into summer clothes together the next day.

What was in our active compliance to the norms of female modesty, which had close affinity to female chastity? Was it simply out of our fear of being seen as indecent? Why did I feel a strange excitement in my compliance?

When I was working on the farm in my late teens, we girls would often swim in the river two hundred feet away from our dorms. Boys went to the river topless. We girls changed into our swimming suits in our dorms and then put on our long, opaque gray plastic raincoats to cover our bodies. We took off the raincoats right before we jumped into the river. Never was there a moment that I envied the boys' convenience. Quite to the contrary, wrapping the raincoat over my body, smiling meaningfully at other girls doing the same thing, I felt a mysterious sacredness. It is a ritual belonging only to girls. Performing this and other female rituals constituted my gender identity in a social environment that lacked significant distinction between male and female youth.

Half a block away from my home was a picture bookstand that

I frequented often before my third grade year. Throughout the 1950s there were numerous private picture bookstands in Shanghai. They did not sell books, but loaned them to kids to read there (sometimes old men read there, too). The stands were usually located at the entrance of a lane that had a second-floor apartment built over the entrance. The entrance's roof sheltered the young readers at the bookstand from the rain and sun. With shelves of picture books against the wall and a few low benches squeezed together, this stand was the place where I found immense pleasure, second only to movies.

My parents never bought any books for me, nor for my siblings. Not many of my friends' parents bought them books, either. We went to bookstands. Picture books usually lent for one cent each. Thicker ones, or those made from movie scenes, cost two cents each. I rarely could afford those. I wanted the quantity, so I often opted for the cheaper thin ones that cost one cent for two. Often, after I had purchased a box of matches, a cake of soap, or a pack of toilet paper for my mother, I would ask if I could go to the bookstand with the leftover change in my hand. My mother usually let me keep the change if it was less than five cents. With more children in school than in the workplace, she did not have more than a few pennies to spare.

The picture books were all about four and a half by six inches in size and were in black and white. Except for the ones made from movie scenes, the rest contained exquisite illustrations on each page, with two or three lines of words below explaining the story or dialogue of the characters. Most of them, interestingly, were not about revolutionary heroes or heroines. Perhaps because of the bookstand owner's taste, there were many mythologies and ancient stories from either Chinese ancient times or foreign countries. I loved them. I am not sure if I was attracted more by the exotic stories or by the beautiful illustrations. In sharp contrast to revolutionary heroines, the ladies in these ancient stories wore gorgeous dresses and fancy hairdos. The dangling hairpieces and earrings and long, silky, wavy sashes around their delicate shoulders and waists emitted a sensuous femininity and accentuated the female characters' gentle and coy manners. Inevitably, a male character would fall in love with the beautiful female character.

One illustration etched deeply in my mind. The setting is in the garden of a Mediterranean aristocrat. A beautiful young lady in a dress similar to a sari leans against a flower fence. She wears fresh flowers in her black hair, thick and shiny and tied in a loose bun. Her dangling earrings, sparkly necklace, and bracelets are made of precious stone. Her dress is thin and tight, exposing her sensual figure. She raises one slender arm to hold onto a vine covered with blossoms. She lowers her head and turns her face halfway away from the man talking to her. She is soft, gentle, and shy. The well-built man is strong and firm, but also gentle, and his upper body leans forward as if bowing. He is confiding his love for her. I remember my heart pounding rapidly when I turned to this illustration, as if I were that lady. I gazed at this picture for a long time. I cannot recall the story at all, but the image remained a quintessential love scene for years in my childhood romantic fantasies.

One afternoon, when I was in the third grade, I was hiding in our small dark bedroom reading. Suddenly, my third brother burst in and snatched the book from my hand. "How dare you!" he shouted. "You are stealthily reading my book again!" My brother was four years older than I and was very mean to me in those years, a result of my parents' undisguised partiality toward me. The cruelest thing he ever did to me was forbid me to touch the books he borrowed from friends. Although the supply of books from my classmates and the children's library was plentiful, by the third grade I was more interested in my brothers' and sisters' books. My fourth sister, who was seven years older than I, also forbade me to read her books, though for different reasons. "You are too young to read these books!" she chided me seriously. "Your mind would be too complicated." "A complicated mind" was a negative phrase meaning that one thinks what one should not think. In my case, she meant that at my age I should not show interest in love stories. But I could not help it. The book my brother snatched away was *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas. Before he returned the book to his friend, I had already read it several times. Our two-room home was too small for my brother and sister to successfully hide any book from me.

I developed an insatiable appetite for romantic stories. Under my peculiar circumstances, I also developed special skills to read

fast and trace the line of romance quickly out of a novel's multiple themes. In the fifth grade, it took me only two afternoons before my sister and brother came home to finish *War and Peace*. It was a thick book even in Chinese, but I skipped all of the parts on war and focused on the pages when ladies appeared. It was not until the Cultural Revolution that I had more security to read romantic stories leisurely.

The Cultural Revolution began in 1966 at the end of my second year in junior high school. Girls in my class formed a Chairman Mao thought-propaganda team. We boarded buses after rush hour and sang revolutionary songs and recited Chairman Mao's quotations to the bus riders. It was a great treat to have free rides on buses. We giggled a lot each time we got off a bus, as we were amused by the comical contrast between the quietly indifferent passengers and bus conductors and our blatantly enthusiastic performances. "The adults don't like us being there, but none of them dares to tell us to get off the bus!" But our festive mood soon changed when Shanghai students began following Beijing students to form Red Guard organizations. Only students from Red families were allowed to join the Red Guards.

One day my two best friends and I were talking outside my home about the troubles on our minds. We revealed to one another for the first time our not-so-Red family backgrounds. Ying's father used to be a small business owner; Feng's father used to be a member of the Nationalist Youth League; and my father used to be a Nationalist Party member. At thirteen, I only understood that this was the first time I was disqualified for something not by my behavior and performance, but by something over which I had no control. I felt humiliated but did not know with whom I should be angry. But my low mood did not last long. Who cares about Red Guards anyway?! Humph! I don't even want to join you! I despised those Red Guards in army uniforms walking around with self-conceited airs. Big deal! I don't see anything special in you. At no time did I associate those teenage Red Guards with the image of a true revolutionary in my mind.

My fourth sister, a devoted young high school teacher, was criticized by some of her students. Her students thought she had a

permanent in her hair, which was naturally curly, and she was criticized for having a bourgeois hairstyle. The students also ordered her to turn in her outlandish clothing, a jean jacket with a sailor collar. She was miserable in those days. I was angry with those ridiculous and ungrateful students, because I knew how much my sister cared about them. Largely because of my sister, my sympathy was with the teachers. Once I saw two male students beating a teacher in my school. I was totally disgusted by the gross and ugly scene. I stopped going to school after that. There was no school anyway.<sup>5</sup>

Except for a trip to Beijing to see Chairman Mao, I spent the first two years of the Cultural Revolution doing my favorite things at home, singing and reading. It was like a never-ending summer vacation. No school, no worries about math tests, and no homework. I could read as late as I wanted and sleep in the next morning. Books were plentiful. My third brother's friend, the one from whom he used to borrow books, offered to give my brother many books. His father was a translator of novels and worried about a house search by Red Guards. His collection of books was evidence of his love for Western bourgeois literature, and he wanted to get rid of them. This was similar to my father's situation. He sent his lifelong collection of rare editions of Chinese classics to a recycling station to destroy evidence of his love for feudal texts. I remember my father's shaking hands touching each book before he parted with them, and I worried about his high blood pressure as his veins popped out on his forehead. I did not feel very sorry about my father's books, though. There was rarely any romantic story in them. Besides, who would want to learn about feudalism?

My siblings and I all loved nineteenth-century European literature. Before the Cultural Revolution these world classics had a legitimate place in socialist China. Supposedly, they would enhance our knowledge of the evils of capitalist society. I suspect it was a pretext invented by a huge body of intellectuals and translators who loved Western literature or made a comfortable living from it. To gain legitimacy in publishing such literature, intellectuals also published articles to guide young readers in reading these classics the "correct way." Often these guides presented a historical context of

the capitalist society in which the story took place and attributed the protagonists' limitations to their bourgeois class background. Glancing over these "guiding" essays that frequently appeared in youth newspapers, I knew I did not read in the "correct way," though my pleasure in reading was no less.

My brother stopped being mean to me in his high school years. My fourth sister was busy attending condemnation meetings organized by Red Guards in her school. No one was monitoring what I was reading. Surely my mind became more "complicated." I started to make my own romantic stories every night before falling asleep. In my fantasies, the beautiful and feminine heroine, me, and the handsome hero inevitably fell in love with each other, although we did not necessarily confide our love for each other. Many times I cried over a touching story in which I sacrificed my love for the sake of the man I loved, or vice versa. There was rarely any physical contact between the lovers. I did not yet know what sex was and could not imagine it even in my wildest fantasy. My love stories were fully charged with emotions, restrained emotions. The hero I loved was metamorphic, shifting from a well-mannered and reserved English gentleman from Dickens's, Hardy's, or Jane Austin's novels, to a passionate French lover created under Dumas's pen, to a sentimental melancholic Russian aristocrat in Turgenev's short stories, and finally to a devoted and loyal Chinese Communist revolutionary. Of course, I also tried to mix different qualities together to make the ideal type for myself. My hero wrote love poems like Robert Browning, confided his love in a sensuous voice like *Cyrano's*, and sang serenades beneath a marble balcony, where I stood, bathed in moonlight, wearing a long white dress. He has the physique and internal depth of Rodin's "Thinker." And he would bravely sacrifice his life for a noble cause like a Communist revolutionary, which was why I often cried over my stories. This project of fantasizing my ideal lover kept me preoccupied for the first two years of the Cultural Revolution, before I was sent down to the countryside. At the peak of Chairman Mao's endeavor to eradicate all bourgeois, feudalistic, and revisionist influences, I eagerly opened my heart and mind to a world of heterosexual romance imbued with Victorian gender discourse that blended well with Commu-

nist sexual mores. Who could have thought that my acquired passion for Victorian romance and "bourgeois taste" would assist me in becoming a Communist Party member?

At eighteen, two years after I had worked on a state farm in Chongming Island, I was accepted as a party member, one of the first four on the farm when the party began to recruit young members in the Cultural Revolution. I had not expected that my party membership would come so easily. The party leaders never even mentioned my father's political problem. It was not because they were too short of applicants to discriminate against me. Our farm had a population of more than twenty thousand young people, and many former Red Guards rose to become prominent activists. My best friend, Lin, had applied for a party membership much earlier than I, but she was not among the first to be accepted.

Lin was four years older than I, and a high school graduate, while I was only a junior high school graduate. We were assigned to the same dorm and shared a bunk bed. I was immediately attracted to her eloquence, quick mind, capability, and devotion to revolution. She had a lovely handwriting and wrote beautiful articles. Compared to mature high school graduates, we junior high students felt like kids. Lin stood out among all of the high school graduates in our brigade, and she was soon promoted as a team leader.

Lin and I talked all the time in the fields, whenever we were not out of breath. Actually, she talked mostly, and on one topic: the significance of the Cultural Revolution. Apparently sensing my apolitical naïveté, she patiently explained to me the history of the Red Guard movement, the great historical significance of the movement sending educated youths to the countryside, and the importance of guarding against revisionism. She enlightened me within only a couple of months. Her description of the goal of sent-down youth (*zhiqing*) fit well with my childhood utopian dream, that Communism aims to make the whole world a beautiful garden where everyone lives happily without exploitation and oppression: "From each according to one's ability and to each according to one's needs." Now we revolutionary youths were in the position to make our country a beautiful garden. We should make this barren

island a beautiful Communist garden as the first step. It seemed feasible to me, as long as we youth all devoted ourselves to that common goal. It cannot be more difficult than the Long March. It required only our sweat and hardship, not our lives.

I enthusiastically began to work toward this glorious dream, imagining myself among the ranks of revolutionaries who heroically endured hardship and pain for the sake of all people's everlasting happiness. Snow flew into our straw hut through holes in the walls. Muddy boots were frozen fast on the dirt floor in our dorm. Rain leaked through the straw roofs and onto our beds. Blisters on my hands bled from digging canals with a spade. Broken skin on my shoulder stuck to my shirt after carrying heavy loads on a shoulder pole for a whole day. My backbones felt as if they were broken from bending for long hours in the field transplanting rice seedlings. The pain was a test to see if I could become a true revolutionary. I confronted each test in high spirit. When the farm increased our salaries, I wrote a letter to the brigade leader sincerely asking for the lowest rank of salary. I reasoned, "When the Red Army soldiers were on the Long March, each had only five cents a day for food. I have no reason to ask for more than what I need to feed myself since our country is still poor." I was soon identified by the party leaders as a promising "revolutionary seedling."

I was striving to be a selfless revolutionary, and so was Lin. She influenced me greatly with the many revolutionary texts she passed to me. But why was I the chosen one and not she? There was only one significant difference between us: She switched boyfriends frequently, while I was without one. Her revolutionary image was severely tarnished by the succession of her boyfriends, while my reputation was impeccable. In fact, before I was accepted as a party member at a routine meeting, where I was to hear the evaluation by the masses, there was only one criticism: "Somehow Wang Zheng has a kind of aloofness. She does not make approaches to the masses." The criticism was a familiar one and came mostly from young men. Once when I was home on vacation, I told my father that some guys in my brigade criticized me for being aloof (*qinggao*, a term often applied to bourgeois intellectuals in the CCP language, connotes bourgeois disdain for the masses of workers and peasants).

I wondered if he saw that in me. My father replied immediately, "What *qinggao*? Any guy saying that wants to approach you. Just ignore them! I know what's in men's minds." I did not expect such a sexual interpretation for what I perceived as a personality problem in me. I found it quite illuminating.

The party leaders on the farm must have seen my "aloofness" in a different light. To these married men in their late thirties, this pretty girl was innocent, pure, serious, and hardworking. They adored this moral paragon who showed no interest in boys, let alone attract gossip. The first group of party recruits were role models for all of the youth on the farm. They had to be morally flawless.

Chairman Mao said, "The eyes of the masses are sharp." Those young men's complaint of my aloofness was perceptive. I sized up each of them at first glance. No one was even close to the ideal type in my fantasies. Why bother to approach them? My love has to be reserved for the one who deserves it. This was a firm conviction based on both the Chinese concept of chastity and the exaltation of romantic love in Victorian literature. Love, in my mind, was as sacred as the goal of Communism, if not more. The difference was that you could take action to build the perfect society of Communism, but you had to wait patiently or, rather, hopelessly, for your perfect love to appear. I was aware of the impossibility of obtaining my ideal love, and it caused me profound agony. Even before I arrived on the island I had thought about the barren Chinese rural setting with despair. Nothing could be more distant from my dream of a cosmopolitan romantic world permeated with music and flowers. Did I unconsciously translate my longing for a romantic garden into passionate action for a Communist garden?

The Communist utopia was my religion. As Marx said, "Religion is the spiritual opiate for the people." A large dosage of this special "opiate" effectively relieved the pain of my hopeless romantic longing and made me "high" in an environment that many without the spiritual opiate found hard to bear. It transformed my despair in finding the ideal love into hyper energy for building an ideal society.

The road to a Communist youth was imbued with gender. However, the subject position of Communist youth was not gender

specific. Clinging to this position, young women like me sensed few gender constraints in our devotion to the revolution. Numerous young female leaders emerged on this island with eight farms. This cohort never believed in female inferiority and were free from social expectations of the roles of wife and mother. Femininity was not defined as performing the traditional roles of wife and mother. To be a good *female* youth was to devote herself heart and soul to the revolution. This criterion implied a rejection of the role of wife and mother, which was embodied in the term *funü* and entailed positive appraisal of young women's remarkable ability and strength. We never worried about being seen as unfeminine for surpassing men in our job performance. When young female and male leaders got together at meetings or training sessions, we talked about our work and discussed Marxist theories on equal terms. Being the same idealist type, young leaders of both sexes shared a comradeship in our concerted efforts to build better farms. A utopia seemed within our reach since the atmosphere was already there. In those intoxicating moments with many young likeminded dreamers, I was a revolutionary youth, a Communist Party member. My gender was irrelevant.

On the day when my college roommates and I were discussing the meaning of *funü* and *qingnian*, I had already worked at various posts for a decade. Experienced as a farmworker, brigade leader, editor and director of the broadcast station on the farm, guide to national and local exhibitions, curator of an exhibition hall, and a movie actor, I regarded myself as a seasoned veteran in a bankrupt revolution. I could no longer identify with the party as a result of my disillusionment, which was intensified by the increasing knowledge of the power struggles within the party after Mao's death, a familiar experience shared by many of my peers. We were ready to discard Mao. But *qingnian-youth*, a term charged with Maoist connotations, was still dear to us. In 1978 the term no longer connoted a Communist dream. Identifying with this Maoist social category, we, the first class of female college students after Mao's death, unconsciously acknowledged our privileges and empowerment in being a youth in the Mao era.

Two decades had passed before I was able to examine the mean-

ing of Maoist *qingnian* at a conscious level. In China at the end of the twentieth century, *qingnian* has long been replaced by *nüxing* (female sex or femininity) as a dominant subject position for urban young women. Now femininity is in vogue instead of revolutionary youths. *Nüxing* connotes no revolutionary zeal as *qingnian* did, and it is not promoted by the party-state. However, *nüxing* spurs strong consumerist zest in the market economy since femininity requires, first of all, many feminine products, with cosmetics at the top of the list. Via new means of media, advertisements that have both reflected and contributed to the contemporary gender discourse of femininity have shaped gendered desires and identities more effectively than state propaganda in the Mao era. Does *nüxing* signify more freedom and space for young women's social advancement than *qingnian*? I don't think so. *Nüxing* helped a generation of young women in the post-Mao era acquire a legitimate sexual identity, unlike *qingnian*, as a dominant subject position in the Mao era that had dismissed sexuality. However, the recognition of female sexuality is double edged. Accompanying contemporary young women's greater degree of sexual freedom, the sexualized female body has been portrayed as inevitably inferior to the male body in the discourse of femininity. The innate weaknesses of *nüxing* have become the rationale for overt gender discrimination in employment and education in the post-Mao era. More seriously, young women who have been constructed by the discourse of femininity willingly choose feminine occupations, and those few who dare to cross or challenge gender boundaries appear unfeminine and unattractive in public opinions.

As a scholar studying gender discourse in twentieth-century China, I find myself frequently reflecting on my own gendering process when writing about gender before and after the Mao era. It has become increasingly clear to me that the gender-neutral subject position of Maoist *qingnian* has significant gender implications. My generation lived through a political era preoccupied with creating socialist new persons. Together with socialist constructors and Communist successors that defined what a revolutionary youth ought to be, these state-promoted gender-neutral terms marginalized many gendered terms in public discourse. Such discursive

practices did not aim at liberating women. Rather, they demonstrated the party's attempts to situate citizens in a new kind of social relationship, to pull both men and women out of the web of Confucian kinship obligations and to redirect their ethical duties from their kin to the party and the nation. Scholars of Communist societies may call this statist scheme manipulation or domination, but few have noticed that the enforcement of this scheme disrupted conventional gender norms and created new discursive space that allowed a cohort of young women to grow up without being always conscious of their gender.

Middle-aged, a mother of two, and residing mostly in the United States, I am no longer a qingnian. But deep inside, I recognize that temporal and spatial changes have not succeeded in removing subject positions formed in my youth. My interest in feminism is generated by its critical power, and it is also conditioned by my qingnian ideal of gender equality. I am delighted to have found in feminism a cause of my own, for the demise of Maoist revolution did not extinguish my youthful dream of a society of equality and justice, a dream shared by numerous feminists worldwide. Feminism also provides me with a critical position and feasible means to carry on a revolution on my own terms. No longer a qingnian, I still want to be a revolutionary nonetheless. I am stuck with the identity of "agents of social change" endowed by the Maoist state.

#### NOTES

1. The author wishes to thank the following friends and colleagues who gave comments on early versions of this essay: Bai Di, Paula Birnbaum, Grace Eckert, Gail Hershatter, Emily Honig, Loretta Kalb, Dorothy Ko, Sheila Lichtman, Nikki Mandell, Karen Offen, Raka Ray, Abby Stewart, Marilyn Yalom, and Xueping Zhong.
2. In the fall of 1977 the first nationwide college entrance exams took place after an eleven-year interval. Those who passed the first exams did not begin their class until February 1978. We were all brand-new college students at different ages.
3. See Claire Wallace and Sijka Kovatcheva, *Youth in Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 66.
4. When Deng Xiaoping took power after Mao's death, there emerged a nationwide Intellectual Emancipation Movement by the end of 1970s. Sanctioned by the new party leadership, intellectuals began to openly critique many practices of the Communist Party during the Mao era and to investigate the political and intellectual roots that led to the calamity of the Cultural Revolution.
5. All teaching in Shanghai schools from junior high and up stopped in early June 1966. All of the teachers and students were supposed to devote their time to the Cultural Revolution.

XIAOMEI CHEN

## FROM "LIGHTHOUSE" TO THE NORTHEAST WILDERNESS *Growing Up among the Ordinary Stars*

In September 1981, when the autumn leaves were turning brilliant colors, I became one of the first students from the People's Republic of China to enroll at Brigham Young University. A few parties and gatherings later, in the course of which my fellow students and I got to know each other, I was urged by my new American friends to write what they called my "incredible stories" of growing up in an elite theater family in Maoist China, especially the events that occurred during the Cultural Revolution. "You may never have to worry about graduate school once you strike it rich publishing a best-seller like that," they predicted, evidently feeling pride in their new friend who was a "Red Commie," and someone they would have never dreamt of meeting a few years earlier.

Moreover, my first week of teaching freshman English composition (as a graduate teaching assistant) made me an instant celebrity in the local evening news, much against my will. On camera, I distinguished between the American and British spellings of *aesthetic* and *esthetic* and convinced an all-American class that they could learn something from me about such topics as the six critical approaches to *The Scarlet Letter*. Oddly enough, however native my English might have seemed, it was the first time I really learned