THE ROAD TO LIBERATION: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE IN A SOCIALIST VILLAGE

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The Road to Liberation: Women's Experience In a Socialist Village

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Abstract

After the Liberation of October, 1949, the ensuing Chinese Party-state of the People's Republic instigated a number of social and economic reforms which included an attempt to improve gender equality, and thereby promote the "ultimate" liberation of Chinese women. Decades later, however, scholars note the persistence of many patriarchal arrangements that continue to effectively subordinate women. Feminists have criticised the Party-state for failing to keep its promise to work towards the liberation of women. A number of scholarly attempts have been made to examine the factors which served to hold back the progress of the women's movement in Mao's China.

This research is based on ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews recorded between 2011 and 2013 with both women and men in Yakou Village (Pearl River Delta). . It is designed to place the rural women at the centre of study. By hearing their voices and documenting their stories, I hope to deepen our understanding of socialist China and the relations between women's liberation and rural socialism.

This research explores the complexity of women's liberation during the time of Mao's leadership. By foregrounding women's experiences and voices, this research proposes that the women's movement in China is an incomplete revolution. On the one hand, the transformation in the relations of production brought about a growing economic independence for women, significantly reducing their subordination to male authority, while on the other hand, changes in social reproduction were yet to take place. This resulted from two factors. First, the increase was crawling in the collective accumulation of wealth failed to provide sufficient material resources necessary to transform the social relations of production. The second was the gap between the economic structure of society and the social consciousness. Mao's apparently abrupt reordering of the social structure after the Liberation was unlikely

to bring about new forms of social consciousness corresponding to it within a short period of time.

Specifically, this research shows that the traditional household as an economic unit was left undisturbed by the reforms put in place by the Marriage Law in 1950s; after all the attempts to socialise domestic labour failed following the Great Leap Forward, marriage as an institution continued to play its role in social reproduction (transmitting values and norms from one generation to the next). The persistence of the traditional household as an economic unit was also caused by a gap between the newly established social structure and the not-yet developed social consciousness. It is difficult to change the mind set of an entire population within a short period of time. Even with the introduction of new elements, such as the public canteens, a new type of social and family life was still beyond the reach of the imagination of most. I argue that women's liberation will not be fully realized until the mode of production undergoes a complete transformation—that women's liberation in socialist China was held back due to an incomplete transformation in the social relations of reproduction.

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I am deeply grateful to the women I interviewed in Yakou. They gave me so much of their time and entrusted me with the memories and knowledge upon which this thesis is based. Their stories not only helped me understand a history that belonged to them, but inspired me to strive to make my own history, for myself and for future generations. I gratefully dedicate this thesis to these women.

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Introduction

If I had known work would be so hard, I would not have come out.

Even three years later, I was still able to remember the words of GH, a resident of Yakou Village: "If I had known work would be so hard, I would not have come out." She had just finished telling me a story about setting up a public canteen in the late 1950s during the time of the Great Leap Forward, and was guiding me through a maze of criss-crossing paths in the village after her interview with me. GH, like many other women of her generation in Yakou, did not take on agricultural work after her family got land in the land reform in 1953. She stayed home caring for children and maintaining the household. Their land was farmed out and her family lived on the rental and the income her husband earned as a street vendor selling fish. The establishment of *gongshehua*, the "People's commune," brought her out of the household to the fields. The hard agricultural labour during the era of collective farming is indelibly imprinted on her memories.

Women's large-scale participation in social production, and the consequent reduction of their domestic duties has been interpreted by orthodox socialists as the most important step in women's emancipation. In this orthodoxy, as women engage in the social production, they gain a source of income which in turn helps them become economically independent of men. The idea is that freeing women from their domestic responsibilities will enable them to have access to the same opportunities as men, and allow them to engage as equals in public activities. Furthermore, the proposition is that emancipation of women cannot come about without a complete transformation of the relations of production, i.e., that women can only be truly emancipated when the means of production are collectively owned, when private domestic labour becomes a social industry, and the care and education of children becomes a publically-shared responsibility.

Mao chose exactly this route for China. After the Liberation, tremendous efforts were made to improve gender equality with the goal of liberating women. With economic recovery underway and a stable regime established, China gradually made private ownership illegal and established the people's commune system in the rural areas. Women began to work side by side with men in the fields, earning an income according to the principle of "equal pay for equal work." Attempts were also made to make domestic labour a collective undertaking. Although these experiments finally failed, there is little doubt that China under Mao moved gender equality to a level that had never yet been reached in history.

At the time, GH's words puzzled me. It seems that the Chinese women's movement, which intended to liberate women from the subordination and oppression of a patriarchal society, did not completely penetrate the rural setting as far as women were concerned. What happened in rural China after 1949? What did women experience? In what form and to what extent did the drive to transform the relations of production change the rural landscape in China? How did women respond to this transformation? And how do they understand their experiences when they look back to the remote past (at the time of my research)? Answers to these questions are not merely an intriguing aspect of the women's movement in Mao's China—they are key to understanding the Chinese women's movement of today.

The Setback of the Women's Movement in the Era of Market Reform

GH's words may well resonate with many women today. According to a recent survey by the All-China Women's Federation and National Bureau of Statistics (ACWF and NBS 2011)—unlike a survey ten years earlier—more women and men prefer an arrangement where women work in the home as homemakers and men work in the formal labour force as breadwinners. At the same time, the argument for having women return home continues to be made, not only by public officials but

also by academic scholars.[1] To Chinese feminists adhering to a Marxist perspective on the topic of women's liberation, this phenomenon represents a setback in the Chinese women's movement.

Such a setback may well also be visible in the situation rural women have faced in the wake of China's economic reform. The most significant change for the majority of rural women has been the systematic return of organization of production to the family unit by way of the Household Responsibility System (HRS), instituted in 1978. At the outset, the freedom and flexibility in organising agricultural production on the distributed land was met with enthusiasm of each household which in turn stimulated rapid agricultural growth and raised the per capita income of rural households. At the same time, the rapid development of the newly industrialized coastal cities, combined with a relaxing of restrictions on the mobility of migrant labour, made it possible for millions of rural redundant labourers including a huge number of women, to look for alternative employment in the city instead of working on the land. With this new source of income, the "working girls," the *dagongmei*, made a significant contribution to the family economy.

At the same time, rural women taking on work in the city have generally been limited to low-status and low-paying jobs with few benefits and few opportunities for promotion—for example, employment in factories, domestic settings, and service industries. The household registration system and the traditional patriarchal arrangements for a woman also mean that an urban existence for *dagongmei* is doomed to a certain transience because these women are often obliged to go back to their home village for childbearing given the absence of necessary support services for migrant workers in the city, such as housing, education, and medical care. And the spatial separation of production from reproduction of labour has been

[1] In 2001, a male member of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) publically proposed that married women should return to the home as wives, mothers and homemakers. In March 2011, a female CPPCC member made a similar proposal, arguing that in a family where the man earns an income sufficient to support the family, the woman should be encouraged to devote her energies to the home rather than working in the formal labour force. Scholars like Zheng (1994) and Sun (1994) support this type of arguments through their research.

strengthened with the emergence of the dormitory labour regime system leading to further alienation of workers (Jacka 2005; Lee 1998; Pun 2005; Yan 2008; Smith and Pun 2006).

The situation for migrant women returning to their rural household is no better. Here, women often have to take on the responsibilities for household tasks such as caring for the young and the elderly and for the farming work, which used to be performed by the whole family when the men were not away. The increase in women's participation in the agricultural sector, for various reasons, is referred to as the "feminization of agriculture," a phenomenon that has become a significant feature of rural economy in China (Croll 1994; Jacka 1997; Hu 2013a). Statistics show that there is an immense female population in this primary industry. According to the Third Wave Survey on the Social Status of Women in China, of the women employed in non-urban areas, 75.1% were engaged in agriculturally-related activities, 11.9% greater than men in a similar setting (All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) and National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) 2011). According to Hu (2013a), in 2001 the employment rate for women was 70.5% and for men, 7%.

Although the growing importance of the role of rural women in the family economy has indeed given them greater autonomy and has, to a considerable extent, eroded the patriarchal structure, both within and outside the family, all the traditional mechanisms that subordinate women continue to persist (Li 2005; Jacka 1997). On top of this, the increasing marginalization of agriculture has further reinforced women's subordination in the society (Hu 2013a). The persistence of the patriarchal structure in rural China, along with the growing marginalization of the agricultural sector, combined with unequal income and education levels, all indicate a persistent discrimination against women in China. In rural areas, women earn less than men—their average annual income is only 56% of their male counterparts (ACWF and NBS, 2011); they receive less school education, with a drop-out rate of 3.13% for girls aged 7–14 compared with a rate of 2.55% for boys (World Bank 2006). According to the 2010 census, 118.08 boys were born to 100 girls (down from

120.56 in 2008) (The National Bureau of Statistics of China). According to Fei (2004) and Zhong and Gui (2011), the apparently high rate of suicide for rural women can be attributed in part to the dramatic changes in China's economic and social structure (Fei 2004; Zhong and Gui 2011).

Certainly, the way in which GH conceptualised the "outside world" in Mao's China, and the way in which contemporary Chinese women conceptualise the "outside world" today are quite different. But the question remains: What do these women have in common that makes them inclined to think that the traditional gender division of labour provides a better arrangement? Which factors must Chinese feminists confront in order to advance the women's liberation movement? Or, when taking the socialist past into account—with respect to the status of women—and considering it in light of the status of women today, the question of interest is: What is the relationship between socialism and feminism?

Why was Yakou Village chosen for this research?

Yakou Village, located in the Pearl River Delta, and adjacent to Hong Kong, falls within the jurisdiction of Nanlang Township, Zhongshan City, the most developed economic region of the province of Guangdong, one of the richest regions in China. In early 1981, when the township attempted to introduce and promote the Household Responsibility System (HRS) with the intention of returning the farmland to private management, Yakou chose not to adopt this system, but to continue cultivating its farmland in the same way it had always done in Mao era, when production was organised collectively and annual distribution was undertaken on the basis of the performance of the labourers during the year. Yakou is known in the public media as "the last people's commune in the Pearl River Delta."

The decision to select Yakou Village as the site for fieldwork for this research was made according to the following considerations:

First, of the few villages which did not adopt the HRS when it was promoted nationwide in 1981, Yakou is the only village which continues to give top priority to

agriculture. For decades, the village has followed the same system to organise and manage agricultural production that was established in Mao's time. Here, farming is organised on two tiers: the village committee—still addressed as "the brigade" by many elderly villagers—takes charge of setting production targets, organising technical support, and generally overseeing production. The thirteen production teams actually organise the production, and take care of the day-to-day operations in the fields. Team members work collectively and their labour is recorded in the form of work points. At the end of the year, team members receive their labour remuneration based on the record of the work points they have earned. In this way, Yakou provides a complete data set that shows how the point system works.

Second, Yakou did not contract out the collective land to households—not because of any outside administrative decision, but as the result of a decision made by way of extensive discussions among the villagers. Compared to situations where collective land was contracted out to households, and where households consequently had to individually confront the ups and downs that came with this reform, the people in Yakou are supposed to have better understanding of the collective.

Third, feminisation has characterised the agricultural activities in Yakou since 1970s when men were attracted to sidelines. Today, the women of Yakou make up at least two thirds of those who labour collectively to undertake all the necessary agricultural work. For the elderly women in Yakou, some of whom still labour in the fields, collective labour has taken up much of their lives, while the tradition that requires women to assume almost all the domestic duties continues.

By observing women's labour and life in Yakou and listening to their stories, the arrangements of production and reproduction thereby revealed as they take place within the structure of the collective. In so doing, we will improve our understanding of the way in which gender relations have been influenced by the transformation in the relations of production. By exploring these issues, it becomes possible to reassess the achievements and limitations of the Chinese women's movement in Mao's China,

from the 1950s through much of the 1970s.

Chapter One Understanding the Women's Movement in China

1.1 Current Research on Rural Women in Mao's China

1.1.1 Studies of Chinese Women's Movement

The earliest academic studies concerned with Chinese women were conducted by western feminist scholars, beginning in the latter part of 1970s. Given the restrictions in place in China at the time, western scholars had limited access to Mao's China, especially to rural areas. Although some scholars were allowed admission, their access was limited to certain locations. Therefore, much of the research reviewed for this study relied on documentary materials and the media archives.

The academic literature published around this time tended to focus on the inconsistencies and limitations of the Chinese party-state when it came to the practicalities of addressing gender inequalities. For example, Davin (1976) examines the policies of the state and the way these changed with respect to women. She notes that, while the state was critical of the ideology that reproduced the subordination of women, the means by which the party-state hoped to liberate women turned out to impose "double burdens" on women. Wolf (1985) explores the degree to which the state fulfilled its promise to end women's subordination and to realise gender equality in political, social, and economic domains. She points out the problematic outcome of a revolution dominated by men, and a post-revolutionary government organized by men with no role for women.

Other scholars look at the patriarchal family system in an attempt to locate the origin of women's continuous subordination in Mao's China. Johnson (1983) examines the transformation of the family and of women's roles following the

Liberation of 1949. She proposes that family was the key site of women's subordination, and that the Marriage Law, which was expected to replace the "feudal" family system with a new democratic one, was not thoroughly implemented. She also argues that, as long as patrilocal marriage patterns (especially village exogamous patrilocal patterns) remain unchanged, the goal of promoting equality for men and women in the family will not be realised (128). She also attributes the state's failure to achieve equality for women to its compromise to the male peasants for their support in the revolution. Ultimately, Marxist revolution sells out feminism.

Stacey looks at the relationship between the Chinese peasant family and the party-state, arguing that, in a peasant family economy, the socialist revolution could potentially reconstruct peasant patriarchy, "which [would] restore family solidarity, and… [might] further inhibit prospects for the development of feminist consciousness' (1983, 266). In her analysis, the land reform, the Marriage Law, and later the collectivisation process were all strategies that consolidated a patriarchal system. She argues that the failure of socialism lies in the compatibility between the socialist mode of production and the patriarchal system, in much the same as way as the compatibility between capitalism and patriarchy.

The Marxist feminist, Croll (1980) focuses on the transformation of the mode of production following the War of Liberation. She notes that, while there were many achievements made by the Chinese women's movement, the subordination of women had not yet been eradicated. Rather than focusing on the inconsistencies of the party-state in its policies towards women, Croll directs attention to the fact that Mao's China was not merely one regime taking the place of another; it was a social project aimed at transforming the old political and economic institutions into new ones. She observes that patriarchal arrangements both in the household and the public domain were not fundamentally challenged:

> [Incomplete] transformations in the mode of production and the continuing though reduced role of the household as a unit of production and consumption continued to work against the reduction of patriarchal

> relations within the household and sexual division of labour within the public sphere. (Croll 1980, 282)

These scholars are, for the most part, preoccupied with party policies and political campaigns, assuming that policies and campaigns reflected social reality. As Honig (1985, 335) points out that it was difficult, if not impossible, to understand the changes that the revolution wrought in the lives of Chinese women only on the basis of political policies and programs. Without 'real women', she argues, their studies were severely flawed.

1.1.2 Research on Rural Women under the Collective

There are not many studies that focus on rural women in the people's communes in China. Academic interest did not turn to rural women until the middle 1990s when scholars began to pay attention to the issues concerning migrant women, such as the movement of female labour to non-agricultural sectors, feminisation of agriculture, and women in rural development (Gao 1997). Research based on first-hand fieldwork observations which also take into account the narratives of women engaged in collective agricultural labour is scarce.

The literature shows that since women started to participate in social production, their role in collective labour had been equally if not more important than that of men. During the Great Leap Forward, 90% of women labourers in many provinces participated in agricultural production (Hu 2013a; Huang 1990). During this time, the traditional division of labour along gender lines where women assumed domestic responsibilities was challenged to a certain extent (Jin 2006). Given that the family was seen as an autonomous economic unit, the particular contribution that women made to the household economy tended to be unspecified. Women's participation in the social production increased their status in the family, but the decreased freedom under the collective system, the low efficiency in agriculture and low work point

rates for women's labour all gave them little horizon to develop as individuals (Hu 2013b).

Some research in this area is, however, worth noting. Gao (2005) examined the mobilisation of women in the cotton production industry in the rural areas of central Shaanxi in the early 1950s. According to her analysis, women's participation in social production was not motivated by a state imperative to liberate women; rather, there was a need for labour and women were deemed more likely to adopt new ways of doing things. At the same time, women were compelled by the new ideas that were being promoted during this period, advocating that "Labour is glorious," encouraging them to "Step out of the house," and participate in "Women's liberation." There was also the important additional incentive that they would be paid according to the principle of "equal pay for equal work. However, in the process of being recognized in the terms articulated at the time: "Women are more suitable for cotton production," men were able to withdraw from labouring in the cotton fields, and to move to more skilled and better paid jobs. This created a whole new form of gender inequity.

Gao (2005) sets out the difficulties encountered by women in the 1950s when they attempted to join agricultural production: the traditional customs against women working in the fields, the particular hardship that came with rural labour, and the difficulty managing both the domestic duties and exigencies of labour participation in a collective system. Goa proposes that mobilising women to participate in social production throughout the 1950s seemed to be influenced by the Marxist theory about the oppression and liberation of women, yet many of the rights and interests of women as a whole were not put into practice. In short, gender inequality, when it came to a more equitable division of labour and labour remuneration, was not altered.

Hershatter (2011) undertakes an ambitious longitudinal study based on extensive archival materials and interviews with dozens of women in an attempt to investigate whether and to what extent there might be a correlation between rural socialism and

the life trajectories of rural women.[2] She places women at the centre of her inquiry and gave emphasis to women's voices. By documenting and interpreting rural women's accounts of the important social and economic events of the 1950s—such as land reform, collectivisation, implementation of the Marriage Law, the Great Leap and the famine—Hershatter is able to argue that women made a significant contribution to socialism but that their contribution was largely ignored.

Hershatter (2011) proposes that "all socialism is local." She emphasizes that, given the particularities of local geographies, relationships, and gendered work, China was not a homogeneous entity. She notes that, in order to understand the specific meanings of socialism, one must explore the way in which socialism is practiced and understood at the local level rather than conceptualising it as a constructed handed down from on high:

> Even the most prescriptive edicts of a centralized state must be implemented in widely varied environments, by local personnel who interpret, rework, emphasize, and deflect according to particular circumstances. The working out of state policies was everywhere contingent upon geography, prior social arrangements, and local personalities. (14)

While many programmes of socialism and the liberation of women were put into practice in the 1950s, this time was far from the "Golden Age" of Chinese socialism. This decade was likely witness to a fierce collision of ideas, customs, and forces, but to understand the relationship between socialism and feminism a longer time span must be considered.

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[2] Hershatter and Gao initiated a 10-year joint research project in 1996 in which they interviewed 72 rural women in a number of villages in 4 counties in the central areas of Shaanxi Province Gail Hershatter, "Making the Visible Invisible: The Fate of 'the Private' in Revolutionary China," *Going Public: Feminism and the Shifting Boundaries of the Private Sphere*, ed. J. Scott and D. Keates (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

1.1.3 Research on Rural Society in Mao's China

The massive changes in rural China in the 1980s have attracted considerable attention by both Chinese and international scholars, resulting in a great deal of research literature. While gender, for the most part, is not a major focus of these studies, it has nonetheless been considered and has provided some relevant perspectives for this research.

The issue that has frequently arisen in these discussions has to do with the work point system: whether the organisation and management of production under the collective was efficient, and whether labour remuneration was based on actual hours and quality of labour.

It has been found that women generally earned less work points than men. Sources uncritically attribute this difference to the perceived physiological differences between men and women (Gao 1999, 62; Potter and Potter 1990, 63; Lin et al. 2013, 169; Guo 2013, 129; Li 2009, 149, 203; Lu 2015, 143). However, on closer examination, differences in the specifics of performance are context dependant. For example, Bossen (2005) reports an instance where a woman (in Lu Village, Yunnan Province) chose to transplant seedlings rather than earn more by ploughing—not because she found ploughing physically difficult, but because ploughing required an earlier start, at a time when women normally had to first complete other chores such as cooking, feeding pigs, and caring for children (120).

The work point system as a method to credit one's performance in collective labour was created during the cooperative movement. It was often adjusted during this time as new situations arose. For example, Friedman et al. (2002) note that when the work point system was first introduced in 1953 (in Wugong Village, Hebei Province), people quarrelled all day long because they could see that there was little correlation between their labour and their reward. It was also riddled with gender inequality. A full day's work by an adult male labourer in the prime of his strength was credited with 10 points, while an adult woman labourer in her prime and an

older labourer would only be credited with 6–8 points, even though they accomplished exactly the same amount of work.

In 1954, some adjustments were made to assure that actual production be rewarded by paying piecework rates. This improved work point system combined with a quota system had sufficient incentives that even the lazy bones started to work harder (Friedman et al. 2002, 226–31). Li (2009) describes a similar situation where the team cadres had to adjust the work point system in order to encourage the members to work (187–89).

There is little doubt that the position of women in the household and in society in general improved as a result of their participation in collective production. However, the extent to which women's labour in the fields was accurately reflected by the work point system is unclear, as is the extent to which (or whether) women exerted themselves in order to develop a more equitable work point system that was actually based on their productivity and not their gender.

Another topic frequently discussed in the research literature concerned with rural China following 1949 has to do with the Marriage Law of 1950. Some scholars observe that the taboo on village endogamy was broken after Liberation. For example, following the land reform, families would marry their daughters to the village cadres in order to consolidate relations (Friedman et al. 2002, 251). At the same time, collective labour also increased opportunities for young people to work side by side, which in turn increased the likelihood of determining their own encounters (Gao 1999, 166; Lin et al. 2013, 129; Potter and Potter, 1990, 201).

Similarly scholars observe that women who came of age in the 1960s at the time of the Cultural Revolution enjoyed more autonomy when it came to making decisions about who they would marry (Li 2009, 155; Lin et al. 2013, 130), and that women were generally more active than men in resisting or not permitting parental interference in their romantic liaisons (Yan 2003, 85).

Nonetheless, it seems that betrothal gifts and customary wedding practices were never entirely abandoned although, during the Cultural Revolution, traditional

customs were restricted to a great extent, and in some areas were replaced with new practices (Hao and Hao 2009, 159). Few parents openly provided betrothal gifts to the family of a prospective daughter-in-law in the previously customary amount and kind. However, with the abatement of the policies enforced by the Cultural Revolution, traditional betrothal patterns and wedding ceremonials once again surfaced (Li 2009, 155). For example, Lu (2015) gives an account of families competing for which family would be allowed to hold the luxurious wedding banquet for the couple in question (148–50).

All the studies reviewed in the course of this research are grounded in the ethnographic method developed by anthropologists for collecting fieldwork data. But given that women are not placed in the centre of their inquiry, women's unique experiences have not been given enough attention.

1.1.4 The Shortcomings in the Current Literature

As noted above, research on rural women in Mao's China is limited. The research literature written by western feminists in 1970s and 1980s tends to be marked by an absence of "real women." Academic discussions tended to centre on the party-state's policies with respect to women's issues rather than exploring in greater depth the experiences of women "on the ground." But how these policies were implemented and in what ways they influenced women's life need further exploration (Croll 1980; Davin 1975; Johnson 1983; Stacey 1983; Wolf 1985). Research by Chinese feminist scholars after the 1990s is also hampered by the same problem (Hu 2013a, 2013b; Huang 1990; Jin 2006).

Research conducted after the 1990s do not take a feminist perspective. Although women do appear in the research literature of this time, they are often dealt with as simply another group of research subjects. Rural women's unique experiences in the era of the collective remain obscure (Gao 1999; Potter and Potter, 1990; Lin et al. 2013; Guo 2013; Li 2009; Lu 2015).

The few scholars who place rural women at the centre of their inquiry tend to

focus only on a certain stage in the era of Mao's administration, rather than on the period of the collective itself (Gao 2005; Jin 2006; Hershatter 2011). In order to properly assess the collective as a socialist project—with the aim to transform social relations at all levels, including gender relations—a longitudinal perspective is required.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

1.2.1 Marxist View of Women's Liberation

This study is grounded in a Marxist theory of women's liberation. Taking a material and dialectical approach, Marx and Engels locate the origin of women's subordination and oppression in the rise of class society. In *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels[3] sketches the history of the human family as it shifted from a matriarchal to a patriarchal system for determining decent and the transfer of property and rights. With the development of large-scale agriculture and the establishment of permanent communities, humans were able to produce surplus resources, and with surplus came the accumulation and unequal distribution of wealth. The outcome of this process was that communities began to split and small groups of men came to control most of the wealth and power of the wider population.

With the rise of a class society and the private property came the transformation of the sexual division of labour. Engels points out that, in pre-class society the sexual division of labour was rigidly defined, where men mainly hunted and women gathered, planted, and cared for the younger children. Since there was no private property, and people worked for the clan rather than for other individuals, both women's work and men's work had equal social significance. With the

[3] *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State* was published in 1884, after Marx's death. But since Engels used Marx's detailed notes along with his own, this work is considered to be a joint collaboration.

domestication of animals, came a shift to agricultural production which created an increase in the demand for labour. This shift in production, with more helpers in the fields, resulted in greater surplus. As a result, there was greater emphasis on women's reproductive capacity; women were encouraged to have more children and the family unit became the centre of reproduction. With the family turned into an economic unit of consumption, its function of reproduction was separated from that of production.

As men's role in production became increasingly important, women became increasingly deprived of their participation in the social production and were increasingly confined to their reproductive role. Engels (1972), in his speculation on the very early origins of the family, argued that, in order to ensure that private property would be passed through the male line, man followed "an impulse to exploit his strengthened position in order to overthrow in favour of his children the traditional order of inheritance," and to do this the "mother-right, therefore, had to be overthrown; and overthrown it was" (58). This, he argued, was how the nuclear monogamous family came into being. Engels looks at the overthrow of mother-right as

> the *world historical defeat of the female sex*. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children…in order to make certain of the wife's fidelity and therefore the paternity of his children, she is delivered over unconditionally into the power of the husband; if he kills her, he is only exercising his rights. (Engels 1972, 59–61. Emphasis in the original.)

According to Engels, the management of the household "no longer concerned society. It became a private service; the wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production" (1972, 79). In Engels' proposition, at some point there came about a complete separation of production from reproduction, a process that was accompanied by an emphasis on the former and a devaluation of

the latter, i.e., the devaluation of both women and the value of their labour.

Engels is interested in an historical progression and attempts to look at all aspects of the development of the oppression of women, from domestic abuse, the alienation of sexuality, the commodification of sex, to the drudgery of housework, and the hypocrisy of enforced monogamy. By stressing the connection between socioeconomic change and the subordination of women, Engels postulates an optimistic outcome: women's oppression could be ended if the social conditions necessary for the operation of the dominant patriarchal system are removed. According to Engels, if "the emancipation of women and their equality with men are impossible and must remain so as long as women are excluded from socially productive work and restricted to housework, which is private. The emancipation of women becomes possible only when women are enabled to take part in production on a large, social, scale, and when domestic duties require their attention only to a minor degree" (1972, 99).

1.2.2 Chinese Women's Movement

The Chinese socialists took precisely this road to women's liberation. That is to say, the shift in emphasis that allowed women to take part in socially productive work on a large scale came with the socialisation of domestic labour. By 1957 the nascent socialist state had initiated a new programme of socio-economic construction in order to create the conditions that were materially favourable to the emancipation of women. The 1949 general principles of the Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference explicitly stated that "Women shall enjoy equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, educational and social life." The Land Reform, which had been put into effect in the old liberated areas ten years before, was now implemented at the national level. This policy, gave women an unprecedented sense of their importance and the potential for guaranteeing their economic independence. The Marriage Law, enacted in 1950, was the first law to be passed by the new government. It was designed to provide a new foundation for

intra-family relations by allowing free choice of partners, monogamy for both men and women, equal rights for women, and legal protection of the interests of women and children.

This policy formed the legal basis for women's equality in all areas of social, economic, and political life. Experimental attempts to reduce the private ownership of the means of production—in the form of co-operatives which had been in place long before 1949 and later institutionalized as peoples' communes in the rural areas during the Great Leap Forward—launched a significant attack on the economic basis for the patriarchal household. Women began to enter into agricultural and other areas of production, such as construction and water conservancy, with the expectation of "equal work for equal pay." At the same time, policies were introduced to collectivise household chores. Many forms of labour were socialised in rural areas, ranging from preparing meals and food processing to sewing clothes and caring for children.

This study will not deal with the Chinese women's movement separately. It will treat it as inextricably interwoven with the socialism in place in the era of Mao's China. It is only with a full understanding of the radical economic and social transformations which the country underwent, that can we understand the achievements and limitations of the Chinese women's movement.

Chapter Two Approaching the Past

2.1 Yakou Village

Yakou Village is situated in the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province. To the east of the village, the Pearl River flows into the estuary, across which is Hong Kong (Lantou Island). Cuiheng Village, the birthplace of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the "Father of the Nation" of the Republic of China, lies to the south. From here, it is easy to travel to Gongbei Port 37 kilometres to the south—one of two ports of entry between mainland China and Macau. There are three streams flowing through the village. Two, Lujia Xi ("Lujia stream") and Xin Xi ("new stream"), have their sources in the Yunti Mountain situated to the west of the village. The largest of these, Da Xi ("big stream"), originates in Wugui Mountain, about ten kilometres to the west of the village.

Yakou is under the jurisdiction of Nanlang Township, Zhongshan. It is an administrative centre, with an area of 36 square kilometres and a population of 3,330 in 2010. The 980 households comprising the village are part of eight natural villages, or "villagers' groups" (*cunmin xiaozu*). Inhabitants with the name of Tan live in five of these natural villages: Xibao, Zhongbao, Dongbao, Xiangxi, and Pingshan. The other three natural villages, Lujia, Yangjia and Huamei, are inhabited mainly by those with the names of Lu, Yang, and Xiao respectively.

Yakou is noted in Zhongshan for its abundant land resources. Rising tides over time left silt deposits in the Pearl River estuary which have systematically been reclaimed as arable land since the middle of the Ming Dynasty. By 1949, Yakou owned about 7,000 *mu* of paddy land.[4] In the land reform in 1952, Yakou gave away

[4] *Mu* is a Chinese unit of area. One *mu* equals 614.4 m². Interviewees also speak of *fen* and *qing*. *Fen* is one tenth of a *mu* and *qing* refers to 100 *mu*. In Yakou, a field that was reclaimed from the river was usually named according to the area it occupied. For instance, when the local people talk about Five Qing, they refer to a field which encompasses about 500 *mu* of land. *Yakou Village Annals*, p. 76.

several thousand *mu* of land to neighbouring villages which were short of land. Today, Yakou still owns 3,000 *mu* of paddy land and 20,000 *mu* of reclaimed tidal land.

Yakou Village has a subtropical climate with an average temperature of 21℃. The average annual rainfall is about 2,000-3,000 millimetres. A favourable climate, fertile soil, and surplus water makes it an ideal place for growing rice. The farmers are able to grow and harvest crops twice a year. The first seeds are planted in February following the Spring Festival and harvested in July; the second harvest lasts from August to November. Less fertile or more remote fields are used as fish ponds, and sugar cane is planted on the dikes around these ponds. The hilly areas are used to grow lychees. The vast tidal land, where the salt water and fresh water mix, is used to farm fish, various shellfish, and crabs.

Prior to 1949, 83.07% of the land in the village was controlled by eight landlord families and six wealthy peasant families.[5] It was not uncommon for men in Guangdong Province, and from Yakou, to leave the village for work, overseas or in other regions of China. While many early emigrants went to San Francisco in the second half of 19th century, later emigrants chose to settle in Hong Kong and Macau during the time of the Revolution of 1911 revolution, and again during the time of the Second Sino-Japanese War.[6] Those who stayed in the village either rented land from the landlord families in order to grow rice or they worked as fishmongers.

Fishing was an historically important enterprise in Yakou. Each day dozens of fishing boats brought hundreds of tons of fish onto the beach where the fishmongers waited with their bicycles. From here, they would transport and sell the fish to markets in Shiqi, the seat of the county government and other neighbouring townships. These fishermen depended on the village peddlers who supplied the fishermen with grain, vegetables, firewood, cooking oil, and salt.

The advantageous location of Yakou made it one of the busiest places in

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[5] Ibid., 77.

[6] Ibid., 123.

Zhongshan. It is close to both Hong Kong and Macau, which made it an important historic hub for smuggling and redistribution. Yakou attracted numerous merchants and was the centre of a booming market. According to the historical accounts, the central street of the village was lined with dozens of shops selling groceries, rice, oil, cloth, tofu, wontons, tobacco, medicine, and dim sum. Every morning, villagers would bring to market their varied harvests of eggs, produce, fish, shrimp and crabs. Mountain people from nearby also came to sell firewood and ornamental silver grass. Tea houses, gambling houses, and opium houses did a brisk trade. Historically, although Yakou had vast expanse of arable land, farming was not a primary occupation for the locals. For example, three quarters of the inhabitants in Yangjia lived by fishing, and land was generally rented out for farming by peasants living in neighbouring villages.

Historically, grain growing in Yakou yielded several millions of catties of grain,[7] and this capacity prevented the village from being disturbed during times of war. Neither the activities of the Japanese army, nor those of the local armed forces organised by landlords and bandits (later incorporated into the Nationalist Party's forces), nor the guerrilla forces led by the Chinese Communist Party in the Wugui Mountains, affected crop production. Yakou was seen as an important source for food supply. Mobilised by the Communist Party, many villagers secretly helped the guerrilla forces by delivering grain to their base in the mountains, or hid guerrilla fighters from the Japanese. Some even joined the militia in local operations such as cutting off passages through the territory by destroying roads or bridges.

In 1952, when Yakou Village enacted land reforms, each villager received about two *mu* of land. Since then, commerce wound down and agriculture became central to the economy of the village. With the co-operative movement to collectivise

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[7] This is an estimated figure. There are no statistics to show the average annual grain output in Yakou Village. But according to archival sources, the average annual grain output in Zhongshan County during the period of the Republic (1911-1949) was between 200 and 250 kilograms. So the figure for Yakou is estimated at 2,800,000–3,500,000. Zhongshan Municipal Archives, retrieved from http://www.zsda.gov.cn/uploads/book/zhuanyezhi/nongyezhi/44.htm.

agricultural activities (1953 to 1955), a co-operative was organised in each of the eight natural village; these merged in 1956 to form one advanced agricultural co-operative. In October of 1958, the Nanlang People's Commune was established. Yakou was one "production battalion" (*shengchan ying*), and in 1976 it became the Yakou Brigade. In 1981, when the Household-responsibility system (HRS) was introduced in China, Yakou did not fall in line with the state policy to distribute its collective land to individual households. As one of the most successful collective agricultural villages at that time, and an important garrison site for the Foshan military region, Yakou's decision won support from the county authority (Cao 2004, 142).

Today the 3,000 *mu* of paddy rice land is cultivated collectively by approximately 600 labourers (one third of the total labour force in Yakou), which are organised into thirteen production teams. These labourers can be classified into three categories: the elderly, the women who remain at home to look after the children and the elderly, and the villagers who are unable to find employment for one reason or another. Present-day agricultural technology has mechanised much of the production process, which means that farming in Yakou is not as physically demanding as it was in the era of Mao's government, and even less physically able labourers are able to be fully competent at their work. Labour continues to be recorded in the form of work points and annual distribution is based on the work points accumulated for the year.

What distinguishes Yakou from the other well-known collectives in China, such as Huaxi or Nanjie, which see industrialisation as the way to prosperity, the village leaders of Yakou see agricultural production as the highest priority, particularly for its role in ensuring food security. Economic success is seen in terms of "two legs": paddy rice farming and the leasing of land. While collective agriculture is an important source of revenue, Yakou receives its primary annual revenue from renting out land, a source of external revenue that makes it possible to subsidise the farmers and thereby maintain the current collective system.

2.2 Historical Ethnography

Yakou Village has been able to maintain its agricultural collective for over sixty years. This study focuses on the first three decades, from 1949, the year that Zhongshan County was liberated, to the late 1970s, when the HRS was advocated nationwide. Collective farming (or communal agriculture) was established in China and, after several political and economic ups and downs, finally developed.

The women in the village of Yakou are the subjects at the centre of this inquiry. This research considers the narratives and recollections of the women who were part of the early years of collectivisation in Yakou, as a way of coming to a better understanding of women's experiences under the collective at the present time. The research addresses the following questions: What do Yakou women know and remember about their experiences during that era; how and why do they remember these experience; and how do they interpret their present life and link it with the past. To put together a history such as this means a journey to the past, and the ideal approach for conducting a study of this nature is historical ethnography.

Silverman and Gulliver (1992, 16) define a historical ethnography as a "synchronic and diachronic study of a past time" which is particularly concerned with "how the past has led to and created the present":

> [It] provides a description and analysis of a past era of the people of some particular, identifiable locality, using archival sources and, if relevant, local oral history sources. The ethnography may be general, covering many aspects of social life during that era, or it may concentrate on specific features, such as social economy, politics, or religion. It was this kind of ethnography that at last brought anthropologists away from long-established, clumsy devices and assumptions such as the ethnographic present, autarchic "communities," and stable "tradition." (p. 16)

Historical ethnography is different from traditional historical accounts, which are based on the written record, often using archival materials because the subjects of

the study are no longer living. A historical ethnography, rooted in the discipline of anthropology and its characteristic methodology of ethnography, is concerned with describing a society in which "people were active and interacting, making decisions, following or avoiding 'rules' and creating adjustments" (Silverman and Gulliver 1992, 17, 18). According to Silverman and Gulliver, in order to document a society with attention to "social dynamics, process, and change" the anthropologist must rely not only the historical record but also take into consideration the "many 'native points of view,' which provide an entry into the complexities of real social life and real people" (17, 18). They emphasize that a dynamic history can best be constructed by also taking into account the contradictory nature of multiple viewpoints (emerging from differences in status, class, age, gender, and so on).

Comaroff and Comaroff (1992), in their discussion of the ethnographic enterprise and its relation to historical anthropology, identify three distinct forms of historiography. The first is evident in those analyses which seek to aggregate descriptions of social structures by shedding light on their cyclical dynamics. So even if these accounts produce perceptive narratives of social struggles, such narratives are removed from history: they never lead to transformation. The second form of historiography is evident in the more "historical" analyses which attempt to verify descriptive accounts of existing social systems, another way of using the past. The authors note that, while this is a highly persuasive form of writing history, the methods employed are likely to "deflect our attention away from the problematic quality of habitual practices, hiding their historicity by mystifying their meaningful construction and the bases of their empowerment" (22).

The third mode of historiography outlined by Comaroff and Comaroff is "based on the axiom that all social orders exist in time; that all are inherently unstable and generically dynamic" (22). They refer to Leach's classic and "remarkable" treatise[8] and emphasize two salient points, that a) local systems should

[8] Edmond Ronald Leach. *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of the Kachin Social Structure*. Norwich: Fletcher and Son, 1964.

be situated in the wider political and social worlds of which they are part; and that b) all human communities are shaped by an interplay between internal forms and external conditions. Comaroff and Comaroff note that Leach's work, despite its shortcomings, it created a model for what historical ethnography could achieve given its intention of constructing a sociologically plausible version of what might have occurred at one time in a distinct society.

2.3 Data Collection

2.3.1 Data from the field

When I arrived in Yakou on the last day of November, 2011, Team No. 7 (Lujia) was having a meeting to work on the year-end summaries. It was a sunny morning. All the members were gathered in the square in front of the *gongbiao*, which translates to "the ancestral temple."[9] The men were squatting against the wall smoking, and the women, greater in number, were grouped in small clusters in the open area, either standing or sitting on stools they had taken from the hall. I was introduced by the team leader as a college student who was to take part in their collective agricultural activities in the coming year for "social practice." I received warm applause, and then they went back to the meeting. The team leader went on to report on the performance of the team, but eventually the crowd became more boisterous. I did not quite understand what was going on. Although I could understand 80% of standard Cantonese, I could barely understand the regional dialect spoken in Yakou at the beginning of my stay there.

Later the team accountant, who also spoke Mandarin, explained that a group of women were complaining about way in which work was being dividing during the harvest. This particular group was responsible for drying grain; for some days the weather had been poor and they needed help but no one would come. As a result,

[9] The building was a not a temple in the real sense of the word, but rather a two-story concrete structure. Apparently, the original temple was demolished by a typhoon in 1964.

some grain was lost and their productivity suffered. The work point rate for drying grain was based on the final amount of grain weighed in the granary. The issue was that those responsible for cutting rice argued that they would receive work points if they had suspended their own work to help. In reality, according to the accountant, the group responsible for cutting rice was somewhat jealous of the grain dryers because the work point rate for drying grain was higher than that of cutting rice. To settle the dispute, the team leader first calmed both sides, and then promised to grant twenty points to each person who was assigned to cut rice but would help with the grain drying in the following year should the same situation arise.

By the time I returned to the village, the Spring Festival was over. The first harvest was about to start and I had already settled myself in a rented house just behind the *gongmiao* which had been vacated by the owner when he emigrated to Macau some years earlier. I had also been able to familiarise myself with my new surroundings and establish a rapport with several younger women by dropping in and joining them for after-dinner walks or the short trips to the market downtown.

The younger people in Yakou are usually better educated and able to speak Mandarin fluently. With their help, I was able to learn to read the leader's notices on the board indicating when and where the team was to undertake specific work. We would walk to the field to work if it was nearby, and if it was further away, my new friends would take me along on their electric bicycles. In the course of working in the rice fields, I had learned the different ways of transplanting seedlings, but in these early days it was still difficult to distinguish weeds from rice plants. Working with the younger people of the village provided me with frequent opportunities to observe and get a sense for the way in which people worked in the collective.

During the break, we would talk a great deal. They were curious about my work, and I would answer any question they asked with sincerity. In time, I came to know more women, along with some older women in their 50s and 60s. Women in this age group were generally able to speak Mandarin, and indeed, took a certain amount of pride in being able to speak Mandarin. They all seemed happy to share stories about

the days of their youth, and often, as they talked some of the younger women would join in. On the other hand, I did not speak much with the men in Team No. 7 (except the leader). Although I tried, but felt their hesitation and did not persist. I never come to know whether men proscribed from addressing young women from outside the village.

Once my presence was accepted, I began to get help from the team members. They introduced me to the older members of their family or their older neighbours. I was soon able to select my first group of women for interviews, and from these women I was able to identify more women who were prepared to share their stories. I had three criteria for choosing the participants in my study: age, residence, and role. I specifically wanted include women from each decade (i.e., the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s); women that lived in different areas (i.e., from the eight natural villages); and women who had different public roles (e.g., the director of Women's Affairs, a member of singing and dancing troupe, a canteen worker,etc.).

Wang Yan introduced me to many of the women I was to interview, and she accompanied me to many of the interviews. As the former head of the kindergarten in the village, her role as "Teacher Wang" eased my access to the people I chose to interview. Translation was always necessary to ensure accuracy. Because I got to know Wang Yang, I was also able to get to know her former students who helped me with translation and transcription in their time off or during their vacation.

I interviewed twenty six women and sixteen men in the village—both in a formal and informal manner. With each interview, I would generally introduce myself and explain the purpose of my research. However, few of the people actually understood what I was up to. Where the older generation tended to identify me as *zhiqing*, a term used to address educated youth in Mao's era, the younger generation saw me as a college student participating in social practice.

The interviews were often unstructured: no fixed or detailed research design was specified at the outset, and pre-conceived categories for interpreting the texts were not built into the process. I would simply encourage each woman to talk about "the

old days" and follow up on whatever she brought up. Women often Women did not usually tell their stories in a chronological sequence, often moving between the present and the past, or they would remember something and move off on a different tangent. They travelled free in time in their narratives from the past to the present and then back to the past again. Their accounts seemed confusing to me at the beginning, but gradually, as I came to hear more stories, a number of themes surfaced.

2.3.2 Archival Materials

As well as collecting data by way of participant observation and interviews, I was also able to make use of archival records. The Yakou Villagers' Committee had recorded the history of the village over time in two annals, which provided important points of reference when I came to analysing my interview data. As well, I undertook research at the Zhongshan Municipal Archives and the Guangdong Provincial Archives. I was able to review directives, work summaries, newsletters, work plans, and surveys all of which helped to provide a context for particular historical events. There were some limitations to these records; due to the various levels of declassification to which these materials were subjected, the historical record could appear somewhat fragmented.

2.3 Data Analysis

Transcription. The first step in making data analysis possible was the task of transcribing the narratives. In order to ensure that the information was captured, I always reviewed the audio recording with my interpreter at the end of each interview. At this time we would work out a list of topics that had been covered in the interview, along with annotations of the content. In this way, I was able to review each transcript according to the list I had put together with my interpreter and ensure nothing had been lost in the process of transcribing the audio recording to text.

Given that my transcribers were untrained, I was not confident they would capture all the information. Later, when my language skills had improved, I was able to compare the transcription to the recording by listening and reading at the same time. Sometimes I did the transcription myself.

Content analysis. Following the process of transcription and verification, I gave the texts a close reading and identified the common themes through a process of adding and abandoning: as more interviews were completed and more transcripts produced, I had to remove some of the themes I identified earlier because they did not fit framework that emerged from the data. I used a similar process of content analysis for the archival records.

Validity. Given that my research is grounded in the principles of historical ethnography, my analysis does not see memory as the repository of "truth" or "fact." I was less interested in what "really happened" in the past, and more interested in what women remembered and how they understood their experiences. For example, I would not characterize a woman as a liar and exclude her story from my study if she claimed to have fought the Japanese, a story which some other interviewee later might prove to be untrue. For my purposes, I considered the reasons that motivated her to tell her story more significant than the facts of her story.

2.4 Ethical Consideration and Reflection

As with many scholars attempting navigate the territory between writing history and writing ethnography, I had to consider whether to name the village and the individuals I interviewed in my account. Hershatter (2011) reminds us that historians aim to reveal their sources and establish the unique circumstances of their subjects by fixing them in time and place, while anthropologists protect the anonymity of their sources and are able nonetheless to establish both the unique circumstances and the shared cultural assumptions of their subjects through ethnographic description (20). Although the people I interviewed generously shared their stories with me, it is not clear that they really understood what I would do with their stories, nor is it clear

that they understood role as a student researcher or the outcome of my research.

In the end, I decided to name the village and protect the privacy of my subjects by using initials to represent the people I interviewed. Uncle Man is an exception. He is a public figure, the hero of numerous news stories, and a considerable number of academic publications regarding Yakou are based on his interviews. However, in order not to over-emphasise his role, or single him out as having elite standing in this rural society, I also used initials (MSH) to identify him in the same way as I did the other individuals that I interviewed.

Another ethical consideration I had to take into account was the necessity, as I saw it, to ask personal questions in the course of my interviews. Stacey (1988) notes that qualitative feminist researchers are often in a position of having to ask uncomfortable questions. I tried not to avoid uncomfortable questions, and when I saw that my question were not easy for the women, I simply left it to them to decide whether to continue with the interview. With the exception of a few women, who dealt with my questions by giving an ambiguous answer in order to head off further discussion, most women answered my questions directly, especially the older women. I was struck once, when a woman said at the end of her interview, "Well, I had never told anyone about the experiences in my past. My children are not interested in my experiences at all. But now that I've talked about them, I feel relieved." I saw then that her observation validated my work.

Language and dialect differences presented a barrier. I was never able to talk freely with the villagers even though I made great progress in understanding what I heard. With the exception of interviews with eight women, all the other interviews required an interpreter. And given their lack of training, my interpreters often found it tricky to find the right moment to interrupt a woman's story in order to translate what she had just told me. Therefore, I often missed following up on parts of the narrative that needed clarification or further exploration in ways that might help broaden my questions. This study is limited by not having a systematic body of data, and it may be further limited in the extent to which my conclusions might be

speculative in nature.

Nonetheless, despite the challenges and, at times, the uncertainties, I did manage to record the stories told by the women of Yakou and I now present them here.

Chapter Three Collective Labour

CXN was in her thirties when her husband died of cancer in 1958. He left her with four children and an infant that still needing to be breastfed. CXN's mother-in-law was not good to her. CXN later considered either remarrying or rafting to Hong Kong like many others, but these ideas were never acted on.

> I went to the sea every day. If I had wanted to leave, I would have left 500 times. I couldn't just run out on my litter of children. So the only thing I could do was work, work hard to bring them up. I worked very hard. Once I tried not going to sleep for twenty days. I didn't even look at the bed.
>
> I don't remember which season was the hardest. If you ask me, I would say it was hard all year round. Was there anything that was not hard if you worked in the production team? Two crops a year. Especially in the sixth moon. After you cut rice, you would be busy ploughing and preparing for the next season. You had to pull up and transplant seedlings. Pulling up one load of seedlings would make your head swim. So I say, farming is the most laborious. If you have a daughter, don't marry her to a farmer.
>
> I was not a slacker. When I carried buffalo dung, I would tramp it down so it was very solid. We didn't wear shoes when we worked in the fields like people do today. When I carried something, I always unloaded it as soon as I arrived at the destination, and then I immediately rushed to carry the 2nd load. Cutting rice in Five Qing, I could finish 4 or 5 loads in half a day. I didn't do it slowly. I ran. When I got to the field, I didn't pay attention to anything else. I cut until I had a load and then left quickly.
>
> Once, two men worked with me. We cut in Five Qing, and then Shahuan,

and then *Yunbojiao*.[10] When we arrived there, they both said, "It's tragic! No one will send our meals here [to such remote place]." I said, "No. No one will send my meal either." I hadn't had my breakfast or my lunch. I worked till 3 p.m. The two men sat on the ground, and looked at me blankly, and said they felt feeble. I said, "Let's bundle one more load of rice before we go back." The men said, "Oh, no. We feel weak. We won't do it." I said, "You should do it even if you feel weak. I am a woman, and you're men. I can do it, and why can't you?" Then I asked them to haul rice back. They asked me to walk slowly and wait for them. I said, "No, I won't. I must go back to do the housework." After we came back, they lay on the threshing ground, tired out. You could hardly blame them. They had no breakfast, no lunch, but they still had to carry a load of rice back from Five Qing to Pingshan. I said I worked as hard as they did. But it's impossible to go back without a load of rice. How could I go back empty-handed? Where to find such stupid people? So I told them to haul rice back. When they arrived, their faces were dark with fatigue.

Once, DZ saw me threshing rice on the threshing ground. He was the Party Secretary and circulated around the fields to oversee. He saw that all ten tips of my gloves were worn. Later he talked about me at the brigade meeting. He said I insisted on working even though the tips of my gloves were worn. Later, I confronted him. I said, if you send my name to the commune, I'll kill you.[11]

The story by CXN is striking. It not only shows the hardships encountered by a widowed mother of five as she tried to raise her children on her own, but it reveals the complexity embedded in women's new identity under the collective: a labourer. Collective labour placed women in a subject position which had never existed in Chinese history. It freed them of economic dependence on men and redefined gender relations in the public sphere. However, while this new identity brought women new

[10] Wu Qing, Shahuan and Yunbojiao were about one hour's walk from the village. In busy seasons, the production teams normally arranged a temporary kitchen to prepare and send meals to those working in the remote fields.

[11] Interview with CXN, 2012.

experiences, their traditional role in the household continued, which meant that for women, their burden was doubled.

This chapter looks at women's experiences as labourers under the system of collective farming. As an important part of farming labour force, women participated in almost all types of agricultural activities, including transplanting rice seedlings, delivering dried pond sludge as fertilizer, digging drainage channels for war, and making mud bricks for the dikes. Women earned work points just as men did, but Both men and women earned work points, but the points earned by women for the same chores tended to be less than those earned by men. This changed over time.

3.1 Collective Labour in the People's Commune

Women's participation in what Engel's identified as "socially productive work" has been seen as the key to their liberation. Engels points out that the "emancipation of women and their equality with men are impossible and must remain so as long as women are excluded from socially productive work and restricted to housework, which is private. The emancipation of women becomes possible only when women are enabled to take part in production on a large, social scale, and when domestic duties require their attention only to a minor degree" (Engels 1972, 99). The Chinese party-state followed the Marxist line on women's liberation, and after it came to power, and with collectivization underway, its goal was to mobilise women to take part in the collective labour force.

There has been a great deal of scholarship focusing on the organization of labour in collective farming in China. Many studies have centred on the egalitarianism in the state's agricultural policies. According to the authors, people's labour and labour payments were not effectively linked to each other. No matter how one's performance was, one always got the equal share of payments to others. (Putterman 1987; Xin 2005). Other studies have focused on the collectivist process of production, which some scholars claim was flawed due to the lack of effective monitoring of the production process. In these analyses, peasants are seen as

self-interested and rational but also vulnerable to state authority (Lin 1987, 1994; Zhou 1995). Workers had no choice in some situations but take "the weapons of the weak," such as slacking off in the fields, and stealing or concealing portions of the harvests which they would share out later in private (Gao 2006; Guo 2013).

These studies see such factors contributing to the "failure" of collective agriculture. However, more recent ethnographic reconsiderations of collective agriculture question some of these conclusions. Laotian (2005) points out that, during the period of collective agriculture, the management of labour made use of two types of work point systems: time rates (*pinggong*) and piecework rates (*baogong*). Under the piece rate system, the effort of peasant workers was credited according to the amount of work they were able to finish. With this system, there was no need to monitor the process of production. Under the time-rate system, team cadres usually worked with their team members which meant that the cost for monitoring was not high. Although shirking existed, peer pressure made it less likely to happen (Li 2009, 197). To make it easier for the team cadres to monitor labour output, production teams were divided into small groups (Gao 1999, 61; Li et al. 2013, 98). When needed, adjustments were made to adapt the work point system to the new circumstances (Li 2009, 187–89). Egalitarian methods of labour remuneration were adopted only for a short time and in limited areas.[12] For most of the period that the people's communes were in place, the work point system was considered fair and reasonable (Gao 1999, 62; Zhang 2013, 81).

As women entered the agricultural labour force and received their own wages, their economic and social position was redefined. Nonetheless, disparity in wages given to women and men persisted. Feminist scholars have criticised the state for its failure to fully abide by its promise of "equal pay for equal work" for all. In the rural

[12] Egalitarian policies were adopted in only a number of provinces during the more radical years of the Cultural Revolution (in the late 1960s and the early 1970s) when the Dazhai-style work point system was advocated. And in the areas where the Dazhai system was adoped, it was not accepted by all the production teams. For instance, only 50% of the production teams in Guangdong adopted the Dazhai system (see Li 2009, 363, Note 1 for Chapter 8).

communes women often received only half the wages of men. While the traditional gender division of labour between the public and the domestic had yet to be redefined, a new division took place in the public sphere: women tended to take less skilled and lower paid work (Croll 1980; Wolf 1985; Stacey 1983).

There were several reasons embedded in the gender disparity in labour remuneration. Traditional division of labour was based, in part, on physical strength which taken into consideration when determining the value of labour. Men were perceived to be stronger than women and thus men's work tended to be "heavy" and deserving of more work points while women's tended to be "light" and therefore worth less work points (Gao 1999, 62; Lin et al. 2013, 169). Additionally, Women's work points were often docked for being late or absent due to their domestic duties especially those having to do with caring for children (Lin et al. 2013, 169). This meant that the value of women's labour would vary according to different phases of their life cycle (Li 2009, 203). Li (2009) notes that, in the end, the patriarchal gender bias prevented women from earning the same work points as men even though everyone acknowledged that men worked much less than woman (203).

Theoretically speaking, gender disparity would not take place unless when women and men did the same work under the time rate. Because women and men were graded with different "base points" according to their physical strength, a full female labourer would always get less work points for working the same amount of time than a full male labourer. However, under the piece rate, a system of different labour grades would not be effective since work points were calculated on the work an individual team member had finished: the more work one did, the more work points one got. The piece rate system gave peasants a strong incentive to maximize their work. According to Li (2009) this strategy on the part of workers "to increase the quantity of one's work at the cost of its quality…was especially likely under piece rates" (197). Nonetheless, Li notes that people worked with greater enthusiasm under this system and points out that the disparity of labour remuneration was narrowed under the piece rate system (187–88).

However, it was difficult to apply the piece rate system to all tasks. Collective farming was continually facing the challenge of how to assign work and record work points according to the principle of *anlao fenpei* "to each according to his work" in a fair and just way.

3.2 Earning Points from the Production Team

3.2.1 The First Time in the Fields

With the land reform, Chinese women were entitled for the first time to their share of land with the result that the number of women who participated in agriculture sharply increased. By 1952, women who worked in agricultural production made up 60% to 90% of the total female work force in China (Deng 1953). In Zhongshan County, the number of women who began to take up agriculture is unknown, but 45% of the women joined the agricultural mutual aid groups following the land reform (Zhongshan County Women's Federation (ZWF) 1955).

As noted in Chapter Two, prior 1949, although there was a great deal of arable land in Yakou, most villagers were engaged in small businesses and did not farm. And it was rare to see a woman labouring in the field. Women were generally preoccupied with traditional responsibilities associated with the domestic sphere: housekeeping and food preparation, caring for children, raising pigs, and looking after their vegetable gardens. Women also did other work to help support the family, especially in cases where men were not capable or simply lazy and good-for-nothing. Many women travelled to sell their fresh produce in Macau, which allowed them to purchase daily necessities that they in turn sold to the small shops in their home village. Young women might have been employed as maids by well-off families in the village or nearby areas. Prior to 1949, women would only work in the fields if needed for transplanting or harvesting tasks, or when their men were ill (or indulged in gambling). LSH (born in 1927) remembered his mother's activities this way:

> We didn't have land before the Liberation. We rented land. When I was small, our family rented only a small plot because only my father and mother worked. My mother didn't know much about farming. My father didn't do it seriously. He played *majiang* and procrastinated. My mother couldn't do that much work on her own. So only when we were grown and could help out, did we rent a bigger field.
>
> In those years some people smuggled salt and sugar from Hong Kong to Yakou Village. They always asked my mother and the others to carry these goods. Once, Tofu Tian's father came after my mother had just given birth. My mother said, "How can I go? I'm still in confinement!" Tofu Tian's father said, "Don't worry. We can help you." So my mother had to go.[13]

By 1953, the land reform was completed in Yakou and each individual had received about two *mu* of arable land[14], which made it possible for the previously landless households to live by farming. However, many households were ill-equipped to manage the day to day business of farming—lacking the farming skills, equipment, or sufficient labour resources—so they would instead hire workers to farm for them. Those who could not afford to hire workers joined mutual aid groups to pool their resources and support each other. By 1954, these mutual aid groups had grown into eight agricultural cooperatives which, within a year, merged into an advanced agricultural cooperative. During this period, for the most part, where farming did occur, traditional division of labour continued with men caring for the fields and women tending the household. LSH recalled: "For each family kept pigs and there were many tasks in the household. Women already had enough."[15] Women were not drawn out to participate in socially productive work on large scale until the formalisation of communal agriculture.

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[13] Interview with LSH, 2012.

[14] Besides the two *mu* of arable land, each individual in Yakou received about one *mu* of woodland (Interview with MSH, 2012). But the women in general do not remember this.

[15] Interview with LSH, 2012.

In a few households following land reform and the parcelling of land to individual household, women became the primary farmers for a variety of reasons. In these cases, they took on all the farming tasks including those that had previously been seen as unsuitable for women, such as ploughing. Although the people I interviewed often failed to offer details about farming in the earlier years, I could sense from the way they recalled this time that farming their own land was a complex experience of remembered pleasure, hardship, friendship, bitterness, joy, and an aspiration to a better life.

YL was born in 1933. Her father died when she was young, and her brother was in the army when their household received their eight *mu* of arable land:

> I was still working as a housemaid in Foshan when I received my mother's call. She asked me not to work as a housemaid any longer. She asked me to go back. Everyone got two *mu* of land. Three girls, and my mother, we four got eight *mu* of land. My brother was in the army then. We had a buffalo. I learned everything, ploughing, rice transplanting.
>
> How did I learn ploughing? First I watched others ploughing. Then I tried it myself. And when raking the soil, I also watched how others did it first, and then I tried it. When one did ploughing, one must display no lack of vigour. Otherwise, the buffalo wouldn't listen. Our buffalo was a good one. I wasn't scared of it.[16]

For most women, especially those with of small stature, ploughing was not easy. ZHF (born in 1937) recalls that her family, together, received twenty *mu* of land. With a father who gambled and a mother who was ill, ZHF had to work with her elder brother in the fields:

> I was 15 or 16 then. At the beginning, we didn't have a buffalo. So we used hoes to plough the land and then we broke up the lumps of dirt with our feet. Later my brother and I joined a mutual aid group. We were the youngest. We chipped in for a buffalo. I learnt how to plough with the

[16] Interview with YL, 2012.

> buffalo. But the plough was heavy so my brother didn't let me do it anymore. It was hard to plough. If the plough went too deep, you couldn't move it. If it went too shallow, it was not good.[17]

Even though ZHF felt that ploughing demanded of strength, she still believed the women could learn to plough: "Men and women could do ploughing if you learned. There was nothing women couldn't do."

YL and ZHF were among the few women in Yakou who did finally learn to plough following the land reform. Although more women participated in agricultural production as mutual aid groups and co-operatives developed, the number of women who learned to plough did not increase. This was partly because of the physiological differences between women and men, as in the case of ZHF. It may have been that cultural factors came into play, although this was not expressly acknowledged by my informants in Yakou. For example, FQ was born in 1937 and was an activist at the time when the land reform was enacted. Because she could speak Mandarin she was able to undertake interpretation for the work team at time when many others were not able understand Cantonese. She recalls how men responded when YL and another woman learned to plough:

> YL came and asked me if it was good to learn ploughing. I said it was. Then I told the men YL wanted to learn ploughing. But the men said, "Women learn ploughing? No." I asked, "Why not? If women learn to plough, you men will not be so tired." Another woman from Dongbao also wanted to learn ploughing. The men said, "If you plough the field, we won't have anything to harvest." When I heard this, I scolded the men, "Nonsense! Your head is shorter than your hair!"[18]

Clearly, women were not encouraged to plough. Considering that the mutual aid groups and the co-ops were generally led by men, this might have also been an

[17] Interview with ZHF, 2012.

[18] "Your head is shorter than your hair" is a swearing phrase that meant "being short-lived." Interview with FQ, 2012.

intentional response. Men generally had an advantage in terms of physical strength and farming skills, and they were just as likely to leave to themselves the tasks with high work point rates such as ploughing, and to assign to women those tasks with low work point rates. Although I have no evidence for this speculation, given that few of the people I interviewed remembered how decisions were made at the outset with respect to the issues concerning work assignment and work points, the following story told by FQ about learning how to transplant suggests that the process of decision-making was not a smooth one. Conflicts between men and women occurred from time to time:

> At the beginning we women only helped men carry seedlings while men transplanted seedlings. I said, "No, No. It's not right. They men are bullying us. They make us lose out. No. let's go to learn transplanting." We helped them carry seedlings all day, but the men just stayed in the fields smoking. If we didn't offer them enough seedlings, they would scold us. So I said, "No. We must learn to transplant seedlings ourselves." So we learned how to transplant. We're the first group to learn transplanting.
>
> When we learnt transplanting, ha ha, you don't know what fun that was. I made a row in the middle at first and asked other women to draw close to it. But they moved farther and farther to both sides. When the men saw it, they scolded us. They said we did a poor job. They said we should return to carrying seedlings. I said, "Mind your own business. We'll have harvest anyway. You want us to carry seedlings for you, but how many work points will you give us? We'll carry our own seedlings and we'll transplant them ourselves. Back off!" It turned out that we did a better job than the men. That year we produced more grain. After that, the men kept silent.
>
> This happened in Pingshan too. The women carried rice seedlings and the men transplanted them. I asked the women why they didn't transplant seedlings themselves. They said the men didn't let them learn how to do it. Then I said, "We women could hold up half of the sky.

> Why don't we hold it? You can learn it yourselves. Don't let the men look down on you." Later, the women learned transplanting. The men had to carry seedlings themselves and they all scolded me. Ha ha. It was not easy to carry seedlings. We had to walk a long way. The load was heavy and our shoulders were rubbed raw. The ridges were narrow and we could hardly walk on them.[19]

An official document by Zhongshan Women's Federation (ZWF 1955) shows that women did not learn much in the way of farming skills when households were still working alone on their own land. However, as the collective agricultural movement developed, women made progress in this area. Not only did they learn the basic skills but they also learned new techniques. The ZWF document also suggests that, at the outset, people may well have still been in the grip of "feudal" thinking, accustomed to believing that women were not equal to the same tasks. This would account for the way work points were given out where women's labour earned less work points than men's even when they did the same work in the same way as the men. However, data from Yakou Village shows that as the principle of labour remuneration in the socialist society 'to each according to one's work' was applied, women and men could enjoy equal pay for equal work.

3.2.2 Labour Grading

From the time of the Great Leap Forward (1958), the labourers in Yakou were graded according to their ability (or physical strength). Given that men generally had an inbuilt physiological advantage, they usually had a better labour grading. The women I interviewed told me that, in Yakou, while the men outnumbered women in the category of the first-grade labourers, it was not uncommon to have a first-grade woman worker. In fact, of the twenty-two women I interviewed who did farm work prior to the 1980s, fourteen had been classified as first-grade workers.

It turned out that labour grading mattered most during two periods of time: the

[19] Interview with FQ, 2012.

Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), and again at the time of Mao's campaign to "Learn from Dazhai in Agriculture," initiated in 1963. In the latter stages of the Great Leap, when the public canteens were short of food, grain rations were determined according to labour grade. For example, first-grade labourers were offered half a catty of grain for each meal while second-grade labourers were allotted less than two hundred grams.

When the "Dazhai-style" work point system was promoted in Yakou in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, labourers were enabled to determine their own labour grade, followed by a "public appraisal" given by their work mates. The differences in the amount and the quality of their work were reflected in the grade they were awarded, rather than by the work points they were given. The way that the local people of Yakou tell it, labour grading seemed to have been more about honour than remuneration.[20] Although there was only a one-point difference between grades, the women I interviewed spoke with pride if they had been awarded a high labour grade, while those who had been awarded a lower grade still could not help complaining.

Nonetheless, a few still saw labour grading as having been unfair. For example, CJT (born in 1938, Team No. 3) and came to Yakou Village with her husband when he was transferred from the army to civilian work in 1961. At this point, she began for the first time to do farm labour and was assigned the lowest grade on the basis of her small stature:

> I was short, and I didn't know how to work in the fields. So I got the lowest grade…. Gradually I knew how to do it, and then I was given Grade 2.5…. Other people were big and strong, but we're short and small.... We're weak labourers. We had to accept whatever they gave us. Some people got Grade 1.5, or Grade 2. They were good at work…. If you're not good, you'd get a lower grade.[21]

Although there are no statistics to show how many women were first-grade

[20] Interviewed with CXN, 2012, HWP, 2012 and LD, 2012.

[21] Interview with CJT, 2012.

labourers in Yakou, many women interviewed state that they were the best labourers in their team. At the same time, MSH made complimentary remarks about other women labourers in Yakou: "Women were strong labourers. Their performance was no different from men's. …Some women could carry three bags of grain on their bicycles. There were 500 catties altogether. These women were really tough. Most men were lazy."[22]

CXN—whose story was introduced at the beginning of this chapter—was certainly one of the tough women. She brought up her children alone because she was able to earn work points on the production team. When her youngest son found a job in Zhuhai in 1980s, she retired and moved to live with him there. Recently she moved back to the village, and was pleased to find that people still remember her:

> When I came back, people said, "Well, it's a waste that you don't work in the fields." I said, "Enough! I worked for so many years. I've had enough!" Now it's more comfortable to work in the fields. People wear shoes and socks. In the past, we hauled rice, and one load was at least 180 catties heavy. Sometimes it was 200 catties. Now, when people in Zhongbao see me, they all say, "If you were Number 2, no one would dare to be Number 1."[23]

Apart from one's ability to do the work, one's attitude towards the work was taken into account, and personal relations also played a role. JM (born in 1954) began helping her mother, LS, in the fields when she was eight years old, and before she was twenty JM was already a skilled labourer with an assessment of Grade One. She explained how labour was graded during this time:

> You took your work seriously. When you carried manure, you worked hard to do it and you would earn many points. Then you were Grade One. That would be the result of the group appraisal. It's not the decision of the team leader alone. There were, say, ten people in a group and

[22] Interview with MSH, 2012.

[23] Interview with CXN, 2012.

> altogether 5 groups.[24] Your group would appraise each member of our group, and then our group would appraise each member of your group. Well, when the team leader asked, "Which grade should JM get?" people would answer, "Grade One." "And so-and-so?" "Grade Two." If people had different opinions, then they would argue.
>
> Certainly personal relations were considered. "I feel you are serious about your work, and you are friendly, and I think you worth Grade One." This was the way I presented my point.
>
> I think the assessment of our labour was fair. Look, we were young and certainly we were stronger than you people in your 30s. You're no match for us, whatever the work was. I was definitely the best. There were not many girls who got Grade One. Only the capable ones could get it.[25]

Although, for the most part, the people I interviewed said the labour grading was usually fair during the period where "Learning from DaZhai" was being promoted, they all felt that the "public appraisal" process was an annoying one. Apparently, the monthly labour appraisal often took several days before it was over because team members had been arguing over an unsatisfactory result. However, in the event of a quarrel, the leader would manage to solve it. CXN described the mediation process this way:

> You worked and I worked, but why was your grade so high and mine so low? You would argue. Then the leader would explain it and you would not argue any more. A simple example [The leader might say]: "You two pull up seedlings. But who ties up the seedlings beautifully? She [or he] does, and so she [or he] gets a better grade. Don't you think so? If you two have the same grade, and now if we want you to show us how you tie up seedlings, can you do it as well as she [or he] can?" The leader would reason the matter out like this. Then all the other fellow members would echo, "Yes, yes. It is right that the leader makes the decision."

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[24] JM is mistaken here. Team No. 7 was divided into four groups for labour grading during the years of "Learning from Dazhai." Several interviewees confirm this (JY, 2012; MSH, 2012; and KSH, 2012).

[25] Interview with JM, 2012.

> They all said she [or he] made beautiful bundles of rice seedlings but that you did not. And then you would not argue any more. You were not her [or he] match. How could you ask for more points?[26]

It is interesting to note that, in contrast to the women I interviewed—whose memories of labour grading are vivid and sharp—the men, the cadres, that I interviewed tend to treat the topic of labour grading as not worth speaking of. MSH thought labour grading is counter to the principle of "to each according to his work" and saw the years of "Learning from Dazhai" as a time of "eating from the same big pot," stressing that this period only lasted for a short time:

> We didn't do it seriously. It was just a naive idea that the superiors had. People worked together. If you had many friends in the team, you might get them lined up to appraise other members poorly. Though labour grading impressed people, it didn't last long. Anyway, since I returned to the village, it had never taken place. Labour grading did not work at all. Labour grading was done around 1969 and 1970…. People worked one day, but might spend three days appraising each other's labour.[27]

It is believed that under the Dazhai-style work point system, the ignorance of one's actual work, i.e., the type and the amount of the work, and emphasis on one's attitude towards work led to egalitarianism to a large extent. In reality, some production teams did not apply the Dazhai-style work point system. HW, the team leader of Team No. 5 between 1967 and 1973 reported that his team rejected the Dazhai-style work point system from the outset:

> When we're told to learn from Dazhai, we didn't agree. We insisted on "to each according to his work." We awarded team members points according to their actual work so they did more and got more. The brigade denounced me, but I was not scared. I had a knack for doing my

[26] Interview with CXN, 2012.

[27] Interview with MSH, 2012. MSH was born in 1937. He worked in the Nanlang Commune as a clerk from 1971 to 1973. In the spring of 1974 he was appointed Party Secretary of Yakou Village, at which time he returned to the village.

> work well, and I held my ground. You wanted to follow the Dazhai line, fine, go ahead, but I'll do it my way as long as I do good work.
>
> It's hard to say if labour grading was not implemented smoothly. It's always decided by the team members themselves. But I didn't care. I always calculated their points according to their work. I always assigned tasks to individuals (*fen rengwu*).[28]

"Assigning tasks to individuals," *fen rengwu*, was a common method for applying the piece-rate system. Once the task was finished, the labourer would be awarded the number of points that would have been set in advance. In this context, one's labour grade was not taken into account. As noted above, labour grades, which determined one's "base points," led to inequalities in labour remuneration in circumstances where team members worked under the time-rate system, i.e., where they did the same work for the same length of time but were awarded different work points. The accounts of the villagers in Yakou suggest that, although the labour of the team members was graded, it could overridden if a piece-rate system was used.

3.2.3 Work Point Rate

In order to record work points for individual team members, a key factor was the prior determination of the work point rate for specific tasks. And this was complicated. To do this, MSH explained, a production team usually selected an able-bodied male and recorded the amount of work he could finish within a unit of time (usually eight hours):

> For instance, if a young and strong labourer who could do his work by the standards set, needed to deliver fertilizer to a field 5 kilometres away [the standard stated that] he could carry a load weighing 120 catties and walk 50 kilometres in 8 hours. That is, he could deliver 600 catties of fertilizer a day. If we set 15 points as the value of this standard [600 catties per day], when you delivered 100 catties, you would get 2.5

[28] Interview with HW, 2013.

points.[29]

In practice, when assigning a specific task and recording work points, the team leader needed to consider both the difficulty of the task and the distance of the work site, and if necessary, modify the standard rate. MSH said,

> When setting the work point rate for transplanting rice seedlings or cutting crops, not only the weight or the area was calculated. The distance the team members had to walk to finish the task was also considered. There were around 3 or 4 levels. 1 kilometre, 3 kilometres, and 5 kilometres. Work points would be adjusted accordingly.[30]

Certainly, few team leaders would not go to the extent of setting the work point rate of a particular task in such a precise manner. They usually relied on their experience, although it was not impossible for team leaders to intentionally raise the work point rate of some tasks in favour of certain people. Usually, team leader would announce their decision about work point rates at the beginning of the agricultural year, and the team members would generally accepted it if it was normal and fair. However, there were also occasions where the members would participate in this decision-making. For example, when the work point rate determined by the team leader was not found acceptable, in which case the team members would bargain and the leader would negotiate until a new rate was decided.

JY (born in 1948) joined Team No. 7 in Yakou when she married in 1968. She recalled that she bargained for a better work point rate when she decided to herd the cattle in 1970s:

> I drove the buffaloes out to graze at 8 o'clock in the morning. And then I removed the buffalo dung [from the barn], and littered some straw on the ground. The barn was clean. At 2 o'clock I went out to bring the buffaloes back. Thus, I finished that day's work, and I got 24 points. The team leader gave 20, but I asked for 24.

[29] Interview with MSH, 2012.

[30] Interview with MSH, 2012.

> Nobody wanted to take this job. You had to do it even on the lunar New Year's Day. The beasts ate every day, after all. On that day, you had to take them to drink water, remove the dung, and haul a pile of straw there. In the evening, you had to go again to take them to water. While you left the beasts in the water, you had to haul straw for them to eat. And then you brought them back.
>
> You went out to work at 8 or 9 in the morning and wouldn't be able to come back till 2 o'clock in the afternoon. You were away for such a long time. Those who stayed home every day could do their housework, however much it was. So no one would choose this task. Thus, if I was to do it, I had to ask for a higher work point rate. If it hadn't been raised, I wouldn't have taken it.[31]

Bargaining would work only in cases where the team leader had no other options. Even so, the team leader would be cautious about accepting individual demands in order to avoid any unfairness that might be caused by altering the work point rate. Once, the ploughing group in Team No. 7 claimed at a meeting that the work point rate of ploughing did not match their labour output and that it should be adjusted. But their claim was denied by their fellow team members (who were mostly women), and the team argued. The leader immediately asked the accountant to calculate the work points of the ploughing group, only to find that the work point rate already in place helped the ploughing group earn several hundred more points than the other team members, and so he rejected their request.[32]

In cases where more than one team member would apply to do a particular task, the leader would ask them to submit a bid. For example, the task of drying was one of the most difficult and demanding tasks. It involved a number of steps: it had to first be winnowed and then dried in the sun before it could be moved to the granary. The entire process usually took a month to complete and, because of this, the work point rate for drying grain was high and members would compete for the assignment.

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[31] Interview with JY, 2012.

[32] Interview with HY, 2012.

In order to set the work point rate for processing grain, the team cadres would first meet to discuss the number of points that should be given for processing every 100 catties of grain, after which they announced their decision at the team meeting. The members wanting this assignment would write their bid with their proposed work point rate on a piece of paper, and the lowest bid won. The winner would then recruit members who were willing to join her or him, because this process could not be done alone.

In Yakou Village, the work point rate varied from one production team to the next, and the a production team might change its work point rate for particular tasks from one year to the next in order to respond to new situations. However, in general, the difficulty of the task was the primary factor for determining the work point rate: skilled tasks were usually given the highest rate, such as ploughing, drainage, and irrigation. As noted above, the team leader announced the work point rate for each task for the coming year at the annual team meeting, and if there were no objections raised, he would proceed to record work carried out by each member accordingly.

3.2.4 Task Assigning

Before factories were established in the village in the late 1970s, earning work points by way of working in an agricultural team was almost the only source of income. In order to get more points, women usually ended up working very hard. When they talk about working in the field, they often refer to *qiang gongfen*, which literally means to "grab work points." For example, when it came time to transplant rice seedlings, the leader did not assign people to work in a specific field—it was virtually impossible to do so at in certain areas at certain times of the year because some fields were too muddy or sandy to navigate easily, and people would not be happy if assigned there: "If you worked in Five Qing, water and mud would come as high as your knees. It was very deep there. One could hardly walk. There, cutting crops or transplanting seedlings in a field of eight *fen* would knock you off your

feet.”[33] This meant that, in order to assure that all the tasks would be finished on time, the leader had to let the members select the field on a “first come first served” basis. JM recalled how she “grabbed” work points in the 1960s:

> I was still a teenager and had just joined the team. I got up at 3 a.m. to pull up rice seedlings. And at 6 a.m. I had to find a field to work on. This was something one had to learn. The leader wouldn’t assign you to a good field. Those who went early could get good fields. Some fields had a lot of sand or were too muddy and were not good for transplanting seedlings. People would not choose these kinds of fields. Only those who were late took them.
>
> We would set off with a torch at 3 in the morning. We had to pull up rice seedlings before dawn and haul them to the field. At that time, if you were capable, you’d do more. If not, you’d do less. Everyone worked hard to grab points.[34]

“Grabbing work points” meant that one could get more pay by doing more work. This approach to assigning tasks was usually applied to the heavy and urgent jobs which had comparatively high work point rates, such as transplanting rice seedlings. Though it was a form of piece-rate and followed the principle of “to each according to his work,” it was nonetheless unfair to those who could not compete for reasons of physical ability or domestic responsibilities. STP (born in 1926, Team No. 6) complained about not having been able to “grab” work points:

> People went to pull up seedlings at 3 a.m. and by 9 a.m. they had finished one *mu*. Everyone tried to grab more points. But how could I work like them? I couldn’t. They were all Grade One! For me, it was good if I could get all the children settled in the morning. When I could finally get away, the others had nearly finished. How could I compare with those single women? They could start to work once they got up. They were capable and got lots of work points.[35]

[33] Interview with CY, 2012.

[34] Interview with JY, 2012.

[35] Interview with STP, 2012.

"Grabbing work points" resulted in complaints about unfair competition; it created a disparity in work point earnings and the strategy was soon given up in favour of having the leader assign tasks to individuals. To do this, leaders first apportioned fields into sections of roughly the same size. Then they had members draw lots to decide who would work in which part of the field. Women welcomed this approach to assigning tasks. CJT elaborated:

> When transplanting the seedlings, the leader divided the task among members, and it was good. If we had done it collectively, it wouldn't have been good. You're a woman, how could you match men in doing the work?
>
> Once the team's gong sounded, we had to arrive and confirm our work for that day. We wouldn't grab work. We drew lots to decide our work. But if you were late, someone else might take yours. So you had to be punctual. How could one be late?
>
> I had one *mu* [to work], and the others had one *mu* too. If I couldn't do as much as the others, I would do less. Suppose I was given one *mu*, I would not shirk. If you were good at the work, you might finish and come back earlier. I was not good, and so I came back later. In order to finish my work, I might have to go out to pull up seedlings at midnight, 1 o'clock! Sometimes 2 o'clock.[36]

Sometimes the team members had to work in groups to get a job done. For example, when pedal-powered threshers were used to cut rice, the machine had to be carried by a number of people in order to get it to the field; it also required cooperation to operate the machine. In these cases, members would freely form groups of three, but which group was to work in which field was still decided by drawing lots.

When it came to routine and temporary jobs that were relatively easy and lightweight and did not require all the members—such as cutting bamboo poles on

[36] Interview with CJT, 2012.

the hillside or carrying seed grain to the fields—the leader would assign the work to individuals by hanging name plates on the board in the front of the ancestral hall. In the morning, before eating, people would go to the hall to check whether they would be working that day and what work they would do. Following their meal, they would start working until they were finished, at which point the leader and the team accountant would check their work and record the work points.

Leaders may well have favoured personal relations when assigning these less demanding individual tasks. For example, the people chosen for individual (rather than team) tasks might be able to sit comfortably in the village shelling seed peanuts instead of bending their backs over weeding with a hoe. The former might even earn more work points than the latter, but these tasks were generally temporary and, in reality, leaders would not be likely to show favouritism in this way given the necessity to keep the potential to earn work points in balance. When asked whether some members would be allowed to earn more points than others because they had been favoured with more opportunities to work, CXN remembered the leaders as having been fair:

> No, that wouldn't happen. The team leader made arrangements. Today he could arrange you did this. The next day, he wouldn't have you do it. He would organise other people to do it. He would share the work among the members. If he let you do it every time, your work points would be high. No, the team leader wouldn't do this.[37]

However, equal opportunity, in principle, did not mean egalitarianism when it came to being paid for one's labour. In Yakou, the major tasks were assigned to members according to the piece-rate system. Physical strength and attitude were factors that differentiated one worker from the next; in this way the undesirable situation of "eating from the same big pot" was avoided. For example, a strong worker could finish an entire day's work of transplanting seedlings and ask for a new job immediately, where a less able worker could easily spend more time finishing the

[37] Interview with CXN, 2012.

same amount of work. In this case, the former would always be able to do more work than the latter and would certainly have the opportunity to earn more points than a physically weaker worker, for example, by carrying additional and heavier loads of manure to the fields. In reality, strong workers would not have been willing to accept the same remuneration for the same time spent:

> Some people who carried more would get more. You might carry dozens of catties while she [or he] carried several hundreds. Of course she [or he] had more work points. If all the people had the same work points, they would have stamped the ground and collapsed in anger. It was true with everything. Some got more points and some less. Some got several hundred more than the others.[38]

Slacking was inevitable. For example, a worker might cheat by dipping a basket of manure in a stream, or by hiding stones in the bottom, thereby increasing the weight of each load before arriving at the scales. However, this practice would have been unlikely to persist given the strict supervision and the severe penalties if caught. When I raised the possibility of cheating, CXN protested: "Put stones in the basket? How dare you! If you had been caught, all your points for the day would have gone. No one did it."[39]

The leader's supervision was important for making sure that work was done well but, more important, the reality that the production team provided people with their principal source of income also ensured that work was done well. In practice, everyone was united by a web of common interests under the collective. HW states that his team ranked third in Zhongshan for the crop yields of 1972.[40] He explained the motives behind his team's achievement:

> We had to eat. And we had many mouths to feed. I had eight sisters and

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38 Interview with CXN, 2012.

39 Interview with CXN, 2012.

40 The information offered by HW was not confirmed. But the official record shows that Team No. 5, led by HW, did have the best performance in terms of grain production for 1972 (Yakou Archives 2007: 29).

> we all depended on the collective. So I had to work well, whatever the cost!
>
> I worked side-by-side with the team. Whatever we did, I took the initiative. They transplanted seedlings. So did I. They cut and carried crops. So did I. Though people all wanted to have a comfortable time, if you set a good example, they would have scruples about shirking or cheating.
>
> All the members worked hard to earn work points. They were all well-motivated. No one said "no" to work. Why? The distribution was good. Of the whole brigade, our team had the best distribution. If anyone had cheated, our ration each year would have put us at the poverty line, 35 catties of grain. It wouldn't have been enough and we'd still have needed help from the country. But how about us? We each had 100-plus catties![41]

Though women generally report that the men and women worked together, division of labour according to gender still occurred. Men tended to work in the skilled and well-paid jobs such as ploughing, draining, and irrigating. Side work, such as fishing, was also done only by men. These arrangements, however, were not written in stone. Evidence shows that women did not transplant seedlings at the outset of the collective agricultural system but, according to CXN, they later became the primary transplanters:

> Women did the transplanting and the weeding. They worked even harder than men. Men seldom transplanted the seedlings or weeded. They usually distributed manure. Sometimes when there weren't enough men available, the leader might ask us to do it. Gradually, women began to distribute manure as well, and later even had to sprout seeds when there weren't enough men to do it.[42]

The women's narratives collected for this study show that, once women

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41 Interview with HW, 2012.

42 Interview with CXN, 2012.

participated in agricultural production, the content of "women's work" was continuously redefined until they were able to take on almost all the jobs in the field. However, the distinction between "light work" for women and "heavy work" for men continued to be made. While "heavy work," such as spreading manure, could usually be finished quickly, "light work," such as weeding, was time-consuming. Therefore, although my informants reported that women earned as much as men, and some women, such as CXN, earned more work points than some men, the fact was they normally worked longer than men.[43]

3.3 Collective Farming: Memories of Bitterness and Happiness

During the land reform, Yakou Village gave over 5,000 *mu* of land to the neighbouring villages, still leaving Yakou with over 4,000 *mu* of arable land for growing rice. Farming this vast area of land was a challenge for a village with less than 2,000 labourers. It was said that women were not willing to marry men in Yakou because they did not want to work on that many fields. Most of the older women I interviewed still harboured a degree of bitterness at the sheer amount of labour required:

> I worked myself to death. Now, when I hear people complaining that they work very hard, I say to myself, "Well, you work hard?" In my day, if the leader asked you to haul urine, then you would haul urine for the whole morning. You had to haul urine from the privy to the fields to fertilize the rice fields. Cutting rice was worse. You think it was as easy as it is today? You went barefooted, and it hurt to walk on the lumps of mud. You had to be careful not to fall down. When you went to lift a heavy load, the bundles fell apart. Really, from morning to night, we didn't take a break. Our life was really bitter.[44]

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[43] HW notes that "These women were willing to work. They had enough strength, and would do whatever was assigned to them. They did more and were paid more."

[44] Interview with LS, 2012.

The feeling of "bitterness" is rooted in the division of labour on the basis of gender. In comparison to men, women working in the fields had a more difficult time. As noted above—with the exception of spring planting and the harvest when both women and men were required—men were usually assigned to do the "heavy work." This type of work tended to take shorter periods of time allowing the men to have more time to rest. Women, by contrast, were often assigned "light work," which generally took longer to finish and consequently left them less time to rest. According to the women I interviewed, even when women and men worked together, men were more prone to shirk: "They stopped now and then for a cigarette in the middle of transplanting seedlings. We women were not like them. Once we bent down to work, we wouldn't stop until we finished."[45] Women also had the burden of domestic labour, which meant that, if a woman wanted to earn as many work points as possible, she had to keep on working.

The narratives in this study indicate that, while some women (like CXN) took great pride in being able to endure more than men when doing the same work, other women saw that "equality" which did not take gender differences into account was not real equality. CY (born in 1933) put it this way:

> Men and women were equal only at the meetings. Women had a right to contribute their opinions, to talk. But when it came to work, where was equality? Women were treated the same as men. If you were Grade Two, whether you were man or woman, when you were assigned to work in the reservoir, the quota was the same: eight thousand catties of mud. Nobody would say you could carry less because you're a woman. You did your work according to your grade. Not equality at all.[46]

Tasks that had to do with flood control were more or less compulsory. Bitterness arose when the principle of "equal pay for equal work" was adhered to without regard for physical differences.

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[45] Interview with HM, 2012.

[46] Interview with CY, 2012.

The older generation of women, i.e., those came of age during the 1950s and 1960s, often compared themselves with their mothers, believing that this generation had lived an easier life. For example, STP's mother had been a concubine who then married an American, STP's father. Her father died when she was nine years old, leaving STP's mother alone to support STP and her younger brother by making clothes for the villagers. STP saw her mother's life as an easy one:

> How could my mother suffer? She spent all day long making clothes at home. She did not need to go out and expose herself to the wind and rain. She could finish one suit by working one evening and the next morning. She did not need to do housework either. I was able to do housework when I was nine. In a word, she worked day and night and raised my younger brother and me with one needle. She never worked in the field. We were in the field all day long.[47]

FQ's family returned to Yakou in the late 1940s from Yangzhou where her father had worked in a munitions factory. Prior to the land reform, her family made their living from a rented field. In comparing her life with her mother's, FQ said, "My mother had a hard life, but not as hard as mine. My mother didn't go out to work. She stayed home doing housework. We went to the fields. In my mother's day, it was men that went out to work. Women didn't need to go out. Women stayed home."[48] To the generation of women in this study, stepping out of the household meant physical hardship. It was difficult for these women to accept the idea that participation in socially productive work could lead to the liberation of women.

At the same time, the women I interviewed nonetheless found the social context of their lives greatly enhanced as an outcome of their participation in collective labour. Labouring side-by-side provided many occasions for singing and enjoying the company of other women. This was especially true for the younger generation of women—who did not experience the difficult years prompted by the Great Leap, and

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47 Interview with STP, 2013.

48 Interview with FQ, 2013.

who saw collective agricultural labour as normal. These women often referred to the times of collective work as merry-making. For example, JY recalled an occasion when she participating in making mud bricks for the dams:

> We stood in a line passing the mud bricks. The person in front threw one to me, which I threw to the person behind. And then I turned back to catch another mud brick from the front. The mud brick were slippery and we had to hold it tightly it with all ten fingers. Sometimes we played tricks. People in the front might turn and throw the mud at your head, or model a small figure to throw at you. We played this on each other and everyone would get covered in mud like mud ghosts. Very funny! At the end of the day, we washed ourselves clean in the stream before we went home.[49]

QY recalls singing when the women worked together transplanting seedlings:

> We often sang when we worked together. There was a field over there beside Shajiang. It was surrounded by trees. A path went through the woods and led to the field. Once we were transplanting seedlings there. We sang, first together and then one after another. We forgot the time. Very late. Around 7. It was dark. My husband saw I was not home and came to look for me. I was washing myself in the stream when he arrived. My husband heard the sound of washing and asked, "Did you see QY?" I said, "What's up?" He said, "Well, it's dark, and you're still here."
>
> When we worked in One Qing, we sang. We sang for a while, and then stopped to play a joke on someone. And then we stopped [doing that] to sing again. We're very happy. Ha ha ha, we sang a lot. We sang "Solidarity is Strength." And then we sang folk songs. We sang together. Very happy. I don't know why we're so happy.[50]

More important, collective labour, also created ties of friendship and solidarity among the team members. The idea that "we were poor but we were united and

[49] Interview with JY, 2012.

[50] Interview with QY, 2012.

happy" was generally shared among all the individuals that I interviewed. QY and JY recalled they helped each other with work:

> If you finished your work first, you helped me. If I finished my work first, I helped you. Once, we were still working at 1 or 2 o'clock after noon. It was hot, so we took a break. We sat under a tree. BL's mother-in-law said, "I have more work today. I can't rest." That day [when they drew lots she] she drew a field with a corner, as big as two *fen*. She would get more work points for working on it. After we finished, we helped her.[51]

> When we didn't work in the fields, we went to work in the reservoir. Some teams went in the morning, and some went in the afternoon. If you worked fast and were strong, after you finished, you could help the others. That way you could walk back together. We were small and we worked slowly. But we were never worried we would be left alone. We always had company.[52]

3.4 Conclusion

Stepping out of the household to participate in collective labour was new in the history of rural women in China. It gave women a measure of economic independence and, although there often remained a gap between the income of women and men, the gap was kept within a reasonable range. The principles of "to each according to their work" and "equal pay for equal work," were generally followed once early adjustments and readjustments had been made to work point rates and task assignments. However, overall women ended up being paid less then men, in part due to differences in physical abilities, in part due to significant domestic responsibilities, and perhaps in part due to residual notions about women's limitations. Men continued to receive preferential treatment when it came to being

[51] Interview with QY, 2012.

[52] Interview with JY, 2012.

assigned tasks that demanded more skill and received more remuneration. Despite these factors, women were able to earn a life-sustaining wage and contribute to supporting their families. This strengthening of women's economic position in the family has allowed them a greater voice in determining family matters. Today it is common for women to manage their own money and to make financial decisions jointly with their husbands when it comes to matters of household management. Some even control household finances.[53] CJM (born in 1954, former director of Women's Affairs), summarised it this way: "In Yakou we women take over the work in the fields and the work in the household. We don't just hold up half of the sky. We hold up most of the sky."[54]

The accounts of both the women and the men in Yakou also show that the collective agriculture of Yakou did not suffer from poor efficiency due to lack of monitoring during various production processes. It might be true, and understandable, that people are likely to work harder on their own land, but in this setting, the common interests of the members of the collective certainly motivated them to take their work seriously. Here, given that team productivity provided the only source of income, neither the team leader nor the members of the team would have tolerated conspicuous shirking. Once the team cadres established the work point rate for tasks, the members of each team would usually finish the work as required. Even in the event of a disagreement, the process for solving these usually prompted a rapid resolution. Under the collective, the crop yields of Yakou increased steadily. In 1973, the per *mu* yield of rice was nearly nine hundred catties,[55] and ten years later, it topped one thousand.[56]

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[53] I did not have the chance to question every woman about who held the purse strings in the household but, of the five women I did ask, three told me that they each kept their income separate from that of their husbands but that they shared household expenses with their husbands. Two women reported that their husbands kept part of their own income for cigarettes and gave the rest to the women for family expenses. KGP, one of the two women in charge of household finances, said that "there can't be two governments in one country." (interview with KGP, 2012).

[54] Interview with JM, 2012.

[55] See Yakou Archive 2007: 32.

[56] This figure is from a local document "The programme for inside contracts in 1984." Cited

Despite the increase in the crop yields over time, the overall low productivity in relation to what the state extracted, kept Yakou from accumulating much in the way of local wealth. The predominant memories women had of "those years" were overshadowed by recollected "bitterness" and "poverty"—a lot of hard work but empty pockets. MSH recalls that the village suffered annually from food shortages until about 1976. The inadequate food security, let alone any accumulation of surplus, meant that living standards did not improve for the villagers in general. The establishment of social welfares targeted at releasing women of their domestic labour was also postponed.

The following chapter will show that, although women were drawn into the public sphere with the collectivisation of agriculture, and were consequently enabled to participate in the socially productive work of communal large-scale agricultural, domestic labour seemed to remain immune to socialist initiatives despite several radical innovations.

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from Cao Zhenghan (2004, p. 104)

Chapter Four Domestic Labour

CHY (born in 1933) is one of the few women in Yakou Village who expressly speaks of inequality between women and men. In 1951, CHY married into Yangjia from a neighbouring village. Her husband was a peddler, riding through the alleyways on his bicycle selling fish and pork. Thus, agricultural production fell entirely on his wife. CHY found working in the field difficult enough, but that her husband would not share in the domestic responsibilities was to her, unconscionable.

CHY's account is somewhat confusing at the outset because she uses the second-person pronoun "you" in an idiosyncratic way. Sometimes "you" refers to CHY, sometimes to her husband, and sometimes to the local cadres. It seems that, by shifting her interlocutor, CHY creates an interesting locus of discourse about gendered division of labour in the household, gender equality/inequality, and state ideology and state intervention. Unlike most of the women I interviewed, who kept silent about the extent of men's exemption from domestic responsibilities, CHY gave voice to her resentment and addressed the state's lack of recognition that domestic responsibilities are in fact labour intensive.

> I don't think men and women were equal [at that time]. Women had to do so much *gongfu*, very hard. You should have made them do less…. When you arrived home, you had to care for the children and wash the clothes. Time was short. Before I finished, the gong would strike. You had to go to eat. If you were late, you wouldn't have enough to eat. After the meal you would come back to wash. If a kid was naughty, you would talk to him for a while. At 7 o'clock, the gong sounded again. It's time for the meeting. What time did you have? No time. You had to do *gongfu* all day long.
>
> You couldn't take a single day off. You had to work in the fields until the 27th or 28th of the last month of the year, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. You should have let us start the holidays earlier so we could do the cleaning thoroughly. You worked till the 28th, and then

the holidays began. After *Renri*,[57] you would start to work.

> What did men do? Everything was done by women. Men didn't turn a finger to help. I always say, don't be a woman in the next life. Just look at my husband. You were a peddler, and you should have helped me when you came home. The kid wet his pants and I put the pants in the basin. He [my husband] came home, took out the pants, threw them aside, and then washed his face in the basin. He didn't wash the pants. Nowadays, women are not as worried about this. Men are willing to do housework. My grandson comes and does everything. This is fair. The wife works and you work too. The wife does the housework and you should help her. Then women won't be so tired. But in the old days men didn't do it.[58]

In Yakou, younger women tend to use the term *jiawu*, meaning "household chore" for domestic labour, but older women usually use the term *gongfu*. *Gongfu* translates roughly to "labour-man." In the local dialect, the term is used to refer to any task done by either women or men, whether in the fields or in the domestic milieu. However, when talking about team work in the field or with reference to a sideline activities of the collective, people say *kaigong* which roughly translates to "opening the door for business." For household *gongfu*, people simply use the term *zuo* which means "do." Clearly, the villagers are fully aware that both field work and housework involve labour, but labour that is differentiated on the basis of whether the work is paid or not.

This chapter examines women's experiences of domestic labour. Traditionally, feeding and clothing the family, caring for children, tending vegetable plots, and managing other sideline enterprises, such as raising livestock, were mostly the responsibility of women. Even after women had been mobilised to participate in collective agricultural labour, domestic labour continued to be the primary

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[57] *Renri* translates as "Human Day" and refers to the 7th day of the first month in the Chinese calendar. According to Chinese folklore, this is the day that human beings were created. Retrieved from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renri.

[58] Interview with CHY, 2013.

responsibility of women. This “double burden” was a perpetual source of bitterness for women. Their accounts of their experiences during the socialist era are full of references to both their unending round of domestic chores and a continual lack of sleep.

Given that Marxist feminism identifies the liberation of women in both domains, the public and the private domain, an analysis of domestic labour should also take into account the nature of state intervention in personal life. Hershatter (2011) emphasises that the domestic milieu is “not a self-evident, easily delineated physical space, but rather a cultural and ideological domain” (185). By documenting and examining the way that women remember their experience of the short-lived attempts of the Party-state to socialise domestic labour, the chapter looks at the implementation and effect of the state policy and women’s attitudes towards state intervention.

4.1 The Domestic Sphere as the Private

Engels, in his 1884 treatise, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State,* pointed out that

> …the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life. This, again, is of a twofold character. On the one side, the production of the means of existence, of articles of food and clothing, dwellings, and of the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organization under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour on the one hand and of the family on the other (1972, 4).

Engels (1972) associated the subordination of women—“the world historical defeat of the female sex”—both in society and in the family with the emergence of

the ownership of private property. The domination of men in the family was the only guarantee that the male heirs would inherit the family property. Engels predicted optimistically that women's liberation would come with the abolition of private property and proposed that the entire female sex be brought back into public industry. He wrote that "with the transfer of the means of production into common ownership, the single family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping is transformed into a social industry. The care and education of the children becomes a public affair; society looks after all children alike, whether they are legitimate or not" (81).

Although orthodox Marxists are often criticised by feminists for ignoring gender,[59] undoubtedly, Engels' proposition correctly indicated the way to women's liberation: the removal of private property, the removal of family as an economic unit of society, and socialisation of domestic labour. Seen from this perspective, the victory of the socialist revolution in China made possible women's ultimate liberation from all forms of authority in the old "feudal" society.[60] With the establishment of people's communes in rural China, private ownership of property was phased out, and women were mobilised to participate in collective production. In this context, the political and social position of women was greatly improved. At the same time, during this period, efforts were also made to transform traditional gender relations in the private domain. To address this, public dining halls and day care centres were set up. However, with the failure of the Great Leap, dining halls were cancelled and day care centres closed, and the Chinese women's liberation movement in the private realm was paused.

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[59] For example, Hartmann is critical of Marxists for not seeing the "woman question" as the "feminist question." Marxists are seen to define women as part of the working class and see women's oppression in terms of their connection (or lack of connection) to production. Consequently, she argues, Marxist "analyses consistently subsume women's relation to men under workers' relation to capital." Hartman, "The Unhappy Marriage", 2.

[60] In his 1927 investigation in Hunan, Mao Zedong listed three systems of authority that usually dominated a man in China: the state system (political authority), the clan system (clan authority), and the supernatural system (religious authority). As for women, he stated that they were subjected to one more form of domination: the authority of the husband (Mao Zedon, *Selected Works*,).

Scholars concerned with gender and the Chinese socialist state in the 1980s criticise the Party-state for its withdrawal from women's liberation movement. The inconsistencies and limitations of the state's practical approach to gender issues come under criticism, and arguments are put forward in favour of a socialist patriarchy (Andors 1983; Johnson 1983; Stacey 1983; Wolf 1985). Since family was seen as the key site of women's subordination, the failure of the state to effectively transform the traditional family system meant a setback of the Chinese women's movement. That is to say, socialism sold out feminism.

Hershatter (2003, 2011) attributes the state's failure in the project of reforming the domestic realm to "theoretical neglect." Her conclusions are based on interviews with rural women in northern China, and her examination of this domestic realm was framed by the concept of "public/private." Hershatter points out that, in contrast to the late imperial thinkers, who saw the domestic realm as the foundation of the state, or the revolutionary activists of the early 20th century, who saw the domestic realm as a key factor in social and political backwardness, the socialist state conceived of the domestic realm as the place where the remnants of feudalism still lurked to create stumbling blocks to the socialist project. The socialist thinkers imagined that these impediments would disappear or be removed as the socialist movement developed. Hershatter (2003) notes that it was the emphasis on production in the public sphere that caused the domestic to be veiled as "private," "for the first time in Chinese history," and with it, women's labour in this domain was rendered invisible (311).

The question is how, or even whether, the duality of "public/private" as it has been applied by Hershatter, can be applied to the analysis of the division of labour along gender lines in socialist China. The socialist revolution was part of the process by which contemporary China engaged in modernity, and it created unique experiences that were not only different from previous reform initiatives in China, but also different from the capitalist revolutions in the west. Western feminists, such as Hershatter, consider domestic labour in the context of a private realm of activity, and see the public and the private as separate domains. But Song (2011) proposes

that, for one period of time in collective China, the boundary between the public and the private was blurred. During the 1950s and 1960s in the Republic of China, women's domestic labour was valued and seen as an important factor in socialist production; housewives were applauded and granted political status. Song (2007, 2011) does not agree with Hershatter (2003), and argues that domestic labour was made visible in the state discourse, although the degree of visibility varied depending on different groups of women: *jiashu*, "dependents of staff and workers", rural women, and women workers (Song 2007, 2011).

Song's (2011) examination of archival materials and official documents allows her to shed light on the attempts of Chinese feminists to transform the Chinese family. She looks at historical continuity and changes in the state discourse of the gendered division of labour within the household, and argues that socialist China tried to theorise domestic labour and absorb it into the system of socialist production. It was only after the mid-1960s that the discourse of domestic labour disappeared and the discourse of revolution took its place.

Song's (2011) discussion does not take into account the effect of the state discourse, which did not put into question the traditional gendered division of labour. Rather, it solidifies the stereotypes of women as caretakers of the home and family. In fact, the Chinese communist feminists consistently treated domestic labour as "women's special problem" and the solution to this was thought to be the socialisation of labour in the future, with the development of industry and social services (Deng 1953; Cai 1957; Zhang 1957). They seemed to have never challenged family as an economic unit of the society. The conflict of interests between collective social production and individual private consumption remained unsolved, and the tension between women's work and their private household chores always existed.

As it turned out, the Great Leap Forward offered Chinese feminists the opportunity to solve the "women's special problem." With the establishment of the people's communes, many forms of individual household chores—including preparing meals, processing food or grain, taking care of children, and sewing

clothes—were turned into collective enterprises. Although short-lived, these efforts were significant and inspiring. They not only released rural women from the double burden they had shouldered since the collectivisation, but their participation in social production and the socialisation of domestic labour also challenged the traditional division of labour. Without the restrictions that domestic labour placed on women's time, women were likely to enter collective social production, receive wages, maintain independence, and acquire equal status in the distribution of social resources. At the same time, communal life in rural China provided public dining halls and childcare—intended to relieve women of food preparation and the many tasks of childcare—which meant that the family was no longer the same unit of consumption in the way it had been before (Croll 1980, 276).[61] Clearly, the Great Leap brought about a transformation in the mode of production by removing the boundary between the public and the private spheres and altering the role of the household in the rural society.

Following 1961, in the aftermath of the Great Leap, public dining halls in the rural people's communes were gradually closed,[62] and daycare centres became "the masses' own business,"[63] with the result that most of the rural nurseries and kindergartens were also closed. In the attempt to achieve economic recovery in a short period of time, post-collectivisation policies allowed people to work their own

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[61] During the Great Leap Forward, public dining halls and day care centres were the most common amenities provided in most of the people's communes. In a few communes alternative radical strategies were used. For instance, in the Chayashan Satellite People's Commune, people were organised into different production battalions, and the members of each battalion would live together during the busy season with women and men separated. Families were broken up and reorganised into different groups. Each week women could take a one-day leave to go back home. Jai, *Rural Politics*. Certainly, in these areas, women's traditional roles as housekeeper and family caretaker was not challenged.

[62] In 1961 "The Regulations on the Work of Rural People's Communes (revised)," (Sixty Articles for Agriculture) was officially implemented. According to these regulations, whether the people's communes continued to manage public dining halls was to be decided by the commune members themselves. Whatever the decision, it had been determined that the grain ration for each commune member was to be distributed to the household. See State Agriculture Commission General Office of People's Republic of China (1981).

[63] The "Report on Rural Child Care Organisations by All-China Women's Federation Party Committee" (June 1961), stated: "Whether, how and in what form to operate [nurseries], [we] must strictly observe the principles: Let the masses make the decisions, and let the masses participate voluntarily." Chinese Women Cadres Management Institute (1988, 411).

small plots and raise their own pigs and poultry, and the traditional sideline activities once forbidden during the Great Leap were recovered. All these factors—the closing of dining halls and childcare centres, and the return to individual domestic food production—worked to turn the household back into a unit of production and consumption and to re-establish the boundary between public and private. The Women's Federation once more brought attention to the "women's special problem" and demanded a solution be sought.

The 1961 report of the Guangdong Women's Federation (1961a) pointed out that women were working more than they had in the time of the mutual aid and cooperation movement:

> After the implementation of the Sixty Articles, most public dining halls are closed. Women now have to stay home to cook, find household fuel, tend to their private plots, and do the work of raising pigs and poultry. They do more domestic labour than before. However, their work quota is now greater than it was during the agricultural cooperative period.

A survey conducted that same year on a people's commune in Huiyang County, Guangdong Province, shows that although the amount of time women spent on housework had not changed compared with three years prior, they were now working in the fields more hours each day, and more days each month. According to the Guangdong Women's Federation (1961a), without the help of a husband or an elderly relative, a woman might be working as much as eighteen hours a day. Another survey conducted in Zengcheng County shows that women often failed to work the full number of hours required by the production team because they were occupied with the household chores. According to the Guangdong Women's Federation (1961b), "the conflicts between work and domestic labour (including household sidelines) on the part of women were brought to the fore with their participation in the production in the fields. With the increase in women's labour, quarrels between husband and wife have increased, and so have cases of uterine prolapse."

The state withdrew from the "private" realm and solutions to their "special problem" were once again left for women to solve on their own. The Women's Federation could not do much apart from encouraging men to join women in sharing the domestic responsibilities. The Guangdong Women's Federation report (1961a) proposed that men share some domestic labour, and that by doing so "men and women will not only do well in collective production and increase the household income, but women will not get overtired, and domestic solidarity and harmony will be improved." The Women's Federation also realised the difficulty of changing the "feudal ideology and old customs that has existed for thousands of years." In the absence of further transformation in the mode of production, their efforts had little success.

4.2 Long Work Days

When the women of Yakou describe a routine day, they often use the terms "unending" and "no break." But when pressed to describe just what kept them so busy, many women find it hard to be specific. It is possible that memory may have been compromised by time, but more likely that domestic tasks simply filled the interstices of each and every day—too frequent, small, constant, and trivial to be named. SL recounted a typical day in her past this way:

> In the old days there was lots of *gongfu* each day. So much [you] couldn't finish all of it. There were many children, and you had to fetch the stalk ends.[64] Very laborious. And there were pigs, big and small. There was no chance in a day when you could sit down for a while. The whole day was work, work, and work. After [you] got up, you started to work and worked until dark. You went to water sweet potatoes, brought pig feed for the pigs. Lots of tasks. [You] couldn't finish all of them. Really, [you] can't name all of them. [You] worked all day long. The

[64] Rice stalk ends were an important source of fuel in Yakou Village. After each harvest, stalk ends were pulled out, left to dry in the sun, and then distributed to each member of the production team. It was often the women who hauled these stalk ends home.

> field work was hard, and there were many domestic tasks. All kinds of tasks, [you] couldn't finish. Working in the fields, cooking, feeding pigs. Many. [You] can't name all of them. [You] collected grass from the hills for the pigs. Then [you] had to cut it into pieces and cook it. Then [you] fed the pigs. Alas, there is so much to say that I can't get it all out.[65]

Domestic work at that time did not allow women any breathing space to recover. The lack of time resulted in a constant sense of pressure, sometimes mixed with panic and anxiety, not to mention pain and sometimes humiliation. The following section describes the way in which women were weighed down by household labour, and it will also show how their labour contributed to the family economy.

4.2.1 Food Processing and Preparation

SL, born in 1948 in a neighbouring village, married into Yakou Village in 1972. Alhough she describes her married life as busy and exhausting, she was nonetheless fortunate because hulling and polishing the rice grains had by that time been excluded from the daily household *gongfu* undertaken by the women. At this time, in South China, hulling and polishing rice grains was done by a machine consisting of a huller (*long*), combined with a treadle-operated tilt hammer (*dui*), and made from earth, bamboo, and stone. The whole operation was known as *ai-long* by the locals, which meant "operating the *long*." Given that rice was consumed quickly at that time, *ai-long* was an ongoing domestic chore, and operating these tools took a lot of strength. To operate *dui* on one's own, one had to lift and release the wooden tilt hammer again and again to pound the rice in the mortar—which was often tied with a stone to give it extra weight and strength—until the rice was completely separated from the hull and became white. Well-off families usually employed people (usually women) to do the hulling and polishing. HWP (born in 1937) remembers that after her father died, her mother was often employed by the well-off families to *ai-long*: "We were small at the time. My mother brought us with her to other people's houses.

[65] Interview with SL, 2012.

We were a big group with my sisters and brothers. We were there helping my mother tread the *long*, and for this we were given one *sheng* of rice and two meals."[66]

ZHF, who had to farm twenty *mu* of land with her brother after the land reform, reports that, because she was afraid of the *ai-long*, she did not even want to get married:

> Really, I was scared to death when I thought of *ai-long*. I'd rather work in the fields. I hulled grain with the *long*, and then I did the sifting and winnowing. And after I polished the grain with the *dui* I did the sifting and winnowing again. *Ai-long* was hard…. I did it alone. It was hard. I trod until I became dizzy. Then I took a break and trod again. I was small, so *ai-long* was not easy for me…. So my mother-in-law passed on a message through the match maker that she would not ask me to *ai-long* if I married her son.[67]

Ai-long was also a time-consuming job. As ZHF describes it, the whole process included hulling, winnowing, and polishing, and each step was often repeated in order to assure the best quality. Generally speaking, a strong labourer working the entire day could process three wickers of grain (around two hundred-plus catties). But many women could not do it. Apart from physical limitations, women always had to do a lot work at the same time and so they had to insert *ai-long* into the intervals between collective farming and their other domestic tasks. When the Spring Festival was approaching, and more rice was needed, *ai-long* meant keeping to a tight schedule as well as resulting in much less sleep for women. CXN described how she fit *ai-long* into her day:

> In the last portion of the Moon Year, *ai-long* made me faint. I had to do several loads. In order to get two baskets of grain, I had to get up at 1 o'clock [in the morning]. I hulled the grain until daybreak. Then I had my meal and went to work in the fields. The next morning I got up at 1

[66] *Sheng* is a traditional Chinese unit of dry measure for grain. 1 *sheng* is equivalent to about 1.5 kilogrammes. Interview with HWP, 2012.

[67] Interview with ZHF, 2013.

> o'clock to hull grain. After that, I went to work in the fields again. When all the grain was done, I did winnowing…. I didn't care about how many hours I could sleep. I got up at 1 o'clock anyway. I wouldn't go to the fields if the work at home was not done. If it was not done, I would think of it while labouring in the field.[68]

Because *ai-long* consumed a lot of time and strength, women could not do it alone so they often helped each other. HM (born in 1953 in Dongbao of Yakou) described how arrangements were made to help each other:

> We ate four wickers of grain every month. And it took one whole day to hull one wicker. Very hard. I was not very strong. Sometimes my younger sister would help operate the hammer. And sometimes the neighbour would ask me for help. In return she would give me some bran. I raised pigs, and I needed bran…. Well, to prepare one meal was not easy before.[69]

In any event, A*i-long* was woman's job—certainly some men may have lent a hand occasionally given that two of the men I interviewed reported that they "tried" doing it once or twice.

In 1957, assisted by a donation by some Yakou emigrants living in Macau, Yakou Village was able to set up a grain mill, and since then processing grain by hand was replaced by a machine. However, some women continued to process grain at home. For one thing, the mill charged fees and the milled rice rate was not as good as when it was processed at home. The mill charged 0.2 *yuan* for processing 100 catties of grain which was a big expense for some households.[70] More importantly, processing grain at home produced bran which was in much demand in households where pigs were being raised.

Obviously, in the 1960s, and probably in the 1970s as well, when the socialist system was established in China, women's domestic labour should not be seen

[68] Interview with CXN, 2012.

[69] Interview with HM, 2012.

[70] Interview with MSH, 2012.

merely as a residual part of traditional division of labour, or an "intentional arrangement" of the patriarchal state. It also formed an important part of the household economy.

In spite of a significant reduction in the time spent milling rice with the introduction of new technology in the late 1950s, there was still a great deal of work to do to prepare a meal. The women I interviewed talked a lot about collecting fuel for their household. Cooking for the family and preparing feed for pigs required fuel, and water also had to be heated for drinking and bathing, all of which required a great deal of time and fuel. In Yakou Village, while rice stalks and sedge were available during harvest time; thorny shrubs and other brushwood were easy to find along the ditches and on the hillsides and women could gather this fuel on their way back home from working in the fields. If time allowed, they would take the hour required, there and back, to walk into the mountains to fetch ferns and branches of pines. Some women planted thorny shrubs alongside their private vegetable plots because the stems would make good firewood once the plant matured. Women usually collected fuel whenever there was time available, as JY described:

> Every woman spent a lot of time looking for fuel in the old days. During the busy periods, you picked rice stalks. During the slack periods, you went to the mountain to cut ferns. And you picked ferns. If you didn't do it, you would quickly run out of fuel. And you cut sedge stalks. Some sedges had long stalks, and their lower parts were not needed [by the production team]. Sedges didn't grow well on the higher sandy beaches, so we brought them back for fuel.
>
> As soon as I finished my work in the field, I went to cut ferns or sedges. When we had no work in the field, I went to the mountain to collect brushwood. A load of brushwood would take, at most 10 days to burn. Just like now, after the rice is gathered, we have holidays and then we can prepare some fuel. But we didn't always have holidays before. Sometimes we repaired the ditches. We got the mud out of the ditches and let it dry in the sun to make fertilizer. We shovelled turf and made

compost out of them.[71]

Generally speaking, collecting household fuel was a woman's job and men would not join. Some women reported that their husband did not go to find fuel—even once,[72] or men would help out only when the load of fuel was too much for the woman to manage. JY is a small woman, about five feet tall; and her husband had been a relatively large man. When they married, they were said to resemble "a grapefruit and an orange." Nonetheless, looking for firewood in the mountain was always left to JY:

> My husband wouldn't go to collect brushwood in the mountain. But he would help carry it back home if there was lots of it. I chopped down the brushwood and made bundles. And then I carried them down to the foot of mountain. My husband would help carry them back from there. He was strong and could carry 4 bundles, but I could only carry 2.[73]

Like *ai-long*, collecting fuel often demanded strength. Apart from having to make the journey between the mountainside and the village, chopping and binding thick branches were not easy. A woman who was good at gathering firewood was often admired:

> My elder sister was very capable. Do you know the old man living by the tower house in YJ? My sister used to go to gather firewood with his wife. His wife was too weak to bind the wood, but my sister was strong. So she helped his wife tie it up. After the woman returned home, her husband untied the knots and asked, "How did you manage to bind the wood so well, so tightly?" Then his wife told him that my sister had helped her. Then her husband said, "What a strong woman!"[74]

Given how hard it was to accumulate fuel for the household, LS (born in 1926)

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[71] Interview with JY, 2013.

[72] Interview with KGP, 2012; interview with HM, 2012.

[73] Interview with JY, 2013.

[74] Interview with HM, 2012.

still remembers how upset she was when a neighbour set her stack of sedges on fire because there had been a dispute between the families:

> That was the most miserable thing. We didn't have firewood. We carried back sedges and made a stack in front of the kitchen. My husband helped carry the sedges back and so did my daughters. So we made a stack. But [my neighbour] set it on fire. We were having sweet potato soup when it happened…. We ran out of fuel every year…. Those sedges, we cut them in at seaside, carried them onto the beach and let them dry there in the sun. Later we carried them back. With the rice stalks from the fields already given out, we had to make this stack. He set it on fire! Alas, we were very pitiful.[75]

To some women whose families had limited labour at their disposal and many mouths to feed, the prospect of not having enough food to prepare meals would cause anxiety—there were always times when they ran out of food and had to borrow grain from neighbours or from the brigade. Asking for help usually fell on the women and those unhappy experiences have remained with them through time.

4.2.2 Childcare

Generally speaking, women left their children with their mother-in-law when they worked outside. If she was not available, they would ask their own mother for help. In Yakou, marriage within the local community was commonly practiced after 1949, and it was convenient for women to leave their children with their family of origin. It was common for a grandmother to watch her grandchildren, often for more than one of her sons or daughters at the same time. YL's mother-in-law died before she married in 1953 and so she relied on her own mother for childcare. She recalls that her mother "watched 10 children, mine and my younger brother's. She would buy an ice bar and each child would have one bite."[76]

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[75] Interview with LS, 2012.

[76] Interview with YL, 2012.

In the extended families where there were good inter-generational relationships, childcare had the potential to strengthen the bonds between generations. But in those families where people were at odds with each other, the necessity for help with childcare would create or intensify family conflicts. In KQP's case, she married into a family where her husband was the adopted son. Once KQP's own son was born, her mother-in-law often complained about having to look after this grandchild. When KQP stayed in Guangzhou to work as a house maid, she chose to leave her son with her own mother: "My son stayed with my mother for 4 or 5 years. My mother-in-law went to work for others for 5 *yuan* a month. She wouldn't help me care for my son.[77] FQ also recalled that her mother-in-law treated her own daughter differently: "She did nothing for us. She only helped her daughter. She lived with us, but every evening she came home after we all were asleep. What did she do? She was like that because my husband had been adopted."[78]

Women would feel relieved when their eldest children were old enough share in the duty of care for their younger siblings. In Yakou it was common that the first child in the family—especially if the child was female—would always have less schooling than their younger sisters and brothers. JM was thirteen years old when her youngest sister was born in 1967. When her mother went to the fields, JM remembers carrying her baby sister on her back as she went to school:

> It was impossible to study. I brought her to the classroom. I would be there for a while and then I would have to bring her back home. Unfortunately, once she cried, the teacher would ask me to stand by the door. I stood there, and watched and watched. When other students began to write, I would go back to my seat to write. I was smart and I wrote neatly. Unfortunately, when I was concentrating on writing, the teacher saw me and said, "Go, go back home!" Then I would carry my sister back home, and at 2 o'clock I would go back to school again. How

[77] Interview with KGP, 2012.

[78] Interview with KGP, 2012; interview with FQ, 2012.

could I have good schooling? I left school after Grade 3.[79]

If nobody was available in the household, women left the older children at home alone and brought the younger ones to work with them. This could put the children at risk, but if they brought their children to the fields, they would often have to leave them in the ditches nearby. CJT remembered this:

> We were hoeing in the field. No one watched the children. They played all by themselves. They ate anything they found there. You don't understand how sad it was. They put the banana skin in their mouth. They didn't know better.[80]

As the primary caregivers for their family, women were preoccupied with their children, which would have an impact on their performance in the collective agricultural tasks and, in turn, on their income. STP describes the impact of having to spend her mornings caring for her children while other women "grabbed" points, working at better tasks, and able to achieve better labour grades (Chapter Three). In the 1970s, when the family income improved, women might pay others to complete her agricultural tasks if they had to leave work earlier to look after their child. For example, JY recalls that she carried her six-month-old son with her when she herded cattle. When it rained and thundered she would have to bring her son back home and give her partner two *yuan* to watch the animals.

In most cases when no family members were available to help, women put their young children in the care of the elderly women in the village. If these daycare workers had been assigned the task of childcare by the production team, they would be paid in work points by both families as well as the production team—a tradition which began with the mutual aid movement. However, even if the production teams helped share the financial burden, the women would still have to work harder in order to earn enough work points to pay for the extra expenses. For example, a daycare worker in the 1970s in Yangjia was paid in work points which came to the

[79] Interview with JM, 2012.

[80] Interview with CJT, 2012.

same total as the average earned by each of the three top labourers that season.[81] In Lujia, when LS stopped working in the fields for health reasons, she was arranged to watch two children. In return, she got seven catties of grain each month, and along with receiving some transferred work points from the mothers of these children, LS would also be paid in kind, usually a load of firewood.[82]

For households that had many mouths to feed, having to also pay daycare workers was a source of pressure. The only way to make up the extra work points needed was to work harder. FQ remembers that she always carried two more loads of mud than the others when they constructed the reservoir: "Even when most of the others had left, I would stay. Otherwise, how would I find the work points for the babysitter?"[83]

An additional source of stress was that the daycare workers had little training. Although the women I interviewed did not remember any serious mishaps, their accounts were nonetheless stories disturbing:

> My second daughter was looked after by an old woman who lived beside the tower house. She lived with a man and no one knew where he came from. He could write in English. People said he had been hurt in an accident, so he was not right in the head…. One day, my second daughter messed up with poo, so he went to the stream with my daughter under one arm, and a chair under the other. I happened to come back from the fields just in time to see this. I was scared to death. He kept saying, "I won't beat her. I won't beat her." He said the old woman was not home, and that he just brought my daughter to the stream to give her a bath.[84]

The most difficult thing for these women was to see their children suffer from illness in their absence. Because many of the daycare workers lacked basic training, they usually did not know how to care for a sick child and would generally refuse to

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[81] Interview with CHY, 2013.

[82] Interview with LS, 2012.

[83] Interview with FQ, 2012.

[84] Interview with JY, 2012.

do it. In these cases, the mother was faced with choosing to take the time off to care for her child and lose work points, or to work in the fields and worry about her child in the care of others. In rural China, although medical care facilities had been established to some extent in the period following 1949, young children continued to die of various diseases. When a child fell seriously ill, there was often the risk of death. CHY remembered a time when her child was ill:

> I only asked for leave if my child was ill. Otherwise, I dared not do it because if I asked for leave, I would lose the work points of that day…. Life was hard, and when your children were ill, you felt life was especially miserable. Few people went to see the doctor. If the child had a fever, people would catch a cockroach, buy a packet of herb tea, and make a drink for the child. Today people are not as frightened because their children won't get measles or chickenpox. My fourth son almost died. He came down with measles. Luckily, there was a doctor in the middle school clinic. I carried my son on my back and went to see him. It took several days for him to recover. The doctor said, if I had been late, there would have been no hope.... Well, I can't tell you all the hardships. What hardships! It's a mercy that now I have some reward. I have rice, I have money.[85]

Young children who were still nursing were more of a worry. In Yakou Village, children usually nursed until they could walk, but the mothers would already have started to work well before then. And they often worked in the fields far from where they lived. During the busy seasons, mothers would have to stay in the field for the entire day and would be unable to return home to feed the infants. In this event, the daycare workers would walk the long distance to the fields so the babies could be fed. CXN recalled an incident in the 1970s when she came to the aid of a babysitter embarked on such a journey:

> I saved DZ's youngest daughter. That day the babysitter was taking DZ's child to her mother to nurse. As she was walking along the Big Stream

[85] Interview with CHY, 2013.

> with the baby on her back and an umbrella in her hand, a big wind came up and blew them right into the water. I was washing clothes by the stream, so I reached them with a carrying pole and pulled them out onto the bank.[86]

When a mother worked in an area too remote to be easily reached, the only solution was to change the child's diet. For example, when YL worked at Yat-sen Reservoir, she had to leave her daughter with her mother, a time for which YL still feels some sorrow: "My eldest daughter stopped nursing when she was 10 months old…. Every morning I got up and made a paste to feed her. After she was full I went to work at the reservoir. At noon her grandma fed her porridge. Well, wouldn't it have been good to have raised my child in today's world, where children have milk and milk powder?"[87]

Of all the domestic duties, childcare was the one that tugged the most at the heartstrings of the women. They were constantly worried about the safety of their children, as well as their diet and their health. Any attempt to liberate women from domestic duties must take these concerns into account.

4.2.3 Raising Pigs

Households with many mouths to feed were often not easily able to get all the money they needed for daily expenses if they only worked in the fields. To earn more money, women would cut wood on the mountain or dig sweet potatoes and sell them in the market. They would also sell hen's or duck's eggs which they would generally have kept for their own household to improve family meals. Those were only temporary strategies in a time of need. In most cases, raising pigs was the only steady moneymaking activity. Women tell me that they could often not pay for food, clothing coupons, children's tuition, or salt until they sold their pigs. Others reported

[86] Interview with XN, 2013.

[87] Interview with YL, 2013.

that they were able to save the money from raising pigs to eventually build their new house:

> It was not enough to depend on the work points for grain. We had to raise a pig and then sell the pig, and with that money we bought grain.[88]
>
> At the time we didn't have any cash. Only after the pig grew up and was sold to the food station could we see any money.… So I worked hard. I couldn't sleep until I cooked a big pot for the pig.[89]
>
> Pigs went cheap in the 1970s. At most 100. Later 200, 300…. Where would we get money at the time? We still had many things half-rationed. If you had many children, you wouldn't have any cash at the end of the year. You'd get only a blank note. So you had to plant some vegetables, some sweet potatoes, and raise a pig to help support the family.[90]

Seen from women's perspectives, raising pigs was essential for getting cash, but it was not a lucrative undertaking. Even after the mid-1970s, when private pig breeding was encouraged and the state procurement price had been more or less increased, a pig weighing 150 catties would bring its keeper, at most, 80 *yuan*. For most people it was not easy to fatten a pig to that weight within ten months. Ideally, women would have picked the strongest piglets from the same litter, but these were more expensive and not every household could afford that expense. Also, pigs would not fatten if they were fed only with green fodder; their diet should be supplemented with leftovers from the table, as well as grain and chaff which also cost money. The costs had to be carefully calculated and consideration given to whether and when to add grain to pigs' diet. And not all pigs reached maturity; they could develop hog cholera during the winter or spring, and only 50% of these would recover. Medicines and herbs were needed for preventative treatment.[91]

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[88] Interview with HWP, 2012.

[89] Interview with HM, 2012.

[90] Interview with JY, 2012. 'Blank note' was a piece of paper showing that the person owed the team a certain amount of money.

[91] Interview with MSH, 2013.

The women I interviewed knew all too well about the risks and costs of raising pigs, although they would not have calculated gains and losses in terms of numbers. According to these women, raising pigs was an indispensable part of household economies, further binding women to the domestic sphere. Their days would start with feeding the pigs and would end with preparing food for the pigs. The women I interviewed has left me with a persuasive image of women cutting up and cooking food for their pigs in their small dark kitchens in the last hours of the day. It seems that women's daily *gongfu* centred largely on tending to pigs if one takes into account the necessity of finding fodder in the wild, planting sweet potatoes at home, cutting, cooking, and feeding—all these tasks that had to be done with care. It is no wonder that women often talked about their pigs as if they were talking about a family member:

> In the morning I fed the pig in the small courtyard, and when it was full, I drove it out. It wouldn't return until evening. The pig liked wandering in the street anyway. If it was tired of staying out, it would come back by itself and lay by the door waiting for you. Sometimes it came back at noon when we were eating. It lay on its stomach at the door watching us. If we had leftovers we would throw some to it. If we didn't, it would wait until the evening. The first thing to do after I came back from work was to feed the pig. Otherwise, it would plague you, groaning and moaning for food.[92]

> When I raised pigs before, however busy I was, I showered them every day. Pigs liked shower time. After the shower they always ran happily in the courtyard.[93]

> Raising pigs was also a lottery. It was like raising children. Some people's children fell ill easily, but other children did not. Raising pigs was the same. Some people were able to fatten their pigs up but some were not.[94]

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[92] Interview with JY, 2013.

[93] Interview with ZHF, 2013.

[94] Interview with HM, 2012.

> [You] had to cut fodder, plant sweet potatoes, cut vines of sweet potatoes, carry pig manure to fertilize the sweet potatoes. To plant sweet potatoes also involved lots of work. You had to make ridges, make compost. If you didn't make compost you wouldn't have vines for pigs. Then the sweet potatoes were used for pigs' food as well as staple food for the family. And to plant sweet potatoes, you had to open up wasteland. You also had to plant thorny shrubs because cooking pigs' food consumed lots of fuel. I planted thorny shrubs in any possible place.[95]

In order to raise pigs, women had to overcome numerous hardships, not the least of which was physical fatigue. Of the women I interviewed, those who succeeded talked about their achievements with pride and confidence:

> I raised pigs quickly. Within 6 or 7 months they were ready for sale. My mother-in-law kept her pigs for one year but the pigs were the same, like stones.... People all said I was good at raising pigs. I built the pigsty myself. Just in front of our house. First I laid bricks a knee-level, surrounded [the platform] with bamboo poles, and then made a roof with the linoleum. People said, "You really have ability. You can build a pigsty all by yourself." I built the pigsty here once I was married and before I had children. Before I was married, their pigs slept in the kitchen in the evening. They were like stones and didn't grow. [My in-laws'] kitchen was small. When the two pigs came back in the evening, they always got underfoot. So I told my mother-in-law, why not build a sty? After the sty was ready, the pigs didn't go to the street. And their excrement and urine were gathered as manure.[96]

> My sister and I both raised pigs. My pigs were fat but my sister's pigs were not fat. My mother's pigs were modest. Not as big as mine.… I fed pigs with the small fish and shrimps brought back from the sea. Pigs grew fast if they were fed with more food.[97]

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[95] Interview with ZHF, 2013.

[96] Interview with ZHF, 2013.

[97] Interview with HM, 2012.

Despite the fact that raising pigs was not a good return on the labour of these women—"Even if you worked yourself to death, you wouldn't get much"[98]—the women were nonetheless keen to keep one or two pigs in their yard. To them, raising pigs was like having a savings account, and pig manure was used to fertilise their private plots. Despite the downsides, raising pigs strengthened the household economy. Or, put it in other terms, raising pigs demonstrated the continuation of the household as an economic unit which occupied a large part of the domestic labour of women.

In the mid-1970s, with the gradual establishment of factories and the development of other sideline productions in Yakou, the contribution of pig breeding to the household economy became less important and fewer women would continue to raise pigs. Consequently, the number of pigs in the village declined, with the outcome that the state purchasing quotas were not fulfilled. At a county cadres' conference in 1975, Yakou was singled out for criticism for its "backwardness" in pig breeding. In order to combat being branded as "backward" the brigade built two collective pig farms, and to encourage villagers to join the movement, the brigade also offered collective pigsties for private breeding. Although some women continued to raise pigs into the mid-1980s, most had given it up by 1981.

4.3 Socialisation of Domestic Labour in the Great Leap Forward

In the winter of 1956 two thirds of the farm labourers in Yakou Village were deployed to build Yat-Sen Reservoir in the mountainous area. The construction site was three hours away from the village and, because the demanding schedule, the villagers often had to work almost 21 hours, from 2 a.m. until 11 p.m. To commute between the village and the construction site every day was not feasible, and so the

[98] Interview with LS, 2012.

brigade organized shifts requiring the villagers to work and live on the construction site for periods lasting a month. This meant that, when the men were away, the burden of farming fell on the women, the only labour remaining in the village. In this situation, to liberate women's labour power for participation in the collective agriculture activities in the village became urgent and the socialisation of their domestic duties was placed on the agenda. In the summer of 1958, when the Zhangjiabian People's Commune was established, public canteens and nurseries were similarly organised in Yakou Village.[99]

4.3.1 Public Canteens

In the summer of 1958, a public canteen was set up for each production team of Yakou Village. Some institutions, such as schools, already had canteens of their own. The communal dining halls were generally located in the temples or ancestral halls, and served meals for as few as two hundred people to as many as six hundred people. Villagers furnished these halls with tables and stools taken from their own households. Each day when the gong was sounded to signal that the meal was ready, people would assemble in the halls and eat together, having brought their own bowls and chopsticks from home: "The gongs of different dining halls sounded different. People in the fields could recognise which one was from their kitchen. Once they stepped into the canteen they would take food from the serving barrel by digging in directly with their bowl. They couldn't wait because they were very hungry."[100]

For the women in Yakou Village, this was not only a new experience. LSH still remembers how his mother reacted to eating in the public canteen: "Ha, certainly my mother was happy! She said, 'Good! Now I don't need to turn the huller, or polish

[99] Yakou Village had undergone several changes in administrative division in Mao's era. In August, 1958, Yakou belonged to the Zhangjiabian People's Commune. And then, in April of the following year, it became a production battalion of the Nanlang People's Commune. In August 1961, it was owned by the Cuiheng People's Commune, and three year later it became a production brigade of Nanlang again.

[100] Interview with KSH, 2012.

rice, gather firewood, or carry water."[101] Public canteens freed women from their domestic chores in the kitchen, the pigsty, and the vegetable plots, which allowed them to spend most of their time in social production and at political meetings.

When the policies of the Great Leap were initiated in 1957, LS had just moved to Yakou, her husband's home village. Before that she had been living in Hengyang, Hunan Province, where her husband was working on the railway. LS brought three children along to Yakou with her and she recalled the work that awaited her:

> I came back in answer to the call of Chairman Mao. He said dependents of the railway workers and cadres should come down to the country. So I came back. I came back in 1957. We did deep ploughing…. In the evening the gong sounded in the fields, signalling that it was time to work again.
>
> In 1958 I worked in the kindergarten. I had a pleasant time. The communisation, the collective canteen, everything was good.
>
> We went to Nanlang for the *wanren dahui* [a conference of about ten thousand people]. Every commune member had to attend it. There was no bus at the time. We walked to the Nanlang Square. We walked in rows of four. We set off early in the morning. Ha ha ha…. After the meeting, we came back. It was hot. My sweat-stained shirt clung to my body. And I just twisted a little bit, and tore a big hole in my shirt. Ha ha ha, a woman saw it and said, "Your shirt is torn." But what could I do? I just let them see it.[102]

HWP was still a member of the Youth Strike Brigade in Longxuetou Village when the Zhangjiabian People's Commune was established. She recalled their immense zeal for production at the beginning of the Great Leap[103]:

> I was about to marry when the Great Leap started. I was 18, 19 years old. We paraded, beat drums, and held flags. We walked to Zhangjiabian. It

[101] Interview with LSH, 2012.

[102] Interview with LS, 2012.

[103] Longxuetou Village is around three kilometres away from Yakou.

> was only 3 o'clock in the morning. We cooked milk fish porridge. After having the porridge, we went deep ploughing. There was a tractor there. It tilled off clods of earth. We worked in pairs and carried them onto the ridges. That was a good time.[104]

In the evenings when there was no work, villagers gathered on the grain-drying ground in Yangja or Zhongbao, meeting with other members of the brigade or the production team. Occasionally, they were lucky enough to watch a movie—*The White-Haired Girl* and other revolutionary operas. HWP recalled that once she delayed her work because there was a movie playing:

> I had been married here not long ago, so some people in Yakou Village called me "Bride." That day I met a couple from Dongbao, and I worked with them. They said, "Bride, Bride, let's go to the market spot together." I said I didn't know where it was. They had pulled up seedlings and were on their way back home. But I had just watched a movie with my husband. It was finished around 9 or 10 o'clock.[105]

However, while the women I interviewed remember happy moments like these, they also remembered how *sanliang zhuang*, "three-*liang* of rice in the pot" overshadowed this time. Soon after the public canteens were established,[106] widespread food shortage arose. At the outset, people were able to eat their fill, and although the dishes were simple, vegetables, meat, and fish were often included. HWP remembers that they still had duck when she was married in November of 1958. Not long after, however, the brigade saw that the barns were running out of grain and they realised that they had to take action immediately. The brigade began to distribute grain to each production team in strict accordance with the basic grain ration of each member. Three meals were reduced to two. Then rice was mixed with sweet potatoes. When sweet potatoes were not available, the grain for each person

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[104] Interview with HWP, 2012.

[105] Interview with HWP, 2012.

[106] Nobody that I interviewed remembers exactly how long was that. MSH and LSH say it was less than one year (interviews with MSH, 2012 and LSH, 2012).

was rationed: For each meal, the men were given three *liang*[107] of rice and the women were given about two *liang*. The elderly and the children were given even less. The women I interviewed use the term *sanliang zhuang*, "three-*liang* of rice in the pot," to stand for "communisation."

HWP described the food in the dining hall towards the end of this time:

> All the bowls of food were set out in a row. Each had the owner's name and a number saying indicating the grain ration. There was no way to take someone else's bowl by mistake. Rice was measured and placed in the bowls. If you wanted the cooked rice to look more adequate than it actually was, you could ask for water to be added. The cooked rice was like thin porridge. If the rice was cooked with less water, you wouldn't feel full after eating. Then, the earthenware bowls were all steamed together in a huge pot. When the gong sounded, people would say, "Let's go eat." Then they went. The bowls were there. People just took their own and then ate together.[108]

Where had the grain gone? MSH attributes the food shortage to the increasingly radical policies of the state. He thought that food shortage in Yakou Village had actually been brewing since the winter of 1956 when male labour had been reapportioned from farming the land to constructing the reservoir, which MSH thinks had an impact on the preparation for the spring ploughing and which, in turn, affected the early rice yield for the following year. MSH is also convinced that the enthusiasm for agricultural innovations during the Great Leap led directly to the reduction of the grain output.[109] Deep ploughing, closing planting as well as planting crops on unsuitable fields, efforts expected to increase grain yields, took a great deal of time and energy, and in the end proved to have been in vain.

> At the time people did deep ploughing in Zhangjiabian. They did it day and night. They even burned the midnight oil for close planting and deep

[107] 1 *liang* is equal to 50 grams.

[108] Interview with HWP, 2012.

[109] Interview with MSH, 2012.

> ploughing.… The harvest of that season turned out to be only half as good as that of the normal season. There was no harvest at all in some fields…. Look, they sowed 300-plus catties of seeds in each *mu* of land, but at the time the per *mu* yield of rice was only 300–400 catties. You sowed so many seeds, how could they grow?[110]

The practices were stopped when people were aware that the agricultural experiments were failing in Zhangjiabian and other areas. When it came time for the new round of planting in the spring of 1959, peasants began to plant rice in the normal way. It seemed that Yakou did not devote its energies to this experiment—at least not to such a radical extent—given that the way people talk about *gongshehua* tended to refer more to the shortage of food in the public canteens. In spite of reverting to the traditional form of preparing the field for planting, the harvest of the first cropping in 1959 in Yakou was not good either. MSH points out that Yakou labour was diverted to the agricultural experiments being carried out by the Zhangjiabian Commune and therefore much of the work in the village was delayed: "Several hundred people travelled up to Zhangjiabian to do deep ploughing. They were there for several months.[111] LSH confirms this: "The rice in Yakou was ready for cutting, but we went to Zhangjiabian to do deep ploughing."[112]

Added to this, the chaos in the village management of agricultural production during the early months of this "communisation" led to grain being wasted. FQ commented that

> Many things were not done properly. For instance, in order to soak the seeds, bags of grain were simply thrown into the pond. When they were taken out, some bags were too far out and couldn't be reached so they were left in the pond. Later when the pond had dried out, we saw dozens of bags in there. It was such a waste! If crops had not been wasted, we would have had enough to eat.[113]

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[110] Interview with MSH, 2012; LSH, 2012; YL, 2012; HWP, 2012.

[111] Interview with MSH, 2012.

[112] Interview with LSH, 2012.

[113] Interview with FQ, 2012.

It is likely, too, that the flood in the summer of 1960 may have contributed to the poor harvest during this time. TJM says, "After torrential rain, sea water flooded the fields near the beach, and crops there all got flattened. We went there to cut the rice. On our way back, we needed to cross the Big Stream. The water that had flooded down from Cuiheng was still waist-deep."[114] It is interesting that MSH does not mention this. He might have forgotten it or, to cadres like MSH, natural factors were not as significant as human factors. After all, flood was not uncommon during the 1950s and the 1960s before the various flood control constructions were completed.

A document from Yakou Village Archives reveals that the grain output for the years from 1957 to 1960 was at a record low. Even so, the lowest point reached for grain output was in 1959, which was still 86% of the output for 1956, and 98% for that of 1964, when Yakou Village was hit by the typhoon.[115] This indicates that, for Yakou, while the changes in agricultural production imposed by the Great Leap did result in the reduction of the grain harvest, the food shortages in the public canteens were not completely the result of crop failures during the Great Leap.

Food shortages in Yakou at that time can also be attributed to the government's excessive extraction of grain which severely reduced the amounts available for consumption. CHY remembers that the crop failure had "nothing to do with the weather. Our grain was given to the Soviet Union. Then people said China owed the Soviet Union money."[116] Since the local cadres inflated the output,[117] it seems possible that the government might have felt able to extract more grain than before. But LSH thought this would not have been the case:

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[114] Interview with TJM, 2013.

[115] See Yakou Village Archives 2007, p. 32.

[116] Interview with CHY, 2012.

[117] LSH recalls a time when cadres from "the above", the superior cadres from the commune or the county level, asked Yakou members to report an inflated figure: "We didn't know how to create figures. The work group sent someone down to teach you how to do it. We asked him, "Where do we find the 100,000 catties of grain?" …They deceived their superiors and deluded their subordinates. Many yields were inflated. It was 100 catties, but he asked us to report 1,000. You could report as many as you wanted. Yakou's output was multiplied several times over." (Interview with LSH, 2012)

> No. We didn't hand over more grain. I remember it. At that time they took state grain as well as surplus grain on basis of half-and-half. For instance, if the output was 1,000 catties, 500 catties would be taken. They first estimated your output, and then decided how much state grain and how much surplus grain they would take after the harvest. In general what was left was enough for us because we had a lot of fields.[118]

There was no record to show how much grain Yakou Village handed over during the years of the Great Leap. SHJ, Party secretary of Yakou Village during this period, notes that "at that time, our task to meet the state purchase requirement was hard. It was more than a million (catties)."[119] "More than a million" seems to follow the "half-and-half" principle LSH remembers, given that the grain outputs for the three difficult years were between 240,000 and 300,000 catties. Although these numbers are far from precise, they at least show that Yakou Village did not hand over their grain on the basis of inflated yields.

The people I interviewed think that poor management of the public canteens in Yakou was a more likely reason for the food shortages. They indicate that the management of the public canteens was chaotic at the outset. No one kept an account of how much grain each canteen got from the brigade barn or how much rice was actually cooked in the canteen. Because people were able to come and go freely, the canteens could not easily plan their food preparation. As a result, it often happened that meals were prepared but fewer people than expected would show up to eat.

STP recalls that people ate freely and not necessarily in predictable locations, and LSH confirmed this:

> Rice was placed in barrels in the hall. You could take as much as you liked. You could eat with your family or your friends. Dishes were prepared by the canteen too…. If you had relatives to visit you, you could bring them with you. If you visited them in their village, they

[118] Interview with LSH, 2012.

[119] Interview with SHJ, 2012.

would bring you with them too.[120]

> You could eat anywhere you wanted. No one was in charge. You could eat in Yakou, Nanlang or Zhangjiabian. No one would blame you. I often had meetings in Zhangjiabian so I ate in the canteen there. Even if you were there not for the meeting or any other work, you could eat in the canteen.[121]

Later, when there was a shortage of food, the canteen workers began to take advantage of their position in order to get more food for themselves. Such "corruption" was so common that the brigade had to strengthen controls by sending cadres to each canteen to oversee the process of cooking. For example, FQ, the representative for Team No. 1, was sent to the Xibao canteen to oversee the food production:

> Why did we need to send someone to the canteen? The women in the kitchen, they took a pinch of rice from this pot and that pot. Other people saw it, and said it was not right. So they asked me to come to the kitchen every day. I weighed up and rinsed the rice, placed [the pots] in the cooker, and then lit the fire. When the rice was almost done, I left…. When I was there I just looked how much rice there was in those women's pots. I was there for a year. I didn't care if they were happy or not. I didn't want to do it. I was busy myself. But we did this for the masses, for everybody…. The old women in the kitchen were not good. They were greedy. Not because they were hungry. They had always been like this. They snatched things no matter where they were.[122]

At the same time, people found that eating in the public canteen changed many of their daily social practices. Many of the people I interviewed found they could no longer entertain their guests at home. This meant that traditional banquets held on wedding days, or celebrations commemorating an infant's first full month also were no longer held. Only close relatives and friends could be invited home for a meal,

[120] Interview with STP, 2012.

[121] Interview with LSH, 2012.

[122] Interview with FQ, 2012.

and for this they had to draw their grain ration for that day from their canteen.[123]

> If you were allowed to bring the rice back home, for example when a daughter came home to visit her family, they could have had a meal together. But at the time no households were allowed guests. If the guest had eaten your share, you wouldn't have had any for yourself. During that time our relatives or friends could come and stay only for a short while. Everyone had their portion and they would have had nothing to eat if their portion was given to others.[124]

It seems that the people I interviewed feel that the last straw was the outbreak of oedema in the village, even though they did not remember it as having been serious. It is thought that "there were probably dozens of cases,"[125] but that "they were mainly the elderly and children, who easily fell ill."[126]

The people of Yakou finally lost interest and confidence in the project of eating collectively. Once they found that they could not get enough food in the public canteens, they immediately reverted to trying to feed themselves on their own initiative. Some people report that they tried harvesting wild vegetables, but many remember having gone fishing in the nearby ocean, activities for which the brigade gave their tacit approval. BSH remembered that, although such private enterprises were not allowed, they went on nonetheless during this time:

> But at that time you were not allowed to do capitalism, to catch fish and shrimps. If you went fishing, they cut your tools. But we still went. At midnight we fetched fish and shrimps. Then we had some nutrition.... The brigade didn't mind it. But the work group was in the village, so

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123 Interviews with STP, 2012 and LSH, 2012.

124 Interview STP, 2012.

125 Interview with SHJ, 2012. Except two women who report that the cases of oedema and even deaths of it in their production team were many, women as well as men say that there were only a few cases in their production team. YL even says she did not see any in LJ (interview with YL, 2012). Interestingly, none of the interviewees report that any of their family members had oedema. In fact, their accounts are more related to the inadequate food offered by the public canteen instead of oedema.

126 Interview with BSH, 2012.

they didn't unleash us completely.[127]

Although private plots were not allowed, it would have been likely that hunger drove people to grow food somewhere in the hills. MSH remembers that people continued to show up in the public canteen: "People were really good at the time. They went to the canteen when it was time and took their own pot. After they ate their meal, they washed their pot and put it back in the canteen. And then they went back home and ate some sweet potatoes".[128] Similarly, FQ confirmed that people had their own strategies to avoid starving:

> We're not scared during the period of *sang-liang zhuang*. After returning from work, my husband would go fishing. We had all types of fish. We made soup and other meals with it. I myself grew many sweet potatoes. At that time everyone converted wasteland for cultivation. You wouldn't starve unless you were lazy.
>
> Sometimes I came back from work and had nothing to do. Then I went to collect sea shells. Sometimes, if I found I had only a plate for growing seedling or a manure basket, I would gather shells in my shirt and carry them back. I usually took a spare shirt when I went to work in the fields in case my shirt got wet. Then I wrapped the shells with the wet shirt. Honestly, in the rural areas, as long as you were willing to work, you wouldn't starve.[129]

As well, family members and other relatives of the villagers who had settled down in Hong Kong and Macau offered their support by sending back food such as rice crust and vegetables preserved in oil: "They knew life was hard in the countryside."[130]

It seems that everyone remembers being unhappy with the public canteens. They complain about the waste, the corruption in the kitchen, and the way the food tasted.

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[127] Interview with BSH, 2012.

[128] Interview with MSH, 2012.

[129] interview with FQ, 2013.

[130] Interview with XN, 2012.

The women who were assigned to work in the canteens remember that they had to get up too early because they still had to do their own washing and house cleaning, and they found cooking for several hundred people to be difficult.[131] According to them, the worst thing was that the canteens were not able to provide enough food while households managed to find and cooking food without assistance. There did not seem to be any justification continuing on with public canteens. The public canteens in Yakou Village were closed sometime around 1961 and food preparation once again fell to women.

4.3.2 Nurseries

The official record shows that, soon after land reform, in 1954 Zhongshan Women's Federation placed the organisation of mutual aid childcare groups, *daier huzhu zu*, on the agenda. The idea was to "realise women's potential for labour" by helping women to "arrange their domestic labour and their agricultural labour." The Federation also proposed that male peasants be educated to share in the domestic labour (ZWF 1954). Three years later, in the heyday of the co-operatives, the Zhongshan County Party Committee decided to set up nurseries, daycare centres, and kindergartens in every co-operative (ZPC 1957). The Committee proposed that women who were deemed unfit for physical labour should look after the children, and that their work points could be contributed by both the co-operative and the mother. The Committee also proposed that the co-operative should purchase toys and other necessities with money from the public welfare fund. Chinese feminists at that time saw childcare as a major obstacle standing in the way of liberating women from the burden of domestic labour. Thus, with the initiation of the Great Leap campaign, the increased demand for labour due to the rapid transformation meant that childcare would have to be made widely available if women were to take part in the labour force needed for the collectivisation of agriculture.

[131] Interview with GW, 2012.

In Yakou some childcare groups had already been organised through the mutual aid and cooperation movement. These developed slowly because there were not many women inclined to send their children. There were often elderly woman in the household prepared to help with children, and at this time, given that participation in collective agriculture was not yet compulsory, women were still able to look after their children and work in the fields. Soon after the Zhangjiabian People's Commune was established in August of 1958, a nursery was set up for children between the ages of six months and four or five years of age.

HL, also in charge of women's affairs in the village during that period of time, talked about running the nursery:

> It was hard work to run a nursery. There were many children, around 60 or 70. We had to cook for them. Very hard. They were all small. All the small children of the brigade were at the nursery. The rooms of [what was once] the landlord's house in Dongbao were big, so we placed all the children there. At the beginning, the nursery was run by the brigade, but it was soon divided and each production team ran their own.[132]

The original brigade-run nursery did not last long enough to leave an impression because, apart from HL, few of the people I interviewed could remember it. Even HL is unable to offer more detail about how it was run and why it failed to keep running. In any event, the challenges to running a nursery are mentioned in the accounts of others—that the nurseries were understaffed, underequipped, and that the care workers were untrained. LSH recalled the nursery at Zhongbao:

> The nurseries didn't have any subsidies. And the care workers didn't teach the children anything. At the time each production team appointed an elderly woman to look after the kids in the nursery. The nursery of Zhongbao was located just behind my old house. All the small children were sent to that place. The woman had a big house with a garden. The place was good, but it was not easy for her to watch so many children. Later Zhongbao was divided into two teams and then the children were

[132] Interview with HL, 2013.

divided into two groups.[133]

In Xiangxi, four elderly women were organised to look after eighteen children in the ancestral temple. STP remembered that parents did not have to pay the care workers during the communisation period, but she was very unhappy about the performance of the care centres:

> The care workers were not good. Other commune members finished their work at three o'clock and went to pick up their children at the nursery. I finished my work and then went to cut firewood on the hillside. Seeing that I was late, the workers just left my child in the yard. If my child had pooped on the ground, or been killed by a pig, what would I have done? I didn't have much time for collecting firewood, so once I finished my work in the fields it was hard to manage getting a load of fuel back home. I came back and saw my child there, and I held him and cried.
>
> Once my child had measles, but the care workers would not give him medicine. It happened the day I was meant to transplant seedlings in Sanqin'er. So I said to the team leader, "The child care worker is unwilling to give my child medicine, what shall I do?" The leader said, "Then you will transplant seedlings behind the Home for the Elderly. When you hear the gong sound, you can come back to eat. Then, you can go to give your child his medicine."[134]

Problems such as these had already been identified by the county-level Women's Federation and solutions had been proposed. For example, in order to improve those nurseries and the kindergartens that had been established in haste in the Great Leap campaign and its program of communising the domestic realm, the Women's Federation worked out a set of criteria to guide the management of the childcare organisations. A 1959 document reveals that the Women's Federation had an ambitious plan to bring the nurseries and kindergartens up to the standard of "six

[133] Interview with LSH, 2012.

[134] Interview with STP, 2012.

goods"—good diet, good education, good equipment, good hygiene, good (simplified) procedures for admission, and good attitude of the care workers. This standard was to be combined with "three changes"—the necessity of making available cribs and cradles, facilities so that children could take a shower, and a diverse diet available to meet different needs (ZWF 1959a).

In reality, these newly-built collective childcare organisations did not operate as hoped for. Many nurseries did not occupy their own facilities; they did not have enough care workers for the number of children, and often a care worker would send several children out, at the same time, to the fields where the mothers were working so that the mothers could nurse their children; many care workers did not settle into their work because it was poorly paid and provided less freedom compared to privately employed babysitters, which meant they did not have strong sense of duty; children were not given nursing care when they were ill; children often hurt themselves while in care; the canteens did not prepare special food for children; and, finally, parents were reluctant to trust strangers to care for their children. It seemed that the level of parental concern about these nurseries was so high, that even cadres would not send their children (ZWF 1960a, 1960b, and 1960c).

In response, the Women's Federation refined their criteria to include "five-assurances": care workers must assure parents that they will shower the children, wash and mend their clothing, guarantee their safety, contact the parents when needed, and cook for the children (ZWF 1960d). These criteria were adjusted a number times along the way in order to deal with new situations. For example, care workers were also required to educate children and give them haircuts (ZWF 1960e). The "six-goods" were also amended to include good sleep, and good education (ZWF 1960a).

The frequent amendments to the policies and recommendations for operating nurseries also reflects a certain apprehension felt by the members of the county-level Women's Federation. While the Great Leap and communisation pressed for the complete liberation of women's labour power, the local cadres were primarily

interested in production and less interested in the "special problem" of women, and I would argue that this mismatch resulted in the failure to properly implement these programmes.

This anxiety is echoed in accounts related in the course of the interviews where women complain about the care workers, to the extent that their remembered concerns dominate the discourse and obscure the underlying efforts of the local organisations, and the women themselves, to improve the childcare situation at that time.

LS (introduced in Chapter 3) provided a different perspective, from the point of view of a careworker and childcare administrator, which makes her account interesting and somewhat contradictory to the accounts of the others. LS moved to Yakou in 1957. In 1958 when the Great Leap was initiated, she was appointed to work in the kindergarten, perhaps because she was literate:

> It was the time of the communisation. A kindergarten was needed. Lujia and Yangjia were merged into one team, so the two teams shared one kindergarten. It was October. There were 3 teachers. I was in charge of giving lessons to the children. I taught them to read, to dance. The other two teachers were in charge of cleaning and caring for children.
>
> There were over 20 children in the kindergarten. They were small around 5 years old…. Children ate in the kindergarten. The canteen sent food to us. The canteen was located in the ancestral temple. Originally we had planned to turn the kindergarten into a boarding nursery school, but later I went to Hengyang. If I had not left for Hengyang…I was stupid. I didn't expect I would come back. I wasn't thinking. Now when I think back, I feel regretful.
>
> I was in charge of the work in the kindergarten. When I studied in Shiqi, I was named the "excellent trainee." During that time, women sent their children here in the morning and picked them up at 5 o'clock. During busy seasons they came later than that. The children went back for dinner.

> Although it was hard work to take care of the kindergarten, I had a good time. The children were here early in the morning. We taught them to sing and dance, and we played games with them. We're like monkeys. The other two women were elderly. They knew nothing about singing or dancing. So everything depended on me. But I didn't complain. I was happy.
>
> The kindergarten was located in today's storage house. The original owner of the house had been the puppet leader of the township before the Liberation, and had committed suicide during the land reform. His descendants went to Hong Kong. The house was beautiful. It had a courtyard. We used to take morning exercises there. The desks were placed in the hall. There was a blackboard on the wall. I taught the children to learn some simple words, like "up" and "down." There was no place for sleeping.
>
> I studied in Shabian for 10 days and in 1959, probably in July, I went to Shiqi and studied in there for one month. I attended a training course for care workers there. I learnt how to run a boarding nursery school.... Well, it was good at that time. [135]

This account summarises much of what the local authorities were able to offer for childcare in Yakou: a fixed place, basic facilities, and trained care workers. MSH also recalls that someone was sent to decorate the walls.[136] LS did not mention diet, but according to LD, the public canteen prepared nutritious food for children because "they were the successors of a new generation and should be taken good care of."[137]

It is interesting to note that LS used the term "kindergarten" in her accounts where others call it a "nursery": "It accepted children as young as six months old, and Yakou did not have a kindergarten until the 1980s."[138] The differences in the way people remember and talk about childcare in Yakou, is not simply a case of mistakenly remembered history but one of differences in status. From the perspective

[135] Interview with LS, 2012 and 2013.

[136] Interview with MSH, 2013.

[137] Interview with LD, 2012.

[138] Interview with MSH, 2013.

of LS, seeing herself as a kindergarten teacher is in keeping with her understanding that her education was superior to those around her, given that she was the only woman in her generation of those I interviewed who knew how to read and write. LS left Yakou for Hengyang late in 1959, and the nursery was closed by the end of that year, not long after LS left. When asked why it was closed, MSH replied that "near the end of the Great Leap, people [the care workers] even had trouble looking after themselves, how could they look after your children?"[139]

4.4 Conclusion

When talking about gender equality, many women in Yakou make a distinction between two stages in their lives: before marriage and after marriage. According to these women, men and women were more equal in the first stage than in the second stage. JT characterized this demarcation in terms of before-and-after children:

> They used to say men and women were the same whatever work they did. But I don't know in what way they were the same. Before I was married, yes, men and women were the same. When we went to meetings and took military exercises, men and women were the same. We spent several days at a meeting in Zhangjiabian, men and women together. No problems…. After married, I came here with my husband. He was active. He taught those women to shoot. I had to look after the kids, so I couldn't go. I stayed home cooking.[140]

The women I interviewed echo the observations of Parish and Whyte (1978): as long as men play only a minor role in tasks such making clothing, tending children, and cooking, women are unlikely to see their labour in the fields alongside men as much of a "liberation" (243). However, simply shifting some of the domestic duties to men is not a solution. I would argue that, as long as the household as an economic unit continues in its present form, barriers will continue to prevent any efforts to

[139] Interview with MSH, 2012.

[140] Interview with JT, 2012.

transform the household into a more equal and democratic economic unit.

There is no evidence to show that men welcomed the state interference, i.e., the introduction of public canteen and childcare centres, into their "private affairs." Once the campaign propelling the Great Leap was phased out, women were once more fully occupied by both domestic labour and collective agricultural labour. The Guangdong Women's Federation report of 1961 pointed out that "now women's domestic labour is as heavy as it was three years ago. …The conflict between women's labour in the field and their labour in the home (including household sideline activities) in this brigade is significant. Women's labour has increased, couples quarrel, and cases of uterine prolapse are increasing…. After repeated studies, the Party branch has decided to call the Party and League cadres together to take the lead in promoting shared domestic work."[141] On the basis of the official records that were available in the course of this research, this appears to be the last time that the state addressed this imbalance between the labour required of women, domestically and in agricultural production.

The failure of the Great Leap can also be seen as a defeat for the Chinese women's movement. From that time forward, the state has concentrated on economic recovery and the further development of agricultural production strategies, and has kept away from domestic issues. The short-lived socialisation during the Great Leap failed to weaken the household as an economic unit. In other words, it might be the incompleteness in transforming the traditional family arrangement that had left chance for its revival from the defeat in the attempts of socialising the domestic labours.

[141] Guangdong Women's Federation 1961b.

Chapter Five Marriage

KGP was born into a good family in a neighbouring village in 1927. Her father was a teacher and her grandfather had been awarded the title of *juren*[142] in late imperial China. Her mother, a daughter of a wealthy family, was given a servant girl as part of her dowry. Born and raised in this family, KGP was taught to be a "good lady". She said that she "seldom went on the street before I was married." She clearly remembered what happened in the street on the day of the Liberation, *jiefang*, because she had been coaxed into being "out" that day:

> How did I know *jiefang*? In the town seat, the students of Yunque Middle School had a parade. They played the drums and called out, 'Jiefang! Jiefang'! So I knew it.
>
> That day I had been set up on *manghun*.[143] My mother asked me to go to see the procession, but I didn't feel like doing. I told her to take my younger sister with her instead. At that moment the students played the drums, very noisy, so my mother took the chance and coaxed me into going out to let the man I was to marry see me. Before that day, my future mother-in-law had already seen me. She had come to my house with an old basket. I was knitting a sweater, and she came alone. I didn't take her visit to heart. Girls before were not like girls nowadays, chattering all day. Then, after a while, my mother asked me to go with my sister to see the procession. I didn't want to go, but she insisted. So I went. I changed my clothes, plaited my hair, and went out. At first, my mother did not intend to come with us, but later she changed her mind

[142] Wikipedia: A recommended man, a qualified graduate who passed the triennial provincial exam (of which there were also military versions). Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_examination

[143] *Manghun* literally means "blind marriage", a marriage arranged by parents or other seniors in the family without the knowledge and consent of the bride, or the bridegroom. Here KGP uses this term to refer to the date about which she had known nothing.

> and said she would drop in on my elder sister. In the street I saw the students dancing *yangge*[144] and singing songs. It's a great spectacle! I stood there watching the paraders, and had no idea that Kailongzai was watching me. My mother and he may have arranged all of this.[145]

KGP's memory of the day of Liberation is linked to her first date with her future husband. It was on an autumn day in October 1949, not long after Mao Zedong stood on Tiananmen Rostrum to proclaim the founding of the People's Republic of China. The Nationalist government of Zhongshan, realising that their day was over, had given up the county seat long before the Chinese PLA soldiers arrived. When more than three hundred PLA soldiers marched through the city gates, they were welcomed by hundreds of thousands of people. The whole town was feverish with excitement and there was procession of bicycles, *yangge* dancers, drummers, and school choirs.

That KGP's memories of *jiefang* coincide with the occasion of her "blind date" when she was first seen by her future husband is interesting and somewhat ironic. Before long the new regime would initiate an immense nationwide socio-economic transformation nationwide that would include the land reform, widespread cooperatives, and the collectivisation of agriculture, and the marriage reform by way of the Marriage Law in 1950. With the land reform, the prior economic power structure was destroyed and for the first time, women shared equally in their entitlement to the land, a significant step towards achieving independence for women. The marriage reforms were designed to replace the traditional family institution with a new one based on equal intra-family relations. The Party-state and the newly

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144 *Yangge*, 'rice-sprout song', is the name for a series of folk art forms including dances, songs and variety acts performed by amateur peasant artists during the New Year and the Lantern Festival in northern China. It is performed in different styles in different areas, but all express happiness. In 1943 The Chinese Communist Party launched a *yangge* movement in Yan'an and infused it with a socialist element reflecting the spirit of reform. Since then, *yangge* as symbol for "new society" has been employed as a medium for Communist Party propaganda and mass education. (Holm 1984; Hung 2005).

145 Interview with KGP, 2012.

founded the All-China Democratic Women's Federation (ACDWF)[146] emphasized that the perpetuation of the interior position of women in society lies in the traditional family institution. To create of a society based on gender equality implies commensurate reforms in the private sphere. In this respect *jiefang* not only announced an end to "the rule of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism in China"[147] with respect to Chinese women, it also implied a new age in which women would see their role and position redefined in family.

The reform policies of the new government did not affect the personal lives of women immediately in the newly liberated areas. To many women such as KGP, the transition to adulthood still continued in a traditional manner. Compared with the older liberated areas, where years of the women's movement in the course of the war had already created a political and ideological foundation for mass mobilisation and thus a more effective enforcement of the law, the women of southern China faced with more obstacles when it came to enjoying the advantages of new marriage system (Croll 1980, 233; Deng 1950, 81; Zhang 2002). The party-state preoccupation with economic reconstruction following the end of the war, along with a series of political campaigns, meant that the state was unlikely to put energy into the marriage reform in any kind of comprehensive way, a point that has often been the object of feminist criticism.

This chapter examines the Marriage Law campaign and its long-term effects. After a summary of the state policy and its implementation at local level, this chapter puts rural women's memories at the centre of the inquiry. Discussion of the marriage reform has been dominated by two narratives. The first is the Party-state narrative, where the Marriage Law, as well as the marriage policies in place prior to Liberation, has been interpreted as the Party-state's commitment to women's liberation and is one of its major accomplishments (Belden, 1949; Yang, 1959; Curtin, 1976;

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[146] In 1957 the All-China Democratic Women's Federation was renamed the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), or the Women's Federation.

[147] Cited from *The Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference*. Retrieved from http://e-chaupak.net/database/chicon/1949/1949bilingual.htm.

Stranahan, 1983). This narrative promotes the idea that marriage reform was a significant step to furthering the emancipation of women; that the traditional marriage system in place during the feudal regime was destroyed; that the structure of family authority was transformed; that family relations were reorganised; and that marriages were essentially more democratic. But it was also acknowledged that feudal elements in marriage practices remained and would take a long time until they were eradicated (Croll 1978; Davin 1976; Wang 2010)

The second narrative comes mainly out of western scholarship, which holds that the Party-state never actually had a strong commitment to women's liberation. Rather, the necessity of gaining the support of the male peasants for the revolution, followed by the preoccupations involved in constructing of the socialist state, made marriage reform a low priority. This narrative contends that the state, in reality, bargained away women's rights and freedoms when it came to marriage. There are also scholars who see the Marriage Law as an attempt by the Party-state to stabilise, or restabilise, traditional families as a way of providing a foundation for socialism (Andors, 1983; Johnson, 1983; Stacey, 1983).

Examining the statements and programs forwarded by the Party-state will not, in itself, provide a better understanding of the way in which marriage reform affected the lives of Chinese women. The marriage reform campaigns and the routinized publicity might vary in terms of local culture, qualifications of cadres, degrees of devotion of the local authority and so on. An enquiry that centres on the village women may better reveal where the campaign failed. Nonetheless, the political and economic shift after the Liberation gradually undermined many traditional features of marriage, but at the same time some central features of the institution of marriage remained untouched.

5.1 The Marriage Law of 1950 as a Response to Women's Grievances

There is no doubt that that the Party-state assigned a great deal of importance to the Marriage Law of 1950. The process, from its drafting to its final promulgation, took seventeen months (Deng, 1950), and it was the first law enacted in the history of the PRC. The law abolished those aspects of the prior "feudal" marriage system based on arbitrary and compulsory arrangements which reinforced the supremacy of men over women; it and prohibited bigamy, concubinage, interference with widow marriage, and the extraction of money or gifts in connection with marriage. To prevent child betrothal, it stipulated the minimum age for marriage (18 for women, and 20 for men), and required couples to register their marriage with local governments. It also established the equal right of wife and husband to possess and manage family property. Apart from granting the freedom to choose partners, the law also granted both wife and husband the freedom to divorce and introduced procedures for divorce, mediation, property settlement, and child support.[148]

The Marriage Law was intended to address the issue of Chinese people, especially women's suffering in marriage. Shi Liang, the Minister of Justice at the time, saw the law as meeting "the demands of the objective circumstances."[149] According to the State-party accounts, these "objective circumstances" were inevitably disturbing. A survey conducted by the Guangdong Provincial Women's Federation (GWF 1953) shows that in some counties, such as Fengshun and Nanxiong, 80% of the families practiced child marriage. Some families would even adopt female children as daughters-in-law before they had a son, which would allow them to have the girl labour as family chattel. If the family remained without a son, the girl would either assume the status of a widow for rest of her life or be sold elsewhere.

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[148] For the complete text, see Meijer, *Marriage Law,* Appendix 8.

[149] See "Shi Liang Talks About the Marriage Law," *Guangming Daily*, April 16, 1950.

Along similar lines, wealthy men were permitted to keeping concubines who, once they assumed a position in the household, were not allowed to return to their homes. In the Beijiang River area (the central part of the province), concubines were often women who had been kidnapped from other areas. If they attempted to leave the village they would either be killed, kept in some form of detention, or sold elsewhere.

Widows were not allowed to remarry or to socialise with men outside the household. A widowed woman would be obliged to treat an entire village to a meal of noodles for simply speaking with a man she might have encountered on her way home from the village. For those women who were alienated from their husbands for many years by reason of their departure overseas—common in central Guangdong, Chaoshan and the Pearl River areas—looking for a new husband or partner was not possible.[150]

The Party-state accounts had always characterised the past in terms of the "evils" of the old "feudal" society. Exposing and denouncing the "feudal" institution of marriage for the inequity and suffering that it brought to women was embedded in strategies aimed at spurring people to support the campaigns of the state. And yet, the accounts of the women in this study do indeed paint a picture of pre-Liberation rural Guangdong where arranged marriages launched these women into lives that often entailed misery. There were some exceptions to this pattern in cases where women originated urban families, where "feudal" ideas had already been challenged in the early days of the marriage reforms; these women were more or less able to negotiate the terms of their marriage.[151] As for the rest, these women could not help but regret the experience of coming to their marriage by arrangements that had been

[150] Guangdong Women's Federation (1952, file 233-1-11-18~26).

[151] For instance, FM showed us a picture of herself and her husband during an interview, saying, "We took this picture when we just started our relationship. I was eighteen…. Someone introduced me to him and he fell in love with me. We dated for more than a year before we got married. He worked out of Shiqi, and returned every two months. When he was in town, we wandered through the streets…. At that time we were civilised. Interview with FM, July 2012.

made without their consent, *manghun*.[152] Their memories of not having been consulted about the choice of marriage partner, or included in the negotiation of the marriage arrangements , are mixed with resignation, bitterness, and regret.

Returning to the story of KGP: on the day she returned from the parade, she was told that "someone" had taken a fancy to her: "I had no idea about it. So when I was married here, whoever had been chosen to be my husband was my husband. I was completely ignorant." Two months after the "blind date", engagement rituals followed. The prospective husband's family sent gifts to KGP's family and they discussed the date of wedding. In the end, the wedding was held ahead of schedule:

> My [prospective] husband came again and told us that my [prospective] father-in-law was dying. He said that, since I had accepted their gifts that made me one of them. He asked me to marry him on the 23rd day that month. He gave me the gifts on the 12th day of the12th month and took me on the 23rd of the 12th month. I couldn't do anything with this. I had already accepted their gifts, I was their person, so I had to marry him. No way out.[153]

Another woman I interviewed, BSH, married in Yakou in 1946, often comments on her life by citing texts from the Wooden-fish Books.[154] She described her marriage as "bitter"; and herself as having been "delicate and pretty" as a young woman, and so felt aggrieved by having been married off to someone "ugly and

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[152] *Manghun* is the local term for "arranged marriage." The way that women told it, the most unacceptable experience of *manghun* was that they knew nothing about the groom not even what he groom looked like.

[153] Interview with KGP, 2012.

[154] According to Liang Peizhi, the Wooden-fish Books, *Mu-yü-shu*, are the texts of *Mu-yü-ge*, "a variety of popular 'ballad' from Kwangtung, especially well-known in the areas adjacent to the Pearl 珠江 and Hsi-chiang 西江 rivers, and of Nan-lu 南路. They were usually chanted in Kwangtung dialects. The texts or *mu-yü-shu*, wooden-fish-books, are, of course, the consequence of the songs; but, on the other hand, the existence of the books furthered their influence among the people. Mu-yü-shu had once a great influence on persons of limited education, especially on women, who were able to derive much pleasure from them even without being literate." Liang *Peizhi, Xianggang Daxue Suo Cang Muyu Shu Xulu Yu Yanjiu* [Wooden-fish books: Critical essays and an annotated catalogue based on the collections in the University of Hong Kong] (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, 1978), quoted in Chan, "Cantonese Opera."

poor”:[155]

> I let my mother make the decision for me…. Pig gall and bitter herb is nothing compared with the taste of sliced ginger and bitter herb. It’s bitter and pungent. I had that bitterness…. Everybody says, “It’s sad that my aunty married my uncle. He was incapable and had a terrible temper. She suffered all her life.”[156]

For daughters of humble and poor families, marriage offered the potential for their families to share economic and social resources with the prospective husband’s family. In such cases, there were few options once arrangements had been made, other than violent resistance. KGP’s mother-in-law had such an experience. Although KGP did not get along well with her mother-in-law, when she spoke of her mother-in-law’s *manghun* experience, she was very sympathetic:

> My mother-in-law was pathetic.... She was 18 when she married my father-in-law, who was already over 50. My mother-in-law was not happy with this arrangement, but her family was poor. They hoped the man’s family would take care of them. My mother-in-law attempted suicide, but her mother insisted that she marry him. In order to prevent her from suicide, her mother appointed several people to look after her till the wedding.[157]

Women’s frustration with their marriages also came from their own feelings of failure at not adjusting well to their new life in the family which they had married into. Frustrations might be caused by poverty, household chores, men, and even the mother-in-law’s supremacy:

> When I was married, this family was really poor. My husband went fishing on the sea, sold the fish and bought rice with the money. And a large family lived in one room. Before I was married, my life was not

[155] Interview with BSH, 2013.

[156] Interview with BSH, 2012.

[157] Interview with KGP, 2012.

bad, but after married, I had nothing.[158]

> It was hard after I was married. I cried each time I thought of how my mother had doted on me…. My mother-in-law asked me to cut firewood in the hills. I had never done that before. How did I know?… During the meal, I served my mother-in-law a bowl of rice, and then I served my husband a bowl of rice. When I saw them finish their rice, I served them another bowl of rice, first my mother-in-law, and then my husband. After the meal, I served them tea. [We] were not as open as this generation.[159]

As for remarriage, interviews with these women reveal that their experiences may be more complicated than either the Marriage Law implied or the official archives indicated. Whether a widow was to remarry was often a decision based on considerations that had to do with livelihood or even simply just survival, rather than the idea that "feudal" ideas about chastity tended to stand in the way of widows remarrying. YL recalled her mother's miserable life:

> My grandfather rented some land from the landlord, but he failed to pay the rent. He had to sell [his daughter] my mother to a family in Huangpu as a servant for 14 *yuan* and 80 cents. For this my relatives cursed at him. My mother was a teenager. At the age of 20 when her lady married, my mother was married [as a concubine]. Her husband was a butcher and very sick at that time. After they married, *chongxi*,[160] he got better…but his wife deprived my mother of this man all the time. Later the butcher died. At that time my mother already had my elder brother and was carrying me. She had to marry again because my aunt told her, "If you don't marry and leave, the wife will torture you to death."[161]

The accounts of these women suggest that, under the provisions of the Marriage Law, they would have been able to make better economic and social arrangements both within and between the families involved. Under the terms of these new

[158] Interview with BSH, 2012.

[159] Interview with KGP, 2012.

[160] *Chong xi* is a traditional Chinese practice in which a wedding was often arranged for the dangerously sick in the belief that the devil and the disease would be driven away.

[161] Interview with YL, 2012.

arrangements, women as well as men would have had more control over their personal lives. Instead of leaving marriage choices to their parents or other senior members in the family, they would have been able to select their own life partner based on mutual attraction and love. The kind of betrothal gift transaction that tied KGP to the family even before the marriage would not have been allowed. The revolutionary Marriage Law of 1950 provided the legal foundation to transform marriage arrangements and laid the groundwork for a more democratic family structure.

5.2 Public Reactions and the 1953 Campaign

5.2.1 Public Reactions to the Law

People responded immediately to the Marriage Law. To begin with, it prompted a wave of divorce in China.[162] Government reports show that it freed people, especially women, from unhappy marriages. Although incomplete, statistics from 45 cities and counties in Guangdong reveal that, between 1950 and 1952, there were 72,688 civil marriage registrations, and during this time the judicial courts also heard 63,089 divorce cases.[163] Local reports show that after the promulgation of the law, marriage disputes ranked number one of all the civil cases received by the local judicial courts.[164] Underlying the statistics, however, is frustrating accounts of opposition to the law and the introduction of new sources of social instability. Poor families interpreted the law as a "divorce law" and were fearful that their men were unable to marry. Women looked to divorce as the only solution to their family conflicts and tended to be rash in their hurry to apply for a divorce. Female cadres

[162] Meijer's (1971) study is centred on data for Guangdong and includes a table showing the statistics at the national level (112-113).

[163] Guangdong Women's Federation (1953, file 233-2-49).

[164] For instance, in Wengyuan County of the Beijiang District, divorce cases accounted for 95 per cent of the civil cases and 90 per cent of them were initiated by women. In Qujiang County there were 72 divorce cases and 70 were initiated by women. In the Yuezhong District, 80 per cent of the civil cases concerned about divorce. And in Dongjiang District, of all the divorce cases, 80 per cent were started by women. See GWF (1952).

saw the law as one that favoured men because it appeared to make abandoning a rural wife easy. People would say, "the Communist Party and Chairman Mao are nice, except for the divorce law."[165]

The land reform was viewed by the state as the first step to women's liberation. By receiving title to their land allotments, women attained the material basis required for their economic independence from men. Their bargaining power was strengthened and they were able to gain more control over their marital arrangements, whether to persist with their marriages or sever the marriage in divorce.

In reality, there are only a few accounts where women, having gained the right to land and property in their own names, felt liberated from the oppression of men, or had a bigger say in the negotiations of their marriage.[166] However, entitlement to a share of land did not guarantee freedom in marriage arrangements. And, even though all the family members were named on the deeds to the land, in reality, the deeds were issued to the head of the household, not to individuals.[167] Theoretically, a woman could bring her share of land to a marriage, or take it with her when she divorced. However, this was hard to implement in practice. Violations of women's property rights to land were common. When women married, they were not allowed to bring land registered under their name to the marriage; and when they divorced, they had to leave their land to their husbands. One report showed that in one district of Jieyang County, only 33 out of 99 divorce cases were resolved with the woman retaining the title to her land. Widows who remarried had to leave their former marital home empty-handed. Reports also show that many people were very unhappy

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[165] Guangdong Women's Federation, "A Work Summary of Propaganda."

[166] Hinton (1966) vividly documents women's account of the relationship between land distribution and the way it strengthened their position when it came to dealing with their marital problems (397). Hershatter (2003) includes an account of a female cadre breaking off her engagement after hearing about the new marriage law from the land reform team (97). However, stories of this kind are not that common, perhaps because this period was quite short or, as Cheng (1988) suggests, partly because of the ambiguity implicit in the state policy towards land reform and women (84).

[167] In some areas, only the names of the men were shown on the deeds—a clear violation of the law (Hershatter, 2003, 81).

with the government for it failed to stop the obvious violations of the law.[168]

More disturbing are the accounts of violence against women. Just several months after the promulgation of the law, reports began to occur in various areas on deaths where women either took their own lives, or were murdered as the result of a family disputes.[169] Although there were also male victims of these disputes, women formed the largest proportion.[170] The 1952 report by the Guangdong Provincial Women's Federation recorded cases of homicide and suicide in areas where the land reform was either complete or still in progress. In some counties there were even cases of collective suicide.[171] The Guangdong Marriage Law Implementation Committee (1953a) showed that, in 1953, in 85 counties of Guangdong, there were 2,189 deaths related to marriage since the promulgation of the law.

It appears that the communist feminists were not surprised by the chaos. In her report on the Marriage Law, Deng Yingchao (1950) emphasised that the provisions for divorce were made on the basis of the demands of the masses of labouring women, particularly in the areas where the Land Reform was complete (37). According to Deng, the allotment of land that women were given was to make possible their economic independence from the male heads of the household and potentially free them from unhappy "feudal" marriages. Deng also observed that "the chaos at the moment is a normal phenomenon in the process of social advancement," and advocated that cadres should prepare for a long-term struggle (81–4). However, the ensuing outbreaks of violence against women required that the central

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[168] Central South Administrative Committee (1952b, 1954).

[169] Official figures indicate that each year there were around 70,000–80,000 deaths nationwide due to family disputes (*People's Daily*, February 25, 1953). In reality, the situation on the ground might have been worse in some areas. A government document reported that in some counties in South-Western District, the actual number of deaths by suicide and homicide far exceeded those reported. For example, one rural woman in Wusheng County was reported as having said that only three out of every five deaths in her area were reported (Zhang 2012, 10).

[170] See "Preliminary Investigation Into One Year's Implementation of the Marriage Law and Opinions on Its Further Implementation in the Future." Also see Tang (2010) for detailed discussion.

[171] Guangdong Women's Federation (1952a). Collective suicides, Guangdong Women's Federation (1952b).

government take immediate action to prevent the situation from further deteriorating. A flurry of directives were issued between 1951 and 1953 urging Party and Government cadres at all levels to investigate the implementation of the Marriage Law. The directive issued on the first of February 1953 ordered that a national campaign take place in March to better publicise the Marriage Law and investigate its implementation with more devotion and effort.[172]

Guangdong was sluggish when it came to implementing the Marriage Law. After the Liberation, the provincial apparatus and the county-level branches of the All-China Women's Federation were preoccupied with the land reform. Apart from sporadic propaganda, they failed to devote the energy required for systematic public education of the newly-passed law. Even after the Government Administrative Council issued a directive that strongly urged local governments at all levels to investigate how the public had responded to the law, only a few counties responded and the whole process was quickly completed in two or three months. In early 1953, the land reform was still the central project in most areas in Guangdong.[173] As a result, only 1,327 townships[174]—in only 42 out of a total of 96 counties—participated in the implementation campaign which, in the end, reached only one tenth of the population.[175]

Zhongshan participated in this implementation campaign, but only reluctantly. The campaign was to take place in March, but the land reform would not be complete until Spring Planting which did not finish until late February. This meant that the leaders and cadres were left with little time to prepare to take on the

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[172] During this period, the directives issued by the Central government included: "Directive on the Investigation of Conditions Relating to the Implementation of the Marriage Law" (The Government Administrative Council, 26 September 1951); "Directive on Continuation of Implementing the Marriage Law" (Ministry of Civil Affairs and Ministry of Justice respectively, 25 July, 1952); "Directive on the implementation of the Marriage Law" (Party Central Committee, 26 November, 1952; The Government Administrative Council (1 February, 1953); and "Supplementary Directive on the Campaign Month of Implementing the Marriage Law" (Party Central Committee , 18 February, 1953).

[173] See Guangdong Marriage Law Implementation Committee (1953c).

[174] The total number of townships in Guangdong grew from 3,499 in 1950, to 12,321 in 1956.

[175] Guangdong Women's Federation (1954).

campaign process.[176] A local report shows that the implementation campaign lasted fifteen days and also overlapped with the Cadres Conference of Zhongshan (from the 5th to the 20th of March).

5.2.2 Cadres' Training

Forty-five cadres from the Women's Federation and the land reform work teams received two days' training before they were sent out to fourteen of the sixteen districts in the county to carry on the campaign. Pilot villages were selected, but being short-handed, some districts had to reduce the number of pilot villages to two or three.[177]

At the next stage of the campaign, according to the reports, about 1,200 local cadres at the township and village levels attended a three-evening training class, after which they set out to undertake mass education initiatives. The Zhongshan County Women's Federation reported that, during this stage, publicity was carried out with a great fanfare, publicising the information with blackboard newspapers, *dazibao* (big-character posters), stage plays, singing, and slide shows. At the same time small mixed groups of people were organised to discuss the problems they were all faced with.[178]

The central government was convinced that the feudally-oriented rural cadres were the major cause of confusion and most likely to be guilty of offences during the implementation of the marriage law, and therefore set out to specifically target the cadres as those most in need of education and training by way of the campaign. Provincial authorities also saw the ambivalence and hostility of cadres towards the law as being on top of the list of problems identified when it came to implementing of the law.[179] The county-level authorities found that the cadres generally either

[176] See Guangdong Marriage Law Implementation Committee (1953b & 1953c).

[177] Zhongshan County Women's Federation (1953a).

[178] Ibid.

[179] See Central South Administrative Committee (1954).

misunderstood or had only a partial understanding about the law. One report from a pilot village in Zhongshan that had been selected for the campaign reported that cadres did not perform any better than the people in general when it came to understanding the law. It seemed that the cadres had "grave misgivings," particularly with respect to the provisions for divorce. Too, they feared that if one woman divorced, other women would feel encouraged to do the same.[180]

These complaints about cadres are not surprising. A succession of political and economic reforms, as well as military activities in the newly liberated areas, left no time for the Party-state to train the cadres at the local levels. Immediately following the Liberation, Yakou Village was governed by a self-appointed "peasant association" consisting of a former guerrilla fighter, a former puppet-governor of the town, along with his wife, a landlady, a manager of public land,[181] a rickshaw-puller and several hired agricultural labourers: "All of them enjoyed showing off in public," MSH recalled.[182] This autonomous peasant organisation also helped organise donations to support the Resist America-Aid Korea Campaign, and carried out the "Eight Characters Campaign."[183]

It was not until the end of 1951, when the land reform work team arrived, that this organisation was disbanded. The new authority was headed by a hired agricultural worker from the neighbouring village: "This man had a good class status, and quick mind. Those selecting cadres at that time valued one's class status. It did not matter if you had no experience or a low degree of education. In fact, lots of

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[180] See ZWF (1953b).

[181] Various forms of public land in China's rural areas was controlled in practice by landlords or rich peasants, which meant that these managers of public land, who "assisted landlords in collecting rent and managing property" were often put in the same category as landlords. Mao (1933). Retrieved from https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_8.htm

[182] Interview with MSH, 2012.

[183] "Eight Characters" refers to *jianzu* (reduce the rent), *tuiya* (refund the deposit), *qingfei* (clean up the bandits), and *fanba* (struggle with the local tyrants). This campaign was carried out in 1950 and was intended to deal a heavy blow to the "reactionary forces" and make preparations for the land reform. See "Eight Characters Campaign" in *Choreography of Zhongshan*, available online at Zhongshan Municipal Archives. http://www.zsda.gov.cn/uploads/book/zhenquzhi/huangpuzhenzhi/48.htm

work was done by the work team."[184]

As the time for the training class was limited, classes had to be cut off. The official report shows that the training of the cadres centred on understanding and being able to communicate three articles of the Marriage Law: One, Two and Eight.[185] Where the first two articles had to do with the general principles of the law, the last article emphasised that it was the duty of marriage partners to build harmony in both the family and the new society. These articles were distilled into three slogans: "Free marriage," "Equality of men and women," and "Domestic harmony and solidarity for production." Although these phrases may have seemed "catchy," the report shows that such condensed notions did not make much sense to the cadres. Cadres often used these newly-learned phrases awkwardly, and instead focused their discussions on traditional virtues, especially those of women. The topic of the marriage relationship between husband and wife tended to brushed over, and divorce—the most upsetting topic to all—seemed to have been completely ignored in the training.

There is no indication in the report of the Zhongshan County Women's Federation whether this issue was ever raised for discussion:

> RECOGNITION OF ADULTERY: Miaolin from Maling of District One said, "I hate people that commit adultery, and would like to take off their clothes and hang them under the tree." A young man confessed that he had bitterly hated his mother for committing adultery. A militiaman confessed that he was excited when someone asked him to catch out those in the act of adultery. After some discussion, it was explained that adultery takes place because marriage is not free and widows are not permitted to remarry. Adultery is caused by the feudal system of

[184] Interview with MSH, 2013.

[185] Article 1: The feudal marriage system—based on arbitrary and compulsory arrangements, the supremacy of men over women, and without regard to the interests of children—is abolished. Article 2: Bigamy, concubinage, interference in re-marriage of widows, and the extraction of money or gifts in connection with marriages, are prohibited. Article 8: Husband and wife are duty-bound to love, respect, assist and look after each other, to live in harmony, to engage in productive work, to care for their children and strive jointly for the welfare of the family and building a new society.

marriage. People that commit adultery should not be hated or caught in the act and punished. Rather, they should be educated.

RECOGNITION OF MEN'S SUPREMACY OVER WOMEN AND EQUALITY OF MEN AND WOMEN: Huang Yancai from District Two used to beat his wife. Now he realises that wife-beating is an expression of patriarchal thinking. Why do so few women beat their husband? Because men and women are not equal. Cuirui from Xinxiang of District Nine has two daughters. She once wanted to sell them so she could buy food. When they grow up, she will not allow them to go out to work. This is because boys are preferred to girls. This discussion brought forth the conclusion that it is not good if men and women are not equal. Equality of men and women must be achieved.

RECOGNITION OF WIDOW REMARRIAGE: A youth from Zhenzhong Township of District Thirteen said he did not allow his mother into his house after she remarried. He was not happy she remarried.[186]

5.2.3 Mass education

Considering the confusion among the cadres themselves, it would be unrealistic to expect more of the mass education initiatives. Compared with the way of the training to the cadres that has been described, the local report of the Zhongshan County Women's Federation describing the meetings held to educate the villagers during the campaign is brief and sketchy. It is also interesting to note that there is no clue as to the reaction of the meeting participants:

MEETINGS FOR IN LAWS: The point was raised that the mother-in-law should be respected and the daughter-in-law should be cared for; explained that widowed women have the right to remarry but they were not forced to do so; used examples to help peasants realise the pain of debt caused by purchased marriage; made the elderly people support the Marriage Law.

MEETINGS FOR YOUTHS: Freedom of marriage and freedom of love were

[186] Zhongshan County Women's Federation (1953a).

raised to make youths understand that these issues are immediately related to their interests, and so they should implement and publicise the law.

MEETINGS FOR WOMEN: Women were instructed to recognise that their pain is caused by the feudal marriage system; that to achieve equality of men and women, they should take the initiative to improve family solidarity and participate in the agricultural production.[187]

The most important session of the mass education initiatives that were conducted seemed to be the meetings provided for the *buhe jiating*, the "inharmonious family." By way of training, and practice for educating others, a cadre was asked to work first with his own family to address family conflicts. When his family disputes were settled, and a typical example formulated, the cadre would go on to work with another family.

The central government emphasized at the outset that the campaign would focus on publicising the law and investigating how and whether it was being implemented. Work teams were not to interfere in the affairs of a family unless absolutely necessary. However, the local report of the Zhongshan County Women's Federation shows that dealing with family disputes soon took priority in the campaign agenda. In order to prepare a "typical" example for teaching purposes, some cadres would target "the most complicated and inharmonious family" to work with. According to the report, the cadres would spend several days meeting with such families, only to find that their efforts were in vain. The report criticised these cadres for being "impractical" and "melodramatic." This approach was also seen as "delaying the progress of the campaign."

The local report of the Zhongshan County Women's Federation also describes a "successful" case of a meeting with a *buhe jiating*— the family of Huang Yanxin, the cadre mentioned above who beat his wife:

[187] Zhongshan County Women's Federation (1953a).

> After the thinking of each individual in the family was straightened out, all the family members were instructed to identify the reasons for their family strife and their own shortcomings. At the request of the family, a family meeting was organised. By looking at themselves critically, the whole family realised their family strife was caused by a feudal arranged marriage. Huang Yanxin has been married for seventeen years. Their feelings about each other were not good. When he got married, he spent excessively, for which he had to sell an ox. He hoped his wife could earn money to buy another ox. As well, his wife's own family ran up a debt and they hoped their son-in-law would pay it off. But Huang's family was living in poverty after he married. So the mother-in-law called the daughter-in-law "Big Feet"[188] because she dragged on the family. Huang was also not good to his wife. The meeting made them realise that all their problems came from the purchased marriage. Once they came to understand this, the family worked out an agreement and a plan for production.

Huang's case was kept on record as an example of the success of the campaign of mass education. It is worth noting, however, that the meetings for this *buhe jiating* did little to publicise the Marriage Law itself, with the exception of the criticism of the "feudal" marriage system. Many important aspects of the Marriage Law—such as the equal status of wife and husband, and the equal rights of women in the possession and management of family property—were not communicated. It would seem that the freedom to choose one's marriage partner and the freedom to divorce—seen as the most significant factor in revolutionising the traditional Chinese family system—(Yang 1959, 82) seemed to have been rejected at the outset. Instead, it appears that the promotion of domestic harmony in the rural setting had become the prime target of the campaign. It also appears that the meetings for *buhe jiating* turned out to be the biggest achievement of this campaign, which the report of the Zhongshan County Women's Federation elaborated in great details:

[188] "*Big feet*" is meant in contrast with "small bound feet." In Zhongshan dialect, this term was used to refer to a woman with an unfortunate fate, one who was born into a poor family and, when married, brought a financial burden to her husband's family.

> The masses and the cadres' misunderstanding of and resistance to the Marriage Law was turned into support for the Marriage Law. A new atmosphere has arisen in the rural areas. In Chongtou Township of District 12, where the resistance was once the greatest, both the masses and the cadres have stopped buzzing with stories about the law. The cadres were busy publicising the law day and night. The masses invited the cadres to their homes to have meetings for *buhe jiating*. In each pilot village there were some successful cases where the inharmonious family was turned into one of harmony and solidarity. In the county there were 81 successful cases altogether. The examples are Huang Yanxin in Pinglan Town of District 2, whose family was inharmonious for 17 years, and Zheng Zao in Tongsheng Town of District 3, for 30 years…. In Zhenzhong Town of District 13, the meetings solved the ideological conflicts of the family members and encouraged them to work together. For instance, after the meeting, Bagen's family in Xinxiang, the mother and two sons, who had never carried and distributed manure over their vegetable plots, joined together for productive labour happily. The universal reaction of the masses is: Chairman Mao and the Communist Party are good. They led us to defeat the landlords and gave us land. Now they are here to hold family meetings for us.

In Yakou Village the publicising of the Marriage Law might have been undertaken in an informal way. YL recalled the performances of the literature and art team: "At the time there were PLA men in the village. They taught us to sing songs of Liberation, and to present plays about struggling landlords. And a Cantonese opera, a play about the oppression in the old society. We also put on a play about freedom of marriage."[189] However, YL looked puzzled when I used the phrase "the Marriage Law." MSH insisted that the Marriage Law was promulgated in 1953 but remembered that there was little publicity:

> The first law is not the Marriage Law, but the Constitution. It was promulgated in 1953, not 1950. From 1953 all kinds of laws began to emerge…. In 1951 and 1952 people were preoccupied with the land

[189] Interview with YL, 2012.

> reform. There was no publicising of laws. The publicising of laws should have begun in 1953. I was in Grade 6. I remember the old headmaster painted the whole wall of the three-room temple and posted up Regulations on Punishment of Counter-revolutionaries, and the Constitution. I never saw a poster about the Marriage Law there. Most of the posters were about the Constitution and the lists of names of those who were condemned to death by the court.

At this time, the Marriage Law campaign was a tentative one in the townships and villages of Zhongshan, and although it was intended to revolutionise the traditional feudal marriage practices and infuse people with new concepts of freedom, equality, and democracy, it was quickly transformed to a strategy to reconcile family conflicts. When considered in this light, the state's effort to reform marriage in one sweeping movement appears to have largely been a failure. Following the campaign, marital disputes that contravened the law or resulted in deaths continued to occur.

The report of the Women's Federation of Zhongshan County (ZWF 1974) shows that "purchase marriage" was still common. According to the report, in order to reduce the bridal price, some men would get women pregnant, which in turn led to an increase in the rate of abortions by various means. At the same time, wedding celebrations provided occasions for extravagance and waste. Traditional marriage customs, although characterised by the government as superstitious ritual, continued to be widely practiced; marriages were often not registered in the civil registry because the young people were under the legal age (18 for women, and 20 for me); and match-makers were still active and were known to swindle families who attempted to arrange advantageous marriages.

The provincial Guangdong Women's Federation must have been well aware that the Marriage Law campaign did not achieve the expected goals. By way of remedial action, the Federation organised a training class for their cadres seven months after the campaign ended in the hope that, by raising the level of the cadres' political and ideological awareness, they would publicise the basic tenets of the Marriage Law

more routinely.[190] The Federation even attempted campaigns in 1960, 1962, and 1963 to promote the implementation of the law.[191] However, there is no concrete evidence that the local authorities at the county level responded one way or another.

Realistically, the First Five Year Plan initiated in 1953—which had as its focus the "central work" of cooperativisation and collectivisation—left the local authorities with little spare energy or resources to promote the implementation of the Marriage Law. The Guangdong Women's Federation issued a gloomy report for 1966, noting that efforts to implement the law in some areas demonstrated that the "legal concept of the Marriage Law" became increasingly dim as far as the rural population in the region understood it, and that there was growing evidence that the law was being violated from 1960 onward. The report concluded that the lack of widespread publicising for years resulted in continued ignorance among the cadres and masses.[192]

5.3 Marriage Practices after the Campaign

5.3.1 Land Reform and Patrilineal Surname Endogamy

Following the completion of the land reform in 1953, Yakou Village began to devote itself to agricultural production and the formation of mutual-aid and cooperation movements in order to increase production and to prepare for coming collectivisation. Apart from bringing about new economic and political arrangements, the land reform had brought about changes in local marriage customs. For example, HL remembered that traditional surname endogamy changed following the land reform: "People said that a Tan couldn't marry a Tan. A woman couldn't marry a man of the same surname. But after the land reform, many women married locally.

[190] Guangdong Women's Federation (1953).

[191] Guangdong Women's Federation (1960, 1962, 1963).

[192] Guangdong Women's Federation (1966).

One Tan married another Tan."[193]

HL speculated that the change came about because of the new collective work system, and from militia activities, but FQ's proposed that the people's shares of land could have been a factor that influenced how people's made decisions about marriage:

> You couldn't bring your land with you when you married. You could take away money and other property, but land, no. Land belonged to this village. If you married into a place like Cuiheng or Nanglang, how could you bring your land along? But things were different if you married to someone here. If you married to some other place, you wouldn't get another share of land.[194]

Land deeds were issued to families rather than individuals. Although the name of each family member was included on the deed, this was insufficient for women to link this concept of ownership to personal benefits. The lack of effective mass education concerning the tenets of the Marriage Law inadvertently made land reform a mechanism by which the property base of the household was strengthened—and thereby the authority of the its head (Croll 1981, 151). Without significant control over property, women's economic independence remained an illusion. It was women's participation in social production—by way of the mutual aid and cooperation movement, and especially in the collectivisation of agriculture, where women and men to worked side by side—which formed an important force that slowly shook loose the marriage system from its traditional foundation.

5.3.2 Match-by-free-choice

The social and economic transformations that came about in the 1950s and 1960s in rural China also made arranged marriages, or "blind marriage" unlikely to happen. From the "Eight Character" movement, women began to be mobilised to

[193] Interview with HL, 2013.

[194] Interview FQ, 2013.

participate in public life. They attended Communist Youth League (CYL) meetings, engaged in struggles with landlords, and travelled to other villages to collect the rents and deposits returned by the landlords. The mutual Aid and cooperation movement, combined with agricultural collectivisation, forced women to step out of their homes and work side by side with men in the fields. As seen in Chapter Three, women learned farming skills from men. Some even learned to plough, work that was viewed as the most difficult and physically unsuitable for women, even today. All of this provided space and opportunity for the young people of the village to socialise with each other, which created a social and political foundation for new and more democratic marriage arrangements.

Nonetheless, there remained a challenge to the process of initiating marriage arrangements: How to start it? The CYL Work Committee of Middle Guangdong (1953) report shows that, after the promulgation of the Marriage Law young people were worried that without a matchmaker they would not find a partner. "Can I just walk right to the woman I meet on the way and say, 'Will you marry me?'" The emphasis in the law on freedom of choice in marriage partners without the involvement of a third party raised challenges to those who previously would have depended on a broker or matchmaker to initiate marriage negotiations. Which party takes the initiative in a marriage procedure is an important indicator of freedom of marriage (Croll 1981, 24-9).

It is interesting to note, when the subject turned to marriage, the people I interviewed often responded immediately by claiming that they either had *ziyou lian'ai*, "free love," [195] or *youren jieshao*, "introduced by someone." HM talked about both her own and her sister's marriage in these terms: "I didn't have free love. My sister did. She and her husband were former classmates, and they worked in the same production team. My husband and I were former classmates too. So we knew

[195] Here, "free love" is directly translated from the Chinese term "ziyou lian'ai", which was created by the Chinese social reformers in the early twentieth century in challenging the traditional arranged marriage system (see Xu, 2011). In fact it was used by my informants to refer to, cited from Xu (2011), "the love feeling which naturally grows between a man and a woman without the interference from the third party" (p. 29).

each other, but we were formally introduced."[196] FQ, former director of Women's Affairs in the village, recalled that "most had free love. At the time people all came out to work. They knew one another. Only those who often stayed at home and didn't feel like coming out needed an introducer."[197]

Based on people's accounts, this study divides the marriage practices in Yakou largely into two categories: match-by-introduction and match-by-free-choice.[198] While match-by-introduction refers to a match initiated by a third party rather one initiated by the parties themselves, match-by-free-choice refers to a relationship initiated by either the woman or the man in the absence of a formal introduction by way of a third party. Although both forms had co-existed since 1950s, there was a decline in the former and an increase in the latter over the course of thirty years.

Match-by-free-choice was seen as a brave and progressive match that people, so much so that those who entered into marriage in this way at that time still feel proud of their choice today. LS (born in 1927) had a love affair before he was married in 1959. On one occasion when we were talking, he suddenly shared his "secret":

> At the time some people had "free love". After the Liberation they began to think of affection, but it was rare before that…. I also had a love affair. It's "free love". We started it ourselves. We were in the same production team. But it must be the destiny. Now it's okay to talk about it. As the saying goes, "people go upwards while water flows downwards." Later she had a better choice…. I was an honest man. I didn't insist.[199]

In the 1950s, match-by-free-choice was still a new thing, and it continued to be rare during 1960s. With the exception of LSH, no other interviewees who were married prior to 1970 reported that they made their own choices when it came to selecting a marriage partner. It seemed that things in this respect did not change until

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[196] Interview with HM, 2013.

[197] Interview with FQ, 2013.

[198] I borrowed the term "match-by-introduction" from Li (2005), since the marriage practice I discuss here is the same as that described in his study.

[199] Interview with LSH, 2013.

the Great Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). For example, TJM (born in 1951), had a five-year romance with her husband before they married in 1973:

> We had free love! We dated when I worked on the brigade committee. Ha ha, it was just that we had mutual affection…. We were not in the same production team, so we didn't know each other at the beginning. In 1969, I was promoted to work on the brigade committee and felt attracted to him. We were the only youth people on the committee. All the other members were elderly. I was attracted to him, but I didn't think of it very much. Later, my friend told me, "He has a good impression of you. He likes you." I asked, "How do you know?" At that time the brigade committee was about to select a group of people to set up the revolutionary committee, and he was in charge of this. My friend said, "He said, if we need a woman member, TJM is a choice. She is good." He was single then, and I was single. He said so, you say, did he have an impression of me?
>
> Later he told DZ he wanted to join the army. It's the navy. He was physically eligible. DZ did not agree. For he was the leader of the militia battalion. If he had left, nobody else could have taken that position. So DZ said to him, "If you go, you will lose TJM." At the time I was away promoting the socialist education movement. He feared I would be with another man. DZ said, "Ask TJM to return! Ask her to return!" Later I came back and worked. Gradually we became a couple. It's very funny![200]

In 1971, three squads of militia women were organised in Yacou Village. Apart from the regular farming work with the production team, these militia women also joined men in military exercises and the construction of irrigation and water-conservancy facilities. This greatly increased the mixing of people in the social life of the village. Women entered a social space hitherto occupied by men and consequently began to behave more boldly. It was during this period of time that QJ (born in 1955) started a relationship with the man who was to become her husband:

[200] Interview with TJM, 2013.

> At the time, we often had military training. Drills, target practice, and so on. And we also participated in the land reclamation project. It was really hard, but we had fun. We were all young and liked to play wild tricks on each other. We threw mud at each other. Once we pulled down the pants of a commune member. He was dull in his mind. And we stuck some buffalo dung into his pants. Ha ha.
>
> When we were together making mud bricks, some would say teasingly, "Hey, why don't you two make a match?" They said this again and again, and then gradually, we began to feel differently.[201]

It should be noted that in these cases of match-by-free-choice, there was often a third party to "push" the negotiations forward, especially when one party, always the man, wanted to express his affections but feared ridicule or was anxious about a potential opposition to his match. Asking a third party for assistance would save him from the embarrassment if he were to be rejected.

FQ described how the village youths started marriage negotiations in 1970s. In FQ's telling, this third party was more like an inconspicuous "messenger."

> At the time there were many meetings. If you liked a woman, then you sent someone to ask if she would like to go out with you. If she didn't want to, then you had to give it up. If she agreed, then you two spent some time together communicating. If you both felt good, you got married.[202]

But some youths were brave enough to break the boundaries themselves. JM, one of the most popular women in Lujia, had quite a number of admirers, one of whom was a veteran:

> Gosh, he chased me for over two years. At that time I was in the propaganda team and he had just returned from the army. He said he liked me. When I was having rehearsals in Pingshan, a bit of a trek from

[201] Interview with QJ, 2011.

[202] Interview with FQ, 2013.

> my home, he picked me up every evening. He walked with me to Pingshan and then walked with me back home.[203]

Although FQ was sure that most people had a match-by-free-choice in those years, there are reasons to doubt it. First, people who had a match-by-free-choice tended to be among the most active and capable individuals in the village. For example, at that time TJM was elected as a member of the local revolutionary committee during the Great Cultural Revolution. QJ was the leader of the women's squad in Pingshan, and JM was the most active member in the propaganda team. Their outgoing personalities, their capable demeanour, and their visible role in public life made them more likely to challenge the traditional ideology. Second, while village youths had the chance to select their own marriage partners, their parents were nonetheless often involved in the marriage negotiations by involving themselves in a search for suitable candidates by way of a third party. That the young people had opportunities, or tried to initiate "free love" did not necessarily lead to successful match-by-free-choice.

5.3.3 Match-by-introduction

Traditionally, women in Yakou married into neighbouring villages, and men recruited their wives from neighbouring villages. This practice was changed after the land reform with more women and men marrying locally. It also became common for a man and a woman with the same surname to marry. However, closer examination shows that the lines of descent remained exogamous. Couples with the same surname in Yakou were almost all from different family lines. In Yakou, the production teams were organised on the basis of lineages, which means that even though collective farming provided young people with greater opportunities to socialise outside of their families, marriage rarely took place within the community.

On the other hand, although women could move about freely in the public arena,

[203] Interview with JM, 2012.

traditional segregation on the basis of sex still existed to some extent. In Yakou, except for collective farming activities, the most important social gatherings were the brigade meetings. The women's descriptions indicate that there were boundaries between women and men on such occasions:

> We had lots of meetings those years. If the weather was good, we had meetings in the orchard…. Men formed a group and women formed another group. We sat with acquaintances, usually from the same production team.... It's more convenient because after the brigade leader finished his speech, we would have discussions within the production team.[204]

It was due to the principle of surname exogamy and the persistence of segregation by sex that individuals were chosen to take on the role of making a formal introduction as a way of initiating marriage negotiations. For example, XJ (born in 1943) originally lived only a few hundred metres away from her husband, and had never spoken together before they were formally introduced:

> Ha ha, I married from this end to that end [of the road]. I lived at the tail of Yangjia with an alley leading to Xiangxi. And an old woman lived next door. Now she is dead. She introduced us. We didn't work in the same production team, but we had already known each other.[205]

Apart from this, there were personal factors that made the role of intermediary necessary in initiating marriage negotiations. For example, a widower with a child, or a man with a nasty mother, would have to depend on an introducer to recruit a wife for them outside Yakou. As FQ put it, "living in the same village and knowing him through and through, which woman would want to marry him?"[206]

An introducer could be a neighbour, a former classmate, or a relative. Although the introducer—usually a woman, much like the matchmakers before

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[204] Interview with QJ, 2012.

[205] Interview with XJ, 2012.

[206] Interview with FQ, 2013.

Liberation—was not a professional matchmaker, she usually received monetary compensation in a red packet when the engagement was confirmed. Inevitably, there were cases where the introducer urged the couple to get engaged in order to get the money earlier. This might explain why, compared with cases of match-by-free-choice, marriage negotiations in a match-by-introduction was often concluded very quickly because time given to courtship was usually short. For example XJ was engaged three months her introduction: "We got married three-something months after we were introduced. In general the introducer would press you for an engagement. At that time the introducer [still] asked for money."[207]

That marriage negotiations in cases of match-by-introduction often ended quickly might be related to other factors as well, such as a limited pool of good candidates, or, once a woman agreed to a match, the engagement would formalise her relationship. As XJ explained that "some people worried that their good thing would be spoiled. You had a good match and someone might envy you. So people were usually engaged very soon, and married ten days or half a month later."[208]

XJ's observation indicates that chastity prior to marriage was a consideration and may have pushed the marriage negotiations along:

> Before, once you accepted the match, the man's family would come to formally propose the marriage. And soon after this proposal you would be married. Before, every woman was like this: Once she accepted the match, she got married. If you expressed your willingness, and you went to the man's house frequently, neighbours would gossip about you. After people asked for your opinion, you went to the man's house at most twice, you should marry. Now it's different. Nobody will blame you even if you live in a man's house for years.[209]

[207] Interview with XJ, 2012.

[208] Ibid.

[209] Ibid.

5.3.4 The Authority of Parents

Scholars document a trend of declining parental authority and power, and a rise in the autonomy of youth in the domestic sphere in rural China since Liberation (Yang 1959; Parish and Whyte 1980; Yan 2003; Yuen et al. 2004). As well, research also shows that, at that time, young women began to actively challenge patriarchal power when it came to choosing marriage partners and negotiating marriage arrangements—that young women gradually gained the freedom to voice their own opinions and even refuse parental interference (Yan 2006; Verschuur-Basse 1996).

The way that the women in Yakou talk about this topic confirms the reported trend. In the 1950s, marriage arrangements made entirely by the parents still took place. JT could not hold back her tears when she recalled how her mother forced her to marry a soldier:

> Someone introduced me to him, to marry him. I didn't want to. I said "No. I'm still student. I'm too young." My mother asked me to marry him. She said he was so good: he had no parents and although he was in the army, he still wanted a family. But he was poor. He didn't even have a bed.[210]

JT's case was not the norm in Yakou Village. In all the other cases of match-by-introduction in the 1950s, the women report that they were consulted by their parents before they initiated courtship arrangements. This does not mean that parents would allow their adult children to conclude the negotiations entirely according to their own free will. It was still necessary to balance the freely-made choice of the women with the involvement of her parents. Yang (1959) observed that, although married partners recollected that their matches were based on free will, their parents likely made all the arrangements (35). After all, it would not have been easy for the older generation to give up its authority over the domestic domain.

KGP, introduced at the outset of this chapter, emphasized throughout her

[210] Interview with JT, 2013.

interviews that one should select a marriage partner on the basis of one's liking. She nonetheless could not help but complain about her son who insisted marrying a woman against his mother's will. In another case, BSH insisted that she would not have intervened in her children's marriage arrangements, but her daughter, HM, told a different story, believing her marriage to have come about more or less as the result of the pressure her mother brought to bear:

> At the beginning I didn't like the match. People said his family was very nasty. I didn't like it…. But my mother said it's good to have a house ready to live in. If you had a house, all you'd have to do is to look after the cooking. My mother was like that. People used to be like that. Not because they were greedy. But because, otherwise, you wouldn't have a place to live. And my brother was married. It's not alright for me to live with my sister-in-law for long. Old people were like this. They asked when you were going to get married all day long. Old people were like this. They pressed you to marry.[211]

Even in the cases of match-by-free-choice, parents' consent was considered as a must. FQ said, "They were parents after all." Marriage without the consent of the parents would not have been blessed, and such rebels also risked being abandoned by their family.

For example, I was told that, in the 1960s, a woman in Lujia fell in love with a man in Zongbao, but her parents did not approve the match. In desperation, she left her family and went to live with the man. The price of this open rebellion was that this woman was not allowed to come back until her mother died decades later, even though the two villages were less than a mile apart. This was considered scandalous at the time, and even today the local people treat this story as a secret.

The intervention of parents in their adult children's marriage arrangements would often have been expressed as concern for the well-being of their children. QJ's mother did not approve her daughter's choice of marriage partner because her

[211] Interview with HM, 2012

prospective husband had “heavy burdens”:

> She didn’t want me to marry him. She said that his family was poor. He was the eldest child in the family and had seven brothers and sisters to take care of. [My mother said] if I married him, I would suffer. My father did not say much. I guess he didn’t want to embarrass me because I was his favourite child.[212]

QJ started a cold war with her mother, who finally gave in a year later. JM also defied her parents directly when it came down to it. After a one-year courtship with the son of Party secretary of the village at the time, she finally refused his marriage proposal in 1971:

> I told them we didn’t develop much affection for each other, and we wouldn’t be happy if we married. And I was too young, and my family was poor. If I was married, my family would have heavier burdens. I didn’t want to get married. My mother scolded me, “He is so good, but you don’t want to marry him. What kind of man do you want?” I told her, “You marry him if you think he is so good. Anyway, I will not.”[213]

At the same time, women’s accounts also show that the decline of parental authority might have been the result of voluntary forfeit. Parents who became aware of the flaws in the old marriage system, or had unhappy experiences themselves, would have been more likely to empathize with the younger generation and would eventually leave marriage arrangements in the hands of the younger generation. This partially contributed to the decline of arranged and compulsory marriage after Liberation. As BSH put it,

> I had a blind marriage myself. I had been through that pain. So when my elder daughter was to marry, and the man’s mother came to ask for my opinion, I said I wouldn’t mind, but only if they were happy…. My children have freedom in their marital affairs.[214]

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[212] Interview with QJ, 2012.

[213] Interview with JM, 2012.

[214] Interview with BSH, 2013.

All in all, from the 1950s to the 1970s, women in Yakou went through the process of constructing their autonomy. The traditional notion of "good girl"—from a patriarchal perspective—was gradually turned on its head. FQ's summarized the experience of her generation:

> Marriage was free already. The old ideas were discarded. We were all good girls. But [our marriage] was not about our parent's happiness. It's our happiness. Who was going to live with him? Not our parents. Me.[215]

5.3.5 Betrothal and the Wedding Rituals

Betrothal, which along with other things, involved a gift to formalize the arrangement, continued to play an important part in the process of arranging a marriage through to the present day in rural Guangdong. The Guangdong Women's Federation (1966) report for 1966 indicates that in the 1950s, people in some rural areas started a trend of getting married without going through the betrothal stage, but after 1960 betrothal was once again practiced, despite that fact that families could incur debts that would take years to resolve.[216] The accounts of women in Yakou show that betrothal patterns in this village, by and large, followed a general trend.

In the 1950s some of the young people in Yakou followed the brief fashion of getting married without asking for or giving a betrothal gift. For example, YL, was married in 1953. Her husband-to-be worked as a cadre in the fire brigade in town:

> We didn't think of betrothal when we were planning to marry. He worked so many years and saved 70 *yuan*. 40 was used for receiving my friends and kin in my family, and 30 for receiving his colleagues. His parents had died, so we didn't prepare a reception in his family. My mother didn't ask for the betrothal gift.
>
> At the time people didn't care whether you had money, or whether you had a house. It's fine if you wanted to marry him. When we got married,

[215] Interview with FQ, 2013.

[216] Guangdong Women's Federation (1966).

> we didn't have a house. We borrowed a room for the wedding. After the wedding I returned to my mother's home and he went back to the town.[217]

YL was a member of the literature and art team. As an activist in the village, she was more likely to embrace new ideas. To most other people in Yakou, betrothal was an inevitable part of the process of arranging a marriage. But people generally favoured both simplicity and economy. Betrothal gifts in the1950s usually consisted of a certain amount of cash—usually dozens of *yuan*—and gifts in kind, including happiness pastries and other items the prospective groom could contribute to the bride's family. For example, when FQ married in 1956, her family received dozens of *yuan* and about thirty pastries. She remembered that they were both poor. By contrast, JP married LSH in 1959. LSH came from a reasonably well-off peasant family, but the betrothal gifts the bride received could be said to have been humble. She told her story with humour:

> Well, we had almost nothing when we got married. They just brought [my family] several ducks and dozens of *yuan*. It sounds good, does it? But I meant ducks not bracelets.[218] At that time everyone had difficulties. It didn't matter…. We didn't discuss the betrothal gift. However much they gave was fine. We liked each other. That was enough.[219]

Betrothal gifts would be sent to the bride's home fifteen days before the wedding. Her family might give some of these gifts to the couple as part of the dowry—as contributions to the joint conjugal fund. In JP's case, a dozen *yuan* was given to her in a red packet as her dowry, *yaxiangdi*,[220] and the ducks were given to the married couple soon after the wedding.

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[217] Interview with YL, 2012.

[218] In the dialect, the words for "duck" and "bracelets" have the same pronunciation.

[219] Interview with JP, 2013.

[220] *Yaxiangdi* refers to the valuable things accompanying the bride as part of dowry to the groom's household, which would come in very handy in an emergency in the future.

During the short-term economic stagnation that came about with collectivisation, the value of the betrothal gift in early 1960s was minimal. XJ described her dowry this way:

> When I was married, only four *yuan*. Less than the price of a chicken. And two packets of fried rice cakes. At that time there was a shortage of materials. You had to go to the town for the two packets of fried rice cakes…. His father and mother were dead. Things were very simple. He and Nanmu walked here, carrying a red packet with four *yuan* in one hand, and the fried rice cakes in the other. They walked here like this.[221]

Interestingly, those women who were married in the 1950s and the 1960s often stress that they did not demand the betrothal gift, and that they placed more importance on a man's character:

> When a woman selects a husband, she should think of his heart rather than his property…. I had nothing when I was married, but decades have passed, I'm still here living my life happily. I often tell the young people not to be too concerned about the material stuff.[222]

With economic recovery in the mid-1960s came a rise in the value of the betrothal gift. Even during the Cultural Revolution, when the "Four-Olds"—Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas—were under attack, betrothal continued to have a function in marriage arrangements in Yakou, albeit in a constructive way. JY, married in 1968, described her betrothal gifts with remembered pleasure:

> My husband was from a middle peasant family, and I was from a poor peasant family. When we married, they didn't give us any happiness pastries, but sent over two gold rings and a leather case. Besides the two gold rings and money, I forgot the amount, they also prepared four suits of clothes for me… Later the relatives of my natal family came to visit me. They saw my house was big, my family was big, I had two

[221] Interview with XJ, 2012.

[222] Interview with XJ, 2012.

> brothers-in-law and two sisters-in-law, and my sisters envied me. They said I married well.[223]

In 1970s, both the value and the variety of betrothal gifts increased significantly. HM was married in 1977:

> When we got engaged, my husband's family sent over some peanuts, sesame candy, pastries, and a ring. Besides, they also gave 110 *yuan*. We were not worth a pin. Ha ha ha, 110 *yuan* plus some money for pastries, and some clothing coupons. I was married for so little money.[224]

The 1970s also saw an overall revival of betrothal customs. It was then that XJ started her practice as a *dajin jie*[225] to help handle the wedding ceremony:

> Supplies were abundant then. The betrothal gifts were carried in two pairs of wicker baskets. There were two packets of sesame candy, two packets of biscuits, two packets of peanuts, two boxes of brown sugar in pieces, and two packets of tea leaves. And one hundred or two hundred happiness pastries, the number depending on the discussions between the two families. But happiness pastries were a must. And fruits, also two bags. To be brief, everything was prepared for two. The bride's family accepted one, and returned the other to the groom's family.[226]

Roughly speaking, women who married in the 1950s tend to emphasise the simplicity of the exchanges made at the time of the betrothal and at the time of the marriage. This impression would have been grounded in the reality of the economic situation at that time, but the new social tendency that followed the Liberation, especially with the promulgation and implementation of the Marriage Law, should

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[223] Interview with JY, 2012.

[224] Interview with HM, 2012.

[225] *Dajin jie*, or *dai kam jie* in Cantonese, refers to a woman usually hired by the groom's family to assist with a number of significant ritual observance. She will have been identified as an "auspicious" married women, with a living husband and children. Her duties include worshiping the gods, preparing the items of significance for the exchange of gifts, picking up the bride at her home, installing the bridal bed, initiating the hair-dressing ritual for the bride, and performing the wedding ceremony. Since the1970s each natural village in Yakou has retained at least one professional *dajin jie*.

[226] Interview with XJ, 2012.

have played a role as well. In contrast, women who married in the 1960s (especially the early 1960s) talk more about the poverty of that time, reflected in the stinginess of betrothal gifts. Then since the late 1960s, the amount and value of the betrothal gifts seemed to have become a source of either pride or shame for women.

5.3.6 Divorce

Divorce was a significant issue in rural China. A woman would find herself faced with many obstacles should she want a divorce (Croll 1980, 233; Deng 1950, 81; Zhang 2002). Even among the activists, the question of divorce was seldom easily resolved (Hershatter 2011, 119).

In Yakou divorce seldom took place. Not a single woman ever divorced or heard of anyone who had a divorce. Some women in their 70s and 80s even looked puzzled when asked if they had ever thought about divorce when they found themselves in a bad marriage. HWP, married in 1957, had a husband who kept his background as a landlord from her until after she married him:

> My sister's husband said he was nice and persuaded me to marry him. Because my family was poor, I hoped to marry someone with a better life.
>
> When I found out he was landlord, I escaped three times. My eldest brother was kind. He could do carpentry. He made stools, a bed base and the other stuff…. I didn't have any children then because I lost my first baby in a miscarriage. I had nothing at that time. Even the stools and the bed were borrowed. You say, what a miserable life I had. I told my husband I would go back to my mother's home, that I didn't want to stay with him anymore. We had a huge row. My brother said to me, "Even if you were married to a beggar, you married of your own free will. Now you have come home. What a breach of etiquette! Don't worry. Put up with it. You don't have furniture? I'll make some for you." I left three times! The first time, my brother persuaded me to go back. The second time, the same. The third time, I was bearing my daughter.

> Not because I wanted a divorce. I didn't leave to divorce. I went back to my mother's home. My brother said, "You should stay with him for life even if you married a beggar. Now you are back, you are humiliating yourself." Once, when I went back, my brother sent me with some stools and a bed frame that he made. But my husband said I took things from my mother's home, and it was a breach of etiquette. And he smashed the stools and the bed frame. I didn't know we could divorce. I knew nothing. If I had known it, I would have divorced immediately.[227]

Some women certainly thought about getting a divorce. The first step they usually took was to consult their own birth family—who often threw up the first obstacle. KGP, who described her "blind date" on the day of Liberation, married her suitor (described above) only to find that he was man with an unsavoury background as a usurious landlord.

> After I was married, life became difficult…. [During the Eight-character Movement] they took everything in the house and cancelled the money owed to him…. My husband didn't have a job and so he went to Macau after my son was born. There he became addicted to gambling….
>
> I wanted a divorce. My own family supported me, except my father…he said, "Put up with it. Don't ask for a divorce because of poverty. Once you are divorced, his family will collapse." Well, my father was a good person, and I was compliant. The old generation was like that. They respected their elders. If they told you not to divorce, you wouldn't divorce…. He said, "You put up with it. If a person is determined, she will put up with everything."[228]

Even if women who wanted a divorce could overcome the obstacles put up by their own families, they would find that the cadres would not approve their application for divorce. FQ had been the female representative of her production team, and was appointed the director of Women's Affairs in the late 1970s. She talked about she handled applications for divorce:

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[227] Interview with HWP, 2012.

[228] Interview with KGP, 2012.

> There was no divorce in the 1950s. At that time family disputes were all about trifles. Very easy to handle. In 70s and 80s, I didn't approve a single application for divorce. [When a couple came to me for a divorce], I explained to the couple whoever did wrong should admit it. It's always the man's fault. [So I told the woman] he would correct it. Don't worry. If you got the message across, men would become good. If you didn't, you would have quarrels all the time.[229]

5.4 Conclusion

The Marriage Law of 1950 was perceived as the most profound attempt by the Party-state to intervene in the personal lives of the people after the Liberation. In the newly liberated areas such as Guangdong, two reforms overlapped: the land reform and the marriage campaign. On top of that, China initiated its first Five-Year Plan in 1953 which made economic development a top priority and which meant that women's issues were backgrounded. The All-China Women's Federation failed to do the routine work of publicising the tenets of the Marriage Law at the local level. Marriage reform was left to the progress of time.

Despite the reality that the Marriage Law was given inadequate publicity, changes in marriage practices nonetheless happened over time. Women's accounts reveal that "blind" or arranged (or forced) marriages disappeared almost overnight. Women's emergence from the household to engage in social productive work enlarged their social network and made it easier for young women to select partners of their choice. The elders gradually began to lose their traditional right to interfere in the personal affairs of the younger generation. But these changes took place slowly and far from satisfactorily. Even in the 1970s, it was still not that common for young people to socialise freely enough to have a better chance to meet the potential partners.

Apart from a few cases in the 1950s, marriage still acted as an exchange between two families rather than between the two individuals in question. Betrothal

[229] Interview with FQ, 2012.

continued to function as a necessary ritual in the process. To women, a man's economic background continued to remain an important factor in the way women made decisions about choosing their partners. It is safe to say that the Party-state's efforts to transform the traditional family through the Marriage Law failed. Family continued to be part of economy, rather than the result of mutual respect and love.

Chapter Six Childbirth

The fact that family as an economic arrangement was not challenged led directly to the extension of the institutions for reproduction in traditional China. The role that women played in theses arrangement in turn strengthened the institution of the family and as a result prevented women from realising further personal development.

The first time we met, SHP showed us her veteran's certificate along with a collection of memoirs produced by the veterans of Zhongshan, handed out as commemorative souvenir at a veteran's gathering she had attended some years earlier. SHP was born in 1927 in Chongkou Village[230] and moved to Yakou when she was small. During the war against the Japanese, like many villagers, she sometimes ran errands for the personnel at the Wugui Mountain Anti-Japanese Base. At the outset, she helped hull and deliver grain, and later ran messages and tended to the sick and the wounded. Once she even joined the others on a mission to destroy a passage used by the Japanese soldiers: "I was only 16. I was scared to tears." After the war, she returned to the village and was later married. SHP was not recruited to serve in the local authority after the war as some other women with a revolutionary background, and the reason was she was continually pregnant:

> One year one child, how could I work for the government? My belly never had a rest. When you carried one child on your back while carrying another in your belly, who would ask you to work for them? I never even had a chance to eat lychees. You couldn't eat lychees when you were pregnant, and then when you were nursing, you couldn't either.
>
> I didn't want to be pregnant anymore. I went to see the doctor after I had my fourth child. I said, "Doctor, help me! I am poor and don't want children any more. Do you have any solution? I don't want to sleep with my husband, but that makes him unhappy. You help me." The doctor said, "How can I help you? No pills, no injection. The only way is separation."

[230] Chongkou Village is about three kilometres from Yakou.

> Then I came back and separated from my husband. We slept in different rooms, and had quarrels all the time. I really didn't want babies. I had nothing to feed them, and I was tired. I already had a son and three daughters. I had enough…. But after we separated, my husband and I quarrelled and fought. As a result, I had another two…. I was scared. I got pregnant easily. By the age of thirty-six I had already had nine births. I was scared. I thought if things went on like this I would have a dozen of children. I didn't want to. So I asked my daughters to sleep with me and my sons to sleep with his father. The space was not enough. A bedroom and a sitting room, two beds, eight adults and children, how to sleep? I had no money and no house, but I risked my life making babies. Well, it was really miserable.[231]

In Yakou when the older women talk about birth, they often refer to unwanted pregnancies. The hardships experienced during pregnancy—the quarrels with their husbands, the pain of childbirth, the risks during labour, the scarcity of food, and the cramped living quarters—are all interwoven with their memories of this singular experience of reproduction. In the traditional Chinese society, birth was never a matter of individual concern. Whether to have a child, how many children to have, and whether and how to use contraception—decisions on all of these matters were rarely made by women. The ideology of fertility, i.e., "the more sons, the more blessings," defined and objectified women in terms of their reproductive capacity.

After the Liberation, with the reestablishment and consolidation of rural authority, the state extended its reach to every corner of the rural society. In the land reform and the marriage reform, the new regime had showed great determination to exert its power over every level of the social life. In 1954 it began to introduce the subject of birth control to society. And yet, while birth control was popularised and promoted, a number of policies were also implemented to protect women's reproductive health. Facilities were improved, midwives trained, clinic stations set up, and new style of delivering children was introduced.

From a feminist perspective, all of these innovations were in the interest of

[231] Interview with SHP, 2012.

women. Chinese feminists emphasized that birth control would offer women the means to space their children and limit their families to a manageable size, thereby allowing women opportunities for study, acquiring skills, and taking part in political and economic activities (Croll 1980, 246). There was a demand for birth control by women and women also played an important role in influencing state policy with respect to birth control (White 1994, 258).

At the same time, in a rural society, where both the ideology and rural economy placed value on high fertility and the production of many sons (Fei and Zhang 1945), a radical birth control program would hardly gain ground. How the availability of birth control was received by rural communities and how individual women responded to it were largely unknown. The fact is that, during the next twenty-plus years, the government continually stressed the urgency of population control. In the 1980s, the state initiated a more drastic measure that eventually caused considerable controversy, domestically and internationally.

Studies examining China's birth control policy have largely centred on its implementation since the 1980s. The question remains, how did the government enforce birth control in the rural areas prior to the 1980s? And how were these government policies received by rural communities? What were women's experiences with respect to birth control, and how did they understand the state population-control policy? What changes in attitude did women experience with respect to the birth rate and giving birth? There are no clear answers to these questions but it is nonetheless important to consider them. Increasing our understanding of these issues will not merely enrich our knowledge of the development of China's birth control policy, but the story of a woman's life would not be complete if the experience of birth were removed from the narrative.

6.1 Stories of Birthing

6.1.1 Power Relations in Childbirth

Of all the women I interviewed in Yakou, KGP stood out. In 1954, she often found herself bleeding in the course of her pregnancies. At that time, she was pregnant for the third time. She went to see the doctor, who told her the foetus was not viable, due to a vesicular hydatidiform mole, a common complication of pregnancy. After aborting the baby with the help of a midwife in the village, she made the bold decision to take measures to sterilise herself lest she have the same complication with her next pregnancy. But her real concern was the prospect of raising more children than she could manage: her husband was in poor condition and her mother-in-law (her husband's adoptive mother), had made it plain that she did not want to help out:

> I was afraid I would have to raise my children alone. We were poor, and my husband had stomach problem. If he died, I would not have been able to bring up the children. So I got some herbs from an old woman in the village. And after taking it, I never got pregnant again. My husband didn't know I did this, neither did my mother-in-law. I didn't tell them. I was not scared.
>
> Two months after I had my son, I menstruated. At that time my husband was still in Macau. My mother-in-law cursed me, "Aha, luckily for me, your husband is not home. Otherwise, I will be done for. I will be exhausted to death if I have to watch many children." She meant, if my husband had been at home, we would have slept together, and would have had more children for her to care for.[232]

The voluntary practice to limit the size of a family was not sanctioned in traditional Chinese culture (Aird 1978). Abortion and sterilisation were at one time seen by the people of Yakou as "wicked crimes," *yingong*. A woman who had been

[232] Interview with KGP, 2012.

discovered having an abortion or taking measures to sterilise herself would risk her reputation.[233] It was held that the woman who offered such services would likely not have an easy time in the next life given that such practices involved taking a life.

KGP did succeed in her pursuit of sterilisation because she knew the midwife, and the trust established between them made it possible to keep this a lifelong secret. To most other women, however, this kind of autonomy—taking matters into their own hands—with respect to childbearing was beyond their imagination.

Into the 1960s, as restrictions on abortion and sterilisation were relaxed, women began to have more sovereignty over their bodies. Although access to contraceptives was still limited, the conditions changed sufficiently to allow more women to prevent unwanted pregnancies. If a woman wanted an abortion, she no longer needed approval from the local authority. All she had to do was to bring her husband along to consult with the doctor. The men usually agreed.

In 1968, after delivering seven children and having two miscarriages, SHP got pregnant again. But this time she had the option to terminate the pregnancy. She recalled telling her husband of her decision to have an abortion:

> I said to my husband, "You must forgive me. You know I have had children one by one. And I care for them all by myself. Our mother did not help to even wash a single diaper, or cook a single meal. How do you expect me to bring up the children? We're like a family of mice. When I go to cut wood, I carry a child on my back and one in my belly. You must understand me. It's not because I don't like children. I am only 36 and you are only 40. Many people are still single, but we already have 7 children." My husband had no quarrel with what I said. He also knew it was not easy to raise children. Then I went to the doctor and took the pills. Later, I had another abortion, and my husband didn't say anything.[234]

Nonetheless, it was generally believed that abortion was harmful to women. When a woman considered abortion, she had to take into account the beliefs at that

[233] Interview with KGP, 2012. See also Li (1993, 76).

[234] Interview with SHP, 2012.

time about health implications. When LS became pregnant for the sixth time in 1967, she hesitated whether to have an abortion because she was already forty-one years old. Her husband said she could decide for herself, but after talking with her friends, she decided against it:

> I decided to have no more children after my fifth child was born in 1957. So when I found myself pregnant again, I really didn't want to go through with it. At that time it was easy to have an abortion. I could get the pills from the doctor if my husband went with me. But Sister Li, with whom I had worked in the kindergarten during the communalisation, persuaded me not to do it. She said, "Don't abort it. You're in poor health. If you take an abortion and don't get enough nutrition to come round afterwards, your condition will be worse." So I had the smallest child.[235]

According to the accounts of the women interviewed, there were also cases where women seemed to have less control over childbearing in general. Some women talked about how both their mothers and their husbands played a significant role in the decision-making. YL recalled that her husband proposed that he would take contraceptive measures after their third child was born, but that her mother encouraged her to have one more child:

> My mother said we'd better have one more child, whether it's a boy or girl. Later, when I was pregnant for the fifth time, I wanted to have an abortion, but my husband wouldn't agree. He worried that abortion would damage my health and that I would be unable to work afterwards. He said if we couldn't raise the child, we could give it away. But how could we give away our child?[236]

Fei and Zhang (1945), in their examination of the rural economy of China prior to 1949, note that women in rural society were encouraged to have children, often for pragmatic reasons, among which were that children guaranteed support for their parents in their old age. According to Li (1993), women were driven by the desire

[235] Interview with LS, 2012.

[236] Interview with YL, 2012.

for more children, especially sons, and so engaged in a competition of procreation—they did not have options or even wish to have options (63, 107). The way the older women in Yakou talk about bearing children indicates that, although women would not choose to be childless, there was a lot of decision-making involved when it came to thinking about bearing children. They took into account their health, the economy of the household, as well the practicalities of childcare. It the ability to weigh a variety of factors combined with a relaxed birth control policy that made "having less children" an option for women. This option would not have been possible without China's birth planning program.

6.1.2 Midwives

Women in Yakou used to deliver their babies at home with the help of a midwife. In each natural village, there were one or two elderly women who practiced midwifery. Some midwives were experienced and could predict quite accurately when it was time for a woman to "lie in," For example, an experienced midwife would palpate a woman's belly to determine the position of the unborn child, and if they suspected complications, they would advise that the woman to go to the hospital. Most midwives, however, lacked the skill and the necessary knowledge and were limited to dealing with uncomplicated deliveries. This lack of experience (especially in judging the placement of the child in the womb) meant that women would occasionally die from unexpected complications during labour (breech, placenta previa, failure of the infant to progress through the pelvis, and so on). If the woman had heavy bleeding following delivery, there was little that even experienced midwives were able to do except send for a doctor.

A Zhongshan County Women's Federation (1953a) report reveals that the local rural midwives were known to have scale hooks, rusty scissors, and broken tiles to help deliver a child. This same document reports that, in some rural areas, in order to expedite the delivery of an infant, midwives would feed a labouring woman oil to vomiting, in the hope that these forced contractions would help push the baby out.

Failing that, in cases of extremely difficult labour, midwives were left with praying to the gods (Zhongshan County Women's Federation 1955). In the accounts given by the women of Yakou, there was no mention of such disturbing procedures, but the women report that disinfection practices by the local midwives at that time was not as strict as in the hospital.

In the years following the Liberation, the mortality rate of women and infants during childbirth was been one of the primary concerns of the Women's Federation. In order to improve women's welfare, health clinics for women and children were established nationwide, and rural midwives received formal training to bring them up to date with modern medical knowledge and skills (Deng 1952, 1953; Kang 1997). In the local region, the Women's Federation of Zhongshan had been involved in organising health clinics and retraining midwives since 1952. Their report for 1953 shows that, in 1952, nearly 700 midwives from Districts One to Five[237] attended a two- to three-week-long training program which, among other things, emphasised the importance of disinfection—especially to reduce the risk of childbed (puerperal) fever, a postpartum bacterial infection. Although 700 sounds like a large number, it was still considered inadequate given that these midwives were selected from over 300 villages. The report anticipated that more midwives would be trained the following year.

Nobody from Yakou attended these training programs in the early 1950s. Even so, by the early 1960s, at least some local midwives seemed to have been using medical-quality disinfectants. SHP, whose youngest child was born in 1963, recalled that the midwife used disinfectant:

> When the old woman came, she had her instruments with her. There was some oil, and some bluish liquid for womb disinfection. There were also two pairs of scissors, a needle, and some thread. Some wounds needed stitching up. The baby's naval might need stitching up too. I always had

[237] In 1951, Zhongshan was divided into eleven districts and one district-level township. Yakou was in District Four. See *Zhongshan Gazetteer*, Zhongshan Municipal Archives online. Retrieved from http://www.zsda.gov.cn/uploads/book/shizhi/zhongshanshizhi/index.htm.

> natural labour. As soon as my pains began, the baby was born. The midwife wouldn't use the oil or the liquid she brought if the woman had a natural labour. She did disinfection only.[238]

In 1967 a number of young men were selected to attend a course for "barefoot doctors" in the newly-established medical school in Zhongshan. Although the course included delivery, it was beyond the imagination of the locals to allow a man to deliver their children. Instead, the Yakou Brigade organised resources to send two local midwives to the Zhongshan medical clinic in the hospital there to be trained in modern delivery practices. MSH recalls that "at that time the economic resources of the brigade were not good. The government had no money to subsidise us. So we had to chip in to cover the expenses.[239] FQ was one of the two women chosen to receive the training:

> I had been the woman representative for Team 8. Then one day in October or November, I went to see the Party secretary and said, "I don't want to be the female representative any more. I want to study medicine. I want to learn to deliver babies." He said, "Delivery? Can you do that?" I said, 'I can, after I learn how to." So I went.
>
> Why did I want to learn midwifery? In our village women usually gave birth at home, but it was hard to find anyone to help with the delivery. It was too important. So I wanted to learn it. I didn't come home for three months. I stayed in the town hospital from morning to night. I learned how to stitch up. I learned how to used disinfectant. Of the 7 or 8 people who were there to learn, the teacher said I was the best. I worked hard and I did everything. I cleaned the babies thoroughly. I cleaned everything thoroughly. The floor and the operating table. Even if I didn't sleep, I would make everything clean.

After FQ returned to Yakou, she began to work in the local health clinic as a medical worker, giving patients injections and delivering children. Because there were no delivery facilities at clinic, she usually went to the women's homes when

[238] Interview with SHP, 2012.

[239] Interview with MSH, 2013.

the time came:

> I delivered many women. In general, if you knew the placental position of the labouring woman, there was nothing to fear. Usually a pregnant woman would ask us to take a check. We would touch her belly to see the placental position and listen to the foetal heart beat. Once, a woman in Team 1 asked me to check for her. I found the foetus was in transverse presentation. That is, the hand would come out first. So I asked her to give birth in the hospital. Later she went to the hospital and the doctors also said she would have a perverse labour.[240]

Into the 1970s, many women continued to deliver at home. Apart from being convenient, the expense of going to the hospital was a major deterrent. It normally took a dozen *yuan* to give birth in the hospital, especially since women were usually kept in for three days. By comparison, there was no fixed cost for giving birth at home with a midwife. The family paid according to their economic circumstances: "Sometimes the midwife didn't take money if the family was really poor. All she asked for was a bowl of vinegar and ginger."[241] FQ recalls that she took five to ten *yuan* for delivering a child at home, which included the cost of medicine and disinfectant. "We didn't care about money in those years. It was all up to them."

In 1973, a female "barefoot doctor" moved to Yakou. By then, the delivery procedures had largely become standardised, and pre- and post-natal examinations were routine. Although there are no useful local statistics available, according to people I spoke with, mortality rates related to pregnancy and delivery were much reduced by this time.

6.1.3 Confinement

The traditional practice of a one-month confinement following childbirth,

[240] Interview with FQ, 2012.

[241] Interview with SHP, 2012. Vinegar and ginger are customarily prepared for a woman who has just given birth, because these were believed to be nutritious for women. Also, when friends and relatives come to congratulate the family, they are usually presented with a bowl of vinegar and ginger in return for their good wishes.

"sitting the month," has persisted in China over time, along with many of the traditional observances. During this period of time, she must follow a specific set of prescriptions and proscriptions in order to recover quickly from the fatigue of labour and be prepared for the demands of nursing. Among these observances, diet is considered the most important. In Yakou, once a woman knew she was pregnant, she would start to prepare for her confinement several months ahead of time, planting ginger, keeping chickens, and saving eggs. Once the child was born, the brigade would subsidise the household with rationed rice, sugar, pork, duck eggs, and glutinous rice wine. Although these items were widely available and not expensive, for a family in straightened circumstances it would have been critical to budget for the coming months. In the older women's accounts, "having nothing to eat when sitting the month" overshadowed this experience and dominated their recollections, especially when women today compare themselves to their daughters-in-law. ZHF recalls her confinement in the 1960s:

> I ate only three catties of ginger and a few eggs while sitting the month. At that time my mother-in-law still lived with us. She cooked meat and mushroom soup for me, but only twice. Then, nothing else. I had no chicken. I had to buy ginger at the market. We didn't plant ginger. Ginger was expensive. My mother-in-law lived in Hong Kong. I had to work with the production team in the fields, and I grew sweet potatoes in the private plot for pigs. So, I had no time for growing ginger.
>
> I didn't know what pig's kidneys looked like. So when my daughter-in-law was sitting the month, her brother gave me a few pig's kidneys and wanted me to cook them for his sister. I cut them into pieces and fried them. The cooked kidney smelled terrible. I didn't get all of the membrane out of the kidney. Later my daughter-in-law's mother came to ask me, "Have you not cooked kidney before?" I said, "No," She asked, "Then what did you eat when you were in confinement?"[242]

A few well-off families could provide a better diet, but most of the food was prepared by women themselves. FQ recalls her diet during her period of

[242] Interview with ZHF, 2012.

confinement:

> We kept several hens in the courtyard. So when I sat the month after my youngest son was born, I had chicken soup and eggs. My husband would go to sea after work. There were many red milk fish there. That kind of fish was the best at replenishing the blood. I seldom cooked chicken. I generally had fish soup. It was the best to cook fish with dates. When a woman sits the month, having fish soup is better than having chicken.[243]

In the women's accounts, "sitting the month" was remembered as the only occasion in the course of their lives, in which their female body could receive some special treatment. Following 1970, the standard of living in Yakou had generally improved. The per capita income in 1978 reached 160 *yuan*, nearly that of the most prosperous brigade in the cash crop region in Zhongshan County prior to that (Cao 2004, 95). Although some women who gave birth to children in the 1970s still thought that their diet was poor by comparison to that which their daughters-in-law were enjoying. However, the period of confinement in the 1970s would have been better than that of the previous generation in the 1950s.

6.2 Protection of Reproductive Health

After the liberation, a great number of women were mobilised into the socially productive work entailed by collective farming. Chinese women were encouraged by the progress of the women's movement which, among other things, advocated that women take every opportunity to exercise their talents. At the same time, Chinese feminists were fully aware of the constraints imposed by women's biological imperatives. In 1951 the Labour Insurance Regulations (of the People's Republic of China) made, for the first time, a number of maternity provisions for women workers in some industries.[244] In rural areas, the work of Women's Federation still centred

[243] Interview with FQ, 2013.

[244] According to these regulations, working mothers were granted a 56-day maternity leave with full pay. Women workers who miscarried or were pregnant for less than 3 months were guaranteed a 15-day leave, and those who were pregnant for 3-7 months were granted a

on mobilising women into agricultural production. Provisions for rural women's "special" problems reached their pinnacle during collectivisation. Apart from more childcare facilities, special provisions for women were made for the "four events" associated with reproduction: menstruation, pregnancy, and the pre- and post-natal periods.

In Zhongshan, as early as in 1954, attention was given to protecting women's income and labour security during pregnancy, including the reasonable allocation of work in keeping with the physical limitations of pregnancy.[245] Given the obvious health impact of overwork during women's "four events," some townships devised ways to protect the income and labour security of women in their precinct. Apart from special arrangements for menstruating women, women who were 6 months pregnant were not given jobs that involved carrying and lifting heavy loads; women who miscarried were guaranteed 20 days of leave and were given an allowance of 50% of their regular work points.[246] In 1957, an allowance was provided for pregnant women, mothers of newborn infants, and nursing mothers. While a pregnant woman or a nursing mother was able to get an extra share of grain, the mother of a newborn was entitled to a 5-10 *yuan* birth allowance.[247]

In 1958, the Great Leap Forward reached Zhongshan and, with it, the demand for women's agricultural labour reached new levels. The incompatibility between the physical challenges that come with pregnancy and childbirth, and the sheer physical demand of agricultural labour was at no time more evident. The Zhongshan County Women's Federation emphasized that, since the Great Leap Forward, the "bitter battles" that were waged were harmful to women's health—mixing heavy labour with the reproductive functions had resulted in frequent incidents of uterine prolapse, miscarriage, and heavy menstrual cramping, or dysmenorrhea.[248] The Federation

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30-day leave with full pay. As well, women workers were entitled to maternity benefits, and coverage of medical expenses related to giving birth (CCCPC *wenxian yanjiu shi*, 1992).

[245] Zhongshan County Women's Federation (1954).

[246] Zhongshan County Women's Federation (1955).

[247] Zhonggong zhongshan xianweihui shenghuo hezuobu (1957).

[248] Zhongshan County Women's Federation 1959a. This document is partly worn and the title

and the government appealed to the commune authorities to work out plans to protect women's health and labour rights during the "four periods."[249] In the first half of 1959, higher priority was given to protecting women from the demands of agricultural labour in the Women's Federation work plan for that year. According to this plan, a menstruating woman could take three days off and was not to be given work that involved deep or cold water. A woman in the first or the last three months of her pregnancy was not to take on heavy work, nor was she to work in deep water when she was five months pregnant. She was also not required to work for the 10 days preceding her due date, and was given a 35-day maternity leave following delivery.[250]

It should, however, be noted that, despite these provisions, the attention of the Women's Federation with respect to rural women's "special" problems was primarily focused on childcare, rather than making sure that women themselves should be protected from the demands of heavy labour and lost income due to exigencies of their reproductive lot in life. The Federation even officially acknowledged that the challenges which confronted women had long been ignored and that measures for women's labour protection had failed to be put into practice.[251] The 1960 report of the local Federation noted that a woman might be punished by having her meal cancelled for taking sick leave, and that some pregnant women who were not relieved of their duties, even on their expected due date, ended up giving birth in the fields.[252]

According to a survey conducted by the Zhongshan County Women's Federation in 1960, of 150,399 able-bodied women in the 33 communes and farms of the region, 5,962 were reported to be suffering from uterine prolapse and 11,492 were experiencing the symptoms of amenorrhea (cessation of menstruation due to

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and the date are almost illegible. On the basis of the content, it might have been established in early 1959.

[249] Zhongshan County Women's Federation 1959b.

[250] Ibid., 1959c.

[251] Ibid., 1960a.

[252] Ibid., 1960b.

overwork or multiple pregnancies).[253] These figures were may well have been low, given that the private nature of the symptoms might lead to under-reporting.

Women in Yakou rarely speak of uterine prolapse or amenorrhea—in fact some of them deny that there were such cases in the village. The theme that dominates their accounts is the hard work they had to do during their pregnancies, and their poor diet once they gave birth. To them, it was pitiful that a woman with a big belly had to work in the fields.

HWP recalled when she miscarried during her first pregnancy in 1960:

> I worked a dozen of hours every day, transplanting rice seedlings, collecting manure, carrying mud, or building the dike. I was sick. Then when I was pregnant, over a month, less than three months, I had a miscarriage. I knew I was pregnant. But I treated myself as if I was not pregnant. I went to work as usual.[254]

The County Women's Federation attributed the failure of women's labour protection to the "incompetence" of the cadres, combined with their "bureaucratic and imperious" style,[255] according to the reflections of the Party-state in the wake of the Great Leap. The women's accounts suggest that this was only partly true. In Yakou, a woman usually would not tell people when she was pregnant. Rather, she would manage to hide her pregnancy until her growing belly gave her away. The reality, in the collective, was if a woman wanted to maximise her work points, she had to keep herself in good form so as not to miss any chance to be assigned tasks with high work point rates. If it had been known that she were pregnant, the chances were that the leader might assign her tasks with lower work point rates. At the same time, she might have been rejected by her fellow team members for fear that she

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[253] In fact the figures for women of uterine prolapse and amenorrhea differed in the various official records for 1960. For example, in one report, the figures for the two were 4,732 and 12,983 respectively, while another report indicated that the incidents were 4,939 and 11,334 respectively. The differences might have to do with the way the population was sampled and/or the dates when the surveys were conducted. Zhongshan County Women's Federation 1960d, 1960e, and 1960f.

[254] Interview with HWP, 2012.

[255] Zhongshan County Women's Federation 1960b.

would drag the group down during the demands of the rice harvest. MSH said, "even if you asked her to do some light work, she would not go. People in those years could endure hardships. They were not as fragile as people today."[256] LS recalled working on the reservoir construction in 1967 when she was pregnant:

> I went to work in the Yat-sen reservoir when I was pregnant. I set off at 2 a.m. and arrived before dawn. I went with others. Our work was to build up the walls of the dam with mud. At that moment, I already had my youngest daughter in my belly. About six months. After hauling mud for the whole day, I couldn't walk back. So a fellow team member borrowed a bicycle and carried me back. I didn't tell them I was pregnant. I had to work even though I was pregnant. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have had work points. Well, we chanted while working in the reservoir, "Stone against stone. But why are you so poor?"[257]

JY confirmed this:

> We needed to work in groups. If you were capable, the others welcomed you to join them. If you were not capable, nobody wanted to be in the same group with you. Eventually, all the team members who were not as capable got together. LS was like that. When she was pregnant, she dared not speak a word about it. She hid her belly with an apron. She was scared no one would want her. No one would want you if you couldn't do the work. If you were pregnant, people would push you away.[258]

The way that women talk about needing to work when they were pregnant indicates that the leader would certainly assign pregnant woman to do lighter work as soon as it became known. The work of drying grain on the threshing ground, or cooking for the fellow members during the harvest seasons, although also hard for a pregnant woman, demanded less strength.

When asked whether the brigade would have subsidised pregnant women so they would not have to work as their due date approached, FQ answered

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[256] Interview with MSH, 2012.

[257] Interview with LS, 2012.

[258] Interview with JY, 2012.

emphatically, “Impossible! In the old days, women had many children. A woman gave birth to children one after the other. How could the collective subsidise her? Another thing, if she had a lot of children and the others didn’t, she would have profited at the expense of the others, wouldn’t she? So, no, pregnant women were not subsidised.”[259]

In the end, driven by the need to earn more work points, women would usually work until the day they gave birth. HWP recalled that she was still cutting sedges on the beach on the day her child was born. In the 1960s, cutting and drying sedges were important sideline productions for the work teams:

> When I was pregnant with my third child, I went cutting sedges. The water was deep there, almost waist-deep. That diked field was full of sedges. I cut them, laid them straight, and then bundled them up. They were very heavy. Each bundle weighed over a hundred catties. Then I made the bundles into a raft, and when the tide came in I could float them to shore. I would haul them onto the shore and carry them back home for drying.
>
> Then, there was a waterway nearby with a big hole. I hauled the bundles, and the mud was sticky. And I had a big belly. I missed my step and almost fell off into that hole. If I had fallen into that hole, I would have been taken away by the tide. People around were scared and shouted, “Hurry, grab the raft! Grab the raft!” I grabbed the raft, and I was safe. After I carried the sedges back, I sat on the ground and began to take deep breaths. I began to feel pains in my belly. So painful. Then I returned home and gave birth at 11 o’clock [that night]. People said, “Why did you come back so late? You knew you were going to give birth.” I said, “Should I have left the sedges there on the shore after everything was already finished?” Well, I risked my life to cut the sedges.[260]

Clearly, women’s labour protection would have been more likely to be carried out if the team had had more collective welfare. The real reason for their ignoring labour protection, however, was in the mode of production. Under the collective,

[259] Interview with FQ, 2012.

[260] Interview with HWP, 2012.

with its incomplete transformation of the mode of production—where consumption remained private but production was socially arranged—every single work point was directly linked to the welfare of the household. In this system, women would not easily give up the chance to work for work points and any labour protection would remain superficial.

6.3 Birth Control: the Campaigns

6.3.1 The Planned Birth Programme

In 1953, the PRC undertook its first population census. It is generally believed that this prompted the government's eventual population control policy. The census returns showed a high population count combined with a high population growth rate of 2% per year, as well as unemployment and underemployment, and a continuing food shortage—all of which was expected to hamper the government's ambitious plans for development.[261] At the same time, with more women entering social production, the conflict between women's wage labour obligations and their domestic demands due to large family size was increasingly evident.

In May, 1954, in a letter to Deng Xiaoping, then vice-premier of the State Council, Deng Yingchao reported that many women cadres were demanding information about birth control. She suggested that the government should take the initiative to work out solutions (Deng 2000). In December that year, the Chairman of the National People's Congress, Liu Shaoqi delivered a speech on birth control as part of the official announcement for a birth control program. In a *People's Daily* editorial in March of 1957, the newspaper emphasised the impact of population growth on the lives of peasants: "The issue of contraception calls for immediate attention in the rural areas."[262]

Although the Planned Birth Advisory Office had been set up in two hospitals in

[261] *People's Daily* 1957.

[262] Ibid., 5 March 1957.

Zhongshan in 1956, its work had been interrupted during the Great Leap Forward and was not revived for several years.[263] The primary task of this office had been to promote contraception by way of education and access to various means of contraception. In January of 1964, the Zhongshan County Steering Commission for Planned Birth was established, thereby signalling the official start of the birth control programme in this county (although related work had been initiated the previous year). According to the records of the Zhongshan County Steering Committee for Planned Birth (1964a), at a conference of government officials, the committee provided directives on the promotion of birth control and late marriage. Two months later the same directives were given to the commune cadres and the heads of the commune clinics. According to the record, some cadres took the lead by agreeing to sterilisation immediately following the meeting.[264]

This document shows that the steering committee argued that both cadres and the masses wanted a fewer children, which it felt would ensure the success of the birth control program. The committee also identified the difficulties associated with implementation: insufficient publicity, underdeveloped medical techniques and surgical procedures, and, as far as the contraceptives themselves, variety was limited and quality and quantities were deemed insufficient. The documents reveals that the commission planned to reduce fertility by 15.2% from the previous year. In order to achieve this goal, the commission decided to train "backbone" cadres at all levels to carry out "deep and intensive" publicity and education among the masses.

It appears that the core of the birth control initiative at this time was to train medical practitioners in a range intervention techniques and surgical procedures—from the insertion of IUDs, to abortion and sterilisation (tubal ligations for women and vasectomies for men). At the outset of this campaign, only a few hospitals had the capacity to perform all four procedures, which meant that training medical staff became urgent. If all went according to plan, by March of 1964, nine or

[263] *Zhongshan shizhi.* Retrieved from http://www.zsda.gov.cn/uploads/book/shizhi/zhongshanshizhi/index.htm.

[264] Zhongshan County Steering Committee for Planned Birth, 1964a.

more commune clinics would have been capable of performing at least IUD insertions and vasectomies; by the end of 1964, all the commune clinics would have mastered the techniques for surgical sterilisation procedures.

This campaign took effect almost immediately. The number of births in the first half of 1964—compared with the numbers for the same period in 1963—declined by nearly half in 11 out of 24 districts. The number of births in these areas still increased, but the increase was below 1%.[265]

What is interesting about this campaign is that vasectomies for men were encouraged at the outset of the campaign. Certainly, the reason behind this strategy was that performing a vasectomy is a less complicated procedure than performing a tubal ligation. However, the extent to which men accepted this idea was not only unexpected but unprecedented. According to the statistics, 2,100 women had opted for tubal ligations by 1971, while 638 men had opted for a vasectomy in 1966. In 1971, 65% of the sterilisations performed nationwide were performed on men. In some areas this figure was even bigger. For example, in 1972, 1,841 vasectomies had been performed in four communes: Huangpu, Fusha, Tanbei and Guangkou, which accounted for 84% of all the sterilisations performed.[266]

Even during the heyday of the Cultural Revolution, when planned birth was not pushed with vigour at the provincial level, the program did not stop at the local level. From 1967 onward, some communes experimented with new oral contraceptives on women volunteers. Which meant that, by the time the planned birth initiatives regained momentum in 1969, the newly established Zhongshan County Planned Birth Leading Group Office found the birth control pills could be safely promoted.[267] By 1969, the record shows that the increase in births had slowed down significantly.[268]

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[265] Zhongshan County Steering Commission for Planned Birth 1964b.

[266] *Zhongshan Shizhi*. Retrieved from http://www.zsda.gov.cn/uploads/book/shizhi/zhongshanshizhi/index.htm.

[267] Zhongshan County Planned Birth Leading Group Office 1969a, 1969b.

[268] The natural increase in births in 1968 was 29.14 in 1,000, and the figure for 1969 was 27.97. See Zhongshan County Planned Birth Leading Group Office, 1970.

The planned birth program was pushed much more vigorously after 1969. A series of studies and initiatives were quickly set in motion, including statistical reports, follow-up studies, publicity in the local community, and identifying and promoting campaign role models. A feature of the campaign during this period is that birth control pills were more accessible and IUDs were more widely used. The success rate was significant: the natural increase of population had declined from 22.26 in 1969 to 12.99 in 1975.[269]

At the same time, there had always been resistance to planned birth, not merely from the local cadres but also from the masses. The record shows that, in one brigade in Nanlang Commune, it took months to mobilise the local women to have IUDs put in, until a few successes became known.[270] The villagers simply would not open their doors when the commune cadres came on an ideological mission, or they would pretend to be asleep if the cadres came inside. It was not until the cadres came either came for a third time—or set up a group at the brigade level under the direction of a planned birth leader, or organised the local cadres to visit the model brigades—that the planned birth program made a breakthrough. Even so, the commune completed only 42% of the planned birth work it had set out to accomplish for 1974.

Yakou joined the planned birth program at the outset. According to the women cadres in the village, who were also in charge of the planned birth work, some of the women began to use IUDs in the early 1960s. However, awareness of the planned birth campaign was not widespread until ten year later. HL, then director of Women's Affairs in the village, recalled that she had to go to Shiqi every two or three days. "At the time, women with two children had to use IUDs, and those with three had to be sterilised. The commune clinic in Nanlang couldn't perform the procedures, so I accompanied the women to the hospital in Shiqi.[271]

Apart from the availability of IUD insertion procedures and surgical sterilisation,

[269] Zhongshan County Planned Birth Leading Group Office 1975.

[270] Nanlang Commune Planned Birth Leading Group, 1975.

[271] Interview with HL, 2013.

birth control pills and other contraceptive devices were available for free.[272] From 1977 forward, the brigade began to push the birth control agenda more vigorously and eventually made contraceptive devices the most widely used method of birth control in their campaign.

6.3.2 Women's Attitudes

The older women in Yakou, who came of age in 1940s and 1950s, generally regret that in their time the planned birth program was not promoted. When speaking of having children, they always compare their time with the present day. For them, a life where they were unable to control conception is remembered as having been miserable:

> In our days, there was no escape if a woman was pregnant. She had to give birth to her child because she couldn't find a way to abort it. Women had no knowledge of contraception. Nobody taught us. Unlike today, a woman can get an abortion in the hospital.[273]

> No pills, and no devices. We had nothing. If there had been any pills, we would have avoided having children. What was the point of having so many children? Did we feel it was easy to have them? Even if we could find food to feed all of them, it was not easy to care for them. Food itself was a problem. Now people are happy. They have one, or two. They have good food and live in a good place.[274]

The planned birth programme, however, did not get such a warm welcome when it was first vigorously promoted. HL recalled how difficult it was to have been selected to promote the planned birth agenda in the village in the early 1970s:

> It was very difficult to do the planned birth work in my time. Today it is much easier. We were often scolded. If you went to people's houses in order to persuade them of the benefits to getting a tubal ligation or having

[272] Interview with DX, 2012.

[273] Interview with HWP, 2012.

[274] Interview with FQ, 2012.

> an IUD inserted, you'd be scolded all day long. Well, we were scolded all the time for doing this work. We were lucky that we weren't chased out with a broom.[275]

The resistance mainly came from within the family, especially from the senior women, and usually the mothers-in-law. According to HL, "some people were open-minded and understood the policy. The problem lay with those elderly mothers-in-law. Mothers-in-law all wanted a big family so they could have more grandchildren." FQ also said that mothers-in-law would emphasize that, if a woman failed to bear a son, it was the mother-in-law, rather than the husband, who was affected.[276]

Senior women often played a decisive role in discussions about family planning, for example, in YL's case where, when the couple had already decided to use contraceptives, YL's mother persuaded her to have one more child. But this did not mean that the younger women welcomed the program. The interviews showed that many women—including those who talked about regretting their lack of knowledge about birth control—"refused to plan births." SHP, who had asked the doctor for help with birth control, told the brigade cadres when they came to encourage her to have a tubal ligation that she had her own strategy:

> [I told them] "Don't ask me to do it. I have my own solution.... Look, my son is already in his teens. If I wanted more children, I would have had them earlier. I'm in poor condition, and I've miscarried several times. Anyway, I promise you I won't have any children."[277]

Similarly YL, who once considered abortion when she got pregnant for the fifth time, also rejected contraception:

> I met a fortune teller when I was young. She said I would flower at the age of twenty-four, two white flowers and three red flowers. That meant I

[275] Interview with HL, 2013.

[276] Interview with FQ, 2013.

[277] Interview with SHP, 2013.

> would have two sons and three daughters. Later a brigade cadre came and encouraged me to use contraception. I said, "I don't need to. I've already had all my children." She asked me what measures I took. I said, "A fortune teller told me I would have five children. Now I've had them all." She said, "What kind of planning is that?" Later she told DZ that I followed feudal superstitions. When we [later] had the meeting in the auditorium, DZ criticised me by stating that someone in Team No. 7 still followed feudal superstitions.[278]

Women's hesitation did not come from their desire for a lot of children. It had more to do with the fear that their health would be damaged if they used any form of birth control. From the early 1970s, the program was relying more heavily on surgical procedures than on birth control pills and other non-surgical contraceptive methods. Nonetheless, it was generally believed that the surgical procedures, especially the tubal ligations, would be harmful to one's health. Women often equated "planning birth" with "getting cut." Women still have clear memories of pain mixed with fear when they remembered the operation, not to mention reservations about the quality of the procedures, and the side-effects of the surgery. HWP was among the first group of women who had a tubal ligation. She came close to tears when talking about this experience—forty years later:

> They opened a hole below my navel. And then they took out my insides with two hooks. If it was the right part for having children, they cut it off. If it wasn't, they put it back and then pulled out another part…. It took more than two hours. There were many apprentices around, thirty or forty. The doctor hooked out what was inside, showed it to the apprentices and put it back. And then he hooked out another part. He tried dozens of times and still couldn't find the right part…. When he finally finished the operation, my shirt was damp with sweat…. When I was carried out, other women waiting outside for the operation were scared to death…. I ended up staying in the hospital for a month. After I came back home, the wound became inflamed and festered. I had to go to the doctor again and again.[279]

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[278] Interview with YL, 2012. DZ was the Party secretory of Yakou Brigade from 1967 to 1974.

[279] Interview with HWP, 2012.

The case of HWP might well have been an exception given that the tubal ligation procedure usually took about half an hour. Nonetheless, women were generally convinced that there would be distressing side-effects from the procedure, such as having it sap one's strength entirely. The vasectomy, a much simpler procedure, was seen to be even more unacceptable to some:

> I would sooner have had myself sterilised than having my husband sterilised. He supported the family by riding his bicycle. He would send a pig to Macau early in the morning. Many men got sterilised, but I didn't let my man do it. If he had gotten sterilised and become incapable of working, what would have happened? We'd have all starved to death.... Look at WZJ and you'll see if it was a good idea to have a man sterilised. After he was sterilised, he became stupid. At that time he was the only man in Team 6 who got sterilised.[280]

To dispel these fears and set a good example, the brigade cadres—mostly men—would take the lead to get sterilised. This strategy did not work well. Then, around the mid-1970s, to drive the planned birth programme forward, the brigade began to apply sanctions against having an "excess" of children: couples with "extra" children would be given only their grain ration, and the work points they had earned in the year would be docked. This meant that, while they would have enough food, they would not have any extra cash income. In light of such harsh consequences, the planned birth agenda became more widely implemented, although many less men than women were mobilised given the persistent fears about the dangers of the birth control. Men were seen as the "bread winners" and thereby protected from surgical interventions—by their wives. FQ recalled that discussions were held among women at the time:

> We always organised meetings for women and asked about their decision, "Will you go or will your husband go?" In most cases, women said they would. Many women loved their husbands. They said men worked outside, but women just stayed home doing some housework. So they wouldn't let

[280] Interview with SHP, 2013.

> their husbands get sterilised. They said, "If my husband went and got sterilised, and if after he came back, would be unable to work, to earn a living, wouldn't it be worse? The children need food and schooling. Everything depends on my husband. Of course I'd go."[281]

Apart from health considerations with respect to the safety of the birth control procedures, mistrust of the cadres also prevented women from embracing the program. According to the women's accounts, the cadres in the village were often described as corrupted and unfair. XJ recalls her confrontation with a woman cadre in 1973 when she was pregnant and was being pressured to have an abortion:

> I'm not scared of those in authority. When I was carrying my youngest daughter, my fourth child, ZP's wife was in charge of women's work. She asked me to abort it. She said, "After you have an abortion, I'll reward you with a week's work points." I told her, "You work in the office, so you can have four children. Why can't I? If you hammered one of your children to death, then I would have an abortion. We are all led by Chairman Mao, or do you think you are led by the Kuomintang?" When I said this, they all dared not talk.[282]

XJ succeeded in keeping her child but chose to have a tubal ligation the following year.

It is tempting to understand the accounts of these women, as they speak of the planned birth program, as a narrative of "suffering." However, although this campaign focused on women, it would be misleading to see rural women purely in terms of victims of state power. It is clear that, while women demanded access to birth control, their "resistance" to the planned birth program was often triggered by their legitimate fear of the sterilisation procedures, their perception that medical practices at that time were "backward," and their mistrust of the local cadres. Meanwhile, the brigade tended to the ideological work of pushing the planned birth campaign forward, which did serve to reduce people's

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[281] Interview with FQ, 2012.

[282] Interview with XJ, 2012. ZP's wife was HL, then director of Women's Committee of Yakou Brigade.

resistance to some extent. For example, FQ had been in charge of the planned birth campaign in the brigade since 1977. According to her, compared to her predecessor HL, FQ knew better about how to mobilize the local people:

> To be honest, it was the most difficult job. I used to go from door to door chatting with people. I said, "Planned birth is not created by me. It is the national policy. There are too many people in the country now. If you have too many children, you will find it difficult to raise them. If you have only one or two children and you raise them well, isn't that better? If they become useful to the country, you'll be much better off. In the old days, we had no solution. There was no planned birth. You had to have children even if you didn't want to. Now the policy is so good. You can plan your births. Why don't you do it?"
>
> A man in Team 3 didn't want his wife to get a tubal ligation. When I went to his house, I found that his daughter broken out in a rash all over her body. The man said, "Look, my daughter is ill. If anything happens, what shall I do?" He said they wouldn't go unless his daughter was cured. I said, "Let me have a look." He showed me the rash by pulling up her coat. I said, "Give me three days. I can cure your daughter. Then, you must go to the hospital." …When I returned home, I collected some herbs for them. They boiled the herbs in water and washed the girl with the broth, and she was cured in three days. Then, I asked, "When will you go?" He said, "Tomorrow or the day after."
>
> The women underwent tubal ligations in the No. 168 Hospital in Zhuhai, where the conditions were better. When they stayed there, all the members of Women Committee stayed there too, taking care of them…. To do better work with women, first you must care for them. Then you and them will be of the same mind. If you don't care for them, they won't even chat with you, let alone take your advice to plan their births. [283]

MSH also recalled that the planned birth agenda in Yakou had been promoted in a relatively mild way: "We were civil here. We never caught anybody. In fact there were some years in 1970s where the policy was relaxed. No one was in charge of the

[283] Interview with FQ, 2013.

planned birth agenda at all."[284] This "mild" approach could also be seen as the male cadres being resistant to the campaign. MSH said, "At the time people all wanted to have a lot of children."

6.4 Boys and Girls

In rural Chinese society, the preference for boys over girls was often explicit. HWP remembered an accident which happened when she was three years old:

> My mother had five children. I had an elder brother, two elder sisters and a younger brother…. Because my sister-in-law[285] didn't have any children, my mother decided to give my younger brother to her. But my sister-in-law was always away and didn't take care of him, so they asked me to watch my younger brother. I was only three. I put my younger brother on a bench. There was a ditch nearby, and my brother wobbled on the bench and fell into the ditch and drowned. He was only one and I was only three. I didn't know how to care for him. When my mother returned, she beat me.[286]

This accident completely changed HWP's life, although she might not have been aware of the full extent. After that, HWP was given away to a childless family, but a year later she was returned to her family: "The man gambled and was thrown in jail, so his wife decided I was an ill omen." Then HWP was sent away again, and again for the third time, and each time returned home as "a bird of ill omen": "I was small. I knew nothing. How pitiful I was! I was given to people, totally free, but people didn't want me." In the end, HWP was raised by her own family, but the label of "ill omen" followed her until she was married to a man from a landlord family.

It is likely that being sent away in this manner had to do with a traditional superstition that persisted in the rural China, but it may also have had to do with the greater importance of boys. Before the Liberation, it was common for a poor family

[284] Interview with MSH, 2013.

[285] Here HWP refers to her cousin's wife.

[286] Interview with HWP, 2012.

to send a girl away[287]—sell her, in fact—because families could ill afford to raise a lot of children. Occasionally a boy might be given away, but usually to a family of the same lineage: "In the old times, if you were a girl, nobody wanted you. People only wanted boys."[288] In Yakou, after the Liberation, girls were seldom sent away although boys might occasionally have been adopted by a relative.

Boys were valued and thus better taken care of. To women, the reason behind this was simple: the common practice of patrilocal residence meant that girls would leave their birth family sooner or later, given that married couples would reside with or near the husband's parents. LD, born in 1946, recalled his grandmother's preferential treatment:

> When I was a school boy I had two *liang* of grain for each meal. For other people, it was not enough, but for me, it was. I didn't starve. My grandmother preferred boys to girls. In my family, boys had enough to eat while girls did not. For instance, after we came back from school, my grandmother gave my sister leftover food from the previous meal but let me eat freshly prepared food. She gave sweet porridge to me and salty porridge to my sister. Although my sister also went to school, her food was not as good as mine. My grandmother said girls belonged to other families not our family, that when they grew up, they would marry out.[289]

To a woman, the prospect of having a son was a pragmatic consideration rather than an ideological imperative to carry on her husband's family line. The local saying goes, "living with a son and cooking porridge is better than living with a daughter and having a feast." SHP observed that, after all, when you die, it's your son not your daughter who takes your photo and walks out the door.[290] In the traditional family system, a mother could only depend on her son because daughters generally married out and moved away. HWP recalled that, when her mother died, none of her three daughters were at her bedside: "What's the point in having

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[287] Three of the older women I interviewed (including HWP) had such experiences.

[288] Interview with HWP, 2012.

[289] Interview with LD, 2012.

[290] Interview with SHP, 2013.

daughters? It made sense that people preferred boys to girls. Girls would leave after they were married. They were useless."[291]

Having more than one son not only meant having greater support in her old age, but in the traditional extended family where relationships were complex, intertwined, and sometimes subject to daily clashes, an elderly woman might have better chances for emotional comfort in her last years. KGP lives with her only son but she does not get along with her daughter-in-law. As we talked, after complaining that, these days, daughters-in-law do not show the respect for their mothers-in-law as they once did, KGP told of her deep regret over having lost her infant son soon after he was born: "I had one abortion. And then a boy, who died three days after he was born. Well, if that boy had been saved and had been able to grow into an adult, I would have had some authority. That baby was born with a green caul.[292] People said a baby born like this would be smashing when it grew up.[293]

These preferences have changed with time, as younger generations have come of age. While preference for male children was more common in the older generation, many of the younger women who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, have come to a different understanding. QJ (born in 1955) was critical of both her mother and her mother-in-law:

> The old women took the preference for boys over girls seriously. My mother-in-law helped look after my daughter and my brother-in-law's son. Of course she preferred her grandson, not her granddaughter. Just look at their faces and you'd see it. My daughter's face was dark and rough. She brought her outside even on windy days. But her grandson, no! She kept him in the house. So his face was tender and smooth.
>
> My own mother also liked her son more than her daughters. She always thought of her son first. But what was the point? Her son is away. Who

[291] Interview with HWP, 2012.

[292] A child born inside a caul (amniotic sac) is rare; it is harmless and easily removed at birth. In China, children born this way were expected to have a lucky life, that if they were "born in water, they would never drown."

[293] Interview with KGP, 2012.

looks after her now? Only her daughters. I am not like her. I have treated my daughter and son equally. They are all my children. How could I treat them differently?[294]

This change is not merely the result of the generation gap. It is most likely also influenced by a widespread and high profile discourse about gender equality. Today—regardless of the expectations that these older women had about being provided for by their sons—the general increase in women's economic independence has increased their confidence in their economic security, no matter the number or the gender of their children. This confidence is even seen in some older women. BSH observed, "Now we're living a very good life. We have social insurance. We have distribution of rice. We really should thank heaven for today's life. Otherwise, we would be in trouble. If we still depended on our sons like before, we would not survive."[295]

6.5 Conclusion

Feminists are divided in the way they understand the position of women in relation to the wider range of reproductive health strategies that they now have control over (i.e., contraception and termination of pregnancy). Radical feminists will claim that women's inherent biology is the origin of gender inequality in a patriarchal society. Women spend a large part of their adult life bearing and caring for children and are thus dependent on men for a significant part of their lives. Therefore, the reproductive health strategies are expected to bring about "the full restoration to women of ownership of their own bodies" and "their (temporary) seizure of control of human fertility" (Firestone 2003). Other feminists critique this position as utopian (Morgan, 1998). For example, eugenicists subordinate women in the name of "perfect babies," subject them to various prenatal diagnoses and foetal monitoring. In countries which have as

[294] Interview with QJ, 2012.

[295] Interview with BSH, 2012.

their national agenda a birth planning program, the state power can be seen to have moved into the private domain, turning pregnancy, originally an individual and family event, into a public and political affair (Barbara Duden, cited from Chen & Chen 2012).

If we view the planned birth program in terms of the way that Firestone sees "seizing control over reproduction"—as a strategy to fully restore to women the ownership of their own bodies—then it appears that the state, while providing the possibility for reproductive control, nonetheless took a heavy-handed approach in demanding that women limit the number of children they would bear, and imposed heavy penalties if they did not comply. But limited by the underdevelopment of economy and technology, its efforts had been frustrated. On the other hand, women's early attempts to gain access to birth control contributed to the agenda of birth planning as a national programme. As White observes, Chinese women were not simply the object of the state the requirement for birth control; rather, women had the "need to link up policy preferences to a defensible political argument" (White 1994, 252). Women's "resistance" to the program was projected at the way the program was carried out, rather than the program itself. In the 1980s, when the medical techniques were generally improved and residual misunderstandings clarified, the women in Yakou were more willing to consider the birth control alternatives available.[296]

According to the women I interviewed, their memories of how they had worked hard through their pregnancies in order to continue to earn necessary work points shows how the household as an economic unit might well have formed barriers to the implementation of women's welfare policies. Certainly the

[296] MSH mentioned an episode from 1988 in the course of talking about "strictly carrying out the planned birth agenda." I could not really get the sense from her account that there had been any resistance (on this occasion) from the women to the idea of sterilisation: "That year more than 200 women went to get sterilised at the hospital. So each day we organised two buses to transport them there with their family members. I remember a man from Xibao who brought with him a bottle of alcohol and a packet of peanuts, and finally got drunk. Later some women from Pingshan couldn't stand it anymore and drove him away *(*Interview with MSH, 2012).

economic constraints of the time played a role, but in the late 1970s, when the collective had evolved and remarkable economic achievements had been made, women's "special difficulties" should have been given higher priority on the agenda of the local authorities.

Chapter Seven Socialism and Feminism

> I never expected I would live such a good life. I ate so much bitterness. Life was so hard in the old days. But now I have grain and money. I am content.[297]

I came to know YL through her eldest son, JG of Lujia, who was working as a driver in the Agriculture Machinery Station of Yakou. At the time, I was sitting outside in JG's courtyard with some of the members from Team No. 7 courtyard, enjoying the cool breeze coming through his gate from the fields, something we did almost every evening in the hot summer in 2012. I was asking them what they knew about the lives of ordinary people before the Liberation. JG said, "Go and ask my mother."

And so I discovered that YL was the daughter of a concubine and a butcher. Her father died before ever having seen his daughter, and her mother remarried a man who turned out to be an opium addict; he died by the time she was eight years old. In order to survive, YL's mother moved back to her own family in Yakou and had to make the decision to sell YL to a nearby landlord family for twenty *yuan*. By then, YL was only nine, "even shorter than the stove," and was faced with a heavy load of daily domestic chores. At that age, she frequently failed to satisfy her masters, and so was often beaten. When YL could not longer tolerate her situation she returned to her mother, who in turn gave the landlord back his money in return for her daughter. However, under the pressure from her parents, YL's mother sent her away to Huangpu[298] where she remained for six years squeezing sugar cane and selling the juice to the passengers at the nearby port. For this, she received no remuneration from her boss, not even a pair of new *getas* for her growing feet. At the age of

[297] Interview with YL, 2012.

[298] Huangpu is located to the north of Zhongshan, on Huangpu River which flows into the East China Sea.

fourteen, YL found employment as a housemaid with various families and in a variety of places. At the time she received her mother's letter telling YL that Zhongshan was liberated and that they would have their own land, YL was working in Foshan. YL's life after the Liberation has been described in part in the preceding chapters: she learned farming skills, joined the literature and art team, attended literacy classes, was married, raised children, and was, for the most part, on her own because her husband worked in Zhongshan and was only able to return to Yakou once a month. Meanwhile, YL participated in the management of the school during the Cultural Revolution.

I recount YL's story here because, in many ways, it represents the changes that poor women in Yakou lived through during this era. There is no doubt that the establishment of socialism led to a social and economic transformation in rural China, a development that improved women's lives by raising their social and economic circumstances in unprecedented ways in the history of rural China. The progress of socialism was not a smooth one. In the process of helping to the build a socialist society, rural women and men lived through many difficulties and hardships. To them, socialism became synonymous with bitterness. At the same time, YL's perspective on her life—in her own words at the beginning of this chapter—indicates that a thorough evaluation of Chinese socialism, as well as the women's movement, must take a longitudinal approach.

7.1 The Development of Socialism in Post-Mao Yakou

In 1975, with the support of Central Canton Shipyard of Zhongshan, Yakou built a factory to manufacture machine parts. This marks the beginning of Yakou's move towards industrialisation. In 1979, with China's program of economic reform and the gradual conversion to a market economy, the village began to take on foreign investment (mainly from Hong Kong and Macau). Yakou established two knitting mills which relied on materials supplied by foreign sources. And in the following two decades, another ten factories appeared in the village, manufacturing products as

varied as garments, lamp holders, and dried seaweed. Judging from the contracts made at this time, the brigade was responsible for constructing the factory buildings and organising the labour force (i.e., villagers who would work in the factories), and the foreign businessmen took charge of production facilities, provided the raw materials, and solicited the orders for the finished good. The brigade required a substantial return on the production, leaving the businessmen with a return of 20% on their investment. This arrangement left Yakou with the financial ability to buy back the facilities and thereby have more control over the production.[299]

These developments in industry, agriculture, aquaculture, and animal husbandry greatly increased the collective accumulation of resources, which meant that Yakou was able to accelerate the mechanisation of agricultural production. From the mid-1980s, the brigade gradually introduced the use of machinery to level land, harvest crops, as well as to raise and transplant rice seedlings.[300] By 2012 the collective owned over sixty agricultural machines, which not only increased overall productivity but also significantly decreased labour intensity and thereby improved the working conditions of the labourers. This has made it possible for the physically disadvantaged to live a decent life while being able to continue to take part in collective labour. For example, SL was still working with the production team at the age of 64: "Now working is just like exercising. If I didn't do it, if I stayed home all day long, I would be unhealthy. And, I have money.[301]

Due to the exigencies of global market and, unfortunately, due also to the lack of managerial talent in the village, all the factories and the aquatic breeding farms had withered away since the mid-1980s.[302] In spite of this, Yakou managed to initiate some social welfare projects. In 1985, a kindergarten was built and was able to operate on the subsidies from the brigade. In 1989 a free nursing home was established for the elderly villagers with no family, or those whose family were

[299] Yakou Cunzhi (2005, 73–5), and Cao (2004, 105–7).

[300] Yakou Cunzhi (2005, 79)

[301] Interview with SL, 2012.

[302] Interview with MSH, 2013, Cao (2004, 109–12)

unable to take care of them for one reason or another. Also in 1989, grain began to be offered to the villagers at a much lower cost than that charged by the state and, since 2001, grain has been free for those aged 16 and younger, to men aged 60 or older, and to women aged 55 or older. In 1999, Yakou was able to provide state health services for everyone who participated in the rural cooperative, and by 2010 was able enlarge the scope of these service to equal those available in urban areas.

Over time, Yakou has become one of the wealthiest villages in the Pearl River Delta. During the harvest season the villagers often speak with sympathy tone about gleaners (women in most cases) from the neighbouring villages. Since the breakup of their collective in the early 1980s, these neighbouring villages have gradually lost their land through increased marketization and industrialisation. But in Yakou, as MSH emphasises, "there is no poverty here."

I tried several times to ask the women of Yakou what they thought about socialism. In most cases I got answers such as "Ha ha ha, they used to talk about socialism a long time ago," or "I have no idea what that is." Only once, FQ, the former director of Women's Affairs, said with some hesitation, "Is that the collective?"

While "socialism," as an abstract concept, is beyond the understanding of these rural women, their unfamiliarity with the term can also be seen as to reflect the embarrassment we are all caught up in. Give that socialism is no longer part of the dominant discourse, those who participated in the "construction of socialism"—among the most important contributors to Chinese modernity—are forgotten. Women's accounts, as this study shows, suggest a discontinuity between the post-Liberation era of Mao and the economic era of market reform we see today. The former tends to be characterised by poverty and hardship, while the latter has come to be associated with prosperity and comfort. This is understandable. The improvement, in recent decades, in the general standard of living experienced by the villagers has created, in retrospect, a sharp contrast between the two.

However, given what Yakou has achieved by way of providing a quality of life

for its collective members, much as other extant collective villages in China have, it would seem that socialism is not doomed to failure. Most important, it is the socialist approach to the collective enterprise of production that has laid a solid foundation for women's liberation. More recently, the mechanisation of agriculture has minimised the physical differences between women and men where, today, a woman labourer can take on all the farming tasks should she want or need to.[303] This innovation has guaranteed that the principle of "equal work for equal pay" can be realised. Also, as women come to dominate the labour force in agricultural production, which is being placed in priority with great amount of subsidy by the collective, women are also the main beneficiaries of their own participation in this enterprise.

7.2 Women's Liberation: Revisiting Marxist Theory

The progress of women in the post-Mao era should not obscure the reality that gender inequality has continued. Many traditional arrangements for the division of labour by gender continue to exist. In the production teams of today, men continue to take all the skilled and well-paid work, although women can earn the same work points as men by working hard. There are no production teams led by women, and the woman cadre in each of these teams does not play a significant role other than passing along messages from the Women's Affairs office. As well, the only female member of the village committee, the director of Women's Affairs, concerns herself primarily with the agenda of the planned birth program and the challenges facing the migrant workers. Women's participation in political affairs continues to be rare—even less than their participation during the Cultural Revolution. The domestic domain continues to be relegated to women, although the burden of domestic work has been significantly reduced by the availability of a variety of appliances designed to make routine tasks much easier. Nonetheless, taking care of the family and managing the household continues to consume a great deal of women's time.

[303] A-juan, the accountant for Team No. 7, sent me a photo recently that showed ML driving a tractor to level the land, a task which had once been assigned only to men.

This raises a number of questions regarding a Marxist approach to women's liberation: Are the Marxists right to say that women's participation in social production that is publically owned, combined with the socialisation of domestic labour, are prerequisites for women's liberation? Would women be truly liberated if the two prerequisites were met? Given that the women in Yakou have participated in socially productive labour in a collective setting, and some (albeit a small portion) of their domestic responsibilities have had the benefit of socialist arrangements (e.g., childcare and the nursing home for the elderly), why is there still such a long road ahead to liberation? In other words, would women's economic independence achieved in a collective setting, with a large degree of socialisation in the domain of domestic labour lead to women's liberation? Could women experience liberation in a capitalist arrangement (wage labour), where their earnings could help pay for household help, and their children had access to state-run childcare facilities?

The experiences of the women in Yakou Village—over a significant period of time—suggest that women's liberation depends on the realisation of two transformations: one in the domain of production and the other in the domain of social reproduction. Without public or collective ownership of the means of production, and the reconstruction of the relations of production, there would be no foundation for transformation in social reproduction. While public ownership might be established overnight, the reconstruction of the relations of production require a longer period of time before the can be complete. This study shows that the process of trial-and-error in Yakou was quite rocky—mistakes were made and corrected, experiments were initiated and adjustments were made. It was not until the mid-1970s where new relations of production were established, where gender, by and large, began to play a much smaller role in production and distribution.

However, it appears that transformations in social relations of production were not in keeping with transformations in the mode of production. Women working as labourers under the collective gained economic independence—along with confidence and pride—but they were still chained to the family structure by the

domestic labour. There are two reasons behind this. The first is both structural and historical. In the first three decades, from the 1950s through the 1970s—before chemical fertilizer was commonly used—agricultural productivity was simply too low to provide sufficient accumulation of collective resources required to socialise household labour (child care and food preparation). This was a significant factor contributing to the failure of the public canteens and the childcare centres to thrive during the Great Leap Forward.

The second reason had to do with the gap between the economic structure of society at that time, and the lag in social consciousness. New relations of production were established soon after the Great Lea; although these relations took quite some time to be fully developed, they did not immediately result in a corresponding rise in social consciousness. Therefore, when the public canteens and the childcare facilities were organised, few people, whether they were local cadres or the local women, could see the potential that these new arrangements had for restructuring social relations within and outside the family. For people at this time, the new elements of living communally embodied in the public canteen did not seem any different from deep ploughing or close planting. With the failure of the Great Leap, this innovation was abandoned along with all these radical practices.

Seen from this perspective, the Marxist approach to women's liberation is correct. In the first place, socialism and feminism are interwoven and cannot be separated. Only under socialism can women, as members of a collective project, gain equal access to the social wealth. Additionally, domestic labour must be thoroughly socialised in order to fully release women. Finally, the new relations of social production and reproduction need to be matched by new forms of social consciousness.

However, the Marxist view of women's liberation is based on the examination and analysis of the capitalist reality. It is not well-suited to take into account the complexities of the world and the variations between different societies. It underestimates, in the case of China, the forces of the traditional "feudal" society

that remain embedded in the family institutions which have prevented women from being liberated. As we have seen from the women's experiences in Yakou, after several decades of exposure to socialist arrangements, new forms of social consciousness did not readily appear. This suggests that, without challenging traditional family institutions, it is difficult, if not impossible, for community members to imagine a new social and family life. And women will always find it difficult to exercise their talents in the broader social space.

The accounts of the women in this study tell a story about progress towards women's liberation which is different from what we have heard elsewhere: it is neither that proposed by the official discourse—that establishing socialism will, in itself, bring about women's liberation—nor the one that held by many western feminists, that the Chinese women's movement was sold out by the male Chinese communists.

Hartman (1979) sums up the frustrations inherent to the attempt to integrate socialism and feminism as it was considered worldwide: "Either we need a happier marriage or we need a divorce." But socialism and feminism cannot divorce. Socialism will not accomplish its mission to liberate the whole of humankind if it leaves half of its population unattended, and women will not achieve real liberation without the transformations only made possible by a socialist revolution.

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