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IN A WORLD TOGETHER YET APART

Urban and Rural Women Coming of Age in the Seventies

During the winter holiday of 1998, I flew to Detroit to spend the holiday with my family.¹ After dinner, I picked up *World Journal*, a major Chinese-language newspaper in North America, to read and relax. A half-page advertisement caught my eyes. It was about a writing contest sponsored by the newspaper to mark the thirtieth anniversary for the movement of the 16.23 million urban youths who went to the countryside during China's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).² The writing contest was for the former *zhishi qingnian* (educated youths), or *zhiqing* in abbreviation, to write about their experience in a foreign land.

At first, I could not believe my eyes. I knew the word *zhiqing* is a highly charged term. It covers a highly diverse group of young people whose experience ranged from those working in production teams (*cha dui*), earning work points like their fellow peasants, to those who were sent to farms (*cha chang*) run by the state or discharged army men earning monthly wages. Geographical locations, living conditions, and personal experiences differed greatly. Yet, to those who once belonged to this group, *zhiqing* also represents a common identity and immediate bond, a major shift in their young lives, a transition from the city to the country and an extraordinary

experience in that unusual, fervent, and turbulent time. There are numerous fiction and nonfiction accounts of zhiqing and their lives, various zhiqing associations or groups, and stores, farms, restaurants, and products named after zhiqing. I would not be surprised to see more activities organized in China around the thirtieth anniversary of the zhiqing movement. Yet I did not expect that I would see this ad in the United States, a place so far away from where the movement took place thirty years ago.

As I read the ad, it dawned on me that it was only fitting that an event like this was being held in America. The contest asked the participants to write about their *yang cha diu* (literally, to insert into the production team in a foreign country) experience. Yes, to come to a different land and culture to face all the new challenges is a major transition in life, just like going down to the countryside; many of us here were former zhiqing, and who we are, how we view and relate to the world, is inevitably shaped by our very experience as zhiqing. This experience has so much affected those who experienced it that its thirtieth anniversary could not be let go without being marked or remembered in North America, or in any other place where former zhiqing disperse.

And the memory of it will never fade; the emotion toward it will never dilute, no matter how many years have passed and no matter where we are. Here in this wintry night, halfway across the globe from China, the ad opened the floodgate of my memory of the eight years I spent away from my home city, Beijing, in a remote village in northeast China.

My memory is a nostalgic one. It is about finding a home away from home. It is about finding myself—as a girl/young woman and as a zhiqing, with my specific family class origin.³ And it is about taking the journey to womanhood with two young rural women, about the friendship that developed among us, which bound our lives together even though we ended up going separate ways. My story begins in the summer of 1966, with the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, an upheaval that lasted ten years and changed the lives of millions overnight.

THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND "FAMILY CLASS ORIGIN"

In 1966 I was finishing my first year at an elite all-girls middle school in Beijing. The quiet, usual scene of girls reading under peach trees in the campus orchard was suddenly replaced by the energy and excitement of the revolution. One scene that sticks in my mind is a group of young female students storming through the corridors of our classroom building—in green army uniforms with their sleeves rolled up, Sam Browne belts over their jackets—the stomping of their bare feet (a sign of rebellious spirit) on the cement floor resounding through the halls as they passed. They were among the more radical and violent of the Red Guards. They did not show any greater tenderness or mercy than their male counterparts in their beating of "hooligans" (people caught off the street who were allegedly engaged in indecent behavior) and their cruelty toward our school principals accused of being capitalist roaders (a cadre accused of having deviated from the correct line of Mao Zedong).

Many of the students at my school came from the families of the Chinese Communist Party and government officials; among them were the daughters of former PRC President Liu Shaoqi and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Deng Xiaoping, the No. 1 and No. 2 targets of the Cultural Revolution. The school was a mirror reflecting the political struggles at the highest levels. Students formed different organizations based on their political points of view. Whenever a parent was "exposed" as a "capitalist roader" with his or her name appearing on the big character posters, the status of the daughter would fall overnight. *Jiating chushen* (the class origin or status of one's family) became a core status for students: it determined whether you could be a member of the privileged Red Guard, join *da chuanlian* (board a crowded train for free travel to other parts of the country to "establish revolutionary ties"), or be outcast from all these activities.

My father was chief engineer and manager of a British-owned coal mine before the Communist Party's takeover in 1949. While he remained a chief engineer afterward, he was termed a "person with counterrevolutionary antecedents" in later political campaigns. As this information was brought to the open at the onset of the

CR in our school, my status changed suddenly—from a popular student in my homeroom class to an outcast, subjected to discrimination and ill treatment. What really shook me to the core was not this status shift, but one single event in the 1968 preparation for the celebration of National Day.

By then, after more than two years' turmoil due to the Cultural Revolution, some order was brought back to school and the initial practice of overt discrimination against people without a "revolutionary class origin" had ceased. The new policy was that people should be judged by their own deeds rather than their family backgrounds. Students also started to graduate or leave school. As universities were closed and employment opportunities were limited due to declined production caused by the disruptions of the CR, a large number of secondary students were sent to the countryside or to state farms to receive reeducation from the poor and lower-middle class peasants. This marked the beginning of the "going up to the mountains and down to the village" movement. We knew that we could soon be leaving Beijing and might never return, so we all wanted to participate in the October 1 National Day parade and celebration in Tiananmen Square for what might be our last time. That year, our school was assigned to be part of the "sea of people" on the square, holding paper flowers to produce changing patterns or words that provided background for the passing parade. After the parade ended, we would surge to the Tower of Tiananmen to see Mao—the dream of most youngsters at the time.

I was elected by my homeroom classmates to participate in the event—by then I was an elected member of the leading committee of my homeroom class, but my participation was denied by the committee leading the whole class. The few of us who were excluded had some "family problems." This incident had a chilling effect on my psyche. Tiananmen Square can hold up to 100,000 people—100,000 people! And I could not be one of them, could not be a drop of water in the sea. I bitterly asked myself, "Am I asking for too much? Did they think that I would engage in sabotage or worse?" I remember the remark of a schoolmate who had a family background similar to mine: "When people learn about your 'class origin,' they would always maintain some degree of suspi-

cion toward you." That remark really hit home. I felt that nobody would ever really trust me and I would never have any future in my life, no matter what I did or how hard I tried.

It was with this deeply buried sense of doubt and hopelessness about my future that I left Beijing on March 22, 1969, boarding a train with four classmates to begin our long journey to a remote village in the Manchuria township of Momoge in Zhenlai County, Jilin Province, in northeast China. I was seventeen years old.

THE VILLAGE AND VILLAGERS

After a twenty-plus-hour journey by train, a ninety-li (one li is about half a kilometer) freezing and bumpy ride in an open truck on the dirt road, and then another thirty-li horse-drawn cart ride, we finally arrived at Baxizhao, our village. It was already dark, and we were invited into a team leader's home. The red tea offered to us tasted like alkaline water, and the room seemed so dark that I could hardly see what was not directly under the large kerosene lamp hanging from the ceiling. It took me several days to get used to the lack of light at night. Electricity would not come until four years later.

We soon discovered that our collective production team had a lot of (unproductive) land but not enough hands to farm it. The village was surrounded by stretches of degenerated grassland and fields of sandy or saline-alkaline soil. They did not produce much, which was why our team was poor, and as a result, there was the need to cultivate more land, the so-called *guangzhong boshou* (extensive cultivation with meager harvest) farming method. The villagers were happy to receive five female and three male students to join them. Our welcome was also cushioned by the special grain ration that came with us, which meant that we would not compete with the local peasants for limited and rationed resources. Ultimately, the villagers embraced us because they were honest, down-to-earth, and warmhearted people who came to treat us with a healthy degree of curiosity, and a lot of understanding and encouragement.

Life was hard for us. We had to learn everything about farm

life: how to husk and process millet, *gaoliang* (Chinese sorghum), and corn with a stone roller pulled by a donkey, and how to cook processed cereal in a huge pot on a kitchen range using grass or crop stems as fuel. During summer, work went from sunrise till sunset, more than fourteen hours a day. After a day's work, my muscles ached all over. It was very hard to get up in the morning when the leader's shout of "Time to work!" resounded in the otherwise quiet village as he walked to the field with a hoe on his shoulder. Sometimes, when some of us were too tired to work or were not feeling well, we skipped work for a few days. The team leader would then come, half begging, half urging: "Please go to the field, the crops cannot wait."

It didn't take long for us to get acquainted with the villagers and we got along well. We followed the local customs, addressing our peers by their nicknames, calling middle-aged married persons "elder brother" or "elder sister," and the elderly "grandpa" or "grandma." They addressed us by our full names—just as all students would be called at school. Young girls referred to us as "sister."

We were housed in the "commune house." This house, collectively owned by the team, was part of a cluster of community construction called "commune court." It included a storehouse, stable, pig-feeding house, a big yard to park the horse-drawn carts, and a well in the center for villagers to fetch water and to water draft animals. Peasants gathered in the court before and after work, so we had a lot of opportunity to mingle. They dropped in on our rooms to visit, especially our peers, and they lent a hand whenever we needed help fixing our tools, sharpening our sickles or grass-cutting knives, or doing other farm tasks. Since each had to tend his or her line(s) of crops during hoeing or harvesting, those who finished first often turned back to assist those who were behind, so we would rest together at the edge of the field. On long, cold winter evenings, the young men guarding the threshing ground brought us corncobs and we would light the stove and make popcorn.

After the first harvest came the "idle winter months." We went back to Beijing to spend the month of Chinese New Year with our families. When we came back we learned that while we were away the team had a meeting and ranked every laborer on the team. At

that time, all the production teams were learning a new way of recording work points and ranking laborers, which was developed by the Dazhai brigade in Shanxi Province, a model for agricultural production. Based on this system, each person's workday would be recorded throughout the year. At the year-end team meeting, laborers would rank themselves and then they would be evaluated by their peers. The higher the grade, the more work points one would earn for a day's work. Besides factors such as strength and farming skills, attitude toward work was another element of the Dazhai criteria. I was ranked a "first-grade laborer," the highest ranking for all villagers. Not all the male zhiqing got this ranking. I knew I did not compare to the older and stronger farmhands, but I learned farm work fast. I was determined, did not give up easily, and I was also extremely healthy and never missed work. I guess these were the factors that contributed to my first-grade labor ranking by the peasants in my absence.

This incident made me realize that the villagers did not really care what my family class origin was when evaluating my work, nor were their views easily swept by the quickly changing political winds. Living their lives in a remote village in northeast China, with little involvement in the welfare system of the state, they were more independent in their minds and maintained their unique perspective. They watched what a person did and determined whether the person was honest, could "eat bitterness," and was willing to toil. Their groundedness, wit, openness, and trust were sharp contrasts to what I had experienced in Beijing, the center of fierce political struggle and division among people. It was in Momoge that I began to heal from the discrimination I had experienced in Beijing. I began to regain hope, confidence, and trust in people. I also got to know the peasants and the countryside, knowledge essential to a better understanding of agrarian China. In some memoirs or literary works, zhiqing are portrayed as victims of corrupt local officials, and the period in the countryside is seen as a waste of time in their lives. I have always felt a deep sense of gratitude and nostalgia toward the people in my village, a place I devoted a full eight years of my youth and from which I have also gained much in return.

ZHIQING

I have to admit that our zhiqing status granted us some privileges in our lives in the countryside. When we first went to the countryside we had no idea what the future held for us. We thought we would be there forever. But the villagers were very clear on this matter from the beginning: "You are students from Beijing, you are different from us. You will all go back sooner or later."

In many ways, we were different from them. We were guaranteed a provision of 650 *jīn* (one *jīn* is a bit over one pound) of unprocessed grain a year, while peasants were entitled to only 360 *jīn* in the case of a bad harvest. Many peasant families were poor and in debt. They had no cash to spend and had to rely on the sale of a few eggs from the chickens they raised to buy household necessities such as salt. Since we only needed to support ourselves, and because we had support from our families, we could occasionally treat ourselves to the thick, hard crackers sold at the village store. This was a welcome alternative to our staple foods: sorghum, corn, and millet, and they were a treat that villagers' children could hardly afford.

We were different also because we had no personal connections to the local people or families of our own to support. We were conscientious about work and loyal to the collective. Our shrewd team leader thus soon learned to entrust us with certain tasks. He assigned one of my friends to keep watch in the melon field, as muskmelon was a hot item from the team vegetable garden and many of them disappeared before they could ripen and be distributed to peasant households. My friend was so conscientious about her job that she not only did not touch the muskmelon herself (it was the common practice for melon watchers to treat themselves with melons—after all, this was one of the incentives!), but she also refused anybody who stopped by the team vegetable garden demanding a treat (a too common practice contributing to the loss of melons). A frustrated and mean-spirited woman thus cursed loudly when passing by our open window: "Little Stingy! They are not your family's (melons)!"

The team once needed somebody to make tofu for the villag-

ers and to feed the team's pigs using the tofu residue and other feed. The team leader told me about this job after we returned from our vacation in Beijing and I agreed to do it. I later learned that the man who had been making tofu refused to take on the additional task of feeding pigs. The team leader did not want to confront him directly, and it probably would have been difficult to get another villager to risk offending the tofu maker and take on more work. A willing and unsuspecting zhiqing was a perfect solution to the deadlock. I received a lot of support for taking on this assignment. The team's stockman taught me how to make tofu. Since he was up all night taking care of the horses, he would begin the long process of grinding soaked soybeans after midnight. When I got up early the next morning, the grinding would almost be over, and I could continue the tofu making along with my other chores.

Because I had to use the mill to grind pig feed frequently, I needed to catch an elusive donkey from the herd to pull the mill. I often got help from older boys or grandpas for this task. An old grandpa also trained a young donkey for me so that I would not have to compete with other women, who needed the donkeys to process their grain. He would often drop in, watch the donkey pulling the mill round and round, and tell me stories about his youth when he was a master carter driving a cart drawn by seven horses (today a cart is drawn by four horses).

Zhiqing were also assigned to do other tasks, such as working as barefoot doctors or elementary school teachers, tasks that made use of their education and training. In the 1970s, "scientific farming" (adoption of new farming techniques) was promoted as a means to increase grain production, and Zhiqing became active participants in this effort. Among the new techniques was a newly developed bacteria manure called "920." Some zhiqing, including the zhiqing at the other production team of our brigade, began to cultivate the bacteria using glass jars and makeshift sterile boxes made from cardboard boxes. All the brigades were required to set up structures for scientific farming experiments. Our brigade thus established an experimental farming station in 1972 staffed by six people—two older men and four young women. One elder man was the deputy party secretary, who oversaw the affairs of the station

while carrying out his duty at the brigade; the other older man handled draft oxen and our cart. The four young women, myself, another Beijing zhiqing from the nearby village, and two rural women, did the farmwork and other tasks, including making "920." The two men stayed with their families in the village while the four of us, from other teams, lived together in the brigade's house. The other zhiqing soon left to attend a vocational school for teachers, leaving me and the two young rural women to live and work together at the brigade.

Northeasterners often use the expression "sleeping on the same kang" or "lading out of the same pot" to describe the closeness of relationships among people. This refers to the living arrangement in the northeastern countryside, where the major feature of every room is a huge kang (occupying half of each room), heatable bed used for eating, resting, sleeping, and doing other work while in a sitting position. This arrangement really brings people close to one another, and thus Guirong and Lifeng, the rural women, and I became close friends.

WORKING WITH MY FRIENDS, THE YOUNG RURAL WOMEN

Both Guirong and Lifeng stood out among their peers. Guirong, a year older than I, was the head of the Brigade's Women's Federation. Lifeng, a year younger, was head of her village's women's team. Both were skilled at farm and needlework. Guirong looked thin and frail but was known for the farming skills she learned from her uncle, a master farmer. To watch her thin out sorghum seedlings was a treat. In her hands, the long-handled hoe moved with high efficiency and accuracy; a few agile and neat strokes would clear out a seedling. There was never a wasted or redundant move. She was equally adept at sorghum harvesting, another farm task that sets farmers apart in terms of their skills. She was quick, yet extraordinarily calm and graceful, leaving behind small bundles of sorghum in the exact same shapes and intervals, making a well-patterned design if viewed from the edge of the field. I tried to learn her way of sorghum harvesting but could never quite get it.

Lifeng was sturdy, with a round face, round arms, and a shy little grin whenever she opened her mouth to speak. She was versatile in farmwork and had greater strength than both Guirong and me. She would vie with us for the most strenuous tasks. She was especially good with the draft animals—the oxen just responded to her commands better—so she became the natural carter for our oxen-drawn cart.

We often said to one another that there must have been some kind of lot or luck that brought us and kept us together. After a year at the brigade's experimental station, we were transferred to the brigade's small orchard, with me in charge. The orchard was located on a hillside next to Guirong's village, with a two-room earthen house overlooking rows of little Chinese pear-leaved crabapple trees. We had three oxen and an old-style cart with wooden wheels. We grew short crops such as beans and vegetables in between the small fruit trees. After working at the brigade orchard for a year, the commune wanted to establish an agricultural experimental farm on the site of the commune, with me as its head. I told the commune leaders that I wanted Guirong and Lifeng to go with me, and they happily agreed. We remained together along with a dozen other people—farmers from various brigades and a few local zhiqing—until I left the countryside to attend university three years later in 1977.

The five years we were together have left me many fond memories. My experience would have been quite different without them. From the time we got together, they showered me with the affection and generosity typically displayed by the country folks. Both Guirong and Lifeng were good cooks. Their plain husked gaoliang and maize cakes tasted much better than those we zhiqing made. There were no vegetables in the long, cold spring in our area, and villagers would eat their meals with uncooked Chinese green onions dipped in thick soybean sauce. I was not used to eating uncooked green onions at the time, so they brought from home dried vegetables and made dishes out of them just for me. I soon learned to eat the way they did and grew fond of northeastern home cooking, which, to my delight, has gained popularity in Beijing in recent years. They made cotton-padded jackets, cotton-padded pants,

and numerous pairs of shoes for me. They made these shoes from scratch. They twisted hemp thread, pasted pieces of old cloth or rags together, and then stitched several layers of those to make soles, then they put the soles and the uppers together. I was still wearing these comfortable cloth shoes after I returned to the city, and I later had to tell them to stop sending me new ones because they wore out too quickly on cement. But I still remember the comfort these shoes brought to my feet and the warmth they brought to my heart.

Guirong and Lifeng were very knowledgeable and resourceful about farming and country life. They were also eager to learn and try new things and were extremely diligent in their efforts. I think we were alike in this respect. All three of us were enthusiastic about and fully devoted to what we did; we had a perfect mutual understanding in doing things and the three of us made a great team. During the first winter we were together at the brigade's experimental station, we were up at the break of dawn to collect manure for fertilizer. We first gathered the pigs' manure in the village, as pigs were not confined when there were no crops in the field. After breakfast, we would go to the grassy marshland to collect frozen cow dung. Since we were away from home and could not look after the "920" bacteria cultivated in the test tubes, we sewed small pockets inside our cotton-padded jackets and put the test tubes in them to keep them warm. We spent the entire day in the grassy marshland in order to collect a full cart of cow dung. For lunch, we would light a small fire to warm up and to soften the corn cakes that had turned as hard as stone in the subzero temperatures.

The winter of 1973 was very cold; my nose was frostitten despite the warm fur hat I wore. My nose would turn pure white if I stood facing the wind. Clear, watery mucus would drip from my nose unnoticed. One day, when we were having supper, Guirong put down her bowl and stared at me sadly. I asked her what was the matter. Shaking her head, she said, "A young woman with a runny nose, how can you find your mother-in-law's house in the future?" A drop from my nose had fallen into my bowl as I was eating and I did not know it. Her seriousness and her saddened voice actually made me laugh. Fortunately, I recovered from the frostbite by the end of the winter, so Guirong did not have to worry

anymore.

Together, the three of us did all kinds of work—one of the most strenuous tasks was throwing up mud and troweling the roof of a house. Once, the three of us troweled a five-room house in one day. After that, both Guirong and Lifeng had chest muscle pains from handling the mud, and the wrist of my right hand was swollen from pressing the trowel too hard for too long. I had to get an injection of medicine from the commune hospital. We did our work under various conditions. I still remember vividly how numb and cold my feet felt when they broke through the thin ice as we cut reeds in the pond at dawn, or when we rode on the horse-drawn cart on long trips related to our sideline production activities in the winter. It was always the feet that got cold first. They felt like two lumps of ice on my body, and the chills crept up to my heart and lodged inside my bones. I felt frozen from the inside out, and it took a long, long time to recover and warm up. There were also many obstacles to overcome. Our heavy, narrow wooden-wheeled cart got stuck in the muddy marshland easily when it was fully loaded with dried grass we had cut in the rainy fall season. When this happened, we would have to unload an entire cargo, get the cart out, and then reload it, wishing all the time that our cart had rubber wheels.

All this may suggest we had a hard time. Yes, we encountered many difficulties and endured hardships, but, all in all, we were happy. At that time, all organizations or projects had to be self-reliant. We had to support ourselves before we could have money to do experiments or other tasks. We were proud that, as a result of our efforts, both the brigade orchard and the commune experimental farm were doing well economically. We had our sweet harvests. For example, among the vegetables we grew between small fruit trees were three huge squashes born on the same vine, the largest was more than thirty jin. The local farmers joked with us: "Better keep a good watch over them. It would be like losing your heart if they got stolen!" Most important, we liked the challenges and we rose to meet them. The specific time and circumstances under which we lived provided opportunities for us to engage in a variety of activities and made our experience fulfilling, enriching, and empowering.

Because we were completely immersed in what we were doing

at the time, I don't think we gave any specific thought to what led us there. Now, in retrospect, I have begun to see how the CR ethos of equality and "men and women are the same" rhetoric, our autonomy in an all-girl setting away from home, and the prolonged, much protected, and privileged stage of youth all worked together to allow us to have these special and remarkable experiences.

GENDER AND YOUTH

When I first began pondering my experience of growing up as a girl, it occurred to me that unlike family class origin or zhiqing, gender was an aspect that I was quite unconscious of in my youth. This did not mean I was unaware of the fact that I was a girl. In some ways I was aware of gender and so were my peers. When writing compositions on what they wanted to be when they grew up, many female students dreamed about being "female scientists," "female engineers," "female pilots," and "female tractor drivers," etc. It was apparent that we were aware of occupational segregation, and we were inspired to take nontraditional gender roles—thus the emphasis on "female" for all the occupational roles mentioned above. No one mentioned anything about growing up to be a mother. One of the students wrote about wanting to be the wife of an ambassador in my middle school. This incident was picked up during the CR as evidence of how the bourgeois education of our school had corrupted innocent young minds: this female student desired a social status acquired through marriage to her husband rather than by her own making.

I guess my insensitivity toward gender came from the fact that as a girl I was never made to feel that I was inferior to or different from boys, either at home or at school. In both situations, the central criterion for evaluating a school-age child was whether the child was a good student. At school, girls took similar classes and engaged in all activities with boys. I was the elected head of my homeroom class from first grade on and later became the chairperson of the Young Pioneer Brigade for our elementary school of more than two thousand pupils. The Cultural Revolution's popular slogan, based on Mao's quotation, was "Time has changed. Men and women are

the same. Whatever men can do, women can do, too." These words inspired girls and women to take unconventional roles and to enter male domains. For example, our commune's well drilling team was made up of young girls, following Dazhai's "iron girl" model. They worked on heavy equipment, moving from village to village to drill deep irrigation wells. Our all-girls brigade orchard and the commune experimental farm led by a female zhiqing were also the products of this specific historical context. In retrospect, I actually benefited from being both a zhiqing and a woman. My formal education as a zhiqing granted legitimacy to "scientific" farming experiments, and, in the "can do" atmosphere of the CR, women were encouraged to do what men did and more women were appointed to leadership positions.

Since I was the leader of a small autonomous group, we were even less restrained by the conventional sexual division of labor and so engaged in farming tasks typically carried out by men: highly skilled tasks such as sowing, plowing, winnowing, hand-feeding the fodder chopper, and strenuous tasks such as ramming home construction, earthen brick making, and cart loading. This enriched our experience. One of my most enjoyable experiences was riding the commune's riding horse. It knew how to "walk." When it took quick, steady steps, it felt as steady as sitting on a bench. And, when it ran, its long, shiny, black mane flew back, and the rapid clatter of its hoofs sounded like beating drums, adding to the excitement. I still remember the sense of freedom I felt when riding this beautiful red horse. Few women could have the luck I had to ride a horse in our area because access to horses was very limited.

The "men and women are the same" slogan also had a direct impact on the construction of my gender identity—in particular, my sense of femininity. Like many of my peers at the time, I wore baggy gray or blue outfits. I really did not like dressing up and was drawn to a simple, unadorned appearance and spirited images of girls and women typical of that time. Unlike many young people who grew up in the post-Mao China surrounded by increasing emphasis on differences between men and women, high interest in fashion and beauty, and commercialized sex in the media, I was actually quite "ignorant" about my body and the traditional sense

of femininity. Among the many things Guirong and Lifeng made for me was what they called "little garment," a strip of white cloth worn like a bra except that it is flat and it tightens and flattens the breast. I knew local people consider it indecent and ugly for young women to show big breasts. But what Guirong and Lifeng told me was that the "little garment" would help me gather strength, especially when doing strenuous tasks such as raising a heavy bundle of millet to load the cart. I tried it and that seemed to be the case. So I wore it when I was there and even after I left the countryside. The first time I had any concrete idea about the concept of bodily shape was around 1982, when I was already back in the city and teaching in a university. I was on a trip with a younger student who had been in the countryside for a couple of years. Recalling her past experience in the countryside, she complained to me: "I really hate *cha dui*, it ruined my shape!" As she said it, it suddenly dawned on me that there existed such a thing as shape—it reminded me of myself hoeing in the field under the hot sun in the countryside—sometimes bare-footed and never wearing a belt. Matters such as looks and shape were just not things I was very keen on when I grew up.

I have to admit that while I was in the country I had little consciousness of gender division or gender inequality. It was easy to take gender equality—an ideal that was widely promoted—as the reality and regard problems as reminiscent of old systems and ideology that would erode with time. When I was in the countryside, I did not have the strong sense of women as a category and group as I do now. For example, as much as I sympathized with the peasant housewives, observing all the backbreaking and endless work they had to do, I viewed their sufferings as all rooted in the economic backwardness of the countryside, which I thought I was helping to eradicate through my work at the experimental farm. It never occurred to me that they and I were all connected as women.

All three of us, Guirong, Lifeng, and I, were also clinging to our youth, which, in a way, blocked us from developing a greater gender consciousness. Youth is not strictly a reference to age. Most important, it is marked by specific roles and status. In our area, a girl becomes a woman when she is married. The local people of-

ten referred to the three of us as "*san ge xiao gu niang*" (three little girls). Once a girl is married, she joins the ranks of "*lao niang men*" (old wives). Young women can be called *da gu niang* (big girls), or *da gui nu*, as the dialect goes, when emphasizing the maturity of a young woman and the qualities she is supposed to possess. But the fundamental difference is between *gu niang* (girl or young woman) and *xi fu* (wife). A common saying is: "it would be the end of it if a female marries" (*nu de yi jiehun jiu wan le*). *Gu niang*, especially *da gu niang*, is in a privileged position at her maternal home. She has a say in the household, wears better clothes, and is still doted on by her parents. Yet, as soon as she marries, she immediately becomes an adult, a *xi fu*—somebody's wife, a marginal figure in her husband's household. Guirong came from a large family of thirteen—her widower uncle and his three children lived together with her parents' family and her grandmother. She was the second oldest of nine children and the eldest daughter. When she went home (I often went with her), her younger sister and two cousins would visit with us, and her sister-in-law, who was Guirong's age or younger, would help her mother cook and do other household chores. She never mixed with us. It is no wonder that northerners use the term *gu nai nai* to refer to both the sister of one's paternal grandfather (for example, grand-aunt) and to the married (and unmarried) daughters of the family. In the case of the latter, it symbolizes the higher status of daughters in her maternal family.

To the young women in our part of the countryside, becoming a *xifu* also meant losing their identity. A married woman was commonly referred to as "so-and-so's *xifu*" by the parents-in-law, relatives, and other villagers. That was the way Guirong's mother addressed her sister-in-law. And the life of a peasant's wife was extremely hard. She had to get up before dawn to make breakfast for those going to the field. Besides preparing and serving three meals, she had to process the cereal; gather and prepare feed for the pigs, chickens, and other household animals; tend crops and vegetables in their own plot and garden; find time to make shoes and clothes for family members; and, of course, take care of the children. In summer, they also had to weed the millet field for the production team. Rural women had to endure more than impoverished lives

in our area. For example, one of the local customs was to have hospitable hostesses at meals to make sure the guests' dishes and bowls were never empty and people could eat to their hearts' content. Guirong's grandma told me that for her generation of women, "If you had a husband who liked to drink, you would have to stand on cold floor for two or three hours on bound feet while they sat on hot kang drinking liquor."

Guirong and Lifeng desperately wanted to be like me, to have a paying job (nobody had any doubt that I would have a job in the future, even though we never talked about it) and enjoy the free standing and economic independence it would bring. With that, everything would follow. If this could not be actualized, their fate and future lives would be determined by whom they married. In that regard, their first choice would be to marry a wage earner rather than a peasant. Next best would be to marry someone with special skills or a position in the countryside, such as a rural doctor, vet, accountant, and so on—so at least they would not have to get up in the dark to prepare breakfast for him. These types of young men were the cream of the crop and were better matched with young women of high aspirations such as Guirong and Lifeng. To be a peasant wife would really mean no future for women like them.

In any case, none of us were thinking about marriage at the time. To me, it seemed to be too early and embarrassing to even think about such personal matters as marriage and dating. The uncertainty of my whereabouts in the future might be another factor that subconsciously made me brush away the issue of dating. Lifeng's mother wanted her to engage in an exchange marriage for her elder brother—that is, marry a man whose sister would marry Lifeng's brother in return, as agreed upon between the two families. Lifeng's brother was already over thirty at the time, way past the prime time for marriage. Lifeng's mother was afraid that he would never be able to find a wife on his own because he came from a poor family headed by a widow. Lifeng rejected the arrangement vehemently. We wanted to achieve something with our experimental farm at the commune. I was a true believer in scientific farming as the way to improve productivity and the standard of

living for peasants and felt that I could contribute to this end. We all wanted the farm to develop into a viable institution that would provide a future for all of us. So long as we postponed marriage and all the issues that came with it, we did not have to directly confront these aspects of being a woman. Years later, when I first experienced gender discrimination and inequality, it was also around the issue of marriage.

It was in the mid-1980s when I was doing graduate work in Beijing that I suddenly found I had involuntarily become part of a "social problem" identified by then Chinese Communist Party Secretary Hu Yaobang. I was part of the large number of young men and women displaced by the CR who remained single into their late twenties and early thirties. Hu called on all organizations to pay attention to this matter, and suddenly matchmaking services and organized activities aimed at bringing these people together boomed. The interesting thing about it was that in urban areas there were many more women than men in this group, and they were better educated and more accomplished. Though equally as displaced as their male counterparts, women had delayed marriage to pursue their education and careers and were therefore as old or older than many of the single men. This created a problem, as men of ten marry women younger than themselves. Moreover, in the changing political and social atmosphere of post-Mao China, the concept of "iron girls" or "superwomen" started to carry a negative connotation. What used to be these women's strength now turned into their disadvantage in the dating and marriage arena, where the majority of men wanted a woman who was weaker than and inferior to himself. And women usually desired a husband of equal, if not of better, quality or education and would not want to compromise their pursuit of career or other goals. I remember feeling annoyed when concerned leaders or elder acquaintances whom I hadn't seen for a while asked me, "Have you solved your 'personal problem' (*geren wenti*)?"⁴ meaning was I engaged or married. I often did not know what to say because I was thinking to myself, "What problem do I have?"

Well, that was another story that happened much later. When we were together, Guirong, Lifeng, and I had our minds set on what

we were doing. However, we would find out that while we had shared aspirations and goals, we would end up with different fates.

THE RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE AND DISPARITY

Once, when I was home for my winter vacation, a Beijing friend was curious about my life with Guirong and Lifeng: "You live with them, are they dirty?" I was caught off guard by the question because the three of us blended naturally and easily. And they were definitely not dirty. As a matter of fact, when I was with them, my cotton-padded quilt and mattress had been taken apart and washed more than ever before. As either Guirong or Lifeng would stay at home to cook and do other work for the team, and they would find time to do things for the three of us, including washing all our clothes. I seldom got to wash clothes except when I was home on rainy days.

Our life together had an impact on all of us, we had all changed. I learned to do all kinds of farmwork and considered myself a good farmer. I planned and arranged farm activities year round (of course, with the help of my peasant partner) and took the lead in doing them (I was a *da tou de*, meaning "the one who takes the lead"). I adopted the local dialect and the peasants' ways of living and chatting to the point that I could pass as a northeasterner. One such episode took place in the winter of 1974, during a trip that our commune organized to have the production team leaders visit Dazhai, the agricultural model brigade. One of the team leaders got separated from the group during our stopover in Beijing, so I went to the Beijing train station to look for him. I was upset that I got scornful looks and slighted responses from the train station employees. When I told a cousin of mine about my experience, she said, "Didn't you know that Beijingers look down on northeasterners? You dress like a northeasterner, you speak with a northeastern accent, they must have mistaken you for a northeasterner." Yes, I had changed. I discarded the vanity and sense of superiority typical of city folks and became more down to earth. My life in the countryside changed my way of looking at the world and at life. Even today, my love for crops and other plants, my re-

spect for and easy bonding with physical laborers, and my cherish of grain and other foods have their roots in the time I spent in the countryside.

Guirong and Lifeng changed, too. They adopted the personal hygiene habits of urban folks, such as teeth brushing and daily washing. They had clothes that were popular on Beijing streets: leather boots, long and wide woolen mufflers, and Dacron clothes that I bought for them in Beijing. They also made a trip to Beijing themselves, staying with me, touring the city, and shopping. As our experimental farm was much better off than their villages and since they did not need to pay for their families' expenses or debts out of their income from our farm, they had money to spend on themselves and had the autonomy and exposure to the outside world that few of their peers had. We studied together in the evenings. Guirong picked up books I had. Lifeng, who had very little schooling, began to learn to read and write. She had a little notebook with her and often took it out to review the words in it when she had a chance. We had shared dreams and aspirations and we had lived together like I would with my zhiqing friends.

But we were all aware, even though we did not talk about it, that our final destinies would diverge because of the fact that I was from the city and they were from the countryside. Due to the strict household registration system aimed at restricting rural migration to cities, it was extremely difficult for them to leave the countryside and change their rural status, while zhiqing were much more mobile, even though they did not have much direct control over where they would go, either. For my sake, Guirong and Lifeng wanted to see me get out of the countryside sooner because they did not see it as a place where zhiqing belonged. By 1975 the zhiqing movement had lost its momentum, many zhiqing were re-assigned jobs in towns and cities, and Beijing zhiqing began to be allowed to return to Beijing for "health reasons"—in reality, a way to let Beijing youngsters go back to their home city. I stayed, not for some lofty or abstract ideal (I was extremely healthy, too), but because I had concrete things to do. My heart was tied up in the experimental farm to which all three of us had devoted ourselves.

But our dream was hard to realize. We had to give priority to

economic self-sufficiency and experiment and research could come only after providing for the members of the farm. The conditions were also inadequate. For example, the small amount of land we had next to other production teams' fields limited our ability to produce hybrid corn seeds. Besides, the peasants did not recognize those seeds. I spoke at a commune meeting of production team leaders, urging them to buy them, but only a few did. I felt the peasants were just too conservative in their thinking and not open to new ideas. Progress was made, but very slowly.

The overthrow of the "Gang of Four" in October of 1976 signaled the end of the Cultural Revolution; even people in the countryside sensed big changes were coming soon. The university enrollment began again. I was already the last Beijing zhigong in the commune. Many urged me to go to college, including Guirong and Lifeng. I realized that there was not much I could do for the experimental farm, and higher education had always been my goal, so I decided to apply. As I still wanted to do agricultural experiment and research, I put down the provincial agricultural university as my first school choice in my application form. Due to disruptions caused by political changes related to the overthrow of the "Gang of Four," the planned college entrance exam did not take place, and applicants were finally assigned to various schools by the local authorities. I was thus assigned to the provincial normal university, becoming one of the last group of "worker-peasant-soldier students."⁵ When I asked a commune leader why I did not get the agricultural university, he said, "All agricultural colleges and universities [have the policy of] *she lai she qu* [recruiting students from rural areas and sending them back to where they came from after graduation]. You are a Beijing zhigong, why make you come back to the countryside?" As a matter of fact, I knew I would be able to go to an agricultural research institute after graduation because I knew people at the regional agricultural research institute would want to have me. I was sure that I would make a good agricultural researcher and that would also allow me to remain connected to what I had been doing and to the place to which I felt deeply indebted.

Guirong and Lifeng were more on the side of the commune

leaders than on mine on this matter: "You can do anything well. It is time you go. Why would a zhigong stay in the countryside?" My imminent departure was hard for all of us. Even though it was not totally unexpected, when it came it still seemed sudden, and it was hard to believe that this would be the end of our five years together. We had seemed inseparable. But Guirong and Lifeng were truly happy for me—and relieved, as they had begun to worry I would be left behind with them, which they felt would have an ill effect on my future. They immediately plunged themselves into preparations for sending me off, taking apart and washing my cotton-padded coat and my cotton-padded quilt and mattress and making me a new pair of cotton-padded pants, which were light with a thin layer of cotton and a checkered flannelette lining that neatly fit my legs. "Back in the city, you won't need to stay outdoors all day long and wear bulky cotton-padded pants," Guirong said.

They never showed any trace of jealousy, not even a tiny bit of resentment over the unequal opportunities and fate lying ahead of us, even though it was at that very point that I began to see clearly the privilege I had, the naked inequality and gulf laying between us. I knew that they were as capable as I was, if not more so, and deserved to have whatever chances I would have in life. This made me feel all the more guilty about leaving them behind with an uncertain future. The desire to help Guirong and Lifeng find a job preoccupied me completely before I left, and this was also the main reason I went back to Momoge during my first summer vacation. I talked to the commune leaders, one by one, about what would happen to Guirong and Lifeng. I emphasized to them that Guirong and Lifeng had worked for the commune for more than three years. If there were any chances for employment—for example, if the commune store needed new shop assistants or the county-run factories recruited workers—they should be the first to get the job. The commune leaders all agreed with me. Nobody could dispute the fact that they were outstanding and had delayed marriage and given their utmost to their work. But chances for employment for rural youths in our poor and remote area were extremely slim, and, despite their hard work, neither Guirong nor Lifeng had any personal connections to the commune leaders. Nor did I have

any clout. If an opportunity ever came up, could Guirong and Lifeng beat the children or relatives of influential leaders in the competition? I refused to give up hope. As a matter of fact, I had never hoped so earnestly and hard that they would be granted their wishes; yet deep down I also felt hopelessly helpless, for there was nothing else I, or we, could do.

I left Momoge in January 1977 with nostalgia and a sense of guilt. The experimental farm was dismantled at the end of 1977, after all crops were harvested and accounts were settled. Guirong and Lifeng went back home and subsequently married. Guirong married the agricultural technician of our commune, a young man of Mongolian nationality who was a graduate of the prefecture agricultural college and a state employee. It turned out that he actually took the only quota our commune had for an agricultural college, the one I would have gotten if given the chance. I felt it was fate that he was given the opportunity I had desired and that Guirong had married him. Lifeng married Wanyou, a fine demobilized serviceman from my village. Wanyou was a good friend of us zhiqing, a frequent visitor of zhiqing's house before he joined the army. He took delight in helping others and had a bright smile and hearty laughter. We all liked him. In pre-reform China, when there was very little mobility, joining the army was one of rural youths' few routes of upward/outward mobility. Servicemen were able to see the world. After marriage, Lifeng and Wanyou settled on a state farm in Heilongjiang Province, where the soil is richer and people's lives easier. I was comforted by the fact that both Guirong and Lifeng were happy with their husbands.

In the summer of 1992, during my first trip back to China since coming to the United States, I went to Momoge, a place I would never forget. Now a township, Momoge had changed a lot. The township (previously the commune) was new and the dirt road that ran through the center of the town was replaced by an asphalt road. There was even an ice-cream stand by the roadside. I was thrilled to visit Guirong, her husband, and their two children, now residing in the township. Guirong had just returned from a four-day bicycle trip to a pond where she had been catching fish to sell to help her family. Her face looked darker and thinner than before but immediately lighted up when she saw me.

I also went back to my village, where I made a point to see the crops. The land was all under family farming now. I found that hybrid seeds were now widely used and the crops were better tended than when I was there. I had to admit that science and technology in farming alone, as I had believed, could not solve the issue of poverty and other problems in the countryside. Land ownership, leadership, state and local policies, and many other factors must all play a role.

It hurt me to find that the peasants there were still living in great poverty. Most of them still lived in cracked earthen houses and wore ragged and faded clothes. After I had been to more places, I could now better assess the local living conditions. Zhenlai County is acknowledged as one of the five poorest counties in Jilin Province. And as I went from place to place during my trip, I discovered that there was a large gap between the prefecture city, county, township, and the village. There was more poverty every step down to the village, even though things were improving. Villagers now all had enough grain to eat. Our former production team leader told me, "Now every family has wheat flour to treat their guests, nobody eats millet when they have guests in their household." True to his words, in the two days I was there, I never ate millet. I actually missed it. At Guirong's maternal home, her married cousins and sister were all back because of my visit, and they slaughtered a sheep to treat me. Her uncle, the patriarch of her family, said to me, "guinu ["daughter," the way he addressed me, treating me as one of his own] have returned home, [we] slaughtered a sheep. Our family now owns sheep."

It hurt me to see that the rural-urban divide and the material gap between Guirong and me were still there after a decade and half. But I took comfort in the fact that time and distance had not affected our bonds, and we were as close as ever. Sitting on the kang at Guirong's house, with our legs crossed, we talked and talked as if continuing an unfinished conversation left from yesterday. Her two children, a boy and a girl, were fast asleep on the bare mattress, stretching out their arms and legs, wearing only their shorts. Her husband, Tiegang, was in the kitchen cleaning a big basin of small fish and doing other household chores. I had already gotten

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

NOTES

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

WANG ZHENG

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

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

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

SOME OF US

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