

# CALL ME *QINGNIAN* BUT NOT *FUNÜ*: A MAOIST YOUTH IN RETROSPECT

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A few days before Women's Day of 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. 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, *funü*, the contemporary Chinese term for women, invoked the image of a married woman surrounded by pots and pans, diapers and bottles, sewing and knitting needles, who was hanging 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 "women" did not go much further that day, but it has emerged from my memory again and again in the past decade of my studying feminism. Each time the scene in my memory generated different questions for me to ponder. Had we internalized male cultural values to such an extent that we denigrated women the same way men did? What were the specific meanings of *funü* in the Mao era? Did our rejection of the term suggest any facets other than our internalization of patriarchal values? What shaped my perceptions of the terms "youth" and "women" in my early years? What was implied by the word "youth" to which we tried to cling? Scholars of communist societies have often emphasized the manipulation of youth by totalitarian states. But when "youth were identified most fully as agents of change for the whole society,"[2] how did this emphasis

*Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (spring 2001). 

affect gender production? Since young women in most societies seldom get to be identified as "agents of change for the whole society," how did communist female youth fare with the officially sponsored identity of major agents of social change? These and many more questions led me to revisit my life in the Mao era.

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

But there were still many *jiating funü*-housewives when I grew up in the 1950s, and they were all mothers or grandmothers. On the first floor of a four-story row house in downtown Shanghai where my family lived, the four families sharing the tiny space were run by four housewives. My mother was illiterate and had small feet (*xiaojiao*) (her feet used to be bound). Of the four housewives, only one could read, but she had small feet too, even smaller than my mother's.

Because my mother stayed home, I did not have the chance to go to daycare or kindergarten. I always envied those kids who walked in line behind their teacher, holding on to a rope, as they walked in the street. They sang and laughed and appeared to have great fun with their friends. I just stayed home watching the

four and more housewives in the neighborhood washing, cooking, shopping, and gossiping.

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

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

In those years, I never consciously associated my mother with the term *jiating funü*, although I knew she was a housewife. The term *jiating funü* suggested many negative attributes that I did not see in my mother. I placed her in a different category. She was illiterate, which means she could not read newspapers that gave us all the new ideas. In fact, she did not even know how to say

any of the new expressions. Although she showed wonderful verbal memory by telling me many folktales and nursery rhymes, I can only think of one or two occasions when she said *renmin zhengfu* (people's government) and *Gongchandang* (Communist Party). That is all. Ignorance of the new socialist ideas should have qualified her as a backward woman, but I never judged her that way. Instead, what I saw in her was hard work and self-sacrifice. In my early teens, I once asked her: "Why didn't Mom go out to work when most women did? Mom could be selected as a model worker easily!" She replied: "Well, if I had gone out to work, you all would have had to eat in the canteens. The meals there are poor and more expensive." She paused a little, adding, "No one who went out to work has small feet." I was at a loss for words. I knew her small feet were a daily physical torture, but I had never realized that they were also such a terrible burden on her mind. The oppressions of the old feudal society are still with Mom, I thought. "Mom is a victim of the old society. I am a new person of the Mao Zedong epoch [a set phrase of the time]."

My mother's small feet and illiteracy made it easy for me to identify her as the "oppressed." When my father blamed my mother for trivial things like forgetting to sew a button back on to his shirt, I would protest to my father. "Stop oppressing Mom, Dad! This is the new society. Dad should not oppress Mom any more." (In my family, my father held to the strict rule that seniors were not to be addressed by the pronouns, "you," "they," "she," or "he." To show respect, to know your place, a junior should always address or refer to elders by kinship terms. This Confucian etiquette in my youthful voice was mixed with my revolutionary speech.) Sometimes, I would try to instigate my mother to revolt. "Mom, don't be afraid of Dad. Men and women are all equal. Mom should say this sentence to Dad loudly." But my mother would smile at me with embarrassment. "I don't know how to say those words," she said. "I have a clumsy mouth." But I could not understand why her mouth was so clever when she told me all those fairy tales, folk songs, and stories from her life. Because new phrases came out of my mouth easily, I decided to be my mother's mouth. Sometimes after my defense of my mother, she would say, "Fortunately I have a little daughter to speak for me." Father called me "a little protector of Mom." My fourth sister once told me, "Dad laughs when you criticize Dad. But once when I tried to

do the same, Dad got mad at me and scolded me terribly. You are Dad's favorite. You can do whatever you want to." I knew my father pampered me, his youngest child, his little pet. Even my criticism sounded amusing to him. He must have seen humor and irony in his little daughter's mastery of revolutionary language.

Mother was the youngest daughter of a worker's family. At eight years old she became a worker in a lace factory owned by Germans. She worked in the factory until she turned twenty, when she married my father. Father was the youngest son of a comfortable gentry family. Both of them were from Shandong, the native place of Confucius. Their fathers, although of different classes, shared a friendship based on a similar taste for wine and an appreciation of each other's character. Once, drinking and chatting in a bar, they found out that the one's daughter was two years younger than the other's son. Neither of the children were engaged. Delighted they decided on the marriage of their children right away. When my parents got married in 1930, my father had already acquired a desire for the new style of women, women with education and natural feet. My father openly complained about his arranged marriage, he had tried to resist but failed. One day he complained to me in my mother's presence. "Look, my greatest misfortune is to have married your mother who does not know the pleasure of reading. She always interrupts me when I am totally absorbed in my book." I replied right away, "That is the result of Dad's selfishness. If Dad had taught Mom three characters a day since the day Mom married Dad, instead of just asking Mom to wash and cook, Mom could have long been literate. Didn't that Communist in the movie teach his wife to read? So no one is to blame but Dad self." Both my parents laughed. They knew to what I referred and what I meant.

We had all seen *The Revolutionary Family*, a popular film with a cast of first-class actors. The story depicted a woman's life from the day she was carried on a wedding sedan chair in the late 1920s. Just like my mother, she was illiterate and was marrying a man she had never seen before. But her educated husband was a Communist, unlike my educated father who was a Nationalist. The underground Communist husband taught her to read and write. After he was killed by Nationalists, she carried on his revolutionary task and brought up her three children as revolutionaries. When I saw on the screen the handsome Communist husband

holding his young bride's hand, patiently and lovingly teaching her to write with a brush pen, I wished that that were the relationship between my parents. The only difference between my parents and this couple was that my father was a Nationalist. I concluded after the movie that all the consequent huge differences between the two couples hinged on that crucial difference. I assumed that the inequalities between my parents would fall away if my father were a Communist. But if my father were a Communist, I would have been totally confused and would have lost the ability to direct any revolutionary words at him. Because he used to be a Nationalist, all the ideas and concepts that I learned from books and movies could be applied to our family case consistently.

Movies were a large part of my childhood memories. There were four movie theaters within a ten-minute walk from my home. The price for a movie was fifteen or twenty cents for adults, eight or twelve cents for children and students. When the whole school booked a movie, the discount price for each student was five cents. The Cathay Theater, on the next block, had Sunday-morning children's specials. I spent many Sunday mornings of my elementary years there. Our school often booked movies there, too. Watching movies was a part of the curriculum. All the students lined up and went together to the theater. After each movie, our teacher would lead a class discussion and then we were required to write an essay about what we had learned. Heroes and heroines in the movies were our role models. Revolutionary movies were a guide to a revolutionary life.

My experience in film education, however, had begun even before I started school. My second sister, Xiujuan, nineteen years older than I, was a factory worker. On her day off, apart from helping my mother with housework, she liked to spend time with me. One warm sunny day, she took me to see *Tens and Thousands of Rivers and Mountains*. This was a hot new movie about the Long March of the Red Army. I must have been four or five at the time, and it was my first war movie. I still remember the scene when Red Army soldiers tried to cross the suspension bridge over the Dadu River. The bridge was made of cables connecting two cliffs high up over the roaring river. The Nationalist Army had removed the planks on the iron cables to prevent the Red Army from crossing. But the Red Army soldiers tried to cross it anyway. One after another, they grabbed the thick cables to crawl over the

river while dodging the dense shower of bullets from the fortress at the other side. One after another, wounded soldiers who could no longer hang on fell into the swift current below. Having never seen death before, I was astounded by the violent, agonizing deaths amplified on the huge screen. My heart pounded madly as I struggled desperately with each soldier trying to hang on to the cable. Their ordeal became mine. They died but I remained alive.

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

My sense of indebtedness to revolutionary martyrs was reinforced after I began school in 1958. Movies, storybooks, and textbooks all described how revolutionaries sacrificed their lives so that we could live happy lives in the new socialist China. The red scarf that we Communist Young Pioneers wore was "a corner of our red flag that was dyed with the blood of martyrs." Wearing the red scarf over a white shirt, we Young Pioneers sang loudly our theme song "Communist Successors." "We are the communist successors. Inheriting the glorious tradition of our revolutionary predecessors, we love our country and love our people."

I was obsessed with the idea of becoming a revolutionary. There was no other choice since I definitely did not want to be an enemy of the revolutionaries or a despicable renegade. I wanted to be like many heroes and heroines in the movies and novels. The most dangerous work for the revolution was underground work. Underground Communists were often arrested, and horrible torture was a common procedure to force them to talk. I fantasized about becoming a Communist underground worker. Taiwan was not yet liberated, and two-thirds of the people in the world were still living in the darkness. It was very likely that I would be sent to do some underground work when I grew up, I figured. But, could I endure the torture if I were arrested? I wasn't sure. I was afraid of many things, besides pain. My mother used to raise chickens in our backyard. Once when a rooster suddenly

charged at me, I was so frightened that I climbed through a window to escape. In school, when our teacher placed sample trays of frogs and earthworms on our desks for us to observe, I closed my eyes tightly, feeling as if in hell. How could *I* pass the torture test? This disturbing question caused the greatest anxiety until one day I found a solution.

In a Soviet spy novel I read in the third or fourth grade, a German spy was caught by the Soviet Intelligence. When the Soviets began to interrogate him, he bit on the corner of his collar and died instantly. There was a tiny lethal pill sewn in the tip of his collar. The story was a revelation. I had never read anything like that in stories about Chinese Communist underground activities. "The foreigners are more advanced," I thought. "I am sure that when I grow up, our country will have this technology, too." This new finding relieved me immensely. My innate weakness could no longer inhibit me from becoming a revolutionary!

Why do I recall these early memories with fondness, when the same experiences prove how thoroughly "brainwashed" I was by Communist propaganda, to use the American mainstream language? Why do I now feel differently about these childhood recollections than I did twenty years ago? Twenty years ago,[3] when Chinese intellectuals began to expose and criticize the horrible deeds of the Communist Party, I saw the tragedy of those soldiers falling into the river with a new sense of loss. The party had betrayed all those martyrs. They had died in vain. I questioned the meaning of their sacrifice. I saw myself as part of a generation of youth who were cheated and used by Mao because he had called on us to devote our lives to the revolution while he had devoted his life to power struggles. The ugliness of the actual process of revolution relentlessly mocked my naïveté in taking the beautiful dream of revolution as reality. I found myself reviewing my childhood dreams and adolescent efforts with deep ambivalence.

The overwhelming volume of exposé on Maoist crimes both enlightened and confused me. The older generations condemned Maoist persecution. Many of my generation repented their inhumanity when they were Red Guards. Everyone who was talking, including the once victimizers, Red Guards, claimed to be a victim, scarred by the Maoist dictatorship. But I could not find expe-

riences in my life to honestly represent myself as a victim or victimizer. I did not know how to feel about my many happy memories and cherished experiences from a time that most vocal people now called the dark age.

Twenty turbulent years have passed since then. Changes in the world, in China, and in my location have all helped me find a way out of my confusion. There is no need to hide my positive feelings for my life in the Maoist era. Instead, I have a historian's intense curiosity to understand the historical and social background that shaped my positive feelings as well as what has enabled me to express my feelings against the dominant voices both in the American post-cold war discourse, and the Chinese post-Mao discourse. Perhaps one brief example can illustrate the kind of experiences that led me to reassert the positive impact of the Maoist era.

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

In the fourth grade, Teacher Jiang asked us to write an essay on the topic "What Will I Be in the Future?" I am sure that all the school children in China were asked to write more than once on a topic like "My Dream," or "My Wish for a Career." But that was the first time I wrote an essay of this kind. I liked the topic because I had much to say. I did not write about my fantasy to be a Communist spy in that essay. I guess by that time I already understood the party's expectations of the younger generation. Battlefields, guerrilla wars, and underground works were the past glories. My generation, born in the new society, definitely missed out on the romance and adventures. Now we were expected to devote ourselves to the construction of socialism. Chairman Mao said that our country is as poor as a sheet of blank paper, but that

will allow us to paint the most beautiful new picture on it. Building a beautiful new China sounded like a pretty exciting project to me.

The essay reflected my mood quite well. I wrote that I wished to be a geological prospector who will explore mysterious primeval forests or uncharted lands to find long-buried treasures (natural resources) for our country; or a farmer who will make our homeland a gorgeous tapestry; or a textile worker who will weave the most beautiful fabrics for our people; or a teacher who will spread the seeds of wisdom and foster the growth of a forest of talented students; or an actress whose performance will inspire her audience; or a doctor who will cure the sick and rescue the dying. I concluded the essay by saying, "Whatever occupation I take, I will be a socialist constructor." I was quite pleased with my flowery essay because it genuinely expressed my feelings. I could not decide which occupation to settle on and I wished to have a taste of them all. These occupations (and many others that did not appeal to me, such as that of a scientist) were glamorized at the time and my words parroted the widely circulated clichés. As children we learned to write in the language of official discourse quickly. Facing the Western embargo, China desperately needed to exploit its natural resources. I believe many girls and boys of my generation dreamt of being prospectors. Propaganda for recruiting young people to work in this area was very effective. When my neighbor's daughter was accepted by the geology department of a prestigious university, we all envied her for her future prospects of adventures. The government's directive on the career choices for youth certainly shaped my desires.

But my desires seemed to be too extensive. Without mentioning my name, Teacher Jiang read my essay loudly to the whole class as an example of poor writing. "It is unfocused and without a theme," she criticized. "No, I have a theme," I disagreed in my heart. "The obvious theme is that I want to be a socialist constructor!" Of all my essays in the elementary and middle school, I only remember this one because of the humiliation of winning the prize for the worst essay. As a historian, this valuable piece of memory is illuminating as evidence. Before the age of ten, the subject position of a socialist constructor was already solidly established. No doubt, "socialist constructor" was an identity fostered by the dominant political discourse. But for a girl, was this

discursive position more oppressive and limiting than that of "a homemaker," a position no less powerfully constructed by the dominant discourse in the United States in the same period? Was "brainwashing" girls to desire to be "young vanguards" in socialist construction more oppressive and limiting than "brainwashing" girls to desire to be cheerleaders for football games? No.

The image of a socialist constructor was gender neutral. Coexisting with traditional gender expectations, the existence of a gender-neutral but hegemonic identity legitimates the crossing of gender boundaries for women and enabled personal development in girls. The theme of my essay *was* to be a socialist constructor, a category that would allow me to go in any direction. In fact, I seldom thought of myself as a girl, a less meaningful category when the prevailing slogans encouraged us to be a "socialist new person." Once I was striding on the wall of our backyard to take a good view of our neighborhood. My mother called, "Get down! How can you little girl climb the wall? What terrible manners!" I looked at her without budging an inch, retorting in my mind, "Mom is just feudal. Why can't a girl climb the wall?" At school, girls and boys shared in all activities, including sports. I jumped and ran like boys. I got into fights with boys. Nothing in the formal curriculum reminded me of my gender. I was a student and a member of the Young Pioneer League, who was going to be a new youth of the new China.

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

When I walked into the hallway in our row house one day, I saw my neighbor Mother Huang telling something to three other women on the first floor, including my mother. Mother Huang was describing something in a secretive, low, sneering voice. The other three women were listening with apparent fascination. I

passed by indifferently, but when I turned the corner, I stopped right away to listen. My ears were especially sensitive to whispers and secretive tones, perhaps a result of training by Mother Huang, who was an informed source because her husband was the gatekeeper in our lane. Gossiping about neighbors' personal troubles and family feuds gave her a sense of moral superiority. She used to be a washerwoman in a brothel and was still washing clothes for some neighbors to subsidize her husband's meager income.

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

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

At nine, I knew that a man could make a woman pregnant but did not know how. Of course, this gossip did not help solve the puzzle, a puzzle you had to figure out someday by yourself. I finally put the pieces together and reached a moment of revelation when I was seventeen. Many of my friends, just like my mother, did not solve the puzzle until their wedding night. At nine, I was unimaginative. I could not imagine what Peiying did with that boy. But I could tell right away from these women's reaction to the scandal that her pregnancy was disastrous to her. Soon, events confirmed my assessment. On Peiying's wedding day, she was all dressed up like a bride. But unlike other brides, she was sobbing in such deep grief as if going to a funeral. Even today I still see her vividly. Wearing a bright red flowery silk scarf, holding a white handkerchief to wipe her tears, Peiying sobbed her way down the lane, under the stares of many women and children. She broke my heart. Such a lovely girl to end up like this!

Worse still, soon that "little rascal" proved to be an abusive husband. He often hit her. Each time, she went crying back to her auntie's home. A few times, when they were fighting in the number 7 row house, Peiying ran out of the house screaming, yelling,

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

Later whenever I came across the word *zhencao* (chastity), I would think of Peiying. I knew all too well that losing *zhencao* meant a girl's doom. I don't remember if I ever made a vow, "I will never let any man ruin me like Peiying did." But I suspect Peiying was the source of my aloofness toward boys.

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

Little girls became successors of the old sexual morality as easily as they became successors of the revolution. After years of free association with boys in elementary school, we imposed gender segregation on ouselves in junior high school. We no longer played with boys and seldom talked to them except to one's deskmate when absolutely necessary. No teacher or parent had a hand in creating this segregation. We adolescent girls initiated it for a simple reason: it was not good to be close to boys because you could attract gossip. One girl at a senior level often talked merrily with boys. My classmates and I commented on her behavior disapprovingly, "Look at her! She is so flighty." "Look at the way she curls her bangs. She tries to be pretty!" Trying to be pretty was a

derogatory description for a girl. We often openly expressed our admiration of pretty girls but disdain of those who were not but were trying to be. Trying to be pretty revealed one's intention to draw attention. We were not shy of standing out for our academic performance or extracurricular activities, but we definitely did not want to attract attention to our appearance. Decent girls were supposed to behave this way. We had established this set of behavioral norms before we learned about political terms like "bourgeois lifestyle" in the Cultural Revolution.

One summer when it got hot unusually early, before it was time to change into skirts and short sleeves, all seventeen girls in my class kept waiting for someone to be brave enough to change into summer clothes. But no one wanted to be the first. She would attract unbearable stares. We rolled up our long sleeves and waited. Finally, one girl could not put up with the heat any longer and came up with a smart idea. She talked to each girl in our class and we all agreed delightedly to change into summer clothes together the next day.

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

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

Half a block away from my home, there was a picture bookstand, which I frequented before third grade. Throughout the 1950s, there were numerous private picture bookstands in Shanghai. They did not sell books but loaned them to kids to read there

(sometimes you would see a few old men reading there, too). They usually were located at the entrance of a lane that had a second-floor apartment built over the entrance. The entrance with a roof sheltered the young readers at the bookstand from rains and the sun. Shelves of picture books against the wall, a few low benches squeezed together, this was the place where I found immense pleasure second only to the movies.

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

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

One illustration, etched deeply in my mind, was set in the garden of a Mediterranean aristocrat. A beautiful young lady in a dress similar to an Indian woman's sari is leaning against a flowering fence. She wears fresh flowers in her shining, black, thick

hair that is tied in a loose bun. Her dangling earrings, shiny necklace, and bracelets are made of precious stone. Her dress is thin and tight, exposing her sensual figure. Her slender arm holds on to a vine covered with blossoms. She lowers her head and turns her face halfway away from the man who is talking to her. She is soft, gentle, and shy. The well-built man, strong and firm, is also gentle. He leans his upper body forward as if bowing, in confiding his love for her. I remember my heart pounding rapidly when I turned to this illustration. I felt as if I were that lady. I gazed at this picture for a long time. I cannot recall the story at all but the image remained the quintessential love scene in my childhood romantic fantasies.

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

I developed an insatiable appetite for romantic stories. Under my peculiar circumstances, I also developed special skills to read fast and to tease the line of romance quickly out of the multiple themes of a novel. In the fifth grade, it took me only two afternoons before my sister and brother came home to finish *War and Peace*. It was a thick book even in Chinese. I skipped all of the parts on war and focused on the pages when ladies appeared. It

was not until the Cultural Revolution that I had the security to read romantic stories leisurely.

The Cultural Revolution began in 1966 at the end of my second year in junior high school. Girls in my class formed a Chairman-Mao-thought-propaganda team. We got on buses after rush hour, singing revolutionary songs and reciting Chairman Mao quotations to the bus riders. It was a great treat to have free bus rides. We giggled a lot each time we got off a bus laughing at the comical contrast between the silently indifferent passengers and bus conductors and our enthusiastic performance. "The adults don't like us being there, but none of them dares to tell us to get off the bus!" But soon our festive moods changed when Shanghai students began to follow Beijing students to form Red Guard organizations. Only students from Red families were allowed to join the Red Guards. One day my two best friends and I were talking outside my home. Troubled, we revealed to one another for the first time our not-so-Red family backgrounds. Ying's father used to be a small business owner; Feng's father used to be a member of the Nationalist Youth League; and my father used to be a Nationalist Party member. At thirteen, I only understood that this was the first time that I was disqualified for something not because of my behavior and performance but because of something over which I had no control. I felt humiliated but did not know with whom I should be angry. My gloom, however, did not last long. Who cares about Red Guards anyway?! Humph! I don't even want to join you! I despised those Red Guards in army uniforms walking around with their self-satisfied airs. Big deal! I don't see anything special in you. At no time did I associate those teenage Red Guards with the image of a true revolutionary in my mind.

My fourth sister, a devoted young high school teacher, was criticized by some of her students. Her naturally curly hair was taken by her students as a perm. She was criticized for keeping a bourgeois hairstyle. The students also ordered her to turn in her outlandish clothing, a jean jacket with a sailor collar. She was miserable. I was angry with those ridiculous and ungrateful students as I knew how much my sister cared about them. Largely because of my sister, my political sympathies lay with the teachers. Once I saw two male students beating a teacher in my school. I was totally disgusted by this ugly scene. I stopped going to school after that. There was no school anyway.[4]

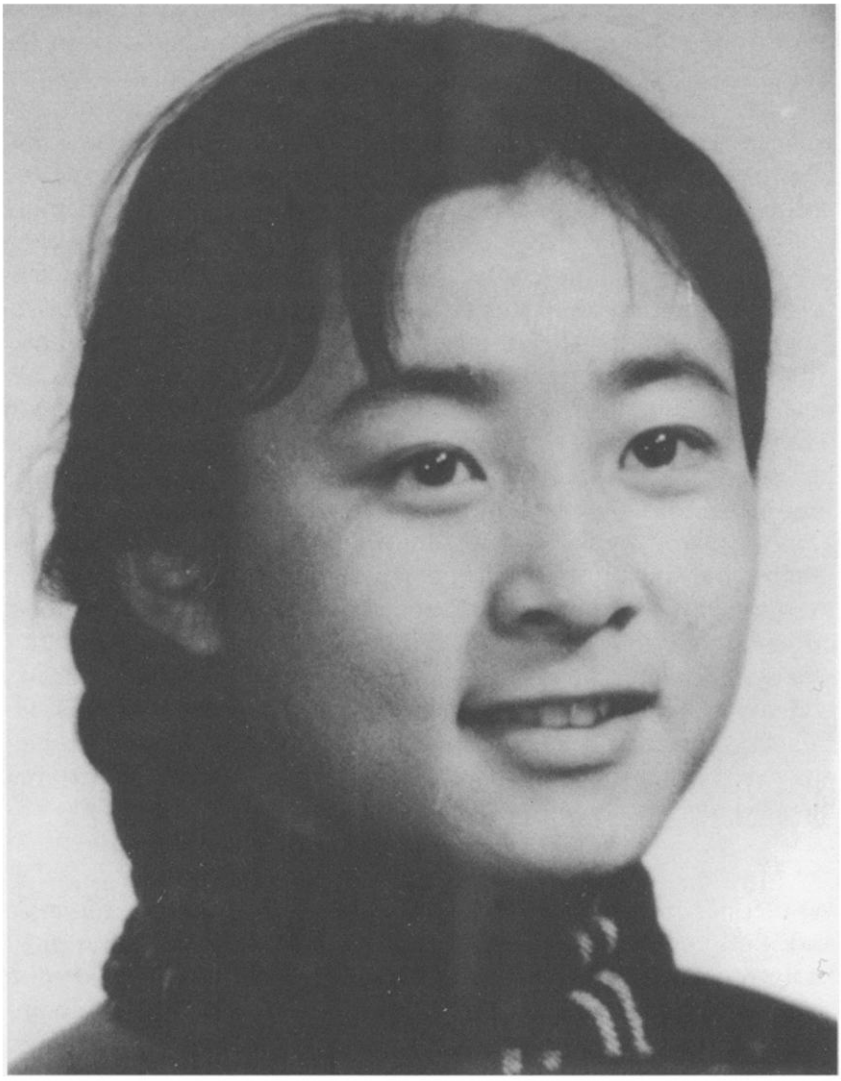
Except for a trip to Beijing to see Chairman Mao, I spent the first two years of the Cultural Revolution doing my favorite things at home, singing and reading. It was like a never-ending summer vacation. No school, no worries about math tests, and no headaches over homework. I could read as late as I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

My siblings and I all loved nineteenth-century European literature. Before the Cultural Revolution these "world classics" had a legitimate place in socialist China. Supposedly, they served to enhance our knowledge of the evils of capitalist society. I suspect, however, that was a pretext invented by intellectuals and translators who loved Western literature and made a comfortable living from it. To gain legitimacy in publishing such literature, intellectuals also published articles to guide young readers on how to read these classics in a "correct way." Often they would present the historical context of the capitalist society in which the story took place and critique the limitations of the protagonists due to their bourgeois class backgrounds. Glancing over these "guiding" essays that frequently appeared in youth newspapers, I knew I did not read the "correct way," although my pleasure in reading was no less.

During the Cultural Revolution, no one was monitoring what I was reading. My brother stopped being mean to me in his high school years. My fourth sister was busy attending condemnation meetings organized by Red Guards in her school. Surely, my mind became more "complicated." I started to make up my own romance every night before falling asleep. In my fantasies, I, the beautiful and feminine heroine, and the handsome hero fell in love

but did not confide our love to each other. Many times I cried over a touching story in which I sacrificed my love for the sake of the man I loved, or vice versa. There was rarely any physical contact between the lovers. I did not yet know about sex and could not imagine it even in my wildest fantasy. My fantasies were fully charged with emotions, restrained emotions. The hero I loved shifted from a well-mannered and reserved English gentleman, out of a Dickens, Hardy, or Austin novel, to a passionate French lover created by Dumas, to a sentimental melancholic Russian aristocrat in Turgenev's stories, and finally to a devoted and loyal Chinese Communist revolutionary. Of course, I also tried to mix different qualities together to make the ideal type for myself. My hero wrote love poems like Robert Browning, confided his love in a sensuous voice like Cyrano, and serenaded me beneath a marble balcony where I stood, dressed in a long white dress, bathed in the moonlight. He had the physique and internal depth of Rodin's *Thinker*. Like a communist revolutionary, he would bravely sacrifice his life for a noble cause, and which was why I often cried over my stories. Fantasizing about my ideal lover kept me preoccupied in the first two years of the Cultural Revolution before I was sent down to the countryside. At the peak of Chairman Mao's endeavor to eradicate all bourgeois, feudalistic, and revisionist influences, I eagerly opened my heart and mind to a world of heterosexual romance imbued with Victorian gender discourse that blended well with communist sexual mores.

Who could have thought that my acquired passion for romance and "bourgeois taste" would assist me in becoming a Communist Party member? At eighteen, two years after I had worked on a state farm in Chongming Island, I was accepted as a party member. One of the first four on the farm when the party just began to recruit young members in the Cultural Revolution, I had not expected that my party membership would come so easily. The party leaders never even mentioned my father's political problems. It was not because they were too short on applicants to discriminate against me. Our farm had a population of over twenty thousand young people, many of whom were former Red Guards who rose to prominence. My best friend Lin had applied for a party membership much earlier. But she was not among the first to be accepted.



Photograph of the author taken at the state farm in Chongming Island in 1969.

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

Whenever we could catch our breath in the fields, Lin and I talked. Actually, she talked mostly, and on only one topic: the significance of the Cultural Revolution. Apparently sensing my apolitical naïveté, she patiently explained to me the history of the Red Guard movement, the great historical significance of "sending down" educated youth to the countryside, and the importance of guarding against revisionism. She enlightened me in only a couple of months. Her description of the goals of the sent-down youth movement fit well with my childhood utopian dream. Communism aims to make the whole world a beautiful garden where everyone lives happily without exploitation and oppression. "From each according to ability and to each according to needs." Now, we, revolutionary youth, are in the position to make our country a beautiful garden. We should make this barren island a beautiful communist garden as the first step. This dream seems feasible to me, as long as we youth all devote ourselves to that common goal. It cannot be more difficult than the Long March. What is required of us is just sweat and hardship, and not the sacrifice of our lives.

I enthusiastically began to work toward this glorious dream, imagining myself among the ranks of revolutionaries who heroically endured hardship and pain for the everlasting happiness of all people. Snow flew into our straw hut through holes in the walls. Muddy boots were frozen fast to the dirt floor in our dorm. Rain leaking through the straw roofs wet our beds. Blisters on my hands bled because we dug canals with a spade. Chafed shoulder skin stuck to my shirt after carrying heavy loads on a shoulder pole for a day. Backbones felt broken from long hours bent over transplanting rice seedlings. Such pains were a test to see if I could become a true revolutionary. I confronted each test in high spirits. When the farm began to increase our salaries, I wrote to

the brigade leader, sincerely asking for the lowest rank of salary. I reasoned, "When the Red Army soldiers were on the Long March, each had only five cents a day for food. I have no reason to ask for more than what I need to feed myself since our country is still poor." I was soon identified by the party leaders as a promising "revolutionary seedling."

Yes, I was striving to be a selfless revolutionary, but so was Lin. I was influenced greatly by her and by the many revolutionary texts she passed on to me. Why was I the chosen one and she was not? There was only one significant difference between us. She switched her boyfriends frequently while I was boyfriendless. Her revolutionary image was severely tarnished by the succession of boyfriends while my reputation was impeccable. In fact, before I was accepted as a party member, at the routine meeting for me to hear the evaluation of the masses, there was only one criticism. "Somehow Wang Zheng has a kind of aloofness. She does not make approaches to the masses." The criticism was a familiar one and came mostly from young men. Once when I was home on vacation, I told my father that some guys in my brigade criticized me for being aloof (*qinggao*, a term often applied to bourgeois intellectuals in the CCP language, connoting bourgeois disdain for workers and peasants). I wondered if he saw that in me. My father replied immediately, "What *qinggao*? Any guy saying that wants to approach you. Just ignore them! I know what's in men's minds." I had not expected a sexual interpretation for what I had understood as a personality problem. I found my father's words quite illuminating.

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

Chairman Mao said, "The eyes of the masses are sharp." Those young men's complaints of my aloofness were perceptive. I sized up each one at the first glance. No one was even close to the ideal type in my fantasies. Why bother to approach them? My love has to be reserved for the one who deserves it. This was a firm conviction based on both the Chinese concept of chastity and the exaltation of romantic love in Victorian literature. Love, in my mind,

was as sacred as the goal of communism, if not more. The difference was that you could take action to build a perfect communist society but you had to wait patiently, or rather, hopelessly, for your perfect love to appear. The impossibility of attaining my ideal love caused profound agony. Even before I arrived on the island, I had thought about the barren Chinese countryside with despair. Nothing could be more distant from my dream of a cosmopolitan romantic world. Did I unconsciously transpose my longing for a romantic garden permeated with music and flowers into passionate action for a communist garden?

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

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

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

Two decades have passed before I am able to examine the meaning of Maoist *qingnian* at a conscious level. In China at the end of the twentieth century, *qingnian* has long been replaced by *nüxing* (female sex or femininity) as a dominant subject position for urban young women. To be feminine is the vogue, instead of being a revolutionary youth. *Nüxing* connotes no revolutionary zeal as *qingnian* did, and it is not promoted by the party-state. However, *nüxing* emits strong consumerist zest because femininity is, first of all, in the market economy to be achieved through acquisition of numerous feminine products with cosmetics on the top of the list. Via the new media, advertisements that reflect and contribute to the contemporary discourse of femininity have worked more powerfully than state propaganda in the Mao era in shaping gendered desires and identities. Does *nüxing* signify more freedom and space for young women's social advancement than *qingnian* did? I don't think so. *Nüxing* helped a young generation of women in the post-Mao era to acquire a legitimate sexual identity, whereas the *qingnian* in the Mao era had dismissed sexuality. However, the recognition of female sexuality is double edged. Accompanying contemporary young women's greater degree of sexual freedom, the sexualized female body has been portrayed as inevitably inferior to male bodies. The "innate weaknesses" of *nüxing* have become the rationale for overt gender discrimination in employment and education in the post-Mao era.

More seriously, young women who have been constructed by the discourse of femininity "willingly" choose "feminine" occupations, and those few who dare to cross or challenge gender boundaries appear "unfeminine" and "unattractive" in public opinion.

As a scholar studying gender discourses in twentieth-century China, I find myself frequently reflecting on my own process of acquiring a gender identity when writing about gender before and after the Mao era. It has become increasingly clear to me that the gender-neutral subject position of Maoist *qingnian* has significant implications. My generation lived through a political era preoccupied with creating "socialist new persons." Together with "socialist constructors" and "communist successors" that defined what a "revolutionary youth" ought to be, the state promoted gender-neutral terms marginalized many gendered terms in the public discourse. Liberating women was not the primary goal. Rather, such discursive practices demonstrated the party's attempts to situate citizens in new kinds of social relationships, to pull both women and men out of the web of Confucian kinship obligations and to redirect their ethical duties from their kin to the party and to the nation. Scholars of communist societies may call these statist schemes manipulation or domination. But few have noticed that the enforcement of these schemes disrupted conventional gender norms and created new discursive spaces that allowed a cohort of young women to grow up without being often conscious of their own gender.

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

## NOTES

The author wishes to thank the following friends and colleagues who gave comments on earlier versions of this essay: Bai Di, Paula Birnbaum, Grace Eckert, Gail Hershatter, Emily Honig, Loretta Kalb, Dorothy Ko, Sheila Lichtman, Nikki Mandell, Karen Offen, Abby Stewart, Marilyn Yalom, and Xueping Zhong.

This essay is a chapter in the forthcoming volume *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era*, ed. Xueping Zhong, Wang Zheng, and Bai Di (Rutgers University Press, 2001).

1. In the fall of 1977, the first nationwide college entrance exams took place after an eleven-year interval. Those who passed the first exams did not begin their class until February 1978. We were all brand-new college students at different ages.
2. See Claire Wallace and Sijka Kovatcheva, *Youth in Society: The Construction and Deconstruction of Youth in East and West Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 66.
3. When Deng Xiaoping took power after Mao's death, a nationwide intellectual emancipation movement emerged at the end of the 1970s. Sanctioned by the new Communist Party leadership, intellectuals began to openly critique many practices of the party during the Mao era and to investigate the political and intellectual roots that led to the calamity of the Cultural Revolution.
4. In Shanghai, schools from junior high on stopped teaching curricula in early June 1966. All the teachers and students were supposed to devote their time to the Cultural Revolution.