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# Back Home in China

By Lee Yu-Hwa

Over a quarter of a century  
after she left the old China,  
a native returns to the new one



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United States Neocolonialism: Grave Digger in SE Asia	.35
By Maud Russell	
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Revolution	By Maud Russell

# Back Home in China

By Lee Yu-Hwa

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Lee Yu-hwa is a resident  
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## FAR EAST REPORTER INTRODUCTION

Many Americans are visiting China, glimpsing millions of people in the process of building a new kind of society. They return with slides, films, talks and articles - sharing their observations, insights and excitements with their fellow Americans - contributing to an accumulating hope for mankind, based on the fact that eight hundred million Chinese are creating a people's society.

A most significant sector of the Americans who are visiting China is the American-Chinese. Their observations, reactions and insights provide what the non-Chinese Americans lack: Chinese background, experience and relatives in China. When they go to China they return to their native provinces, their home-towns and villages, to their Chinese families, class-mates and friends. They can compare as non-Chinese Americans for the most part cannot, the China of today with the old China.

Lee Ju-hwa returned to visit China after living in the United States for twenty six years. Her first reactions in China were obviously conditioned by the American kind of society; she was initially "touristy" (to use her phrase), resisting her sister's insistence that she learn something, not just enjoy the sights, from her visit. "Luckily, my relatives did not wish it" to be a tourist visit.

Far East Reporter is privileged to bring to its readers this essay by Lee Ju-hwa. She is a Han Chinese who returned to her formerly privileged landlord family in Yunnan Province and chronicles their reactions to the new, the people's society.

In the beginning days of her visit she found herself with many almost hostile questions, questions that were subsequently answered as relatives shared with her their experiences of adjusting to the new China. "They set me straight," she writes.

In Lee Ju-hwa's telling of her conversations and discussions with her family members one gets authentic insights into what has been happening to formerly privileged landlord families. How did Lee Ju-hwa's brother-in-law who, in his patriotic effort to promote educational activities, "executed many Liu Hsiao-chi-type policies" (to quote him) come to understand where he was wrong? How her cousin's son, working as a "barefoot teacher" helping to bring schooling to isolated families, demonstrated to her the new attitudes toward minority peoples; and how the new society rescued this son from the opium-eating life of the traditional privileged landlord class that would have been his lot under the old Chi.

Lee Ju-hwa visited communes that had never been seen by foreign tourists; what she saw gave proof that what these foreign visitors do see in the arranged visits to less remote communes does present an accurate picture of commune activities and life.

Long conversations with family and commune members reveal how nation-wide ideological movements touch and involve people in such remote areas as villages in southwest Yunnan Province. Members of landlord families and former exploited peasants, now commune members, participate in such current (1975-1976) movements as "Build Ta Chai-type Counties Throughout the Land" and "Revolution in Education" - not perfunctorily, but with an understanding of the class-struggle nature of these movements. The fruits of China's "continuing revolution" was plain in the lively appreciation by commune members of the new dignity they had as citizens of a society that is truly creating "the new human being."

Far East Reporter readers can be grateful to Lee Ju-Hwa for underscoring and confirming the insights and enthusiasms her fellow non-Chinese Americans who visit China are bringing to the American people.

*You can go home again, a native of Kunming discovers. But what you find there be very different from the way things were when you left.*

By Lee Yu-Hwa

WHEN I arrived in Peking in 1973 I found my youngest sister grim and her husband sickly. Through casual remarks I learned that during the Cultural Revolution my brother-in-law was sent to the May Seventh Cadre School, where he spent two years without seeing his wife. As a place for thought-reform of mid-level government workers, the school sounded ominous to my unformed ears. I did not want to harass my brother-in-law with questions.

Relations between my sister and me were strained because her expectations of me were foiled by my apparent lack of change during the 26 years since I had left China. In her eyes I remained frivolous, undisciplined, and temperamental—characteristics she felt were responsible for my failure to have a career, hence, to be a useful person. Her disapproval was made clear to me when I did not want to participate in the program set up by the Travel Service to visit the hospitals, schools, and communes. She asked me why I came back to China if not to learn how China had changed and what had been achieved. And how could I learn if I did not go out to learn? She did not want to listen to my answer: that I could not learn from the wonderful achievements of acupuncture or from the factories that seemed conjured up by a magician overnight, or that I suspected that the programmed visits along the well-oiled track of many previous tours would show me a slice of spruced-up Chinese life. She was so irritated by this nonsense she had had all her life that she threatened to let me "rot" in the hotel. Since meaningful conversation was impossible, I decided to treat my stay in China as a touristy holiday—there could be no better place for this than Peking, with its

magnificent palaces and restaurants. But luckily my relatives did not wish it to be so.

The day my husband went to the Union Hospital to watch surgery performed under acupuncture anesthesia, I went with my relatives to the palace museum. After one of our frequent stops for tea, I sat on a low bench in the Imperial Garden, to smoke a cigarette. My youngest sister's husband and Little Plum, my eldest sister's daughter, squatted in front of me, two corners of a triangle. My brother-in-law took a cigarette from me, and allowed it to burn down, hardly puffing on it.

"You have been back for nearly a month now," he said, smiling pleasantly as though not to alarm me. "How have you found everything?"

"I do not know." I examined him closely. His eyes had the yellowish, rheumy look of one who has done too much reading at night and not had enough sleep. He looked ill, and I wondered why he was not in a hospital bed. The thick mop of hair, now grizzled but still unruly, as it was in his younger days, crowned his head like the wild growth of weeds that grew only on top of grave mounds in my hometown. As he groped for words in an obvious effort to avoid discomforting me, I said flippantly, "I am the blind man who is told to feel the elephant. I touched here and there, I do not know what an elephant is."

He was eager to laugh at the innocuous retort. As the conversation halted, thoughts rushed through my mind. I wanted to learn how he—or anyone in the country—was able to adapt to the colossal, rapid, and continual changes taking place over the last 24 years. How did he survive the famines, the harsh

Cultural Revolution, yet remain in firm support of the government? How was the country able to survive the setbacks accompanying drastic institutional changes, deal with factional strife while pushing ahead in the race to industrialize, and emerge a unified whole? These questions lost their meaning at the moment I looked at him. I saw a sick man, afflicted with vertigo and whatever other diseases he refused to go to a doctor for, who nevertheless drove himself to work hard, walk long distances, and climb high hills through sheer will. If he could master his body, he could master his mind to support what he had faith in.

At the same time, there was another thought going through my mind. I had always known that worldly success had no place in his life. Perhaps it is easy for a Chinese to resist worldly values since the virtue of material denial had long been immortalized in Chinese culture. During the Chinese New Year, one of the popular inscriptions used to decorate door frames had been "Farming and Learning Are the Inheritance of the Family." A humble life distinguished by honest work and learning had been idealized as truly aristocratic. No matter how stultified it might have become as the country weakened, the traditional didacticism still held the people's imagination. With worldly ambition thus written off, one was left with a lofty purpose: to do useful work for a society conceived not on a narrow, national scale, but worldwide.

The traditional didacticism was the cause of my relatives' dissatisfaction with me and also the cause of my own sense of guilt. They felt I should find a way to render service to society. If I failed to work for China, I should work where I was. My sister blamed self-indulgence for my failure. My brother-in-law was more understanding; he recognized that as a Chinese student of English literature I could hardly find work in the United States. Reacting against this pressure, I said to my brother-in-law, "Why did the Cultural

## 'The ordinary man in China is not afraid to express his opinions or to stand up for his rights'

Revolution last so long? Eight years is too long for so paralyzing a movement."

He smiled, sensing what was behind the large, impersonal question. As he deliberated, Little Plum gave a theoretical exposition of the Cultural Revolution, which began in 1965. She asked me not to think of it as a paralyzing movement, although I did find schools and universities closed, and offices and factories involved in dispute. It was a revolutionary movement that made corrections and readjustments in individuals as in government offices. It was also a learning process in which everyone reevaluated his own thoughts and deeds and helped others to do the same. The result was an overall correction of past errors and the setting of new directions.

Little Plum squinted into the sun. Once or twice she got up and tugged at her inner jacket. Thin as a bamboo pole, she was careless about her appearance. The waistline of her slacks, twice as wide as her waist, was clumsily fastened with a belt. I could not help noticing these trivialities while she talked. Even worse, I almost snickered at the recollection of the time I first saw her (when she was only eight or nine months old) during a visit to her home. I remember that my eldest sister would bathe the baby every night, wrap her in a little bundle with a quilted blanket, and place her on my bed next to my pillow. I slept with that doll-like baby, listening to her miraculous breathing. That tiny creature had grown up and taken part in revolutionizing the educational system at Peking Teacher's College. And now she came to set me straight.

"What you just said makes things much clearer to me," I said to Little Plum, in an endeavor to collect my wandering thoughts. "But I asked your uncle, not you, why the Cultural Revolution has gone on for so long. You are young; you are not responsible for it."

"How? In which way do you hold him responsible?" Little Plum said earnestly, unheedful of her uncle's apologetic nodding. According to her, my problem was that I approached the Cultural Revolution from a capitalist viewpoint. I had a static outlook. In any sudden change I saw only the disruptive aspects. My first reaction to the news of the Cultural Revolution back in 1965, she said, must have been that it was required to patch up failures of the 1949 revolution. I laughed and admitted it was true.

"How wrong!" Her eyes brightened and she rattled on in her crisp Peking dialect. "You think of a revolution in terms of a new phase which either works or does not work. We think in terms of a continuous revolution. The big revolution in 1949 is to be followed by a series of little revolutions. The big revolution set the direction for our country, but it did not map out the whole process of construction for a socialist China. Within the framework, adjustments have to be made. The Cultural Revolution is one of such adjustments.

"As for the violence, you must have heard exaggerated reports. Tempers flare when opinions go to extremes. You yourself noticed how people have changed. The ordinary man is not afraid to express his opinions or to stand up for his rights. [She was referring to street scenes where I saw men arguing with police and park guards when they felt they had not been treated fairly.] You can imagine what tempers were like during the Cultural Revolution when serious issues were involved."

Little Plum, reminding me of the American students' antiwar protests and of the black movements, said, "There you had violence, too. Your type of violence achieved nothing more than to

indicate discontent. In the Cultural Revolution, violence was never a means of protest, but just a chance outcome when the involved parties were stubborn and refused to listen to each other. The Cultural Revolution is constructive. This side people often overlook."

She then criticized me for my refusal to visit communes and factories—the very reason for my youngest sister's anger. If I went, she said, I would find an actual increase in productivity because of the Cultural Revolution. In the colleges, education was finally being renovated to suit the needs of the times.

"For instance, in my department," she said, "we no longer feel that studying literature requires burrowing into the old texts. China is abandoning its Confucian past, we need to create a new literature for our new society. During the Cultural Revolution the students sat down with the professors and worked out a new curriculum. The result is that a few students are selected to study the old texts. The rest only study the old literature in a course on the history of Chinese literature. The main job of the department is to prepare writers who can speak for their age. Creative writing is a required course for several years."

When I went to school in China, students also felt that the educational system was not geared to the country's needs, but we knew there was no way to effect a change. Young people like Little Plum who grow up with the belief that a healthy society is one with the capacity for change can make changes. There is nothing, from personal habits to institutional organizations, that cannot be altered. Now when the students considered that the colleges did not provide the kind of learning their society needed, the colleges were changed.

Our conversation ended when my daughter and grandniece became weary of the palace garden. On our way out, strolling with his hands clasped behind him, my brother-in-law casually said, "I had no idea what it was all about when the Cultural Revolution first started. When I read Yao Wen-yuan's

critique of Wu Han's play, *Hai Jui Dismissed from Office*, I thought it an academic discussion."

More than being informative, my brother-in-law was seeking to address himself to the hostility that lay behind my earlier question about the prolonged Cultural Revolution. What I had said to him amounted to, "Well, I did nothing with my life. What have you and your wife done? You allowed the Cultural Revolution to take place and drag on."

Wu Han wrote a historical play, my brother-in-law continued, to defend the Defense Minister P'eng Teh-huai, who was dismissed in 1959 because he was a follower of Liu Shao-ch'i. Liu opposed the Yen-an revolutionary spirit, a reliance on the masses. Instead, copying the Soviet Union, he stressed technical expertise in order to achieve fast industrialization. This meant that an elite class would emerge to rule. Yao Wen-yuan, a member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee and Chairman Mao's faithful disciple, wrote the critique attacking the Liu clique.

"I had no idea," he said, "that two opposite policies had come to the final stage of confrontation. I executed many such Liu Shao-ch'i-type policies without realizing that I was betraying the revolution or doing harm to the country."

"What kind?" I asked eagerly.

"It is difficult to explain to you; you have been away all this time." He thought for a while and said, "For instance, another man and I started a middle school. Our idea was to make a model school. We invited the best teachers in Peking to participate in the program. The result was that we did have a very fine school. In this school of ours, English, French, Russian, and Japanese were taught from the seventh grade on."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Our experiment was to find a model school for China and we came up with an aristocratic institution."

What China needed, he said, was education for every child. The child born in the hills must not be sacrificed

## Revolution should not be merely a transition of political power from the incompetent to the capable

in order to maintain high-level education for the city child. His efforts would have turned the clock back on education, with good schools for the few while ignoring 80 per cent of the population.

"Revolution is meant," I said, "to provide opportunity for improvements. Right after 1949, anyone would interpret 'improvement' in a qualitative sense."

"That is wrong. That is why we have to be reeducated. We grew up in the old society, we could not help interpreting things according to our former way of thinking. And if we were permitted to continue in our mistakes, we would bring back the old society. To set up a model school, to start the training of specialists at an early age—in this line of thinking I saw only the glory the expert could create for China. I did not see that specialists meant a small group of people in charge of things, elite rule, the same as throughout our history."

Revolution should not be merely a transition of political power, my brother-in-law believed, from the incompetent, the corrupt to the capable and the good. The Chinese were more susceptible to this way of thinking because our dynastic history made us feel that the Confucian system always remained though the emperors came and went. A man's approval of the change was the transfer of his loyalty from the discredited ruler to the newcomer. But China was now undergoing an unprecedented and fundamental change. Establishment of the new government in 1949 was an assurance that the changes would be put into practice. In no sense did it imply that

the changes were fully realized, as his own mistakes proved. Unintentionally and even unawares, he allowed his old capitalistic thinking to emerge, and it led him in the wrong direction.

"It is easy for anyone to accept a political doctrine," he said, "but hard for him to live and work according to it. The old habits and ideas are hard to get rid of. Furthermore, one's own capitalistic tendency is nurtured by a similar thinking in others; one goes the wrong way without realizing it. Liu Shao-ch'i had many involuntary followers. That is why we say the class struggle must continue."

I wondered whether what he had just said was the reason for his apparent lack of rancor against whatever harsh treatment he might have received in the May Seventh Cadre School. I dared not probe further because of my own cowardice. I could not bear to hear the details from this sick man even though I realized I should have asked him. I have a weakness for exaggerating the worst possibilities; my own imagination often creates a greater horror than reality.

"To put things at another level," he continued, "the choice between training experts and educating the public is not merely a moral issue. It is of serious practical concern. The progress made in China cannot be brought about by experts alone. It is the work of the masses. The workers and the farmers are the builders of factories, roads, and dams. A child taught in a distant commune is a valuable worker whose contribution to society need not be less than that of a trained person.

"My mistake was that I overlooked many seemingly simple truths," he concluded with fresh remorse. "For instance, if I had asked myself the question, 'For whom?' in whatever I undertook, I would not have taken the wrong class stand. Or if I remembered those words," he pointed at the red characters on a girl's shoulder bag, "'To serve the people,' I would not have committed many mistakes." Then he smiled and added, "You are not used to our jargon, are

you? After all, you are a savorer of words. It is easy for you to get bored with reiteration of plain truths. But these truths are the road signs guiding us to socialism. They are especially important for those of us who were educated in the old society, since our knowledge of these truths is skin-deep. I made my mistakes because I was blocked by what I learned in the old society and failed to penetrate deep into the new ideas. If you try to see China according to your preconceived views and your old habits of looking at things, you will go away with a distorted impression."

He and my sister had talked about how to make me understand what had taken place in China before I arrived. Their worry was that I would examine China with a classroom cleverness; I would push aside the basic principles because of their seeming simpleness and dismiss the fundamental concepts as overworked slogans. To remedy this, they had thought of persuading me to see as much of China as I could and get a feeling for what had been done and how it was done. They did not, since I protested to my sister, try to educate me with production figures.

He made me ashamed of my impetuous nature. Perhaps I should have let myself be guided by the Travel Service to visit schools, hospitals, factories, and communes. But deep in my heart was a stubborn insistence that the brief talk with him and Little Plum had given me much insight. I told him so and he promised to talk to me more when I returned to Peking.

I better appreciated the significance of my brother-in-law's self-criticism after a visit to my cousin in Yu-hsi County, near Kunming, in the southwest province of Yunnan. Her son is a lively storyteller, and equally accomplished, as his father was, on the *er-hu*, a two-string violin. During the elaborate dinner his mother had prepared, he told us that after Liberation in 1949 he took a course in teacher's training, and volunteered to work in the isolated areas of Yuan-chiang County.

In Yunnan Province, in addition to the Hans, the Chinese majority originally from the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers area, there are some 20-odd distinct ethnic, racial, and tribal groups. Few of these minority groups are found east of Yuan-chiang County. Throughout history Chinese political power hardly penetrated the tribal territory. During the Republic, casual efforts had been made to bring the minority races into the fold of Han civilization. This was done by educating the sons of the tribal chieftains. These aristocratic young men were pampered in various colleges. They returned home with a gloss of modern education: some ability in Chinese, less English or French, but thoroughly enthusiastic about modern luxuries—cameras, phonographs, and other gadgets. Their people remained ignorant of the affairs of the outside world; they knew only how to obey the whims of their chieftains.

My cousin's son, working as a "bare-foot teacher," had helped bring schooling to the isolated families, both Han and tribal, in Yuan-chiang County. These scattered families, often two or three at any one place, were too few for a classroom. The government organized a number of itinerant teachers, each to travel a given route. My cousin's son taught children as well as adults. His teaching included Chinese, elementary arithmetic, hygiene, political doctrine—in short, all that the people needed to know within the framework of their lives. He spent a few days with each few families, leaving a certain amount of homework for them to prepare for his next visit, and went on to another group along a fixed route.

It was arduous work. The teacher had to be healthy and strong enough to walk the long distances and climb the mountains, with books and his own personal belongings on his back. He also had to know how to take care of himself walking alone through the wilderness, for in those days the counties were still infested with wolves and other predatory animals.

On our way from our cousin's to the hostel, I conceded to my youngest sister, who had obtained leave from her office in Peking to make the trip with us, that she was right to insist that I see as much of the country as possible. If I had not seen with my own eyes, I would not have believed the miraculous transformation of Yu-hsi County. I had loved Yu-hsi and was always the one to beg my parents to spend summers there. The lush green plain girdled by the mountains was a garden of nature and the people gentle and friendly. But Yu-hsi had also been mired in the residue of stultified medieval thinking and degeneration. The two towns in the county, the Northern Town and the Circular Town, where the landlords resided, were large camps of opium dens which the farmers in the countryside had to work hard and live in poverty to support. My cousin was illiterate and foot-bound although she was born in a family that could have afforded her education. Her husband, brother, and sister-in-law all died young from smoking opium. I remembered my father's advice for young relatives was invariably to leave "home" for a better life elsewhere. Neither my father nor I could ever imagine changes possible in Yu-hsi.

Earlier when I was listening to my cousin's son talking, I could not help thinking what his chances might have been in the old society—most likely, like his own father and uncle, he would have started smoking opium at the age of 14 or 15 and never left the opium bed until he was carried out in a coffin when he reached early middle age. If for nothing else but this, his being saved from the dreadful life he was born to, I was grateful.

I had much admiration for my young relative. He was indeed the true hero of the new China, one who had met the need of the country. He was justly awarded the coveted honor in China, membership in the Communist party. It was people like him who made certain that no child born in the remotest village

or factory yard was denied the opportunity of schooling; in a single generation illiteracy was wiped out. The result was that the educated masses provided a human resource that cannot be matched by all the efforts financed by the world's wealthiest treasuries.

When we visited the Red Flag Dam, my husband asked the commune leader, Comrade Yin, how much money the dam cost. Comrade Yin looked puzzled for a second and then said, "It needs no money. We got the stone from the mountains, we made our own cement, and we built the dam."

### Hsiang-hua Brigade

*Lee Yu-Hwa A native of Kunming gets to visit a commune near her hometown that no foreign visitors to China had ever seen, and' where the citizens had not been exposed to outsiders.*

**M**Y VISIT to Hsiang-hua Brigade had been postponed several times because heavy rains had made the narrow paths between the fields too muddy to walk on. I suggested to Comrade Ou-yang, the guide assigned to me by the China Travel Service, that we borrow straw sandals and wood clogs from the farmers. He smiled and said, "They don't use those things any more."

The replacement of the traditional village wood clogs with sneakers and rain shoes, formerly middle-class commodities, indicated the degree to which the living standards had been raised in the rural areas. But that this should have taken place in a short 25 years, and in Ch'i-chia village, was quite astonishing. Ch'i-chia, literally "the seventh village," part of Hsiang-hua Brigade, had been one of the poorest villages near Kunming. It is one of nine situated along the P'an-lung River, which flows between the city and Kunming Lake. Situated too far down the river and too far from the lake, Ch'i-chia used to have a serious water problem. The villagers fought with the upstream farmers for water during the sowing season, and sometimes the belligerents were killed.

## 'If you try to see China according to your preconceived views, you will go away with a false impression'

The villagers had to supplement their income from farming by working as coolies and fruit peddlers in the city. Whenever there was either a flood or drought, they were the first to tie a straw knot on their children's hair and bring them to the city for sale.

The disappearance of the wood clogs also suggested that the farmers had themselves become consumers. They no longer lived only off the land, depending completely on themselves to produce what they needed. Industrialization, betokened by small factories all over the countryside, has become an integral part of the farmer's life.

The rain stopped for 24 hours. It was dry enough for the car, though we had to forego inspecting the fields. With a threatening heavy cloud overhead, we set out for Hsiang-hua Brigade. When we drove into the southern suburb of the town, I found, much to my dismay, that it had changed (like Rip Van Winkle, every wanderer expects his hometown to remain the same). There was an impressive new railroad station, from which the train goes to Peking, Canton, and Chengtu, the large cities that link Kunming to the whole nation. The road to Ch'i-chia was wide enough for our car to drive there directly. There used to be two ways to get there: by boating down the P'an-lung River and then walking on the narrow footpaths in the fields to the village, or via the ox-cart road on foot, sometimes soliciting a free ride on a bumpy cart. A smooth, paved road could only mean the village had developed a prosperous business that required trucking. What could Ch'i-chia send to the city, I wondered, and what could they afford to buy from the city?

Our car stopped in a fair-sized clearing among the huts. A score of men and women awaited us. The men wore the two-piece suits in various shades of blue, cotton caps, and sneakers. The women wore the traditional clothes, overblouses buttoned on the right and loose slacks, and silver earrings. As it was a chilly day, they also wore sleeveless jackets and blue kerchiefs over their heads. The men bowed and ushered us with extended arms into a hut which was open and not divided into the usual combination of bedroom and activity room. In the middle of the room two low square tables had been moved together, with straw hassocks around them. We were seated on these hassocks while the old men and young women sat on the high benches placed along the wall. A shy young girl hid herself behind the back of an old woman. An old man sat puffing leisurely on his thin, three-foot-long bamboo pipe while his grandson, lodged between his legs, played with the pipe. If it were not for the kibitzers, this could well have been a meeting with the former village officials.

Comrade Ou-yang introduced me to Wang Fang, the leader of the Brigade. He was a mild-looking man in his middle forties. Without the obsequious preamble that one had formerly expected from a village head when he had to deal with city folks, Wang Fang started to talk about his Brigade. It consisted of three natural villages, that is, there was no shifting about of the villagers in forming the communes. The Brigade comprised 3,096 persons on 507 acres. As Wang Fang continued with the Brigade inventory, checking his notebook from time to time for the correct figures, he impressed me as a well-disciplined public servant. Unlike the former village heads whose knowledge of taxation and conscription was what earned them the lucrative job and whose ignorance of the welfare of the village was legendary, Wang Fang knew how many pigs, cows, and water buffaloes there were in his Brigade—even how many bicycles and wrist watches. His ingenuousness in telling us that his Brigade owned 210 bicycles and 300

watches made us all laugh (Comrade Ou-yang later explained that figures on personal belongings were not usually given in a report). But I understood Wang Fang's pride in Ch'i-chia's having emerged from its centuries-old poverty to a level of urban prosperity.

Among the new wealth was a truck, which explained the existence of a good road. The truck took vegetables, straw hats, and flour to the city for sale. The handmade straw-hat industry and the mill absorbed the labor force not needed in farming and earned additional cash for the Brigade.

"We make a lot of money from growing vegetables," Wang Kun, Wang Fang's brother, broke in, "now that we have water. Before Liberation, we didn't even have water to drink. We had to go three *li* to get drinking water." (Each *li* is about six-tenths of a mile.)

"We'd harvest one or two hundred catties [one catty is about one-and-one-third pounds] for each *mu*," Wang Kun said with disgust. (A *mu* is about one-sixth of an acre.) "The rent was three hundred catties per *mu*. The landlord took all—we still owed them rent. It's just unbelievable how we suffered! Unbelievable that nobody did anything about it!" "What could have been done?" Wang Fang said.

(The brothers were different. Wang Fang, the elder one, spoke slowly and seemed to be the kind of man who took his time forming an opinion. In his early forties, and with quick flashes in his eyes, Wang Kun looked as though he had a temper.)

"Ah," the old man sighed again. "No use to blame anyone for the things that weren't done right. In those days who could know? If someone told me then that I could have seven hundred catties of grain a year, that I could wear unpatched clothing and have a warm quilt in winter, I'd say he was dreaming—dreaming that the sun rises in the west."

"When I was 14 years old," Wang Fang said, "our village fought with the next

## Accompanied by her sister and a state-assigned guide, the author explores more of the new China

village for water, and I got a broken arm."

"A broken arm was nothing," the old man said to Wang Kun. "You were too young to know how things were! We were just poor tenant farmers; there was nothing we could do about water. When we asked the next village not to dam up the water, there was a fight. You killed me, I killed you, and still no water. Chairman Mao is Heavenly Lord with open eyes. He alone can bring water to everyone."

Wang Kun got off his hassock, picked up a thick water pipe, and squatted next to the wall to smoke. He held to his protest: why hadn't somebody in his village started a revolution earlier, why had they endured the miseries?

"We've dug canals and piped water through the fields," Wang Fang resumed. "We're protected now against both drought and flood. The yield ranges from a little more than four hundred catties per *mu* to over a thousand catties. Before Liberation, each person got an average of two hundred-some catties of grain each year, now everyone gets over seven hundred."

Wang Fang wound up his talk with a report on education. There used to be only nine villagers, from well-to-do families, who went to high school. The rest of the villagers had never had any schooling. Now there were three elementary schools in the Brigade and 610 students attending them. Each child learned at least to read and write. The better students were sent to the city high schools, and these numbered about 20.

The old man mumbled, "In the old days, the rich sent their sons to school, the poor sent their sons to grow pigs." He

was rubbing his grandson's hair, no doubt entertaining a sweet dream of his being educated. In a Chinese heart, education is next only to food and clothing.

We were invited to lunch. The teacups and cigarettes on the tables were whisked away. Young women brought in bowls of food and set them in two groups on the joined square tables. There was chicken, preserved pork and fish, eggs and several kinds of vegetables, and home-brewed *kao-liang* whiskey. My sister and I liked particularly a dish of preserved eggplant, a specialty of our province that we had not eaten for many years (my sister left Kunming in 1945 and has worked in Peking ever since). We told them how good the eggplant was. They were pleased and urged us to try their preserved pork and fish.

"There's no trick to making a good preserved eggplant," a middle-aged woman said, "when you can have eggplants, salt, and pepper."

I thought she was going to give us the recipe. But when her sentence ended in dead silence, I realized she had delivered a moral. Just as I was about to laugh at the comic situation, the woman said, "Cooking's no trouble when you can just open up the rice chest and dish out what rice you want." The whole table froze at her unusually bitter tone.

"Later, wait till later," Wang Fang said to her. And he introduced her as Kung Lan-ying, the woman who had made the eggplant.

I had noticed her earlier. She was thin and had a flattened forehead and cheeks, with a sudden upsweep to the tip of her nose and chin. Her eyes had a reddish, over-wept look. When the conversation touched past miseries, I caught her turning away, dabbing her eyes.

Wang Fang had a certain innate graciousness. He changed the subject by telling me that he was from a poor, tenant-farmer family. I had thought he was one of the nine students who went to high school in pre-Liberation days, but he learned reading and writing only after Liberation when he was 23 years old.

"We had a *mu* of land," he said. "We rented three *mu* from the landlord Loo. That still did not give us enough food. My parents worked as day laborers to build the airport for the American army. My father sold fruit in the city. He left home at dawn, walked twenty-some *li* to the orchard to buy fruit and then carried it to the city to sell. He did not get home till sunset. On a good day he earned six cattles of rice, barely enough for a day for our family of five."

He and his brother herded buffalo for the landlord when they were seven or eight. When he was 16, the village head came to take him to the army. He ran away and hid in a relative's home in another village.

"Chiang Kai-shek's army was a hell-hole," Wang Kun said. "Few men came back alive. The soldiers were not killed on the battleground, fighting the Japanese. They were starved to death, beaten to death, or got sick and died."

However, the Wang brothers did not for long escape the army. The village head arrested their mother and beat her. Wang Fang had to return so his mother could be released. In 1945, when the Japanese surrendered, he was sent to Indo-China. Then his army unit came back and was stationed in Mòntse County. He had never been home once during the six years.

"He was married with a rooster," Wang Kun said.

"How?" I asked.

"The army wouldn't give me leave to get married. My fiancée's family wanted to marry off their daughter. So my parents sent a rooster in the flower sedan to take my wife home."

"Yes," the old man was laughing and nodding. "His wife was carried to our village in the flower sedan with a rooster in her lap."

Judging by the laughter in the room, the marriage must have become a village joke that would be passed down to Wang Fang's great-grandchildren.

Wang Kun was taken into the army a year later. He seemed to be better at looking after himself. He became a messenger boy for the officers. After a

couple of years, he persuaded an officer to let him go home to look after his parents. On his way he stopped to see his brother.

"I begged and begged the sergeant before he let me see my brother," Wang Kun said. "The soldiers were kept like prisoners. At night, the sergeant slept by the entrance of the staircase; no one could get out without waking him up. And my brother looked so skinny that his teeth showed."

Everyone followed Wang Kun's eyes to look at his brother who, with a cigarette between his fore-and-middle fingers, was sipping the fierce *kao-liang* whiskey. Studying his brother's healthy, suntanned face, Wang Kun said, "I cried when I took a look at him. And he cried. He could not stop crying. He said he would never be able to see me again. When he followed me to the train station, he wanted to come home with me. He said he was going to die anyway—whether he ran away, got caught and shot, or just slowly starved to death." Turning to the young people who had had lunch and were sitting on the high benches, he said, "None of you know or understand the hardship and the trouble we had." Pointing to a girl, he said to me, "That's my daughter. She doesn't understand the meaning of hunger. White rice to eat, soft cotton to wear, and that's not enough for her. She chooses and picks!"

The girl did not look like a poor farmer's daughter. She was taller and bigger than her father, as a result of good nutrition. Her hair was done in short braids, and she wore Western-style clothing, a pretty printed blouse over blue slacks—I had noticed that the Yunnanese farm girls dressed much prettier, in colorful greens and pinks, than the city women. She also wore a big watch on her wrist, and she was smiling silyly. Every inch a pampered girl!

After lunch, it started to rain, heavy and steady. A damp chill arose from the packed-earth floor. I held the hot tea between my hands to warm up. The old man was telling me that the lunch we had just had could be served at a moment's notice by any villager.

"Every family has chickens," he said. "How long does it take to kill a chicken? When the water's boiling, slit the throat, and feather it. Before you know it, the chicken's on the table. Preserved pork and fish are in every kitchen. At the end of the year, every family kills a pig or two for the New Year. We eat some fresh and preserve some for the whole year round. From the pig, we get enough lard to cook our vegetables. In my whole life, up to Liberation, I never tasted a whole piece of pork."

"And clothing! I never knew the warmth of a quilted jacket. In winter, we put on all the clothing we had, layer after layer to keep warm. Now in summer, we have thin cottons and in winter, quilts or sweaters. The young kids like sweaters. They don't know that in the old days only the landlords wore sweaters. And for bedcovering, we have sheets and blankets."

"I slept with a *so-yi* [a rain cape made of palm leaves] for cover," said Kung Lan-ying, who had sat down in the hassock next to mine that seemed reserved for her. "But that's not what I complain of. My mother lived that way and, before her, my grandmother. I didn't want anything better. But there're things in life that make a person bitter. . . ." Choked with sobs, she dabbed her eyes with the half apron she wore.

"You're from this area, you'll understand what I'm going to tell you," she said to me when she had brought herself under control.

Her parents were stupid; her mother, a bondmaid, never learned to use money. In fact her mistress chased her out of the house because of her stupidity. Her father was a cargo coolie with severe eye trouble. The parents had several children, all of whom, except for her and her younger brother, died in infancy. When Kung Lan-ying was six years old, her father died. Her grandmother, a blind old woman, accidentally burned down their hut in the same year, and they had to put up a tent with straw mats.

She was sold to a nunnery. In the daytime she helped with the housework and was taught proper etiquette. Whenever the

nun called her, she had to place her palms together and answer, "My guru, here I am!" At night she learned to recite the Buddhist scriptures—often a transliteration of Sanskrit, which makes no sense in Chinese. After repeating a phrase twice after the nun and failing to memorize it, she had been severely punished. Her ear had been torn; she showed us her earlobe hanging loose from her cheek. Once, after being struck with a drum stick, a religious implement, she ran to her aunt's house. When her aunt brought her back to the nunnery, she was punished by being forced to kneel on the ground with a basin of water on her head to keep her motionless. She moved and the water spilled. The nun was angry, pushed her to the ground, and, sitting astride her, stuck her feet repeatedly with a hat pin. Afterwards she could not walk and had to crawl about on hands and knees.

"I was seven years old," she cried, "only seven years old!"

As she went on sobbing, I turned around to look at my daughter, who was seven. She was sitting in my niece's lap, learning an intricate game of cat's cradle. She was peeping at the woman from the corners of her eyes. When she caught my eyes, she smiled. The tears were just as incomprehensible to her as the foreign sound of Chinese.

Kung Lan-ying was retrieved from the nun's torment when the monks in her village collected enough donations to redeem her. The price was two rolls of homespun cloth.

She stayed home for two years and there was just not enough food to feed the family. She was hired out to herd the cows and to take care of a rich farmer's baby. One day when she had a fever and was asked to carry water to the kitchen, she fainted and broke the pail. The farmer's wife beat her with iron tongs. The next day she was still feverish and was sent home. Her grandmother got a boy's urine to feed her as medicine to cure her fever.

In the depth of winter, they ran short of food. The whole family went begging. They were too ashamed to beg in their own village, so they went to the city and to the other villages.



"Ashamed!" She bit on her lower lip to hold back her anger. "We weren't lazy, we didn't refuse work. It wasn't our fault that we were poor. But we were very ashamed." She was staring blankly ahead as though she was still confounded by the crooked moral standards.

She ran away again. She wandered in the villages outside the southern gate of Kunming. An old beggar fed her and she joined him, begging in daytime and sleeping under a pagoda at night. Then he sold her for money. He said, "I can't afford to feed you. Here's a way for you to save your little dog's life." The new Master was a 60-year-old landlord with bad eyesight. He was also a money lender and opium dealer.

When she was 14 years old, she stayed alone with the old Master in the city, acting as his guide dog while he carried on his opium business. She became his mistress. When they returned to the house in the country, she was six or seven months pregnant. The old man's wife took her to the inner court and screamed at her, "Ours is a decent, respectable family! Look at what shame you've brought on us." She knew the old woman's intentions and ran back to her own family.

When I had the baby, I had no money to get a midwife. No one would come anyhow because a bastard brings bad luck. I rolled on the ground for three days before the boy was born. He lived for 40 days before he died."

She wept, shading her eyes with a hand. From time to time, she dried her eyes with the half apron. When I put my hand on her knee, she sobbed, "When I heard you were coming, I just wanted you to know. I wasn't as good as a dog." I patted her knee. In my heart I thanked her for sharing her sorrow with me. The scene in the room was reminiscent of the return to her mother's house of a wife who had been mistreated by her mother-in-law; with her relatives around her, she would cry out her tale of woe. No one could help her in her misfortune, but she was soothed by the sympathy and understanding.

"The year after the baby was born, we were liberated," she said. "Then it was explained to me that nothing that happened to me was my fault. I was not ashamed any more. Then I was married. We now have five children. My grandmother died, but my mother lives with us. Last year, the Brigade gave us land and we built a new house with a tiled roof." A tiled roof used to be found only on a landlord's house, while the farmers lived in thatched huts.

Before we left, Kung Lan-ying took my hand in hers and said, "I say a prayer for Chairman Mao every day to bless him for a long life. I don't care that everyone will criticize me for being superstitious."

Before I came to visit the Hsiang-hua Brigade, I was not prepared to meet Kung Lan-ying. No one else in the car was, either. Comrade Ou-yang heard her story for the first time. He said he had trouble understanding her dialect since he was from Canton and came to work in the backwoods Yunnan Province as a volunteer 10 years prior to our visit.

Riding through the thick, black rain back to the city, I held my daughter close to me, feeling the warmth of her little body and smelling her fragrant hair.

## Black Dragon Brigade

*Lee Yu-Hwa encounters in her native land an extraordinary communal leader, Comrade Chou Ping-fa.*

IN 1939 and 1940, the Japanese bombed Kunming and my high school was moved to a little town on the other side of Kunming Lake where there was a large temple that could house the seven or eight hundred students in our school. In the town, there were also many rich farmers who had big houses which were converted into classrooms. The most convenient route to school was by train to Ch'eng-kung County and then either on foot or horseback to the town. The whole journey took about four or five hours. It was a very pleasant trip, as Ch'eng-kung County was the fruit-producing area. In spring the fields and hills were covered with flowers and in the fall the farmers would let the students eat their fruit free in the orchard, provided none was carried away in bundles.

I liked the part of the journey made on foot or horseback. There was always an excuse for prolonging the trip: to stop in a village teashop for a cup of tea; to buy some sesame candy in a grocery store; to watch young girls draw water and to hear them chat by a well; or just to wander off the road and sit on the narrow path in the field, inhaling the fresh smell of growing vegetation and listening to the water gurgling in the stream. As a result, I came to know the villages along the road pretty well.

When Comrade Ou-yang, the guide assigned to me by the China Travel Service, suggested that we go visit the Black Dragon Brigade, I was quite pleased. He was not intent on showing off a happy country life, I thought to myself. The Black Dragon Brigade lay along the road between the train station and my school and I knew how poor that area had been. Little did I suspect that I was to see what could be done to poor villages.

We were lucky to have found a sunny day for the trip. After driving for about an hour, we reached the Black Dragon

## During her visit to China the author returns to the area surrounding her old high school

Brigade at 10 o'clock. In the town, we found only pre-school children and old people. On the main street, the teashop and the small stores that sold candy, cigarettes, and tobacco had disappeared. Such things were now sold in a large store.

This change in the business world reflected changes in the life of the town. The teashop had been the hangout for idlers, sons of small landlords and riffraff who somehow managed to get by without honest work. If there was anything bad happening in town or in the neighboring villages, one could be sure it was the work of these teashop habitués.

When our school first moved to the nearby town, we treated the whole area as a haven where we could roam safely. One Saturday, a group of younger students went to a market to propagandize against the Japanese. When they did not all return by evening, the student council, of which I was a member, became worried and went to wait for the stragglers outside the town. They finally appeared in the dusk, two or three running ahead towards us while a few more dragged behind and walked huddled together, all screaming and crying. They had been robbed, and one of the girls had been stabbed in the thigh. After that we realized that the countryside was not inhabited only by kind farmers who let us eat their fruit and only shouted at us if we picked too

many of their tender horsebeans. The village teashop was not a wholesome place of recreation for the deserving farmers. Their enjoyment lay in smoking a pipe of tobacco with a neighbor.

Among the children who were waiting for us in front of the Brigade office were three young girls. They were giggling and peeping at us from behind each other's shoulders. Apparently on their way to work, they carried hoes. They wore pink and green printed cotton blouses. In the past, when a girl put on such a blouse, everyone would know immediately that she was just newly married and on her way to pay her respects to a relative or that she was taking part in some equally important social occasion. She would not have worn the pretty, once-in-a-lifetime blouse to work in the field.

Comrade Chou Ping-fa, the leader of the Black Dragon Brigade, was in his middle forties and had dark, high cheekbones and quick, intelligent eyes. His quick thinking was revealed in his fast speech. When he talked, one had to listen carefully for the ideas that seemed to come out on each other's heels. He was the only one who wore worn-out clothes. His shirt was a washed-out blue and his black, sleeveless, quilted-cotton jacket was gray along the collar. Later he told us that he was an eater not a dresser. Though his wife had made several new garments for him, he let them lie in the drawer. He preferred his comfortable old clothes.

If it was a privilege for me to visit the Brigade and to take up his time, Comrade Chou was equally anxious to meet us, perhaps to see the result of his work through our eyes. He took us to the Brigade office, which had been the house of the former landlord, Yang. It had an entrance courtyard and a main court. The east wing of the main court had become a clinic. There were two patients there, suffering from the colds common during the rainy season.

I no longer looked at such humble clinics and wondered what good they could do. The man in charge might not have had more than a rudimentary training to recognize cold and fever and to

dispense aspirin and Chinese herb medicine, or to bandage wounds. But for people who had never had medical attention, these simple treatments relieved much suffering and prevented the ailments from becoming worse. The teaching of hygiene eliminated many diseases, especially those to which the children easily succumbed, those from drinking contaminated water, and skin diseases. These communal clinics raised the health standards nationwide. If there had to be a choice between founding a few excellent hospitals in the cities or establishing communal clinics, the latter was to be preferred.

Comrade Chou did not learn to read and write as the leaders of the other communes I had met had managed to do. However, this shortcoming was offset by a phenomenal memory. He spoke without a notebook; all the facts and numbers were firmly registered in his mind. When he attended a political meeting—he was chosen to go to Peking as an outstanding communal leader—he would sit and listen and, with the aid of packs of cigarettes, memorize what had been discussed. Unlike many of his colleagues who could not write as fast as the speakers spoke, he never came back with a confused message. In fact, others would have to check their notes with him for accuracy.

He was efficient, too: he was the only responsible person to receive us, in contrast to the other communes where we were introduced to three or four leaders. Here the communal leaders must have been at work; our visit made the least disturbance in his Brigade. Despite his dispensing with formality, he was a gracious host. He had invited several old people to talk to me about their lives in the old society. There were also several young women who waited on us with a disciplined efficiency that reminded one of a well-run, wealthy household from the past. Tea and cigarettes were offered to the guests and the elders in a respectful manner. Cold tea was unobtrusively replaced.

There were 2,064 persons in the Brigade. The work force was divided

into eight field groups and six miscellaneous groups. The field groups were responsible for food production. The miscellaneous groups, each with 40 to 60 persons, operated a brick kiln, a fishery, a forestry service, a zinc refinery, an agricultural research unit, and a vegetable farm. The kiln produced more bricks than the Brigade needed and was a good source of income. The fishery, too, brought good money each year from the catches sold in the city. June was not a fishing month. Unlike the past, no one along the lake shore would violate the conservation regulations for private gain. The fishing group spent the idle months mending their nets and boats. Tree-planting came under the nationwide program of "greening the ancestral land." Not counting fruit trees, which came under a separate department in the Brigade, 8,000 palm trees and eucalyptus trees had been planted. The oil from the eucalyptus trees was another source of income. Inspired by the idea of dispersing light industry among the communes, the Brigade worked on zinc.

The most interesting of these groups were the agricultural research unit and the vegetable farm. There were 40 farmers in the research group who worked all year round on improving the crops. These people were not college-trained. They attended lectures or got help from the agricultural department in the college, but they relied chiefly on their own experience to find the new varieties of seeds suitable to their own land. As the chemical content of the soil changes, new varieties can increase the yield. Comrade Chou might not have been able to read or write, but he was a firm believer in scientific farming.

His ingenuity also showed up in the organizing of the vegetable group. When the government allowed each family a small plot of land to grow whatever vegetables they wished for their own private use, Comrade Chou did not like the idea. In his Brigade, there were several old single persons unable to work the private plots they received, and thus they would have been deprived of additional benefits. Comrade Chou held a

## The pig-farm woman's complaint about walking to lunch was evidence of her improved standard of living

meeting in his Brigade to discuss this problem. He got unanimous support to put the private plots under communal management. Fifty-two men were assigned to this job. The crops were divided evenly among all, regardless of their ability to share in the work. The infirm and the aged, as well as the families with too many children, were looked after in this way.

Comrade Chou was not a romantic idealist. He was all for looking after the disadvantaged people in his commune, but he made sure that they also contributed in whatever way they could. The old people were sent to watch the fruit trees and the pigs. No children were allowed to roughhouse in the orchard and everything had to go smoothly on the pig farm. But it was not easy to make use of old people. Their little problems also had to be taken care of. A few days earlier, the woman working in the new pig house complained that her job created a hardship for her, which turned out to be the long, strenuous walk back to the village for lunch. Comrade Chou arranged to have a charcoal stove set up in the pig house so that she could cook her hot lunch there and save herself a trip.

At this point, all those who remembered the poor farmer's lot in the past smiled. Who had ever heard of a farmer complaining of such an inconvenience? In the past she would have been glad that there was food at home to eat, she would not have thought a walk home for lunch strenuous. And if she had had no time to come home, she would have wrapped up some food to take with her and eaten it cold. The pig-farm woman's complaint was evidence of her improved standard of living.

Comrade Chou's handling of the private plots showed an experimental spirit and a degree of flexibility within the communal organization. The government regulations were not rigidly followed. Each commune could adapt the regulations to suit its own particular needs. People of the Black Dragon Brigade tried what they believed to be right, and if the idea did not work, they would again attempt to correct their mistakes. Even if all else failed, they could easily have gone back again to the private plots. But their idea worked! Not only did everyone have his share of vegetables, the crop was good and more than sufficient. Cabbages were left over to feed to the pigs.

The major effort of the Brigade was devoted to the production of food. The next most important job was improvement of the land. Water was first on the list.

This problem was easier for the Black Dragon Brigade to solve than it had been in other places. Since the Brigade was by the lake, there was no need to construct a dam.

The old landowners had not spent money on irrigation since there had always been a cushion of tenant farmers between them and famine. Nor had the farmers been able to combine forces to seek a lasting solution as they had under the present government. The 1,200 acres of communal land was separated from the lake by a range of seven hills. A canal was dug and the lake water was pumped over the hill into the canal. When this was done, the Brigade was insured against drought and famine.

The water problem had been solved, but their land was still of no use. As Comrade Chou described it, the land looked like a scalded head from the top of the hill. Some acres were thick with green while other places were loosely covered with rice plants. Then in 1969 they learned about the agricultural achievements of the model Tai-chai Commune, and they applied the methods to their own Brigade. After they leveled the land, the rice grew with an even richness and yielded twice as much as before Liberation.

They also tried to expand the arable land. At first they took land along the margin of the lake. This practice was stopped when they realized the lake was a natural resource to be preserved. Then they followed the example of Tai-chai Commune and began to convert the seven hills into corn fields and fruit orchards. They had one-and-a-half more hills to go. The rest had all been converted, and they were already eating fruit from the new orchards.

In addition to these monumental projects, they had also built 21 roads, totaling 420 miles. These roads were linked by 120 large bridges and 220 small ones. The farmers no longer had to carry their crops with a yoke on their shoulders. Hand carts could be brought to any corner of the land. These simple labor-saving devices were something no Chinese farmer dared dream of in my youth. Comrade Chou's tone fully indicated his appreciation of these devices.

After this introduction to the Brigade, we were treated to a lunch during which we saw constant evidence of Comrade Chou's organizational ability. Before lunch, the young girls brought in basins of water for us to wash our hands. This, I thought, must have been one of his ideas to upgrade farm life. Chinese do not handle food at table and as a result never had the habit of washing their hands before meals.

Comrade Chou's trip to Peking was part of the romance of the present government. Under the imperial reign a Chinese scholar-official, or his counterpart during the Republic, would travel to Peking, but never an ordinary farmer. Not only did Comrade Chou make the trip, but, more importantly, he did not go there as a humble person to pay his homage to the finest things in China. He was so sure of himself that he did not succumb to culture-worship, with its tradition as ancient as Chinese history. This boldness was exciting to me.

His criticism of the elegant Northerners came out during lunch. He gestured with his chopsticks to invite us to taste the lake fish—he had broken the regulations against fishing in June and had

gotten fresh fish to serve us. He picked up a small fish by the head with his chopsticks and shook it gently so that the meat from both sides fell into his bowl neatly. This was the way to eat a small fish, he said, and the Northerners in Peking did not understand it.

"One has to come home for food," he said. "We Yunnanese are not fancy dressers but we can eat. When we entered a Peking restaurant, people only noticed our old clothes. But when we started ordering, then they knew we knew food."

What he said was double-edged. When I was growing up the most generous compliment an outsider could pay me was to say that I did not look like a Yunnanese. Comrade Chou artfully pushed aside this regional humbleness to take a fresh look at our cultural superiors, the Northerners. At the same time, he managed effortlessly to obliterate his own individuality in dress. He by no means represented the Yunnanese attitude towards clothing. He was a bad dresser anywhere, even in his own Brigade.

Comrade Chou would be considered exceptional in any circumstances. Even understanding this, I was surprised how close to the elegant table talk in upper-class society his conversation was: the comparative notes on travel, the cultivation of a discriminating taste. In my mind, I fancied him as the founder of both an enterprise and a great family line in a society of private ownership. Not only would he accumulate a family fortune, but he would also establish a cultural life-style for his family. Later, when I told my younger sister of this impression, she said that the rich and the middle-class had no monopoly on fancy habits and ideas. The farmers and workers who came up from the bottom could acquire them as their circumstances changed. The Cultural Revolution was not to reform a certain group or class of people, it was to curb the unconscious tendency to steer the people of all classes away from socialist construction.

Little did Comrade Chou suspect, I was sure, that he had acquired some upper-class traits. In his heart, he must have believed that he was doing his best

## According to Comrade Chou, China needn't worry about population increases; Comrade Ou-yang disagreed

for the new life. His yearly income was lower than that of a hard-working farmer, although he was the busiest man in the Brigade. His job as the Brigade leader earned him fewer points than if he had put the same amount of time working in the field. This financial sacrifice did not in the least disturb him because he was working for what he believed in. On the other hand, his sincerity and his humble birth did not immunize him from ideological mistakes.

At one point in the conversation, Comrade Chou was holding forth on the debatable merits of birth control. According to him, China had no real worry about population increases. Take his Brigade, for example, he said: it could feed twice as many people. Besides, there was so much unworked land left in China. More people would mean a greater labor force and more fields to be cultivated. I listened with true admiration for his confidence and courage. These were qualities rarely seen in the poor farmers in the old society who had been compared to the buffalo and the horse in the sense that they worked as hard and were also as tame as the animals. The restoration of his self-confidence was a great achievement of the 1949 revolution.

Comrade Chou's overweening confidence in China's ability to meet the demands of its population increases was alarming because his feelings on population must be shared by many farmers. Though birth control worked well among the educated and in the cities, the countryside resisted it. The traditional desire for a great family with many sons still had a firm hold over the rural area. Comrade Chou had six children. The

older people in the room all had four or five grandchildren from each child of theirs. In a way, it was pitiful to deny them this pleasure as there could be no greater happiness for a farmer than to have many children. It was a small compensation for their hard life.

As I sat listening, worrying about the effect that Comrade Chou's optimism might have on his community, Comrade Ou-yang spoke up. In a quiet voice, he suggested that Comrade Chou should give more thought to this opinion. And it would be good for him to discuss it with someone because it concerned the national welfare. Although friendly and tactful, Comrade Ou-yang came straight to the point. Such a simple, direct human relationship was not possible in the old society. I would not know how to correct Comrade Chou's erroneous idea; I had never learned how to contradict a host whom I did not know well.

After lunch, over cups of tea, two old men and an old woman talked to me about their past miseries. Most of the land in their villages had belonged to four large landlords, all named Yang. One was a county legislator, one an engineer, and another a tax collector. The one who occupied the highest position was a major in the army. They owned most of the 1,300 acres of land and employed the villagers as their tenant farmers. The rice crop went to the landlords, the tenant farmers kept the horsebeans and the corn. During the winter, when the food ran short, the men carried dry beans to the city in a neighboring county. The trip took them four days to complete. In a month, a man could earn about 25 to 30 pounds of rice. This was not enough for a family with two or three children. They made porridge, which they supplemented with wild vegetables.

The children started to work when they were seven or eight years old. The boys were the sweepers, the cowherds, and the pig keepers. As if this work was not enough, they had to gather fallen branches from the forest to start the kitchen fire, and horse and cow manure from the road for fertilizer. They were not paid with money. Food and old

clothes were all that they received for their dawn-to-dusk, year-round work. Only when they were 17 or 18 and could do a full day's work in the field were they paid. The boys fared better than the girls. The girls were not valuable as labor and only brought in money when they were sold as bondmaids.

The old woman and one of the old men with whom we were having tea each had a sister sold. The old woman's sister was beaten to death by her mistress. (She cried twice during the conversation, once about this sister's death and another time about her first childbirth.) The family knew that the girl was being cruelly treated because, being a poor farm girl, she did not know how to please her masters. But after they had taken money from her master, they lost all rights to protect her. There was nothing they could do but watch her being cruelly treated and finally beaten to death. The girl was 13 years old.

The other unforgettable suffering took place when her oldest son was born. Her husband was taken into the army and she had nothing to eat. Eighteen days after her child was delivered she found work building the airport and took her baby with her. The foreman did not allow her to work with the baby on her back, so she put him under a tree, far from where she was working, and worried about the sun and wind being too strong for the baby or that the big dogs might bother him. At lunchtime she was allowed to take care of him. It was a miracle that he lived.

While she spoke the old woman's grandson came to see her. He was eight or nine years old. In a polo shirt, short pants, and sneakers, he looked more like a child of a middle-class city family than the grandson of this old woman. She rubbed his cropped head and chided him affectionately, telling him that he should run along and not disturb her when she was talking to guests. I told her that he looked very bright and must be a good student in school. Her eyes creased by a happy smile, she nodded and said, "Someday he might even go to college in the city."

I never realized how much resentment there was among the poor farmers against the landlords—the poor farmers had never had the opportunity to speak for themselves. Only the landlord's views were known: the hardship of managing tricky, dishonest, ungrateful, and irresponsible tenant farmers or their own magnanimity in taking care of the shiftless people who might otherwise perish. This magnanimity had been greatly idealized by the scholar-official gentry, a class of formidable landlords. They were the ones who could afford to educate their sons to become officials, who, in turn, worked to make money to buy land as the most reliable way of securing a comfortable life for their families. A lesser degree of exploitation, such as lower interest rates or rent, used to make the landlord glory in his own generosity. But nothing could change the fact that the most humane landlords maintained their comforts through privileged maneuvering and exploitation. This much I had known. What I did not know, and had often wondered about, was what the poor tenant farmers felt towards the inequality imposed by their births. I had seen them crying to the landlords to postpone payment or obtain a loan, but never had I been able to find out how they felt about their own poverty and the landlords' wealth. There was a boundary line between me and them which I could not cross to learn the facts.

This situation has changed. I felt that there was no longer a class distinction between me as an educated person, identified with the landlords, and them. They were no longer ashamed of their poverty. They were fully convinced it was an injustice done them. With this understanding, they became expressive, and I learned how sensitive they were to the differences, even the most minute, between their lives and those of the landlords'. They felt bitter that when they worked as servants in the landlords' houses they were given table scraps to eat, while the German shepherds were fed beef and egg-fried rice. Every night after eating they had to go to sleep. In the villages only the landlords could afford

to keep the lights on at night while they amused themselves. Mornings, while the landlords were still sleeping, the servants had to get up to sweep out the nut shells, fruit parings, and cake wrappers. They never had fun, always stuck with the drudgery. The old woman especially hated to work as a temporary hired hand during the spring planting or fall harvesting. There she bent down in the field all day long, planting the seedlings or cutting the wheat. If it was a sunny day, the landlord Yang would send his dumb brother to supervise the work. The dumb brother came with a bag filled with peanuts, watermelon seeds, and cakes. He sat on the river bank under an umbrella eating all day long.

The most insidious exploitation was perpetrated through religion. From 1947 to 1949, just before the collapse of Chiang Kai-shek's government, a religious sect spread through the villages and counties around Kunming. Salvation was promised to all members; they, in turn, had to prove their piety with donations and diligent observation of rituals. When the sect came to the Black Dragon Community, the landlord Yang's first wife was installed as the mistress of the chapel, which was set up in her house. She called all the tenants together there and explained to them that they had done evil in their past lives to be thus punished with present poverty. They had to pray for Buddha's mercy. But one could not simply enter the chapel to pray. One had to drop one to four silver half-dollars in the big treasure vase in the chapel before being permitted to pray. It took a man four days carrying beans to make a little more than a half silver dollar. Making the donation meant less food and more wild vegetables for the family for months, but the farmers dared not refuse to join the sect because they were worried—not about their next lives, but about offending the landlord's wife and being kicked off her farm. After they made the donation, they were allowed to pray—at night, as they had to work in the day. They listened to the priest sing and mumble incomprehensible incantations and kowtowed till their backs ached and their knees hurt.

The next day, while they went to work with tired body and sleepy eyes, the landlord's wife and the priest slept.

The people in the Black Dragon Brigade felt they treated the landlords better than they had been treated by the landlords. The landlords received their equal share of everything in the Brigade. The old landlords were unhappy but their children made the adjustment. They worked well and were accepted by the community.

Comrade Chou was not himself originally from the Black Dragon Brigade. He had asked to settle down here after he was discharged from the army. But as the saying goes, all crows under heaven are alike; all the poor farmers in China were victims of similar tragedies resulting from the landlords' exploitation and natural disasters. These tragedies, played with little variations, occurred in each person's life: hunger, the selling off of children, and death.

After the talk, we all went for a tour of the village. Comrade Chou was anxious to take us up to the hilltop for a panoramic view of the achievements of the Brigade: the terraced field and the leveled flat land. We walked along a canal that carried lake water for irrigating all the fields in the Brigade. From the high bank, we waved to two women who were spreading out wheat and little fresh-water shrimp on mats to dry. The yard they were working in was flanked by houses on three sides. The yard was swept clean. And not a piece of paper or rock was to be found anywhere on the road. My sister said to me, "It is not easy to be the head of this family!" She, too, was impressed with how well run the Brigade was.

The hillside was planted with a lush ground cover, *pelargonium graveolens*, bearing fragrant flowers. As we were picking the flowers to keep in our handbags, Comrade Chou suddenly took a sprig of delicate white flowers from my daughter's hand, threw it into the canal, and told my niece to take my daughter up to the rest station halfway up the hill to wash her hands. The flower was called tiger's paw

## The people in Black Dragon Brigade felt they treated the former landlords pretty well

plant. It rots the skin on contact. In the past, Comrade Chou said, the villagers used it to rot their legs and arms to stay out of the army.

The rest station contained a dining room and a big adobe stove. Lunch was prepared here for the farmers who worked on the terraces. The time saved by not going home for lunch they could spend on their midday rest. We were met there by the old man who looked after the fruit trees in the hillside orchard. He was aged and alone, without a family to take care of him. In the old society, he would have become a beggar. He now received his ration of rice, and, under the program of pooling private plots, he also had his share of vegetables, like everyone else in the Brigade.

The orchard watchman kept the children away and also checked the ripeness of the fruit. This he did very well. He took us to the trees which had the first ripe peaches and guided my daughter to choose the sweetest.

From the top of the hill, we saw the flat field of Black Dragon Brigade stretched out like a lush green carpet. Pointing at the row of trees lining a stream bank in the distance, Comrade Chou said that was the Brigade's boundary. I had the feeling that each time he had occasion to come to the hilltop, he had to pause to look at these miraculous improvements. With pickaxes and shovels they had leveled all 1,200 acres of land. And with pickaxes and shovels they had peeled the lime crust from the hills and pulverized it into the ground. They had terraced the hills into cornfields and orchards. The basket of peaches Comrade Chou gave to my daughter was from the first converted orchards.

Coming down from the hills, we passed a courtyard where the fishermen were mending nets, making new ones, and repairing the boats. In two months they would again be fishing. Then we stopped to see the plot of land used for cross-breeding plants. It looked like a house plot, closely planted. My ignorance did not diminish Comrade Chou's enthusiasm in fingering, examining, and explaining what had been done to the different plants. The impressive drama I observed at that moment was the conversion of a slave into a scientific farmer.

We wandered through the town and stopped to see the hot water supply house in its center. It was an easy walk from every corner of the town. Anyone could bring their thermos jug here at any time for hot water. It might seem a simple thing to supply boiled water. But this simple renovation was a powerful guard against many deathly diseases, such as cholera and typhoid. In the past only the landlord could afford to boil water for drinking and to own thermos jugs. Ordinary farmers drank water from open wells and the creek.

We walked to the end of the village to see the noodle factory. It was set up, not

for commercial purposes, but for the convenience of the people. Anyone from the Black Dragon Brigade could take wheat there to make noodles. People from nearby communes also came here to use the noodle machines, but they had to pay a fee of two American cents per bushel of wheat. There were about 40 men and women making noodles. In the huge room and on the ground outside were rows of bamboo poles to dry the noodles. An old woman with a toothless smile said to us, "Just imagine, with Chairman Mao as our leader, I live to see us poor farmers grow tired of eating rice! Now we want noodles for a change."

Comrade Chou pointed to the pig farm in the distance with its red brick pig house. He was sorry that we had no time to see it. It was better than the old houses in town. I told him that I was sure many bigger and better achievements would follow. He smiled and looked very pleased. And I smiled back. Behind our smiles was the thought that a Chinese farmer was now a man confident in his own ability to combat natural disasters, work incessantly towards improving his life, and, if need be, deal with any complication that might arise in human affairs.

## The Author in China



*The author (center, light jacket) and her young daughter join their relatives in this pose at the square in front of Tien-an Men, formerly the main gate to the Imperial Palace.*



*The author stands in front of her husband and between two cadres at Northern Town Commune in Yu-hsi County.*

Mornings in Peking are lively with calisthenic enthusiasts: shadow boxing in the park, foot-bound old ladies exercising their cramped legs, and busy office workers stretching their arms while walking briskly to work. It was also striking to see people eating buns on the way to work.

The stores that sell breakfast buns can be found in any neighborhood. In the stores one can breakfast sitting on benches and sharing tables with strangers. There are 15 or 20 different kinds of buns, steamed and fried, and cooked cereals, sweet or salty, to choose from. Our favorite was a deep-fried dough stick eaten with soybean milk.

The restaurants are packed during the dining hours—in the big cities there are 24-hour snack bars to serve the factory workers, while the regular restaurants observe lunch and dinner hours. Before Liberation the rich ate sumptuous dinners within the restaurants while hungry beggars drooled outside for table scraps.

We often ate in the Chin-yang Restaurant near our hotel. Invariably, we were seated on sofas covered in white, and while we were consulting the headwaiter about the menu, we were served tea. We were then ushered into the dining area, which was partitioned by a screen. My husband and daughter were impressed with the deluxe treatment, but my sisters were embarrassed to share our privilege.

The cheapest lunch I had in Peking cost a nickel. It was a bowl of hot, spicy noodles in a restaurant converted from a private house. It was self-service. People milled around the big mud stove, rinsing their chopsticks in the hot soup to sterilize them while awaiting their turn for the bowl of steaming noodles. On the wall were posters with urgent messages.

Dinner is still the favorite time for the family to get together. Everyone cooks. It is not unusual for a teenage son to have dinner prepared while waiting for the rest of the family to come home. The 5,000-year-old male prerogative not to soil their hands with kitchen dirt was eradicated in a single generation.

Although liquor is sold everywhere, I never saw a drunk. In the restaurants, I often met groups of young men, red in the face from much hot food and beer, laughing noisily and shouting at each other. They had a horrible way of mixing the excellent beer with sugary orange soda. I first saw this done in Canton by my nephew and his wife, and I thought it a personal idiosyncrasy. But apparently it was very popular everywhere. If drinking is not a problem in China, smoking certainly is. I met many chain-smokers. And they shrugged at the idea of cancer, lung, heart, and other cigarette-induced ailments.

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