

Thoughts on 8 March (Women's Day) - Ting Ling



A discussion of Women's Day - written in 1942 in Yen-an, China, where the Red Army had settled in cave dwellings at the end of their Long March retreat. This text was one of several that made criticisms of the ruling Maoist elite at Yen-an. It was condemned as "narrowly feminist" and Ting Ling and others were successfully pressured to repent and disown their criticisms. Nevertheless - depending on the changing fortunes of competing bureaucratic factions - Ting Ling suffered periodic persecution for decades afterwards as a result of daring to publicly criticise the ruling hierarchy.

[This translation was originally published in 1975 with [this introduction](#).]

When will it no longer be necessary to attach special weight to the word 'woman' and to raise it specially?

Each year this day comes round. Every year on this day meetings are held all over the world where women muster their forces. Even though things have not been as lively these last two years in Yen-an as they were in previous years, it appears that at least a few people are busy at work here. And there will certainly be a congress, speeches, circular telegrams and articles.

Women in Yen-an are happier than women elsewhere in China. So much so that many people ask enviously: 'How come the women comrades get so rosy and fat on millet?' It doesn't seem to surprise anyone that women make up a big proportion of the staff in the hospitals, sanatoria and clinics, but they are inevitably the subject of conversation, as a fascinating problem, on every conceivable occasion.

Moreover, all kinds of women comrades are often the target of deserved criticism. In my view these reproaches are serious and justifiable.

People are always interested when women comrades get married, but that is not enough for them. It is impossible for women comrades to get onto friendly terms with a man comrade,

even more so with more than one. Cartoonists ridicule them: 'A departmental head getting married too?' The poets say: 'All the leaders in Yenan are horsemen, and none of them are artists. In Yenan it's impossible for an artist to find a pretty sweetheart.' But in other situations they are lectured at: 'Damn it, you look down on us old cadres and say we're country bumpkins. But if it wasn't for us country bumpkins, you wouldn't be coming to Yenan to eat millet!' But women invariably want to get married. (It's even more of a sin not to be married, and single women are even more of a target for rumours and slanderous gossip.) So they can't afford to be choosy, anyone will do: whether he rides horses or wears straw saddles, whether he's an artist or a supervisor. They inevitably have children. The fate of such children is various. Some are wrapped in soft baby wool and patterned felt and looked after by governesses. Others are wrapped in soiled cloth and left crying in their parents' beds, while their parents consume much of the child allowance. But for this allowance (25 yuan a month, or just over three pounds of pork), many of them would probably never get a taste of meat. Whoever they marry, the fact is that those women who are compelled to bear children will probably be publicly derided as 'Noras who have returned home'. [*] Those women comrades in a position to employ governesses can go out once a week to a prim get-together and dance. Behind their backs there would also be the most incredible gossip and whispering campaigns, but as soon as they go somewhere they cause a great stir and all eyes are glued to them. This has nothing to do with our theories, our doctrines and the speeches we make at meetings. We all know this to be a fact, a fact that is right before our eyes, but it is never mentioned.

It is the same with divorce. In general there are three conditions to pay attention to when getting married. (1) Political purity; (2) both parties should be more or less the same age and comparable in looks; (3) mutual help. Even though everyone is said to fulfil these conditions—as for (1), there are no open traitors in Yenan; as for (3), you can call anything 'mutual help', including darning socks, patching shoes and even feminine comfort—everyone nevertheless makes a great show of giving thoughtful attention to them. And yet, the pretext for divorce is invariably the wife's political backwardness. I am the first to admit that it is a shame when a man's wife is not progressive and retards his progress. But let us consider to what degree they are backward. Before marrying, they were inspired by the desire to soar in the heavenly heights and lead a life of bitter struggle. They got married partly due to physiological necessity and partly as a response to sweet talk about 'mutual help'. Thereupon they are forced to toil away and become 'Noras returned home'. Afraid of being thought 'backward', those who are a bit more daring rush around begging nurseries to take their children. They ask for abortions, and risk punishment and even death by secretly swallowing potions to produce abortions. But the answer comes back: 'Isn't giving birth to children also work? You're just after an easy life, you want to be in the limelight. After all, what indispensable political work have you performed? Since you are so frightened of having children, and are not willing to take responsibility once you have had them, why did you get married in the first place? No-one forced you to.' Under these conditions it is impossible for women to escape this destiny of 'backwardness'. When women capable of working sacrifice their careers for the joys of motherhood, people always sing their praises. But after ten years or so, they have no way of escaping the tragedy of 'backwardness' (i.e. divorce). Even from my point of view, as a woman, there is nothing attractive about such 'backward' elements. Their skin is beginning to wrinkle, their hair is growing thin and fatigue is robbing them of their last traces of attractiveness. It should be self-evident that they are in a tragic situation. But whereas in the old society they would probably have been pitied and considered unfortunate, nowadays their tragedy is seen as something self-inflicted, as their just deserts. Is it not so that there is a discussion going on in legal circles as to whether divorce should be granted simply on the petition of one party or on the basis of mutual agreement? In the great

majority of cases it is the husband who petitions for divorce. For the wife to do so, she must be leading an immoral life, then of course she deserves to be cursed!

I myself am a woman, and I therefore understand the failings of women better than others. But I also have a deeper understanding of what they suffer. Women are incapable of transcending the age they live in, of being perfect, or of being hard as steel. They are incapable of resisting all the temptations of society or all the silent oppression they suffer here in Yenan. They each have their own past written in blood and tears, they have experienced great emotions—in elation as in depression, whether engaged in the lone battle of life or drawn into the humdrum stream of life. This is even truer of the women comrades who come to Yenan, and I therefore have much sympathy for those fallen and classed as criminals. What is more, I hope that men, especially those in top positions, and women themselves will consider the mistakes women commit in their social context. It would be better if there were less empty theorizing and more talk about real problems, so that theory and practice are not divorced, and if each Communist Party member were more responsible for his own moral conduct.

But we must also hope for a little more from our women comrades, especially those in Yenan. We must urge ourselves on and develop our comradely feeling.

People without ability have never been in a position to seize everything. Therefore, if women want equality, they must first strengthen themselves. There is no need to stress this point, since we all understand it. Today there are certain to be people who make fine speeches bragging about the need to first acquire political power. I would simply mention a few things that any frontliner, whether a proletarian, a fighter in the war of resistance or a woman, should pay attention to in his or her everyday life:

1. Don't allow yourself to fall ill. A wild life can at times appear romantic, poetic and attractive, but in today's conditions it is inappropriate. You are the best keeper of your life. There is nothing more unfortunate nowadays than to lose your health. It is closest to your heart. The only thing to do is keep a close watch on it, pay careful attention to it and cherish it.
2. Make sure you are happy. Only when you are happy can you be youthful, active, fulfilled in your life and steadfast in the face of all difficulties; only then will you see a future ahead of you and know how to enjoy yourself. This sort of happiness is not a life of contentment, but a life of struggle and of advance. Therefore we should all do some meaningful work each day and some reading, so that each of us is in a position to give something to others. Loafing about simply encourages the feeling that life is hollow, feeble and in decay.
3. Use your brain, and make a habit of doing so. Correct any tendency not to think and ponder, or to swim with the current. Before you say or do anything, think whether what you are saying is right, whether that is the most suitable way of dealing with the problem, whether it goes against your own principles, whether you feel you can take responsibility for it. Then you will have no cause to regret your actions later. This is what is known as acting rationally. It is the best way of avoiding the pitfalls of sweet words and honeyed phrases, of being sidetracked by petty gains, of wasting our emotions and wasting our lives.
4. Resolution in hardship, perseverance to the end. Aware, modern women should identify and cast off all their rosy, compliant illusions. Happiness is to take up the struggle in the midst of the raging storm and not to pluck the lute in the moonlight or recite poetry among the blossoms. In the absence of the greatest resolution, it is very easy to falter in mid-path. Not to suffer is to become degenerate. The strength to carry on should be nurtured through the quality of 'perseverance'. People without great aims and ambitions rarely have the firmness of purpose that does not covet petty advantages or seek a comfortable existence. But

only those who have aims and ambitions for the benefit not of the individual but of mankind as a whole can persevere to the end.

Dawn, 3 August

Postscript. On re-reading this article, it seems to me that there is much room for improvement in the passage on what we should expect from women, but because I have to meet a date-line with the manuscript, I have no time to revise it. But I also feel that there are some things which, if said by a leader before a big audience, would probably evoke satisfaction. But when they are written by a woman, they are more than likely to be demolished. But since I have written it, I offer it as I always intended, for the perusal of those people who have similar views.

[*] A reference to the heroine of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, who left home to achieve her freedom.

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[For further discussion of Wang Shih-wei, the Yenan Literary Opposition and the later development of the Maoist state bureaucracy see [this article](#) by Simon Leys.]