FIVE

Why We Joined the Revolution
Voices of Chinese Women Soldiers

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In 1934 the beleaguered Chinese Communist armies, under constant attack by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces, withdrew from the Chinese Soviet base areas in central and south China. This 6,000-mile retreat west and north across China became known as the Long March. In the late 1980s I had the good fortune to interview twenty-two Chinese women who had participated as Red Army soldiers in the Long March.

These women told stories of leaving children behind with peasant families, of crossing glacier mountains in the third trimester of pregnancy, of leaving babies where they were born, or of carrying them along a day or two after birth. They described the work they did as women soldiers, carrying stretchers, spreading propaganda, recruiting laborers and male soldiers, and carrying gold for the army. Rich as these stories are, the greatest wealth of material came in response to the question, "Why did you join the party and the army?" Their answers, framed by their understanding of Marxist ideology at the time of the interview, contained details from their childhood, their family situations, how they perceived their future, how and when they were politicized, and how they understood their own decision to join the revolution. From the responses of these women, it is possible to find ways to understand what motivates women anywhere to become revolutionaries and go to war.

All the women, those who joined communist organizations before entering the army, as well as those who enlisted in the Red Army directly, spoke not of joining the army but of "participating in the revolution." What "becoming revolutionary" meant was as varied as the women themselves. To some, it meant freedom from exploitation and abuse at home, the hope of escape from the chaos of poverty, and the safety of a secure, regimented environment with enough food to eat; for those whose futures were unsettled, it was a way of avoiding marriage into a strange family, or remaining an unmarried, unpaid worker on the lowest rung of the family ladder; for the educated and educable, it was an exciting way to fight for social justice and work for national sovereignty. For almost all, participating in the revolution meant finding a place to belong. One, echoed by several others, said, "The party was my family." However, the revolution, unlike their families, offered them opportunity to allow their unsubmitting, independent traits to surface.

When asked "Why did you join?" the women spoke about (1) the social and economic situation in their families and the level of education they received; (2) the geographical setting of their home cities or villages, including the proximity of their home to the Chinese Soviet base areas or the path of the Red armies; and (3) the opportunity to learn about the revolution from communist underground workers in the village, revolutionary organizations in the village, progressive teachers in school, and family members, usually men, already in the revolution.

From the founding of the Chinese Communist party (CCP) in 1921, the male party members had been serious about equality of the sexes, although they interpreted equality within the boundaries of their own cultural consciousness. They organized schools for their sisters, wives, and mothers; established literacy classes for women workers and peasants; and wrote sexual equality into their documents, advocating emancipation of women and an end to child marriages of all kinds. They guaranteed protection for women and offered them access to the economic and cultural life of the society. The CCP has continued this top-down policy of liberation of women within the patriarchal society.

FAMILY SITUATION, CLASS, AND LEVEL OF EDUCATION

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, there was little institutional support for girls and women in China. In the poorest families, baby girls were unaffordable luxuries, to be disposed of as quickly as possible by death, sale or marriage. Unlike sons, daughters were part of the birth family only until they married and joined their husband's family, giving rise to the common Chinese saying, "When a girl is married, it is like throwing water on the ground." In those harsh economic times, girls from poor families were sold into marriage as tangyangzi.

Tongyangzi

Four of the twelve tangyangzi among the women interviewed were infants under 1 year old when they were given to other families. Li Jianzhen, born to poor peasants in Guangdong, was sold to another poor family for eight copper coins when she was 8 months old. She spoke of the plight of some girls in rhyme:

Eighteen-year-old wife, three-year-old husband.
At night the wife puts the little husband to bed,
Works hard to take care of him until he grows up,
When the husband is grown up, the wife is old;
The dream has been hidden away.

There were two different situations [she continued]. There were
younger baby brides as well as younger husbands. In the old
society, families with money would buy a girl, but actually she
would be a servant or daughter rather than a wife.

My own mother had twelve children: four dead, eight living.
The three of us girls were sold, leaving five. Four of my brothers
were sold abroad in Southeast Asia. Finally, there was only one
younger brother left.

In the old society, we called it "selling baby pigs." There was no
alternative. You bore one child, gave it away, and bore another.

In Sichuan, Liu Jian’s destitute family gave their first child, a daughter, to
another family when she was 3 days old. Then two more daughters were
born and, Liu explained, "People didn’t have any choice but to put them
in the urine bucket and cover it." She was more fortunate than her
sisters. When she was born in a paddie field and left to die, her
grandmother picked her up. A year later, when her mother gave birth to a
son. "They said I was good luck, because I brought my mother a boy." A
son was old-age insurance for his parents. His wife came into his family to
work and to continue the male family line. Together, husband and wife
took care of his parents when they were too old to be productive.

The girls who became tongsyngsi when they were older had a much
more difficult time. Four of the five women who were sold into another
family between the ages of 6 and 8 spoke of maltreatment. Their
experience was typical. The abuse of tongsyngsi was widespread and for
all four, their mistreatment was a crucial factor in the decision to run away
and join the revolution. Two believed they would be beaten to death by
their "in-law" families and chose the uncertainty of life and death in the
military over the certainty of death in their adoptive families. The other
three tongsyngsi were sent to their "in-law" families just before puberty, in
one case to prevent her from joining the army.

None of the twelve tongsyngsi was educated as a child. Several, how-
ever, spoke of standing outside the schoolroom, listening to the teacher after
they had taken the boys in the family to school. Two, whose designated
"husbands" were revolutionaries, received some schooling as teenagers, one
in a CCP school, the other in a progressive work/study school.

Daughters in Birth Families
The three who were from poor peasant families but not sold as tongsyngsi
had no education. The other seven, who grew up in more comfortable
families, received some schooling. Even in wealthier families, however,
girls were seldom educated with their brothers, since girls were not highly
valued. Money spent on education for girls was thought to be a waste. Lin
Yueqin, from a mountainous area in Anhui province, explained:

At that time, China was governed by feudalism and there was no
equality between men and women. Chinese women had no
freedom, no right to education. Boys from rich families could go
to school, but girls from rich families could not. They had no right
to choose freely whom they would marry. When you were in your
mother’s belly [laugh], your parents arranged your marriage.
Women had no status. They were at the lowest level of society,
doing household chores, home labor.

My father was a businessman in our small town and was
comparatively accepting of the idea of equality between men and
women advocated by Sun Yat-sen after the May Fourth
Movement. So, although men and women were not equal, I did
got some schooling. I studied at home, first, and later went to a
primary school for three years.

Liu Ying, an educated woman from Hunan province, came from a
family ruled by a traditional father. She had to fight for her education
with some support from her mother, who was herself literate.

The sons were more important than the daughters in my rather
feudalistic family. My father wanted the sons to go to school, not
the daughters. But I also wanted to go to school. I struggled and
struggled, studying by myself until I could pass the entrance exam
for the Women’s Normal School in Changsha. [At that time, boys
and girls didn’t go to school together.] An early communist
revolutionary, who had just come back from studying in France,
established this progressive girls’ school where we didn’t have to pay
tuition. Many of our men teachers had been classmates of Mao
Zedong when they were students in the No.1 Normal School in
Changsha. Under the influence of these teachers, we joined the
revolution.

Later, Liu Ying continued her schooling at the college level in Moscow, the
only one of the women interviewed to receive tertiary education before the
Long March.
WHY WE JOINED THE REVOLUTION

Four of the others also attended progressive schools and became political activists as a direct result of what they learned from their teachers. They did not follow the usual pattern in society of the time, for they came from families that were more enlightened than Liu Ying’s. Jian Xianren, also from Hunan, was educated in the village, along with her little brother.

We started school together when I was 8 and my brother was 6. Old Chinese people favored boys over girls, but in our family, boys weren’t considered more important than girls. They just thought I was old enough to take care of my younger brother, so they let my little brother and me start school together.

However, when it was time for Jian Xianren and her brother to go on to middle school, her grandmother became ill. She was kept at home to help, while her brother went on to school in the provincial capital. He became a revolutionary and brought her material to read. After her grandmother died, she joined her brother, entered the same school in Changsha that Liu Ying attended, and also became a political activist.

He Manqiu, in Sichuan province, did not attend a progressive school. She explained that her father and grandmother raised her, because her mother did not like her: “She thought I was ugly and wanted to throw me away.” Her grandmother wanted her to follow traditional Confucian principles, to be a proper daughter and become a proper wife. When she was 6 or 7, her grandmother bound He Manqiu’s feet, to which process the child agreed in spite of the pain. After her father took her to meetings advocating unbound feet, however, she decided to take the bindings off before her feet were too badly crippled, an even more painful process.

Not at all the modest, submissive female her grandmother wanted her to be, He Manqiu was something of a tomboy. Her comparatively open-minded father hired a tutor for her, then sent her to middle school in Chengdu, the provincial capital. She was brought back home when she was 14, because warlord armies were fighting in Chengdu. At home, she was bored and increasingly “afraid my grandmother would find a mother-in-law for me.”

GEOGRAPHY

He Manqiu came from Sichuan, a vastly overpopulated and opium-riddled province. In addition to warlord armies living off the land as they fought each other, the Nationalist and communist armies were fighting near He Manqiu’s village. He Manqiu describes how the Nationalist soldiers had two guns—a rifle and a “smoking gun” (an opium pipe). My father said we’d better stay out of the way of these soldiers because they tried to take everything they could from the local people, so we hid for several days. When we returned to the town to see what was happening, we heard firecrackers, drums, and gongs as soon as we got close to the village. I had never experienced such an exciting scene in all my 15 years! My father was cautious and didn’t dare go further, but I wasn’t at all afraid. I squeezed into the crowd and stood next to a neighbor, who was a good friend of my father’s. I asked him what the matter was.

He said, “What do you mean, what’s the matter? This is the Red Army!”

Beginning from that time, I began to think about participating in the revolution.

Chinese Soviet base areas were established in poor, remote mountainous regions, often straddling provincial borders. The advantage to the communists included proximity to a supportive population, terrain favorable for guerrilla warfare, and distance from the scrutiny of national and provincial authorities. Of the twenty-two women interviewed, sixteen lived in or near Soviet base areas, in places where the Red armies were fighting, or in the path of a moving Red Army. These areas, poor in normal times, were even more devastated by the depredations of the warlord and Nationalist armies on the civilian populations. Not only did these armies feed and clothe themselves by living off the land, they also took the young men to be soldiers and laborers. Like He Manqiu, however, the women interviewed remembered the Red Army positively. When the Red Army stopped moving, even for a brief time, they established local communist government and mass organizations. They redistributed the land and shared the landlords’ grain with the local peasants.

As early as 1928, the Party Congress passed a resolution emphasizing the need to bring women into the revolution and linking women’s interests with revolutionary activities. Three of the seven women from Sichuan and Anhui who lived near the 4th Front Army cited the CCP propaganda advocating women’s liberation as one of the reasons they joined the revolution.

OPPORTUNITY

Many of those who lived in proximity to the Red armies reported that nothing in their village had ever been as exciting as the coming of the army. Certainly, the attraction of adventure existed for all the women, although it was never directly cited as the reason they joined. None was
quite as straightforward as Li Yanfa who said, "Why did I join the army? To go find food to eat. There was no food at home." Several others mentioned hunger as a factor, but they also spoke of the effects of propaganda that promised equality between men and women, and a chance to change the social and economic structure in China. The powerful attraction of a different way to live life, an alternative to being a wife in a poor family, was clearly important for many. Even Li Yanfa, like the others, expressed several reasons for joining, although her basic reason for joining the army was simply hunger. She found life in Sichuan with her opium-smoking father intolerable, and her life, after he sent her to her "in-laws," even worse.

The first time I saw the Red Army [Li Yanfa explained], I went to the meeting in a big village. My father was lazy—you know, he smoked. I went by myself. Children weren't afraid any more. The meeting was led by a woman. At the first meeting, I didn't dare say anything. At the third meeting, I asked if I could join the army. They said yes, but asked, "What about your family?" I answered, "My mama died. My two brothers don't live at home and my father smokes opium." I told them everything. And they said, "Yes."

When her father found out that Li Yanfa wanted to join the army, he told her, "If you join the army, I'll pull the tendon out of your leg!" Then he insisted that she get married immediately into the family to which she had been betrothed before she was born.

"Whatever you say, it's okay with me," I said. I knew that I was going to join the army anyway, so I went to my "in-laws."

The bed that the family gave me was only a frame with a shabby rain cape made of palm leaves on it, not even any straw or stalks on the bed. When I got up in the morning, I had to take the ox out to graze. Five families owned one ox. I carried pails of water on a shoulder pole for the five families. After I fetched water for each family, I gathered kindling and cut grass while the ox was grazing. You know what I ate when I got back? They fed the dog sweet potato leaves mixed with the rice that had stuck to the pot and some water. After the dog ate, I would eat what was left.

Li Yanfa hid her time until she could safely run away to the army headquarters one morning while the ox was grazing.

I ran ten miles without stopping, but they wouldn't let me in. There were two guards at the gate.

"What do you want? What's a little girl doing here?" they shouted. I was thirteen.

I said, "The team leader says I can be a soldier."

"Let you be a soldier?" they replied.

My clothes were shabby, just hanging in threads.

"You join the army?" one guard repeated. He went inside to see if the team leader knew anything about it. Then he said, "Come in." I saw the team leader and ran to her, crying in her arms.

After we filled in some papers, I had a bath in a basin of water. Then they took me to eat. I ate one bowl of meat and vegetables, one bowl of rice.

"Is it enough?" they asked.

"Give me one more serving," I said. I finished, and they asked again.

"Enough?"

Still not enough, so I got another, until I had three bowls of meat and vegetables, three bowls of rice. The salty vegetables were so tasty—sweet potato, pumpkin, tofu, pork, all mixed up together. They wouldn't let me have any more. They said I'd burst!

"We eat this every day," they told me. "Don't eat any more now."
The shabby clothes I came with were burned and they gave me a set of clothes that had been taken from the local tyrants—two sets of underclothes and one set of padded clothes. We used red cloth for the epaulets and the star on the hat.

That was how I joined the army. No one in our village joined with me. There was no food at home. When you join the army, you have food to eat and clothes to wear.

Proximity to Army Route or Base Area
Zhong Yuein emphasized the accident of life that put her in proximity to the Red Army. She had been sold to a family living in a larger village in Jiangxi province when she was 8 years old; a happy circumstance, she said, because
if I had stayed in my mother’s village, I probably wouldn’t have taken the revolutionary road. My mother’s village was in a mountain valley. It was rather backward and isolated from outside ideas. When I went to the family as tongyangzi, I had more opportunity because the village was larger, much more open and receptive to Communist party propaganda.

There were quite a few people who could read and write because many young people were concentrated there. They officially organized the local government and some mass organizations like the Children’s Corps, the Young Pioneers, the Women’s Unit. I joined the Young Pioneers by myself, just because I thought it was good.

At that time, we believed that women had been oppressed for thousands of years. One time I was told to go to a women’s meeting. At the meeting they asked what my name was. I said, “I don’t have a name.”

I hadn’t had a name before that.

All of her life, Zhong Yuelin had been called “Old Zhong’s daughter.”

The Communist party organizations not only gave individual women the most basic recognition but also provided social legitimacy for women who occupied the lowest position in the family as well as in society.  

Underground Communists Working in the Villages  
Among the women who lived near the Soviet base area in Jiangxi province, where the central communist government was based, only Wei Xiuying joined the army directly, before joining a local communist organization. After carrying messages for the soldiers, she joined the army with several men from her village. They encouraged her to enlist with them, she said, because of the daily abuse she suffered from her “in-law” family.

Deng Liujiun followed the usual pattern for the women in this area and joined Communist organizations before joining the army. She described a woman who came to her village, befriended her, and persuaded her to make a revolutionary commitment:

I was still waiting for the son who hadn’t been born yet. My foster parents half-adopted a son, borrowing him from another family. I was supposed to be his fiancé, but I didn’t like him at all. Later he got sick and died.

I lived this way until 1929, when Mao Zedong, Zhu De, and Chen Yi brought the army to western Fujian where I lived. Because of the Nationalist reactionary propaganda, most of us ran away to the mountains to hide when the Red Army arrived. We were naive at that time, so we believed what the Nationalists said and didn’t trust the Red Army. Gradually, we began to understand and we moved back to the village.

I know now that even before the Red Army came there was an underground organization in the township. A woman who often came to visit us asked me if I wanted to become active in helping the poor people. I knew my family wouldn’t interfere if I tried to do this kind of work, so I said, “Of course, but what can I do? Nothing can be done.”

“Why not?” she asked me. “You are so poor, you’ve suffered a lot—you have to liberate yourself.”

“How can I liberate myself?” I said.

She suggested that we two be the first to cut our hair, to set an example. At that time, I wore a pigtail. As a married woman, she wore her hair in a bun. In the old society, nobody had short hair, so cutting hair was abnormal. If you cut your hair, everybody laughed at you. She had to persuade me several times until I finally gave in. We cut our hair. People stood around and looked at us but we thought, “Think what you please, we’re cutting our hair.”

After we cut our hair, and after I accepted the things she told me, she said, “Now that the Red Army is here, we want to overthrow the landlords. You are a poor person. Would you like to join the party to help in the work to liberate the poor people?” So in 1931, three years after the Red Army came, I joined the party and she was my sponsor. Before I joined the party, I didn’t participate in any revolutionary activities. I just had advanced ideas.

CCP Organizations in the Villages  
Cutting away the symbol of marital status in cutting hair, joining communist organizations, and running errands for the army were all paths to involvement for the women living near the Central Soviet base area on the Jiangxi-Fujian border. In some cases the families supported the girls, especially childbrides like Deng Liujiun, who had no one in the family to
marr y. In Li Guiy ing’s case, she was compromised by the revolutionary
sac of joining a literacy class and had to make the break with her “family,”
not unwillingly:

I was sold when I was 7 years old. My foster family was also poor. I was just sold to this family—there was no husband for me. The son was much older than me and had left, so it was only the old woman and me. That old woman was very fierce, terrible. She wasn’t good to me. I had to do almost everything—men’s work, women’s work. I shouldered everything in the house. At that time we led a bitter, hopeless life. Then, Chairman Mao and General Zhu came to our county. I was about 18 or 19.

When the mass organizations were established, Li Guiy ing secretly joined a literacy class organized by the communists:

I’d go to the class when that old woman wasn’t home. When she was at home, I didn’t dare go. When she found out, she threatened to kill me with the kitchen knife and tried to beat me to death. She gave me a black eye. The comrades in the literacy class told me to go back to class, but I said, “I don’t dare go. It’s all right as long as you’re here, but when you leave, that old woman will beat me to death!”

They made that old woman wear a tall hat and paraded her through the village, shouting, “Don’t abuse child brides!”

After Li Guiy ing joined the army and began the Long March, her husband was wounded in battle. She and her husband were sent to join a guerrilla team near her husband’s hometown. She was wounded during a skirmish, and her husband died. Pregnant at the time, she endured terrible physical suffering, especially when she was captured and jailed. When Li Guiy ing talked about the difficulties she experienced, both before and after she joined the army, she spoke in a matter-of-fact voice, neither dramatizing nor minimizing the violence she suffered. She gave no indication that she was aware of the irony of escaping domestic violence only to experience military violence, but seemed, in retrospect, to understand violence as simply a part of life. Neither she nor the others interviewed expressed any regrets over their initial decision to join the revolution.

Progressive Teachers and Relatives
Jian Xianfeng gave more complex reasons for joining the Red Army. Her sister, Jian Xianren, already politicized by her brother before she entered the Women’s Normal School in Changsha, was a student activist wanted by the Nationalist police. In order to avoid putting her family in jeopardy, Xianren left and joined the Red Army. Xianfeng, 7 years younger, explained that her thinking was influenced by the political ideas of her older brother and sister, by the patriotism of progressive teachers, and by the Nationalist threat to her family.

My older sister and brother went to school in Changsha, but in 1927, after Jiang Jieshi19 betrayed the revolution, there was an official order to arrest them. They escaped to our hometown, but the official order was sent to all the counties, so they were on the run and joined the Red Army. Afterwards, our family life wasn’t peaceful anymore. I was always haunted by that.

Of course, I was influenced by my sister and brother. They told me about the October Revolution and described how the Soviet Union was building socialism there. I listened very eagerly, and although I was young I understood.

After the older children found refuge in the Red Army, the family was harassed by the Nationalists, who arrested Jian Xianfeng’s father. When the family bought his release, he worried about his vulnerable 16-year-old daughter and sent her away to the Women’s Normal School in Changsha.

When the September 18 incident occurred, I was in school.20 During our lessons, our teachers told us how our country was humiliated. We felt so sad when we listened—sometimes we were in tears. After the September 18 incident, Jiang Jieshi refused to put up any resistance against the Japanese. The Nationalist policy was to establish internal peace before resisting foreign aggression.21 They wanted to fight the Red Army in a civil war.

Under such circumstances, I couldn’t go on with my education. I had gone home during vacation and hadn’t wanted to go back to school. My father comforted me and said, “When there is an opportunity, go join the Red Army and fight the Japanese.” I already had such a thought. In December 1934, the 2nd Route Army Group guerrilla troops came to our town. Some of the guerrillas knew about my family, and they welcomed me to join the army.

“What can I do in the army?” I asked them.