

FOREIGN WOMAN IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC

Kim Echlin

Les premières impressions de l'auteur à son arrivée en Chine pour y travailler comme enseignante . . .

The Arrival

China. The word resonates with the exotic, the unknown, the fascinating, the forbidden. I stepped off the plane and was immediately struck by the smell of the middle kingdom – coal, bamboo, dust, humidity. It was the middle of the night and through fatigue and darkness I found myself in a different day, in a different time.

The Streets

To know a place you can walk. You can peep into courtyards and watch and smell and listen and feel. In Beijing I began to wander. Old men and women wheel babies in bamboo carts and children wear little pants cut open without diapers. Men squat in circles, spitting beside old wooden gates, telling stories and playing at games on the sidewalk. Young people rent well-thumbed books and sit near the book cart on wooden stools to read. There is a crowd waiting around the newspaper vendor. There is a line-up for melons brought by donkey from the country. In this crowded, busy city everyone seems to be waiting. Young women rattle by shoulder-to-shoulder with the men of the People's Liberation Army.

It has been said that women hold up half the sky.

An Encounter

Across the street is a young woman whose body is different. She has blond hair, blue eyes and she catches my attention because she looks different. Sudden-

ly I see that she is western . . . like me. *Différence.*

On Chinese Women

I wander into a courtyard off the main street. I cannot read the signs beside the doors. I wait. I watch. There, through a window, I see a group of young women laughing around a table. The room is cluttered with paper, with journals, with teacups and their lids. Someone is struggling with a copying machine in the corner, and those women behind the glass feel familiar after the strangeness of the street. I walk to the door and hesitate. A young woman comes out and I speak slowly my Chinese phrase, "Can anyone speak English?" She is startled. From the flow of her answering words I pick out two familiar sounds ". . . *dui* (yes) . . . *français.*" I laugh and say, "*Oh good! Oui, moi aussi, je parle français,*" and laughing we begin to talk.

Her spontaneous answer, her "*dui*", allows my "*oui*", allows a new "*us.*" All communication, all translation depends on this double yes-yes. And so I have found the "All-China Women's Federation" after all. *Dui, oui, yes.*

Tea

She guides me into a quiet room and pours tea. Another older woman who also speaks French comes in and sits down. She asks me who I am, how she can help me. She explains that a long time ago she studied in France, in Belgium. She tells me what they do at the Women's Federation. She gestures me to a more comfortable chair. The door opens and yet another young woman walks in. "Hello," she smiles, "I studied at your university in Toronto."

Our differences sparkle in the twinkle of her eyes.

A Little History

I listen and watch and ask questions. The All-China Women's Federation was founded at a meeting attended by five hundred women in 1949. The first legislation passed in China after liberation was the Marriage Act which allowed women and men to come together of their own consent in matrimony without arrangement by a third party. Last year in September 1983, 2,011 women attended the Fifth National Women's Congress to create their first constitution. Here are the first and last articles of the first chapter on Tasks.

- To educate women in patriotism and collectivism and in socialist and communist ideology, as well as in the ideas of emancipation of women and equality between men and women. To encourage women to foster lofty revolutionary ideals, conscientiously learn Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, general, scientific and technical knowledge, and play their full role in building socialist material and spiritual civilization. To publicize women's important position and role in the socialist modernization programme, and endeavour to eliminate the vestiges of feudal ideas and traditions that look down upon women.

- To develop friendly exchanges with women of other countries in the common struggle to oppose imperialism, hegemonism, colonialism and racial discrimination, safe-guard world peace, promote human progress and defend the rights and interests of women and children.

The All-China Women's Federation has established relations with 226 organizations in 123 countries. Representatives attend U.N.-sponsored activities concerning women and children and international meetings of women's organizations. At home the federation serves as a link repre-

唐永泰公主墓壁畫
侍女圖



Reproduction of Dunhuang mural by Chang Shana

senting women's interests between all Chinese women and the party. They publish *Women of China*, a Chinese language magazine, and are currently launching a newspaper.

Women's Mysteries

As I leave the office three women stand on the cement steps, chatting and waving good-bye until I turn out of the courtyard and onto the street. I cannot understand what it might mean to work for the state without choice. I cannot understand what these women have lived behind the language of their ideologies. But as I wave

good-bye I feel their genuine warmth in Beijing. I have felt their community.

The Struggle Ahead

In the report from the Fifth National Congress, concerns and goals were voiced: sex discrimination, the conflict between women's traditional home roles and their duties in the workplace, violation of women's and children's rights, women's freedom of choice in marriage. The Congress noted that seventy percent of China's 235 million illiterates were women and that educational, scientific and technological levels of most Chinese

women were relatively low.

Silk route, Mayflower, bound feet, unbound, our paths converge and separate and cross once again as we walk forward.

Language

I sit down to learn my pronouns. *Wa* means I. *Ni* means you. *Ta* means he or she. A most clever trickster must have silently presided over Babel. *Tamen* means they or them. *Nimen* means you-plural. *Women* means we or us.

Always-Arriving

I walk the streets of Beijing and smell China. I watch and wait. It has been my experience that the more profoundly we penetrate that which is Other, the more profoundly we discover our own sources. Slowly, painfully, with moments of exhilaration. By attempting to understand difference we stretch our own boundaries so that we are always-arriving. The women of China have reached out to other women around the world. The women of China are stretching boundaries. While we wait and listen we join in the always-arriving.

Kim Echlin is currently teaching in China. She is interested in mythology and is presently researching the roles of women in Canadian Indian mythology.

nameless
passing our scandals
mother to daughter
(woman to woman to
woman to woman).

one fills books with sky pictures.
the other lets her kid run wild.
this one likes caterpillars and moths.
that one will not give birth.
one climbs trees.
the other took a woman lover
("oh, what shall we ever do?")
the black haired one will not pluck her
eyebrows.
the gray haired one lives out of her
knapsack.

in our wills we will will our daughters
our recklessness, our daring.
(my child, one day all this will be
yours.)

Clara Valverde
Montreal, Quebec