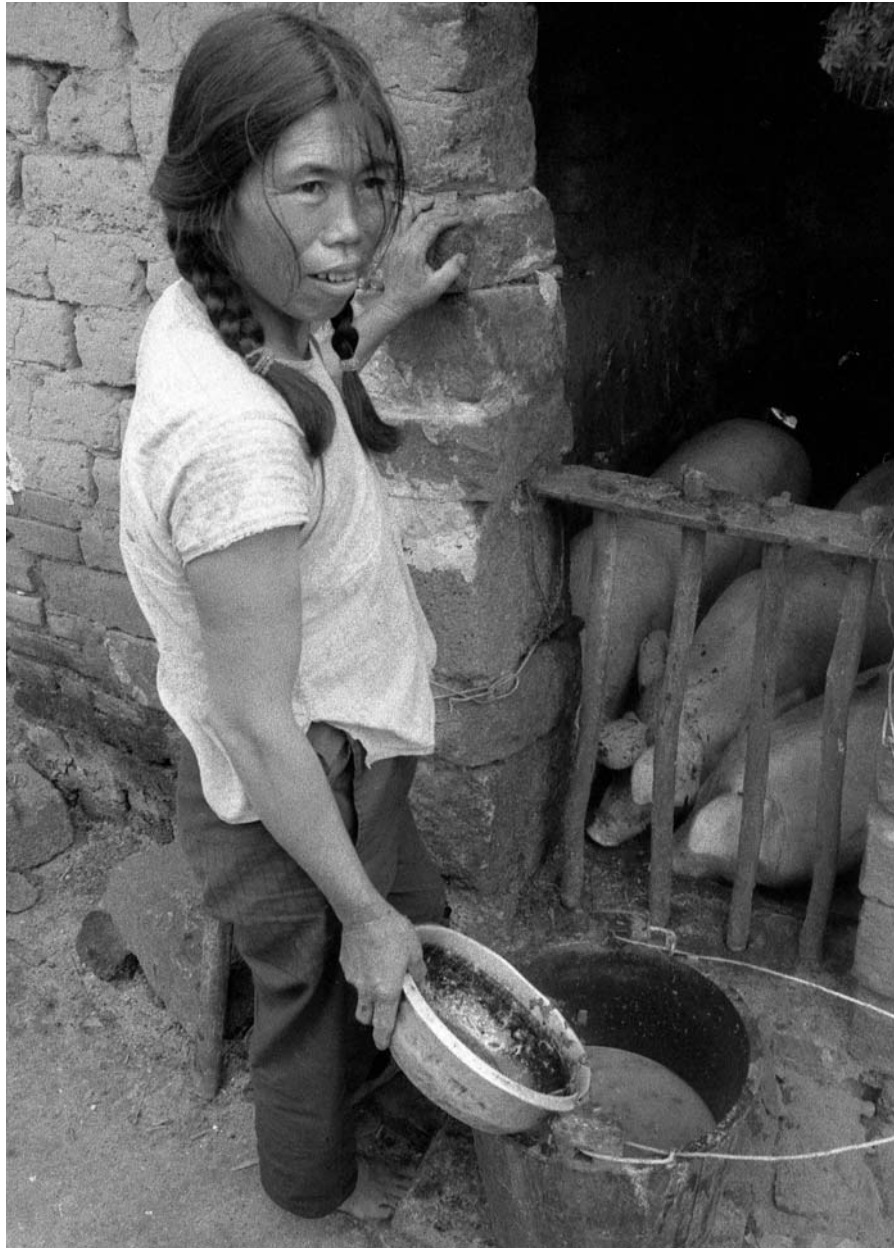


III



The Cow Lady

She guides her bulls along the narrow road that bisects the lowland fields. The light is clear and sharp today, the sky perfectly blue and cloudless.

The bulls move in formation toward the hills rising above the lowland fields, casting long deep shadows across the dusty road. When a bull strays from the path, she strikes him with a long stick.

Don't you dare, she shouts when a bull starts to feed on a bush. I'll kill you. You're so hungry you're going to die.

She leads the bulls to the sugarcane fields above the lowland rice paddies, ties them to a small tree, and gives them sugarcane leaves to feed on. She picks up a sickle and starts to strip leaves off the freshly cut sugarcane.

She says she has never had enough money to make a better life for herself and her family. She says her bad luck started when she came to Long Wan at the age of 19 to marry her husband. Her mother-in-law was sick and the family didn't have enough food.

In recent years life has improved and her family no longer goes hungry, but making a decent living is still difficult. She and her husband earn extra money raising and selling livestock, but their income still isn't high enough to cover the family's growing expenses.

She says she hasn't enough money to find wives for her three sons. Finding a wife for each of them will require at least several thousand yuan, she says.

The 45-year-old mother of five has other expenses as well. Her husband was recently hospitalized with a stomach ailment and the family didn't have enough money to pay for his treatment. Unlike many city dwellers, the villagers must pay for their own health care.

The operation cost a few thousand yuan. We had to borrow money from the village and now must pay it back with interest, she says. It's not good to be always poor. When you're poor you can't talk about being happy. To be rich is good.

The Good Life

Lu Qiu crosses the lowland fields carrying the hoe she'll use to weed her peanut field.

Rice seedlings glow bright green in the paddies. The lowland fields stretch to the horizon on either side of a dirt road that bisects the fields. Soon the villagers will transplant the seedlings to muddy land nearby to begin their final stage of growth.

For days the spring weather has been damp and overcast, but today the sky is clear blue again.

Lu Qiu says she is accustomed to laboring in the fields, but being used to it doesn't make the work any easier. Farm work is hard and everyone in the village knows it. If it were possible she would prefer a more comfortable job, but she has no choice but to work as a farmer.

If I wasn't a farmer I don't think I could find another job, she says.

Liu Qiu says she generally wakes up at five or six o'clock in the morning, though the time she rises depends on what needs to be done in the fields. In early April, when the rice seedlings need to be transplanted, she gets up early

and works till late in the day.

As soon as she wakes she prepares breakfast for her husband and three primary-school-aged children. After that she feeds the pigs and chickens. Once her chores around the house are finished she picks up her hoe and goes out to the fields to work with her husband.

The family grows rice, sugarcane, peanuts, and watermelons, she says.

What is a good life? She considers the question carefully before answering.

A good life means living in a beautiful house and eating meat or fish ¼ maybe chicken or shrimp - with every meal.

The house she lives in now is old and unattractive, and her family seldom eats meat or fish with their meals.

No, she says, her life in Long Wan isn't much like the one she imagines, though it's not that bad either. Many village women believe that living in Long Wan is better than living in other villages because there's always enough rice to eat.

Long Wan has more land than many other villages and can produce more food, she says. In Long Wan people have rice left over to sell for cash in the market.

In fact, some of the villagers are getting rich and building new houses, she says. Some are growing more sugarcane and raising livestock; others are earning extra money working outside the village.

Life isn't as bad as it used to be, she says. Before the reforms there wasn't enough rice, but now no one goes hungry.

Who Can Take Me Out of Here?

Chen Feng sits on a wooden stool in her village house. Late-day light filters through the windows.

Although she is more than 40 years old and has four children, she still has dreams of finding a better life in the city.

When I was young I wanted to marry a city man, she says. I wanted to escape from the countryside, but it was impossible. I married my husband because he was the village doctor. I thought he would give me a good life, but he couldn't take me out of here.

It's true that life in the village now is better than it used to be, but it's still not good enough, she says. In the old days her father died of sickness and hunger, but at least now there is enough food to eat.

If it were possible she would leave the village right now and find a better life in the city. If she could go to Zhanjiang she could maybe buy a house or a building. If she could go to the city she would not be so poor.

I'm always gloomy, she moans. I am never happy.

Chen Feng says that many village women feel as she does about living in the countryside. They dream of another life outside the village, but they doubt it will be possible.

The women work as hard as the men, she says. They do the same labor in the fields. They work hard under the rain and sun.

A farmer's life is especially hard for her because she suffers from a chronic bone disease and can only work for short periods in the fields.

But it's impossible for her to stop working now, she says. Her family has too many expenses. Her children's middle school tuition is especially burdensome, costing as much as 160 yuan a year. Paying for their children's schooling has become a burden for many village parents.

Chen Feng says it would be easier to accept the expense for schooling if she believed the children could one day use their education to find jobs outside the village.

But she doubts that most of them can do this. Most will end up living and working in the village as farmers. Few will have the chance to make use of their education.

Because of this many farmers see no value in educating their children, she says.

The young people want to move to the city because they think life in the countryside is too difficult and won't offer them a bright future.

Her eldest daughter recently migrated to the coastal city of Shenzhen and found work in a toy factory. Both Chen Feng and her husband agreed that it was a good idea for their daughter to leave the village for Shenzhen, a fast-growing city and special economic zone near Hong Kong.

But her daughter recently became ill and returned to Long Wan because she missed her family. She thinks Shenzhen is too far away from home, she says.

Chen Feng's husband listens disapprovingly as his wife complains about her life in the village. A tall, stern-looking man, her husband is the village's traditional Chinese doctor. In recent years his reputation has suffered because many villagers no longer have faith in his ability to cure people.

He sits on a stool smoking a water pipe, eyeing his wife suspiciously as she speaks.

All this talk is useless, he blurts out. Talking like this won't make it any easier to leave the village.

But his words fail to silence her. She continues to talk despite his warning, albeit less volubly than before.

We seldom talk to each other, she says. We are always too busy working.

Chen Feng says that she and her husband are equals; they do the same work and make decisions together.

She asks him jokingly who makes the important decisions, but he continues to sulk, refusing to answer her question.



