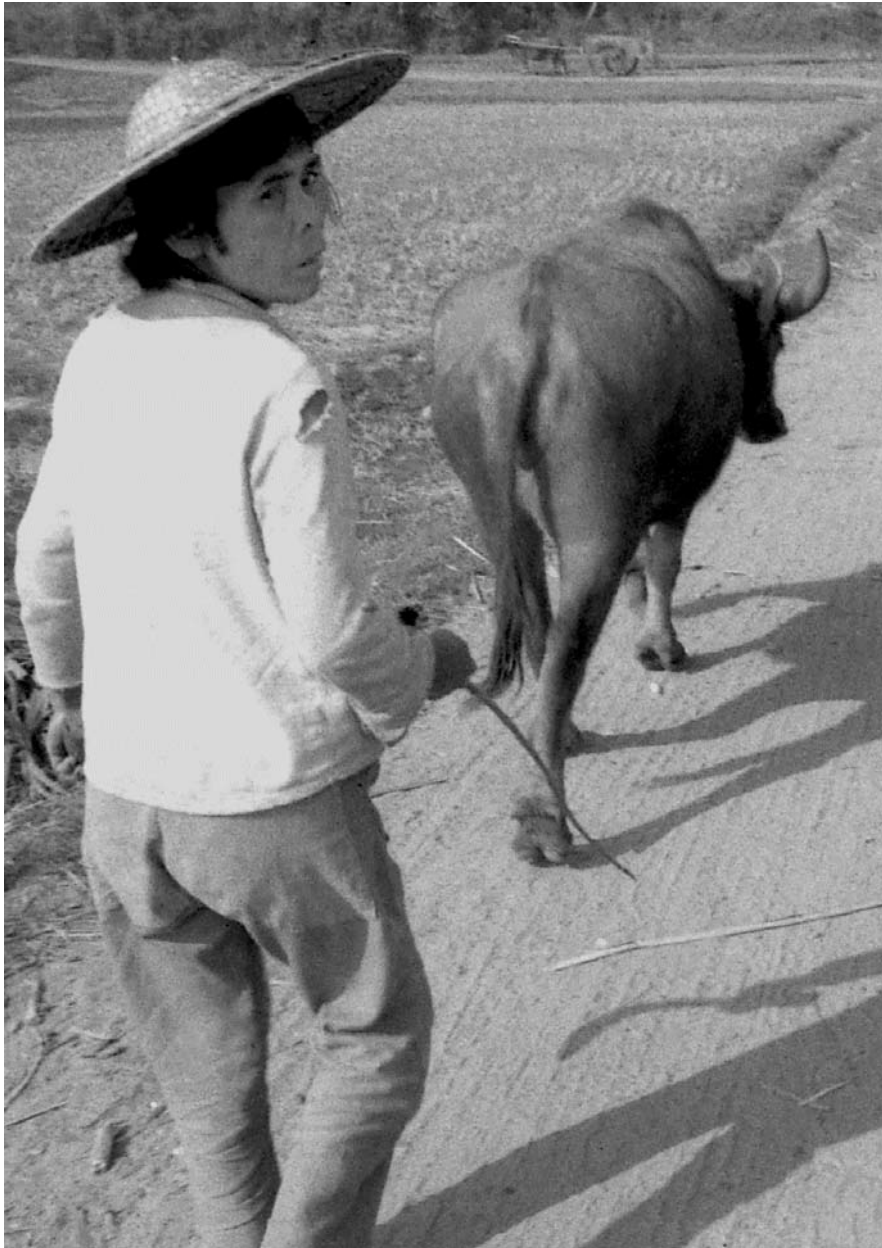


XIV



Village Wives, Village Mothers

Xu Mei

Xu Mei sits in the front room of her crowded village house. Her son stands beside her, listening, and her daughter peeks through an opened bedroom door, afraid to show her face because of a disfiguring skin condition.

The sky darkens as thunderclouds move overhead; almost every day rain and thunder arrive in the afternoon.

Xu Mei, 39, has lived in Long Wan for 11 years. She lives with a large extended family that includes her husband's parents and brothers and sisters.

She says she and her husband are equals and discuss everything, but it's her husband's parents who have the ultimate authority in the family.

It's hard to say if life here is good or bad, she says. No one likes to work in the fields. We just have to do it.

If she had the chance she would prefer to work outside the village because just about any job would be better than working in the fields.

These days everyone talks about finding new ways to increase their income. The villagers are earning more money but their expenses - the cost of fertilizer, for example - continue to rise, she says.

This time of year everyone is busy in the fields harvesting the rice. This year's crop is neither very good nor very bad. Rainfall has been adequate so it can't be too bad, she says.

Xu Mei is resigned to her life as a farmer and doesn't expect much more from her life than what she has now. She places all her hope in her children. She says she wants them to attend college and perhaps have their own businesses someday. She wants them to earn more money and have a better life.

Zheng Yu Mei

Zheng Yu Mei stands at the gate of a muddy pigpen pouring feed for the animals to eat. In most village families it's the women who feed the pigs and chickens.

Zheng Yu Mei has been a resident of Long Wan for 27 years and is the mother of four sons and a daughter.

Every day she wakes up at 5 or 6 a.m. to cook breakfast for her family.

Although only one son and his family are at home now, she still has a lot of work to do each day. After the family has finished eating breakfast, she goes out to feed the pigs. Later, she joins her husband in the fields to help with the farm work.

In her family, her husband makes most of the decisions. Men have more power than women, she laughs, though she quickly adds that she shares equally in the work.

During the planting season, the family starts work at about 8 a.m. and doesn't return home until about seven in the evening.

Her life in the village revolves around planting, growing, and harvesting the crops. There is nothing more important than assuring that the year's harvest will be a good one, she says.

Just about everyone in the village feels the same way. The farm work is at

the center of their lives and what they often talk about when they visit each other's homes.

Their lives are guided by the cycles of the lunar calendar. For thousands of years it has been this way. Year after year the pattern repeats itself.

They spend their days caring for their plants, caring for their growing children.

The young people want to leave the village and find work in the city if they can, says Zheng Yu Mei.

But leaving Long Wan means that many village families won't have enough hands to do the farm work, she says. It's not easy to earn money in the village, but it will be even harder if a family doesn't have enough people to do the work. A family often has either too few workers or too little land. To do the farm work, she says, a family really needs two sons, but the government says we can have only one son.

Why do they have to control the population in the countryside? she asks. Why can't they let us be? If the farmers can support their children, why should the government try to keep them from having more?

Why do they have to sterilize people? If a woman is sterilized, she can no longer do the heavy work in the fields, she says.

Zheng Yu Mei says the adults often try to talk the young people out of leaving Long Wan, but there's really not much they can do to stop them if they really want to leave.

She says her son wants to go to college and start a new life in the city. He failed the college entrance exam once but has decided to retake the exam. He refuses to give up his dream, she says.

Zheng Yu Mei wants her son to go to college and find work in the city despite worrying that she won't have enough hands to help out with the farm work if he succeeds in doing this.

Free in the Countryside

A young woman stands in the living room of her house and agrees to answer my questions. But just as she is about to speak her husband enters the house and orders her to stop talking to the foreigner.

The woman immediately stops talking and leaves the house with an older woman who appears to be her mother-in-law.

Twenty minutes later the same woman is walking with her daughter and the older woman near the ancestral temple at the edge of the lowland fields. Although her husband ordered her to stop talking when he walked into the house, she agrees to answer my questions now that he is gone.

She says she came to Long Wan from a village in Guanxi Province. A friend introduced her to her husband and she moved to Long Wan to live with him.

She has two daughters now and works every day in the fields. She says she and her husband are equals and generally discuss everything before making decisions.

She says she is content to live in the countryside because she's free to do as she pleases. People who live in the city have to go to work at a specific time each day, but the villagers don't adhere to such rigid schedules.

She says this is what she most enjoys about her life in Long Wan and doesn't

want to give up.

Washing

It's a warm fall afternoon and a group of village women are washing clothes at a spring in the middle of the rice fields.

They spread their work clothes out on slabs of stone and scrub them hard with soap to remove the deeply engrained dirt. The women wear wide-brimmed hats to protect their faces from the sun. The women are happy today, laughing and joking as they wash their clothes.

A young woman says she has lived in Long Wan for about five years and has no complaints about her life here: she has enough money to spend and there's always plenty of food.

If the harvest is good then the people are happy, she says.

If there's harmony in the family then the women will have a happy life, says a grandmother sitting beside her. The most important thing is for the family members to get along well with each other.

Parents should teach their children to listen, she says. They should teach them to be obedient and live peacefully with others.

Weeding

She crouches in a field weeding a watermelon patch: it's late afternoon and Huang Shao Fang works alone in the empty fields.

The men and the women do the same work, but the men have more power in the family, she says. Her father-in-law has the last word when important decisions need to be made in her family.

She says she makes her own decisions when it comes to small matters that arise in the fields, but for important decisions she prefers to let the men decide.

I don't think I know how to make decisions, she says. It's a tradition for the men to make the decisions and the women to obey. Women generally aren't good at making decisions, except perhaps in the kitchen.

Huang Shao Fang says village life has been improving in recent years. So I am quite content with my life now, she says.

TV Nights

A young woman complains that her friends seldom visit her at home now. Many villagers have their own TVs and no longer feel the need to go out to socialize or watch TV at a neighbor's house, she says.

In the past, villagers who didn't own a TV often visited the homes of neighbors who did. But now more people are watching TV with their families, she says. Before TV came to the village, the neighbors spent more time together.

Life moves much faster now, she says. People work longer hours. We hardly have the chance to get together because everyone is so busy working.

