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The Long March

The True History of Communist
China's founding Myth

Sun Shuyun

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SUN SHUYUN

Sun Shuyun was born in China in the 1960s. She graduated from Beijing University and won a scholarship to Oxford. She is a film and television producer and has made documentaries for the BBC, Channel 4, and international broadcasters. For the past decade, she has divided her time between Beijing and London.

Ten Thousand Miles Without a Cloud

THE LONG MARCH

THE TRUE HISTORY OF COMMUNIST CHINA'S
FOUNDING MYTH

SUN SHUYUN



ANCHOR BOOKS

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Mao presiding at the opening of the First China Soviet Congress

Mao's calligraphy, Zunyi Museum

Mao and Zhang Guotao at Shaanxi, 1937

Red Army at Shaanxi, 1937

Bo Gu and others, Shaanxi, 1936

Zhou Enlai, Mao, and others, after Xian Incident

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The Xiang River

The Red Army's road out of Zunyi

Luding Bridge

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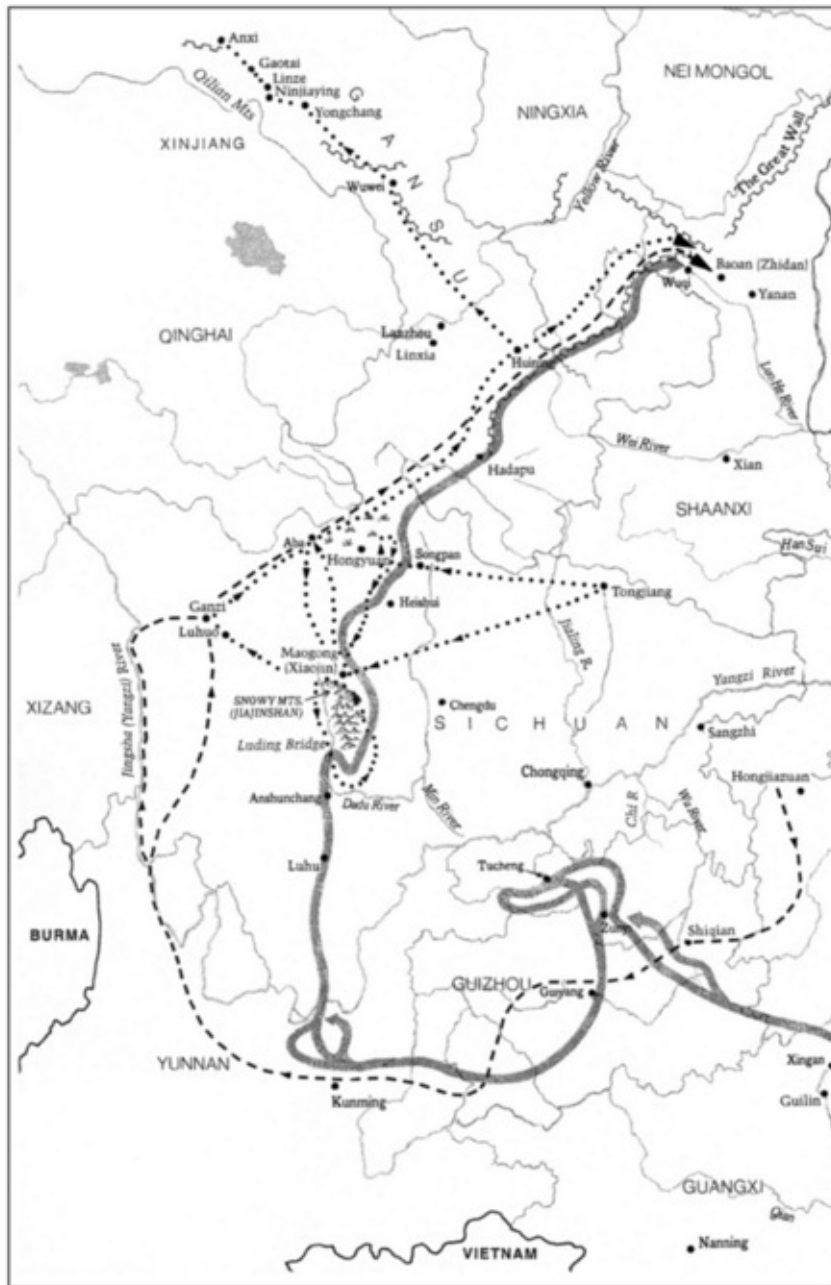
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Notes

I am deeply grateful to everyone who helped me on my journey and with this book, especially RHC, ever patient, ever supportive.



I was born to the sound of a bugle in the barracks of the People's Liberation Army where my father served; I grew up with stories of his battles. There were plenty—he was in the army for nearly thirty years. He joined up with the Communist troops when he was 17. He often said only they could help the poor in his village. He really felt for the poor. “In winter they dropped like flies,” he told me.

Father fought his way across the whole of China and helped to defeat the Nationalist government led by Chiang Kaishek, whom he called “a paper tiger.” On October 1, 1949, when Mao declared on Tiananmen Square that the Chinese people had “stood up,” my father thought he was finished with fighting. He planned to find a wife, have children, and settle down. But he was called to the Korean War; he told me, “We had to show the American imperialists our true colors, otherwise they would shit on our heads and take over our homes.” He got shrapnel in his back, and from early childhood, I saw him wearing a leather corset around his waist, like a saddled horse.

Fighting erupted again soon after I was born. The Cultural Revolution became virtually a civil war, employing every weapon except for planes. There were barricades in the streets, rifles, and cannons. Father was no longer with the army, but he was horrified to see our city turning into a battlefield, as if his former life was returning. My grandmother was just confused—she thought the Japanese had invaded again. To this day I still dream of the battles, whose gunfire I could hear outside our sandbagged windows.

It was not Father's personal stories that impressed me most. He talked about his experiences at war only when I begged him to. For him nothing was more exciting and revered than the Long March. Father was too young to take part in it, but his senior commanders were all veterans of the March. “The battles we fought were like child's play compared with theirs; the hardships we encountered were small dishes,” he told me. “The Marchers were outnumbered by their enemies one to a hundred, and they had nothing to eat but leather and grass. Yet they won! It was a miracle.”

As I started school, I began to understand the message he'd tried to drill into me: “If you find it hard, think of the Long March; if you feel tired, think of our revolutionary forebears. Surely nothing compares in difficulty with the Long March. In 1934, the fledgling Communist Party and its Red Armies, some 200,000 strong, were driven out of their bases in the South by Chiang Kaishek. Pursued, blocked, and harried by their enemies, they chose the only way out—to go where no one could follow, over mountains higher than birds could fly, across rivers where all the boats had been burned, through swamps and grassland death traps. It was Mao who steered the course from victory to victory. After two years of incredible endurance, courage, and hope against impossible odds—and a march of 8,000 miles—the Red armies reached the barren Yellow Plateau of northwestern China. Only a fifth of those who set out arrived—worn out and battered, but defiant. In just over a decade, they had fought back and launched the new China in the heat of revolution. In Mao's own words:

Has history ever known a long march to equal ours? No, never. The Long March has proclaimed to the world that

the Red Army is an army of heroes. The Long March has sown many seeds which will sprout, leaf, blossom, and bear fruit, and will yield a harvest in the future. In a word, the Long March has ended with victory for us and defeat for the enemy.

The myth was born, and it remains the enduring emblem of China today. For us the Long March is a story on a par with Moses leading the exodus out of Egypt. We can hardly escape it. It is enshrined for the nation in the musical extravaganzas *The East Is Red* and *Ode to the Long March*, and feature films of battles fought during the March are cinema classics. They take the idealism, optimism, and heroism of the Long Marchers and imprint them on our minds. The myth glows ever brighter with the help of two major adulatory accounts, both oddly, by Americans: Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China* (1936) and Harrison Salisbury's *Long March: The Untold Stories* (1985). With the imprimatur of the Chinese Communist Party, they make the myth close to impregnable.

Decades after the historical one, which according to Mao was only the first step in the Communist scheme, the nation has been spurred on to ever more Long Marches. But not everyone could keep up with the rigor of the Marches. Mao had almost all the veterans of the Long March purged in the Cultural Revolution—they were too old, and too unwilling, to obey his bidding. The Red Guards were the new Marchers.

The economic reform after Mao's death—another new long march to modernize China—saw the beginning of our newfound material prosperity. But for my father the changes were the abandonment of everything he had given his life to. How could the landlords and exploitative capitalists he had struggled against have become the new heroes, respected and admired by everyone? What he found hardest to swallow was that his generation was blamed for what had gone wrong. Still, I was shocked when I told him I had won a scholarship to study in Oxford, and he replied, "You might as well stay there; there is nothing here for you to come back to." My father died a bitter man, cremated in his Mao suit and wearing all his medals.

But whatever else has changed in China, few have ever challenged or even modestly questioned the Long March myth; it is just part of who we are. Nevertheless the questions remain: Was Communism the magnet that drew the poor in droves to the Red Army? How did the Red Armies supply themselves with food, weapons, and medicine? What happened to the four-fifths of the Marchers who did not reach the end—were they killed in battle, did they succumb to hunger and cold, did they desert, or did they fall victim to their own comrades? Was Mao the great strategist who never lost a battle? How were Mao and the Red Army finally saved? People have begun to ask such questions, but they are earthly matters. The Long March remains the sun in the sky.

Books about the March fill yards of shelves, but they rarely ask all these questions, or provide answers. In 2004, seventy years after it began, I set out over the same route, to discover as much as I could about the realities beyond the myth. There is not much documentation remaining—so many of the records were destroyed as the Armies fled. Quite a few generals have published their memoirs, but real scholarship is rare. Of the 40,000 original survivors, perhaps 500 are still alive, and they are now in their eighties and nineties. Most are just ordinary people who were left behind or managed to reach the end, but the

still have much to tell us.

I traveled mainly by train and bus. It is still a daunting journey, through areas little changed to this day—inaccessible, and desperately poor and undeveloped—but I saw enough to know that nothing can possibly compare with what the Marchers endured. My challenge was to find survivors and unlock their stories. I marched to the remote corners where they lived, sometimes 10–15 kilometers in a day, and up as high as 18,000 feet. The rough territory made me appreciate what the real Marchers went through, even though I was well fed and equipped, not worn down by a heavy pack and covering great distances day after day, month after month, on an empty stomach, ill-shod and poorly clothed, ambushed and bombed, in between battles with more mobile and better-armed enemies.

I managed to find more than forty veterans, happily with their memories still fresh and their spirits undiminished. Once I started talking to them, their stories poured out. Frequently, I would come back for a second or third day; they had so much to tell, and were so keen to tell it. I was intrigued, astonished, moved, and inspired. They retain the idealism and optimism that first drove them, and also their doubts, uncertainties, and fears. They touch the heart of the Long March: its bravery and sacrifice, its setbacks and suffering, and its self-inflicted wounds. Why so many supported the Communist cause also became very clear—as well as why many did not.

I record here the voices of these men and women. This is the Long March without the embroidery of adulation, and in all its humanity, as it was lived. It is not my story. It is theirs.

*I'm sending you to the Army my man, You must see the reason why
The Revolution is for us.
I'm sending you to do or die.*

*Here's a towel I've embroidered
With all my love to say:
Revolution for ever!
The Party you must not betray!*

The song pierced the silence of Shi Village, which nestled at the foot of a hill covered in thick bamboo groves. It was mid-October, 1935, in Jiangxi Province, southern China. The autumn harvest was already in and the land surrounding the village was yellow with the stubble of rice stalks, but some fields stood as if wasted, with grass sprouting in the dried-out paddy, already turning brown. A few water buffalo were plodding home, one stopping when they came to their favorite place, the village pond, where they drank, ducks and geese swam, children bathed, women washed their clothes, and men asked one another about their day. Nearby stood the giant camphor tree, whose overhanging branches gave ample shelter from the rain and intense heat of the South.

Today the water buffalo had the pond to themselves, and only the village ancestor shrine opposite showed signs of life, but not with pious prayers and hypnotic chants offered to the ancestors: only the revolutionary song calling on young men to join the Red Army. Through the imposing entrance topped by grey-tiled eaves, boys carrying spears rushed in and out looking solemn, as if they had been entrusted with the most important task of their lives. Two young women were putting a table and some benches outside the gate. As the song died away, more women came out, clutching shoes they were making out of cloth, calling the children, while others gathered up firewood from outside the gate, and went home to cook.

“Nobody is too tired to sing! Keep up the good work!” called Wang Quanyuan, the young woman who had just emerged from a house nearby. She had on a grey cotton jacket, the kind every soldier wore, tied with a rope round her waist, but its simplicity made her beauty stand out even more. She asked one woman to bring more benches, and then stopped one of the boys who was running by, and whispered something in his ear; nodding eagerly, he took to his heels.

Wang noticed the slogans on the white wall of the shrine, written in black ink but slightly washed out by the summer rain. “Down with the Landlords and Evil Gentry!” “Long Live the Communists!” “Long Live the Soviet!” “I mustn’t forget to tell them to repaint the slogans,” she murmured to herself, remembering that until four years ago she had no idea what Soviet was. Someone had told her that it was a foreign shop, and others said he was the brother of a famous Communist labor organizer. A warlord definitely thought so: he had posted a notice throughout the villages, offering a reward for the capture, dead or alive, of Mr. Soviet. In the local dialect, Soviet was pronounced *Su-wei-ai*, which meant “we,” so perhaps the Soviet was

our government, she once thought. Now she was actually working for the youth and women departments of the Soviet, a government of workers and peasants that had been set up by Mao and his Red Army in southern Jiangxi in 1931. Small as it was, with barely three million people in half a dozen counties, hemmed in on all sides by Chiang Kaishek's Nationalist troops, the Jiangxi Soviet had all the functions of a state. Wang was told that the Communist Party was working to turn the whole of China into a Soviet. That would be the day, Wang smiled, but then became very solemn. "Everything hangs on tonight," she muttered to herself.

As darkness fell, the bell hanging from the camphor tree rang out. Four giant bamboo torches lit up the pond and the gate of the shrine hall. Women, and a few men, old and young, gathered with several hundred people from nearby villages, summoned by Wang's Red Pioneers. She had also sent for half a dozen militiamen from the county Party headquarters. When they finally arrived, Wang stood up and delivered her speech:

"Sisters and brothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, the Red Army is at its most critical time now, with many wounded every day. But in a war, there is always winning and losing. If we stop fighting just because we have lost a few battles, our Revolution will never succeed and we will always be exploited by the rich. You are strong. Do you want to be trampled on for the rest of your lives? If not, join the Red Army now!"

There was no reply.

Wang nodded to the militiamen who were standing close by, and continued: "Don't be afraid. We will win. Use your brain. This village has hundreds of poor people, and only one or two landlords. Aren't we more powerful than them? All we need to do is to unite, but there is a traitor who does not want this to happen. He seems to care about you, telling you to keep your men at home, but if we all stay at home, our enemy will come, taking our land and raping our women. Is that what you want?"

"Of course not!" shouted the militiamen.

"Then let's bring the traitor out." Wang waved her hand. Two militiamen appeared from behind the shrine gate, each holding the arm of a man, followed by a third with a pistol in his hand. Silence fell and the villagers looked at each other speechless. The accused was none other than the Party secretary of their district, Mr. Liu. Suddenly, a Red Pioneer raised his arm, shouting, "Down with the traitor! Kill the traitor!"

"Tell me, what do you want done with him?" Wang asked several times.

"Kill him," yelled a militiaman.

"Kill him now!" a chorus of voices followed.

Two shots at point-blank range and Liu fell to the ground. Wang announced grimly: "This will be the fate of anyone who dares to sabotage the Revolution."

It was hard to believe, when I met Woman Wang, that she had ever done such things, or suffered more than I could bear to think about. She had started as the quintessential supporter of the Revolution. Poverty had made her family sell her into a marriage which she did not want; joining the Communists represented hope. Chosen as one of only 30 women to go with the 1st Army among 86,000 men, she survived and rose to head the Red Army's own women's regiment. A year later, she was captured, raped, and given to a Nationalist officer as a concubine—a "crime" for which she was denounced by the Party, remaining under a cloud

for the next fifty years. Still, she remained loyal to the Party, which she regarded as dearer to her than her parents. I remember thinking to myself after reading her biography: if there were ever a true Communist faithful, it must be Wang.

What better way to start my journey than by talking to her? I set out in October 2000, exactly seventy years after the Chinese Communist Party and the 1st Army abandoned their base in Jiangxi and began their escape from the Nationalists—the Long March as it became known. From Beijing I took the train, eighteen hours due south, and then after two hours more by bus through green-clad mountains and hills I found myself in Taihe in southern Jiangxi. It was a big town, with a grand new avenue, beautifully surfaced and complete with modern lighting—not many buildings yet, but looking for twenty-first-century growth. I wondered if I would have trouble finding Wang—after all, Taihe had a population of half a million people and all I had was her biography, which I had been rereading on the train. I took a rickshaw from the longdistance bus stop and mentioned Wang’s name hesitantly; I was relieved when the driver told me to take it easy. “What a woman! How many went on the Long March from Jiangxi? Eighty thousand? I guess not many of them are left today. Three hundred in this town, and forty in Jiangxi. If you come next year, they will probably all be gone.” He took me down the big avenue and then into the old quarter. Dusty, narrow, busy, and crowded, just like the photographs of provincial towns in the 1930s. I was dropped off next to a dumpling shop with a queue of hungry customers. Behind it was Wang’s courtyard, shaded by a pomegranate tree with its dark red fruit just bursting open. Beneath it, there she sat, looking gentle, serene, and elegant, belying her 91 years, and without a trace of the toughness of the Red Army commander.

She was not surprised to see me, a complete stranger, walking in off the street and wanting to find out about her past. My copy of her biography was a good enough introduction. She asked me to sit down and called, “Another visitor from Beijing!” A middle-aged woman came out. From what I had read, I assumed she was her adopted daughter—Wang was unable to conceive after the Long March. “You shouldn’t ask too many questions, she gets too excited. Last week we had a journalist from Beijing, and she talked so much, it made her ill. Anyway, it is all in there,” she said, referring to the book on my lap. Wang cut her short. “They think talking is a waste of breath, but they don’t understand. So many men and women died for the good life we live today and I want people to remember that.” She sent her daughter back inside for another biography, written by a local Party historian. “You might not have come across it.”

The daughter came out with the book and a tray of sliced watermelon. “Eat now, read later. I will answer all your questions. It will take you a few days—you see, unfortunately, I have had such a long life.” She took a mouthful of the melon, and smiled, as if it was the rarest fruit in the world and she was tasting it for the first time. Clearly she was keen to talk. She was quick and warm, and over the next three days she opened up like the pomegranate—I heard of the idealism, the hope, the suffering, the sacrifice, the harshness, and the courage of her life, like those of so many others. But Wang also painted in some of the shadows of her history, things that were almost against her nature to reveal, and more certainly at odds with the glorious stories of the Long March that I had grown up with.

Wang was born in 1913 in Lufu Village, not far from where she lives now. Her family

barely had enough rice for six months after the landlord took his exorbitant rent. From the age of 5, she roamed the mountains with her sister to collect wild plants to eat. By the time she was 11, her parents found her a husband, who offered to pay off the family debt of 200 kilos of rice. She was in the dark about the arrangement until the wedding day, when her mother dressed her in a bright red outfit, and put her on a palanquin sent by the groom. Her husband was sixteen years older than Wang, slightly retarded, and with so many smallpox scars he was nicknamed Big Smallpox. The villagers said a flower had been planted on a cow pile. When Wang saw him, she fainted, but her mother said the rice was in the pot, and nothing could be done about it.

Her parents' only request was that he would not consummate the marriage until Wang was 18. Meanwhile, she would work like a slave in his household. But he could not wait for seven years: he slept around and the wife of a blind fortune-teller bore him a son. Gossip spread around the village and Wang was so humiliated that she returned to her parents' household, hoping they would pity her and annul the marriage. No, you must go back, her mother told her. "When you marry a chicken, live with a chicken; when you marry a dog, live with a dog." It was fate.

When the Red Army marched into her village in the spring of 1930, she learned it was her fate. "Why do the landlords have so much land, while you have none?" a Red Army officer asked her and her family. "Why do they eat fat pork every day, while you don't see one drop of oil for a whole year? Why do they wear silk while you are in rags? It isn't fair! For every one of them, there are ten of us. If we unite, we are bound to win. What do you say? Join us. Join the Revolution!" She signed up on the spot, and her family received land, salt, rice, hammers, and tools, all confiscated from the landlords.

She told everyone about the benefits of the Communist Revolution, citing herself and her family as examples. And she did so by using the most popular method in rural Jiangxi—for songs. She set new words to the old tunes, not the usual love ballads but full of zeal for the Revolution. She was so good, she was given the nickname "Golden Throat." This was one of her favorites:

If we save the mountain, we'll have wood. If we save the river, we'll have fish to fry.

If we save the Revolution, we'll have our own land.

If we save the Soviet, red flags will fly.

In December 1933, Wang had some unexpected news. Her devotion and success in working with women and young people brought her to Ruijin, the Red capital, as the people's representative for the Second National Congress of the Soviet.

"Have you visited Ruijin?" Wang asked me expectantly. I said I was going to after seeing her.

"You should have gone there first. It was the capital! An old lady like me can wait. You know, we had a saying at the time: up north it is Beijing; down south it is Ruijin."

She did concede later, although very reluctantly, that Ruijin could not compare with Beijing. It was a typical southern town with good *feng shui*. The curving Mian River embraced it, and an undulating mountain range shielded it from the west, with a white pagoda overlooking it from the hill to the east. No bigger than an average county town, its four gates

and four roads leading in from them crossed at the center, and 7,000 people lived within its walls. Because Chiang had imposed an economic blockade with his Fifth Campaign, many shops had their shutters down. Local products such as bamboo, paper, nuts, and dried vegetables from the mountains could not be shipped out; salt, oil, gasoline, cloth, and other daily necessities could not come in. Those who broke the embargo were liable to punishment or even execution. The Nationalists reinforced the blockade with a Special Movement Corps whose members had every incentive to catch the offenders—they were rewarded with 5 percent of whatever they confiscated.

Wherever there were profits, there were smugglers: salt, medicine, gunpowder, and other much-needed items were transported, hidden in coffins, at the bottom of manure baskets, and inside bamboo poles. They even managed to bring in an X-ray machine in a coffin, with three dozen men and women pretending to be grieving relatives, crying their eyes out. The warlord of Guangdong also defied the blockade by secretly buying tungsten that was found in abundance within the Soviet. But it was like throwing a cup of water onto flaming firewood. Ruijin was feeling the pinch. Salt was the scarcest commodity; Wang did not taste salt for months, and out of sheer desperation she and her friends scraped the white deposits from the walls of toilets, and even from graveyards, and boiled them down.

Even today she craved salt. “I think I’m making up for the shortage all those years ago. You don’t know what it’s like, as if your body were made of cotton, or you were walking on clouds. I often fell.” I knew how deprived she felt when she invited me to join her, her daughter, and her two grandchildren for lunch. Had she not explained, I would have thought the daughter had emptied the salt pot when she was cooking. The chicken, the bean curd, the beans, and the soup were all so salty that I could barely eat them. I must have drunk a gallon of tea to wash the meal down.

All the hardship of daily life in Ruijin was forgotten when Wang attended the Congress on January 22, 1934. The Hall of Workers and Peasants, specially built for the occasion, took her breath away. She had never seen anything like it. It was not like a Buddhist temple; it was not like the mansions of rich people; it was not like shrine halls, which were normally the most impressive buildings in southern towns and villages. It was very grand, an octagon in the shape of a Red Army cap. Above the imposing main entrance was a big red star with a hammer and sickle on it, the emblem of the Red Army. The impressive scale of the interior matched that of the exterior: it was massive, with two stories, and it could hold over 2,000 people. She could not understand how they had built it, with a roof but no central pillar. And it was lit by these strange lamps that did not need oil. All it took was for someone to push down a black handle on the wall, and the hall was flooded with brilliant light.

Wang and the 776 delegates stood inside the hall, listening as a band played a rousing song, “The Internationale.” A tall, lean man with big eyes came onto the platform, and stood in front of the Communist red flag. The woman next to her whispered that this was Comrade Mao, the man who set up the Soviet. She had hardly registered the fact before Mao said, in his thick Hunan accent: “Comrades, on behalf of the Central Executive Committee, I declare the Second National Congress of the Soviet open. On behalf of the Central Executive Committee I give the whole body of delegates the Revolutionary salute!” There was thunderous applause from all, and Wang clapped so hard, her hands hurt.

Mao, founder of the Jiangxi Soviet Government, Zhu De, the Commander of the Red Army, and other senior Party leaders all spoke during the Congress. What they said was most beyond her—for example, she did not know where Tibet was and why Mao mentioned it in his report on the Soviet government. But she was really fired up by Mao's conclusion:

Our Congress is the supreme organ of state power of the whole country ... Our Congress will make the Fifth Campaign end in utter rout, develop the Revolution in the whole of China, extend the territory of the Soviet to all regions ruled by Chiang Kaishek's government, and unfurl the red flag throughout the country. Let us shout: Long live the Second National Soviet Congress! Long live the Soviet New China!

She could not get over this somersault in her life. It was like heaven and earth swapping places. One moment she was a poor country girl; the next she was a member of the supreme body which governed the Soviet. A folk song came to her mind, down to earth but true to her feelings:

*Light from lamps is no light
Compared with the brightness of the sun;
Fathers and mothers are dear
But the Communist Party is dearer.*

The most important day in Wang's life was April 17, 1934. With her right arm raised before the red flag, she made this solemn pledge to the Communist Party: "I will sacrifice myself; I will keep my promises; I will struggle against our enemies; I will fight for the Revolution; I will obey orders, and never betray the Party." She knew she would honor this pledge. She was even willing to die; without the Party, her life would not have been worth living. Mao's words on the Red Army Martyrs' Monument in Ruijin, built in 1932, were engraved on her heart:

In the great fight against imperialism and for land reform, many comrades have gloriously sacrificed themselves. Their sacrifices demonstrate the invincible courage of the proletariat and lay the foundation for the Chinese Soviet Republic. The worker-peasant toiling masses of all China are advancing, marching on the blood these comrades shed, to overthrow the rule of imperialism and Chiang Kaishek's reactionary government and win victory for the Soviet over the whole of China.

Wang was sent to the Party school, where they groomed future leaders, but she had hardly settled in there before she was called to the most urgent task of the moment: the recruitment drive. For the past four years since October 1930, Chiang Kaishek had launched five successive campaigns against the Communist base in Jiangxi. He started with 100,000 men for the First Campaign, thinking he would have no difficulty getting rid of a mere 9,000 Communist guerrillas supported by fewer than 2 million people, in an area of just 200 square kilometers. He likened the Communists, or the Red Bandits as he called them, to a locust trying to block the way of a cart—they were day-dreaming. But the Red Bandits gave him a taste of their ferocity and skilled guerrilla tactics—15,000 of his troops were captured in two months.

Exasperated, Chiang threw in more men and arms, and himself flew to Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi. He appointed himself Commander-in-Chief, but only to suffer more

humiliating and crushing defeats—he lost nearly 50,000 men to the Red Army in 1931 alone and another 30,000 in early 1933. After this, he vowed to wipe the Red Bandits out once and for all—they were obviously more than just a nuisance. In July 1933, Chiang began his fifth and biggest campaign: 500,000 men descended on the Jiangxi Soviet from three directions, equipped with the latest weapons from Germany, Britain, and America, and supported by 200 planes with 150 American and Canadian pilots.

Ten months into the Fifth Campaign, the Red Army lost over 50,000 men. On May 2, 1934, the Central Committee of the Party called for more soldiers for the front:

The decisive battles in the coming months will decide whether we live or die. These will be the last and most crucial moments for us to wipe out and kill the enemy. This is total war. Every member of the Communist Party, every worker, and every member of the toiling masses should prepare to shed his last drop of blood at the front.

The Party called for 50,000 recruits within three months. However, this was not enough, and September saw another urgent campaign with a target of 30,000, with each village, district, and county given fixed quotas. Wang was told to go to Gangxi County, which had repeatedly failed to reach its target.

Why was she given a hard case like Gangxi? I asked.

“To test me. To try me. To encourage me. As we say, good iron should be used for the blade.” I wanted to tell her that the Party chose the right person.

She walked from village to village, accompanied by Liu, the Party secretary of the district whom she had been assigned to help. What she saw shocked her. The villages were almost deserted, haunted, with little sign of life and very few young men around; some were simply abandoned, with the peasants having fled to the areas controlled by Chiang’s government. When she went up to an old man in the field for a chat, he yelled at her: “You are draining the pond to catch the fish. But you don’t understand, there are no fish left in the pond!” Liu took her aside, explaining that two of his sons had joined the Red Army five years ago and he had not heard from them since. Everyone was doing their best like the old man, Liu promised. The district had about 1,300 men between the ages of 16 and 45, and over 1,000 were either in the army or working for it as porters and laborers; the rest were sick, or they were from landlord and rich peasant families and so could not be trusted to fight for the poor. He did not see how his district could come up with another 45 men this time. But he would try his hardest.

The deadline came on September 27, and out of a quota of 4,000 for Gangxi, barely 700 had signed up; Liu’s district only came up with twelve. On September 28, she received an urgent message from the Women and Youth Departments in Ruijin. The deadline was extended to October 5: “This is the last deadline and must not be one minute late or a single recruit short.”

I asked what would have happened if she failed to meet the target. Would she lose face, or worse, her job?

She turned around and looked at me, surprised and almost annoyed by the questions.

“Lose face? You have no idea. People could lose their lives.” One of her friends had a quota of fifteen in a previous recruitment drive, but she only managed twelve. She was put

prison for sabotaging the Revolution. Her family all thought she was going to be executed, they even prepared her funeral clothes. But she was released after fifteen days, on condition that she would make up for her crime by meeting a double quota next time.

Did she not think the punishment was a bit extreme? The poor woman must have tried.

“Trying was not enough. You had to succeed,” Wang quickly corrected me. “You know what the Party said: ‘Failure in enlisting equals helping the enemy!’ I did not get it at first, but later I understood. If the Red Army had more soldiers, we would have been able to hold on to the base.”

In their drive to reach the targets, local officials often resorted to extreme measures. Shengli County insisted that all Party officials join up. Overnight many fled to the mountains—some even committed suicide—and there was absolute chaos. In the worst areas of Ruiji, those who refused to join the army were locked in dark rooms with their hands tied behind their backs. And no food was served to them—the soldiers at the front were more deserving. Wang’s department received any number of letters from the village women’s association complaining about the rough way their men had been treated. One letter read: “The Party secretary said there was a meeting in the village hall to discuss land issues. Many people turned up. Suddenly two men locked the door. ‘Sign up for the Red Army, or no one can leave.’ It was not until the early hours when some finally agreed, and they were taken off straightaway.” What shocked Wang even more was that some women activists promised sex to any man who would join. They did fill their quotas quickly, but she wondered how long the men would stay in the army.

I had always thought the peasants competed to join the Red Army—after all, it was to defend their land, their homes, and their children. Our literature, art, films, and school textbooks are full of stories and images of parents signing up their sons, wives persuading their husbands to fight, sisters making uniforms for their brothers, and young women seeing off their lovers to the front. I particularly remembered one metaphor: the Red Army was the fish and the peasants the water. The fish would be dead out of water, and the water would be poorer without the fish. The support of the peasants was the secret weapon of Communist success. As for forced conscription, I had always been told that only Chiang’s army used it.

Wang laughed when I told her that. She held out her hands and said: “People are different, just like my ten fingers. Many had suffered like me, and they begged to join the Revolution. Recruitment was not difficult at all in the early campaigns. But as the war continued, it got harder and harder. There were not enough men around. Also people thought we were losing, so they did not want to die for nothing. That was why we had to work on them.”

Wang was right. After five campaigns by Chiang’s troops in five years, both the population and the area in the Jiangxi base had been reduced so drastically that a Red Army officer said it was no wider than an arrow’s flight. In one year more than 160,000 men had been drafted into the Red Army just to break the Fifth Campaign. In fact, almost all the able-bodied men had already been enlisted. Mao did his own investigation in Changgang District in late 1934. Out of 407 men between the ages of 16 and 45, 79 percent were in the Red Army, very much as Party Secretary Liu reported for his district. Perhaps the old man in Gangxi County was right: the Party was draining the pond to catch the fish.

“We had to defend the base at all costs. The survival of the Party required it.” Wang was

adamant.

She had been ordered to deliver her quota of forty-five men in October 1934. For the first time in her life, she was having sleepless nights. But Wang quoted another saying. "A man should not be made desperate by his pee." She had an idea.

She put on her jacket and went outside. It was drizzling, dark, and silent, with not even a dog barking: they had all been killed to stop them from giving away the army's movements. She tiptoed from house to house, alert for the sound of conversation. Suddenly she heard the voice of an old lady:

"Aya, such a dreadful day! How are the three coping on the mountain? Perhaps you should take them their bamboo hats."

"What's the point? They must be soaked by now," replied a woman, perhaps her daughter-in-law.

Wang listened for a while, and then crept quietly to another window.

"Party Secretary Liu is two-faced. In front of comrade Wang, he is all enthusiasm; behind her back, he bad-mouths the Red Army. What is he playing at?" asked a young girl.

"Stupid girl! Secretary Liu is thinking of us. The Red Army has been losing for the last six months. So many are being killed every day. If your brother hadn't deserted and gone into hiding, he would have been cannon fodder by now," grumbled a man, who seemed to be the father.

Now she understood what was going on. So there were still fish in the pond and birds in the mountains. If she could persuade them to come out of hiding, she would not only meet her quota, but also send much-needed men to the front. But what was she going to do with Liu? She thought about it and decided to send a messenger immediately to the county Party headquarters. Then she launched her plan of action.

At the crack of dawn, Wang dispatched a dozen Red Pioneers to the nearby village requesting everyone to come to an urgent meeting that evening in Shi Village. Then she went to the house with the three deserters. The old lady and her daughter-in-law looked as if they had had a bad night. Wang inquired about the men in the family and the older woman said that her son was away as a porter for the Red Army, and her two grandsons were fighting at the front. "We all do our bit," she added, poker-faced.

"By hiding in the mountains, granny?" Wang asked.

The old lady lost her nerve, and blurted out: "Yes, you give us land, but with no men in the house, what can we do with it?" She shrieked, pointing to her bound feet and her daughter-in-law's: "Thunder will strike women who work in the paddy. When your people called on our sons and husbands to join, they promised to send men to help on the land. Some turned up at the beginning, but they were more trouble than they were worth—you had to feed them and look after them. And soon nobody bothered to come. We haven't got much of a harvest this year. We complained to Secretary Liu. He said we should go and loot, or get our men back."

Wang might have sympathized if she had not pointed to their bound feet. That made her angry. Under the Communists, women could not get married unless they unbound their feet first, yet these women refused to free themselves. She and some other activists on

attempted to straighten women's feet by force, but they soon went back to their old ways. In her eyes, they were like parasites, sitting at home waiting for their husbands to work the fields. They only had themselves to blame.

It baffled her how women could fail to support the Revolution. They benefited most—unbound feet, abolition of arranged marriages, violence toward women outlawed, and more roles for them in general. Their very happiness depended on the survival of the Soviet. When the New Marriage Law came out, tens of thousands of women immediately asked for divorce, remarried, and then divorced again. The local officials were so swamped by the paperwork, the Party had to pass a decree forbidding men and women from marrying more than three times, and they must live together for at least two months before they could register for divorce.

What surprised me was that Wang did not walk out of her own arranged marriage, as she had persuaded many other women to do. On the contrary, she promised her husband that she would fulfill her wifely duty if he signed up for the Red Army. He did so the very next day, and his happiness was doubled when he was allowed into her bed without having to wait for another two years and honor her mother's request. Why was that?

"Why not? The Red Army needed all the manpower it could get," she said in a seriousness.

"But you weren't happy with him," I said.

"What's happiness got to do with it? When so many people were suffering, how could you be happy? I couldn't," she reminded me, before she went inside to make more tea—her daughter had gone to the market to get things for supper.

A thought did occur to me, fleetingly: did Wang sign her husband up because she knew that would be the surest way of getting rid of him? As we say, bullets are blind. I was wrong. When she returned with the tea and biscuits, Wang said that her husband died from tuberculosis while she was busy recruiting in Gangxi County. He was desperate to prove he was worthy of her affection, and he exerted himself as a scout for the Red Army. His last words were: "Without seeing her, I cannot even close my eyes in death."

I was ashamed I had even contemplated such a thought. It would have been to misjudge Wang entirely. I could not think myself into the degree of dedication she had attained. For her, and many of her generation, personal happiness and physical desire did not count—they were submerged in the excitement she felt for the Revolution. Yes, she had another recruit and would be praised for it. But her innermost feeling was devotion—to the people and ideas that promised to lift China out of the oppression she saw all around her, and had been subjected to herself. I remembered the slogans and exhortations that filled our schoolbooks: "Communism is higher than the sky. Sacrifice everything for it." For me, they were just slogans; for Wang, it was faith.

My respect for Wang increased later when I pieced together how much she was up against from memoirs, interviews, and government archives of the 1930s—when the Communist Party was still quite open about its strengths and weaknesses. At the time, it was not unusual for women to threaten their husbands with divorce if they signed up for the Red Army. Others went a step further. Ruijin had a hospital for disabled soldiers and it became

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