

Chapter 5 – The 1960s

Two of the moments in this book meet in the Cultural Revolution. Shuangguan Yunzhu leapt to her death in 1968 (Chapter 4), and Wang Guangmei, wife of China's president, Liu Shaoqi, was denounced and paraded in front of a mass criticism rally in 1967. Both were woeful examples of the violent excesses of Mao's effort to revitalize the Party and China's revolution in the 1960s.

As will become clear in this chapter, the distinction between perpetrator and victim, between Party and cadre, is not so very clear. Wang Guangmei suffered in the Cultural Revolution, yet her Peach Blossom Experience – a report of her Party work team's visit to rectify the local leaders in a village – supported the sort of revolutionary violence and mass criticism sessions that, in the end, were turned on her. How did the Party come to such a state of affairs?

In 1958, the Eighth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China congratulated itself on a decade of success. This was not without some reason. China in 1949, when the Communists had taken power, was war-ravaged, with a broken economy and a starving population. The Party had restored order and basic health, albeit at times violently. The life of Shuangguan Yunzhu reflects that the Party had some success in building its image of a New China and garnered the talents of a number of artists and intellectuals. Yet the sclerosis of the Soviet system, the institutional corruption, the lack of personal freedoms, and the depressed consumer culture began to take their toll. The limits of Party power to remake China were showing.

Mao refused to acknowledge this and led China on three great waves of "continuing the revolution" to save the CCP from the fate of the Russian Communists under Khrushchev, whose "revisionism" was replacing revolution with consumer goods. All three efforts failed. In early 1957 Mao turned to urban intellectuals to trim the bureaucratism of the Party, but the criticism from intellectuals turned out not to be limited to and aimed at local leaders, but rather was systemic and aimed at the Party itself. This spring of "a hundred flowers blooming" turned into brutal purge that summer and fall of intellectuals – and even of loyal Party members – who had headed

the call to criticize Party bureaucratism. This became the Anti-Rightist campaign of 1957–1958 in which thousands of intellectuals were packed off to prison camps. Next Mao turned to the peasants and his “Great Leap Forward,” an ill-conceived forced production campaign that resulted in the largest famine in modern history. Between 1958 and 1960 tens of millions of farmers died. One lasting impact of the Leap was the reorganization of rural land and agricultural production into collective people’s communes. Finally, Mao’s last revolution is best known as the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976, but it began with the Four Cleans movement in 1964 – exactly the scene of Wang Guangmei’s Peach Blossom Experience. Through all these radical campaigns, and despite the growing casualty list, the authority of Mao and the Party kept leaders like Wang Guangmei willing to follow Mao’s ideas and blunted the attempts of any to resist. Mao had succeeded in reuniting China when all doubted it could be done. Now, not even his comrades could stop him as he drove China to the brink.

5 THE 1960s

Wang Guangmei and *Peach Garden Experience*

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Introduction

In the spring of 1967, China's former first lady, Wang Guangmei, was paraded onto a stage before a jeering crowd of half a million people to suffer public humiliation for her "bourgeois" crimes. Despite her repeated protestations, Wang was forced for the occasion to don a form-fitting dress festooned with a garland of ping-pong balls to mock the elegant silk *qipao* and pearl necklace ensemble that she had worn only a few years earlier while accompanying her husband, now disgraced president Liu Shaoqi, on a state visit to Indonesia. William Hinton describes the dramatic scene at Tsinghua University in Beijing, where the struggle session took place:

A sound truck had crisscrossed the city announcing the confrontation, posters had been distributed far and wide, and over three hundred organizations, including schools and factories, had been invited. Some had sent delegations, others had simply declared a holiday, closed their doors, and sent everyone out to the campus. Buses blocked the roads for miles and the sea of people overflowed the University grounds so that loudspeakers had to be set up beyond the campus gates . . .

At the meeting Wang [G]uangmei was asked to stand on a platform made of four chairs. She stood high enough so that tens of thousands could see her. On her head she wore a ridiculous, wide-brimmed straw hat of the kind worn by English aristocrats at garden parties. Around her neck hung

a string of ping-pong balls ... A tight-fitting formal gown clung to her plump body and sharp-pointed high-heeled shoes adorned her feet. The whole outfit was grotesque ...

The masses ... shouted angry slogans, "Down with cow-devils and snake-gods! Carry through the revolution to the end!" These shouts from tens of thousands of throats rolled through the campus and surrounding district like sea waves. They pounded the plump figure of Wang [G]uangmei in her straw hat and her ping-pong ball necklace until it seemed she could no longer stand, but stand she did and the meeting went on ... The mass confrontation with Wang [G]uangmei marked the high point of the repudiation of capitalist-roaders in Peking.¹

Shortly after this event, which was among the largest and most spectacular of the countless struggle sessions to occur during Mao's Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, Wang Guangmei was packed off to prison. It would take a sea change in the Chinese political landscape before she was finally released twelve years later. Wang Guangmei's tribulations reflected the brutality of the most turbulent decade of Mao's tumultuous rule, a period marked by wave after wave of state-mobilized mass campaigns. But Wang was no innocent bystander in this vicious chapter of PRC history. Renowned for her intellect and acumen as well as her elegance, she was a key protagonist in the political conflicts of the 1960s that culminated in the cruelty and chaos of the Cultural Revolution.

Background

Wang Guangmei was born in 1921 into an affluent and educated family in Peiping (as Beijing was known between 1928 and 1949). Her father, who had studied business administration at Waseda University in Japan, served as a government official under various pre-Communist Chinese regimes. Her mother, schooled at a progressive academy for girls in Tianjin, encouraged her three sons and five daughters to aspire to a high level of pedagogical and professional achievement. Inspired by her childhood heroine, Marie Curie, Wang Guangmei dreamed of becoming a scientist. She attended Furen University, a German Catholic

institution in Peiping, where she studied the science of optics and cosmic rays. An outstanding student, Wang Guangmei was the first woman in China to earn a graduate degree in atomic physics. After completing her MA at Furen, she received offers of admission to doctoral programs at Stanford and the University of Chicago.

Instead of going abroad to pursue a PhD in physics, however, Wang decided to accept the invitation of an acquaintance in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) underground to serve as an interpreter for the CCP mission to the Executive Headquarters, the organization in Peiping that was established at the end of World War II by General George C. Marshall as a vehicle for negotiating a cease-fire to the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists. When that work wrapped up after a few months, she requested and received permission to proceed to the Communists' revolutionary capital of Yan'an. Fluent in Russian and French as well as English, she worked for several months as a translator in the Foreign Affairs Department of the CCP. Then in the spring of 1947, Wang, like thousands of other young intellectuals whose patriotism and idealism had led them to Yan'an, was dispatched to the countryside as a member of a land reform work team charged with mobilizing revolution in villages under Communist control. Thanks to her computational skills, Wang was assigned the job of compiling the registers that recorded the seizure and transfer of land and other property from landlords to poor peasants.

The Jinsui base area in northern China where Wang Guangmei spent the next year was known for exceptional bloodshed in the land reform campaign. Several high-ranking CCP leaders – including her future husband, Liu Shaoqi, as well as Mao's personal henchmen, Kang Sheng and Chen Boda – were sent there from Yan'an to correct initial errors of “peaceful land reform.” Thanks to their forceful intervention, Jinsui's originally nonviolent style of land redistribution was superseded by a particularly vicious approach. The richest landlord in the county where Wang lived and worked, Niu Youlan, was a strong supporter of the revolution who had been personally hosted by Mao in Yan'an and had written glowingly of the Communist movement. Niu had even turned over his sizeable estate to the Party to use as its local headquarters. In the fall of 1947, however, Niu was made the prime target of a struggle session attended by over 5,000 people. Playing on the fact that the

character for the surname Niu (牛) also means “cow,” his accusers subjected Niu Youlan to bestial treatment normally reserved for livestock. They branded his flesh with a burning-hot iron, forced a metal ring through his nose and had his son (a revolutionary activist who became vice minister of finance in the PRC) lead him around on a rope. Niu Youlan died in detention just a few days later.

Wang Guangmei herself was not directly involved in mobilizing peasants to engage in land reform struggle sessions, in part because her educational background qualified her for office work but also because she was utterly unable to communicate in the local dialect. Her fluency in three foreign languages was of no help in deciphering the northwest Shanxi dialect. She was assigned an interpreter, who recalled that getting the peasants to understand Wang’s standard Chinese proved even more challenging than getting them to attack landlords!

Despite the formidable linguistic barrier, Wang deemed her land reform experience extremely valuable. Having been raised as a cosseted urban intellectual, she would later credit her year on a rural work team with instilling lessons in personal discipline and practical politics that she could never have obtained from reading books in the sheltered comfort of her Beijing home. Wang’s time in the countryside brought other life-changing opportunities, too. Liu Shaoqi, whom she had met briefly at dance parties in Yan’an, showed a personal interest when they encountered one another again in Jinsui. The following year, in August 1948, the couple was married in the interim Communist capital of Xibaipo. Although Wang Guangmei was Liu Shaoqi’s fifth wife, and twenty-three years his junior, she immediately became a partner in work as well as life. Wang joined the Communist Party and took on an important political role as Liu Shaoqi’s personal secretary.

After Liu Shaoqi was named president of the PRC in 1959, a position that put him in charge of government operations, Wang Guangmei accompanied her husband on a series of high-profile state visits to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Burma, and Indonesia. She joined him on domestic expeditions as well. In the spring of 1961 Wang accompanied Liu for a month on a work team dispatched to his native province of Hunan to investigate rural conditions in the wake of the terrible Great Leap famine that had claimed tens of thousands of lives. On this occasion, Liu urged his wife to get close to the

peasants by conducting house-to-house visitations. She found herself frustrated again by being unable to communicate in the local dialect. She did, however, take note of Liu Shaoqi's warning that grassroots cadres were trying to conceal information from the work team and that to get at the truth it would be necessary to organize mass struggle sessions among the villagers rather than simply convene group discussions or listen to summary reports from officials.

Wang Guangmei remembered these admonitions two years later when Liu Shaoqi suggested that she venture down to the countryside again to participate in the Socialist Education Movement (or Four Cleans, as it was more commonly called), a state-mobilized anticorruption campaign that was then gearing up. Liu did not volunteer a reason for suggesting that his wife decamp to a rural village without him, but he was sixty-five years old and in poor health. Like others in the top leadership, Liu was heavily dependent on daily doses of sleeping pills; he had already suffered several serious falls while under the influence of the drug.² Wang suspected that her husband was grooming her for a day when he would no longer be around, so she might be capable of taking independent political action.

Peach Garden Experience

With three young children to worry about in addition to her husband's declining health, Wang Guangmei was initially reluctant to be separated from her family in Beijing. Other members of Liu Shaoqi's staff advised against the idea, as did Premier Zhou Enlai. Liu continued to insist, however, and eventually Wang felt she had little choice but to comply. Having participated in rural work teams in the past, she began to look around for a suitable Socialist Education work team to join. This time she was determined to select a location where she could understand the local dialect well enough to communicate directly with the peasants. She set her sights on the surrounding province of Hebei. It promised the dual advantage of an intelligible patois and proximity to Beijing, enabling her to return home quickly in case of need. Before finalizing things, she sought Chairman Mao's blessing. At a dance party in Zhongnanhai, she told Mao of her plan to go to a village in Hebei for an extended period to "squat on a point" (蹲点) and implement the Four Cleans. He responded, "Good!"³

Thus reassured, Wang met with the Party Secretary of Hebei Province to decide on the destination for her sojourn. He suggested joining a work team bound for a village in Funing County, one of two counties designated as provincial “test points” for conducting the Four Cleans campaign. Wang was familiar with Funing, having visited it on several occasions when staying at the nearby seaside resort of Beidaihe, where the top leadership repaired each summer to escape the Beijing heat. She readily agreed to the recommendation.

Despite these amenable arrangements, Wang was seized with doubts when she headed off on her mission. She would later recall:⁴

As I walked away clutching my suitcase, I glanced back and saw Shaoqi still standing there in the doorway of the office. Knowing that I would be gone for a year, I felt uneasy. Since marrying Shaoqi, we had never been separated for such a long period. I had never left the family for such a long period. He was old and in failing health. He worked day and night. If I wasn't there, who would care for him? There would be no one to remind him to dress properly. He was prone to catching cold! What if he got up in the middle of the night and took a fall? Would the children's education not disturb his work? Who would take charge of all the household affairs? But things had already reached this point and it wouldn't do to delay any longer. I had to grit my teeth and, while looking back again and again, walk on.

Although she did not fully realize it then, Wang Guangmei's decision to participate in the Four Cleans presaged her debut as an influential actor on the Chinese political stage. Posing under a pseudonym as a cadre from the Hebei security bureau, Wang spent the next half-year “squatting on a point” and practicing the “Three Togethers” (三同) of living, eating, and working with the peasants of Peach Garden Brigade. According to her account, the dearth of televisions in China at the time meant that neither the 1,000-plus villagers nor most of her fellow work team members were aware of Wang Guangmei's real identity. Only a handful of cadres from the Hebei provincial security bureau who were responsible for ensuring her personal safety knew that the deputy head of the Peach Garden work team was actually China's first lady.

Initially Wang Guangmei found daily life in Peach Garden trying. While the local dialect was basically intelligible, other features of mundane existence were more difficult. The morning chore of fetching water from the village well proved especially challenging. She dropped both buckets down the well on her first attempt to maneuver a shoulder pole. But Wang eventually adjusted to the rigors and routines of rural life, and the villagers for their part began to open up in response to her probing inquiries about cadre improprieties.

After a few weeks of investigation, she determined that Peach Garden was plagued by two “black winds” of cadre malfeasance. First, cadres often resorted to striking and beating the peasants to enforce compliance. Second, they (along with most of the villagers) were addicted to the illegal practice of gambling. Further investigation revealed that local cadres had abused their positions by embezzling public resources for private gain. The work team convened a series of mass meetings at which cadres were instructed to confess their wrongdoing. After being subjected to the public humiliation of “flying swallow” treatment (in which both arms were roughly yanked behind their backs to resemble a bird in flight), the chastened officials admitted their errors and agreed to return or repay stolen goods and money. This process was known as “taking a bath.” The “fruits of struggle” were then distributed among the villagers at large. Seeing the financial benefit of cadre “baths,” some villagers suggested convening a “mass bath” as well. At these sessions, ordinary villagers confessed to petty thefts and other infractions. Tools, kitchen utensils and other stolen objects were remitted to the collective and in many cases reunited with their original owner.

Midway in the work team’s Peach Garden sojourn, team members returned home to celebrate the lunar new year holiday. On this occasion Wang Guangmei again took advantage of a gala at Zhongnanhai to seek Mao’s guidance. While dancing with the chairman, she expressed disappointment at the peasants’ reluctance to expose the full extent of cadre misbehavior. Mao advised her not to be so detached and impassive and suggested that she should convene a huge struggle meeting with thousands of people and enough excitement and fanfare to “mold public opinion.”⁵

Buoyed by this encouragement, Wang returned to Peach Garden Brigade determined to press forward with a militant crusade.

Drawing on her own experience during the land reform campaign, she stressed that the work team's primary task was an all-out mass mobilization of ordinary villagers to engage in struggle against "class enemies." Revolutionary techniques that had previously pitted peasants against landlords in an often bloody process of land redistribution were now to be deployed against Communist cadres themselves.

Because the land reform campaign in this part of Hebei had been conducted with minimal violence and loss of life, Wang suspected that it had failed to thoroughly identify class enemies. The work team therefore mobilized the youth in Peach Garden to research and write up family and village histories intended to reveal concealed property. Five landlord households and two rich peasant households were found to have escaped detection in land reform. More alarming, still, these "hidden class enemies" were accused of exercising influence over the local cadres and the Party branch. Although central Party guidelines at the time held that more than 95 percent of village cadres were reliable, the Peach Garden work team forced thirty-nine of the forty-six cadres in the brigade (85 percent) to submit to mass criticism. When the Party branch secretary complained about the work team's harsh procedures, he was declared to be a "counterrevolutionary enemy of the people." The secretary and deputy secretary were both removed from office, expelled from the Communist Party, and sentenced to hard labor. County-level cadres challenged this verdict, but Wang Guangmei did not back down. To add insult to injury, she falsely accused the former Party secretary of keeping a mistress and smeared his wife as a prostitute who consorted with village bachelors. A new leadership team was selected by the work team; at Wang's recommendation, the militia captain was installed as the new Party secretary.

Shortly after Wang had completed her five-month stint in the countryside, she was asked to report on her experience at a gathering of central-level Party cadres. Her riveting account of the Peach Garden saga earned her other speaking engagements – not only in Beijing, but in Hebei, Shandong, Anhui, Jiangsu, Shanghai, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan as well. Recordings of the talk, which took a full six and a half hours for her to deliver, circulated even more widely. Considering this positive

reception, Liu Shaoqi – who had recently been tasked with command of the national Four Cleans campaign headquarters – proposed that his wife transcribe and revise her talk as a written document which he then edited. On September 1, 1964, after getting the green light from Mao, Wang Guangmei’s report – entitled *General Summary of One Brigade’s Experience in the Socialist Education Movement* and commonly referred to simply as *Peach Garden Experience* – was distributed as an official Party central document to all Party committees and millions of work team members around the country. At the time, Mao was so impressed by Wang Guangmei’s report that he recommended it as essential reading to his own wife, Jiang Qing.

Composed in the context of a nationwide campaign to combat corruption by reviving the revolutionary spirit, *Peach Garden Experience* provided a how-to manual for stirring up conflict and division in Chinese society. Key to this process was the identification and cultivation of allies at the grass roots who could be counted on to attack designated “enemies of the people” and enforce central Party priorities. While practicing the “Three Togethers” of working, living and eating with the villagers, the first job for an outside work team was to “strike roots and forge links” (扎根串连) – or develop a network of its own supporters among the masses who were not beholden to the local power structure. These grassroots allies, or “roots,” would reach out to like-minded members of the community to create a web of activists or “backbones” committed to carrying out the dictates of the higher-level Party and government authorities to whom the work team reported. They would in turn mobilize other villagers to participate in large-scale, emotional “speak-bitterness” struggle sessions at which “class enemies” were criticized and punished for their misdeeds. A major challenge for the work team was to “control the temperature” (掌握火候) so that these “class struggle” meetings could reach a blistering temperature without, however, boiling over and out of control.

Wang Guangmei opens *Peach Garden Experience* with a bold characterization of the socialist education movement as a “great revolutionary campaign” marked by a “sharper, more arduous and more complex class struggle than land reform.” She credits her previous time on a Land Reform work team as valuable experience, but criticizes land reform work teams for not having

understood the basic patterns and principles of mass movements. Drawing on her education as a scientist, she explains,

In the past, I studied natural science and have always felt that social science was more difficult than natural science . . . Thermometers indicate whether someone has a fever and other instruments measure other conditions . . . but there is no instrument to gauge the temperature of a mass movement . . . The art of leading a mass movement lies in knowing what to stress at what stage in the boiling process.

The first challenge, she notes, is to figure out with whom to “strike roots.” Unlike Beijing opera, “where the actor’s gestures, costume and makeup reveal immediately whether he is good or bad,” the outside work team cannot make an instant determination. The work team cannot depend on local cadres for information; it must conduct its own painstaking investigation. Moreover, a brigade work team need not limit its operations to the village level; it should investigate cadres at commune, district, and county levels as well. She concludes her report by depicting the Four Cleans as the antidote to Soviet revisionism; instead of Khrushchev’s policy of “peaceful evolution” in Russia she prescribes class struggle.

In interviews many years later, Wang Guangmei emphasized that the lodestar behind all her activities at Peach Garden Brigade was Chairman Mao’s admonition in 1962 to “never forget class struggle!” Her contribution was to develop a systematic method of “all-out mass mobilization” (放手发动群众) which established a direct connection between work teams and ordinary people that was beyond the purview of local Party and government officials. Work teams were not only expected to enlist mass involvement in policy implementation; they were instructed to investigate and intimidate recalcitrant cadres in the process. With outside work teams authorized to replace the local power structure, their numbers and influence expanded commensurately. In 1964, virtually every college upperclassman and countless cadres and activists were assigned to these large and powerful entities. When Liu Shaoqi declared that a requirement for higher-level Party promotion would be a successful record of “squatting on a point” and “striking roots and forging links,” ambitious Party members volunteered in droves for Four Cleans work team assignments.

Work team members underwent a lengthy training program in the policies and methods of the campaign before being dispatched to villages, factories and schools around the country. The struggle techniques detailed in *Peach Garden Experience* were a cornerstone of this instructional curriculum, eagerly studied and imitated by the more than three and a half million people (including more than one and a half million cadres) who participated in Four Cleans work teams. But Wang Guangmei's recipe for mobilization had detractors as well. And soon its fate became entangled in high-level political conflicts that caught Wang by surprise.

In January 1965 Mao Zedong began to voice complaints about the composition and conduct of the Four Cleans work teams. As the person overseeing the campaign, Liu Shaoqi (and by extension his wife) would suffer the consequences of Mao's growing dissatisfaction. At a central Party meeting in the Great Hall of the People, Mao launched an unexpected broadside against the tactics being employed in the Four Cleans campaign: "More than ten thousand people descending on one county, wasting time studying documents, not relying on the masses, acting secretly, striking roots and forging links, too detached and impassive, engaging in scholasticism, engaging in human wave tactics . . . Why do we need all these work teams anyway?"⁶

Tsinghua University

As the Four Cleans gradually ebbed only to be overtaken by the sudden onrush of the Cultural Revolution, the question of work teams continued to concern the central leadership. Mao's growing reservations notwithstanding, work teams had been the Chinese Communist Party's standard method of campaign governance since the days of land reform. Following the familiar CCP playbook, the Politburo Standing Committee in June 1966 approved a decision to send work teams to schools and universities to manage the increasingly unruly Red Guard student movement that had emerged with Mao's call for a Cultural Revolution. Unlike the Four Cleans, however, the Cultural Revolution work teams were dispatched in haste, with minimal higher-level direction or advance instruction. In just over a week, thousands of Party officials were assigned to hundreds of teams with unclear missions. The result on the ground was chaos and confusion.

At Tsinghua University the work team immediately removed the popular president and Party secretary, Jiang Nanxiang, who was also serving as China's minister of higher education. It proceeded to suspend all university officials and Party branch members from their posts, pending investigation and criticism. Refusing to acknowledge any genuine "leftists" among the Red Guards, the work team generated a hostile backlash from the incensed students.

Liu Shaoqi deputized his wife to investigate the chaotic situation at Tsinghua, where, as it happened, his daughter Liu Tao was also a student. After spending a couple of days reading the big-character posters of handwritten student and faculty criticisms posted across campus, Wang took up residence in a guest house near the university. Commuting to campus by bicycle each morning, and operating under a pseudonym, Wang served for more than a month as senior adviser to the Tsinghua work team. The Tsinghua work team was notable for conducting the most thoroughgoing purge of any university in the country. Only fourteen of the 206 top officials were spared labor reform; the majority were forced to perform grueling manual labor from morning to night with signboards hanging from their necks identifying them as members of a "black gang" of counterrevolutionaries.

With the university administration having been completely displaced by the work team, Wang's chief concern was to curb Red Guard extremism. She presided over several all-school assemblies where work team members squelched attempted protests by student rebels.

At the end of July, however, Wang Guangmei had the rug pulled out from under her when Mao declared his opposition to Liu Shaoqi's method of conducting the Cultural Revolution, accusing the work teams of having suppressed the student movement. Work teams were quickly withdrawn from all schools and universities, and Wang – after a brief stint serving potatoes in the college cafeteria as penance for her mistakes – retreated to Zhongnanhai. Radical Red Guards at Tsinghua, now feeling fully vindicated in their opposition to the work team, demanded that Wang Guangmei return to campus for a public reckoning. Premier Zhou Enlai intervened to delay the confrontation, but eventually the Tsinghua rebels – with higher-level assistance – resorted to deception to lure Wang back to campus.

Framed as an epic ideological and political struggle against the corrosive forces of “revisionism” that threatened to undermine Mao’s socialist project, the Cultural Revolution also had a more personal and less heroic underside. Just as Mao begrudged the expanding power of Liu Shaoqi following the disastrous Great Leap Forward, so Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, resented the outsized influence that Wang Guangmei enjoyed after the nationwide distribution of *Peach Garden Experience*. The Cultural Revolution presented an opportunity for Jiang Qing to turn the tables on her rival. In December 1966 Jiang went to Tsinghua to visit Liu Shaoqi’s daughter, Liu Tao. Presenting herself as the appointed emissary of “Uncle Mao,” Jiang informed Liu Tao that Liu Shaoqi and Wang Guangmei had both been deemed “counterrevolutionaries” and that she herself would have to choose between filial piety and Mao’s revolution. To ease the choice, Jiang Qing arranged for Liu Tao to meet her birth mother, a previous wife of Liu Shaoqi, who was only too happy to fill Liu Tao’s head with ugly stories about her father in his younger years. Once persuaded to sacrifice her father and step-mother for the sake of the revolution, Liu Tao helped her radical classmates at Tsinghua concoct a pretext to decoy Wang Guangmei from her Zhongnanhai home.

On January 6, 1967, Liu Shaoqi’s security guard received an agitated phone call saying that Liu’s younger daughter Liu Pingping had been hospitalized after breaking her leg in a serious traffic accident on the way home from school. Shaken by the news, Liu Shaoqi and Wang Guangmei hesitated over how to respond, knowing it was unsafe for either of them to venture outdoors at a time when radical Red Guards had vowed to seize them and subject them to struggle meetings. Before long, however, a frantic follow-up call warned that the hospital required Wang Guangmei’s signature for the emergency surgery to proceed; time was of the essence if Pingping’s leg were to be saved. Wang rushed to the hospital, where she was captured on the spot by Red Guards who spirited her back to Tsinghua for interrogation.

The first struggle session directed against Wang Guangmei turned into a fiasco when Wang’s deft ability to deflect the Tsinghua rebels’ questions allowed her to gain the upper hand. Refusing to answer unwelcome queries on grounds of national security, she repeatedly shot back, “This matter I can only discuss with

Chairman Mao or the Central Committee. I cannot reveal state secrets.” But three months later, Wang Guangmei was sent back to Tsinghua – this time with the approval of Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou – to face a much more intimidating round of criticism. By then the Red Guards had done their homework, with the help of Jiang Qing and others in the top leadership determined to destroy Liu Shaoqi and his wife.

The crowd of half a million spectators who gathered on the Tsinghua campus in the spring of 1967 to taunt the absurdly attired former first lady included some who had journeyed over a hundred miles. Cadres and villagers from Peach Garden Brigade who had suffered at the hands of Wang Guangmei’s work team three years before were among her most vehement accusers. In preparing for the mass struggle meeting, Tsinghua rebels had made repeated trips to Peach Garden to gather incriminating evidence of Wang’s “counterrevolutionary” activities. In the process, they learned that the work team’s decision to favor some Peach Garden cadres at the expense of others was not the result of unbiased investigation. It turned out that Wang’s choice of Peach Garden as her “squatting point” was not simply due to the intelligible local dialect. Both Wang Guangmei and Liu Shaoqi had visited the village back in 1958, while attending a summer gathering of the CCP leadership at the nearby beach resort of Beidaihe. When Peach Garden became part of the newly established East Wind Commune a month later, the couple donated a Soviet-made movie projector to the commune, in return for which Liu’s entire family was granted honorary membership. While ordinary villagers may have failed to recognize China’s first lady when she returned on a Four Cleans work team, that was not the case for the cadre whom the work team elevated to Party secretary at the expense of his local rival. He was the very person who had arranged for the exchange of the movie projector for commune membership. Now his persecuted adversary had a chance to even the score.

Other elements of the Tsinghua struggle session had a backstory as well. Wang’s outlandish getup was the product of sartorial suggestions from Jiang Qing herself. As it happened, Jiang had offered Wang Guangmei some fashion tips prior to her 1963 trip to Indonesia that the first lady cavalierly ignored. The form-fitting

silk gown, floppy straw hat and florid ping-pong necklace that she was now forced to wear was not only a mockery of her state-visit finery; it was vengeful payback from a nemesis of her own.

Denouement

When Wang Guangmei's agonizing day at Tsinghua finally ended late that night, she was returned to Zhongnanhai only to be jailed in a small room. Initially Wang Guangmei attempted to defend her activities at both Tsinghua and Peach Garden as a faithful reflection of Mao Zedong Thought, but she was eventually worn down by successive rounds of harsh interrogation and public humiliation. On August 5 a final mass struggle session, this time together with Liu Shaoqi, was conducted inside the leadership compound. Liu and Wang's youngest children later recalled,

We three children had been ordered to attend . . . We stood at the back of the crowd and were seized with sorrow and fury as Mommy and Daddy were brought into the hall by several burly men who pushed down their heads and forced back their arms into the "jet plane position." They hit and kicked Daddy and pulled on his thinning white hair to make him look upward for a photograph. Then they dragged both Mommy and Daddy into a corner of the hall just a few steps from us and made them kowtow in front of two huge cartoon-like drawings of Red Guards. Daddy's nose was discolored and his face was swollen from having been beaten. His shoes had been trampled and he was in his bare socks. But suddenly Mommy broke free and clasped Daddy's hand. Daddy ignored the kicks and punches and held on tightly. They stood tall, hand in hand, gazing at each other. That was Daddy and Mommy's final farewell.⁷

After a few more months held captive in Zhongnanhai, where she was assigned to hard manual labor transporting bricks, Wang Guangmei was transferred to the dreaded Qincheng Prison on the outskirts of Beijing. She was falsely charged with having served as a secret agent for the United States while working as an interpreter for the CCP mission to the Executive Headquarters. For the next twelve years Wang endured solitary confinement, under round-the-clock

surveillance. The most demeaning aspect, she later recalled, was that a window directly above the toilet in her cell subjected even the most intimate behavior to observation.

It was while in prison that Wang learned of her husband's death three years earlier. A lifeless Liu Shaoqi, suffering from either medical neglect or torture, had been found lying on the floor of a makeshift prison in Henan drenched in vomit and feces. Wang was informed of Liu's demise only because their children had written a letter directly to Mao, inquiring into the whereabouts of their parents whom they had not seen for five years. Mao scribbled a terse note in response: "Father is dead, can visit mother."

Wang Guangmei was finally released from prison in December 1978, two years after Mao's death. For the next three decades, she devoted herself to the posthumous rehabilitation of her late husband's political reputation and to philanthropy. In 1995 at age seventy-four Wang became founding director of Project Happiness (*Xingfu gongcheng* 幸福工程), an NGO to assist mothers living in poverty, which she endowed by auctioning off family antiques that had been returned to her after the Cultural Revolution. By the time of Wang Guangmei's death in 2006, Project Happiness had distributed over 400 million yuan in micro-loans to more than 170,000 mothers in need across China.

Conclusions

Wang Guangmei was a catalyst to the fiery politics that culminated in the inferno of the Cultural Revolution. But rather than simply point the finger of blame, judging her to be as much a perpetrator as a victim, it is perhaps more instructive to reflect upon the multiple contradictions and paradoxes that Wang's remarkable biography embodies. Raised in an elite family of means, she joined a peasant revolution committed to eradicating the very privileges that she had once enjoyed. Intelligent and well educated, she sacrificed a promising academic career for the sake of the revolution and of her husband's leadership role in it. A chief architect of "class struggle" under socialism, she was undone in the 1960s by the application of her own destructive tactics. Yet after the Cultural Revolution Wang reclaimed her dignity and purpose, repairing her husband's damaged reputation and drawing on her own inherited wealth for

philanthropic ends that befitted a scion of the Beijing elite. Such ambiguities were not unique to Wang Guangmei. They run through the biographies of many of the early revolutionaries. In some respects, Wang's eventful life exemplifies the ironies of Chinese Communism itself – a radical rejection of elite tradition that in the end reproduces much of what it ostensibly repudiates.

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