

ADDENDUM TO CHAPTER XII

The Changing Status of Chinese Peasant Women

Historian Ma Shexiang interviews Shen Jilan on changes in the social status of women in Xigou Village, Shanxi Province in the past 60 years

A brief introduction to Xigou village and delegate Shen Jilan

Xigou is a village located in the Taihung Mountains of Shanxi Province. It was a revolutionary base in the war against the Japanese and against the Kuomintang. Xigou had organized mutual-aid teams even before the founding of the People's Republic of China. When the Jinxing (Gold Star) agriculture, forest, and animal husbandry cooperative was founded in 1950 in Xigou Village, Pingshun County, Shanxi Province, it was one of the first cooperatives established in China.

Ma Shexiang conducted an oral history project in Xigou to record the history of early cooperatives. There, she met Shen Jilan, who had served as Vice-chair of the Jinxing Cooperative. In 1954, Shen was elected to serve as a delegate to the First National People's Congress. Shen is currently a delegate to the Eleventh National People's Congress, and is the only delegate who has served from the First to the Eleventh Congress. Through this interview we can gain a better understanding of how the status of peasant women has changed in a small village in the mountainous region of Shanxi Province over the last 60 years.

Ma: China celebrated the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic in October 2009. In 1947, when you were 18 years old, you got married and moved to Xigou. In 1951 you became the vice-chair of the later famous Jinxing Cooperative. Three years later in 1954 you were elected as a delegate of the First National People's Congress. At that time what were your feelings and what impacted you the most?

This interview was conducted by Ma Shexiang, a researcher at Wuhan Academy of Social Science. Ma is a well-known historian who has published 12 books, including one on Mao's second visit to Jinggang Mountain in 1965 as a prelude to the Cultural Revolution. Her oral history project on the agricultural cooperative movement is to be published as another book. Ma's research for this project brought her to Xigou Village, where she met Shen Jilan, a woman from the village who served as delegate from the First to the Eleventh National People's Congress. This interview, which I translated into English, was also presented at the Second International Feminist Congress in Buenos Aires, Argentina on May 22, 2010.

Shen: I was 25 years old when I was elected as a delegate to the First National People's Congress. Recently, I just turned 80. Before Liberation, a woman like me, who lived in a small village in a mountainous region along with tens of millions of women in the laboring class, never had a chance to go to school. In Xigou Village, there was not one single woman who knew how to read. In 1952, Pingshun County organized a group of literary people to come to the countryside to teach people how to read and write. Two male teachers came to our village and a female teacher named Zhang Gaimiao went to Wujing District. They were all unpaid volunteers. (In 1972 Zhang Gaimiao became the Chief of the Public Safety Bureau of Pingshun County. In 1982 she became the Vice Executive of Pingshun County, the first woman to ever hold that position.) During the illiteracy eradication campaign, we formed a small team of four or five people and gathered every night to study under an oil lamp. We called our team "Learning under lamp-light." We memorized characters and learned to read newspapers. At that time in Xigou all men and women under 40 years old joined the literacy classes. That was how I lay the foundation of my education.

All over China, so many people learned how to read newspapers through attending those kinds of classes. In the 1950s, the women model workers in our county were all products of those classes. By the 1960s, however, all women model workers had formal education. That was because after Liberation there were many campaigns aimed at establishing equality between women and men. Young girls started going to school and received elementary school and lower middle school education, because the tuition was very low. After they graduated, they engaged in agricultural production and many were selected to be model workers. During Mao's time our county had several scores of women selected to be model workers at all different levels—at the national, provincial, district, and county levels.

What we were doing—walking out of our own villages, crossing provinces and meeting people, was unimaginable for peasant women before the revolution. We became public figures. Take me as an example: if not for the Communist Party, I would have stayed, like many women of earlier generations, in this mountainous gully, limited to the kitchen and without much of a chance to see the outside world. The reason I could become a delegate to the People's Congress was because the Communist Party placed great value on agriculture and on villages like Xigou. If there had not been socialism and the collectivization of agriculture, it would have been impossible for me, a member of the cooperative, to be discovered, trained, and eventually become a delegate of the People's Congress.

Ma: You are right. It was after the founding of New China that the Communist Party opened up the spiritual world of a vast number of peasants, especially peasant women, through the illiteracy eradication campaign. At the same time the social status of massive numbers of women was raised through women's participation in production. I heard about the work you did in the early 1950s from my oral history work in Xigou and also from reading historical records, leading women in Xigou in the struggle for equal pay for equal work. It had a great impact nationally. Can you elaborate how the struggle started and how it succeeded?

Shen: Yes, of course. Xigou is located in the old revolutionary base in the Taihung Mountains. As an old revolutionary base, we started organizing mutual-aid teams and cooperatives earlier than the rest of the country. In 1943, Li Shunda, a veteran Party member, led us to organize the first model mutual-aid team in China. At that time I still lived in my home village—Nandi Village. In 1946, I married Zhang Hailiang, who was a revolutionary soldier, and moved to Xigou. Xigou founded the first elementary cooperative in December 1951. We held the election by placing a bowl behind the back of each member up for election, and everyone voted by putting a bean in the bowl of the person they wanted. Li Shunda got the most beans and was elected the head. I got the second highest number and was the vice-head.

We had 22 male productive members and 24 potential female productive members in our cooperative. We had to mobilize the female members to work in the field in order to accomplish the enormous amount of work to be done including planting and harvesting, work to improving the land, and any other work to increase production. If women had not joined production, it would not have been possible for us to accomplish all the work. My responsibility was to mobilize women to join production work. However, for thousands of years, young women in Xigou followed the saying “Good women stay home”—that their work should be limited to three areas: the kitchen, the bed, and the grain processing area. I was not very successful in my recruiting work, but I never considered that the unequal pay between women and men was one of the barriers in my unsuccessful work in recruiting women. When I went to one family, the woman complained that whether it was in the mutual-aid team or the cooperative, women always only earned five points for their work while men earned ten. She said that she could do better by staying home making shoes. I went to another family, and the woman there said, “My work-points are recorded together with my husband’s in the book, so the record does not show how much work I actually did.” The women told me that if Xigou cooperative was ahead of others in having women join production, women should earn the same work-points as men.

At that time Li Shunda was part of the Chinese peasants’ delegation visiting the Soviet Union, so I went to the Party Branch Office and reported to Song Jinshan about the women’s request. Song said that the request was reasonable and the Party Branch Office should support the women. However, an obvious problem was that men were physically stronger and were also better skilled. How could equal pay for equal work be accomplished? I made a suggestion to have some male members who had skills come and teach the women, and that women should be allowed to join the skill training classes. The Party Branch selected Lu Guilan, some others, and me to join the county skill training session.

When we got back, it was just in time to work in the wheat fields. Work needed to be done to thin the wheat and get rid of weeds in the fields. The cooperative allocated 35 *mu* (about 2.33 hectares) of the wheat fields for women to be in charge. After some campaigning, seven women expressed willingness to join but we needed more, so I went to Li Erniu’s house. Li did not usually come to meetings, but it just so happened that Erniu was unhappy that day and complained that her husband was not treating her well. I said to her that if she started working, she could earn work-points and bring home grain, and her husband would change his attitude towards her. Erniu thought about it for a while and

agreed. The next day, she took her plow and came to work. The same day, other members elected her to be the model worker of the team. Around the time we ate our supper, the village broadcasting station announced the news, and it shook the whole village. The third day I had 19 women follow me into the wheat fields, and we finished the work in three days.

The cooperative then quickly mobilized older women to form a team to take care of the younger children, so the women did not have to worry about their young children. These women concentrated on their work and were able to raise their skill level very fast. By this time even the ones who strongly opposed equal pay for equal work were convinced that women should earn the same work-points as men. After that, both male and female members of the cooperative worked together in the fields. They went home together and shared the cooking—one raised the fire and the other cooked. The relationship between husbands and wives improved a great deal. The status of women cooperative members went up. An amendment was added to the Xigou Cooperative regulations: “Women would have five day off each month during their menstruation” and receive two menstrual pads each month.

The cooperative also began a new method of delivering babies. I was assigned to be the person responsible to implement the new method of childbirth. We also campaigned to improve the nutrition of newborns. In the past, babies of several months were only fed thin rice soup. An egg was added to the rice soup and the babies grew stronger. With better food supplements, women could reduce the amount of nursing time each day and return to work. Same pay for same work raised both the economic and the social status for women in Xigou, thus helping women and men in our big mountain gully to improve the equality between them. What we did also encouraged the national campaign for equal pay for equal work. In the collective era during the last century, women in Xigou were all willing to work in the fields. They had a good time working together laughing and talking. They were so much happier than working in isolation in their own kitchens. You know Ma Junzhao, who is four years older than I and is still alive. She used to work everyday in the fields, and she was so full of energy, always singing happily while she worked.

Ma: Before Xigou was able to implement equal pay and equal work, had other cooperatives already adopted the practice?

Shen: According to the reporters and leaders in agriculture, no other cooperatives had done it before Xigou. Women participated in production work in the early stages of the famous model cooperative in the Wugong Village, Rauyang County, Hebei Province. But women there did not receive the same pay for the same work as men. The main reason was that women could not do the same work as men. They accepted that kind of distribution and did not raise any questions. Our village was the old revolutionary base, so we had earlier education on the equality between women and men. With the support of the Party Branch, we went ahead and involved ourselves in the struggle for equal pay for equal work.

Ma: When was the first time that Xigou's accomplishment in the equal pay for equal work was publicized outside of your village?

Shen: We participated in a conference in Changzhi County on agricultural mutual aid and cooperatives in early December 1952. Li Ling, Party Secretary of Pingshun County, encouraged me to give a talk on this topic at the conference. I had never spoken in public and was quite scared. Then I thought I would just give a factual report and it was going to be all right. I asked Party Secretary Li to leave the room, because I did not want to be embarrassed before him if I were to do a bad presentation. Li smiled at me and left the room. I looked at all these unfamiliar faces and told myself not to be scared. Everything just came out and I told them the whole story how Xigou struggled to achieve equal pay for equal work. After I finished the whole audience clapped loudly. A few days later a journalist came to our village to do more investigation.

On January 25, 1953, the *People's Daily* had a long report entitled "Work Means Liberation and Achievement Can Only Come from Struggle—the Story of Xigou Women Fighting for Equal Pay for Equal Work." Lan Tuan, a woman reporter, wrote the piece. Then woman organizations began their discussion on this topic nationally. On April 15, 1954, I participated in the Second National Women's Conference. Not too long after that, I joined other Chinese woman delegates to participate in the International Women's Conference in Denmark. I received such honor for just being a woman cooperative member from a mountainous gully, but the political significance did not belong to me as an individual; it had everything to do with the times we lived in.

Ma: It was indeed very significant for a peasant woman to become a delegate to the National and then attend the International Women's Conference. Could you tell us more concretely how it happened?

Shen: The majority of the delegates to the Second National Women's Conference in 1953 were workers and peasants. They were all working class women like myself. In the middle of this conference (on April 22), 35 delegates were elected to attend the International Women's Conference in Denmark. During the Second National Women's Conference, I also gave a report on how we achieved equal pay for equal work in Xigou. I was elected as one of the 35 delegates, because I represented the agricultural cooperatives. I was also elected to be one of the 125 representatives of the Standing Committee of the Second National Women's Conference. Soon afterwards I joined the other Chinese woman delegates and left for Demark via the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic, Poland, and arrived in the capital of Demark, Copenhagen, on June 4.

The six-day conference started on June 5 and ended on June 10. There were 1,865 delegates from over 70 countries. But women delegates of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, The Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and Malaysia, who were fighting courageously for their country's independence and world peace could not attend, because the government of Demark refused to issue them visas. All the delegates were angry and we together sent our protests to the Demark government.

Woman delegates at the Conference exchanged gifts. A famous Japanese painter gave the conference one of her paintings of a dove, representing peace. Gifts from Greece and Turkey were handicrafts made by patriotic women prisoners. Chinese delegates gave every delegate a silk scarf with the logo, "Women of the World Unite" embroidered on the scarf. The delegates were so happy; they held and kissed the scarves. We were back in Beijing on July 4.

Ma: You received so many honors in those years. You were then elected a delegate to the First National People's Congress. Were there many women elected to be delegates to the First National People's Congress?

Shen: Not many. As far as I can remember the First National People's Congress had the least numbers of women delegates. Among the 26 delegates from Shanxi Province, only four were women. One was Hu Wenxiu, mother of Liu Hulan. (Liu Hulan was a young Communist who died at the age of 15 as a martyr fighting the Kuomintang.) Then there was the famous singer Guo Lanying. There was a woman cadre from the old revolutionary base in Linfen named Li Hui and myself. I shared a room with Hu Wenxiu, and from the first night of our arrival, she talked about her wish to meet Chairman Mao. Both Hu and I met the Chairman when the Congress was in session and were both so elated. After our meeting with Chairman Mao Hu cried all night talking to her daughter, who sacrificed her life for the revolution. She told her daughter, "I met Chairman Mao today and the Chairman said that he remembered you, and he saluted to you and all of our revolutionary martyrs. The delegates to the Congress all remembered you. You received a big honor today and your mother did too." When Hu met the other delegates the next day her eyes were red from crying the night before, yet she was so happy. Her smile touched everyone.

Ma: You participated in the National People's Congress so many times. Who were the grassroots level delegates that impressed you most?

Shen: Many grassroots level woman delegates impressed me. There was the young woman intellectual delegate Xing Yanzi who had gone to the countryside to work. She was a delegate to the Third Congress in 1964. Mao invited her to lunch during the session. Then there was Xing Yulan. She started working in agriculture after she graduated from elementary school and was elected the head of her cooperative at the age of 15, the youngest ever in the nation. When she was 30 years old, she became the Party Secretary of Lingxi County in Hebei Province. She was the one who called for all cadres to go down to the fields to make improvement in agriculture. She was a delegate to the Fourth and Fifth Congress. When she was young she also served as vice-head of an advanced cooperative. There was also Li Suwen, who was a delegate to the Fourth Congress and was elected the Vice Executive Director of the National People's Congress. Li was very down-to-earth; she was not at all arrogant. I heard that after the [1979] Reform she became the vice-head of a factory and has done good work. These woman delegates from the grassroots level happily returned to lead production when they were needed. I have the same experience.

Ma: I heard you were elected the Chair of the Women's Federation in Shanxi Province. Is that right?

Shen: Yes. It was in 1973 in the middle of the Cultural Revolution, shortly after the Tenth Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. One day when I was working in the fields, I received a notice with a red chop (seal) of the Shanxi Branch of the Chinese Communist Party. I was asked to participate in the committee that was preparing for the founding of Shanxi Women's Federation and also to become the head of that Federation after it was founded. I made a decision at that time; I believed that since I was elected as a model worker, I should stay in production. Also, since I was the Xigou delegate to the People's Congress, I wanted to stay in Xigou. After I became the head of the Shanxi Federation of Women, I immediately talked to Shanxi's Party representative and registered my requests. I wanted to forgo my salary as the head of the Federation, and I wanted my official residence to remain in Xigou. I did not want my rank to be reassessed, nor did I want a special car. The Party representative agreed with me and said Shanxi Province was following the directive of the Central Committee on cultivating cadres who continued working in their production posts. I think that was the reason that during the Fourth National People's Congress there was a group of woman delegates who had continued their work in production. I was elected a model worker, and I did not want to work in other leadership positions. I chose to come back to Xigou and continue to work in the fields and continue to do what a model worker should do.

Ma: After the Reform, has there been an increase in the number of peasant woman delegates from the grassroots level, or has the number of peasant women delegates actually decreased?

Shen: The number has decreased. There are very few peasant woman delegates, and for that reason I have continued to serve. There are very few agricultural collectives left now. For the few villages that still have collectives, things are different from what they were during Mao Zedong's era. The emphasis is no longer placed on production, nor is there any encouragement given to peasants to become model workers. In the past, many woman delegates were selected from woman model workers. Most delegates were from the grassroots level. Currently, most of the delegates to the People's Congress came from the leadership level. They became someone with a leadership position first and then were elected as delegates to the People's Congress. This is the opposite of what was done in the past. In the past the delegates came from model workers elected among workers and peasants.

As far as Xigou is concerned, the status of peasants has gone down. Our collectives were broken up and land is contracted to individual families. Each family has a small plot of land, and it is impossible to achieve an overall rational division of labor. Men in many families have left to work in cities, and women are left behind to work in the fields. Some young women have also left, leaving the elderly and young children at home. There is no longer anything like equal pay for equal work.

Under the current circumstances, it is not possible for women to improve their status. Take for example the 84-years-old Ma Junzhao I mentioned earlier. She has one daughter and two sons. During the collective era, members of her whole family were model workers. Her husband was a model worker in raising farm animals. She was a veteran Party member. Her daughter and sons were all very active in the collectives. There were reports about her family in the newspapers. However, after the collective was broken up, her daughter and daughter-in-laws returned to the traditional women's role of working around the house. Sometimes they do some work on their own land, but they lost the spirit we had in the past. Ma Junzhao joined the Party before Liberation, and as an old Party member, she receives less than 100 RMB [less than USD15] a month. She lives alone and is not living well. Her daughters-in-laws are not doing well either. They live isolated from others and have a very narrow focused outlook on life. Ma's grandchildren now have less education than her children. Ma's son graduated from high school, but her grandchildren only went as far as junior high school. Girls in many families now only go as far as elementary school. We no longer have high schools in Xigou. Anyone who wants to attend high school has to go to the nearby county or town. The expense of going to school in another county or town is very high and few can afford it. If this continues, how is it possible for peasant women to improve their status?

Ma: I have traveled to other villages in recent years, including Xiaogan Village and Xiaojing village in Anhui Province. Both of these villages are known as models of the family responsibility system after the Reform, where land was divided up and distributed to individual families. There I also found that young girls are quitting school. Peasants now seem to believe that education no longer serves any purpose. This kind of thinking seems to have a negative impact on the status of women in China's countryside and will also have a negative impact on developing a balanced society.

Shen: Yes. Due to various reasons, after the Reform there has not been a single woman in our village to receive a university education. This is very regrettable. There are some women who work for the government. But we don't even have a fully accredited teacher. Zhang Shuying, the daughter-in-law of old Party member Li Caifa has been a teacher in a private school in the next district for twenty some years, but she still has not been recognized as a fully accredited teacher. We do have many young women who now work either here or in cities, but few of them can get anywhere. On the contrary, many of these young women who go away often are injured or become sick. There was this famous cooperative member in Xigou named Ma Haixing. His daughter-in-law, Song Renjiao is a Party member. Ma's children were all honest and down-to-earth peasants. Ma's grandson, Ma Yongqing (Song's son) joined the military and came home after a few years. He then left home and worked as a laborer and he met this young woman from Henan while he was away working. They later got married. However, his wife was later discovered to have hepatitis B. They found this out when she was examined during her pregnancy. The baby was born but they have not had money to treat her illness, so Song Renjiao (Ma's mother) is now taking care of the baby.

If we look beyond Xigou at the nation as a whole, there is no longer a system or a mechanism designed to promote ordinary workers and peasants, so they can become

future leaders. During Mao's time Xigou often recommended young women to become workers and to join the People's Army. In the past, school was not expensive and peasants could afford to send their daughters to school. As long as they worked hard and learned diligently, young women had many ideals and many hopes. The social status of women in Mao's time was totally different from the status of young woman workers today. In the past, young peasant women lived in a society that valued ordinary working class women and men, and it had a mechanism to promote ordinary women. I was the product of that system in Mao's era.

Ma: During the last few People's Congresses, have there still been some outstanding women delegates from the countryside?

Shen: Guo Fenglian from Dazhai is still a delegate. She is still the Brigade Party Secretary and served on the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. We still have frequent contacts. In addition to meeting each other at the People's Congress, she came to Xigou a few times, and I also visited Dazhai many times. Guo Fenglian did not have many years of schooling. She only graduated from elementary school, but she has gained a lot of experience and wisdom from engaging in production for such a long time. She is very capable. She writes beautiful calligraphy and can give a report that lasts several hours without any notes. She is very articulate and is a gifted leader.

Dazhai is doing well. Unlike Xigou, they maintained the collective economy so their agricultural production is mechanized, and they have also managed their enterprises collectively. The difference between the rich and the poor is not too big in Dazhai. Those "iron girls" [model workers], of course, are all old now. They are still active in community affairs. They also pay a lot of attention to cultivating women leaders. Women manage many of the village enterprises. During last year's Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan Province, two Dazhai woman representatives went to Wenchuan and made a donation of 480,000 RMB (about \$70,000). We don't have many villages like Dazhai in China any more, where women still have equal status with men. The social status of women is dependent on their economic status. When agriculture returned to small household operation, women could no longer participate in production like when the economy was collective. In a collective economy, the division of labor between women and men was complementary. The collective economy in Dazhai has a lot to do with the higher status of women there.

Ma: Could you tell us the characteristics of woman delegates of the current People's Congress as compared to the past?

Shen: The woman delegates today are much younger and much more educated. There is no other woman delegate like myself who was once illiterate. Guo Fenglian is not highly educated either. She only has a grade school education, but from her participation in practice she has become so capable. The rest of the delegates all have college education or higher. There are now more and more woman delegates from private enterprises. As far as I can remember, only the First and the Second Congress had delegates elected from the national bourgeoisie. A national bourgeoisie representative, Rong Yiren, was a delegate

to the First National People's Congress. He was praised for donating his factory to the government. [Ma's note: The Central government insisted on paying him for the factory] Some important progressive members of the national bourgeoisie also participated in the Third Congress but they represented part of the coalition the central government formed. There were not that many women among the national bourgeoisie. It is different now; woman delegates from private enterprises continue to increase.

Ma: You have been delegate to the National People's Congress for more than half a century. Your case is singular in China, and I think there are very few cases like yours worldwide. What do you consider to be the successes in your life?

Shen: For me, personally, there have not been such things as successes or failures. From the first day I joined the Chinese Communist Party, what I wanted for my life has been the same as what the Party needs. I understand talking like this now sounds old-fashioned, but that is what I truly believe, and I have followed it in deeds accordingly. The Party and the land in Xigou gave me everything. What I did was to seriously fulfill what the Party asked of me, and that was to become a highly conscious communist who represents the peasants. If there is anything I can personally conclude from my life, it is: "We need to remember the truth: being modest keeps us progressive and being arrogant sets us back." This was what Chairman Mao taught every Communist Party member and every person in China.