

Marriage



Conditions in China Before the Revolution



In prerevolutionary China, parents generally arranged marriages for their children. Tradition dictated that couples were not allowed to meet before they married. Wealthy families often arranged their children's marriages before their children were born. In most families, however, when a daughter reached the age of 16, a marriage broker came to the young woman's family and proposed a marriage arrangement between her and someone her age or older. If the young woman's family was interested, the broker arranged for the suitor (potential husband) to visit the family.

The suitor brought gifts of food for the family and cloth for the young woman, who remained hidden during the meeting. If the young woman's mother was satisfied with the suitor, the families negotiated how much the man's family would pay the woman's family in exchange for the woman. Once married, women were considered part of their husbands' families. They lived with their in-laws and had to work very hard for them. Poorer families often sold their daughters into marriage as young children, and the girls worked as servants for their husband's family until they were old enough to marry. Women were not allowed to initiate divorces, and women in desperate situations escaped marriage only by running away or committing suicide.



Conditions in Liu Ling After the Revolution



After the revolution, purchase marriage (a woman being sold to her future husband's family) in China was made illegal. Families in Liu Ling were no longer supposed to arrange their children's marriages; instead, couples themselves were supposed to decide when to get married and to whom. Many parents still tried to influence who their son or daughter would marry, but they now had less power to force their children if they were unwilling.

Marriage decisions in Liu Ling were usually made for pragmatic (practical) reasons. Villagers explained this change to a visitor to Liu Ling:

When a girl considers the boys with an eye to choosing one to marry, she looks for one who is strong and healthy and able to work well. Girls attach great importance to behaviour: the boy they choose must be even- not quick-tempered. Appearance is less important. As the girls say: "We have a long life to live together. He may look handsome now, but his looks will soon go. But if he is faithful and kind and hard-working, we can have a good life together." Boys who are known to be lazy seldom get married.

When a boy considers a girl, the first thing he asks himself is: "Can she look after a home?" Next in importance is that she should be even-tempered. Appearance plays a certain part, but not a great one. In Liu Ling no one will say that a girl is ugly or plain, just that she "looks well enough in her way."

Despite the ban on purchase marriages, children almost never planned to marry someone without their family's approval. A villager in Liu Ling explained:

The person with the most say in the matter of a girl's marriage is her grandmother, then her grandfather, then her mother; what her father thinks is of least importance. What they all want for the girl they are marrying off—and what the boy's parents are also looking for—is a “good marriage” to someone who is rich, strong and able to work well.

Once a couple in Liu Ling was engaged, they met often to talk or go to the cinema together. When they were ready to marry, they went to register with the government marriage bureau. Liu Ling villagers explained the new legal process:

They have to say how old they are and they are asked: “Do you love each other? Do you want to marry? Are you doing this of your own free will?” Only after that are they given a marriage license. Having got that they are legally married.

After registering their marriage with the government, couples in Liu Ling usually had to wait up to six months before having a wedding ceremony. The wedding ceremony was generally held in the groom's home, and all the relatives, neighbors, and friends of the couple were invited. Sometimes more than a hundred people attended the four- to eight-course wedding banquets. During the ceremony the bride and groom stood in front of the banquet table and paid respects to a portrait of Chairman Mao, their parents, elders, and guests by bowing to them. Then they had to tell the guests how they fell in love. The guests joked with the couple and tried to make them blush. Both the bride and groom wore big red paper flowers, which they exchanged, and then they drank some wine. The guests asked the bride to sing, and then the couple sat down and everyone congratulated them and began to eat. Close friends escorted the couple to the bridal chamber, where they all drank wine and sang until midnight, at which time they left the couple alone. Three days after the wedding ceremony, the couple went to visit the bride's family to have a banquet with the family's good friends. Then the newlyweds began to live with the groom's family.

Newly legal, divorce in Liu Ling was common immediately after the revolution because many couples wanted to end unhappy arranged marriages. However, couples who chose one another—rather than having their parents arrange their marriages—rarely divorced. Villagers considered divorce immoral, especially if a couple had children. Liu Hsin-min, a young official in Liu Ling, noted, “Before the courts can consider an application for divorce, the mediation committee must have tried to mediate between the two partners and to get them to continue their life together on a new and firmer basis.”

Education and Literacy



Conditions in China Before the Revolution



In the Chinese countryside before the revolution, only wealthy, land-owning families could afford to educate their children. Their sons (very few families deemed girls worthy of formal education) studied for years under strict masters (teachers) to memorize the Confucian classics. Then they took extensive examinations, which few passed the first time. Those who did pass were eligible to become government officials and lived lives quite separate from the peasant majority.

Most peasant families could not afford to send their children to school. Even if they had the money for school expenses, few could survive without the income their sons made working in the fields. Because of this, in some areas it was difficult to find anyone who could read or write. If a person received a letter, he or she was forced to travel from village to village seeking someone who could read. In addition, peasants who could not read or add and subtract were easily cheated by educated townspeople with whom they bargained for goods in the cities.



Conditions in Liu Ling After the Revolution



After the revolution, the communists abolished the government examination system and established new schools in the countryside. In Liu Ling, the Xian (county) administration first established a lower basic school (grades 1 through 4) and later opened a higher basic school (grades 5 and 6) in 1956. These schools not only taught reading, writing, history, and mathematics, but also agricultural theory and garden work. The school year began on August 1 and ended on June 20. Classes, which were 40 to 45 minutes long, were held six days a week from 8:00 A.M. until noon and from 2:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M. Han Yin-ling, the headmaster of the Liu Ling school, explained how schooling reflected the spirit of the revolution:

Our school fulfils the task the party has given us. Teaching has to serve the policy of the proletariat [common people], and teaching has to be combined with productive work. The pupils study, but after lessons they have to contribute, as well as they can, in productive work in the school's vegetable garden....The school garden...is not run for income, but to teach the pupils...right attitudes toward work. It is part of the pupils' moral upbringing to grow their own food and eat it, sharing it and their labour with others.

All forms of physical punishment are forbidden....We discuss problems with the students, we discuss them with the parents....The methods we use are different from those of the old days. We have no learning off by heart. We try to stimulate the pupil's own interest in what is being studied....School education must be such that they of their own accord long to go to school and love their studies and understand why education is necessary.

Because we explain to the children that the purpose of their studying is to make them fit to build up their country, our pupils now work with great enthusiasm. That was not the case in the old days. We attach great weight to their moral education. We hold up various models and heroes as moral examples for them. We tell them what they should do and what they should not do. We make it clear to them where the line runs between right and wrong.

Boys and girls attended Liu Ling basic school, though the number of male students was almost twice that of females. Kou Chao-lan, a teacher, talked about the aspirations of her students:

Some said they were going to join the Chinese People's Liberation Army. A couple wanted to be airmen, in order...to "defend China's wide frontiers." One girl wanted to be a schoolmistress. "There have to be some who educate those who later are going to build up communism in China," she said. Several wanted to be tractor drivers. Many of those were girls: "We must harvest more grain, and one does that with machines." A couple just said they wanted to become merit workers in agriculture. We tell the children that, now, women can have any post in society, so it's natural that some girls also want to be soldiers or airwomen. All their ideals are the same, both the girls' and the boys'.

Though attending school was not compulsory (mandatory), most parents wanted their children to go to school. Some families, however, kept their children out of school because they needed them to help in the fields. Han Yin-ling noted:

It may also happen that parents do not consider that their children should go to school. Perhaps the family is badly off for labour and want to have the child at home in order to put it to work. We then have a talk with the parents about the necessity for education. We try to get them to understand this and to agree.

The Communist Party also encouraged adult villagers to become better educated. Classes to teach adults how to read and write were held by village organizations, such as the League of Youth and the Women's Committee, as well as by special study groups set up by educated villagers. Lo Han-hong, the labor brigade bookkeeper who organized one such group, explained:

We used various methods to make more people able to read. We wrote the characters for the different agricultural tools on the tools themselves, so that people would see the character as they used the tool. Later, they asked to be allowed to study in books. We could not find any suitable reader for them, so we wrote a book which gave 500 characters specially suited to [the] village....In 1956 we had read through this reader and by then all...were able to read. They knew 500 characters; they could write their names, they could read the co-operative's books, and no one could any longer diddle them over work points or cheat them over money.

The improvement in education in Liu Ling enabled more than half of the villagers between school age and 40 years to read at least 1,000 Chinese characters (elements of the written language)—enough to read a newspaper.

Health and Hygiene



Conditions in China Before the Revolution



Health conditions in the Chinese countryside were very poor before the revolution. Many factors—including limited knowledge about medicine and hygiene (cleanliness) and chronic food shortages—contributed to the severity of illnesses. Most villages did not have a resident doctor. If they could afford a doctor's services, people with severe illnesses usually had to travel long distances to get them. Children were generally more vulnerable to disease than adults, and many died at an early age. Young girls were especially vulnerable because families placed greater value on boys, so boys were fed first in times of food shortages. Women often had many children because of the high infant-mortality rate (number of babies that die per year), and repeated pregnancy and childbirth—for which care was poor—was a risk to their health. An additional risk to some girls' welfare was the process of foot binding. This common practice—rooted in the belief that tiny feet were more attractive—was very painful, and often led to infections and caused problems for women as they aged.



Conditions in Liu Ling After the Revolution



After the revolution, most villagers in Liu Ling still knew little about basic hygiene, which contributed to poor health. While parents washed once a day and bathed their children in the morning and in the evening, it was difficult to keep clean from the dirt of the fields and dust of the streets. Young children, especially girls, often suffered from bladder infections caused by unsanitary conditions. Children often drank water directly from the river, easily contracting water-borne ailments such as intestinal parasites, which led to diarrhea and typhus (an infectious disease characterized by high fever).

Other common illnesses in the village included smallpox, influenza, and pneumonia. The elderly, particularly women whose feet were bound, also suffered from rheumatism (swelling) in their hands and feet.

The efforts of the Communist Party to improve health care in the villages eventually helped improve public health. For example, teachers taught students about the importance of good hygiene. The teachers explained, "Bacteria are tiny animals that make you ill. They are so small that they cannot be seen by the eye." Teachers encouraged students to boil water before drinking it, clean vegetables before they ate them, and wash their hands and faces regularly. They also helped families improve their hygiene habits by having children teach their parents about the harmful effects of bacteria and other parasites.

Before and after the revolution, most medical care in Liu Ling was provided by the local doctor, who learned his trade from an older doctor. The doctor, who was also a farmer, used local medical books and personal experience to prescribe Chinese medicinal remedies. After the revolution, the Communist Party established a small clinic, where people were vaccinated against smallpox and typhus. Doctors began traveling to nearby villages to provide medical care to those who did not have resident doctors. With improved medical care, fewer children died from diseases at an early age. In addition, the old practice of foot binding was outlawed, and the bindings on all young girls' feet that had been bound were removed.

The Communist Party supported attempts to reduce the health risk of women and the newborn in villages. The Liu Ling Women's Committee, for example, was formed to address issues of special concern to women. One of its particular concerns was the care of women and newborns during childbirth. Members of the committee counseled women in the village about how to take care of themselves when they were having a baby. One woman explained:

We go to see the women who are pregnant and talk with them about what to do in their pregnancy. We instruct them in the new delivery art [how a baby is birthed] and tell them how to look after their infants. Before, a woman had to be sitting straight up and down on her *kang* [cement bed with a stove below to keep it warm] three days after having her baby. Now we say to them: "That is all stupidity and superstition. Lie down with the child beside you and rest. You're not to sit up at all." We tell the women to let themselves be examined regularly and follow the doctor's advice.

Work



Conditions in China Before the Revolution



Peasant life in prerevolutionary China was difficult. Most peasants did not own land; instead, they rented fields from powerful landlords who controlled most of the land in the countryside. Land-owning families did little manual labor and lived comfortably off the rents paid by peasants. Peasant families, on the other hand, worked hard all year to pay their rents and feed their families. Men toiled in the fields from early morning until dusk. Women worked primarily at home preparing food and making clothes for the family, and they also plucked grass for the family's livestock. Children began working almost as soon as they could walk, plucking grass or helping gather fuel. As they got older, most boys began working for the landlord, carrying water, herding livestock, and eventually working in the fields as day laborers. Girls began helping their mothers cook by the age of 10 and cared for the younger children from the age of 4 or 5 years old.

Despite their hard work, most peasant families did not have enough to eat. Many could not afford clothes for their children or quilts to keep them warm at night. Landlords demanded high rents and taxes, and families were often forced to go into debt to pay them. If a family was in debt to a landlord, he could take away the family's land and possessions and prohibit the family from moving away.



Conditions in Liu Ling After the Revolution



In Liu Ling, as in many areas with small villages, the revolution ended land ownership by powerful landlords. The communist People's Liberation Army (PLA) took land from the landlords and distributed it so that each family in Liu Ling—including the landlord's family—had its own private plot (piece of land), the size of which was determined by the number of family members. The valley land, where the soil was rich and crops were easily produced, was distributed among the villagers. In addition, families could farm as much of the unbroken hillside—with poor, rocky soil—as they could clear. Although clearing new land was hard work, peasants—now happy to work for themselves—willingly did it.

To produce the maximum number of crops and to make sure no one achieved prosperity (wealth) at the expense of another, villagers in Liu Ling began to work together and share farming responsibilities. First they formed labor groups, in which farmers helped one another. Later the Communist Party organized an agricultural cooperative in which villagers shared most of the land communally (jointly) and worked together to farm it. Membership in the cooperative was voluntary, but within three years every household in the village had joined. At the same time, families maintained small private plots to ensure they could produce enough food for their families.

The cooperative from Liu Ling later merged with cooperatives from other villages to form a *people's commune*. In the commune, most land and animals were owned by the people in the region, and agricultural production was planned by commune leaders. The leaders also helped organize large-scale projects—such as building dams, terracing fields, and planting trees—in the countryside. Such projects helped reduce crop failure and improved agricultural production.

Villagers in Liu Ling still worked hard all year. Men had four days off of work per month; women had six. Men mostly farmed, repaired tools, and gathered fuel, though some men in the younger generation also helped in the home. Women's responsibilities expanded as they began to work in the fields while continuing to work in the home. Li Yiu-hua, the Party secretary in Liu Ling, noted the change in women's roles:

The women work well. In the old days they weren't worth anything. Women were oppressed then, and people used to say: "An incompetent man can get about nine countries, but a competent woman can only get round her cooking stove."...Now both men and women share in cultivating the land. Women are hard workers. Do you see that the women down there have baskets beside them as they weed, but the men don't? That's because the women aren't only weeding, they are also collecting grass for the family's pig.

After the revolution, Liu Ling children still assumed household responsibilities and field work as they got older. Boys helped collect grass for the animals, carried water, and helped farm the family plot. Girls helped make and wash clothes, cook, and sew shoes. For the first time, village children began to attend school.

During the busiest season, when all parents and older children worked long hours in the fields, cooperative childcare helped families. Li Kuei-ying, the leader of the Liu Ling Women's Group, explained:

Since 1958, we have also established a children's day nursery and a collective dining hall. These are used in the busiest of the harvest season, when it is important that as many as possible work, and so the women have to be relieved of their domestic work for a time. During harvest and ploughing, the women who are pregnant and the old ones with small, crippled feet do the work in the day nursery and the collective dining-hall. All the others are out in the fields. It works very well. In that way the women earn money.

WMA

Children and the Elderly



Conditions in China Before the Revolution



Throughout Chinese history, the young and the old maintained a close and special relationship within the family. The Chinese valued the continuance of the family name above all else. Having children was so important, in fact, that couples were not considered properly married until they had their first child. The Chinese believed that the deceased lived on through their descendents (later generations), whose regular rituals honored their ancestors. Accordingly, the elderly did not consider their lives fulfilled unless they had grandchildren. As part of extended families (three or more generations living together), grandparents and great-grandparents helped care for small children while parents worked. As a result, the elderly often developed close relationships with the young.

Childbirth and infancy, however, were precarious for Chinese families. Death of newborns and infants was commonplace due to poor health conditions, disease, and malnutrition. So many newborns died, in fact, that children were typically not given names until a month after their birth. The elderly were also weak and susceptible to disease. Those who died before the age of 60 were considered unlucky, and people did not like to talk openly about them after they died.



Conditions in Liu Ling After the Revolution



In Liu Ling, knowledge of birth control enabled women to plan pregnancies, and improved health care reduced some of the risks in childbirth. As before the revolution, the importance of birth was marked by ritual and tradition. Villagers in Liu Ling explained:

When a couple has their first child, whether boy or girl, their relatives send them presents of dried noodles, wheaten flour, bean flour, and eggs. When the baby is a month old, its mother invites their immediate relatives and best friends and all who have sent them presents to a celebration. The celebration consists of two meals...guests bring all sorts of presents: little shoes, baby clothes, etc. But this is only done for the first baby in the family. There is no celebration for the others that may come, and birthdays are not kept.

Mothers nursed babies for two or three years, during which time they were gradually weaned and began to eat with the rest of the family. Toddlers did not wear diapers; instead, children wore trousers open in the back until the age of six. People expected children to be “house trained” by the time they were able to walk.

After the children had been weaned, grandparents—who usually lived with their children and grandchildren as part of an extended family—took over much of their care. Since they could no longer work in the fields or do as much of the housework, elders did light work and spent the days talking to other elderly people and watching their grandchildren. Close relationships between elderly and young children were commonplace. Villagers said:

It is always [the grandparents] who are closest to the children. They have the most time for them and talk with them the most. Whenever a child wants to do something its parents won't allow, it has only to go to its grandparents and weep; then the grandparents go to the child's parents and read them a lesson.

Villagers had great respect and reverence for the elderly, whose wisdom was sought and valued. The elderly generally accepted the changes of aging and prepared for their eventual deaths. Villagers explained:

When a man reaches the age of fifty, he starts getting his coffin ready. He may even have bought the wood for this years before...but having reached the age of fifty he can ask a carpenter to make up the coffin. Once they are fifty, men let their beards grow and also they start smoking and drinking spirits [alcohol].

The great day of a man's life is his sixtieth birthday, for then he has completed his span. If he dies before sixty, it is an unhappy death, but after sixty he can die happy. The next birthday celebrated is his seventieth, then his eightieth and so on, and each is a happy and honourable occasion.

One invites all one's friends and relations to one's sixtieth birthday; so that in the case of a respected man, the entire village will be there. He will regale them with noodles, eggs, meat, wine and spirits. Everyone drinks and makes speeches, saying lucky and luck-bringing things to their host.

When an old person died in Liu Ling, family members put on white mourning clothes, since white was considered the color of death. They then informed relatives and made decisions—often with the help of a specialist—as to when and where the person should be buried in their family burial ground. Funerals lasted over three days: on the first day, the mourners spent the day eating, weeping, and talking about the deceased; on the second day, led by the oldest son, they took the coffin to the grave and burned offerings of paper money and set out food for the deceased; and on the third day, the younger members of the family visited the grave again and made offerings. After that, each year “everyone in Liu Ling, both communists and those not in the party, [went] to the graves of their ancestors and [made] offerings.”

Standard of Living



Conditions in China Before the Revolution



In the Chinese countryside, the standard of living for peasants was extremely low before the revolution. Most peasants did not own land; instead, they rented fields from powerful landlords, who lived luxuriously in large homes. Despite working hard year round, peasants earned very little. Landlords paid low prices for peasants' crops at harvest time and raised prices when peasants needed to buy crops to feed their families. As much as half a family's yearly earnings went to pay land rents and taxes. Tax collectors came every month to collect from the peasants, whom they beat if they did not have enough money to pay. As a result, most peasant families had few possessions, and many did not have enough food to eat or adequate clothing. Entire peasant families often lived in small, one-room huts, and the family shared a single bed and quilt. Unable to save money to buy their own land, most peasants had little means for improving their standard of living.



Conditions in Liu Ling After the Revolution



After the revolution, the communist government did much to improve peasants' standard of living in villages throughout the country, including Liu Ling. To ensure that families' basic needs were met, the communists organized Liu Ling villagers into communes, which produced more crops through cooperative farming. In addition, the government subsidized (paid for) a certain amount of goods—such as salt, soap, cotton, and sewing thread—for each family. A visitor to Liu Ling reported:

The country people buy very little of their food. Each family receives its quota of grain from the labor group to which it belongs, and, in principle, they produce on their own private plots all else that they require. Families can always grow their own vegetables, tobacco and the like; and they are free to buy in the market vegetables, pork, sweetmeats, everything you eat and drink, except salt and sugar.

A number of other steps were taken to help families in Liu Ling save and earn money. The government began to provide social grants (money) to families in need. It also established a state bank, through which villagers could save money and take out loans to support them as they cleared new land to farm. Taxes on grain, livestock, and vehicles were collected by the Liu Ling People's Commune and given to the government. Grain taxes were based on a fixed percent of the harvest, so the tax payments never exceeded what the villagers could afford to pay. In addition, the government did not tax newly cleared land for the first three years that it was cultivated.

With the introduction of electricity to the village, the standard of living improved significantly in 1960. Most families in Liu Ling were able to install an electric light in their home. Loudspeakers were placed in every home that had electricity, providing a cheap way for families to have a radio. Furthermore, electricity made it possible for the village to buy an electric pump instead of manually pumping water from a well.

With the commune system, the centralization of income allowed for other improvements in working conditions and village life. The commune purchased new tools, a tractor, and trucks for carting manure to fertilize the land. Water-regulation works, such as dams, canals, and irrigation systems, helped ensure good harvests, which stabilized villagers' income.

The reorganization of land after the revolution also provided new opportunities for peasants to improve their standard of living. Because they now kept and could sell all the produce from their own private plots, families were able to save money to buy material for clothes, blankets, and other possessions to make their lives more comfortable. Villagers' most prized possessions were bicycles, which they explained could be used for "transporting things, for bringing things home when we have been in town shopping, and...to ride over to [visit] relations in other villages." People also used bicycles to travel to town to go to the cinema or attend opera performances.

As life improved, families sought more luxuries. Lo Han-hong, the bookkeeper for the Liu Ling People's Commune, spoke about the new attitude among villagers:

People live better than they used to, and they are beginning to have new needs. What's happening now is that people are providing themselves with means of transport. Almost every household has already got itself a two-wheeled cart on rubber wheels. These can either be pulled by hand or harnessed to a bicycle. There are more and more bicycles all the time. And those who have carts and bicycles are now wanting to have radios and alarm clocks. There is no limit to their needs. The better life is, the greater become one's requirements.